

## The [Hi]stories of Chotto Desh

*DESH* – and *Chotto Desh*, its younger version adapted for family audiences – began with a promise, one made by a son to his mother. Years ago, early in his career, Akram Khan had promised Mrs. Anwara Khan he would make a piece on the country of her birth, Bangladesh. Akram intended to keep his promise, but life kept happening, other projects kept coming in the way... Then one day, it all started coming together. Akram met visual artist Tim Yip, someone he had admired for long. Tim, agreeing to collaborate with Akram on his next work, suggested it should be an exploration of his parents' roots: Bangladesh. It was time to keep a promise. To go on a journey.

And that is what we did. The entire creative team met for the first time in Bangladesh, travelling together for ten days through November 2010 to discover many of the voices, faces, places that compose the country.

Now, in this strange, unprecedented moment of physical isolation and danger, when memory and emotional nearness and beauty are our magic wands for sanity, we remember them.

Now, when *Chotto Desh* will be streamed in an attempt to share something that gave us so much joy and warmth, it seems fitting to share also our memories of those voices and faces and places, the ones that compose *DESH* and *Chotto Desh* in ways both visible and invisible.

Dhaka, the unstoppable metropolis, of multi-coloured streets, hurtling traffic and intrepid pedestrians. The busy villages, the vast countryside, the carom-playing children. The shades of the sky flowing down Modhumoti river, the otter-fishermen who ride its currents. The docks at Sadarghat, with their ship-building and breaking industries, and the teeming migrant workers, some barely in their teens, whose hammering and thudding punctuate the soundscape of the show.

Ruby Ghuznavi, champion textile conservationist, who spent decades reviving the age-old traditions of natural dyes and weaving crushed by colonial and industrial juggernauts of synthetic cloth and colouring. The weavers and dyers at Aranya Crafts, wizards who enchanted us with a flick of the wrist, turning colourless yarn into sprightly blues, insolent greens or tender pink. The flowers, spices and minerals that wrought the spells: indigo, coral jasmine, cardamom, madder...

The late Tareque Masud, Fipresci-award-winning film director of *Matir Moyna* (Clay Bird), who invited us home for a sumptuous dinner and a private screening of his as-yet unreleased film, *Runway*, a quiet gaze at the rise of religious extremism, at intergenerational, personal conflicts that snowball into public violence.

Shahidul Alam, the great photographer and human rights' activist. Drik, his multimedia organisation and art gallery, which maintains visual archives of the liberation war and key chapters of national history, whether the Dhaka siege, the protests by dispossessed communities like the Chakmas, or, more recently, the plight of Rohingyas in refugee camps.

Then the people we never met but whose stories, whose resilience and spunk, fuelled our narrative. Two, in particular, who came alive to us through Shahidul's photographs and recollections on a bright, wintry afternoon in Dhaka.

Juhi, the cheeky, intrepid youngster from the Chittagong Hill Tribes who moonlights as a software trouble-shooter, and solves the iCal problems of the Akram-character in *DESH* and *Chotto Desh*. The name – like her telephone-encounter with Akram – was invented for the show, but the person is very real: an anonymous, but inspiring teen whose story was chronicled, and told to us, by Shahidul.

Noor Hussain, the martyr of the Dhaka Siege of 1987 where citizens came out into the streets and demanded an end to military rule. Shahidul showed us that last image of Noor – fist raised, the words *Free Democracy* painted in Bangla on his back – which took on a fresh new life in the show, through Akram's high-octane choreography, Yeast Culture's animated re-creation of the protest and Jocelyn Pook's soundtrack, suffused with the chants of the people, as remembered and reprised by Leesa Gazi – who had actually been on those very streets in '87.

Thanks to all of them, we were blessed with a treasure trove of memories, collective and individual, to borrow, remould and reinvent. Thanks to the experiences and emotions generously shared, we could imagine a narrative where the adult Akram faces the resistance his child-self had to his parents' homeland, relives the push-and-pull between parental expectations and personal dreams. A narrative where the imagined child-self finds resolution in a fable told by a grandmother. Where history, memory and lore mosaic in a salute to the children we were, and the adults we strive to become. There may be no time more fitting than now to savour that journey in our own lives, unique to each of us.

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