

## Documentary Photography Review Podcast - An interview with Kazi Riasat Alve

Rebecca - so to begin with , why don't you tell us a little bit about your journey into photography? So how you became interested in photography and how you've developed? Because you are also working, aren't you? how do you juggle between the two things?

Alve - Actually I started photography in the beginning of 2011 and at that time I wasn't much into photography. I just started it as my hobby. Actually at the end of 2010 I had a camera for almost a scrap Nikon camera from one of my elder brothers and that made me start doing photography actually, and in 2011 I bought my camera and from that time I started to take photography seriously.

When I just started, I was kind of interested in nature photography or something like that, but when I started to look at street and documentary photography on the internet, especially photographers from Magnum photos books and Panos and these kind of big agency photographers, I became interested in documentary photography.

Rebecca -Right.

Alve- Then as a business school student, it was kind of difficult for me to be in photography professionally, because at the end photography and business where too different things. But business school helped me to become a... my major was in marketing actually, so my marketing knowledge helped me out to use my portfolio smartly to market myself and use what I learnt in business school.

Chris - That's a useful skill to have, because I am sure a lot of photographers would like to know how to promote themselves better and how to market themselves more effectively. So it's good that you've got that background, you've got a head start.

Alve - yes.

Chris - Can you tell us a bit about the Chittagong railway project?

Alve - Actually when I started the project at that time, the Chittagong railway station was actually just beside my university in Chittagong. I am actually living in Dhaka for the past 2.5 years, before that I studied in Chittagong. Actually Chittagong is my hometown, Dhaka is not my hometown, I just moved here for my studies and for doing photography and that kind of stuff.

Chris - right.

Alve- When I got my camera, well Chittagong railway station was just beside my university, so I just went there to kind of do take photography or something like that, at that time I didn't have any intention to do a project there, but when I worked there for almost one year, I felt like I can do with some projects there. From about one and a half years I was seriously thinking about doing it there. Actually from that time I was thinking about developing a project there.

Rebecca - And how did you sort of first start approaching people in the station and start developing relationships for the project?

Alve - Actually it is kind of difficult to create long-term relationships there, because as you know, in railway stations, no one is fixed there, the passengers are coming and going, homeless people are coming and going and some homeless people are seasonal, for

example some homeless people are coming from the northern regions of Bangladesh, while they are there, they have no job in particular in the northern parts of the country and they come to Dhaka and Chittagong and look for some source of income here. So it is a little bit difficult to make relationships, for example if I take a photograph of a person here, I am not sure if I am going to meet the person again tomorrow, because most of them are roaming people here, but when I go there, I try to talk to them at first I try to know the stories of their life, I try to know their name and from where they came from and I ask them this, and try to make a relationship with them in a really short period of time, because I am not sure I am going to meet the person again tomorrow.

Rebecca + Chris - Right.

Rebecca - That's interesting , that's an interesting point that you might see one person one day and a different set of people the next day, it's a different sort of challenge then, isn't it?

Alve- yes it is, it is really challenging.

Rebecca - yeah.

Alve- Because if you can continuously photograph a particular person day after day, you can actually have the chance to make a strong relationship with them, but in Chittagong railway station I had no chance for doing that.

Rebecca - right, yeah. Do you think being from the city helped you with the project, helped you with the kind of , gaining trust in people quite quickly or do you think being local was an advantage?

Alve - Being local is an advantage because I know the language of the people here but most of the people - especially the roaming people do not speak the local language of Chittagong, because as I said earlier, most of them are coming from other regions of the country, but I know as a local person, I know that everything at the surrounding of the station really well, so it really helped me out.

Rebecca - right.

Chris - Being local helped you to gain access to these people, but obviously you are experiencing other challenges, in terms of the fact that people may be there one day and not there the next, so did you really struggle to kind of build up any sort of relationships, so was there a need to kind of build up people's trust? Where you able to just go there at any time and photograph these people?

Alve - Yes, something like that. I go to that place at any time, but I didn't take photographs at night, because there are some security issues or something like that. After night it became kind of dangerous, some robbers, hawkers and people like that - drug dealer and drug addicts, who are trying to collect money for drug. But I have planned to photograph at night, but it is a little bit risky to take.

Chris - yeah.

Rebecca - And can you say a something a bit about the railway stations in Bangladesh and this one , about perhaps how things have changed in the past with kind of more and more people moving into the cities. Has that created more people that find themselves having to live in these stations, are out of work. Has that created more poverty?

Alve - Before telling you about that, let me give you some idea about railway stations in Bangladesh. Actually the Bangladesh railway was developed in the British period, as you know this part of the world was a colony of the British Empire. So major development was made at that time, but after that, there was almost no development in the railway system of the country. For example, let me say one thing, this morning I was roaming around the Chittagong railway station and I saw a kind of old tower, that still had the name of children of the British government written on it, so things like that show that there no more major change here right after the British period in (railway stations?) in Bangladesh.

Chris - right.

Alve - And this place became shelter for homeless people and roaming people, because it is easier for them to stay at night there, as I said they are coming from other parts of the country, most of them are. There are actually coming here, instead of staying there, many of them are working as roaming hawkers, many of the women are working as prostitutes at night there, something like that.

Rebecca - Right. So has it become an increased problem, with more and more people moving to the cities?

Alve - Yeah, this is creating a problem, because as you said...as I said that many of them are involved in crime and they don't have any proper basic human rights there, and this is kind of a problem.

Rebecca - Right.

Chris -And in terms of how you were received, was everyone happy for you to be around that area and photographing with all this, you know, with an expensive camera around your neck?

Alve - Most of them were happy, but sometimes I faced some weird situation there. For example sometimes railway stations guards asked me, "Why are you photographing here? What is the purpose? Are you from any agencies or are you doing any pictures for press? " or things like this they asked, but not all the time. Almost all the people I photographed there, are very welcoming.

Rebecca - So you had more problems with the authorities, not the kind of people, the roaming people?

Alve - Actually there is no law or something like that, that I can't take photographs in the railway station. There is no rules like that. So in Bangladesh...sometimes the guards are the problem, are the main problem, but actually there is no reason behind this.

Chris - And is this an ongoing project? Is this something that you intend to continue to develop? Do you go back to Chittagong?

Alve - Yeah, this is an ongoing project. I come to Chittagong almost every month and stay here four or five days in every month. Actually I am planning to continue this for the next few years.

Chris - Okay. Good.

Rebecca - And quite a few of the pictures you take, have children in them, which are obviously quite a venerable group of people, and I was just wondering about the sort of

women, because most of your pictures, seem to have boys or men and I was interested to know like about the women who are also living in the railway stations and, cause I imagine them to be a very venerable group as well.

Alve - As you know Bangladesh is a Muslim country and women are a little bit shy to be photographed, so many of them didn't give me permission to photograph them, and for this reason I felt comfortable to photograph men and boys, but I also have plans to photograph women - especially the prostitutes that are living there.

Rebecca - Right okay, so in this case, you being a man, had mixed influence, in that you felt more comfortable photographing men but it perhaps restricted your access to women?

Alve - Yeah, it is kind of restricted a I said.

Rebecca - Yeah.

Chris - How do you think, things would have been different...Because obviously you know the language, you are local to the area. Do you think, white, Western, European photographer, would have been treated differently? Would they have a different experience? Would they have more difficulty accessing these people and being welcomed?

Alve - Actually the people of Bangladesh are very welcoming, they have very welcoming mentality for foreign people, especially for western people, they actually love the white people and people coming from Europe and North America, but the people are actually welcoming here.

Chris - Yeah.

Rebecca - And in terms of your choices about photographing in black and white, I found this very interesting, I found the photos very powerful, but there are quite a few images of Bangladesh or India, which is a country I know, is a very colourful place, so often the images are in colour. So can you tell us something about why you chose to shoot black and white?

Alve - Well, actually when I started photography, I was influenced by colour photographers like Steve McCurry, Alice (?), GMB Akash from Bangladesh, but I later discovered the works of photographers like Joseph Koudelka, Daido Moriyama from Japan, Munem Wasif, Saiful Huq Omi for me from Bangladesh, and I felt that black and white, I like this style more, and I think that black and white photography is kind of abstract, because you cannot see black and white in your own eyes, so when people look at a black and white photograph, they interpret it in different kind of abstract. That was why I was interested in black and white photography but this doesn't mean that in the future I won't work in colour, I have also plans to work in colour in the future.

Rebecca - The same project in colour, or a different project?

Alve - A different project.

Rebecca - Okay.

Alve - Obviously a different project.

Rebecca - Yeah, cause I think the black and white, sort of, really brings the focus on the subjects and helps to slow down the pace, because the railway stations, the pictures I've

seen, always made them seem very very busy and hectic, and the black and white for me, sort of isolates the people and gets you to really stop and think about their lives and what they are going through. I think it's really effective in that way. So I think it's a very interesting choice

#####MOVE##### Rebecca - Just going sort of back to your images again, thinking about the black and white, and you also, do quite high contrast in your post-processing, and I also really like the way you use quite a lot of shadows and lights. Was that a conscious choice before you took the pictures or just that kind of came out when you were looking at them afterwards, that those ones worked really well, or will you always be interested in using shadows and light?

Alve- Actually because of my interest in photography, I was inspired by photographers who were working in this style. I am also trying to develop my work in this style, but in the future I have plans to work with colour I will work with even low contrast photographs.

Rebecca - Right. But I think these images work really well, and I think the light and shadows in them are great and they are very effective, they're bringing definitely a really strong kind of atmosphere, which suits the work, so I think they're lovely.

Alve - Thank you.

#####MOVE#####

and which photographers were you saying you were influenced by them? You named a few Bangladeshi photographers, is that right?

Alve - Joseph Koudelka and Daido Moriyama are not Bangladeshi...

Rebecca - No.

Alve - ...but later influenced by Munem Wasif and Saiful Huq Omi of Bangladesh...

Rebecca - Right.

Alve - ... and Saiful Huq Omi is actually my mentor, he is a great photographer, very world famous photographer.

Rebecca - and is there quite a big sort of photography scene in Bangladesh?

Alve - Actually Bangladesh is doing very well, nowadays, in the last few years, with photographers getting many international recognitions, and Bangladesh major photography exhibitions like Chobi Mela are being held. Chobi Mela, as I know, is the second artist photography festival of the world, that is a biannual photography festival. So the movement in Bangladesh for photography, especially with documentary photography and this kind of photography, yes the movement is nowadays very good.

Rebecca - Right.

Chris - So that's documentary and photojournalism, rather than fine art or other forms? Is it specifically documentary and photojournalism that's flourishing?

Alve - Yeah, documentary and photo journalism are flourishing, but other kinds of photography like, fine art photography, glamour photography, food photography, in this kind of photography Bangladesh is actually not doing very well, but in documentary

photography and photo journalism, Bangladeshi photographers are doing very well in international arena.

Rebecca - Yeah, interesting.

Chris - Would you be showing your work at a Bangladesh festival?

Alve - Actually I still have not participated in any Bangladeshi festival, but I would love to. But most of my exhibitions have been held in Europe and especially in England. For example this year (2013) I had four exhibitions in England.

Chris - Right. Where have you exhibited?

Alve - First photography was exhibited in Sony World photography award in Somerset house.

Chris - Okay, yeah.

Alve - Then in Kingswood school in Bath. Then I exhibited in [Downstairs at] Mother in London as part of Ian Parry scholarship - I was one of the commended photographers of this year's Ian Parry scholarship that was given, jointly given, by Sunday Times, Canon and Save the Children.

Chris - Nice one. Have you ever explored audio and video with your projects? Because obviously it will be very interesting to hear more about the individuals that are around Chittagong railway. Are you using exclusively stills photography, when you are documenting this or are you using audio and video as well?

Alve - Well I take a cheap audio player with me or sometimes I record audio with my mobile phone, just to have records of the people I am photographing, but I am not still using this audio in my projects. This project is exclusively in photographs, but in the future I want to do some multimedia project, and also I have planned to study multimedia photojournalism in the future.

Chris - Okay, what other projects would you like to explore in the future?

Alve - Beside the Chittagong railways station, another project is going on, that is Suhrawardi Uddan, that was the one commended in the Ian Parry scholarship, but beside these two ongoing projects, I have some other plan to do some other work, like, I have plans to work in environmental projects, like, to work with environmental refugees - climate refugees, also actually my next plan is to work with these topics.

Chris - Climate refugees?

Alve - yeah.

Rebecca - Okay.

Chris - Of which are quite a few in Bangladesh, am I right?

Alve - Yeah, Bangladesh is one of the most suffering countries, that suffers from climate changes.

Chris - Yeah.

Chris - And what are you doing to promote yourself and your work? What tools are you using and what platforms?

Alve - Till now I am not working as a professional, because doing assignments or something like that, but I want to make my own website blog and I am going to promote myself by it, and continuously I will try to get in international exhibitions, international competitions, so right now this is my way of promotion.

Chris - and you are getting a lot of recognition already. Which is great.

Alve - yeah, I've been getting some recognition.

Chris - Do you use twitter at all to connect with others around the world?

Alve - yeah, yeah.

Chris - And how do you find it as a tool to connect with other photographers around the world?

Alve - I use Facebook, Twitter and these kind of social media to connect with other photographers.

Chris - Yeah, and have you many connections, have you kind of connected with many photographers outside of Bangladesh?

Alve - Yeah I have done some workshops, some international masterclass workshop held in Bangladesh, I had connection with them and also I'm working with photographers like Saifula Huq Omi, Andrew Biraj in Bangladesh - they are very famous, and both of them are very internationally acclaimed photographers. I work under them, I work under ongoing mentorship of Saiful Huq Omi.

Chris - That's fantastic.

Rebecca - That's great.

Chris - It's a great opportunity.

Alve - Yeah.

Chris - When we spoke last week, you mentioned that you are heading to Cambodia, can you tell us a little bit about that?

Alve - I am going to Cambodia to participate in a photographic workshop, named Angkor Photo Workshop. This great photographers like Anton ???? will be taking classes there, and I am one of the thirty selected photographers from around Asia and it is very competitive - the best emerging photographers are selected to participate in this workshop in Cambodia.

Chris - Right.

Rebecca - That's great. What a great experience.

Alve - Yeah that should be a good experience.

Rebecca - Yeah, very exciting. So there seems to be quite a good network of people there in Bangladesh. As you were saying, it is an up and coming area for documentary photography, so do you find there is a lot going on, in terms of exhibitions and workshops and people to talk to about your work?

Alve - Yeah, that is really a great experience to have. Actually exhibitions are one of the ways that you can show a photographer to the masses, to the general people, so that should be a good opportunity I think.

Rebecca - but there is a good community of people, where you are, in Dhaka, to talk to and exchange ideas and so on.

Alve - yes there is a very good community of documentary photographers here in Dhaka, I can share my experience with other photographers here.

Chris - And what about exposure to the work of other photographers? Are there many exhibitions organised, in Dhaka, or other cities around Bangladesh?

Alve- Actually the movement of photography, still now based just in Dhaka. Every year many exhibitions are going on in Dhaka...

Chris - Right

Alve - But also in Dhaka it is really difficult to show my work.

Rebecca - Right, Ok - yeah - is that why you moved there?

Alve - I moved to Dhaka because while I was in Chittagong, in my university there is no... my minor studies in Dhaka was Media and Communications but in Chittagong there is no Media and Communications department, so I transferred my credit to other university so I could study in Media and Communication. My major was in marketing, but minor was in Media and Communication. So I moved to Dhaka to study Media and Communication.

Rebecca - Right, Ok...yep, yep.

Chris - But then by moving to Dhaka you have more opportunities to both evolve as a photographer and also get commissioned?

Alve - Yes, yes - obviously I have more opportunities in Dhaka.

Chris - And so what do you hope to get from the mentor programme that you're going to participate in - what do you think you'll be exposed to?

Alve - The mentor program...this mentor program was very helpful for me, and my mentor helped me to shape my mentality and shape my thinking towards photography. He actually totally changed my mind in photography. So that was really for me to - how to see people.

Chris - Are there many female photographers at all?

Alve - Female photographers?

Chris - Yes

Alve - Well many women are nowadays doing photography in Bangladesh, but most of them are not continuing to turn professional and not doing this for a longer period of time, but

now some female photographers are doing very well. For example in the Ian Parry Scholarship, I was commended, but the main winner was named Farzana Hossen - she's also from Bangladesh, and she's doing some tremendous work on women in Bangladesh. And other photographers like Taslima Akhter she's doing her project on garment workers - that working is getting recognised by international...

Chris - That's good to hear

Rebecca - Yeah, it is good to hear. What do you think the barriers are to woman photographers in Bangladesh are?

Alve - The barriers are...like one major problem is the security for women - the security for women in Bangladesh is not very strong till now. And the other thing is that most of the women are not doing photography for example while they are getting married - they are giving up photography.

Rebecca - Right

Alve - Actually, these are the main barriers for the women photographers here.

Rebecca - Ah, ok - so they stop when they are married?

Alve - Yeah, yeah - most of them.

Rebecca - Yeah, yeah.

Chris - How do you go about initiating...how to you go about starting a new project - do you do a lot of research? You say that you want to do one on climate refugees. So do you have a concept in mind - an approach? Have you done research on the topic and organisations that are working in the field?

Alve - Yeah, I am starting research in climate change and about climate refugees, and I do some research before doing my project of the ????, but the Chittagong railway station project I did not do that much research because as I said earlier I started almost...

Chris - so what about the climate refugee project - how will you start it, how will you research it - how will you get access to the people and the environment?

Alve - Right now I am actually doing my research on the idea, but after coming from Cambodia I have plans to do some fieldwork - some field research on this project.

Rebecca - Ah right - where will you be going for that?

Alve - Umm, I have plans to go to coastal areas of Bangladesh...

Rebecca - Coastal areas?

Alve - But I have not decided test which specific area I will be going to, but I am going to visit some coastal areas of Bangladesh.

Rebecca - And will you just turn at these areas, or will you make contacts before you go, or work with organisations?

Alve - Actually, I have some relations in coastal areas - at first I will contact them, to get answers to know about the place well. Right now this is my plan, and after going there I will definitely get some other spots I think.

Rebecca - right, yeah.

Chris - How do you find exposing the rest of the world to your work - I know you have been referred to as an emerging photographer in some Western publications. How easy do you feel it is for people elsewhere in the world to gain access to very established competitions and also agencies and the likes - like Panos and Magnum? Do you feel like the opportunities exist?

Alve - From Bangladesh?

Chris - Yes.

Alve - Bangladeshi photographers are already working in Panos - agencies like Panos and VU. I think it is actually very difficult to work at big agencies from Bangladesh. Some guys are already working in big agencies from Bangladesh.

Chris - Who is your current main inspiration?

Alve - My current main inspiration are photographers like Munem Wasif, Saifula Huq Omi, Joseph Koudelka - these are my main current inspirations

Rebecca - Can you tell about a - read a book or seen an exhibition recently that has inspired you? Or...in Bangladesh - perhaps something you've seen on the internet in terms of a...

Alve - Recently in the beginning of this year (2013) I was present at Chobi Mela in Bangladesh, which is, as I said earlier, the second largest exhibition in the world. Many great photographers were exhibited here and recently I am looking at 'Belonging' by Munem Wasif - so I recommend this book to the rest of the world. He's a Bangladeshi photographer and working in the agency VU and he is one of my most favourite photographers.

Rebecca - Can you just say that name and the book title again?

Alve - His name is Munem Wasif and the book's name is 'Belonging'

Rebecca - 'Belonging' - Ok, great!

Chris - What I'll do is I'll get all these names and websites and book titles from you via email, and I will make sure they are available for the listen.

Alve - Yeah, yeah - I will send it to you via email.

Rebecca - I have a quick question...will you just stick to Bangladesh for the climate refugee or do you think you might go outside of your country?

Alve - No - I just plan to work in Bangladesh for the climate refugees

Rebecca - Just work in Bangladesh?

Alve - Yes

Chris - Do you feel that climate refugees in particular is an under-reported issue? What motivates you to pursue this particular project?

Alve - this issue is not that much reported an issue actually. Some big photographers are focusing on this subject, and many of them have photographed in Bangladesh as well, but personally I think that for example, that even some of my relatives are a victim of climate change, and so for this reason I am interested in it.

Rebecca - So on a more personal kind of level then?

Alve - Yes.

Chris - And what about getting access to Bangladeshi mainstream media - do these stories - such as homelessness, such as climate refugees and climate change....

Alve - Actually, the access for this stuff in Bangladeshi mainstream media are very limited, but if I can develop a strong body of work on this issue, I have plans to expose it in the international media...

Chris - Right, yeah

Rebecca - Why do you think the exposure in the mainstream media is limited?

Alve - As I said earlier, Bangladeshi photographers are doing very well, but the Bangladeshi mainstream media is not that much friendly to photography...

Rebecca - ah ok.

Chris - Do you mainly then use the internet to get to other Bangladeshis - to inform other Bangladeshis of these issues?

Alve - Yeah, I use the internet - also I am in contact with other Bangladeshis personally and I often use the internet as well.

Chris - Well thank you very much for your time.

Alve - I am really happy to have been interviewed by you guys.

Chris - Well thank you very much - we appreciate the time you have taken, and we will be in touch.

Rebecca - Yeah definitely - good luck with all your projects.

Alve - Ok - thank you

Chris + Rebecca - Thank you - take care - Bye Bye

Alve - Bye bye