Majority World: Challenging the West's Rhetoric of Democracy

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Sugarcane worker: Waste molasses from the sugarcane factories make the water in nearby ponds unusable. Women bring in water from afar in the early hours of the morning. Near Aurangabad. Maharashtra, India

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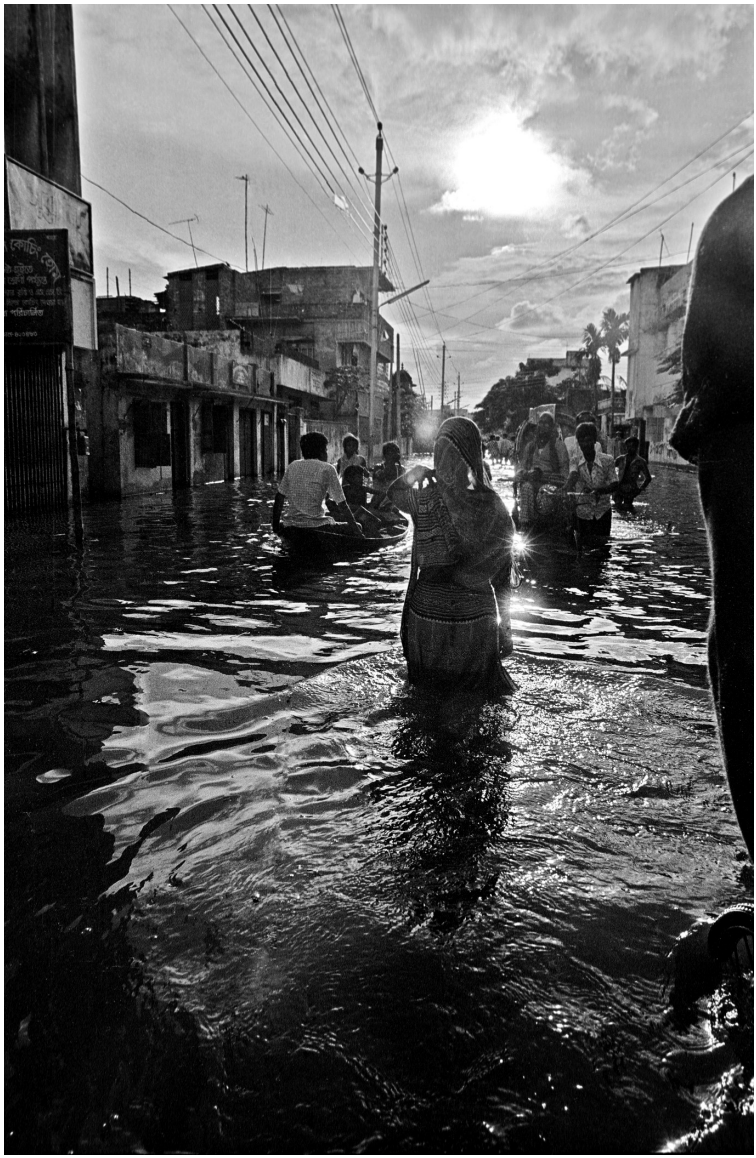

In September 1988 Bangladesh was hit by one of the worst floods in its history. In a high street in Kamalapur, a woman wades to work. Business is as usual.

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Majority World:
Challenging the West's Rhetoric of Democracy

Shahidul Alam

Economically poor countries of the world are invariably countries that have been colonized, and continue to be colonized through globalized forms of control. They have been categorized as being "Third World" or "Developing World" or even LDCs (Least Developed Countries). The expressions have strong negative connotations that reinforce the stereotypes about poor communities and represent them as icons of poverty. They hide their histories of oppression and continued exploitation. The labels also hinder the appreciation of the cultural and social wealth of these communities. Though these terms are still used without remorse, there is an increasing feeling within the communities themselves that these terms are inappropriate.

In the early 1990s, I began advocating for a new expression "majority world" to represent what has formerly been known as the "Third World." The term highlights the fact that we are indeed the majority of humankind. It also brings to sharp attention the anomaly that the Group of 8 countries—whose decisions affect majority of the world's peoples—represent a tiny fraction of humankind.

The term majority world, now increasingly being used, challenges the West's rhetoric of democracy. It also defines the community in terms of what it has, rather than what it lacks. In time, the majority world will reaffirm its place in a world where the earth will again belong to the people who walk on it.

(Writings selected by *Amerasia Journal* from Shahidul Alam's website: http://shahidul.wordpress.com/)

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A student in a prison van used by police to arrest students in Jagannat Hall, Dhaka University, screams out to friends for help, after a raid on the January 31,1996, as part of a pre-election arms recovery drive. Jaganath Hall is known for its high Hindu population.

Power of Cullture: Bangladeshi Spirit

February 1, 2004

Culture glides through peoples' consciousness, breaking along its banks, accumulating and depositing silt, meandering through paths of least resistance, changing route, drying up, spilling its banks, forever flowing like a great river. Islands form and are washed away. Isolated pockets get left behind. It nurtures, nourishes, and destroys. Ideas move with the wind and the currents and the countercurrents. Trends change, flowing in the slipstreams of dominant culture. A few swim against this current, while others get trapped in ox-bow lakes, isolated from the mainstream.

Photography, more than any other media or art form, has influenced culture. Photographs in particular take on the dual responsibility of being bearers of evidence and conveyers of passion. The irrelevant discussion of whether photography is art has sidelined the debate from the more crucial one of its power to validate history and to create a powerful emotional response, thereby influencing public opinion. The more recent discussions and fears have centered on the computer's ability to manipulate images, subsuming the more important realization that photo-

Grouse Hunt: Lord Terrence Devonport enjoys the traditional sport of grouse hunting in the North East of England. (part of my ongoing story on the British Upper Class)

graphs are largely manufactured by the image industry, one that is increasingly owned by a corporate world. The implied veracity of the still image and its perceived ability to represent the truth hides the ubiquitous and less perceptible manipulation enabled by photographic and editorial viewpoint. Not only can we no longer believe that the photograph cannot lie, we now need to contend with the situation that liars may own television channels and newspapers and be the leaders of nations. Given the enormous visual reach that the new technology provides, the ability to lie is far greater than has ever been before.

Photography has become the most powerful tool in the manufacturing of consent, and it remains to be seen whether photographers can rise above the role of being cogs in this propaganda machine and become the voice for the voiceless.

"Development, Culture, Globalization"

October 25, 2007

I will talk about my personal experiences as a majority world photojournalist trying to challenge the control that the power brokers within the media have. Conscious that mainstream media had no working class representation, in 1994, I started teaching photojournalism to ten working-class children in Dhaka.

The first day we met, we sat on the veranda of their school, talking pictures. As we looked at a photograph taken by Azizur Rahim of the bodies of children who had died in a fire in a garment factory, Moli, a ten-year-old girl said:

"Oh, that was the fire in number 10."

"What happened in number 10?"

"What's there to say, the owner took the bodies and dumped them in the drain at night."

"What happened to the owner?"

"Nothing ever happens to owners," she said.

Then, waiting a bit, she added, "If I had a camera, I would take his picture and put that guy in jail."

As a working photojournalist, I get cynical about what we actually achieve through our photography. But here was a child who had that conviction that we as professionals have somehow lost. She still believed.

Given the way the media is controlled however, I recognize that at a global level, the messages are too well orchestrated, and that putting the guy in jail, requires a lot more than having a camera.

Using the media to shape people's perceptions is of course nothing new. "Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could possible have."

The date is interesting. The birth of photography parallels a move by colonizers to dominate the globe. The colonization of our visual space became merged with two words, "Development" and "Civilization," while a new word later joined the ranks, "Globalization." Photography is particularly relevant to this understanding, as globalization's reach allows photography to manifest itself.

Even the gatekeepers need to devise methods to justify their actions. Hence rules were made that allowed justification and mindsets created that accepted the reasoning. The silences are also part of this visual vocabulary.

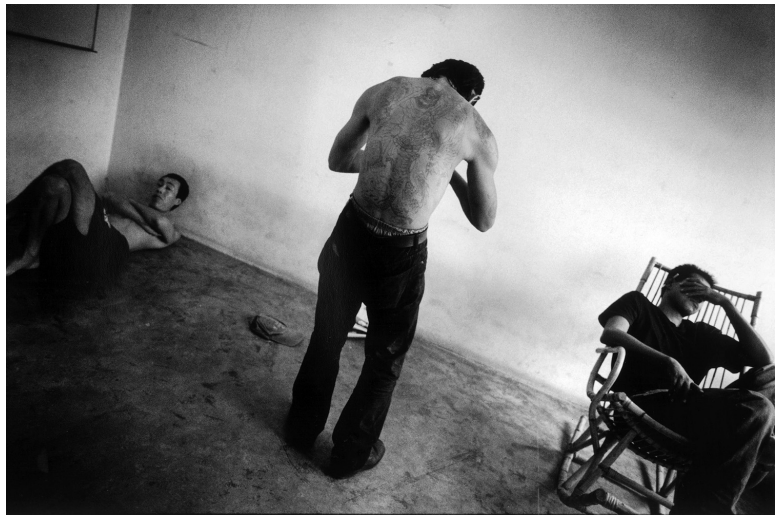
The five permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations happen to be the world's five biggest arms dealers, and tend to do precisely as the U.S. requests. Rarely has there been a greater "conflict of interests" when it comes to promoting world peace. While the standard press photographs of

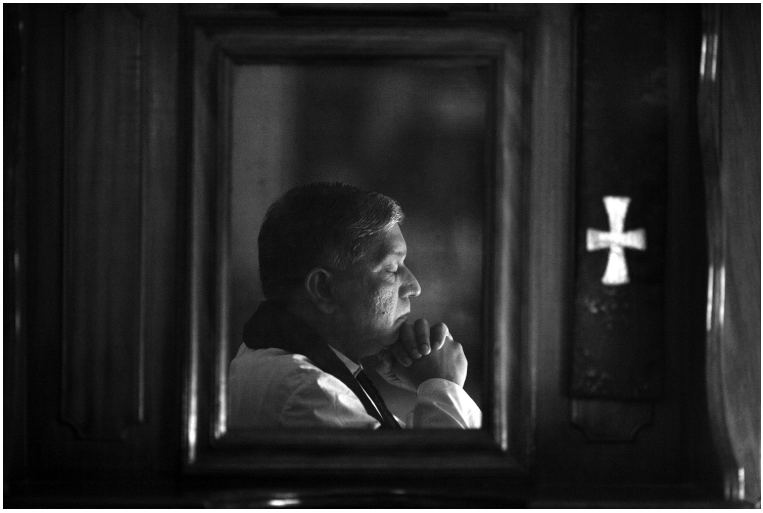
United Nations meetings are abundant. The photographs have never been placed in this context.

Wide-angle black-and-white shots, grainy, high contrast images characterize the typical majority world helpless victim. Huge billboards with a dying malnourished child in a corner with outstretched arms. A clear message in polished bold font in the top left corner cleverly left blank. The message reads, "We shall always be there." A reality constructed for and by those who want us to forget the implications. That "you (the majority world) shall always be there." In that role—a passive existence deliberately maintained—we who receive aid ("the client group") remain.

I was staying with friends in Newry in Northern Ireland. Paddy and Deborah had kindly made their five-year-old daughter's room available for me. Corrina was friendly and curious and would spend a lot of time in the room. One day as I was clearing my pockets of change I had accumulated, she suddenly remarked, "But you've got money, but, but you're from Bangladesh." The family had just returned from a trip to Bangladesh. Paddy was a development worker and they had visited many of the projects. At the tender age of five, Corrina knew that Bangladeshis did not have money.

Positive Lives: One of the junkies who regularly comes to "cool off" at the drop-in centre of Rumah Pengasih, a drug rehabilitation centre run by former addicts. Part of the international Positive Lives project (www.positivelives.org) that documents the impact of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2001.





Rev. Dr. Alex Vadakumthala, 48, is the Executive Secretary of the Health Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India. For years he worked at the Vatican. Upon returning to India nine years ago he took up the AIDS issue as his primary role. "The Church finds its meaning when it responds to the challenges of the times." Delhi, India

The hungry child, the woman with the shriveled breast, the pitiful look— it is an image that has deliberately been propagated since it feeds into a new economic system, one that requires a patron-client relationship. On the other hand, some lives are cheap.

"All things considered, we think the price was worth it," Madeleine Albright said about the 500,000 children who had died in Iraq as a result of U.S. sanctions. Bangladesh revisited.

It was not considered "inhuman" to forcibly enslave 50 million Africans. Thirty-six million died en route and only 12 million eventually made it. In Bangladesh, the trade of Dhakai Muslin was stopped in favor of the Lancashire yarn and a tradition passed down from father to son was brutally crushed. Humanism had a visible face with the "we" clearly defined, and of course, no photographs.

John Lucaites felt "the primary reason for a photograph achieving iconic status was through presenting a strategy for managing endemic tensions." It was a further tool for control, another cog in the mechanism for manufacturing consent.

The Image Business

October 25, 2007

Businesses have been quick to recognize the capital involved in the image business. The two biggest owners of images today are Bill Gates (Corbis) and Mark Getty (Getty Images). Besides buying up huge archives, Gates is now building an underground warehouse for images. Libraries, which were once browsable by researchers, students, and interested public, will be buried beneath the ground, with only images that Gates et al consider "appropriate" released to the public domain.

The quest for "development" has become an inevitable drive towards certain goals. Those who stood in the way of this "progress" were "backward" and the obstacles needed to be eliminated. In the process of learning to be "fully human," only some kinds of suffering were seen as an affront to humanity, and their elimination sought.

"Good pain," whether it meant amputation by a doctor, or a surgical strike from the sky, was noble. Where the "goodness" of the pain was not so obvious, the images had to be eliminated. The image of the charred Iraqi soldier by Kenneth Jarecke (called "crispy" by his agency Contact Press Images) slipped through the defense screening, but the media itself decided to cull the image. It did not fit.

The scriptwriters also had problems with the images of Bosnian Muslims protesting against the September 11 attacks. These too were culled, by all major channels. To create and nurture this "civilization," a new soldier was born, armed with camera and a satellite phone. Things had gone horribly wrong in Vietnam where the media had free reign. The new soldiers knew how to manufacture consent. They knew how "truth" had to be presented. A new science was born, the science of manufacturing consent. In some parts of the world, it is called "journalism." Icons of misery sometimes replace the icons of poverty, while the photographer becomes an accomplice in a process controlled by the news desk. But it has to be the right misery.

A woman sued *Paris Match* magazine for publishing a photograph taken of her sitting on her boyfriend's shoulder. They were celebrating France's victory in a sporting event in public at the Champs Elysees. Her grounds for the case were simply that she did not want to be in *Paris Match*. The dying in Somalia, the starving in Sudan, the devastated in Bangladesh are regular fod-

der for the glossies and the news magazines. Their choice has never been an issue.

It also has to do with the times and current sensibilities. There have been no pictures circulated of Diana dead in her car. The films had been confiscated. JFK and Martin Luther King were shown dead, but not Di. The "people's princess" was sacrosanct. No one cried "censorship."

On the other hand, the Orient and its misery were being romanticized. Typecasting in Algerian postcards required little more than swapping captions under the photographs of the same model. She was after all, what you wanted her to be. Voluptuous, exotic, demure, enticing, above all she was there as a still life, ready to be consumed. Much like the rest of the "Orient."

Don McCullin's photograph of a Bangladeshi refugee carrying the body of a woman dying of cholera was part of a significant body of work by a committed photojournalist trying to highlight the plight of a wronged nation. Twenty-five years later, Paul Harrison's image, a virtual copy, establishes the stereotype basket case.

People at play, children dancing, tender moments at home, are images that Corrina will never see. The skeletal frame dangling from a weighing scale will make it to expensive books and museum collections. All at a time when the majority world screams out for the icons of poverty to be replaced by images of humanity, and our visual radar remains restricted to "terrors" defined by a few.

"The Game of Death"

December 29, 2007

She may well have been the best leader available. With a military dictator and a corrupt businessman as the alternatives, Benazir Bhutto, with her Western admirers and her feudal followers, was clearly a front-runner. How she died will probably remain a mystery, but she was playing the game of death, and it was unlikely she would win every time.

It is difficult to write about people who have just died. Many are grief stricken at the untimely death of the former prime minister. Even her critics are shocked by the way she was hunted down. An insensitive piece would aggravate their pain, and one does not generally speak ill of the dead. I remember as a child asking my mother "Amma. Do bad people never die?" A man not known for his strength of character had died, and newspaper

Shahidul Alam, Photographer

reports had described him as an honest social worker. I am no longer of the age to get away with such questions. But even for those who have loved Benazir, I believe the questions need to be asked if this cycle is to ever stop.

It was 1995. They were troubled times in Pakistan. I had gone over to Karachi on the invitation of my architect friend Shahid Abdulla. There were no telephone booths at Karachi airport, or anywhere else in the city. The government was worried the MQM would use them for their communication. Sindh was at war with itself.

Shahid wanted me to run a photography workshop at the Indus Valley School of Architecture and Design that he was involved in. Those were the days when we had time for long conversations. We talked of many things. The gun-toting security men outside every big house in Karachi. Shahid's meeting with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. His memories of Benazir. But the conversation would often veer to a person we both admired. Abdus Sattar Edhi, the humanitarian who had set up an unparalleled ambulance service all over Pakistan.

On the morning of October 10, I went over to see the man. He had an easy charm that came from living a simple life and having little to hide. He sat on his wire mesh bed, talking of how things started. We were regularly interrupted by people coming in with requests, and Edhi responding to minor crises. Then we

heard about Fahim Commando, the MQM leader, having been killed. Fahim and his comrades had apparently been caught in an ambush and all four had died. They had been in police custody, but the police had all escaped and not one of them had been injured. Edhi was not judgmental. Fahim was another man who needed a decent burial. As I watched him bathe the slain MQM leader, I could see the burn marks on the bullet holes on the commando's body.

The extra-judicial killings during Benazir's rule are well documented. The fact that no investigation was done when her brother Mir Murtaza was killed outside Bilawal House, the family home, fueled the commonly held belief that her husband Asif Zardari had arranged the killing. Even Edhi's ambulances had not been allowed access. Not until Murtaza had bled to death. Anyone who witnessed the murder was arrested; one witness died in prison. Benazir was then prime minister.

Murtaza had been vocal against the corruption of Zardari. Benazir defended her husband stoically throughout. Despite the Swiss bank accounts, she assured people that he would be seen as the Nelson Mandela of Pakistan. With Zardari now tipped as the new chief of the PPP, Pakistan's Mandela and his Swiss bank accounts might well be the new force. Whether Pakistanis will see this polo-playing businessman as the savior of the day remains to be seen.

Supported by the U.S., Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto had been largely responsible for the break up of Pakistan and the genocide in Bangladesh. The current string pulling by the U.S. has hardly made Pakistan a safer place. The western support of militarization in Bangladesh and the growing importance of Jamaat is an all too familiar feeling. If Pakistan is an omen, it is a sinister one.

Perhaps Mrs. Packletide would have known how the former prime minister of this nuclear nation died. But the government's attempts to cover-up will do little to quell the conspiracy theories. Like the Bhutto family, the military too have burned a lot of bridges in getting to where they are. There are too many skeletons in their closet. There is no going back, and no price too high.