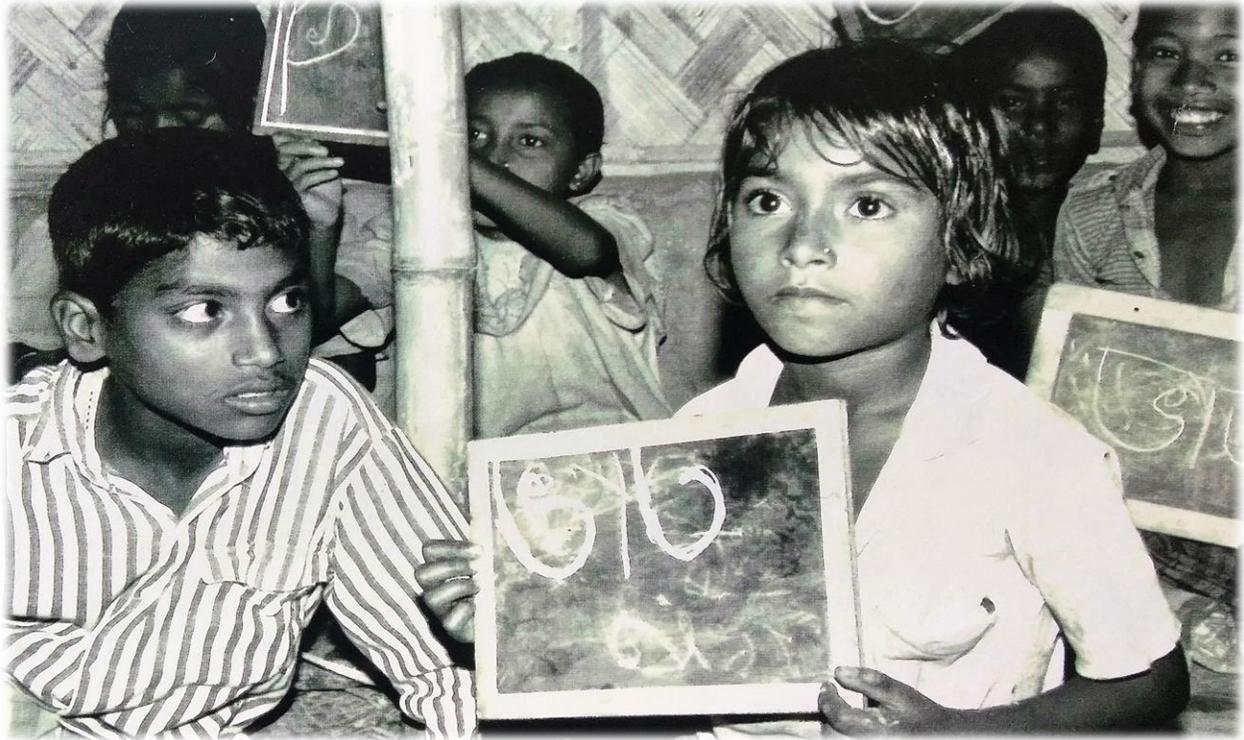


Photo by Duncan Gregory



Shefali: the doctor from Dhaka

I was seated on a slim wooden bench inside a hot, sweaty, bamboo shed, with approximately 100 eyes gazing at me: this strange-looking creature from the West! Once things settled back to what I judged might be almost normal, I uncased my camera and began to photograph proceedings, which in turn set off another round of bubbling interchange. After things settled again, my eye – and my camera lens - were drawn to a particularly attentive young girl, seated towards the rear of the class.

The year was 1990 and my assignment was to report from Bangladesh on a range of development projects: some in the main city, Dhaka, and others in remote rural areas. Part of this was to be a focus on children and so from day one I was meeting Bangladeshi kids. This quickly became a central interest of mine, perhaps something of a passion, as I became more and more motivated to try to understand what I could

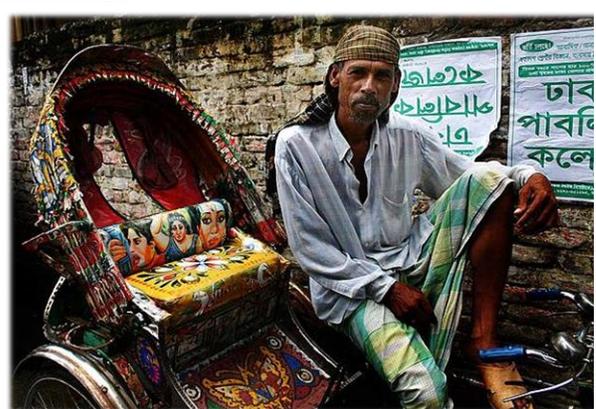
about their perspectives and their aspirations. I was eager to get the view through their young and hopeful eyes (It would be nice to be able to say 'young and innocent eyes', but I came to realise that most of the young in this, one of the poorest countries, lose their innocence at a very early age: they have had more experience of hardship before the age of six, than most people in the West encounter in a lifetime.

In Dhaka, the two-tiered capital - where the rich boast mansions with manicured lawns, but the vast majority live on the edge of life, immersed in a sea of poverty - formal education for kids at the lower end of the pyramid was generally regarded as an unthinkable luxury. This was brought home to me very clearly when I stumbled upon a bright-eyed young girl at a local evening literacy class, doing her best to achieve a rudimentary education, and thus progress in life.

This young lady who was about to become the centre-point of this story, lived in what might be kindly termed the down-market end of the capital. Turning away from the relatively spacious sprawl of the *New Dhaka* streets our man-powered, cycle rickshaw - beautifully adorned with paintings of film stars and politicians - wound its way into ever-narrowing lanes, filled with ever-increasing numbers of people.



*Left: busy streets of Dhaka
(image: wallsdesk.com)
Below: beautiful designed rickshaw
(image: wikibooks.org)*



When it became apparent that a combination of road width and people numbers meant that our 'baby' could not proceed any further, my guide Akram had a word to the guy

pushing the peddles and we disembarked. In the fading light we walked away from the roadway and across a series of six or eight railway tracks: the main trainline from the East, into Dhaka. A stream of people moved in either direction, along the tracks, as far as the eye could see and many enterprising young people had laid out their stalls where they could bank on a steady flow of customers.

Image: thestar.com

Across the lines, Akram and I climbed down from the railway embankment, to find a world of people-packed lanes, with the people in question engrossed in shopping activities and more small business stalls hawking their wares, on either



side. After a short walk we came to an open space where the ground dirt was rammed hard by constant traffic; water lying in the tyre marks indicated recent rains. The focal point of this fairly large quadrangle – it could be called a piazza in Italy – was a small rattan building, with a rusty iron roof. As we approached, people began to gather, so that by the time we reached the door of the hut it was obvious to me that our arrival had been telegraphed well ahead of the actual event.

Ushered through the door by a young woman with a nervous smile and colourful headscarf, I was confronted by the common gaze from a hundred-and-one fascinated eyes. They stared at me as if I had just dropped in from *Planet Zed!* I looked back with a smile and waved, hoping this might dispel their fears of an intergalactic invasion. This was a literacy class for kids: Dhaka city style.

To say that the room was crowded would be understatement: packed like sardines might be closer! Memories play tricks, but the camera does not lie; the photos I took that

evening showed around 35 children crammed into little more than ten square metres. Within that, the lucky teacher standing next to a blackboard had a space of about one square metre to work with. The kids shuffled together even closer, to allow myself and Akram to enter and get seated on a hand-made wooden bench, near the door.

The male teacher was armed with chalk and flipcharts and each child had a soft-backed language coursebook, along with a small chalk board, in front of them. I was acutely aware that I must have appeared a very peculiar oddity to these children; This place was a long way from the prestigious streets of diplomatic Dhaka and most, if not all, may never have clapped eyes on a westerner - a white man - in their short lifetime.

On the way to the evening class I had asked Akram if it would be possible to visit the home of one of the kids, after the class finished. So, I was pleasantly surprised when, by chance, the child who had featured in many of my photos came to the front as soon as the class was over. Akram spoke briefly to the teacher and then introduced me to the girl. Her name was Shefali and she was the one whose home I would then go on to visit.

It seemed quite a twist of fate, that the young girl I had picked out towards the back of the class should be the one to come forward and take me to her home, but then when her father turned up at the door a few minutes later, I had to agree, remarkable coincidences do sometimes happen. There were handshakes with the teacher and animated goodbyes from all the other children, then in the dim light of the early night, Akram and I followed father and daughter back to their home.

Shefali lived in a slum area of squat shacks, supported by bamboo and garlanded with rusting metal, plastic bags and old sacks. It had rained during the day, meaning that the ground in the narrow passage between the shacks, was ankle deep in mud. The young girl proudly showed me her house and introduced me to her elder sister who was busy cooking the evening meal of rice and vegetables, over an open fire in the muddy lane. I was inwardly stunned by the dire poverty that met my gaze that night!

Needing to take photos, I struggled to change the 35mm film in one of my cameras (this was just before the age of digital). By this time, I was surrounded by maybe fifty faces,

mostly kids, curious to know what this strange looking guy was doing in their midst. My fingers shook, as I tried to change the Kodak spool, almost by feel in the dim light, praying silently that neither the film nor the camera would fall into the sea of mud below.

Film change negotiated without too much calamity, I was then able to take photos of Shefali, her father and her sister, inside their tiny home and outside in the alleyway. Later and with time, I regarded the photographs taken that evening as top-ranking from the many hundreds of photos taken during my Bangladesh stay; the best, in black on white, seemed to convey a feeling of raw emotion from that night. And it transpired that others thought so too, because a few months after returning home, two photographs of Shefali were selected as part of an exhibition to tour Australia.

Looking back on this time in the children's literacy class and then particularly with Shefali at her home, I remember being shocked by the appalling living standards. I had travelled to many places in India and Bangladesh, but this was perhaps the worst I had seen. The so-called house that this 12year old girl lived in would hardly be considered fit for a dog in the West!

But there was a little bit of hope there too, in the simple fact that people had banded together to provide an education for their kids. Pretty basic though it was in reality, the literacy class I visited that night could be the spark that lights the fire: a slender ray of hope that enables one or two of those youngsters to move on and achieve their dreams.

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Before leaving, Shefali told me (via Akram) that she wished, one day, to become a doctor: a huge, and seemingly impossible ambition, for this child in her current situation. It would be a descent achievement if she ever progressed to formal schooling and a job, let alone university and a career in medicine. But you never know, very occasionally the impossible becomes attainable.

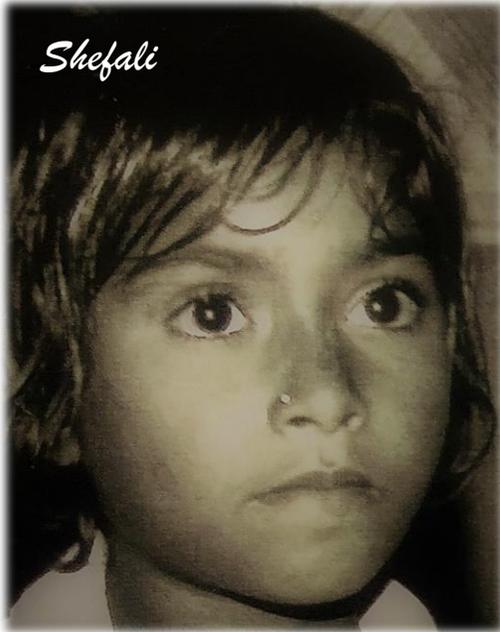


Photo by Duncan Gregory

Thirty years later I sometimes wonder if the young bright-eyed girl I met on that moonlit night in the slums of Dhaka did go on to achieve the impossible and become a doctor. It would be interesting to know how she fared and what transpired.

Who knows? Now, in 2020, Shefali could be dressed in PPE, doing her best to treat those less unfortunate than herself, who have succumbed to Covid19: the coronavirus. Never say never is my everlasting motto.

