

# BECAUSE NO ONE ASKED

## Archiving the Rohingya past



**Visitors at Ek Khaale: Once Upon a Time, curated by Greg Constantine and organised by BRAC University's Centre for Peace and Justice, engage with archival photographs that seek to reclaim the memory and dignity of the stateless Rohingyas.**

COURTESY: GREG CONSTANTINE

### NASEEF FARUQUE AMIN

It began with a question, the kind of question that arrives quietly, almost like a sigh. Greg Constantine, an American photojournalist and documentarian who has spent nearly two decades chronicling the plight of the Rohingya, sat inside a bamboo hut in Cox's Bazar, leaning towards the elderly men who were holding plastic bags filled with their pasts—brittle documents, photographs yellowed into sepia, certificates folded and refolded until the creases seemed older than the paper itself. He asked them, almost casually: Why have you never shown these to anyone else?

The answer was short, devastating, a reply that could have been whispered by ghosts: Because no one asked.

That single phrase carried the weight of exile. It explained the decades of invisibility, the silences in the archive, the way the world had walked past without pausing to look. Journalists had come, yes, lawyers too, researchers with clipboards, UN officials with acronyms and deadlines. But their questions were always about the destruction: When did

the soldiers come? How many houses were burnt? How many were killed? Never? What did you carry? What survived of your life? And so the archives—the land deeds, the family portraits, the yellowing certificates of births and schools and marriages—remained unasked for, unacknowledged, unshown.

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: the world's largest refugee camp, where nearly a million Rohingyas endure lives reduced to rations, patrols, and waiting. Bamboo shelters collapse in monsoons, fires return like curses. Stateless and unnamed, they grow up without citizenship, without futures denied but not extinguished.

Their condition is not just displacement but archival deletion. Myanmar denies their very belonging. Bangladesh hosts but refuses integration. The world offers aid, but not recognition. The Rohingya are spoken of as a burden, as a crisis, as a statistic. Rarely as people. Rarely as history.

It is this long silence that the exhibition *Ek Khaale: Once Upon a Time* sought to confront. Curated by Greg Constantine and organised by BRAC University's

Centre for Peace and Justice, the ten-day show ran from 18 to 28 August 2025 at the Merul Badda campus in Dhaka. Through photographs, dialogues, and archival fragments, it became less an art exhibition than a reclamation of memory—an attempt to reassemble the scattered lives of a people into a visible, dignified whole.

For decades, the Rohingya were photographed into victimhood. Constantine himself acknowledges that his own lens, alongside those of his peers, helped produce this visual identity: the endless march across rivers, the mothers clutching infants, the skeletal shelters on the bare hillsides. Necessary, yes, but reductive. Necessary, yes, but imprisoning.

And so he asked himself: what happens when photographs define a community, not as they are, but only as they suffer? What if the very act of documentation turns into a cage?

From that crisis came the decision to stop producing images of the present and instead to search for images of the past.

Family albums, wedding photographs, handwritten letters, property deeds—the private, the domestic, the overlooked. These would not erase the story of persecution but would complicate it, broaden it, and humanise it.

This is where diaspora studies become a compass. Stuart Hall reminds us: identity is not essence, but positioning. The Rohingya archive repositions. It insists that the community has been not only as stateless victims but as agents with deep pasts, thick roots, and futures denied but not extinguished.

Constantine turned from

photographer into archivist, a metamorphosis rare in the world of photojournalism. He trained young Rohingya in Bangladesh, in the refugee camps, and inside Myanmar—in Buthidaung, in Sittwe, in Yangon—to ask questions, to listen carefully, to photograph documents, to build trust.

The method was radical in its patience. "No deadlines," he told them, "no

expectations." And so materials began to appear, quietly, like shy animals emerging from a forest. An old man would bring out a single deed, carefully unfolded on the floor. Conversation would follow, trust would build, and then—almost ceremonially—the man would disappear into his hut and return with a plastic bag filled with papers, papers carried over rivers, smuggled across mountains, hidden under floorboards.

What surfaced was more than personal memorabilia. It was world history. A war service certificate from 1945, issued by the British government to a Rohingya man named Abdul Salam. A passport from 1949. Diaries, letters, certificates of education. Oral traditions long dismissed as myth now bore documentary proof: the Rohingya had served in the British "V Force," intelligence agents working behind Japanese lines in Arakan during World War II.

Constantine, researching simultaneously in the British Library, stumbled upon military memoirs describing the very same man. In the dusty pages of a 1945 book, an illustration captioned "Abdul Salam, Arakanese headman from Buthidaung."

The coincidence was uncanny, as if the archive itself had been waiting for recognition. Later, he found the descendants of the British officer who had commanded Rohingya fighters. In their attic lay suitcases filled with photographs, letters, and diaries—among them, the only known photograph of a Rohingya guerrilla unit in 1943, standing with their British commander holding the British flag. History, dismissed, denied, suddenly glared back from paper and ink.

Archival research, as Achille Mbembe reminds us, is always about power: who gets remembered, who gets erased. Here, the Rohingya archive re-entered world history, not as victims but as participants.

From these fragments emerged a cartography of diaspora. Rohingya memories surfaced in California, in Karachi, in Indiana, in Dublin. A man who studied engineering in the US co-

invented an EEG brainwave machine at UCLA. A student sent to Berkeley in 1954 became a nuclear physicist. Families studied at Sindh Muslim Science College, at universities in the UK, in Malaysia, in Saudi Arabia.

These are stories that rupture the singular narrative of victimhood. They show a community deeply entangled with modernity, with science, with intellectual production. They show Rohingya as contributors, as inventors, as cosmopolitans.

Ek Khaale is not just a Rohingya project; it is a project of diasporic memory itself. It reminds us that refugees are not only displaced people but displaced archives—scattered, fragmented, yet connected.

One of the most striking curatorial gestures of the exhibition is the decision to distinguish between documents and family photographs. The images of deeds, certificates, and albums are displayed level to the ground, echoing the way they were first laid out when Rohingya families revealed them to Constantine and his team. The floor becomes both archive and altar: the surface where histories were unfolded, examined, and photographed. In contrast, the family photographs are arranged on the wall in dense collages, much like the way ancestral portraits are typically displayed on the walls of vintage cafés or old family-run restaurants, filling every inch of space with layered memory. Seen up close, each photograph tells a singular story; from a distance, the collage becomes the story of a community. This dual display preserves the intimacy of private lives while amplifying their collective presence, aligning perfectly with the essence of an archival photography exhibition.

The exhibition is not a neutral display but an act of reclamation. It curates against erasure. It insists that the Rohingya not be remembered only for their expulsion, but also for their persistence.

Archival research restores subjectivity. It turns refugees from shadows into witnesses. It challenges the state's erasure. It affirms dignity. In the words of Ek Khaale: "The documents do not merely survive; they insist."

**Naseef Faruque Amin** is a writer, screenwriter, and creative professional.

# LAST WITNESS TO A LOST KINGDOM

## Landslides push Tripura families to the brink

### MINTU DESHWARA

"Our part of the village, Satchari, was once part of the Tripura state," said 90-year-old Mangeswari Debbarma, a long-time resident of Tripura Palli. "The traditional Kachari House in Srimangal, established by the Tripura Maharaja in 1897, stood as a witness to our heritage. But now, it's being lost to neglect and indifference."

She added that thousands from the Tripura community once lived in the region, which lies just across from the present-day Indian state of Tripura. However, after the Partition of India, many families migrated, and the area began to suffer from recurring landslides.

"A few years ago, there were 30 families. Five have already left due to landslides. Just recently, four more families lost their homes. The rest of us live in fear, not knowing when our homes might be next," she said.

Mangeswari said erosion has been ongoing for several years, displacing families year after year. "Two families left in 2018, one in 2019, another in 2021. Now we live under the hillocks, watching them erode every time."

"The landslides this year may not seem severe, but they haven't stopped. The only road we use to travel is also damaged, making life even harder. Two more families are now getting ready to leave. If this continues, there will be no one left here."

The Tripura indigenous community in the Satchari area of Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj is facing an existential crisis as landslides continue to threaten their homes and disrupt daily life.

Once spread across several areas of Chunarughat, the Tripura people have now been reduced to just 24 families, living precariously on a hill surrounded by dense forest and tea gardens near Satchari National Park—an area locally known as Tripura Palli.

Despite their remote location and harsh conditions, the Tripura community has shown strong interest in education. However, frequent landslides during the

monsoon season have not only put their homes at risk but also severely hampered movement, especially during emergencies.

"Whenever it rains, landslides hit us so hard that it's hard to believe," said Akash Debbarma, assistant headman of the village. "We can't send our children to school or take patients to hospital. A few months ago, a maternity patient had to wait an hour before we could even cross the stream."

The village sits just behind the main gate of Satchari National Park. The steep earthen mounds, formed of red soil, are visibly eroded in many places. Several houses are now perched dangerously close to the edge.

Landslides have become more frequent and intense in recent years. In one incident, five families were rendered homeless after heavy rains washed away portions of the mound. The erosion continues, narrowing the terrain and putting more homes at risk.

"Previously, we used to catch fish from the streams, but now there's nothing left," said Chittaranjan Debbarma, the village

headman. "Climate change has taken away our traditional livelihood and changed the forest. We're being forced to adapt."

"We've sought assistance from various places to no avail. The villagers fear losing everything if urgent action isn't taken."

The Water Development Board

proposed an 8 crore 21 lakh Tk project in 2020 to protect 480 metres of hill slope in Tripura village from erosion. However, the Ministry showed reluctance due to the perceived high cost for the benefit of 24 families, he added.

Local residents say the situation began deteriorating years ago due to unregulated sand extraction from nearby hills. Although efforts have been made to improve infrastructure—including the construction of a concrete bridge in 2012—none have provided lasting relief.

"The bridge collapsed due to erosion



**A partially collapsed concrete bridge in Tripura Palli, Chunarughat upazila, Habiganj. Local residents blame years of unregulated sand extraction from nearby hills for worsening erosion.**

PHOTOS: MINTU DESHWARA

headman. "Climate change has taken away our traditional livelihood and changed the forest. We're being forced to adapt."

"We've sought assistance from various places to no avail. The villagers fear losing everything if urgent action isn't taken."

The Water Development Board

proposed an 8 crore 21 lakh Tk project in 2020 to protect 480 metres of hill slope in Tripura village from erosion. However, the Ministry showed reluctance due to the perceived high cost for the benefit of 24 families, he added.

Local residents say the situation began deteriorating years ago due to unregulated sand extraction from nearby hills. Although efforts have been made to improve infrastructure—including the construction of a concrete bridge in 2012—none have provided lasting relief.

"The bridge collapsed due to erosion

the Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA) in Habiganj, said uncontrolled and illegal sand extraction has significantly destabilised the hillocks in Tripura Palli and surrounding areas. These activities are not only violating environmental regulations but are also directly threatening the lives and homes of indigenous Tripura families living in the area.

He said the fragile geology of the hillocks makes them particularly vulnerable to erosion and landslides when large-scale sand removal occurs.

"When sand is extracted without regulation, it weakens the structure of the hills, making them prone to sudden collapses during monsoon or even moderate rainfall. This has led to repeated landslides over the years, displacing families, destroying homes, and eroding the only access roads in the area."

"The authorities must take immediate and sustainable action. First, illegal sand extraction must be stopped through strict enforcement of environmental laws. Secondly, comprehensive rehabilitation plans must be developed for the affected indigenous families—including safe and permanent housing, as well as the restoration of safe transportation routes."

"We are not only witnessing environmental degradation—we are watching a community lose its history, its land, and its sense of security. These people have lived here for generations. They deserve protection, not neglect."

Calling for greater coordination between government departments, local administration, and environmental experts to ensure long-term safety and cultural preservation in the area, he added.

Chunarughat Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Shafiqul Islam said, "A concrete bridge was built, but part of it collapsed due to the slope. An alternative road through the Satchari tea garden has been made. We will consult higher authorities to address the landslide problem."

**Mintu Deshwara** is a journalist at *The Daily Star*.



**Members of the Tripura community in Tripura Palli stand on the edge of an eroded hillside. Just a few years ago, 30 families lived here. Repeated landslides have already forced many to leave, while those who remain live in fear that their homes could collapse at any moment.**

from the hill slopes," said Sanjukta Debbarma, vice president of the Satchari National Park Forest Management Committee. "It was extended in 2022 by Barrister Syed Sayedul Haque Suman, but it didn't last a year."

"We are requesting the construction of

a proper bridge and a guide wall to protect our homes," said Sanjukta. "We have approached many people, but we are still waiting for a real solution."

Women in the village echoed the concerns. "It's very dangerous for our children to go to school or for us to get medical help," said housewife Sandhya Debbarma. "We are in dire need."

For the Tripura families in Tripura Palli, time is running out—and the next heavy rain could push them further towards the edge.

Tofazzal Sohel, general secretary of