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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

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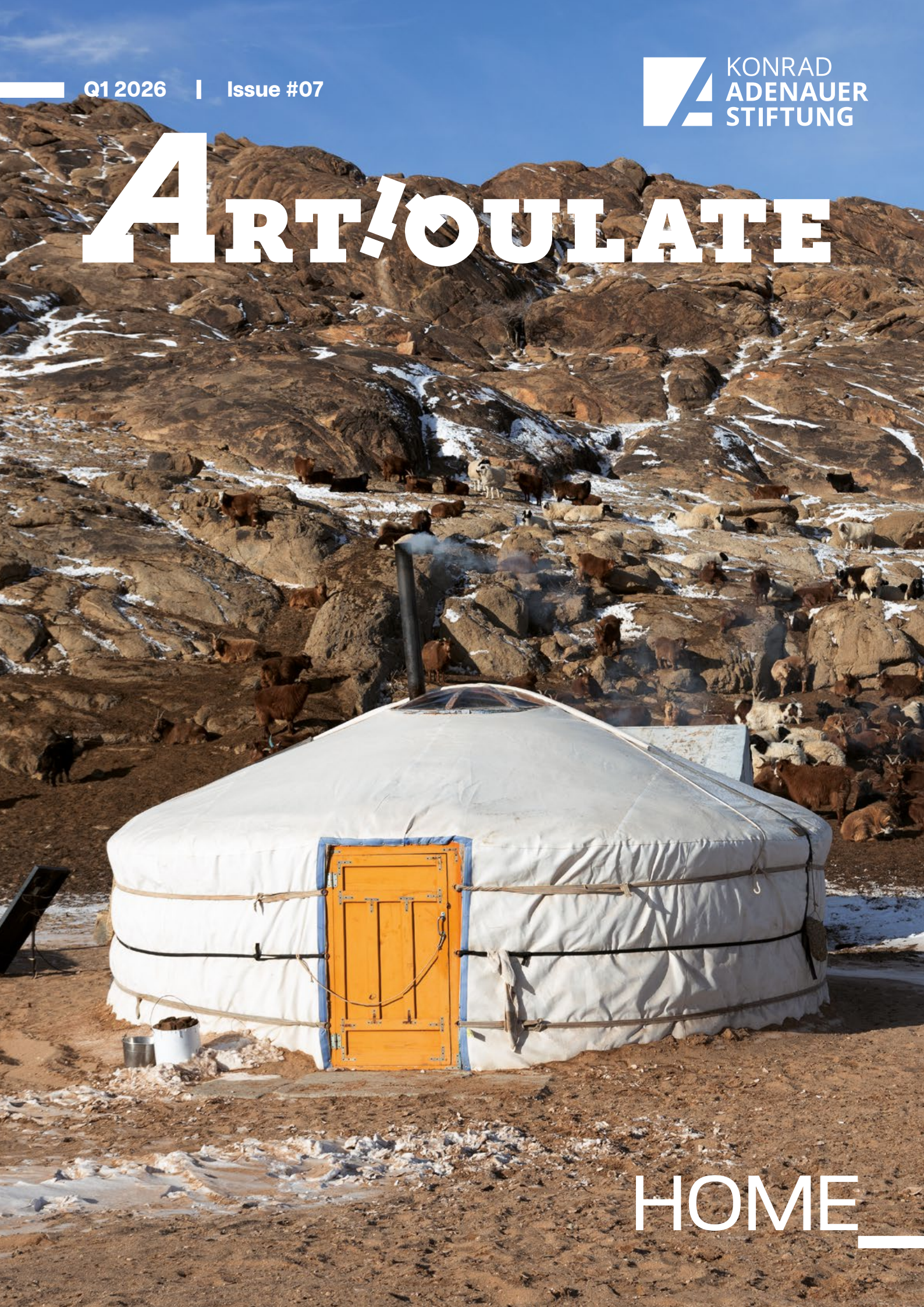

HOME

ADENAUER FELLOWSHIP

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Konrad Adenauer, Turkey, 1954.
Photographed by Ara Güler.

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia

Named after Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia was established in 1996 to promote a free, responsible and ethical press in Asia. The KAS Media Programme Asia therefore connects leading journalists with one another, collaborating with colleagues and partners worldwide. The overarching goal of our work is to promote and support Asian media institutions and journalists in the development of professional journalistic standards in the region, to support young journalists as best as possible throughout their careers, and to advocate and promote the importance of media as an integral part of democratic and liberal societies.

The Adenauer Fellowship

The Adenauer Fellowship is a scholarship programme offered by the KAS Media Programme Asia to support journalism education in the region. The KAS Media Programme Asia partners with several educational institutions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. For more information about applications and application deadlines, please visit: https://adenauer.careers

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Foreword

A few months ago, my family and I packed our bags. Not for a holiday, but to turn the page on a new chapter in our lives. We crossed continents from Europe to Asia, moving from Germany to Singapore. You could say we set off for a new home on the other side of the world.

Why am I sharing this? Because it ties in beautifully into the theme of this issue of *ArtIQulate*: 'home'.

'Home' is a word that resonates deeply yet means something so different to each of us. The articles in this issue explore its many dimensions. They take us to the Altai Mountains in western Mongolia, where herders move their homes with the rhythm of the seasons; and to the banks of the Ichhamati River in Bangladesh, where nomadic families have lived on boats for generations. They show us how palm tree deforestation and climate change are making it increasingly difficult for birds such as the baya weaver to find a home. And they reveal that 'home' can also be something more than a physical place; it can be a purpose, a vocation, a way of life.

For me, that purpose has brought me and my family to Singapore. From my new home, I have the great privilege of heading the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Media Programme Asia, which is dedicated to strengthening quality journalism and promoting the education and training of the next generation of young journalists. Part of this is the publication of *ArtIQulate*, which was launched by my predecessor Ansgar Graw, as a platform for the scholarship holders of our media programme. It is an initiative I am very much looking forward to continuing and growing.

I hope the articles in this issue inspire you to reflect on what 'home' means to you, wherever you may find it. May you have a stimulating read. ■

Fabian Wagener
Director, KAS Media Programme Asia

Fabian Wagener is the Director of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Media Programme Asia, based in Singapore. He joined KAS in 2020, initially working as editor for the magazine "International Reports" and as host of the foundation's foreign policy podcast. Before entering the foundation, he worked in journalism including several years as a reporter and as head of a local office at the German newspaper "Mitteldeutsche Zeitung". Fabian studied Arabic/Islamic Studies and Political Science in Göttingen, Germany.

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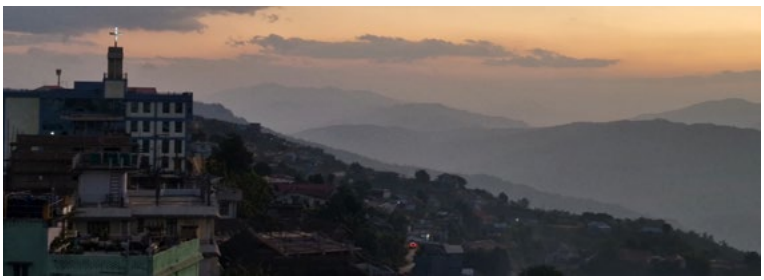

Reimagining Media in a Shifting World Order

In an increasingly volatile and unpredictable world, the Adenauer Media Leaders Academy 2025 shined the spotlight on the media's role in upholding truth and ethics.

Johanna L. Añes-de la Cruz






Once again, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Media Programme Asia, brought together fellows and alumni of the Adenauer Fellowship from across Asia for its annual Adenauer Media Leaders Academy (AMLA) conference. Two days of bold conversations on global challenges, ethical reporting, and the role of the media in a fast-changing region were shared.

The Adenauer Media Leaders Academy 2025 took place on 17–18 September at the chic Baitong Hotel, right at the heart of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's proud and historic capital. The day before the conference proper, the participants arrived in different batches, with Day 0 ending on a literal high note with a lively dinner on the hotel's topmost floor.

The occasion allowed the fellows to catch up with old friends and make new ones. It was also their chance to meet KAS Media Programme Asia's new director, Fabian Wagener, who warmly welcomed everyone with a short speech. In his message, he thanked everyone for their attendance at this 'wonderful opportunity' to become acquainted with the participants and their body of work.

Day 1

After a hearty breakfast, the participants gathered at the hotel's Orchard Hall for the first day of the conference, which began with a presentation from Fabian on what KAS does and what it stands for. He gave an overview of KAS' work, with a focus on its scholarships and cultural activities. In particular, Fabian underscored that KAS supports media professionals because it believes in journalism's central role in societal development, as well as in the importance of fact-based discourse.

Following Fabian's presentation was a 40-minute Speed Networking session, arguably the most animated activity of the conference. Participants spoke with each other one-on-one for three minutes per interaction, turning the venue into a hive of chatter and laughter as the fellows got to know one another better on a professional—and even personal—level.

The first lecture of the conference took place after a quick break. Shahzeb Ahmed Hashim—lecturer at the Centre for Excellence in Journalism, Institute of Business Administration and Senior Editorial Advisor at *Dawn*, the largest English-language newspaper









in Pakistan—focused on three key issues, namely economics and trade, geopolitics and conflicts, and human rights discourse, with the view to highlight the media's role in connecting the dots for audiences.

Shahzeb highlighted how media coverage should go beyond leader-to-leader diplomacy, avoid 'breakup' sensationalism when reporting on political matters, and incorporate visual components such as timelines and maps. He reminded the participants to 'humanise' their stories, as the ones most affected by these pressing issues are ordinary people.

After his lecture, Shahzeb asked the fellows to break into three groups, with each assigned one of the three themes. Group members first discussed the current issues faced by their respective countries, which was then followed by brainstorming on possible solutions, story angles, and collaborative stories. The first group, which had the theme 'economics and trade', shared their insights and answered questions from the audience.

Day 1 ended with dinner at Kravanh, an elegant restaurant housed in a colonial-style villa. Participants and speakers had their fill of traditional Cambodian dishes, which were as satisfying to the palate as they were to the eyes.

Day 2

The second and final day of the conference commenced with a short message from Mouy Ing Sean, programme officer of KAS Cambodia. In her brief, heartfelt speech, she talked about the programme's pivotal role in keeping the country's media ecosystem alive by continuing to 'feed young people's minds'. She shared that KAS makes this possible through journalism fellowships and training for young Cambodians, and challenging the notion that journalism is a 'risky' profession.

After Ing's speech, the remaining two groups from the brainstorming activity on Day 1 delivered their consolidated reports and answered questions from the speakers and their fellow participants.

Alexis Carlo Corpuz, co-ordinator and lecturer at the Asian Centre for Journalism, Ateneo de Manila University, and former photojournalist with *ABS-CBN* (Philippines), delivered the next presentation. In his highly interactive lecture, which saw the participants analyse several photos, Alexis delved into the dos and don'ts of ethical photo editing and how even the subtlest of edits can alter meanings and mislead audiences. He also touched on newsroom workflows that promote accountability and transparency.

The third and last speaker of the conference was Shafi Karimi, founder of *Future Afghanistan*. The Afghan-born, Paris-based journalist talked about how he founded and continues to sustain his media start-up, which he described as a media platform for journalists in exile.

Shafi began his presentation with an in-depth look into Afghanistan's media landscape before and during the Taliban. He also discussed the challenges of running a publication that carries stories about a repressive regime, from legal and bureaucratic hurdles to economic constraints, professional roadblocks and psychological impacts, including fearing for family left behind in Afghanistan and the isolation and identity crisis that come with living in exile.

The last day of the AMLA ended with a taste of German flavours at the Berlin Bar at Meta House, an arts centre run in co-operation with the Goethe Institute. Everyone enjoyed a sumptuous three-course dinner of potato soup, chicken schnitzel, and apple crumble, with some fellows pairing the feast with German beer.

The following morning was bittersweet as the participants said their goodbyes, all while looking forward to AMLA 2026 with buoyant optimism. Most of the fellows hopped on their respective flights back home, while some opted to stay and discover more about the host country and its rich culture. ■

A customer looking at a digital clock
in a mall in Manila, Philippines.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2025.


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A Home on Water

Life of the River Nomads of Bangladesh

Naimur Rahman
Sraboni Roy

Along the Ichhamati River near Keraniganj in Bangladesh, around 15–16 families live in 10–15 boats, forming a small floating community. Though it may look temporary, this has been their way of life for generations. Photograph by Syed Mahamudur Rahman. 2025.

Along the banks of the Ichhamati River are families who have spent their entire lives on water. Known as river nomads, they live on wooden boats that serve as both their home and livelihood. Their lives are shaped by tradition but challenged by poverty, storms, and a changing world. As modern society closes in, many fear their way of life may soon disappear.

‘I’ve lived on this boat for more than 40 years. This is my home. People have dreams, and so do we. But not all dreams come true. We don’t have any land or a proper house. We just live on boats like this. Our whole family lives here,’ says Abul Hossain.

Abul sits on the deck of his wooden boat, anchored on the edge of the Ichhamati River. His hands rest on the railing, fingers worn from years on water. This boat has been his world since his youth. It’s where he sleeps, eats, prays, laughs, and weathers the storms of life.

Abul is a trader by profession, selling bangles, ribbons, and cosmetics as he moves from one place to another. He belongs to a floating nomad group known as the Shandar Manta or Saudagar community. For generations, they have lived and worked on wooden boats.

Their boats contain everything needed for daily life. Each one has a cooking stove, utensils, bedding, and sometimes even an old cassette or DVD player. Some decorate their homes with metal dishes, a tradition passed down from their elders. They say people in cities decorate with luxurious items, but since they can’t afford such things, they make their homes beautiful with what they have.

This lifestyle is often described as nomadic. Along the Ichhamati River near Keraniganj in Bangladesh, around 15–16 families live in 10–15 boats, forming a small floating community. Though it may look temporary, this is their way of life.

In Bangladesh, river nomads are part of a minority ethnic group. While the exact population numbers are unknown, studies estimate around 1.7 million people across 53 districts belong to nomadic communities.

But like all things, times are changing. Pollution, river erosion, natural disasters, and modern healthcare have pushed many nomads to settle on land, forcing them to give up their traditional lifestyle.

Mahmud Rahman, a photographer, has documented five distinct river nomad groups in Bangladesh. The Mal Manta are snake charmers and fortune-tellers. The Ojha Manta are snake catchers. The Bajigar Manta were magicians and some now make batteries for vehicles. The Toila Manta use monkeys in their fortune-telling. And the Shandar Manta, like Abul, sell small goods like glass bangles, toys, plastic items, vegetables, fish, and more.

Shanta, a woman from the Saudagar community, got married four years ago. She now lives on a boat with her husband and son. Her in-laws live on a boat nearby. ‘I was born on a boat. My father later bought land and built a home, but I didn’t get to live there for long. I got married on a boat, and now this is where I live again.’

Nomads often travel from village to village to sell their products. Some groups speak different languages and follow unique customs. But over the years, their traditions have come under threat. As technology progresses, people no longer rely on charms or traditional remedies. Magic tricks that once entertained crowds are no longer popular. Without steady sources of income, they have found themselves pushed to the margins.

Many have tried to shift to mainstream livelihoods, but this brings new challenges. Their ancient ways, passed down through generations, are at risk. The government and NGOs have made efforts to support them, but a lack of resources has slowed progress.

Shanta explains how hard it gets during the rainy season. ‘We earn just enough to eat each day. When it rains for days, we can’t go out to work. We often run out of food. Our children learn to swim before they learn anything else. Water is life, but it can also take it.’ She says her dreams of education never came true because there was no school available.

Women also work to support their families. They visit villages selling bangles, ribbons, and clothes. But there are no toilets for them on the boats. ‘We have no washrooms,’ says one 56-year-old woman. ‘When we get sick or have our periods, it becomes very uncomfortable. We bathe in the river, and without proper hygiene, we fall ill often.’

Lapmia, around 60 years old, has spent most of his life on a boat. ‘My life started in a floating house made of wood. There is no safety. Sometimes boats sink during storms. When that happens, we move to land and set up tents,’ he says. ‘I used to sell bangles and ribbons, but that doesn’t work anymore.

Now I weave umbrellas. I have a grandchild now, and I worry for him.'

Tears gather in his eyes. 'The government promised us a house, but we haven't received anything. I wonder if I'll ever see a real house. Sometimes I dream of having one for my grandson. Then I could die in peace.' He pulls out an old photo of himself, taken at 30. 'We can't keep anything. But I've kept this one photo. It's all I have.'

Their lives come with many hardships. A study found that around 46% of the nomad community live in low-built boats that sit close to the water's surface and are vulnerable during storms. About 23% face sanitation issues. Nearly 18% lack clean drinking water, while others report problems with electricity, mosquitoes, or waterlogging. Some snake-catching communities now face restrictions due to forest laws, limiting their work. They have asked the government for alternative jobs, though many wish they could keep their traditions alive.

The boat is their only shelter, their only place of rest. Children grow up learning to swim and trade rather than going to school. There is no proper healthcare, except for occasional vaccination drives. But even those are unreliable.

Shanta sums it up aptly. 'We don't have a toilet. We don't have a house. We live and eat on the boat. We stay here for a few months, then move on. We don't have a permanent place. When the water rises, we go to the big river, near the bridge. In the monsoon, life becomes very hard. Sometimes food runs out. If it rains for days, we stay hungry.'

Nazma adds, 'We don't have homes like you do. No one gives us anything. One time, we received five kilograms of rice, a bottle of oil, some flattened rice, and a bar of soap. That was it. The government gives us nothing. When storms come, our homes get washed away. Some people even drown. Nobody helps us. Life on the boat is hard. It's difficult to even talk about it.'

Abul Hossain agrees. 'These boats are not safe. And we no longer earn like before. People used to enjoy our shows, but now everyone's on their phones. No one buys bangles or ribbons anymore.'

There is a deep divide between settled society and the world of these nomads. They survive through honest trade, yet they are often targets of misinformation. Shanta mentions a YouTuber who falsely claimed that women here were involved in illegal work. 'That hurt us deeply.'

Shanta and her son Sheen inside their boat. Nomadic river communities live on boats and earn a living by selling clothes, trinkets, and toys as they travel from village to village. Photograph by Syed Mahamudur Rahman. 2025.

These communities face layers of discrimination—social, economic, political, and cultural. And this shapes every part of their lives. Most live in poor conditions, excluded from the opportunities that others take for granted. Their traditional jobs are fading, but they have few alternatives. They still carry their culture with pride, even if the wider world doesn't value it.

The truth is, life on a boat is filled with struggles. Even in death, some can't find a proper resting place. They have no way to hold onto treasured belongings. For some, a home means a solid building. A place of safety, family, and food. But for the nomads, home is a small wooden boat, drifting with the current. Their lives float on the river, moving from one place to another, always uncertain. It is their world, their identity, their only refuge.

The river is their land. The boat is their house. But the question remains: Will the state recognise their boat as a home? Do their stories matter?

These communities face layers of discrimination—social, economic, political, and cultural. And this shapes every part of their lives. Most live in poor conditions, excluded from the opportunities that others take for granted. Their traditional jobs are fading, but they have few alternatives. They still carry their culture with pride, even if the wider world doesn't value it.

Their home is not fixed to the ground. It moves with the flow of the river. And for them, this very floating wooden boat means more than any piece of land ever could. Life on the river is at the heart of who they are. Their work, their stories, and their identity come from this way of life. At the same time, the hardships are real, and some admitted they hope for a safer and more stable place on land. But local leaders believe that the traditions do not have to disappear if the government steps in with basic support, such as recognised docking areas, access to schools and healthcare, and a way to register their homes. With a little help, this community will not have to choose between safety and heritage. ■

Top: Lapmia, 60, with a photo from his younger days in his boat on the outskirts of Dhaka. Photograph by Syed Mahamudur Rahman. 2025.

Bottom: A woman preparing a meal in her boat. Photograph by Syed Mahamudur Rahman. 2025.

Naimur Rahman is a Dhaka-based multimedia journalist and filmmaker known for his powerful, people-centred storytelling. He works with *The Daily Star* and also serves as a module developer at DW Akademie. Naimur is a DW Akademie and Adenauer Fellow. He is also a trainer on media literacy, digital safety, and constructive dialogue.

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Sraboni Roy is a recent graduate working at *The Daily Star*, where she focuses on human-centric storytelling. She enjoys travelling and finds inspiration in the voices and experiences of the people she meets along the way.

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The Mountains That Are Home to Mongols

For Mongolians, home is more than just a place or a dwelling where they sleep—it is the land itself. The Altai Mountains not only sustain local communities, they are also central to the growing challenges Mongolians face in the midst of the climate crisis.

Anand Tumurtogoo

Left: Toson-tsengel Mountain before snowfall.
Right: Toson-tsengel Mountain after snowfall.
Photographs by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

Gerelchuluun Ayush, a 37-year-old herder, fetches a chair from the back of his porter truck and sets it down on the grassland for his mother to sit, while he goes back to tying up the uni—long wooden poles that make up the ceiling of a Mongolian ger, a traditional dwelling. He is setting up his home at the basin of the Altai Mountains in Western Mongolia. Mongolians are known for their nomadic way of life, and their homes reflect this: a tent-like structure that can be easily taken down and put back up to allow for mobility.

That said, Mongolians mainly move within a certain vicinity of their home area. For herders who live in the western and northern parts of the country, far from the vast open plains in the south and east, moving usually means going closer to the mountains in winter and descending in warmer months to reach a water source like a river. Herders follow their animals, seeking the best pastures and reliable water, and familiarity with the land is key. Most herders know exactly which valleys protect them from harsh winter winds and which river basins provide enough grass for their livestock. The mountains are always in their lives, even when they move away. For many in the west, living at the base of the Altai Mountains means that their true home is within the mountains themselves. If you sleep under the stars in the Altai Mountains, their peaks can be seen in the corner of your vision—the mountains are always present for the people of Western Mongolia.

The melting ice signals an uncertain future—disappearing glaciers threaten the rivers that both herders and wildlife depend on. Floods may become more frequent at first, followed by increasingly dry summers as the mountains stop feeding water to the plains below. Some herders have already witnessed this phenomenon firsthand.

Western Mongolia is also unique for its diverse demographic. Unlike most of the country, where the Khalkha Mongols form the dominant group, the far western region is primarily home to Kazakhs—Turkic people with their own language, traditions, and Islamic faith distinct from the Buddhist practices of the Khalkha majority. Sharing these mountains are also the Uriankhai, or Tuvans, whose heritage blends both Turkic and Mongol influences. Gerelchuluun is part of this community. In the Altai Mountains, these three ethnic groups live side by side, speaking different languages and dialects and following similar but individual customs, united by the same landscape and the shared rhythms of pastoral life.

Archaeologists believe this area has been a crossroads of people for thousands of years. Dr Will Taylor, a zooarchaeologist from the University of Colorado Boulder, states that the Altai Mountains are likely where early migrants from the west first settled, bringing with them new cultures and ways of life. Taylor and his cohorts also hypothesise that this is where people started shifting from a hunter-gatherer way of life to more animal husbandry, almost settling. Taylor and his team have studied archaeological remains of early hunting, particularly of wild Argali sheep, and other signs

An archeologist holding the shaft of an arrow found on Toson-tsengel Mountain, Western Mongolia. Photograph by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

A flock of sheep and goats grazing near the Altai Mountains. Photograph by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

of early pastoral life. Many of these artifacts are now thawing from melting ice caps. This is a mixed blessing. While it allows researchers to study them, exposure to the air means the artifacts quickly degrade. Worse, the melting ice signals an uncertain future—disappearing glaciers threaten the rivers that both herders and wildlife depend on. Floods may become more frequent at first, followed by increasingly dry summers as the mountains stop feeding water to the plains below. Some herders have already witnessed this phenomenon firsthand.

Gerelchuluun feels the shift clearly. 'Five years ago, this area was mostly muddy,' he recalls, 'but now most of it has dried up.' As water sources shrink, vegetation stops growing, and when winter arrives, underfed animals are more likely to perish in Mongolia's harsh cold. Gerelchuluun used to move his home within the mountain range four times a year with the changing seasons. Now, with climate change and land degradation from overgrazing, he moves only three times a year and has had to settle far from his original home area.

He is not alone. Some families migrate even farther from their original homesteads where they grew up or have lived for most of their lives in search of grazing lands, often ending up in the basins of snowcapped mountains. Otgon Lkhamjav, a 35-year-old Khalkha herder now living at the base of Tosontsengel Mountain—one of the peaks of the Altai Mountains—originally lived two subprovinces away. She and her husband moved with their three children because pastures in their home area have degraded and water sources have dried up. But being newcomers comes with challenges. 'If we had money for fodder for the animals, we probably wouldn't have moved,' she says. There is animosity from some long-established families nearby, she says, and the dangers of not knowing the land well. When I visited the area in August 2022, a bout of unexpected snowfall lasted for two days, blanketing the landscape in snow at the height of summer. Otgon's eldest child got lost while herding animals in the snow. 'Luckily, he was found safe,' she says, 'but it showed us how hard it is to live somewhere unfamiliar.'

Top: Gerelchuluun Ayush fixing the uni of his ger near the Altai Mountains.
Bottom: Otgon Lamjav stepping out of her home at the base of Toson-tsengel Mountain.
Photographs by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

Top: Juha Jinas (middle) with his grandchildren in front of his home, at the base of Toson-tsengel Mountain.

Bottom: Gerelchuluun Ayush's son looking out from a half-finished home as his uncle and grandmother stand on the sidelines near the Altai Mountains.

Photographs by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

Gerelchuluun Ayush outside one of his gers, his truck in the background, near the Altai Mountains. Photograph by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

Organisations like The Nature Conservancy (TNC) are at the forefront of this movement and are helping herders adapt in these uncertain times. TNC works with herder communities to form co-operatives that pool resources, share labour, and manage grazing more sustainably. The organisation recognises that herders are the best stewards of local wildlife and native flora. By equipping them with the tools and knowledge to improve their livelihoods, TNC also strengthens conservation efforts in Mongolia—a country where vast, sparsely populated landscapes make traditional conservation challenging.

Juha Jinas with his golden hunting eagle at the base of Toson-tsengel Mountain. The eagle is adorned with a falconry hood to calm and control the bird of prey. Photograph by Anand Tumurtogoo. 2022.

Jinas Chuha, a 78-year-old Kazakh herder and eagle hunter, has lived in the Tosontsengel basin for over 45 years. He was stationed here to herd during Mongolia's communist era and stayed after the country transitioned to democracy in 1990. He has watched the summers grow drier over the last decade or so. 'This year has seen very little rainfall, similar to previous years,' he said in 2022. Since visiting him in 2022, the last three summers have somewhat improved, but weather patterns are increasingly extreme. 'Snowfall used to start in late September,' he says. 'Now it comes earlier every year.' Regional leaders even advised families to leave their spring homes early and move to warmer areas lower down the mountain to escape unexpected cold snaps.

Jinas remembers a time when herders relied on each other for survival, when they were part of a co-operative in the communist era. In that time, herders did not own their livestock. After Mongolia transitioned to democracy, ownership shifted to individuals, leaving herders solely responsible for caring for their flocks as the former co-operatives were disbanded. But he is also noticing a shift that revitalises the positive aspects of the past. 'Herders are starting to form co-operatives again,' he explains. 'We are beginning to focus on the quality of our animals, not just how many we have.'

Organisations like The Nature Conservancy (TNC) are at the forefront of this movement and are helping herders adapt in these uncertain times. TNC works with herder communities to form

co-operatives that pool resources, share labour, and manage grazing more sustainably. The organisation recognises that herders are the best stewards of local wildlife and native flora. By equipping them with the tools and knowledge to improve their livelihoods, TNC also strengthens conservation efforts in Mongolia—a country where vast, sparsely populated landscapes make traditional conservation challenging. They teach herders the benefits of selling livestock earlier instead of keeping large, aging herds that put more pressure on fragile pastures. These initiatives may not stop the climate crisis, but they help herders reduce pressure on the land caused by large livestock numbers and encourage them to support one another. It is a more sustainable approach to adapting to climate challenges—and a way for herders to continue living on and caring for their homeland. ■

Anand Tumurtogoo is a visual journalist based in Mongolia with over seven years of experience. He has collaborated with various international media organisations, including *Al Jazeera*, *AFP*, *Foreign Policy*, *ProPublica*, and more. As a Adenauer Fellow, Anand was the first Mongolian to receive a postgraduate diploma in visual journalism from the Asian Centre for Journalism in 2023. His passion lies in bringing stories from Mongolia to the world with a unique Mongolian perspective. Currently, he aims to establish the first independent multilingual media organisation focused on Mongolia.

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Beyond Visas: Finding Home When You're Far from It

Wara Irfan

In an American city full of strangers, home is found in shared laughter over South Asian meals and conversations with fellow expats who understand what it means to build a sanctuary from memory, hope, and the unspoken bond of being far from home.

Wara Irfan is an Adenauer Fellowship alumna and a Fulbright scholar currently pursuing a master's degree in media and public communication at the University of Denver. Prior to this, she worked as a journalist for DAWN.com in Karachi, Pakistan, for a year and a half. Her research focuses on the intersection of gender, class, and culture.

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Is home a physical place or something within us? In seeking to answer this question, I began thinking of space, time, and people. Some say home is where you surround yourself with like-minded individuals. As cliché as that sounds, I experienced this myself when I moved more than 12 thousand kilometres away from my physical home in Karachi, Pakistan, to Denver in the US for graduate school.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of students from around the world move to the US in pursuit of further education. In 2024, the country hosted over 1.1 million international students, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE)'s Open Doors report.[1] It is not merely the lure of higher institutions in the US that pulls in such a huge number, but the romance of the 'American dream' that attracts youths from around the world. According to the same report, India sent 331,602 students to the US in 2024, the largest group, even surpassing China.[2] These are not just numbers, but also diverse stories of how each individual managed to cross oceans to come here.

Given the current US administration's policies, I started to wonder, why are these stories only told through the lens of visas and bureaucratic language?

What about the lived experiences shaped outside of the legal category of 'international student'? For this, I interviewed Indian and Pakistani students around me about what it personally means for them to be in the US. Both of my interviewees are the first in their families to come to the US to pursue higher education. The scope of this article is to explore their experiences outside of the classroom, their interactions with the city they live in, and how they navigate it daily. How do they create a 'home' in an uncertain and precarious time and space?

After spending two decades of her life in Bangalore, India, Aishwarya Miriyala, 25, decided to apply for a scholarship to pursue her undergraduate degree in the US. When she reached Huntington, Pennsylvania, where her college was, the first thing she noticed was the lack of people. 'On campus, you would see people; if you're off the campus, you would barely see anyone, which was very jarring for me,' she stated. Born in Mumbai, a city with almost 30 million people, and then spending most of her life in Bangalore, a city of about 12 million, and finally moving to a town with a population of only about seven thousand, was extremely isolating for her. 'If you're alone in a big city, you can always go out and make friends,' she says, but how do you do it in a place with practically no people?

Similarly, Ahmad Saleem, 25, found Denver 'very different'. He moved to Denver after spending most of his life between Lahore, Pakistan, a city of seven million, and his hometown, Bahawalnagar, a city with more than two hundred thousand people. 'Even though [Bahawalnagar] is a small town in South Punjab, it has a lot of people. When you go out, you see people walking around. I lived in Lahore as well, where, even though people don't know you, it feels welcoming. You can just sit anywhere you want, have a cup of tea, you know, smoke a cigarette, and make friends.'

'It felt that the societal element of it, the community part of it, was missing in Denver. Because even though it's a very welcoming city, when you talk to people, it just does not have what towns in Pakistan have. All of these things such as not having a community were a bit alienating,' he says.

On the topic of family expectations and class background, Aishwarya emphasises the importance of money. 'You've got to have a financially stable family, otherwise it's very hard. I have seen people sell property or take loans to come here.' Himself from a middle-class family, Ahmad saw students mostly from elite backgrounds going to Western countries for higher education. 'I realised, in order to have a level playing field, education seemed the best stepping stone for me,' he says.

> I think people passively seek home everywhere. They try to create a sanctuary for themselves. You're always searching and building a community for yourself where you find comfort.
>
> **AHMAD SALEEM**
> International student from Pakistan

> I hope I'm creating a home here. It's about finding like-minded people who understand me without explanation.
>
> **AISHWARYA MIRIYALA**
> Former international student from India

After finishing her undergraduate degree, Aishwarya began temporary employment—which is permitted for one to two years after or during your education as an international student—and moved to Denver. She is the only South Asian person in her workplace. Pointing towards the microaggressions she has faced, she recounted the time when a classmate asked her if she 'knows what ketchup is'. 'Sometimes when I go to church, I would be the only brown person there, and that would make me feel very uncomfortable. People would be giving me such looks like, "Must be from India, a third world country", asking me questions like, "Do they have cities there?"', she tells me.

Ahmad, a Pakistani man, has also experienced microaggressions and had racial slurs hurled at him because he 'looks' Middle Eastern. He recounted an instance in his class, where a professor 'hinted that terrorism is my community's doing'.

It is paramount to acknowledge the nuances within the South Asian identity itself as it is perceived among a diverse diaspora. Identity is multifaceted and is often defined by oneself, not just by others. For instance, Aishwarya views herself as a South Asian person, while Ahmad doesn't identify himself as such, but rather as a Pakistani person. 'I am not from a Middle-Eastern country that is on a travel ban, but then [my] country [also isn't one] that the US government encourages people to travel to,' Ahmad says.

Despite the alienation and microaggressions, both youngsters have had an overall welcoming experience in the US. Particularly, Aishwarya stressed that as a woman, it is a very different set of affairs as opposed to what she is used to back in India. 'For example, walking alone at night, living with my partner, and also being able to [talk about my relationship and living status] with others without any judgment . . . Those small freedoms make a huge difference,' she says.

Even though Aishwarya plans on staying in the US and Ahmad wants to return to Pakistan, they both subscribe to the idea of an ever-changing home. From the Telugu music playing in one of the few South Indian restaurants in Denver to cooking and eating South Indian food with her friends, this feels like home for Aishwarya. Similarly, food played a big role for Ahmad in creating a sense of home in a place culturally and socially removed from his birthplace. 'When I started cooking after coming here, I realised that using spices that my mother used back in Pakistan was grounding for me,' he notes.

However, his idea of home keeps changing, shifting with time and space. 'When I'm here [in the US], I'm mentally in Pakistan; when I visit Pakistan, I'm mentally in Denver. I'm in a diasporic headspace all the time,' Ahmad confesses. 'I plan to return to Pakistan. However, home keeps evolving. When I go back, everything has changed so much. Nothing is as I left it.'

'Home is both a destination and memory,' he observes. 'I want to ultimately return because I want to add value back in Pakistan.'

While they are away, both have found home in the people around them.

'You kind of form your own community. International students, no matter if they are from Norway or Peru, bond over what differentiates us from American culture,' Ahmad explains. 'I think people passively seek home everywhere. They try to create a sanctuary for themselves. You're always searching and building a community for yourself where you find comfort.'

'I hope I'm creating a home here. It's about finding like-minded people who understand me without explanation,' Aishwarya says. ■

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A Poet's Army

From classrooms and protest lines to rifles and camouflage, a new generation embraces both discipline and hope in the fight against military rule.

1. New recruits of the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) practicing drills in Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)-held territory. 2024.

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"A Poet's Army" is an article by a Burmese photojournalist.

In the emerald hills of Myanmar's conflict-torn borderlands, a new force is taking shape—an army of poets, artists, students, and activists, their camouflage uniforms a stark contrast to the civilian lives they once led. Here, in makeshift camps beneath the forest canopy, the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) is rewriting the story of Myanmar's resistance.

Formed in April 2021, the BPLA emerged in the wake of the military coup, founded by Maung Saungkha, a poet whose verses once warned against the futility of war. Now he commands a force of over a thousand fighters, drawn mostly from the country's Bamar majority but also joined by a diverse mix of women, LGBT individuals, and others who once found themselves on the margins of Myanmar's society.

Life in the BPLA camps is a study in contrasts—part boot camp, part community, and part school. Recruits arrive from all corners of Myanmar, some carrying only the clothes on their backs and memories of tear-gas-soaked streets. Their mobile phones are collected upon arrival, a symbolic severing of ties to the world they left behind.

Days begin before sunrise, when the smell of wood smoke mingles with the mist that clings to the treetops. The first hours are claimed by drills: push-ups, running through obstacle courses made of logs and bamboo, and weapons training with rifles that have seen better days. Sweat soaks through uniforms that don't always fit as the recruits learn to move in unison, transforming from a loose collection of individuals into something closer to an army.

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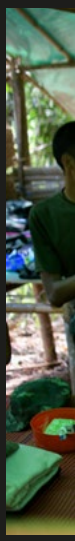

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Meals here are a testament to resilience. Near the frontlines, where supply channels are fragile and the jungle offers little bounty, fighters fill their bowls with banana stems boiled in thin broth, canned fish that tastes of tin, and instant noodles cooked over small fires.

Between drills, the camp hums with the quiet work of survival. Some collect firewood or reinforce bamboo huts against the rain, others mend torn uniforms or patch holes in leaky tents. The camp's makeshift infirmary, a bamboo-and-tarpaulin shelter, doubles as both a medical post and meeting hall, where fighters tend to each other's blisters and bruises or simply rest in the humid shade.

Evenings bring a different rhythm. As darkness falls and the jungle chorus swells, the BPLA gathers for political education. Seated on logs arranged to form an improvised classroom, fighters listen to lessons on federalism, gender equality, and the promise of a just society. For many, this is the first taste of ideas which challenge the old ways that once silenced voices like theirs.

2. Members of the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) preparing lunch. 2024.
3. New recruits of the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) having lunch. 2024.
4. A leader giving political lessons. 2024.
5. New recruits standing in parade at a camp. 2024.
6. New recruits folding their uniforms. 2024.

The jungle is both a sanctuary and a crucible. Since its founding, the BPLA has suffered its losses—more than 20 fighters have fallen, some to enemy fire, others to the dangers of a life lived on the edge. But alliances with older, battle-hardened ethnic armies have helped the group hold ground in contested regions, giving them a foothold in the larger struggle against the military regime.

The BPLA's struggle is not just against a dictatorship, but against a legacy of division that has defined Myanmar for generations. In a country where identity has long determined power, the BPLA's ranks reflect a different vision, one in which ethnicity, gender, and social class no longer determine who has a voice.

The military coup has weighed heavily on civilians. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) reports that more than 6,700 civilians have been killed by the military since it began in 2021, and over 29,000 have been arrested as of June 2025.[1] For many BPLA members, the decision to fight stemmed from the collapse of civilian rule and the violent suppression of peaceful protests. The BPLA emphasises that their struggle is not just against the military regime, but also a fight for a future federal system that recognises the rights and voices of all ethnic and social groups in Myanmar. ■

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7. A soldier checking her phone while resting in the camp. 2024.
8. A member travelling on a truck. 2024.
9. A leader in the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) at a meeting with his commanders. 2024.
10. New recruits during a break. 2024.

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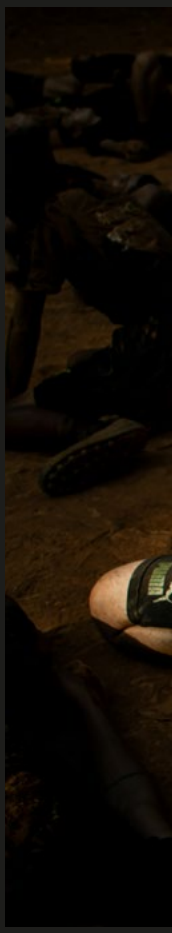

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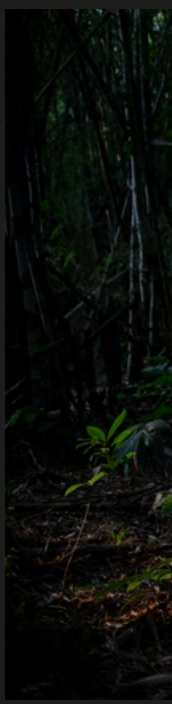

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11. New recruits attending a political training session. 2024.
12. A new recruit during a training session at a camp. 2024.
13. New recruits taking a break during a training session. 2024.
14. A leader in the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) leaving his camp. 2024.

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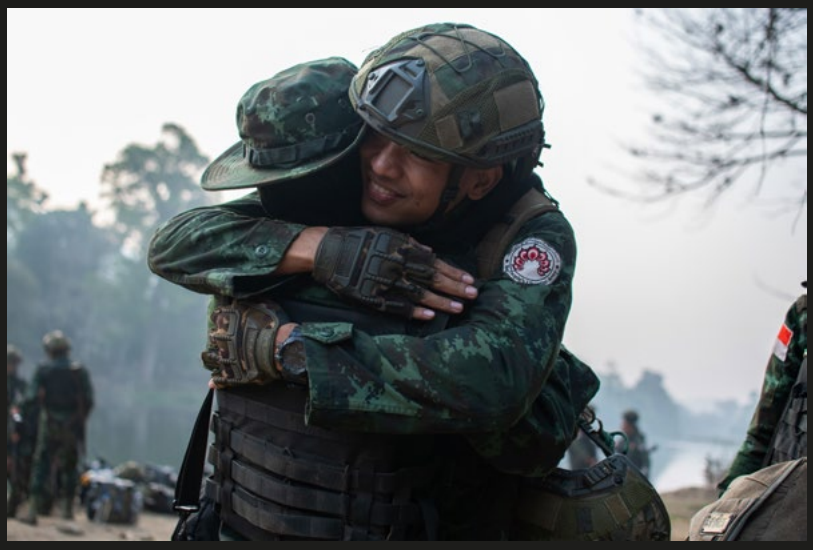

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15. A new recruit in a training camp. 2024.
16. Members trekking to another camp. 2024.
17. Members hugging near the frontlines. 2024.
18. New recruits having lunch. 2024.
19. A member travelling on a truck in a region controlled by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). 2024.

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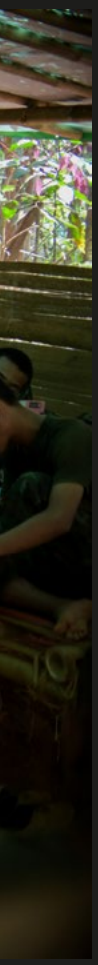

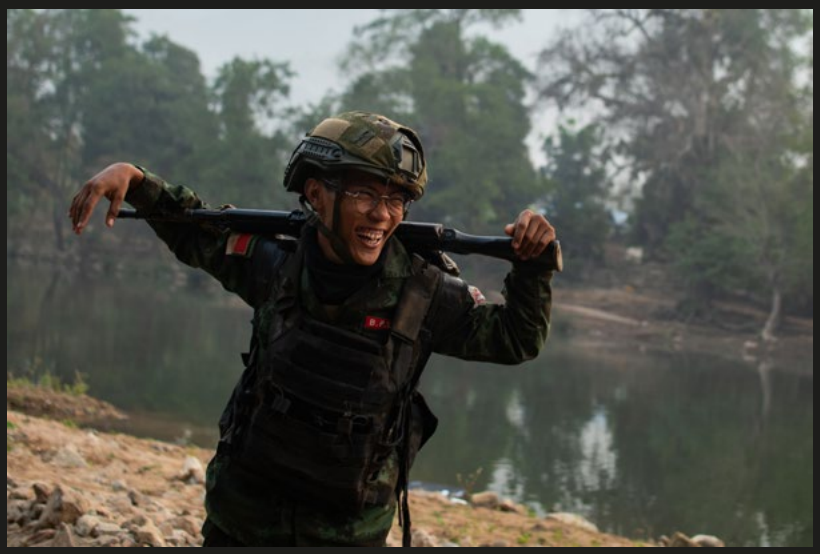

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20. A new recruit taking a nap. 2024.
21. New recruits resting during a break at camp. 2024.
22. Members travelling by truck to another camp. 2024.
23. A member near the frontlines. 2024.
24. Members cleaning their guns at a camp near the frontlines. 2024.

Disappearance of a Master Nest-Builder

The Baya Weaver's Struggle to Survive

Md. Ibrahim Khalil
Shafiqul Islam
Md. Anayet Hossen

The baya weaver, once celebrated for its intricate nests, is now struggling to survive in Bangladesh due to widespread deforestation, especially the loss of palm trees. Forced to adapt, the birds are nesting on fragile trees, leading to high nest failure and mortality. Habitat loss, climate change, and pesticide use have drastically reduced their numbers. This ecological imbalance could harm agriculture and even food security. Urgent palm tree replanting is needed to protect both the birds and the environment.

A palm tree covered in baya weaver nests. Photograph by Md Anayet Hossen, 2025.

Renowned Bangladeshi poet Rajanikanta Sen wrote of the baya weaver's pride in its craftsmanship in his early 20th-century poem 'Swadhinatar Sukh [The Joy of Freedom]'. In the poem, the baya weaver, known locally as the babu-i bird, points to the beauty of its self-made nest in response to the sparrow's taunts—the sparrow's nest may be stronger and larger, but it is not made by its own hands; while the baya weaver, with its handmade nest, understands the true value of 'home'. But today, the once-proud baya weaver is struggling to find a place to build its nest. This nesting crisis exists across the country. One of the most important trees baya weavers build their nests on is the tall palmyra palm, known locally as tal gachh, which has now become a rare sight in Bangladesh.

In June this year, a local man cut down palm trees in Jhalakathi district, resulting in the destruction of over a hundred baya weaver nests, which in turn caused the deaths of baya weaver chicks, and sparked nationwide discussion in Bangladesh. Following an outcry on social media, two legal cases were filed by the government and local authorities. The individual was eventually arrested for felling the trees, as reported in Bangladesh's daily newspaper *Prothom Alo*. However, this is hardly an isolated case, and not all incidents receive attention on social media. In many other districts, palm trees are being cut down with little resistance, destroying baya weaver nests in the process. These events often go unreported and unnoticed by mainstream media.

After hearing about this sorry state of affairs, we decided to go in search of baya weaver nests in July. We began exploring the districts of Rajbari and Faridpur in Bangladesh in search of these birds. We

chose these districts because they were once home to many palm trees—and by extension baya weaver birds—but numbers have now dwindled to almost nothing. We started our journey in Rajbari. This region was selected due to its unique geography—surrounded by rivers, floodplains, and flatlands. We travelled about 35 kilometres to Munshibazar in Goaland Upazila, Rajbari. There, we discovered several baya weaver nests on a coconut tree beside a house. According to the locals, these birds have been nesting there for the past few years.

We then travelled to Faridpur town, and to nearby remote villages and char areas (riverine sand and silt landmasses formed by river sediment deposits). But we couldn't find a single baya weaver bird. There were no palm trees either. Locals told us that the trees used to grow there, but the wood isn't considered very useful, so people cut them down. No one plants new ones anymore.

Still, we asked around the neighbourhood where we might be able to find baya weavers. Nobody could give us any clear directions. Eventually, we came across palm trees in Teljuri village of Boalmari Upazila in Faridpur, about 85 kilometres from Rajbari Sadar. Every inch of their leaves was covered with intricately woven baya weaver nests. Not a single spot was left untouched. Residents we met said there used to be more of such trees in the area, but most of them have been cut down over time.

Another one of our destinations was Shalepur Char in Charbhadrasan, Faridpur, about 62 kilometres from Rajbari. When we arrived, we were

quite surprised. There were no palm trees, but there were baya weaver birds! They had built their nests on trees like mahogany, acacia, dalbergia sissoo, and jujube—species not typically associated with their nesting habits. These trees are generally fragile and not ideal for their intricate nests. It became clear that, in the absence of their usual, safer palm trees, the birds had adapted and made alternative arrangements. Even birds change their age-old habits in difficult times.

We noticed similar patterns in various regions of the country. In places where there are no palm trees, baya weaver birds built nests on other relatively tall trees. However, their nests are not as durable on these alternatives as they had been on palm trees. Even a mild storm can cause the nests to fall, leading to the death of the birds. But the baya weavers have little choice. Without palm trees, they are forced to nest wherever they can.

We spoke with Aminul Islam Sujon, an official from Bangladesh's environmental organisation Poribesh Bachao Andolon (POBA). According to Sujon, excessive use of pesticides on agricultural land has led to the death of many baya weaver birds in the country. And due to climate change, the loss of forestland and food shortages have also caused various bird species to disappear, the baya weaver among them. The baya weaver usually does not search for food more than one kilometre away, and hence build their nests on palm trees near reliable food sources. However, with the decline in palm trees, especially with people increasingly cutting them down, they are now forced to build fragile nests that only last a few months in any large tree near food sources.

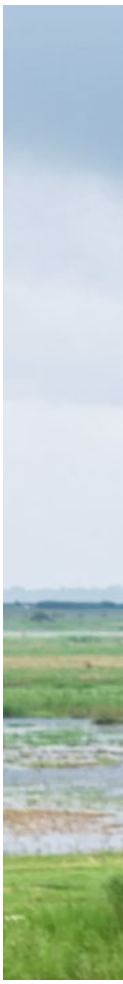
In places where there are no palm trees, baya weaver birds built nests on other relatively tall trees. However, their nests are not as durable on these alternatives as they had been on palm trees. Even a mild storm can cause the nests to fall, leading to the death of the birds. But the baya weavers have little choice. Without palm trees, they are forced to nest wherever they can.

Bangladesh is gradually becoming an increasingly hostile environment for birds. Numerous environmentally harmful activities are taking place. According to government statistics, the country has lost 101,000 hectares of forestland over the past decade due to climate change and deforestation—an area approximately three and a half times the size of the capital city of Dhaka. In this same period, 64 species of trees have disappeared from the country, according to preliminary data from the National Forest Survey conducted by the Forest Department in 2024.

When tree numbers decline, bird habitats are severely affected, which is exactly what has happened with the baya weaver. The birds are now rarely seen across the country.

On the topic of the disappearance of bird species, China is a prime example. In 1958, Chinese President Mao Zedong launched a campaign to eliminate all sparrows from the country. The argument was that each sparrow consumes about 4.5–5 kilograms of grain per year. With a population of one million sparrows, that would mean enough food for 60 thousand people was lost annually to these birds. As a result, a massive campaign was undertaken to cull sparrows through various means. However, it didn't take long for the people of China to face the disastrous consequences. Just a few years later, famine broke out in the country, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands. Without the sparrows, crops were ravaged by pests and insects, leading to a devastating loss of harvest.

Given the rapid rate at which trees, especially palm trees that are essential habitats for the birds, are being cut down in Bangladesh, the complete disappearance of the baya weaver could also potentially lead to food shortages in the country. Baya weavers aid rice production by feeding on harmful pests in paddy fields. But due to the rising population, agricultural land is increasingly being converted into housing, removing a vital food source for baya weaver birds and usually destroying palm trees in the process. The effect is two-fold: the loss of farmland due to urbanisation poses a risk to the bird's food supply and habitat, and the resulting loss of baya weavers



A palm tree covered in baya weaver nests. Photograph by Md Anayet Hossen, 2025.

may also weigh on crop yield from the remaining agricultural areas.

Furthermore, advocate Syed Mahbubul Alam, the Legal and Policy Affairs Secretary of Poribesh Bachao Andolon, stated that due to the declining number of palm trees, Bangladesh has become one of the most lightning-prone countries in South Asia, which then adds further risk of the remaining palm trees being struck by lightning. Clearly, the replanting of palm trees is of vital importance.

Every year, various types of wildlife and birds continue to disappear. One of the main reasons is the lack of awareness on both the social and state level. Along with the destruction of forests and trees, the use of harmful pesticides in agriculture has greatly reduced the natural habitats of birds. Many species of birds have disappeared without our knowledge due to the ignorance of humans, and neither does the government track these losses. The baya weaver bird is just one entry in a long list of species on the verge of disappearing.

As a society, it is our responsibility to protect this species—the baya weaver is a vital part of our ecosystem. Communities can play a crucial role by preserving trees, avoiding the use of harmful chemicals, raising awareness, and reporting any form of wildlife harm. The survival of the baya weaver depends not only on laws or organisations, but also on the active involvement of the public. After all, every species is a part of our shared environment and heritage. Saving the palm trees will not just save the baya weavers, it will help us too. ■

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AI-Powered Sensors

A Game Changer for Buffalo Farming in India

Suhail Bhat

Buffaloes at Lalit Chauhan's farm are bathed three times a day to keep them cool during intense heat and humidity. This process underscores the high water usage and the challenges of resource management in a warming climate. Photograph by Suhail Bhat. 2024.

India's dairy sector, heavily reliant on buffaloes, faces serious challenges due to rising heatwaves and climate change, which threaten milk production and livestock health. To address this, the Central Institute for Research on Buffaloes (CIRB) has introduced AI-powered sensors that monitor buffalo health in real time, tracking temperature, feeding patterns, and disease symptoms. These sensors improve milk yield, quality, and animal welfare. If successful, the initiative could transform milk businesses across India, particularly for small and marginal farmers, by making dairy farming more sustainable, efficient, and climate-resilient—a true gamechanger in livestock management.

Delhi – In the last two summers, when India was hit by severe heat waves, Indian dairy farmer Lalit Chauhan lost three of his buffalo herd. One died after yearning for half an hour earlier this year, and the other two died sudden deaths last year (he suspects of disease but has been unable to verify his suspicions).

'If a buffalo reduces its food intake, we can tell something is wrong, but if there are no other symptoms, it's hard to figure out the problem,' says Chauhan. He adds, 'I have no idea what went wrong.'

Chauhan is one of the many dairy farmers in India losing their cattle to heat, humidity, and disease outbreaks. A 2017 study by the Central Institute for Research on Buffaloes (CIRB) in the Hisar district of the north Indian state of Haryana found that buffalo farming in key milk-producing states is highly vulnerable to climate change. For example, high temperatures and extreme weather can reduce buffalo milk production by 20–30%, posing a significant threat to food security in India. Buffalo are more vulnerable to heat stress due to their thick black skin and fewer sweat glands. And the loss of traditional wallowing ponds exacerbates this vulnerability.

India's dairy sector employs over eight million people, most of whom are small and marginal farmers. Despite them being the primary contributors of this industry, little has been known about the options available to them to mitigate climate-related losses.

Additionally, climate change affects milk production by disrupting fodder availability, altering pasture conditions, increasing disease prevalence, and causing the shrinking of water bodies, which leads to water scarcity.

Despite these challenges, buffalo milk draws a higher price due to its 7–7.5% fat content, nearly double that of cow's milk, according to the CIRB. Buffalo are efficient at converting low-quality feed and can thrive on crop residues and green forage that requires minimal inputs like fertiliser or pesticides, even in harsh climates.

In response to the recent difficulties, the CIRB has introduced AI-driven sensors to monitor buffalo health and productivity in real time, marking a significant step towards addressing these challenges.

These sensors, like rumen bolus sensors—small devices placed inside the buffalo's stomach to record activity—and biosensors, track everything from body movements and nutrient intake to reproductive health. They help in the management of the impact of changing weather patterns by continuously documenting the buffalo's physiological responses to environmental conditions.

For instance, they can detect early signs of heat stress by tracking body temperature and activity levels, allowing farmers to take preventive measures such as providing shade or adjusting feeding schedules.

'We observed improvements like higher milk yields, better quality of milk, less antibiotic residues,

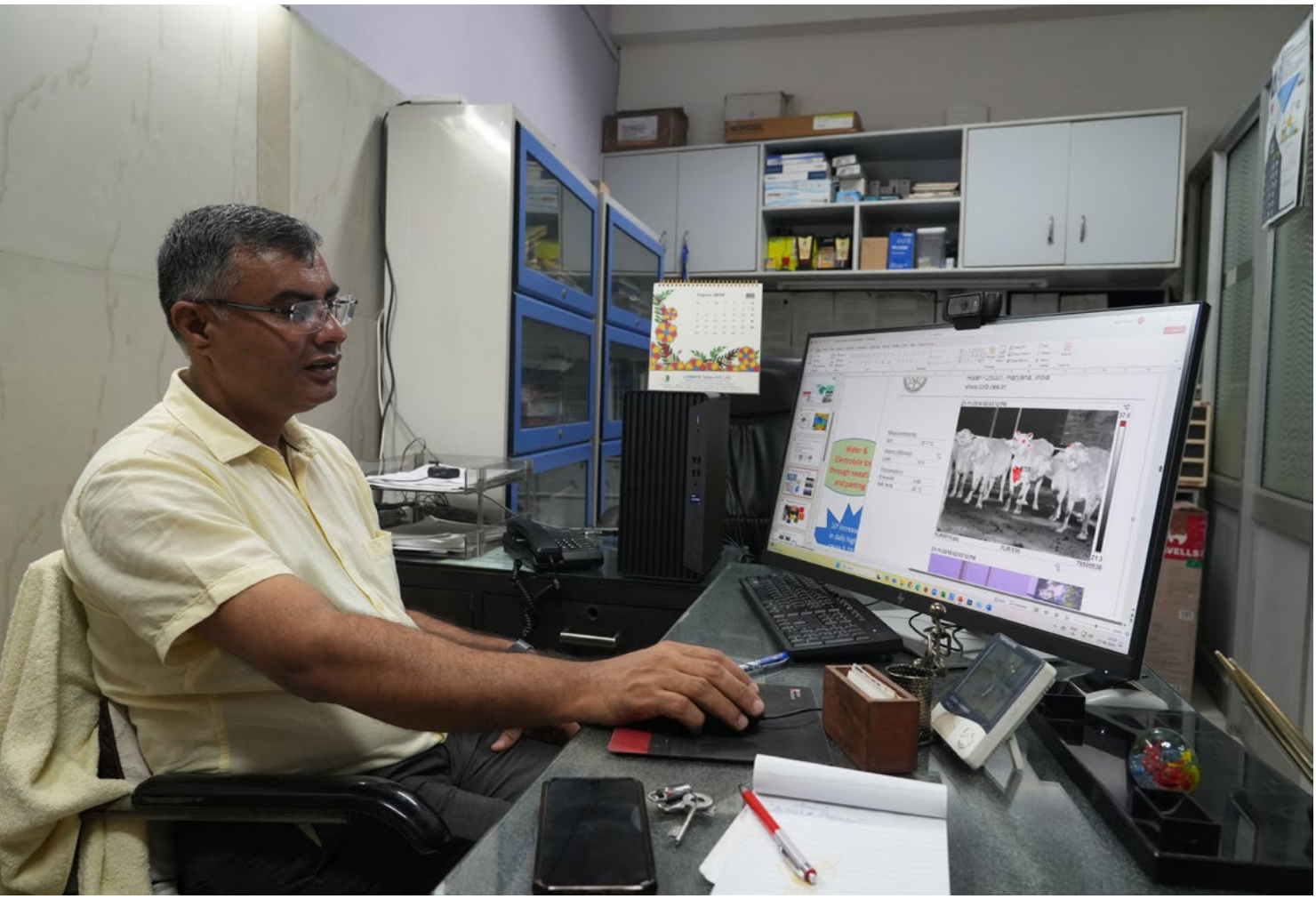
Lalit Chauhan, who manages over 800 buffaloes on his farm in Haryana, has experienced firsthand the challenges of maintaining milk production during extreme temperatures which reduces production by 20–25%. Photograph by Suhail Bhat. 2024.

better fat content, and overall better nutritional value of the milk, which directly benefits farmers' income,' Dr Ashok Kumar Balhara, Principal Scientist at CIRB who helped design this project, told *Nikkei Asia*.

India's dairy sector employs over eight million people, most of whom are small and marginal farmers. Despite them being the primary contributors of this industry, little has been done to help these farmers to mitigate climate-related losses, and they are usually unaware of the meagre options that are available to them.

'The development of AI-driven sensors for buffalo is inspired by the need to address the challenges posed by climate change, particularly in smallholder dairy systems in India,' says Dr Tirtha Kumar Datta, Director of CIRB.

> "The development of AI-driven sensors for buffalo is inspired by the need to address the challenges posed by climate change, particularly in smallholder dairy systems in India."
>
> **DR ASHOK KUMAR BALHARA**
> Principal Scientist at the Central Institute for Research on Buffaloes (CIRB)



Dr Ashok Kumar Balhara using thermal imaging to monitor buffalo health, identifying abnormal body temperatures. In the image, the red spot indicates a buffalo with a higher temperature compared to others, demonstrating early detection of heat stress. Photograph by Suhail Bhat. 2024.

Unlike previous livestock-monitoring technologies—which have primarily focused on cattle or general livestock, as reviewed by Alipio and Villena—this initiative is designed specifically for buffalo. 'The program is set to expand to testing around two thousand buffaloes across Haryana, Punjab, and other locations,' Balhara says.

'Success in these trials will lead to demonstrations and training programs for farmers and stakeholders to support widespread adoption in the coming five years,' he adds.

There are a total of 109.85 million buffaloes in India, according to the most recent census in 2019, about 1% more as compared to the previous census in 2012.

According to India's National Dairy Research Institute, buffalo milk contributes over 12% to global milk production, and in the Indian subcontinent, most milk is produced by buffalo. Balhara says, 'These sensors give us a detailed picture of each buffalo's health, allowing us to intervene early and prevent diseases. [. . .] The data we collect is analysed by AI, helping farmers make better decisions about feeding, breeding, and overall herd management.'

AI is at the heart of this initiative due to its ability to process vast volumes of data and identify patterns that would be impossible for humans to go through in the same amount of time. In the context of buffalo farming, where small physiological changes can have significant impact on health and productivity, AI offers a way to monitor these animals with accuracy.

'Buffalo have been underserved by modern farming technologies, despite their importance to India's dairy sector,' says Balhara. 'By integrating AI into this project, we're able to create precision tools that cater specifically to buffalo, enhancing their resilience to climate change.'

Farmers like Chauhan have experienced firsthand the challenges of maintaining milk production during extreme temperatures. 'Heat reduces production by 20–25%, and issues like silent heat in the animals

often go unnoticed,' Chauhan explains. 'If AI sensors could help with early diagnosis, it would be incredibly helpful. This business could grow by 50–80% in profit if AI sensors were introduced.'

'It will be like a miracle for us,' says Chauhan.

While this project targets buffalo, its potential extends beyond livestock management. Datta expects that the technology could be adapted for precision agriculture, environmental monitoring, and human health. 'This technology is not only a first for buffalo, we also aim to scale up to millions of animals across India, with potential applications in other countries and industries,' he says.

Balhara adds, 'Similar systems could be used for monitoring crop health or tracking environmental changes.' The AI models from this project could also be applied to industrial process control, broadening its impact.

In India, where buffalo are vital for rural livelihoods and food security, this technology offers a path to more sustainable dairy farming. The project could serve as a model for other countries facing similar livestock management issues. 'As CIRB expands its program across Haryana and potentially other regions, this initiative could redefine livestock management standards worldwide,' adds Balhara. ■

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Echoes of Empire

Nahid Hasan

The decaying remains of an abandoned Jamidar house lie in deep isolation. Photograph by Nahid Hasan. 2020.

Echoes of Empire is a visual journey into the fading remnants of Bangladesh's feudal past. The crumbling Jamidar houses epitomise the silent aftermath of colonial rule, displacement, and the erosion of inherited power. It also evokes questions on memory, belonging, and the cultural forgetting of a once-dominant social class.

Wild plants growing unchecked around a broken veranda of an old Jamidar house, slowly reclaiming the abandoned structure. Photograph by Nahid Hasan. 2020.

Nahid Hasan is a documentary photographer, filmmaker, and visual journalist based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. His work explores human rights, gender equality, marginalised communities, and social, cultural, and environmental issues. Guided by a deep sense of social responsibility, Nahid's visual storytelling blends realism with poetic sensitivity—capturing unspoken emotions and the quiet resilience of those often overlooked. His work has been exhibited and published in national and international festivals, galleries, and media outlets. He currently works with several international media outlets as an independent visual journalist.

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In the quiet corner of Bangladesh, where time holds its breath, the Jamidar Baris (Zamindar Houses) stand like forgotten curators of history—structures dethroned of their power yet heavy with memory.

The Jamidar Baris of Bangladesh, where land, power, and identity were closely linked, denote a distinctive historical period. Built in the colonial era, these mansions once reflected the control and social dominance of the Jamidar class. Yet, the structures today stand as silent markers of decay.

With the end of colonial rule, and the abolition of the Zamindari system, the disruptions caused by the Partition displaced the landlords of these estates, leading to the instant dismantling of their power. Many were compelled to migrate, leaving their ancestral homes to decay or to be occupied by independent residents. This course of displacement was simultaneously physical and symbolic. The withdrawal of the old colonial masters resulted in the collapse of a class system, and the resulting evacuation of landlords paralleled the loss of inherited power, while the physical deterioration reflected the erosion of cultural legacy.

The present state of these residences reveals a layered narrative: architectural glory juxtaposed against structural decay, historical significance overshadowed by cultural erasure. They epitomise both the material consequences of political turmoil and the symbolic death of a ruling class.

As architectural structures, the Jamidar Baris recite stories of displacement and the deterioration of power. Their continued decline raises questions about memory, belonging, and the contentious preservation of history in post-colonial Bangladesh. ■

Top left: The fading outlines of an abandoned Jamidar house can be seen as its cracked walls slowly erode and wild plants and creeping branches grow over the structure.

Bottom left: A resident reading a book in an old abandoned Jamidar house.

Below: A saree hung out to dry at an abandoned Jamidar house, now quietly inhabited by an unknown resident.

Photographs by Nahid Hasan. 2020.

Below: The decayed facade of an abandoned Jamidar house with overgrown trees growing freely.

Top right: An old abandoned house with charred walls lying in ruin.

Bottom right: A man walking past an old abandoned Jamidar house.

Photographs by Nahid Hasan. 2020.

Suffering in Silence
Rising Domestic Violence in Bangladesh

Violence against women in Bangladesh is on the rise, affecting all social classes and regions, especially in disaster-prone areas. Cases of domestic abuse, rape, and harassment continue to increase, with many victims remaining silent due to fear and stigma. Despite existing laws, weak enforcement and growing societal misogyny worsen the situation. Recent legal reforms aim to speed up investigations and trials, but without broader awareness and cultural change, real progress remains uncertain.

Md. Ibrahim Khalil

In 2022, after being absent for three consecutive days, a home cook returned to work. Both of her eyes were swollen, and her head was bandaged. She had been brutally beaten by her husband. Her 'crime' was arguing with him over his drug addiction. Because she was the primary earner in her household, she had to cook for six households every day despite her injuries. She didn't file any complaints with the police and didn't even tell her family. She was once again beaten and hospitalised by her husband just a month later.

Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon situation in Bangladesh.

Across the entire country, incidents of violence against women have increased, and this phenomenon is not restricted by distinctions of education, geography, or urban-rural divides. However, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the rate of women facing violence at the hands of their partners or husbands is relatively higher in disaster-prone areas affected by climate change. This information was revealed in March 2025 in the *Violence Against Women Survey* 2024 in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is composed of eight administrative divisions, and this report presents a breakdown of data for each division. According to the findings, the Barisal division has the highest percentage of women—approximately 82%—who have experienced physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence along with controlling behavior by their intimate partners or husbands at least once in their lifetime. Barisal is one of Bangladesh's most disaster-prone regions, especially for cyclones, floods, and river erosion. The Khulna division, another disaster-prone area, follows closely with 81%. Even in divisions with the lowest reported rates, such as Sylhet and Dhaka, approximately 73% of women have faced such abuse. In other divisions, the prevalence is also alarmingly high: 76% in Chattogram, 75% in Mymensingh, 75% in Rajshahi, and 74% in Rangpur.

The highest rate of women who experienced such violence in the 12 months prior to the survey was also recorded in Barisal at 57%. The lowest rate was recorded in Rajshahi, where 41% of women reported being subjected to violence in the past year.

According to the report, 70% of women in Bangladesh have experienced violence based on

UN measurement standards at least once in their lifetime by an intimate partner or spouse. In the past 12 months, the highest rate of violence was reported among girls aged 15 to 19, with 62% experiencing abuse. A total of 27,476 women aged 15 and above from urban, rural, disaster-prone, and slum areas were interviewed for this survey.

The BBS report further shows that in natural disaster-prone areas, nearly 81% of women have experienced domestic violence at least once in their lifetime. In contrast, the rate is 74% in non-disaster-prone areas. The rates are 53% in disaster-prone areas and 47% in non-disaster-prone areas for domestic violence experienced the 12 months before the survey.

'In disaster-prone areas of Bangladesh, men often leave their homes in search of work. During this time, the responsibilities of household tasks and caring for family members fall heavily on women. Although she effectively becomes the head of the family in terms of housework, her opinions are not considered in decision-making. Various complaints are made against her by in-laws, children, and even neighbours. When the man returns home, he hears these complaints and begins to believe that his wife is "good for nothing". In such situations, emotional abuse against women is far more prevalent than physical abuse,' disaster expert Gawher Nayeem Wara stated.

While Wara's statement provides a rationale for the increase in violence against women in disaster-prone areas, it does not adequately explain why this number is also rising in urban areas. And it is not just domestic violence against women that has increased in Bangladesh. Incidents of rape and murder of women—including by their husbands—have risen more than ever before.

According to data from Bangladesh's human rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a total of 401 women across the country were subjected to rape and gang rape in 2024. Among them, 34 were murdered after being attacked, and seven took their own life following the assault. Additionally, 109 women were victims of attempted rape. In the first six months of 2025, 441 women were victims of rape, including 111 who were victims of gang rape, and 162 women faced attempted rape, ASK's latest data shows. Of this, 22 women were murdered after the attack. What is especially tragic is that in most of these cases, evidence shows the involvement of individuals known to the victims.

An analysis of the national emergency service call data in the country also revealed that the number of calls reporting harassment, abuse, and violence against women has been increasing every year.

Dr Fauzia Moslem, president of the women's rights organisation Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, said, 'We would have been very pleased if the rate of violence against women had decreased under the current interim government. But we see no sign of that happening. In fact, what we are witnessing now is a growing misogynistic attitude in society. Anti-women groups have become active once again. They are using religion against women—restricting their mobility, criticising their clothing [. . .] weaponising religion to spread hatred and intolerance. Even worse, those who point fingers at women are being welcomed with garlands. These are not good signs.'

The shocking level of abuse revealed in reports by BBS, UNFPA, and ASK is only the tip of the iceberg. In Bangladesh, many victims choose to remain silent and endure the abuse due to fear and social pressure. They feel unable to file complaints out of fear or concern for their dignity and safety. Some who do report their experiences later withdraw the complaint out of fear for their lives. Although laws exist in Bangladesh to address violence against women and children, proper enforcement is lacking. The current legal and judicial system is failing to protect these vulnerable groups.

However, Bangladesh's Law Advisor Professor Asif Nazrul recently announced reforms to existing regulations for cases regarding rape and violence

- The rate of women facing violence at the hands of their partners or husbands is relatively higher in disaster-prone areas affected by climate change, while incidents of violence against women have increased across the country as a whole.
- 70% of women in Bangladesh have experienced violence based on UN measurement standards at least once in their lifetime by an intimate partner or spouse.
- A survey of 27,476 women aged 15 and above from urban, rural, disaster-prone, and slum areas revealed that the highest rate of violence was reported among girls aged 15 to 19, with 62% experiencing abuse, in the past 12 months.
- Many female victims of sex-based violence in Bangladesh feel unable to file complaints and pursue legal actions for fear or concern for their dignity and safety, as well as out of social pressure.

against women. The investigation period for such cases will be reduced from 30 days to 15 days, and rape trials must now be completed within 90 days, as per the new mandatory provisions. This is to ensure quicker justice for survivors, to hold perpetrators accountable in a timely manner. But, without taking concrete steps to raise individual awareness—a critical factor in ending violence against women—will these changes truly improve the situation, whether at home or in public? Or will it continue to worsen?

All members of the community need to be taught about gender equality, and encouraged to challenge the stereotypes that are rife in a patriarchal society. Legal reforms will not be sufficiently effective without changing mindsets at the grassroots level, especially given how the government seems to yield to public pressure regarding this serious issue.

In the past, the government has often turned to religious scholars to raise awareness on various issues. But what happens when these religious scholars are themselves guilty of perpetuating discrimination and violence against women?

Islamic groups have previously reacted strongly to suggestions of legal reform put forward to improve the protection of women, deeming them 'anti-Islamic' according to their distorted interpretations of religious teachings, and even organised a rally in Dhaka in 2025 calling for the dissolution of the Women's Reform Commission (WRC) responsible for reviewing the legal, social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate discrimination against women. Members of the WRC were openly threatened at the rally. Since then, the government has not implemented any of the reforms recommended by the WRC, and the group largely appears to have been sidelined.

Creating a society where every woman can feel safe in her own home is of utmost importance, but when social pressure prevents the implementation of reforms to take the next steps in this endeavour, the problem must be tackled at the very root. ■

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Changing Rooms, Unchanging Rules

Bangladeshi Girls and Their Idea of Home

For many girls in Bangladesh, home is not a place they own but a space they pass through. From their parents' house to shared hostels and eventually their husband's family home, each stop comes with rules and limits. This story looks at how young women are challenging long-held beliefs about belonging, identity, and ownership, and how their quiet resistance is slowly reshaping the idea of what it means to have a home.

Nafisa Kabir

For Bangladeshi girls, this idea [of home] is shaped by movement and transition, not permanence. From their father's home to a university hostel, from rented apartments to their husband's family home, many women never really have a space they own or control.

When asked where home is, Shova smiles faintly. 'Right now, it's this small hall room I share with two others,' says the 23-year-old university student in Dhaka. 'But I don't think I've ever had a home that I could truly call mine.'

For many, the idea of home is deeply tied to identity, belonging, and stability. But for Bangladeshi girls, this idea is shaped by movement and transition, not permanence. From their father's home to a university hostel, from rented apartments to their husband's family home, many women never really have a space they own or control.

For most Bangladeshi girls, the journey begins in their parents' house. That's where they grow up, but it is rarely seen as their long-term home. From a young age, girls are reminded that they will one day leave. 'Ei basha tomar na [This house isn't yours]' is a phrase many girls hear in passing. It's not always said with cruelty, but it is a constant reminder of a girl's lack of authority.

> It's hard to explain. It's your house, but it isn't. You're always adjusting yourself to fit in. [...] I want something else for my daughter. I want her to know that home is not just where people allow you to stay. It can also be where you choose to belong.
>
> **SANJEEDA KABIR, 28**

> It's about power. When you don't own the space, you can't make rules. You can't rest fully. You always feel like you're waiting for someone's approval.
>
> **SHOVA, 23**

When a girl leaves home for higher studies, she usually moves into a dormitory or shared accommodations with others. These are usually small rooms with shared toilets, cracked walls, and borrowed furniture. But this is the first time they taste freedom. And often, the last.

'When I moved to the hall, I felt like I could finally breathe,' says Shova. 'No one watching when I eat, when I come home. But still, it's temporary. At the end of my university life, I have to pack up everything and leave.'

Marriage is the next big step. And here, space becomes even less negotiable.

Sanjeeda Kabir, 28, lives with her husband and in-laws in a modest apartment in Dhaka. She is a full-time homemaker and originally comes from Sylhet. 'I see my parents once a year,' she says. 'It's not that anyone forbids me from visiting, but there's always something in the house that makes it difficult, like family plans, money or looking after my child.'

She lives in a home where her mother-in-law chooses the wall paint and arranges the furniture. 'They're good people,' she says. 'But still, I ask before I bring a friend over. I ask before I buy a curtain.'

For Sanjeeda, the boundaries aren't always spoken, but they exist. 'It's hard to explain. It's your house, but it isn't. You're always adjusting yourself to fit in.'

A generational divide

This journey from daughter to tenant to wife is repeated across millions of lives. And behind it lies a quiet generational script.

Amena Banu, 65, says she never thought twice about moving into her husband's house at 15. 'That's how it was. You leave one house and enter another,' she says. 'Why should a girl live anywhere else?'

Amena didn't allow her daughters to work. She wanted them to marry early and settle in their husband's homes. 'Freedom is dangerous,' she says. 'It makes girls lose their way.'

Her views reflect a time when women's safety was deeply tied to obedience and presence within the family structure. A woman's worth was often measured by her ability to conform and remain within the system.

But the system is starting to crack.

Laki Begum, 42, is part of the in-between generation. She lives with her husband and his parents in Narayanganj, and she supports the traditional ways—to a certain extent. 'My mother never questioned anything. I did,' she says. 'But I still didn't move out. I didn't have the confidence or support.'

Her daughters, however, are growing up differently. 'They talk about living alone, working abroad. It scares me sometimes. But also, it makes me proud.'

Laki believes the pressure to move in with one's in-laws is still strong in both cities and villages. 'Even when a girl earns more than the husband, she ends up living in his family home. It's just how things are.'

Owning nothing

Behind all this is one simple reality—very few women in Bangladesh own a home.

According to a 2022 report by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, less than 12% of residential property in the country is owned by women. Most inherit nothing. Some don't even know they have the right to claim.

'It's about power,' says Shova. 'When you don't own the space, you can't make rules. You can't rest fully. You always feel like you're waiting for someone's approval.'

This lack of ownership also affects a woman's sense of safety and identity. 'If there's a fight, you're reminded that it's not your house,' says Sanjeeda. 'If your marriage ends, you're expected to leave.'

'I want to build a small studio apartment someday,' says Shova. 'Nothing fancy. Just a space where I can write, rest, and lock the door without asking.'

For girls like her, home is no longer just a place inhabited after birth or marriage. It is something to claim, build, and defend.

But it is not easy. Families often discourage unmarried girls from living alone. Landlords refuse to rent to single women. Society questions those who break the mould.

'I once tried to rent a flat with two of my friends,' says Tumpa, 27, a fresh graduate and school teacher in Chattogram. 'The landlord said he wouldn't rent to "loose girls". He meant girls without male guardians.'

The future of home

As young women push for space, the older generations push back. But the conversation has begun.

'I don't blame my mother,' says Sanjeeda. 'She did what she thought was right. But I want something else for my daughter. I want her to know that home is not just where people allow you to stay. It can also be where you choose to belong.'

This redefinition of home is what many young Bangladeshi women are fighting for. They are changing addresses, yes. But they are also changing the idea of what it means to belong.

And in that journey, perhaps, lies the quiet revolution.

Still, it is a challenging path. For every young woman daring to draw her own blueprint, there is an older voice telling her where she should live and why.

But the questions are being asked. And sometimes, asking is the first act of change. ■

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Life Inside Geneva Camp

Naimur Rahman

An aerial shot of Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, where hundreds of tightly packed buildings stretch across a small patch of land. From above, the camp looks like a maze of roofs and narrow lanes, leaving almost no breathing space between homes. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

Geneva Camp in Dhaka is home to nearly one lakh people, most of them descendants of those displaced during the Partition of India-Pakistan and the Liberation War. Though legally citizens, many remain stuck in social and economic limbo. This piece explores what "home" means inside a place formed by cramped spaces, limited resources, and inherited exclusion.

I first set foot in the Geneva Camp on a humid Thursday afternoon as a translator for a Canada-based film producer. I still remember that day. The air was heavy with the smell of sweat, damp walls, and fried snacks from nearby stalls. Stepping into the alleyways felt like entering a world caught between yesterday and forever. The narrow passages were barely wide enough for two people to walk side by side. In some parts, the sky was hidden by makeshift extensions and hanging sheets. There was hardly any space, and even less light.

After five days of filming, the producer said the camp could be defined in three words: cramped, limited, and full.

I recently visited the camp again for an assignment and spoke with the residents of in various settings.

'I've never seen anything beyond this camp,' says Nadim, a 13-year-old boy sat beside a half-broken doorway, looking out at the narrow alley where he plays cricket with friends every afternoon. 'This is where I was born. I sleep here, I eat here. I know every corner.'

When I asked him what 'home' meant to him, he didn't pause to think. 'It means this camp,' he says, his voice drowned out for a second by the honk of a passing rickshaw. He stands barefoot, one hand holding a broken bat. Behind him, a maze of clotheslines, tin roofs and tangled electric wires form the backdrop of what nearly one hundred thousand people call home: Geneva Camp, Mohammadpur.

Geneva Camp is a temporary shelter that began with exile. The people who live here are mostly descendants of Urdu-speaking Biharis who migrated from India to East Pakistan after the 1947 Partition. But their fate changed again in 1971, when Bangladesh fought for independence from Pakistan.

Many Biharis supported West Pakistan during the war, either actively or by association. After independence, they were seen by the new Bangladesh nation as outsiders, even traitors. Targeted violence and revenge followed. Thousands were killed. Many survivors took shelter in this camp, hoping to be repatriated to Pakistan. That hope never came to be.

Now, five decades later, generations have passed but the label remains. 'Stranded Pakistanis'. Legally, many are now citizens of Bangladesh. But in practice, they remain in limbo.

'I was born here, just after the [liberation war of Bangladesh],' says Neelima, 54, as she sits on a plastic stool just outside her room. 'I've seen floods, fires, elections, promises. But nothing really changes here.'

She points to the corner of her room. 'Ten of us used to sleep in this room. My daughter just got married. They had a baby, so now it's 11.'

Neelima's voice is calm, but her words carry weight. The rooms are small, dark, and damp. Walls are patched with sheets of newspaper and old calendars. A single shared toilet often serves more than 50 people. Electricity cuts happen often. Water sometimes runs out.

'When you live this way your whole life, you stop dreaming about change,' she adds.

Between belonging and exclusion

For many, life in the camp is a cycle of work, worry, and waiting. Muhammad Ishtiak, 32, works at a welding shop nearby. He earns around BDT 500 (US$4.11) a day if there's work, even less if it rains.

'I can't get a good job. No one wants to rent a flat to us. They hear we are from Geneva Camp and look at us like we're criminals,' he says.

His father wanted to go to Pakistan. He waited years for repatriation which never came. Ishtiak, on the other hand, no longer thinks of that country. 'I was born here. I can speak Bangla, I support Bangladesh cricket. But outside, I'm still seen as a criminal.'

We ask him how it feels to be stuck like this. He shrugs. 'We survive. That's what we do.'

In a corner tea stall, Rifat, 20, is scrolling through his phone. He studies at a local college, helps his mother with their home-based tailoring work, and dreams of becoming a teacher.

'When people ask where I live, I say "Mohammadpur". I don't say "Geneva Camp" unless I trust them,' he says. 'I've been mocked. People think we are dirty, backward, even dangerous.'

Still, he doesn't want to leave. 'It's strange. This place has so many problems. But it's where I feel safe. It's where my friends are. My childhood memories are all here. So, this is home.'

Home in exile

The idea of home is simple for most people. It's where you belong, where you rest, where you are accepted. But inside Geneva Camp, this is more complicated. Here, home is not a place of comfort. It is a place of compromise. It is inherited, not chosen.

The people I met didn't speak of big dreams. They spoke of small things: getting clean water, finding steady work, keeping their kids in school. Most of all, they spoke of being seen—not as stateless or stranded, but simply as people.

As I left the camp, Nadim called out, 'Come again. I'll show you the rooftop next time. You can see the whole camp from there.'

I smiled and waved. Behind me, the alley twisted back into its usual rhythm: mothers calling children, speakers playing old Urdu songs, boys chasing a tennis ball, and someone frying a tawa (a round metallic wok) full of chicken chaap curry in a corner.

This place may be called a camp. But for the residents, it's more than that. It's a world of its own. A place where life continues.

A place they have no other word for but 'home'. ■

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The people I met didn't speak of big dreams. They spoke of small things: [...] Most of all, they spoke of being seen—not as stateless or stranded, but simply as people.

An aerial view of the homes inside Geneva Camp. Most buildings are made up of only two or three small rooms. All the buildings are less than 28 m^2, a very limited living space for the families in the camp. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

Geneva Camp is surrounded by the high-rise buildings of Dhaka. The city itself is crowded, but the camp is even more tightly packed. It is one of the most congested pockets in the area. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

A Hill to Dance On

In Manipur's Ukhrul, a dance studio offers belonging beyond boredom, drugs, and conflict.

In Ukhrul, a hill district in India's Manipur state, Zaishin Dance Studio is bringing together young people—helping them find confidence, friendships, and a sense of home. Set against the backdrop of a growing drugs crisis in a region long shaped by insurgency and ethnic conflict, the video documentary, *A Hill to Dance On,* follows the vision of a young woman who grew up in this town looking to belong.

According to a 2018 survey, Ukhrul has an estimated six to seven thousand drug users. The district has long struggled to provide opportunities for its youth. And Ringwon Tangvah, dancer, choreographer and teacher, is determined to change that. 'Ukhrul is home,' she says. 'It's where my dreams began, and where I hope to inspire others to dream, too.'

While in school, Ringwon joined one of Ukhrul's first hip-hop crews: Generation Squad. Their motto—'Dance, Not Drugs'—was a response to the town's own socio-cultural landscape. 'During that time, I was the only girl in the group,' she recalls. 'The question was always the same: "How will this sustain you?" But dance made me feel alive.'

In 2019, Ringwon left for Delhi, enrolling in a professional dance program. Two months of formal training gave her structure and discipline, and broadened her vision of what may be possible back home. In May 2023 she opened Zaishin Dance Studio. The name, from the Tangkhul word 'zaikora', means 'everyone'—a reflection of her dream to make dance accessible to all and 'about moving forward together, as one.'

Today, 15–20 students on average attend classes each month. On any given day, the sound of sneakers squeaking and music echoing from Zaishin offers a stark contrast to the stillness outside. Most families cannot afford to pay exorbitant fees, so Ringwon keeps costs low and handles everything herself from teaching, to cleaning and accounting. The ethnic violence that erupted across Manipur in 2023 has made it harder to bring in mentors from Imphal, cutting off students from broader exposure.

'Running a dance studio is not easy,' she admitts. 'But seeing the progress of the students makes me want to carry on.'

Even though addiction and conflict still weigh heavily on the town, there is a persistence for change. It is palpable in the sounds of a studio that continues to open its doors, and students who return to practice. Through Zaishin, Ringwon carries forward the message she first learnt as a teenager in Generation Squad—movement can be a way out. ■

CHECK OUT THE VIDEO DOCUMENTARY "A HILL TO DANCE ON" :

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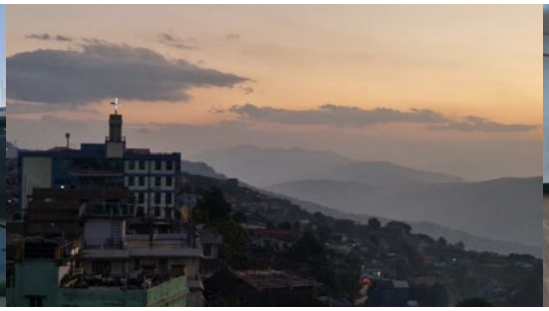


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A homeless person taking cover under an umbrella while living on a decaying sidewalk in Manila, Philippines.
Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2025.

All photos for this article:

The quiet roads of Pilerne, North Goa.
Photographs by Prateebha Tuladhar. 2024.

Home for One

Creating a home for oneself is integral to experience independence on one's own terms.

Prateebha Tuladhar

Prateebha Tuladhar is Adenauer Fellow from 2009 and holds a master's degree in journalism. She lives in Kathmandu, writes for *Nepali Times* and teaches at Asian universities. She also talks to trees, dogs and sometimes cats.

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Solitude standing

In November 2024, I left my home in Kathmandu in search of one elsewhere. I ended up in Pilerne, a village in the north of Goa, India, to spend some time alone at a friend's unoccupied house. The purpose was to learn to be at peace with myself. And to complete unfinished assignments.

Now, I cannot remember where I picked up such a habit—one of going away—but since I was a child, I've always felt a nagging need to leave behind my everyday life and embrace solitude. By the time I reached adulthood, that need had intensified and I often found myself working out of cafes buzzing with strangers for hours on end, or holed up in strange hotel rooms where I could just *be*.

Once, when I was checking into a small hotel in Thamel, Kathmandu, the receptionist looked at me searchingly. He was probably not used to women renting rooms for a day on their own. Now, well into my 40s, the question still gets thrown at me. In Goa, at Casa Pilerne, the caretakers were curious about me. Why had I chosen to come and live in isolation? How did it feel to be the sole resident in a colony of 15 houses? What did I do for a living? Where had I come from? Where would I go next?

On my first day in the village, the housing manager sat me down and produced a list of rules. I was not to leave the house alone after 5 p.m. or loiter in the village as feral dogs were likely to gang up on me. I was not to wear shorts when going into the village. I followed the rules closely. I wore long trousers or skirts during my walks despite the blazing Goa sun that pushed temperatures to 30 degrees Celsius, even in winter. And I tried to stick to taking walks only at 4–5 p.m.

In Kathmandu, I'm used to walking a couple of kilometres every evening. On my first day, my legs were aching for a long stride, and before I even realised, they had taken me further than I had planned, all the way to the nearest highway. The road there was scenic, flanked by coconut trees on both sides, severing it from the fields that stretch as far as one can see. If you've watched Bollywood movies shot in Goa, you've seen a road like this in every one of them.

I stopped to look at the birds, took pictures, and walked some more. When a car started to follow me, I didn't notice. There were three men in a white car; one rolled down the window and gestured to me, trying to talk to me. I did my best not to look and I kept walking ahead, my skin crawling and the air suddenly feeling very hot and humid around my nape. I walked on, my eyes focused on the ground before me so I could shut out the men in the car and get to the busier part of the road. A bus and then a scooter showed up, and the car made a U-turn and left. Probably drunk tourists, I thought.

I forged ahead. I didn't even stop to glance at the man from Rukum, Nepal, whose small convenience store I had stopped by earlier to chat.

The feral dogs had probably picked up the scent of fear emanating from my body. And then it happened. Five of them came at me at once! They surrounded me, barking and snarling. I stood very still. The only people in sight, a couple seated at the bus stop, did not come to help me. But an elderly man, carrying heavy iron tools, the kind you use to work the roads, walked towards me and shouted at the dogs. 'Chal chal [Go]!'

'Chalejao [Go away]!' I shouted as loud as I could. He brandished his tools at the dogs and they dispersed. He told me not to worry and to keep walking. And I walked as fast as I could, barely breathing until I reached the casa.

I learnt that day to bring a stick with me during my walks. It scathed the dog-lover in me to be wielding a weapon for the purpose of warding off these beloved animals, but it was the only way.

The village of frangipani

Pilerne is a 17th century Portuguese-era settlement with large, sprawling bungalows bearing names with the term, 'Casa', a residue of the colonial era. There are Catholic churches and Hindu temples in the village, alongside old houses that have been abandoned as the residents moved to Portugal, chasing their ever-distant ancestry. Over the years, the children born from Portuguese-Indian marriages have wed Indians, becoming more Indian in the process, while still upholding their claim to Portuguese heritage.

The village roads are heavily sheltered by indigenous trees and frangipani. The roads would come to life in wide intervals when a car, a bike, or a fishmonger's horn interrupted the silence. Once in a while during my walks, I would run into a passerby returning from work or school. They would glance at my dog stick and look away—I probably became known as the woman who walks around with a stick.

The dogs, clearly having encountered people with sticks before, left me alone. But the events involving strange men did not end. I would run into a young man playing on his mobile phone near a church every evening. He would try to make conversation with me and I would keep walking, pretending not to notice. Some men would wave. A couple of others on motorbikes would park at the same place every evening and chat. And while I did not know their intentions, I imagined they were watching me. The unpleasant encounters I had had shaped my thoughts.

So I had to step up my stick game. Every few days, I would stop by the big Banyan tree just outside the colony to find a bigger, longer stick. Whenever I needed reassurance, I would wave the stick in the air.

During those weeks of walking the same road back and forth on repeat to keep up my step count, I learnt by heart the nooks and corners of Pilerne Road, the colours of the houses, the smell of the trees, the voice of a certain man from Pondicherry who lived in a yellow bungalow with two frangipani trees that bear pink flowers. And I memorised the smile of the elderly gardener out tending to the garden with a massive frangipani in the front yard. He became my only acquaintance of sorts in the village. We had started to wave at each other when we crossed paths, and something about that quiet friendship made me feel less terrified of going on walks.

Inside my borrowed casa, it was quiet, cool, and calm. My days were spent focusing on myself, learning to cook better, to eat alone with great patience, to do the dishes, and clean up after myself. In Shalini's kitchen, I thought about my mother and her underrated cooking skills, and the journeys she has never had a chance to make. She always says I must travel so she can live vicariously through my experiences.

My restless feet have tried to make a home in many places, despite the little challenges spilled across their path. What I've learnt over the years is that a woman needs to have a house of her own, and every time I've moved has been an attempt to create a home for myself.

Sitting at Shalini's dining table, which doubled as my office desk, I made some notes to create a house of my own:

- Learn to cook from scratch. Call up favourite aunts and ask for recipes. Learn from my little sister what 'julienne a carrot' means. Ask Mother what goes into daal. Fail at cooking some days, and some days, get it right.
- It's okay to eat standing in the kitchen.
- When eating alone, if the silence is too much, read a book or watch a comedy show.
- I must allow the cat that shows up twice a week and sleeps on the washing machine to come back for a nibble, for cats only seek the kind.
- I must light candles on some evenings, bring in flowers, and some days just sit and stare at the trees in the yard.
- I must have a house with four trees in the yard. Two fruit ones, and two flowering.
- Get a dog to talk to, to walk. Except, perhaps a cat would be more suitable for working women, given the time and attention dogs need.
- My home must have a mail box and good chairs, even for guests who barely visit. But hope is a thing with feathers.
- A woman needs a house of her own, because it tastes like freedom.

Days passed simply at this home I created for myself in Goa. I fell into a routine with my days spent cooking, eating, working, watching, reading, writing, and sleeping. It was just me and time. The silence was restful. And so, Pilerne became my home in a way that will stay with me forever, even if it was only a temporary reprieve from the world. ■

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Leaving Home

Alec Corpuz

Black Nazarene devotees fill the stretch of Finance Road in Manila City, Philippines, as police try to keep order during the annual procession. Millions of people join the procession, colloquially called 'Traslacion', which transports a replica of a 400-year-old statue of Jesus Christ considered by many to be miraculous along the streets of Manila in one of the most fervent displays of Catholicism in the world. Photograph by Alec Corpuz. 2020.

When thinking of 'home', most people picture a place. A street, a city, a country. Maybe a glass table with a cracked corner, a couch where the light hits just right on a lazy Sunday afternoon, or a patio where the family pet is sprawled, waiting for belly rubs.

For others, home is a person. Someone whose smile lights up the room or whose embrace makes the world feel just that little bit safer.

But some of us find home in a role. A calling. In my case, home was two cameras slung across my shoulders, cigarette between my lips, and a newsroom with a work culture more toxic than I cared to admit.

In 2013, I stepped into the world of photojournalism thinking I had found my calling, and for a long time, more than a decade in fact, I had. Photojournalism gave me the excitement of covering breaking news, as well as moments of quiet, grief, and joy. I wasn't just living, I was documenting history.

I carried the title of photojournalist like a badge of honour, puffing my chest out every time someone asked what I did for a living. In some ways, I felt like I was living the dream.

Being a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung fellow amplified this feeling. Exchanging ideas with my peers from across Asia expanded my perspective and helped me further my career. Telling others that I was a KAS fellow lifted my ego, which admittedly is not something that needs any more boosting. I can honestly say the fellowship played one of the biggest roles in helping me find this home.

But as Abbot Elementary's Mr Johnson once said, 'Dreams can be a distraction just as easily as they can be a goal.'

Masked penitents kneeling in prayer at the San Felipe Neri Parish Church in Mandaluyong City. Every Holy Week, groups flock to various makeshift stations found in Barangay Poblacion as penance for perceived sins or as a vow for wishes yet to be granted or already given. Despite repeated disapproval from the Catholic Church, self-flagellation continues to be a Holy Week ritual in many parts of the Philippines, with the penitents believing the practice allows them to physically and emotionally connect Jesus Christ's suffering. Photograph by Alec Corpuz. 2025.

Over the past few years, the thrill faded. Not all at once, but steadily. After a while, deadlines became exhausting instead of thrilling. Newsrooms started prioritising urgency over accuracy, and while the stories stayed important, the images seemed less so.

That felt like a sign to step away.

No grand exits here. Just a quiet but steady decision, years in the making. We all choose our paths and I choose this. One that would allow me to create without the pressure to produce a photo to fit someone else's story. I want to take photos not just on the whim of the newsroom, but to fuel my own creativity and mind.

And I want to leave before I become someone who stays just because they do not know what else to do. I would rather leave now while I still love the craft, instead of turning into the person at the bar reminiscing about the 'good old days' that maybe were not that good to begin with.

This is not goodbye to storytelling, though. It is just a pivot, a not-so-quiet turning of the page. A decision to carry what I have learnt into something new.

And it is not because the dream does not matter to me anymore. But sometimes letting go is the only way to move forward.

I feel nothing but respect for the colleagues still grinding it out. I will always be cheering from the sidelines, nodding with approval every time I see your byline from a protest, a disaster zone, or just a perfectly timed moment in everyday life.

The dream was real. It still is. But sometimes, you outgrow even the best homes. And that's okay.

See you guys around, hopefully with a camera still slung over our shoulders. ■

Top: Sister Vita Domingo, the 15 Mysteries Catholic Lay Missionaries founder, attending mass in their grotto in San Miguel, Bulacan, Philippines. The grotto, which has several life-size images made by the group and giant statues of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, has become a tourist destination for visitors especially during Lent.

Bottom: Local tourists visiting religious statues at the 15 Mysteries Catholic Lay Missionaries grotto on Maundy Thursday.

Photographs by Alec Corpuz. 2023.

A man producing artisanal salt in San Vicente. Several families are involved in this cottage industry due to the region's vicinity to the sea and salt beds. Photograph by Alec Corpuz. 2014.

Residents and workers looking for salvageable items as firefighters gather their equipment after a blaze hit a warehouse near an informal settler community in Makati City. Photograph by Alec Corpuz. 2018.

Top: Members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies flock to the University of the Philippines Diliman for the third edition of the Lovelaban: Pride PH Festival to mark Pride Month in the predominantly Catholic country. Aside from pushing for inclusivity and the still-pending Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Equality (SOGIE) Bill, the event also called for environmental sustainability.

Bottom: Filipino wrestlers at a practice session as legendary Japanese wrestling superstar Yoshi Tatsu (left, standing) gives tips at the Brawlpit Bulusan gym. Still a niche industry, professional wrestling in the country is in its early stages, making it difficult for wrestlers to rely solely on the sport to make a living.

Photographs by Alec Corpuz. 2025.

Alec, after more than a decade in the newsroom, recently left his role as photojournalist and photo editor for a Manila-based newsroom to pursue work in the NGO sector.
He continues to teach and share his experiences as a member of the academe, teaching photojournalism to undergraduate students at the University of Santo Tomas and to post-graduate students as the co-ordinator of the Diploma in Visual Journalism programme of the Asian Centre of Journalism (ACFJ) at the Ateneo de Manila.
Alec obtained his diploma in photojournalism at the ACFJ and his master's degree in journalism at the Ateneo de Manila as an Adenauer Fellow.

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A food delivery rider making his way around Binondo, Manila, during rush hour.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2021.


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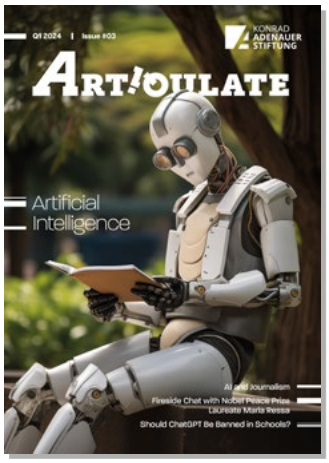

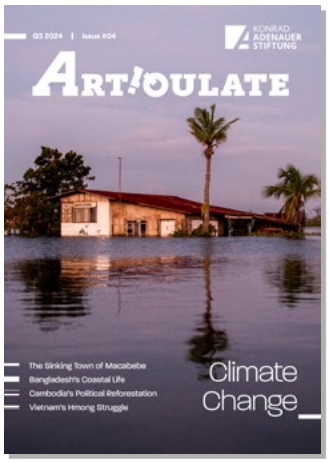

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