

Archiving for the Future: Ashfika Rahman's *Of Land, River, and Body* (মাটি, নদী, দেহ | Mati, Nodi, Deho)

Ashfika Rahman was born in 1988 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a country whose socio-cultural vicissitudes inform her contemporary art practice. Bangladesh's fifty-four-year history witnessed remarkable progress, particularly in terms of its economy and in the arts and education. However, the country is better known on the world stage for its devastating natural and industrial disasters, military coups, dictatorships, and rising ethnonationalism. The cornerstone of Bangladeshi identity is Bengali nationalism (defined by Bengali ethnicity and language). The regional history of the land includes British colonial suppression and several political regimes with a long record of oppression against their own population.

Only last year Bangladesh emerged from fifteen years of authoritarian rule under the previous ruling party, whose government perpetuated this history in even more extreme ways, eroding democracy, freedom of the press, and the rights and protections of its leader's critics through fear and violence.¹ Members of religious and ethnic minorities emerged from last year's coup even more vulnerable. The nation's path forward – how it defines itself, who it protects, and who is entitled to democratic process – remain unclear. Under this regime, socially engaged art took on an urgency as other forms of knowledge dissemination and resistance became ever more challenging. Rahman is among a small yet growing number of Bangladeshi ally artists, who although members of their nation's dominant communities, create witness-bearing art to illuminate state-perpetrated abuses. Comprised of three distinct projects, artworks in *Of Land, River, and Body* (*Mati, Nodi, Deho*) are united by their marginalized subjects (Indigenous, women, the silenced), whose histories, bodies, cultures, lands and water are being systematically erased. Rahman describes her art as 'archiving for the future', where she transforms her subjects' testimonies into affective artworks to actively resist that erasure.

Rahman's numerous accolades include winning the Future Generation Art Prize in 2023–24; being a finalist for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize (2022) as well as the Samdani Art Award (2023, 2020, 2018); participating in the *New York Times* Portfolio Review; and receiving recognition as one of the '12 Women Photographers to Watch' by PhMuseum (2022). At present, she is an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie in the Netherlands. Her wide creative footprint enables the artist to bring the testimonies of her marginalized subjects to diverse audiences in Bangladesh and beyond.

¹ See for example: Ido Vock, "Euphoria in Bangladesh after PM Sheikh Hasina flees country", BBC News (August 5, 2024): <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clywww69p2vo>.

Witnessing in the CHT: *Than Para – No Land Without Us* (2024–ongoing)

Rahman collaborates with and listens compassionately to her subjects' testimonies, a process she learned from her mother, Rashida Begum. An activist and social worker, Begum worked with Indigenous survivors of sexual abuse in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. (CHT). The region is a militarized borderland that is home to eleven Indigenous communities, each with over 1000 years of culture, language and history distinct from Bangladesh's majority Bengali-Muslim population. In most of Rahman's work, she re-visits the lands and people her mother once encountered, collaborating with them to narrate and articulate a collective voice.

In *Than Para – No Land Without Us*, Rahman explores the widespread state-assisted land expropriation throughout the CHT, here in Than Para village, which was seized for industrial projects and luxury resorts. The project is dominated by a monumental orb of hundreds of suspended brass bells, each with a thumbprint in *kumkum*.² 'Than' means land, home, and the name of the local god, indicating the Indigenous inhabitants' spiritual ties to their homeland. Each thumbprint is an index of an individual villager, the orb a referent of the collective forcibly dispersed community. Rahman photographed each villager impressing their reddened thumb onto a bell against the verdant landscape. With no registered land deeds, these photographs are the villagers' symbolic petition to support their claim to their homeland.

When activated by the slightest breeze, the bells ring in defiant unison, proclaiming a presence that refuses erasure. *Than Para* is a memorial not only of this community, but all displaced peoples from stolen homelands. The bells chime the villagers' testimonies asserting: 'We are still here. This is still our home. Can land forget those who loved it for centuries?'

'Dear Behula...': Witnessing Gender Violence and Environmental Degradation in *Behula These Days* (2022–23)

In *Behula These Days* (2022–23), Rahman turns her lens to entwined abuses against the environment and women. Her frame is a medieval Bengali folk heroine, Behula, whose husband, Lakhindar, dies from a snake bite on their wedding night. Upheld as a paradigm of piety and wifely self-sacrifice, Behula sailed on a raft with Lakhindar's corpse along waterways of the Chalan Beel (now divided between Bangladesh and India). Behula fervently prayed, especially to the Snake Goddess, Manasa, and the couple reached heaven.

Rahman brings Behula into the present. She travelled along the Chalan Beel, photographing and collecting stories from women she encountered. The women embroidered prayers in the form of letters to Behula on green cotton, each in their mother language (Bengali, dialects and Indigenous languages). The letters begin with 'Dear Behula' and offer deeply personal testimonies of domestic

² *Kumkum* is a red powder used in Hindu rituals.

abuse and unrealized dreams. They also address more universal concerns: climate change and its impact on rivers. One poignantly reads:

‘Dear Behula, I had planted some trees...they were washed away during the last monsoon...my sister was also swept away by the river. Some say the river claimed her, while others suspect her husband of foul play, thinking he may have murdered her... my heart aches for my sister...do you have a sister?’

Suspended from delicate golden threads, the embroidered prayers evoke Behula’s raft that sways in the breeze. *Behula These Days* was exhibited at the 2023 Dhaka Art Summit, which was visited by an estimated half-million people. Rahman was awarded the Future Generation Art Prize in Kyiv in 2024 for an offshoot of this work, titled *Behula and a Thousand Tales*. Gender violence is a taboo topic in South Asia and climate change an uncomfortable, contentious reality globally. Rahman garners a wide audience for both through her Behula archives.

Testimonies of the Silenced: Catharsis and Healing in *Files of the Disappeared* (2018–ongoing)

During the last years in the tenure of the previous regime in Bangladesh, an estimated 4000 young men were arbitrarily detained by an elite state police force, enduring physical and psychological torture while in custody. The exact reasons for these abuses remain unclear; detainees were not charged with any crime and those who were released were warned not to speak out. *Files of the Disappeared* is a witness-bearing project in which Rahman collaborated with professional psycho-counsellors and her disappeared countrymen. Understandably, the subjects experience PTSD. Rahman and the counsellors lead them on guided meditations to explore their suppressed trauma and begin to heal. She then photographs them in familiar surroundings with family members, where they feel safe and at ease.

For their safety, Rahman partially conceals her subjects’ faces in shadow. The artist also added woven gold masks over the subjects’ mouths or entire faces, representing their silence enforced through terror. The portraits include excerpts of their testimonies, filled with trauma, yet also hope and resilience. The following accompanies the portrait of a man missing a hand:

‘I’m disabled now; I lost my hand. Despite this, I have children who give me reason to keep going...I yearn to do so much more for them. My daughter dreams of learning to dance, and I’m determined to make that dream a reality. Though that incident took much from me, it can’t steal everything.’

Files of the Disappeared also includes photographs of haunting, eerily empty, misty, wind-blown, or dark landscapes. These are locations where corpses were discovered following encounters between the police and alleged criminals. The project unites the two groups of Bangladesh's disappeared: victims and survivors, perhaps assisting the latter in their healing. Viewed together, works in the series proclaim: 'We are not silenced. These violations occurred, but we are still here.'

This project is timely. Far beyond Bangladesh, the trend of enforced disappearances by law enforcement is alarming. This is a global concern threatening human rights and challenging principles of law and justice.

Conclusion: More Than an Archive

Artworks in *Of Land, River, and Body* go beyond archiving injustices and resisting their subjects' erasure; they celebrate gods and make heroes relevant in troubled times in local languages and aim to heal and uplift. The government and most of its citizens ignore, deny, are unaware, or unconcerned about the ongoing state-perpetrated abuses Rahman explores. Her media is apt for her witness-bearing art and recalls Roland Barthes' assertion that 'every photograph is a certificate of presence'. According to Barthes, a photograph's unique power lies in its ability to prove that someone existed, or something happened. A photograph not only represents a past reality, it compels the viewer to acknowledge that reality's existence.³ This is exactly what Rahman asks us to do.

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December 2025

³ *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981), 5–6; 87.