





**SRIMONGOL AND JAFLONG, BANGLADESH:**

# ANTI-CENSUS PHOTOGRAPHY

#8

PhotoDemos Pamphlet Series  
University College London  
November 2021

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For many Bangladeshis, Srimongal, in the heart of tea country, is a holiday destination. It is only about five hours drive from Dhaka, and an easy journey (if you can get a ticket) on the express rail line connecting Dhaka with Sylhet. It offers lush landscapes, national parks and forest sanctuaries, and a sense of escape from Dhaka.

In 2018 and 2019 when I visited Srimongal there were commonly agreed to be 12-14 photo-studios still active in the town. Of these four were run by Manipuri proprietors, that is persons of Manipuri heritage and identity normalized and enshrined in the neighbouring Indian state of Manipur. Srimongal is a place of cultural complexity, of overlaps and mixture. It feels liminal and free in way that Dhaka usually doesn't. Considering that it is a provincial town with deep

rural roots it feels reassuringly cosmopolitan. The census indicates that it is 95% Muslim, but the photographic demographic is quite different, giving a disproportionate visibility to the area's Manipuri and other Hindu communities.

The discrimination on which the census is founded, its absolute ability to categorize, is belied by the experience in photo-studios, where identities often manifest as subtle and sometimes unknowable. Jiban Das in NS Studios noted that from a commercial point of view Muslim and Hindu weddings were quite different: Muslim ones lasted two days whereas Hindu ones usually lasted two to three days. So, although they were more difficult to cover, they were invariably more profitable from the photographer's point of view. But when examining a pile of 200-300 bride-centric prints (shot in a high gloss Bollywood style)

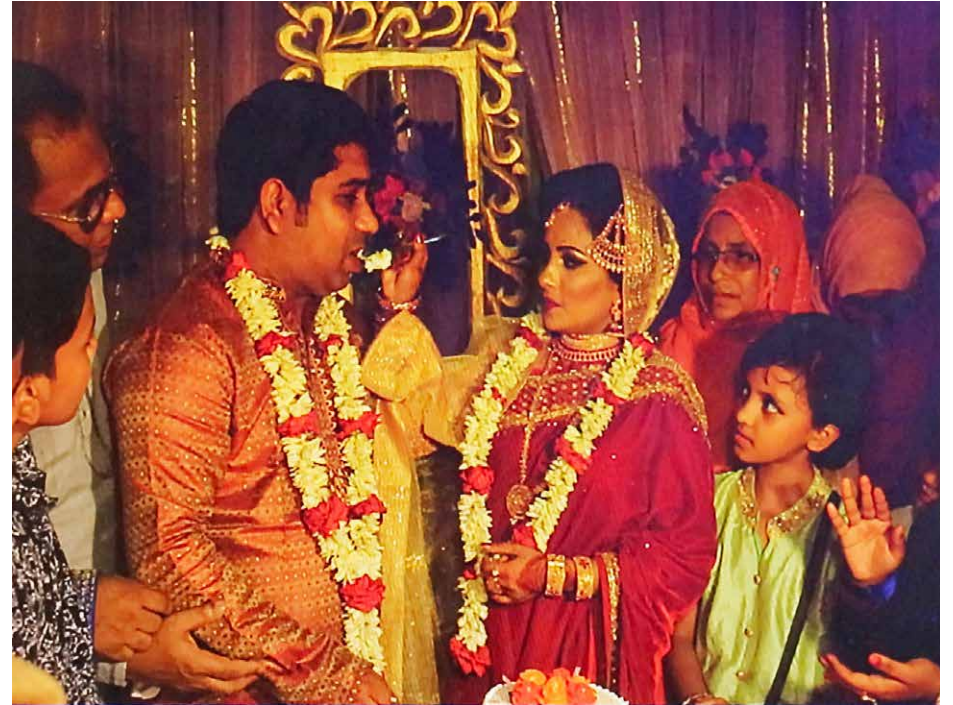


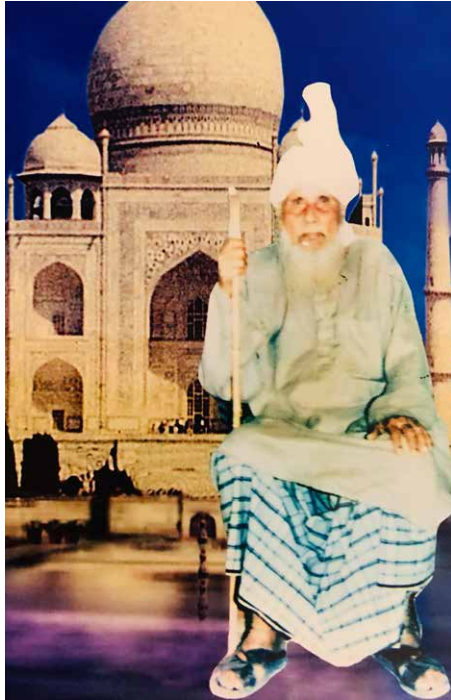
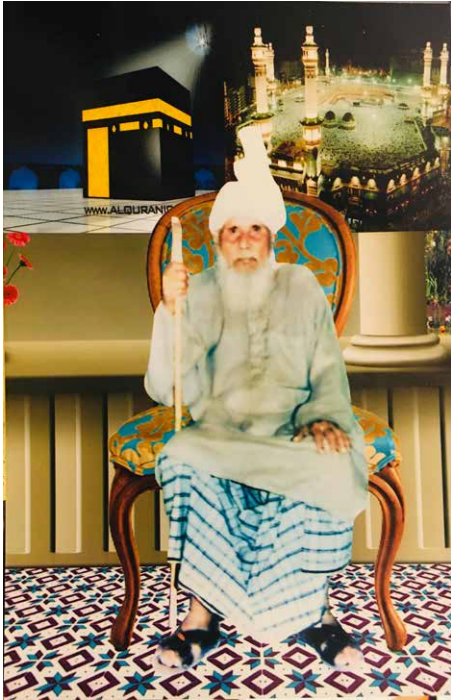


he found it difficult, on the basis of the visual evidence in front of him, to say whether this was a record of a Hindu or a Muslim wedding. Later I would encounter records of more easily recognizably Muslim festivities. From this photographer's perspective the antinomies of the census identities were eroded by common human desires that cut across communities: 'Everyone wants to see how pretty the bride is, and what she's wearing'.

Several studios maintained vast archives of images of figures of religious importance ranging from Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to figures with very local followings. Most were Hindus, but some were Muslim. In the case of Gas Pir ('Tree Saint') local traditions are montaged into the central traditions of Islam through the use of PhotoShopped backdrops of Mecca and Medina. When I was collecting printed copies of Gas Pir's photographs from the Oparupa Studio, a client grabbed one of the images and kissed it, demonstrating how actual Muslim practices usually have little difficulty in venerating images.

In Soronika Digital Studio, Samit, the young proprietor, took me through his current and recent commissions and revealed another dimension of the divergence of







the photographic *corps* from the *corpus*, to recall the distinction that Barthes makes. Many of his customers were tea workers who brought in studio portraits made elsewhere for Photoshopping against glamorous landscapes, mostly of flower-filled parks. Samit noted that unlike many Srimongol clients they didn't want to be pictured against tea estate backdrops. That particular landscape aesthetic was prized by town-dwellers, not those who actually spent their working life there. Positioned above the computer monitor on which we viewed the estate workers' images was a large flex-printed photo of the former proprietor standing in the middle of a tea plantation.

Soronika is named after the 'remembrance' function of photography and its clientele reflects the Hindu investment in memorial portraiture and a general (but certainly not total) Muslim avoidance of it. A Hindu woman is pictured seated with hands symmetrically placed on her knees positioned against a fecund backdrop. A flute-playing Krishna presides over an un-mistakably Bangladeshi rendition of Braj, the legendary location of Krishna's birth. Another recently prepared

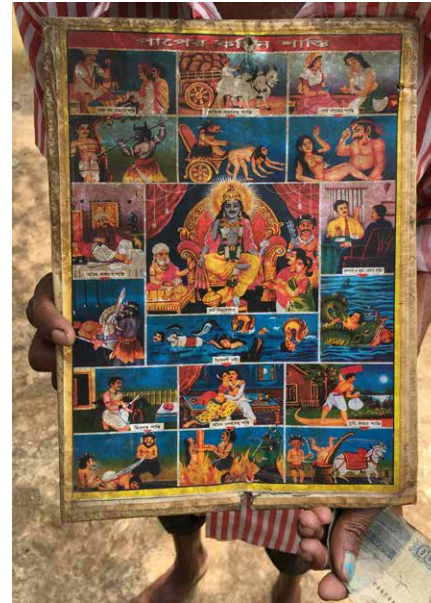
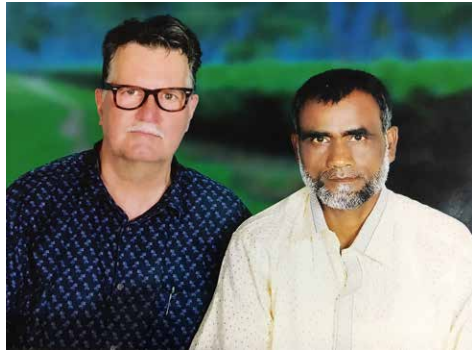


image takes an original image of a deceased priest in a tea-estate temple and reframes him at the centre of a greetings card template, cooing love birds and red hearts making it clear the deep affection in which he was held. In Protiva Digital Studio, which like Soronika is on the outskirts of town, many more *shraddha* portraits are being worked on. A tea estate worker has been extracted from a group image – her only photograph – and Photoshopped against a blue backdrop, a micro bus driver reunited with his wife and child.



## কমল ডিজিটাল স্টুডিও Komol Digital Studio

- ❑ আর্জেন্ট ছবি তোলা হয় ।
- ❑ মেমোরী কার্ড, পেনড্রাইভ, সিডি ও ছবি থেকে ছবি করা হয় ।
- ❑ লেমিনেটিং করা হয় ।

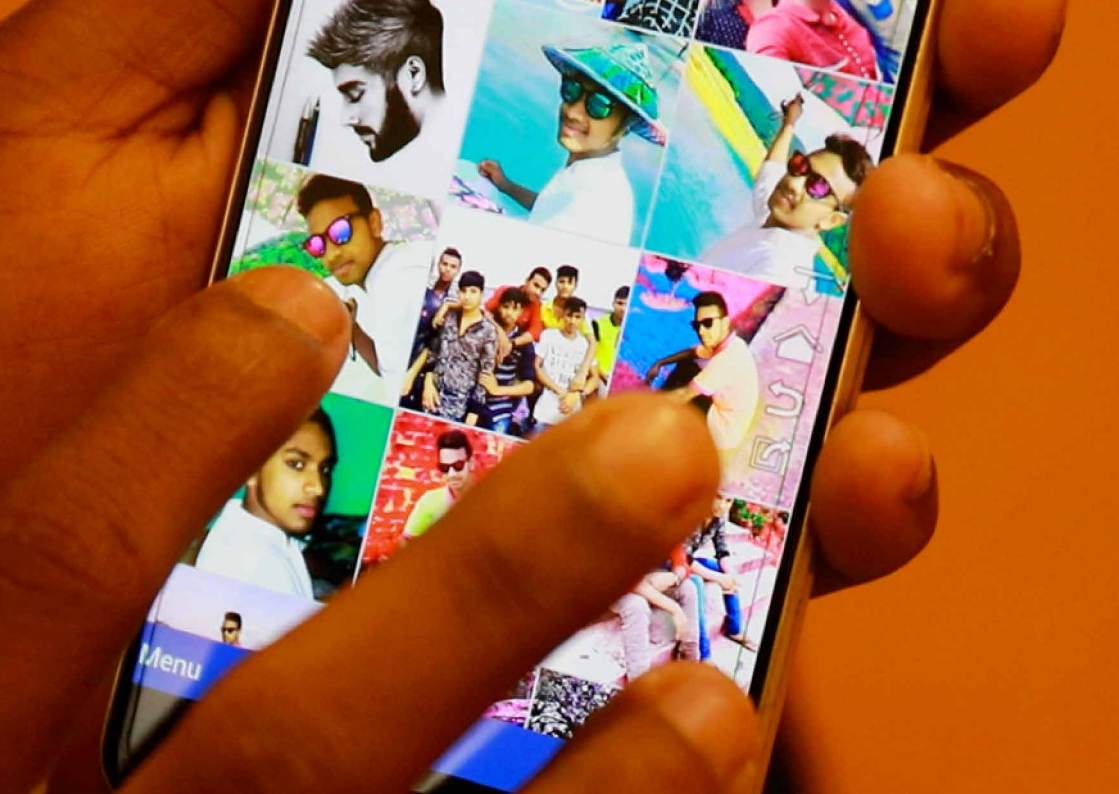


By contrast, the future orientation of much popular photography was seen most strikingly at work at the popular tourist destination of Jaflong a few hours further north of Sylhet. The river Piyain which separates Bangladesh and the Indian state of Meghalaya attracts numerous younger Bangladeshis, many of whom avail of the services of one of the dozens of photographers who use printers on floating barges to produce images for their clients. Tourists sit on rocks in the middle of the river and exchange Whatsapp details with Indian tourists who flock from the Meghalaya side. Photography is deeply entangled in this fantasy of border-crossing and escape to



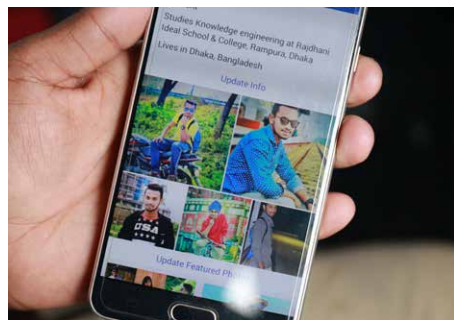
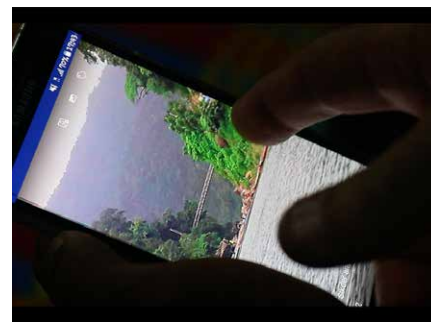
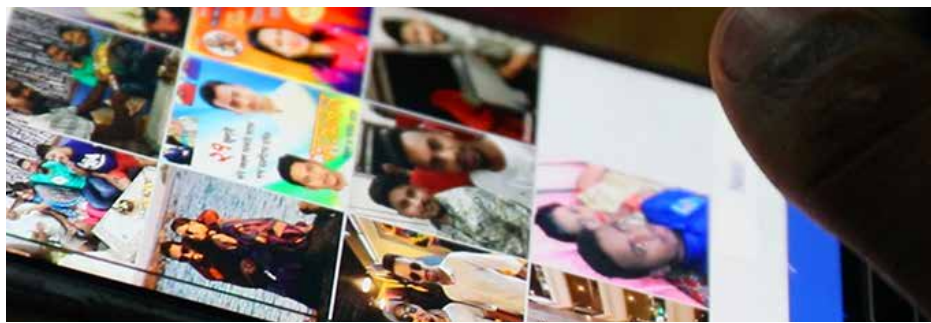






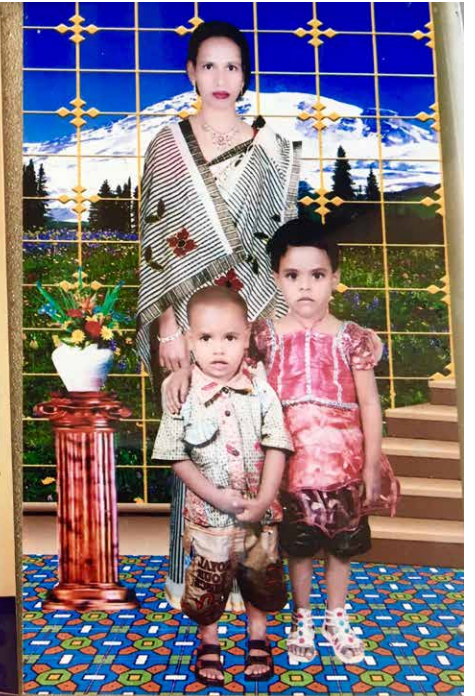
a 'beyond'. The outward looking direction of their gazes (from Bangladesh towards India and from India towards Bangladesh) seems to symbolize the manner in which photography not only consolidates locality and what is already familiar but also opens up new vistas.

On one of my journeys back to Dhaka I found myself, on the Parabat Express, sitting next to a student from Dhaka who was a regular visitor to Jaflong. He amplified its role in a fantasy of border-crossing and escape to a 'beyond'. He showed me the numerous images on his phone in which he and his friends stood in and alongside the river, pointing to the border. That this was conceived as a space of freedom and potential was suggested by his insistence on also showing me images of his friends' old Indian visas, and credit cards (he himself had never travelled to India and did not have a credit card). These images stored on his mobile phone seemed to do the same work as glamorous cityscapes in photo-studios, pointing to a desired future and celebrating the yet-to-be.



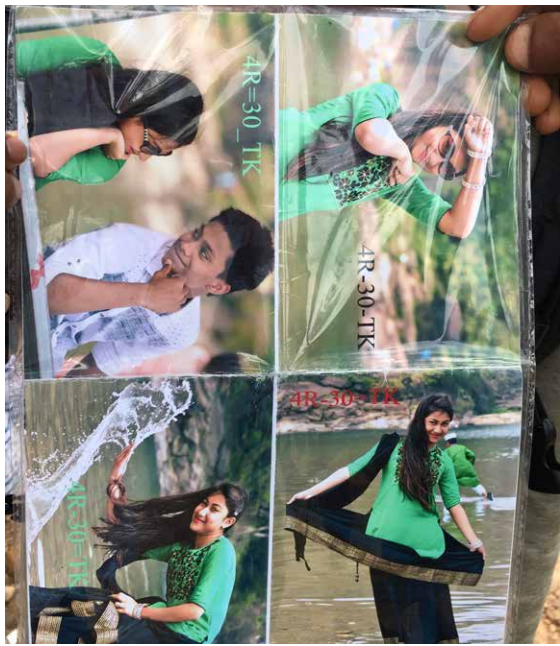














## Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:

Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)  
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)  
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)  
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)  
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)  
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on <https://citizensofphotography.org>

Research in Bangladesh was made possible through the skill and expertise of Ahsan Habib.

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Layout by Dominik Hoehn

