ELEGY

From 2015 onward, Sarker has been exploring and photographing abandoned feudal estates and decaying buildings previously owned by Hindu jamindars or landlords. The changing relationship between the land, its rulers and subjects as reflected in these regions is also a story of Bengal’s history: from the 1500s onward, the Mughal Empire established a system of apportioning tracts of land for the purposes of revenue collection, with the Muslim authorities receiving tax tributaries from conquered Hindu rajas. When British colonizers took over Bengal in the late 1700s, they entrenched this feudal structure with the Permanent Settlement, a system intended to extract large shares of revenue for the East India Company, while creating a small class of landed local aristocrats loyal to the British. It resulted, however, in the disenfranchisement of rural tenants, rifts between Muslim villagers and Hindu minority landlords, as well as unintended land speculation.

Following the 1947 partition of India, Bengal was split, with predominantly Hindu West Bengal going to India, and predominantly Muslim East Bengal going to Pakistan. Renamed East Pakistan, East Bengal was to become the independent nation of Bangladesh following the Liberation War of 1971. Amidst the chaos of decolonization and new nationhood, huge migrations were taking place: Hindus were leaving East Bengal for India, and in the same way, Muslims departed West Bengal. Those who were wealthiest and most well-connected—including landlords and large business owners—were the first to leave upon the loss of their political and social power. At the same time, a series of controversial laws dating from 1948, culminating in the Vested Property Act of 1974, allowed the confiscation of property from any groups declared “enemies of the state”. This led to the appropriation of many feudal properties and agricultural land that had belonged in the same family for generations, further spurring the departure of the jamindars. Sarker’s series Exodus focuses on what remains of these abandoned landscapes and little-documented buildings, many of which have been taken over by nature and gradually enveloped into the daily life of the surrounding villages.

While contextualized by the events of the region, the work reflects broader philosophical ideas about the scale, directionality and universality of time. The section titled Disintegration features buildings and structures, broken apart by the elements and enshrouded by tropical foliage. Despite the incompleteness of their forms, the architecture’s classical symmetry invites the eye to naturally trace lines where arches, columns and walls were once whole. Hybrid in their design and setting, they visualize specific ways that colonial and independence histories have marked the country, reflecting how the rise and fall of dominions can be read in the transformation of physical structures.