
Things We Did While Waiting for the Fence

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The anthropologist in the field searches for a textured object of study; one that can allow the unravelling of a series of interlinked concerns, and the peeling of layer upon layer of interpretation. From the concentric Balinese cockfight (Clifford Geertz) to South Africa's black churches (Jean Comaroff), many such moments are a combination of planning and serendipity. Both these elements are at play in this Delwar Hussain's first book. It is a work animated by the mapping out of institutions, networks, and lives that are built up, then hollowed out, and finally replaced over a half century of post-colonial development, industrialisation, deindustrialisation, and neo-liberalisation. Within the India-heavy focus of South Asian Studies, this book is part of a welcome new generation of scholarship about Bangladesh.

When Hussain first arrives at the Zero Point of Boropani (dipping into the Bangladesh district of Sylhet and the Indian state of Meghalaya), his object of study is the security fence that India is building along the border with Bangladesh. The proposed fence, when completed, would encircle the entire country. This was characterised in the Bangladeshi press as a hostile move from the Indian state, directed at the very country whose 1971 independence from Pakistan would have been impossible without the active support of the Indian government of that time. Bangladeshi "illegal migration" is a hotly-debated topic inside India, especially at election time when the bogey of "Bangladeshi" can be folded into political scaremongering about changing demographics in some Indian states. Incidents of Indian Border Security Force (BSF) shooting at Bangladeshis trying to cross into the country has created mounting anti-India

BOOK REVIEWS

Boundaries Undermined: The Ruins of Progress on the India-Bangladesh Border by Delwar Hussain (London: Hurst, 2013; pp 187).

sentiments inside Bangladesh (*pakhir moto marche*/"shooting them like birds" is a common, incorrect characterisation in Dhaka political *addas* I have attended). The fence represents another step in attempting a permanent closure of the border, against the potential porosity and fluidity of border lives.

Khonighat and Boropani

It is this disputed, larger-than-life fence that was Hussain's original research focus. However, when he arrived in Sylhet (from where his grandfather, migrated to England), he found the fence nowhere in sight. What he found instead are two twinned villages, Khonighat inside Bangladesh and Boropani on the border. The first encounter with these two sites is mundane, and Khonighat registers in Hussain's consciousness only as a place to live while doing research. He is initially arrested on suspicion of being a spy, and finds his British citizenship a liability in this border area. Later, one of his guides sorts the matter out with local authorities, with a smiling "Once a Sylheti, always a Sylheti". As things start getting more tenuous with fieldwork (Hussain is upfront about the travails of his research year), Khonighat's semi-abandoned limestone mining quarters emerge as a safe space to set up residence.

Over the course of the book, the two villages of Boropani and Khonighat become central to his exploration of a particular postcolonial modernity project, the new modes of work that thrive in the aftermath of the collapse of that project, and the energetic, multiple

modernities that ultimately develop in this border region.

Hussain weaves in the histories of the multiple partitions of Bengal, and this border site is an appropriate space for considering the human separations and structural inconsistencies set in motion by the 1947 partition, as well as the aftermath of two decolonisation/industrialisation periods – East Pakistan from 1947 to 1971, and Bangladesh thereafter. At the time of the Radcliffe partition line, most of East Bengal's inclusion into Pakistan seemed preordained – based on, among several factors, Muslim numeric majority, a will-to-separate among parts of the polity on both sides of the proposed border, and the lack of a sufficient "secular" political base that would argue against division. However, two regions remained more of a question mark until 1947. The first was the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an absolute majority Buddhist (and non-Bengali) region at the time of Partition, but also a natural hilly border and fortifying line against Burma. The second was Sylhet, which was formerly part of Assam, and was only separated from that Indian landmass by a "pro-partition" referendum election (this is personally resonant – my mother was born in Assam, and at least one aunt has told me of actively participating in canvassing votes for Partition).

The partition was supported by Muslims in Sylhet, as well as Assamese Hindus and Muslims who wanted to remove a district that was both Muslim (from Hindu perspective) and Bengali (from the Assamese linguistic point of view). It is this newly divided Assam that, after 1947, becomes a site for an experiment in large-scale industrialisation. This sets in motion the new status of Khonighat, and its eventual decline in later decades as well.

The 1947 partition's impact is usually expressed in terms of cultural, social, and political separations and the ensuing narrower worlds and lives. Hussain's introductory chapters look at the economic impact of the separation on this Sylhet border area, specifically by breaking the supply chain of industrial production. At the time of Partition, Chathak in Sylhet

hosted a large-scale cement factory. After 1947, the factory was severed from the raw materials, which were now in the land that belonged to India. The revival of this cement industry became crucial to the national identity of the new state of Pakistan because, as Hussain argues, the decolonisation narrative required not only freedom from British colonial rule, but also from each other. In this new era, the Khonighat limestone factory was set up to be one of the templates for Pakistani industrialisation par excellence, and also to set up a master narrative of the new social order. Hussain leans on James Ferguson's critical description of the modernisation project, especially the theory that moving peasants from the field to the factory would propel "backward" people into "civilisation". A reader familiar with Ferguson's work on the Zambian copper belt (or James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, also cited here) will know what is to come – the eventual collapse of this modernisation project. But before that arrives, Khonighat does succeed in setting up what the book calls "instantiations of modernity". creating a new social order, which encompasses the ideal worker, family unit, and social behaviour.

Decline of Khonighat

Khonighat's decline occurred in two waves. First, through the birth of the new state of Bangladesh, which allegedly created a new regime of "each man for himself" – Hussain presents this assertion directly, but a little probing of the impact of the 1972 transition to a pro-Soviet axis on industrialisation policy is needed here. The second change comes through the post-1991 liberalisation regime, which eventually leads to Khonighat's closure. Here, too, an interesting lacuna could have been for Hussain to consider how the arrival of democracy, after a decade of military rule, opened the doors wide for neo-liberalism's high moment. After Khonighat's decline, its early years continue to be idealised in the memory of its former workers. Stuck in a nostalgia loop (Hussain compares former workers with battle-scarred war veterans), they speak of a time when "The Project" aimed to deliver "progress,

status and prestige". According to James Ferguson, at the root of this type of narrative is a myth, which should be re-examined in light of the many reversals in the global south, such as Khonighat. However, we should ask if the Khonighat managers truly believed in the myth. While reading Hussain's description of the "sense of immense betrayal", I wondered if the pivotal opening scene in David Lean's film adaptation of *Dr Zhivago* was instructive. As the Russian general is informed of the amazing progress at this Russian plant (template for many of the "leapfrog" modernisation projects of the Third World) you can see, even then, in his eyes and words, the knowledge that these projects will eventually collapse under their own contradictions, or from the pressure of external forces.

Multiple Modernities

Hussain argues that there are "multiple modernities" at play in these border areas, and therefore the collapse of a modernity project does not equal a full reversal (Ferguson's concerns with conflating cultural and economic modernities are referenced in a footnote). Instead, what we begin to see are the rise of new projects, which develop precisely in the new "local spaces of creative potentialities and possibilities" – all this is best exemplified through the rise of Boropani from the ashes of the Khonighat project. Earlier in the book, Hussain calls Boropani village Khonighat's "unsightly step-sibling" and compares its growth to the colonial era phenomenon of a native settlement that would grow alongside a "white town". Unsightly it may have been, but Boropani hosted an informal economy that was crucial to sustain Khonighat. Those workers who could not secure employment in the vaunted Khonighat, as well as those who did not want to submit to the constraints of state-sponsored employment, moved to Boropani and swelled its workforce and energy. After the ignominious closure of the Khonighat project in 1993, it was Boropani that became the economic centre. Instead of fulfilling the needs of Khonighat, it now became the hub of the increasingly lucrative coal trade (especially as demand for coal-fired

machinery skyrocketed in the liberalising Bangladesh economy).

Hussain engages in depth with those wanting to talk of the "old days", and quite naturally this brings to the foreground the acute sense of change and loss of the post-Project era. Thus, one significant chapter talks about the manner in which a certain religious unity, even a curated form of secularism, prevailed in "The Project", ensuring amity between Muslim and Hindu residents and workers. Hussain draws from Jonathan Parry and Jan Breman's work on Indian industrial labour to argue that Sylhet in the post-Khonighat era has a private sector with no interest in providing social and economic stabilisers that foster harmony among heterogeneous populations. Readers may also look at the south-west of Bangladesh in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the arrival of large agricultural, resource extraction and tourism private sector operators has rapidly accelerated already existing trends of ethnic displacement of the majority indigenous, Buddhist, Jumma peoples. However, a binary of state projects aiding secularism, and a private sector that strips it away, would be too limiting. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the private sector entered to finish the task of displacement already half-completed by the Bangladesh state. Furthermore, as Jeremy Seabrook's *Freedom Unfinished* depicts (although that book is afflicted with an over-generous acceptance of parables set down by his interviewees), non-government organisations (NGOs) such as Proshikha, when taking over functions left behind by the state,

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have also, for a time, attempted to inculcate secular life patterns among those it reaches.

Emergence of NGOs

Turning to NGOs themselves, Hussain explores the manner in which these organisations have come to take over the social service sector that was abandoned by Khonighat (and not of interest to Boropani's businesses). He argues, taking from Ferguson, that democracy was pushed forward as a project precisely at the time when state power was reduced by many of their functions being transferred over to the NGO. While it is true that the NGOs have emerged as a "third force" inside Bangladesh, state power's decline is perhaps also a comforting myth. In the Bangladesh context, the state, through a series of mechanisms, monitors, reprimands, and extracts rent from the NGOs at every level.

The ultimate fate of Proshikha (featured in Seabrook's book) and the ongoing battle over the future of Grameen Bank, shows a state fully able to exercise power, without responsibility. Hussain does acknowledge that Aihwa Ong's theory of "thinning of state power" at border zones is insufficient to explain the Sylhet situation. Rather, one can argue that the Bangladesh state engages in a dance of convenience – withdrawing social services from regions, knowing very well that the NGOs will step in and prevent a crisis that could have political consequences. At the same time, as they have demonstrated in the Grameen Bank case, the state also retains the ability to step in to take over operations when it is politically expedient, or financially beneficial. These calculations play out in macro power games, but in the border region, inhabitants seem habituated to the presence of NGOs and do not seem to be waiting for any service from the state. Intriguingly, the NGOs are seen with far more suspicion than "The Project" was – even though the behaviour patterns that the limestone factory tried to regiment, especially those regarding family, women, childbearing, etc, were certainly as "alien" to the region in the 1960s as the NGOs projects may be today.

One recurring motif is that the NGO workers fear attacks by the same population they serve, if some services are found lacking. The explanation they give is that the border population is by nature of a more "criminal" type and inclined to violence. This is a familiar stereotype regarding what sort of subject is constituted by the experience of living in the borderlands. However, I also wonder if another aspect could possibly be that the NGO workers themselves have over time become enmeshed in some of the illegal activities themselves. Journalists have documented border security forces compromised by bribery. It is possible that the NGOs may also be similarly compromised over time.

'Aristocracy of Nostalgia'

Hussain talks with visible affection for the former workers of Khonighat, trapped in an "aristocracy of nostalgia". Their days are spent communing with other former employees, and talking of the glory days of the Project era (Hussain poignantly compares them to Laura Bear's portrait of Anglo-Indians, who feel "slighted by history"). The book's rendering of their plight reminded me of my fathers' generation, who believed in the promise of *bhadralok* government jobs, and were then bewildered by a Dhaka city where a rising business class rendered all else irrelevant. Just as that 1960s generation of government employees could not adjust to the new Dhaka (when "Dacca" became "Dhaka", as it were), the Khonighat middle-elite also could not fit in with the ascendance of Boropani. The mid-level managers of the limestone factory were not senior enough to be transferred elsewhere, nor were they marginal enough to be willing to dive into the dirty business (figuratively and literally) of coal trading. It was only the labourers in the limestone quarries who could move to the coal business, some becoming fabulously wealthy traders. Their numbers have been swelled by newer arrivals, who never knew the government-mandated social order of Khonighat. Thus, Hussain's premise is that the nominally socially marginal, the rejected limestone labourers, including women, transgender

hijras, and religious communities, are now in control of Boropani.

Third Space

One of Hussain's contributions is to excavate how Boropani thrives in a third space of "(il)licit" – economic activities that are legally banned but socially sanctioned. Some of these activities are embedded within the coal trade itself, and the rest are in a network of support activities. One example is the booming trade in mobile phone SIM cards. The Indian state banned the use of mobile phones in many of these border areas, claiming it would aid "separatist insurgents". The Bangladesh state also claimed "insurgency" and maintained a similar ban in Chittagong Hill Tracts until 2008. This ban generated a huge market for Bangladeshi SIM cards at the Zero Point, purchased on one side of the border and used on the other. Hussain traces the filigree of economic relationships undergirding the transaction, and his description of an Indian BSF guard's wife paying an international rate to call her husband gives a glimpse into the absurdities and opportunities of these spaces. These activities straddle the space between what the states consider legitimate, and what the actual participants in trans-border networks consider legitimate. In the case of the Boropani, the network is between only two countries, both with formal governments in place – an example of a multi-valenced network can be found in Janet Roitman's book (*Fiscal Disobedience*) on the Chad Basin.

In this highly unregulated environment of Boropani, those who thrive are the actors for whom the formal state citizenship project has little space. Hussain lays out his strongest chapter in pursuit of the "third sex" inhabitants, who form a large and crucial role in this region, fulfilling sexual roles reserved for women elsewhere in the country, while also performing as part of the workforce. Although many *hijras* arrive here through the information disseminated via *guru-chela* (leader-follower) networks, Hussain argues that they are also sought out because they can fulfil sexual functions while also being able to work in conditions of uneven

sex-ratio, high alcohol use, and lack of basic facilities. Hussain points out that female workers in the area often pose a hazard for the employers, because if they get pregnant this news will be understood “in the language of rape” since consensual sexual relationships are rendered invisible by patriarchal notions of female sexuality. The hijras have come to occupy a key third space, fulfilling a role and being able to work and live with freedom not always possible elsewhere in Bangladesh.

Unlike the expected mode of hijras elsewhere in Bangladesh, many of the Boropani inhabitants wear “male” clothes, have short hair, and have a dominant position in that society. New regulations are often imposed to solidify the borders (this echoes, as Hussain cites, Wendy Brown’s theory of boundaries as reactions to pressures on sovereignty), but at the same time, new forms of (il)licit behaviour become codified to create parallel economic, political, and social orders. In some ways, these new social orders are just as prescriptive as those imposed by Khonighat in earlier decades. They are part of another new modernity,

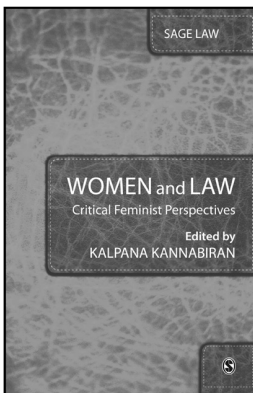
and the lives of the borderlanders, including the third sex, are key to understanding these dynamics. Hussain possibly signals this with his choice of dust jacket photo, showing a grimy hand gripping a coal sack. On the wrist is a silver bracelet with the inscribed words “Nike”, and underneath is bright red nail polish.

While the Boropani-Khonighat axis is particular to a border region, politico-economic developments throughout the nation radiate out to this distant corner with alacrity. The book weaves together some of the major work on Bangladesh in the last few decades, from Willem Schendel to Rehman Sobhan. Hussain’s focus remains on the Bangladesh side of the border, and the Indian side of the border is largely absent from these pages. As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh Studies is a nascent field and one sign of its infancy is the lack of sufficient cross-fertilisation between various scholars. Those interested in these borderlands should supplement this book with related work by Ranabir Samaddar, Reece Jones, Malini Sur, Jason Cons, Charu Gupta, Mukul Sharma, and Paula Banerjee.

One final coda is about the documents related to “The Project” itself. The house that Hussain was allocated was formerly the records room of the Khonighat factory. Although he managed to save three document scraps, for the most part this was not where his initial attention was. One day he woke up and discovered that an entire store-room’s worth of documents had been disposed, most likely sold to a “bits-and-bobs man”. Tantalising bits of these documents do show up in the book from the fragments he had managed to save, and they give a tiny glimpse into the hierarchical (five signatures on one letter), highly ordered, social planning influenced vision of a future “that did not happen”. Perhaps all that will unravel in further detail in the hands of a future excavation of the paper trail of this particular ruined utopia project.

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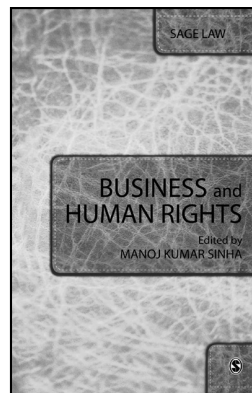


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