



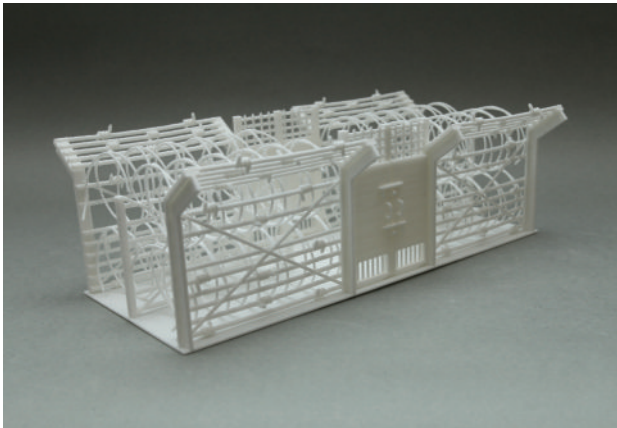
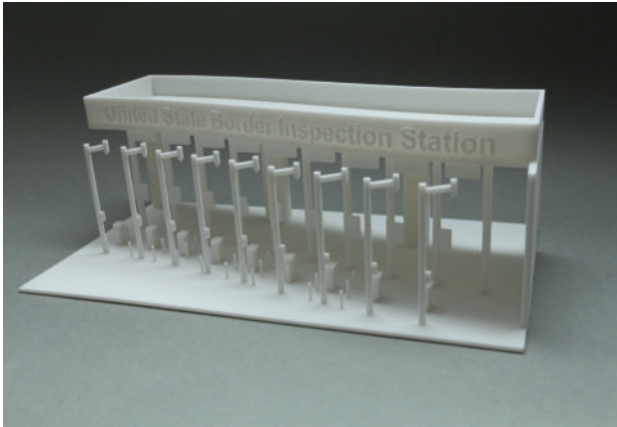
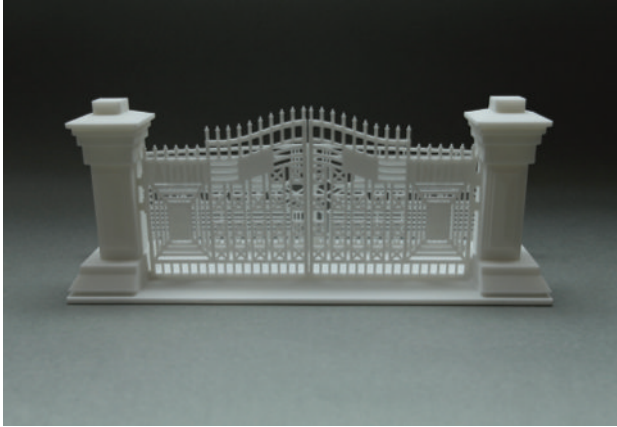
Things We Sketched While Waiting for the Fence

Naeem Mohaiemen

The anthropologist in the field searches for a location that can stage the unspooling of a series of interlinked concerns. From the concentric Balinese cockfight to South Africa's dissenting churches of Zion, finding these sites is a combination of planning and chance. Both elements are at play in Delwar Hussain's *Boundaries Undermined*, a book animated by the mapping of networks and lives built up, hollowed out and replaced over a half century of postcolonial development, de-industrialisation and trade liberalisation in a border town. The book also serves as a useful starting point from which to approach Shilpa Gupta's recent corpus of work around other coordinates of this contested border. Hussain's initial focus was the security fence that India is building along the Bangladesh border. The fence is possibly a futile attempt at crushing the porosity and fluidity of border lives, but it does accomplish an emotional distancing through the rhetoric of hostility (on one side) and hurt (on the other). This hostile move is directed at the country whose independence from Pakistan would have been impossible without the active support of the Indian government of 1971. But 2015 is a long way from 1971, and by now Bangladeshi "illegal migration" is a redline topic, especially at election time when the bogey of "Bangladeshi" can be folded into scaremongering about demographic shifts in Indian border states (more "Muslim" and "Bengali"). In Bangladesh as well, headlines of "*pakhir moto marche* (hunting them like birds)" greet each border event, and deepen distrust. After the notorious killing of 15-year-old Felani Khatun at the border, historian Afsan Chowdhury diagnosed the contradictions when he wrote, "There are millions of such desperately poor girls who live out a terrible life and die but nobody pays any attention. But we notice Felani because it's violent, involves our sovereignty and also India, whom we dislike for many reasons."¹

Hussain located his research at the Zero Point of Boropani (dipping into the Bangladesh district of Sylhet and the Indian state of Meghalaya). When he arrived at this border area of Sylhet (from where his grandfather had migrated to England), he found the fabled fence nowhere in sight. What he found instead were two twinned villages, Khonighat inside Bangladesh and Boropani on the border. He was initially arrested on suspicion of being a spy, and found his British citizenship a liability in this border area. Later, one of his guides sorted the matter out with local authorities, with a smiling reassurance of "Once a Sylheti, always a Sylheti". As things started getting more tenuous with fieldwork, Khonighat's





Naeem Mohaiemen
Schizoprene (after Bhanu Kapil), 2014





semi-abandoned limestone mining quarters emerged as a safe space to set up residence. Soon, the two villages of Boropani and Khonighat replaced the fence as Hussain's object of inquiry, as he explored the collapse of a postcolonial modernity project (factories), and the energetic, multiple modernities that rose in the aftermath.

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 Muslim numeric majority, a will-to-separate among parts of the polity in the state, 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, formerly part of Assam and only separated from that Indian landmass by a "pro-partition" referendum. Bengali Muslims in Sylhet mostly supported the partition — my mother was born in Assam, and at least one aunt told me of actively participating in canvassing "yes" votes for Partition. It was also favoured by Assamese Muslims and Hindus, who wanted to remove a district that was both Bengali (from an Assamese linguistic view) and Muslim (from Hindu perspective).

It was this newly divided Assam that became a site for post-1947 experiments in industrialisation. This set in motion the new status of Khonighat, and its eventual decline in later decades as well. Partition's impact is usually expressed in terms of cultural, social and political separations and the ensuing narrower worlds and lives. Hussain looks instead 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 the decolonisation narrative required not only freedom from British colonial rule, but also from each other. The Khonighat limestone factory was set up to be one of master narratives of this new social order. Before the eventual collapse of the factories, it did succeed in setting up what Hussain calls "instantiations of modernity" including the concepts of ideal worker, family unit and social behaviour.

Khonighat's decline occurred in two waves. First, through the birth of the new state of Bangladesh which, according to Hussain, created a regime of "each man for himself". The second change came during the post-military liberalisation regime of the 1990s, which eventually led to Khonighat's death. After the 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". While reading the description of the "sense of immense betrayal", I thought of the opening scene in David Lean's adaptation of *Dr. Zhivago*. As the





Russian general is informed of the amazing progress at the plant (template for "leapfrog" modernisation projects of the Third World) you can see in his eyes an unease that the projects would eventually collapse from internal contradictions.

Hussain argued that there are "multiple modernities" at play in these border areas, and therefore the collapse of Khonighat actually leads to new linkages across the border, reversing 1947's sundering. New projects develop through the rise of Boropani from the ashes of the Khonighat project. Hussain calls Boropani village Khonighat's "unsightly step-sibling" and compares its growth to the colonial-era phenomenon of a native settlement that grew alongside a "white town". Unsightly it may have been, but Boropani hosted an informal economy that sustained Khonighat and gave space to workers who did not want to submit to the constraints of state-sponsored employment. After the ignominious closure of the project in 1993, Khonighat became the hub of the newly lucrative coal trade (especially as demand for coal-fired machinery skyrocketed in the liberalising Bangladesh economy). Boropani thrived in a third space of "(il)licit" — economic activities that were 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 along the border. One example is the booming trade in 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 a similar "insurgency" and maintained a ban in Chittagong Hill Tracts until 2008). The Indian 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 moments. In this highly unregulated environment, those who thrive are the actors for whom formal state citizenship has little value.

The border is unconstructed (physical) and porous (conceptual) in Hussain's book, and it is made similarly liquid in Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* (2014-15). Not fettered to one fieldwork site or academic publishing timetables, Gupta travelled along the Bangladesh-India border multiple times, documenting the length of the already constructed border, the number of floodlights, and the debates around security in the Lok Sabha. Similar to Hussain's thick description of the border coal business, she looked with an intimate eye at the mechanics of the smuggling trade that forms a multi-million-dollar trade flow between the two countries, all managed by traders at the minute level. Hussain highlights one of many absurdities (the trans-border SIM card) at a demarcation line that vanishes in the face of continuous, voluminous trade between these two intimately entangled countries. Gupta looks even more closely at this trade that is illicit but tolerated, illegal but also legalised, and takes pleasure in materialising the contradictions and flashes of humour within these exchanges. Each of her objects (bewitchingly sculpted in forms that oscillate between specific and allusive) sits atop a double exchange created by a razor-sharp border, even though the huge volume of trade is more appropriate to a *Schengen* free trade zone. Better qualities of Dhaka's famous Jamdane sari are available in Kolkata, because the product fetches higher prices there. Gold flows inside clothing, and the currency flowing in return is so large that Indian banks have set up border





branches. The cough syrup Phensedyl is legal in India but outlawed in Bangladesh due to wide abuse as a drug, and so pharmacies empty out as trucks full of the syrup cross the border, bringing a cheap high.

Most fascinating of all is the cow trade, one of the largest volume transactions across the border and the source of an enormous, unofficial trade deficit in favour of India. One of Gupta's sources tells her that cows fetch ten times the price in Bangladesh than in India, and the prices spike astronomically during Ramadan and Qurbani Eid (the Modi-era Hindutva cow hysteria will probably, ironically, increase this trade). Not only as food, cow parts are also used in bone china ceramics, which Bangladesh then exports all over the world. Although Bangladeshi media complains about an Eid market flooded with expensive Indian cows, the trade is so vital that a 1993 Bangladeshi law allows smugglers to be reclassified as "traders" if they pay a customs fee. The Indian state claims to go all out to stop Bangladeshis from crossing, but at the same time maintains a trade deficit in its favour assisted by this same illicit cross-border trade.

I cited *Schengen* zones earlier, and both Hussain and Gupta demonstrate that in surreal ways, this border also follows some of those European free trade principles. But this same example also highlights the danger to this flow from the chant of security panic. After the Paris bombings, politicians quickly mobilised to attack the *Schengen* system.² In a similar way, after Pakistanis, Bangladeshis are the newer category of "danger" in media polemics. Indian politicians, especially in border states, compete to use each tragedy to further militarise the border. This is what is drowning out the stories that this duo of anthropologist and artist have sketched out so carefully. In one of the rooms of Gupta's installation in Venice, you open a curtain and are blinded by a floodlight. Eventually your eyes adjust, as you find your way past its glare, and start to make out hidden objects in the subsequent rooms. At the real border, we can still hope that security hysteria will eventually give way to a border trade universe whose contradictory flows suggest a form of cacophonous after-modernity.

This essay is expanded from "*Things we did while waiting for the fence*", a review of *Boundaries Undermined: The Ruins of Progress on the India-Bangladesh Border* by Delwar Hussain (London: Hurst), 2013; in *Economic and Political Weekly* (India), November 02, 2013. The original essay benefited from comments by Malini Sur and Annu Jalais. Naeem Mohaiemen's museum projects on borders, wars, and belonging include *Kazi in Nomansland* (part of the Hammad Nasar curated *Lines of Control*), 2009, and *Schizoprene (after Bhanu Kapil)*, 2014; he co-edited the anthology *Between Ashes and Hope: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism* (Drishtipat/Manusher Jonno, 2010).





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Palazzo Benzon, Venice





Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* (2014-15)

Visual Documentation























[The text in this section is extremely faint and illegible due to the image quality. It appears to be a multi-column document, possibly a newspaper or a report.]

In 1993, Bangladesh gave the cattle trade a legal status by making it a source of income. A cattle "auctioneer" licensed a "dealer" and he in turn Bangladesh and page 200. The 1993 in the text says he made to state that he found the cattle "trading near the border".





After crossing over, where the demand is high, I can get ten times the price in India, per cattle head. Here you can go to jail for slaughtering a cow - it's holy.

So we bring them on trucks and trains from all over, then wait for the right moment and walk the cattle across. First it was 2000 and now we keep aside 4000 per cattle head to pass on to the uniform man at the border.

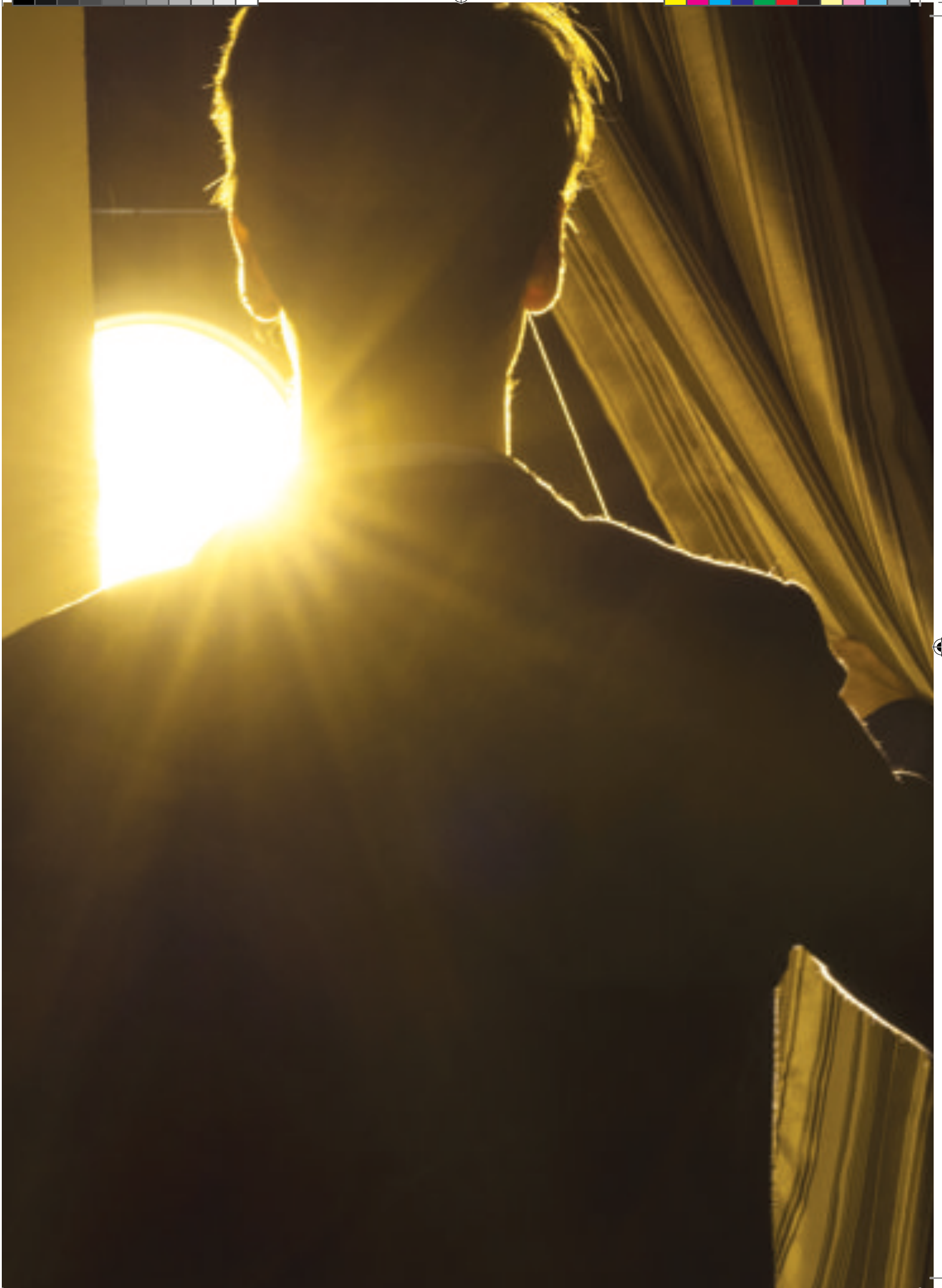
With every cattle head fetching over 20,000 there, it is still worth it. It's 4K crore (over 80 million dollars) dhanda with strong network all across. And the month of Ramadan is a period of even better business for us. The demand for meat is almost double.

Our bone china ceramics contain 52% cattle bone ash. It gives the product hardness, translucency and makes it light weight.
- Ceramics exporter from Bangladesh















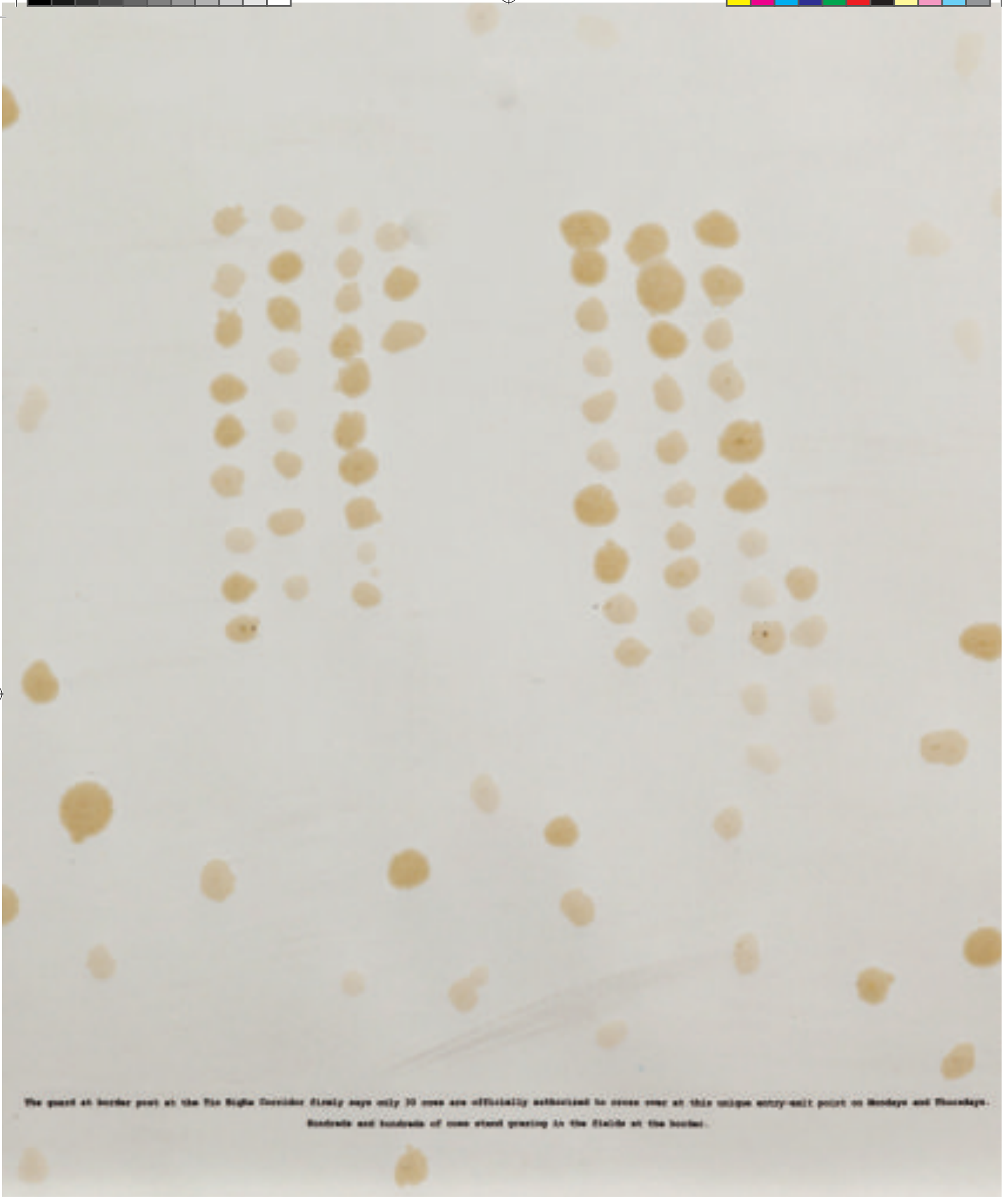


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Witness in denial

Take away one
Open after crossing 150 yards - the distance between the zero line and
fence where no defensive structure is permitted

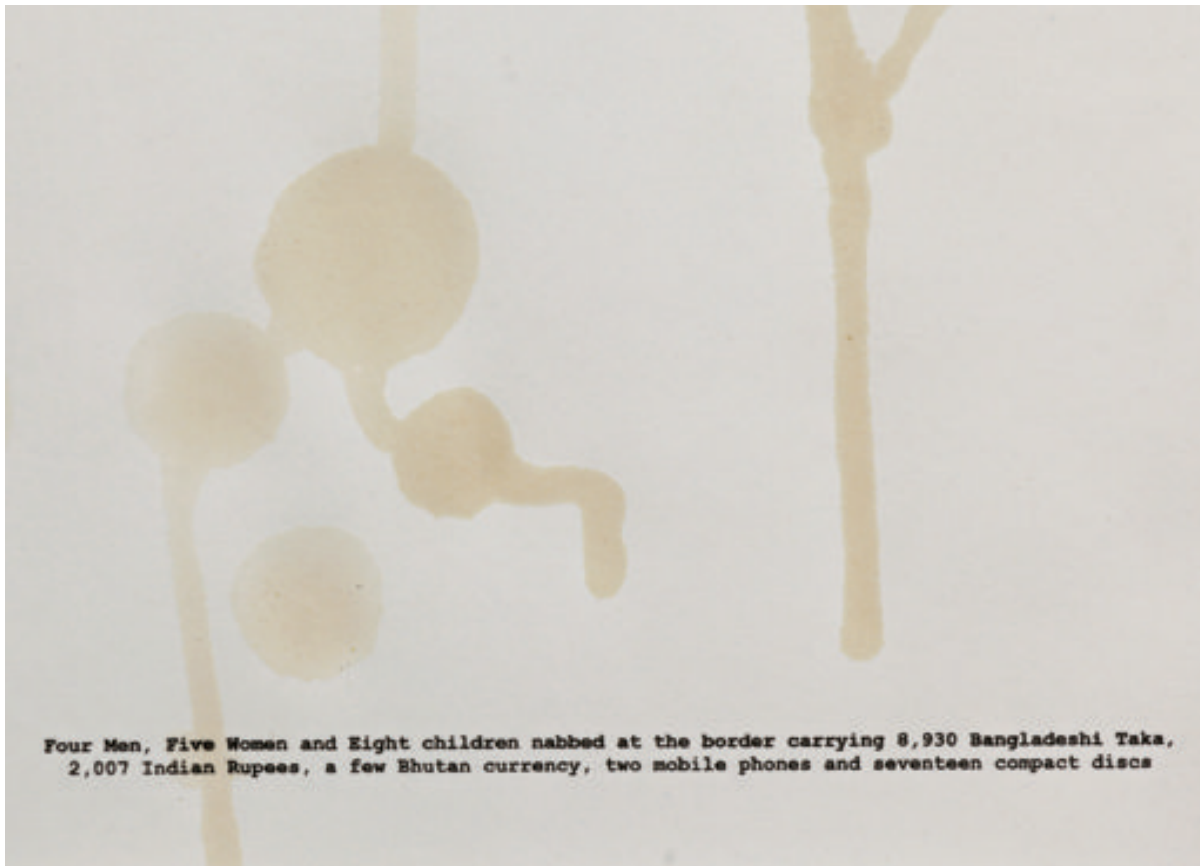






The guard at border post at the Tin Bigha Corridor firmly says only 30 cows are officially authorized to cross over at this unique entry-exit point on Mondays and Thursdays.
Hundreds and hundreds of cows stand grazing in the fields at the border.





Commissioned by Samdani Art Foundation for Dhaka Art Summit 2014, with additional support from Majlis
Image Courtesy: Chemould Prescott Road









My East Is Your West

May-October 2015

A project of The Gujral Foundation
New Delhi, India

Titled after a light installation by Shilpa Gupta

Featuring artists Shilpa Gupta and Rashid Rana

At Palazzo Benzon
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