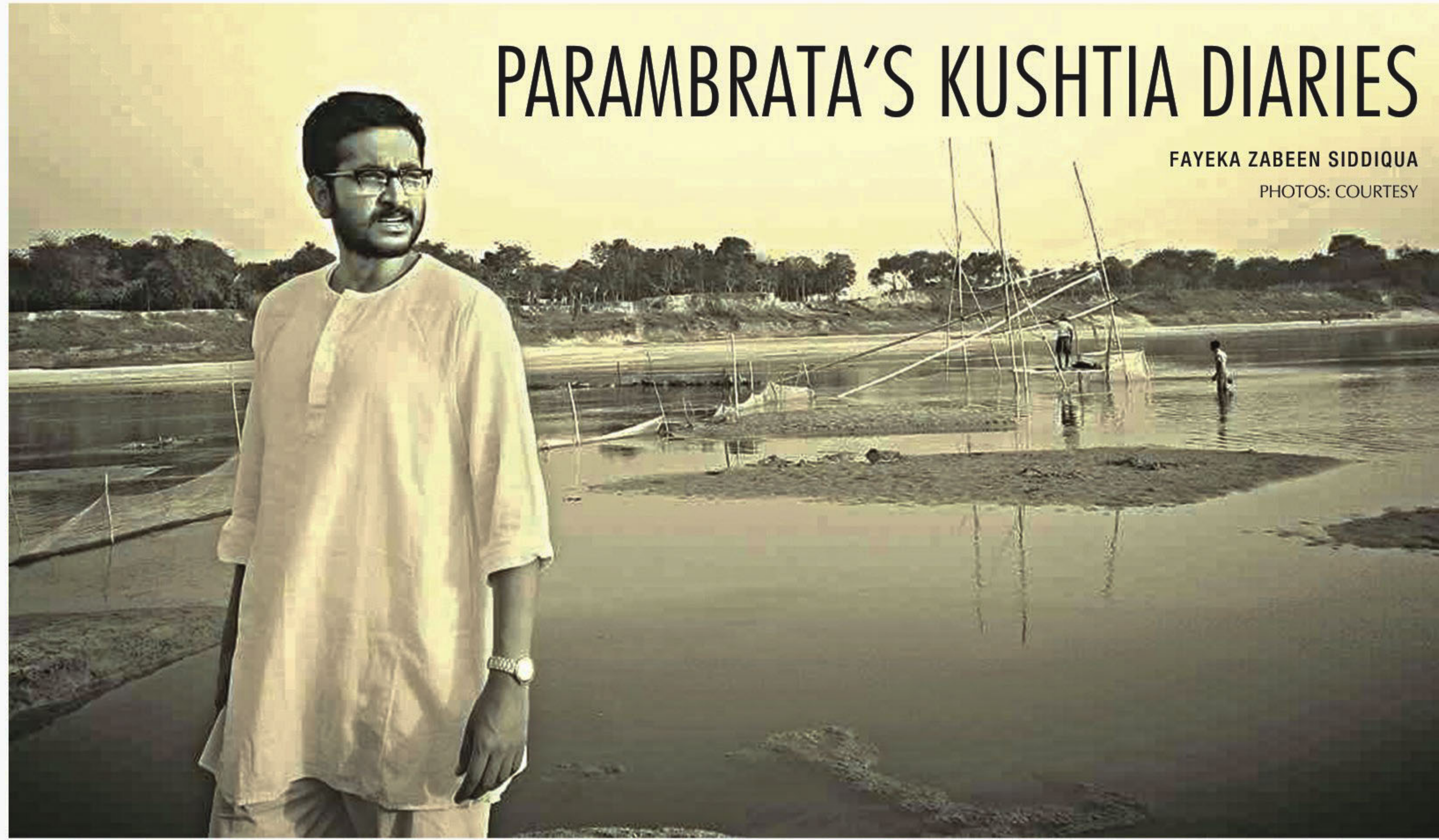


| RENDEZVOUS |

PARAMBRATA'S KUSHTIA DIARIES

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA
PHOTOS: COURTESY



For Bangla film aficionados, Parambrata Chattopadhyay needs no ornate introduction. An Indian actor based in Kolkata, Parambrata has given the Bangla film panorama a number of tremendous films and continues to do so. This time, his love for movies based on real life events dragged him to Kushtia, Bangladesh, where he is shooting his new film *Bhuban Majhi* directed by Fakhru Arefin.

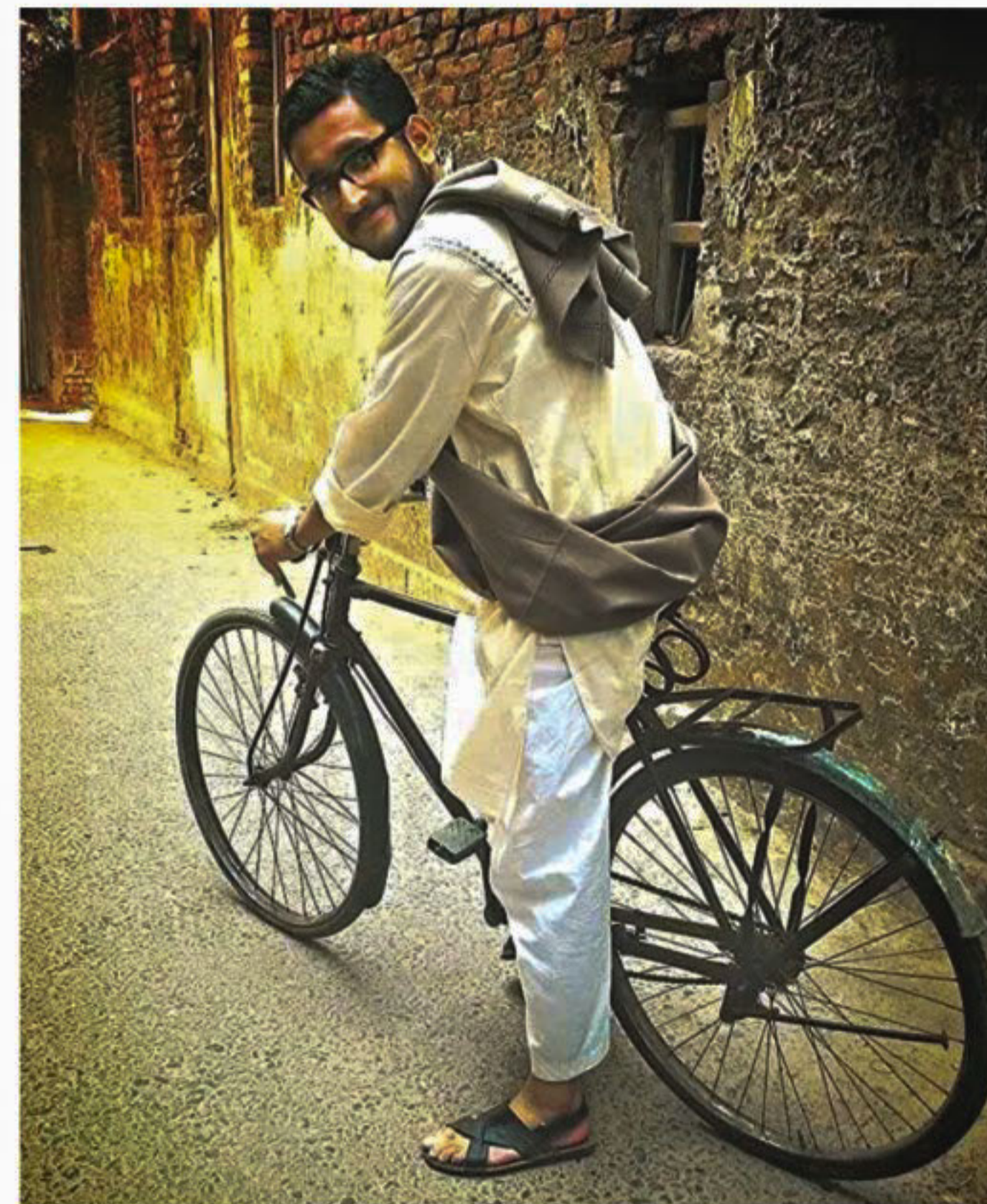
"Working with the local people was a lot of fun; it energised me as much as doing the film itself, and I truly appreciate the love that everyone showed to me," he says, sitting at the balcony of Shilaidaha Kuthibari Guesthouse. "The love that people of Bangladesh show is enough to make you forget your sorrow," he adds with a smile.

Bhuban Majhi explores two time periods simultaneously – 1970 to 1971, and 2004 to 2013, Arefin explains. The film opens in 1970, depicting the rise of a rebel in a common man, played by Parambrata, who struggles with his ideals, and ends with the philosophy of Baul Ananda Shai in 2013.

Nahir, played by Parambrata, comes to Kushtia to complete his graduation a few days before the 1970 election. The ongoing countrywide turmoil revolving around the movement for independence in then East Pakistan, and the elections don't seem to move him in the slightest. All he seems to be bothered with is his love for theatre and Farida.

Nahir, like many of us, has many layers to his personality, believes Parambrata. "There is always an element of doubt and hesitation in the mind of a sensible person. Whenever something happens around us, we prefer to mull over it before jumping to conclusions." The character of Nahir is not any different from that, as he too embodies the contradictory nature of most humans. As a patriot, Nahir feels the urge to take part in the war, but the artist in him wants to attain independence in a peaceful manner.

A believer of *ahimsa*, (non violence) Nahir is unsure whether he'd be able to kill someone in the battlefield. "This character portrays the dilemmas and contradictions we face every day in our principles and practice, and our



struggle of choosing one over the other," explains Parambrata.

Parambrata likes being pulled into the vortex of a different era, and portraying Nahir allows him the scope to delve into a time that he obviously isn't personally familiar with.

"Thanks to Arefin and his team for constantly providing me with different nuances and anecdotes from that time, as that helped me expand my experience."

Creating the right ambience was very important for perfectionist Arefin. "We could have easily done the shooting somewhere convenient around Dhaka, like Pubail, Uttara or inside FDC," he says. "But we decided to stick to the reality of Nahir Shah's life and came all the way here. Also, I believe being in the mood of the film,

even when you are not shooting, is very important. So we decided to live in this guest house adjacent to the Kuthibari."

"No problem' (*shomoshya nai*) happens to be the answer to everything here. No matter how difficult your request, this is the answer that you get here," laughs Parambrata. "Starting from Kushtia Shilpakala to the local residents' house, everywhere we went, people welcomed us open-heartedly with love, immense cooperation and a lot of food. Where can you get such warmth, such hospitality?"

Our conversation was not limited to only the film. From Nahir Shah's philosophy to Padma River, it was a long, interesting conversation. Plus, it helped that I was a huge fan of the down-to-earth star and didn't mind listening to him for hours at an end.

As we were about to wrap up the meeting, Parambrata makes an honest confession. "As a professional artist, I act in different kinds of movies, and so my experiences are different. There are films that I don't like to work in, but I do them anyway. At the end of the day, my gross takeout from that group of movies is my remuneration. But then there are movies like *Hemlock Society*, *Hercules*, *Apur Panchali* that leave me with a prolonged and profound reaction, he says. "I believe *Bhuban Majhi* is going to be one of them," says the ever gracious Parambrata.

Not only his experience as Nahir Shah, Parambrata is also taking back a bag full of memories from Bangladesh back with him. A walk by the Padma River in the full moon, visiting Hardinge bridge – about which he has heard of from his grandparents – getting lost in the spirituality of Lalon's *akhra*, celebrating Ekushey February by visiting the Kushtia Shaheed Minar, the cricket matches played with the crew, the *deshi* delicacies, the autographs and selfies taken on local people's phone, the silence and serenity of Shilaidaha; the list goes on.

And also as Arefin jokingly puts it, "Getting interviewed during a full moon, right next to Rabindra Kuthibari, harmonised in nature and away from the mad city, how often does that happen?" ■

| PROJECT |



LEARNING TO SPEAK ABOUT MEN

AHMAD IBRAHIM

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Bangladesh has a long and well-documented history of respectability (which, in Bengali, one might call *bhodrolok*). This pathological need to not deal with things and instead carry on with a pained exchange of pleasantries resonates well beyond the urban spaces of the middle class where one would normally expect it to reside. Instead, we 'do not touch it' quite frequently and in a very cohesive manner that speaks volumes about the history of the Bengali ethnicity (which excludes several other groups and communities that exist in this country) and its role in forming not only the most densely populated nations in the world, but also one of the most well connected and spread out diasporas in the globalised world.

Think about it- we do not touch on the topic of race, of indigenous oppression, on the topic of rape or even politics. All of that just sours what is otherwise a pleasant evening's tea. Likewise, we do not touch on the topic of masculinity; what it means to be a man in a man's world. We do not explore, out of a sense of inconvenience to ourselves and others, the varying degrees and shades of masculinity that is mostly toxic and violent, but is also sometimes oppressed and invisible. The Masculinity Project attempts to bridge this gap in public discourse by facilitating a space in which men (and people of other genders) can think critically of what it means to be a man. The project kicked off on February 27 with a display of photo-narratives at the EMK centre in Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

The project was conceived by Kazi Tahsin Agaz Apurbo, photojournalist for the Daily Star and Saad Adnan Khan, Sr. Associate Researcher, James P. Grant School, BRAC University. They have both

had their own tumultuous and, at times, non-normative experience with what it means to be a man in this country. The project thus aims to portray the distinctive ways in which people who identify as men in this region think of their masculinity- from the indigenous, to the gay men, to the dis/abled, to those of us who struggle with the idea of fitting into one part of a gender binary. The exhibition, which displays these photos along with small excerpts taken from interviews, is only a small part of a larger project which includes workshops, dialogues, a photobook and an academic course on masculinity.



"Our two core themes of this project were critical thinking and self-reflexivity," says Saad Khan, who also mentions that this project should be viewed as a gateway into a discourse rather a definitive view of what 'masculinity' is. "In some ways," continues Saad, "this is also a study into making research work on topics such as this available to more people outside of academic circles."

Given the long-term vision of this project, it is difficult to pass judgment on successes or failures so early. However, having viewed the exhibition itself, there are many things which the project seems



to touch on and be successful about, while there also remain many other avenues where it can be improved. The question of visibility is handled better than any other broad-spectrum project that I have seen. That is, the project was not largely restricted to middle-class urban spaces and that must be applauded as a big success. The photographs are a strong point; as they are taken with a view to describe without words what the participant has said about his own experiences with masculinity. As you move down the gallery, the photographs display, sometimes in queer contradiction with the words themselves, each of the men in their personal habitat.

The narratives themselves, however, leave much to be desired. The answers are often abstract or cursory in the kind of way that academic researchers dread. It is, however, important to note that most of the people who have shared their narratives do not think reflexively of their own masculinity, let alone share it with others.

Do we get a glimpse of the ways in which masculinity is performed in Bangladesh? Not really, but we do get a

glimpse into ways in which the performers think of it, which some would argue is just an important breakthrough. The project is very successful in bringing up these questions- what do we think about when we think about masculinity, what are some of the other ways in which people who also call themselves men think about it? The project also creates tension by juxtaposing conflicting views of masculinity that the different participants have. If nothing else, I took that away as its biggest strength- the ability to mention and not demonize the many forms of masculinities that are prevalent here which would stand to largely be condemned, or worse, not spoken of, in other spaces.

We've been crying out for a long time to begin a discourse on what masculinity is, and how it is affected by class, race, ability, gender/sexual orientation etc and also how it affects those that come in contact with it. We cannot speak of masculinity without speaking of the untold violence attached to it. Let us now, for the love of god(desses) start talking about it. For those interested in checking the exhibition out, it will be on display until March, 10, 2016. ■