

Smells evoke emotionally charged memories. Like the smell of freshly picked green mangoes after the season's first Kalbaishakhi or the smell of clothes washed with Chaka Ball soap and laid out to dry on the wires running along the village front yard. However, Beautiful Bangladesh—our tagline for tourism—has its imitable share of horrible smells that also manage to etch themselves into our memories.

Like that of a public bathroom at a busy railway station mingled with the musty scent of sweat, cheap cologne and smoke. It is during my travels and the many stops at different railway stations of the country that I have accumulated pockets of memories unique to Bangladesh's railway stations.

And so it was that yet again I found myself in another railway station of this dust-ridden city of the capital on a fine

## NORTHERN BANGLADESH THROUGH SANTAL VILLAGES, MIDNIGHT WALKS AND GHOST STORIES

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Zipping through these familiar landscapes, making our way through the night-fog from Saidpur, crossing district after northern district, we made it all the way up to the topmost point of Bangladesh.

We set up camp by a tiny river, within the compounds of a tea garden bungalow. It was the dead of night by the time we were ready to settle down into a deep slumber.

The next morning, we were woken up by the sounds of barking dogs and chirping birds.

We were in Tetulia in search of a bird.

We walked in search of the Black Francolin, a critically endangered bird, as listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Bangladesh in 2000.

Although its range formerly extended over Chittagong, Dhaka and Rajshahi divisions, it has all but disappeared from most of these areas owing to habitat loss

and hunting. Now it is only found in Kazipara and Sharial villages of Tetulia in Panchagarh district, in the far north-west of Bangladesh, along the international border with India.

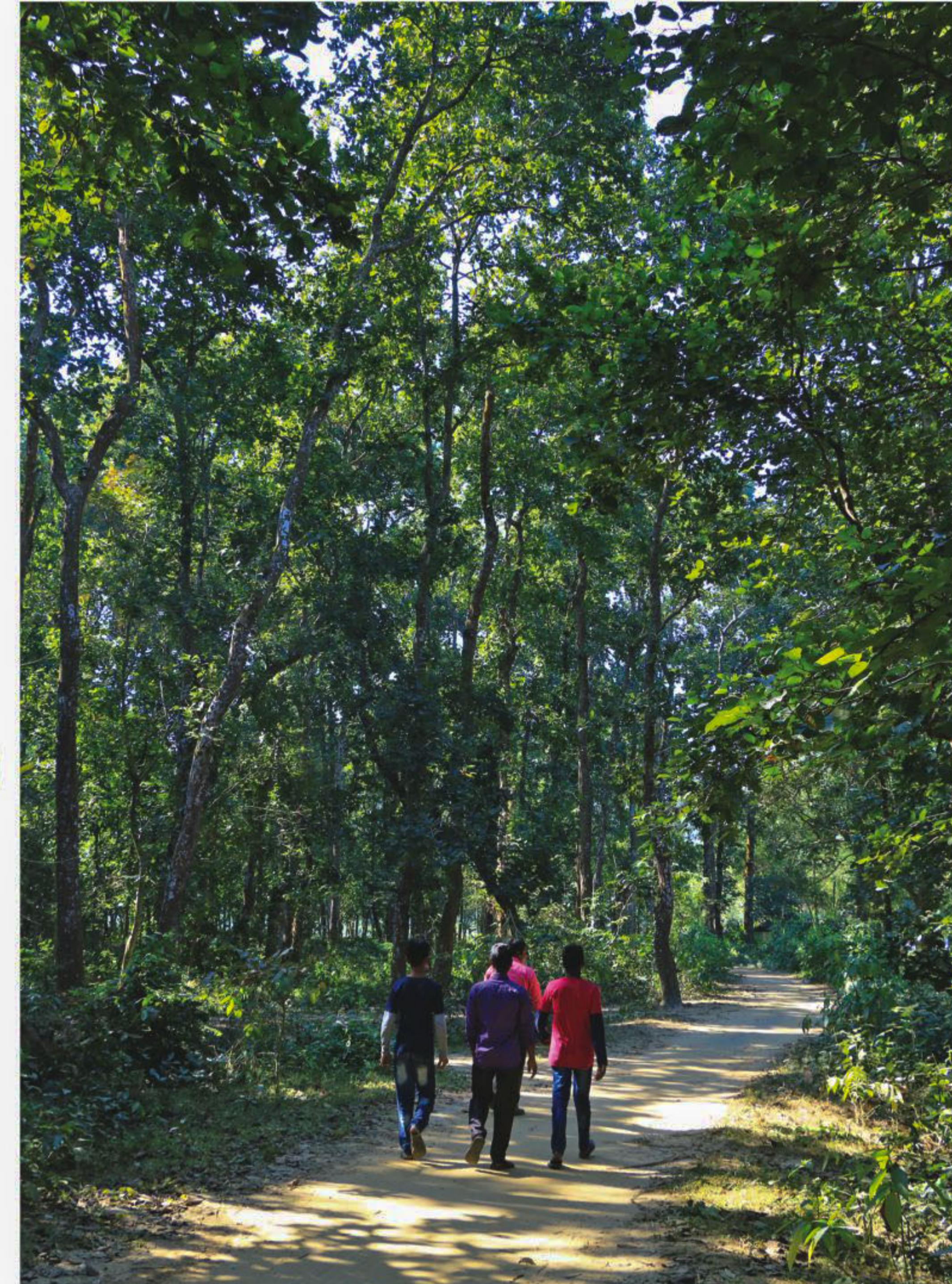
Save two among us, we were obviously not expert birdwatchers because we failed to catch a glimpse of the bird.

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A flock of Asian Openbill stork taking flight from a sandbar in Padma river.

PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED



Locals walk through the Singra National Park, with Sal trees towering on both sides of the trail.

PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED

## TRAVEL

### NORTHERN BANGLADESH

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However, in search of the bird, we walked miles and came across old, old trees possibly housing ghosts in their trunks. We came across unknown families opening up their houses to us, offering fried cauliflower nuggets, dense bakery biscuits, tea and water. Such is the simplicity of rural Bangladesh that any unknown person from the faraway city is subject to their sometimes even forced hospitality.

We spent the evening lying on our backs in the flat lands of Kazipara village, with the Indian border looming ahead of us. The shiny, menacing barbed wire separating the two countries, glistened in the setting sun as cattle herders made their way back home.

The next day, we were up and about early. The winter sky, painted with lazy wisps of white clouds, paralysed any further movement on our parts. We stayed in our beds, watching the day unfold. Flowing close by us was a tributary of the Mohananda River. A mid-afternoon swim and many dog-paddles later, we were ready for lunch. It was a humble affair, as lunch usually is, in the 'bhaat-er' restaurants in the north. Spinach, runny dal, and a choice of mutton curry cooked with chickpeas or fish curry, were on offer. We gulped it all down and ended the meal with Kalojam (a variety of sweet famous here in Bangladesh). It was our last evening in Tetulia before we headed off to Dinajpur, another district in northern Bangladesh.

By the time we headed out of the sub-district, dusk was settling in and the northern sky was a myriad of colors. There is a busy-ness to the sunsets in the north. It is as though all colours—reds, oranges, purples and blues—clamour for their moment before the sun dips into the horizon lined by the tea gardens of Panchagarh.

It took many long hours for us to finally reach Dinajpur. We roamed the vast expanse of the district in the span of another two days. Hosted by Santal families, we did not have to worry about lunches or dinners. We walked around the Singra National Park, a Sal forest—once possibly dominating the landscape, now reduced to a small pocket—in search of termite mounds

awe for hours. Each tile boasts of detailed artwork depicting the lives of mythological gods and goddesses in different forms and shapes. The walls depict their everyday lives and capture their story in the terracotta tiles for generations to come.

We were told by locals and it was later confirmed by the priest that the Kantajew Temple is built in a 'navaratna' (nine-spired) style before the minarets were destroyed in the earthquake of 1868.

Outside the temple are small stalls selling religious books, small idols of Hindu gods and goddesses and to our delight, sweet milk tea and 'Gur-er Jilapi'.

and fields upon fields of jute and sugarcane that swayed in the winter breeze.

Our time in the north was almost drawing to a close, but before bidding goodbye to these places that remain as though caught in a time capsule, we decided for a short stop-over at Rajshahi. This is the university town, and everyone will make sure to remind you of that as you head closer to the city.

Rajshahi, built by the mighty Padma River, has also managed to break a few records. According to UN data, in 2015, the town did more than any other worldwide to rid itself of air particles so harmful to human health.

An early start, and we were off to

spend some time on the many sandbars of Padma. The afternoon was taken up by walks in the sprawling campus of Rajshahi University, visits to the Varendra Museum and the many abandoned British Colonial era administrative buildings set up to control the Indigo farming in the region.

The city, however, comes to life in the evenings as a carnival-like atmosphere starts to dominate the banks of Padma River. We made it through the throngs of people, to find a quiet spot and watched the sunset and the half moon rise over the mighty river.



Fields of sugarcane swaying in the evening breeze near the Kazipara village.



The late-medieval Kantajew Mandir in Kantanagar of Dinajpur is one of the most magnificent religious edifices belonging to the 18th century.

PHOTO: COURTESY

By night, a different city starts to take shape. It gets transformed into the university town that it is so famed for. Tea-stalls everywhere hold a crowd of five or six people, all busily discussing the college woes. Even the small restaurants remain open late into the night, serving hot meals to students, hungry after a busy 'adda'.

The beautiful northern Bangladesh, with its many fields of jute, corn and sugarcane, hundreds of tea-stalls and conversations of local politics, old dilapidated Rajbaris, meandering rivers and Sal forests is like being on a treasure hunt. Not knowing what the next turn could hold, you are pulled in by the great mystery that is the north.

**ABOUT TOWN**

**SIMULACRUM**  
TARIQ JULFIKER'S ART EXHIBITION

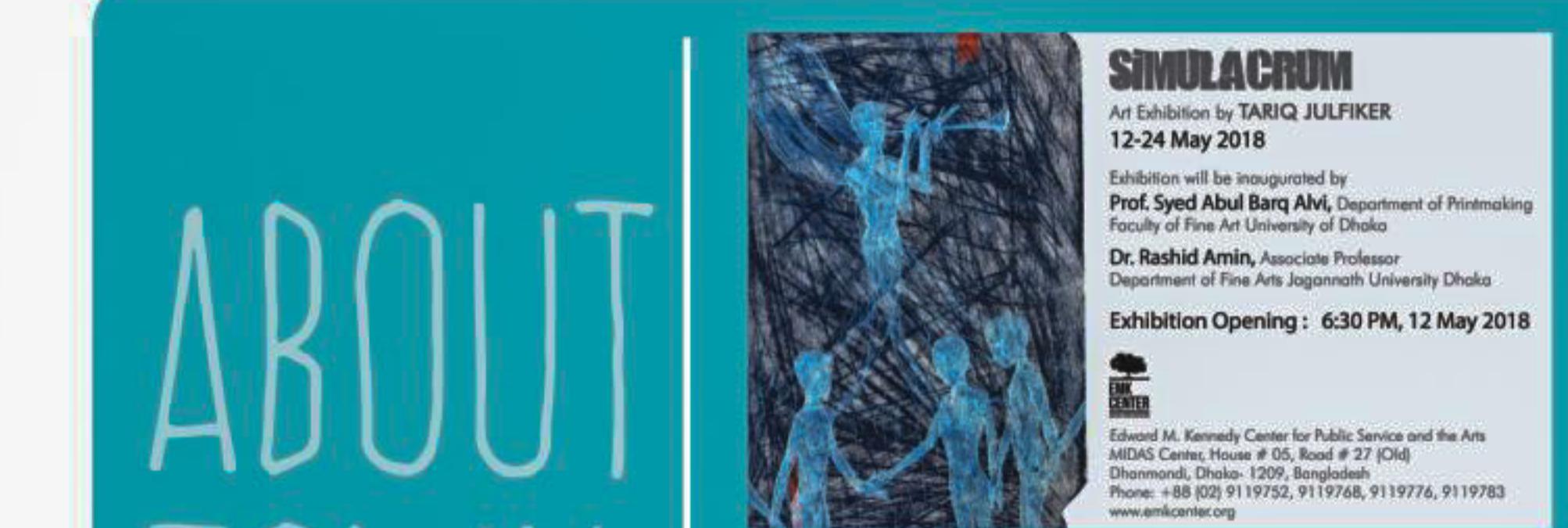
Organiser: EMK Centre  
May 12-24, 9.30 am - 8 pm, EMK Center, Midas Center Building, Dhanmondi

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KUNTAL BARAI'S ART EXHIBITION

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