

Star OLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 21, 2003

next in line



Taking timeout by the Titas



LOCATION > NATORE / PUTHIA CATEGORY > FAMILY

Meandering through mystic land

It's a three-day trip to the northwest -- of richer experience -- with my colleague. Our stay appeared fluid -- full of suspense offered by the journey into the half-known. We felt our lives -- although for a short time -- to be isolated, stripped of pre-packed rules, not accountable to anyone. We stood for ourselves. Only to watch or look around. Floating and lost.

We set out on a summer morning. The sun was getting harsher by the minute at a time people don't prefer to go outdoors, let alone traipse off to a far-away district. Our bus from Kalyanpur in Dhaka belted over the Jamuna Bridge to Sirajganj to Natore, the land of Banalata Sen. Along the way, vibrant green of trees and myriad houses glided past like kaleidoscopic images. We reached a road -- farther north -- that shot through vast sheets of water on its either side. *Chalan Beel*. The monsoon has swelled the *beel* high, blurring the line between the water's edge and the horizon.

Soon the countryside shook itself loose, bursting into true colours under the sun. Summer clouds scudding across the sky cast moving shadows on the waters beneath, over fishermen engrossed in catching fish. The wind sent gentle ripples against the boats bobbing here and there. I thought to myself: Life is more than what we live out in the

fact sheet
NATORE

Position from Dhaka: north-west
Distance: over 300 kilometres
Road condition: excellent
Attraction: archaeological
Places of interest: Puthia in Rajshahi and Uttara Ganabhaban and Ranai Bhabani Palace in Natore
Best time to visit: spring

urban matrix. I felt like hurrying out of the bus to join the fishermen. But the bus sped on, zipping forward.

We arrived in Natore town at noon and checked into a hotel. After lunch and shower, we headed out in a hired car for Puthia, 16km west of Natore and 23km east of Rajshahi. Puthia is caught between two worlds -- one too powerless to be urban and the other constantly losing

its pristine face. The car finally halted. We struggled out and sprinted towards the towering Shiva Temple, built by Rani Bhuban Mohini in 1823, walking into an ambience drugged by the placid afternoon sun. The temple was glowing, though now a little faded by time, against with the blue sky bending down to touch its tallest dome.

We stood awe-struck on the landing of the stairs leading into the temple's interior. We paused for a moment, undecided whether to climb the stairs in

shoes. We stood waiting until a woman came -- sari bunched in one hand -- and climbed her way up. We followed. Once atop the large plinth on which the temple rests, Himu, accompanying us from Natore town, sounded, "Bishu *dai*!" The caretaker hurried forward. As he eased the temple door open, we stepped inside and faced a Shiva image in black stone placed at the altar's centre. We looked up and down, scanned the walls covered in floral motifs. I lifted my eyes from the image and looked at the main dome

tapering upwards. We stepped out and moved towards the back of the temple. A moat -- locally known as Shiva Sagar -- skirts the temple area with its waterline. Emerald-hued water of the moat contrasts with the greys of the five-domed temple. On the bank of the moat, a painter was capturing in his canvas the beauty of the temple in the fading sunlight.

There are several other temples in Puthia to visit. We hurried back into the car. The driver manoeuvred through many bends and turns and finally arrived in front of a 19th

century palace of Puthia Rajbari. We threaded our way in. An impressive terracotta temple, the Govinda Mondir, with a look of the Kantajir Mandir in Dinajpur, stands alone in the courtyard, as earthquakes wiped two others out of existence long ago. Basements of the two temples are the only remnants.

The Govinda temple, built sometime between 1823 and 1895, is a 47'-6" square, two-storey structure with a set of ornamental miniature towers. Four towers are on each corner of the first storey and the central one crowns the top of the

second. Outer walls of the temple are covered with continuous bands of terracotta panels, depicting both figural and floral motifs. The panels of Govinda Mondir portray Radha-Krishna images and scenes from the Hindu epics. The small compositions are complete with refined and careful details that depict battle scenes. Imagination finds its unbridled place in the profusion of figures such as doorkeepers, warriors, archers, dancers, musicians, devotees, birds and animals.

We moved out and raced to another terracotta temple tucked away among trees. The single-domed temple is a receptacle of motifs from Hindu myths. But it looked uncared-for. I felt a stab of pain, a sense of loss. The spectre of mutability haunted me -- confined me to the thoughts of dark recesses of time.

The day wore on. The August sun dimmed its light to a few crimson rays that suffused the water of a pool in front of the home. We slouched onto the pool's *ghat*. I climbed a few steps down, and skimming the water's surface, damped my hair down. The cool feel of waterdrops on my face relieved searing summer heat a bit. Twilight thickened into evening. We started moving back to Natore town, our car darting into the pockets of darkness. The lines -- *Time to wrap up work and get set for the telling of tales. All birds home -- rivers too -- life's mart close again; what remains is darkness and facing me -- Banalata Sen!* -- came flashing to my mind in rare moments of reflection.

ARUN DEVNATH
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN



Caption:

1. Freezing afternoon glory in canvas
2. Opening to the blue sky
3. Remnants of beauty
4. Gateway to presidential palace in Natore
5. Archway in closeup
6. Time ticks away
7. Maharani's palace in Puthia, Rajshahi
8. Land of mystic minds

Budget

Cost for 10 persons
Microbus fare - Tk 3,000
Fuel and driver - Tk 2,000
Food - Tk 1,000
Overnight stay - Tk 500 (three rooms)
Total Tk 6,500

Traveltips

- Sunscreen lotion is a must since you have to spend most of the time in open air
- Don't forget your umbrellas.
- A sun hat or a cap is a must to escape the scorching sun.
- Wear light-soled shoes.
- Sunglasses.
- Take lunch packs and water with you.