

NON-FICTION

POETRY

'Aamar desh Korokdi'

KRISHNA LAHIRI MAJUMDAR

'Where is your desh?' I was asked long ago, and was terribly embarrassed because I did not know the answer! I knew there existed a desh, a mysterious place where my grandmother disappeared for months, several times a year. But that day, ashamed of my ignorance, I ran home to ask my father where my desh was. It was then, at the age of 7, that I learnt that it was in Faridpur, in what was then East Pakistan.

Many decades have gone by since then. Gradually I became aware of the fact of the partition of the country. Later I read many heart-rending stories about the hate, fear and violence that came in the wake of that event. But the picture of my desh, which took shape in my mind from the stories I heard from my grandmother, my father and my aunts remained untouched by what I later heard and read about partition. Faridpur got localized into Korokdi the village that my forefathers came from and it remained in my mind a golden land, a rural paradise. In my imagination I could clearly see the 'pukur' (pond) in front of our house where my father, Abani Lahiri, and his sisters had loved to swim; the 'naat mandir', the 'chandi mandap', the library established almost a hundred years ago in memory of a relative, Ramdhan Tarkalankar, a great scholar of the shastras, the school founded in 1901 in memory of Rashbehari Lahiri, a forefather, the 'maath' (grounds) where Baba played football, the club where he went to 'exercise' finally leading to his joining the revolutionary Jugantar. All this was firmly imprinted in my mind untarnished by the violence and tragedy that had swept across Bengal.

In the last years of his life my father spoke more and more of his childhood and adolescence in the village. As I listened to those oft-repeated stories, the village and its people came alive for me and I often wished I could one day go with Baba and visit what might have been my desh. With his passing away I knew that that would remain only a dream. It was unlikely that I would be able to reach Korokdi, and even if I did, to identify the places that he reminisced so fondly about.

But destiny works in inscrutable ways! At the prodding of my cousin I had clicked my way into Facebook in itself an incredible feat for a technologically challenged person like me. Once there I discovered to my astonishment the existence of a Faridpur group, and then, a Madhukhali group! Hardly able to believe my eyes I clicked to join and was soon looking at photographs of our village and the remains of some of the places and houses that my father had talked so much about. Excited but somewhat puzzled that so many people were interested in Korokdi, I soon discovered that a prime mover of the group was Subrata Kumar Das, a young teacher of English in Dhaka, who happened to come from a village very close to Korokdi. It was he who had photographed the remains of our homes and posted them on Facebook.

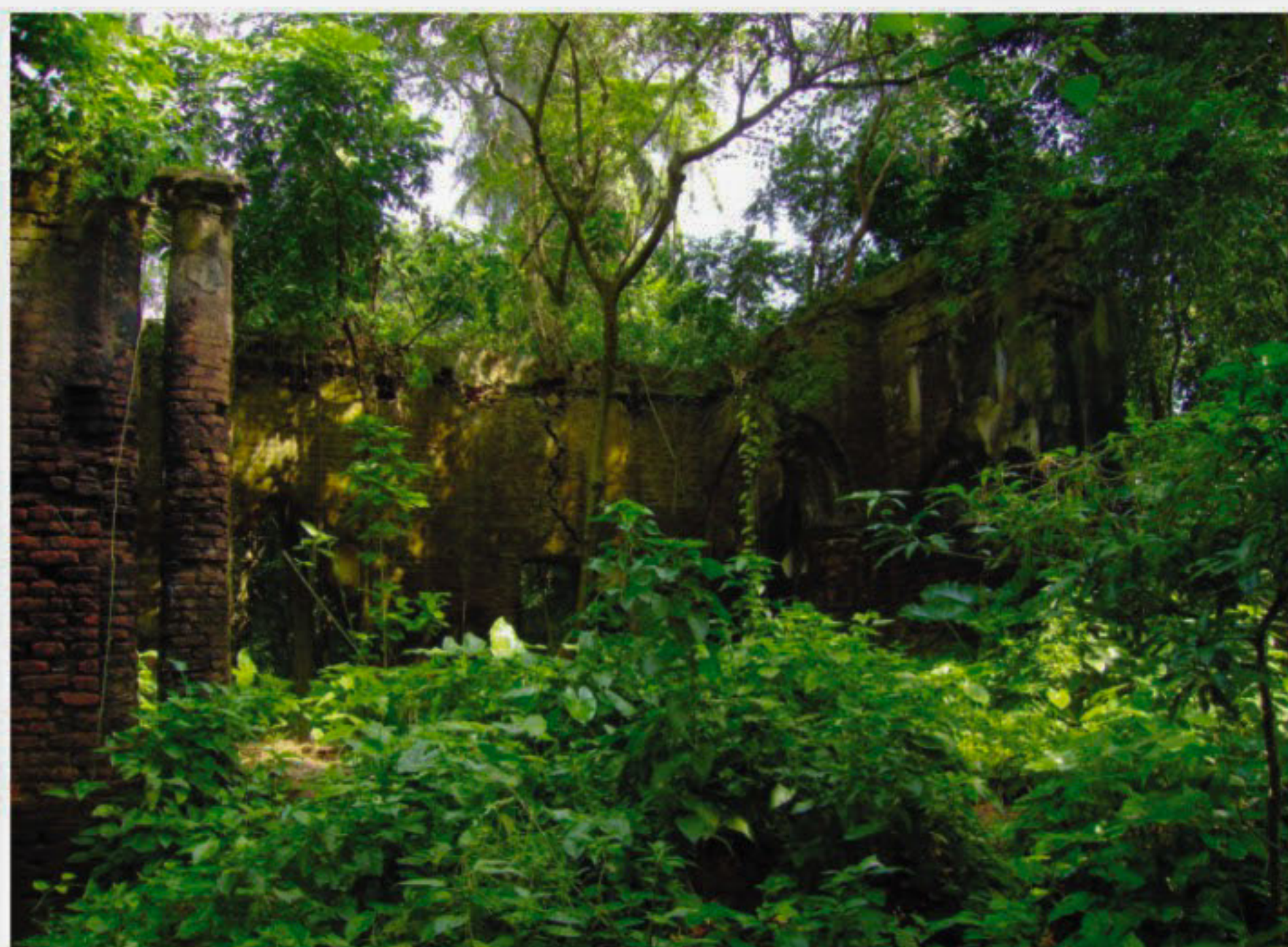
As our acquaintance grew, I learned more and more about Korokdi from him. His father had picked up a book called Mahabharata Manjari published in 1928 from a footpath bookshop in Kolkata, and Subrata, leafing through it one day was taken aback to find that the book was written by Bankim Chandra Lahiri of Korokdi. His interest in Korokdi awakened, he began to research the place and its people. What he found amazed him. This small and very remote village had produced many people who had excelled in their sphere of activity. Many of these I had heard of from Baba, - for instance Shibdas Bhaduri, clearly a childhood hero of Baba's whom he had spoken of till the end with awe and admiration. Shibdas Bhaduri had been captain of the Mohunbagan football team that had, against all odds, repeatedly defeated the British team and lifted the shield in 1910. Also from Korokdi was Bijoydas Bhaduri who also later captained the Mohunbagan team. Others I had known personally, but there were many I knew nothing about. I too was intrigued at the diverse talents that had emerged from Korokdi.

Over the months that followed, an idea took shape in Subrata's mind the idea of organizing a somabesh (gathering) of the people who had once belonged to Korokdi, at least those that could be contacted! Why not invite all such people who could come, now scattered across

continents, to visit or revisit the home of their forefathers and meet the people who now lived there? Subrata's organisation Bangladesh Literary Resource Centre (BLRC) came forward to shoulder all the troubles.

It was a daring idea, but one almost insurmountably difficult to put into action. The logistics seemed impossible. The time, the place, the resources, the connecting and coordinating with different people, - I wondered if it would ever work out. But work out it did! Subrata's enthusiasm, determination and persistence made it happen. And what a spectacular happening it was!

We landed in Dhaka on the 29th Jan '10, not really knowing what to expect. All of us, - my sister, my cousin, my children and I, - had grown up on stories of Korokdi, of the Padma, of the Goalondo Ghat, of Baagat 'er doi, and so much more. Here we were, actually going to see it all. But what came before that took us by surprise. Subrata had told us that he had arranged a press



Remains of library at Korokdi

conference that morning, but to our amazement, when we reached the Dhaka Press Club we found it was packed, not only with journalists, but also with many renowned intellectuals, civil rights and political activists.

As I heard the speakers I was struck by what we had in common. We who were descendants of a family of Lahiris of Korokdi had come to connect with our past, our roots. Personally for me, the pain of being unconnected, rootless, was like a thorn deep within me that I could never forget. I had lived in Kolkata till the age of 10, not aware of my desh but surrounded by immediate and extended family. After that we shifted to Delhi and though 50 years and more have gone by since then, the sense of loss of the wider family and social networks, of the language, the culture, - indeed the very life that should have been mine, has grown more acute over the years instead of less.

None of the other speakers at the Press Club that day were suffering from the same sense of rootlessness that I was, but as I listened to them I realized that in a wider sense they too were seeking for their roots. As one of the speakers said, a nation needs roots as much as an individual. A young nation like Bangladesh needed to go down to its roots, in Korokdi and in thousands of villages like it across the country, thus enabling it to reclaim the heritage that it was in danger of losing. It was a truly moving experience for me. That my feelings were understood and shared by so many warmed my heart and made me feel it was quite natural to be there.

The next 2 days of our visit were spent in Korokdi. We travelled by road, but to our great disappointment there was no Goalondo Ghat nor a steamer crossing there. The massive, awe-inspiring Padma that I had heard about was no more than a gentle stream. The Goalondo Ghat had been closed and another more modern ghat built, but gone were the steamers and the famous chicken-curry that Baba had sworn was the best ever! Our car piled onto a very modern barge, along with many other buses, trucks, cars,

bikes, people etc. And of course the hawkers! As ubiquitous as in India, the ferry had swarms of hawkers selling everything under the sun...most interesting for us though were the baskets of fish, - chingri, ilish, pona, tangra, kajri, - being waved at us with suitable sales pitches!

By mid-morning we were at Baagat, the town famous for its 'doi' (yoghurt). This time we were not disappointed. As we were plied with the doi, who could refuse a second or even third helping?

A few kilometers from Baagat, off the highway and some 2 kilometres through the open fields, was Korokdi. On that first day we went up to the school grounds, the same school and the same grounds where Baba had studied and played. It was a very emotional moment for us all. We were in the village where Baba was born and grew to adolescence. It made him what he was to become later, a man whose exploits are the stuff of legend and of whom we, his family, are so proud.

change followed, and members of our actually defied all norms of the brahminical conservatism and travelled to England, for which they were boycotted by the powerful religious leaders of the village.

Korokdi was a small village really, surrounded by mustard and jute fields, even in my father's time. By the time my father was born it was a pretty prosperous and relatively modern village. My grandfather had installed the first tube-well in the village, and someone actually had a fridge that ran on kerosene! There was a library named after a Bhattacharya which had rare collections of ancient texts, besides other books.

As we entered the village our first stop was at the school. Built in 1901 in memory of Rashbehari Lahiri by his son, this was where the boys in the village studied, played and grew up. Part of the original building still remained, and there were still children studying there, - only now there were many girls to be seen too. It was an unbelievable moment for us - we could never have imagined that the school still existed and that we would actually be walking down its corridors and stepping into the classroom that Baba must have sat in 80 years ago.

We were fortunate to have among us Alok Bhattacharya, a cousin of Baba's who had spent his early life till adulthood in the village. As we walked through the village he was able to point to the structures that still remained and explain what they had originally been. The famed library had lost the last of its columns that Subrata had photographed a year ago, but the still-impressive remains hinted at how grand it must have looked. Nothing remained of Baba's house or the famed tube-well, but the ruins of the home of another member of the Lahiri-family remained, - the only trace of the Lahiris. As we clambered over the plinth and the overgrown brick walls, I was filled with a deep sadness for a life that was lost forever. We walked past the pukur (pond) that was part of the Lahiri bari, a vast body of water that had seen generations of children learn to swim in its blue-green expanse. There was one structure that remained and that I could recognize, - the ghat leading into this particular 'pukur'. As we stood on the steps that descended to the water and gazed at the serene waters, memories of countless stories I had heard came crowding around like ghosts, whispering of experiences that never would be ours.

The Bhattacharya part of the village was relatively intact. A part of the family was still living there, and they were doing their best to look after, both their own and other houses in which brothers, cousins or uncles had lived. Visiting their house was a truly unique experience, - it was like stepping back in time. The house, the stairs, the yard, the trees surrounding the house, were something city-bred people like us had never ever seen. Climbing on to the roof and reaching out to pluck tamarind pods off the tree, cutting bananas off a tree to eat, plucking green coconuts to drink the sweetest coconut water we have tasted, was unforgettable.

But the picture that will remain forever etched in my mind is of the 'chandi-mandap' (Durga mandir). The original Bhattacharya who came to Korokdi apparently first performed a puja to invoke the Goddess and seek her approval before he settled there. At the spot he later built the chandi-mandap around which centred much of village life. How many countless times Baba had talked of the Durga pujas at the chandi-mandap, the coming home for the pujas and the celebrations, the amateur dramatics, the feasting, the meeting up with all relatives. As we stood in front of it, it would have been unrecognizable but for Alok kaka explaining to us the layout of the temple. All that had survived were the ruins of the temple - some arches and alcoves of red brick to the rear and some columns at the front. It was as if the centre had fallen apart.

Our visit to Korokdi left me more moved than I could have imagined. I was full of a sense of wonder and great happiness at actually being able to walk through my ancestral village, but also deep sadness at the loss of a heritage that, but for a twist of history, would have been mine. I'm glad though that we did come. And I have no words to express my gratitude to those, who with nothing but enthusiasm and friends, made this happen.

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SHORT STORY

SHARMIN AHMED

"See this"
It was a photograph; a figure facing a twilight of brilliant orange spread across the horizon of a silent, still shoreline. I gasped at its sheer elegance.

"Who is the person?"
He chuckled; "That's a test for you, tell me."
"It's definitely not you, because you took the shot", I naively replied.

This time he laughed out loud and said it was indeed him and that he had taken the picture with a remote control...

It was such short conversations, and then one thing led to another then another and another and another. But it just went on and on and it never came to an end. We were both hesitant to come to an end. Because the more we conversed the more our differences were highlighted. However, we could not resist the need to overcome them although they seemed too hard to overcome... they were too hard to overcome.

There was this time I had sent him someone else's text; 'I'm going home. See you tomorrow'. He replied; 'Ok, see you tomorrow, dear'. It was funny because we both knew we couldn't meet despite living in the same city, our differences got in the way. It's not like we never tried, because the day after he did call, I was on my way to attend a seminar, he said, "Call me when you are done". And I did, but he didn't pick up. I later got a text, 'I have a meeting now, sorry dear...missing you a lot'.

So the conversations continued in erratic phases and topics, sometimes with long pauses. I would get agitated, but somehow he never got restless and that itself would anger me and unreasonably so.

Then one time, I totally cut all communication with him. It continued for a while and then he called.
"Hi."
"Hello."
"Oh my! You seem to be burning with anger."
"No, why should I be angry?"
"You aren't! Why I'd be angry, if you hadn't kept in touch, I'd be so angry I'd have come blow up your house!"

I was fuming now, mumbling an excuse that I had to go. I hung up. He did however convince me to call him back as soon as I was free. And I did finally make the call. He usually cuts the call and calls me back, but this time he only cut it. Assuming he was busy I waited a few hours and finally giving up, texted him that I wasn't angry at him but at myself for caring when he did not. To which he replied; 'Are you free?' I answered a 'yes'.

I expected a call after that but it never came and I was up all night waiting for it.

He called the next day. I had already given up on him.

We conversed as if nothing had come to pass the day before. He talked of a trip that he had planned. We had been to such trips together before not alone but with a huge group. In fact, that is how we had met. He would organize trips; he called them 'safaris', he and a whole bunch of photographers would go with their huge lenses and SLRs.

I'm no photographer. I just liked to get lost in nature and for someone living in a suffocating city of limited scope. These trips were heavenly retreats to me.

He would lament, "I just couldn't convince you into taking up photography."
It was strange how things were on those trips. He would go off with his gear and I would be wandering in my own bliss of sightseeing. We hardly spoke except for a few exchange of greetings and his usual "Need anything?"
There wasn't much to be spoken even though we didn't really know much about each other. It

didn't seem necessary or convenient.

"The place is just awesome; I wasn't even in the mood to take pictures! But I just had to stop and in a drunken daze I took shots, as if my hands did not belong to me! I won't go there again without you; you just have to come, won't you?"

"You were supposed to call yesterday."
"I know, but I fell asleep."
"You know what? I'll have to talk to you later". I hung up.

It was over, lost in transition like the fleeting song outside on the street on a labourer's stereo that blared,

*This is the end, beautiful friend
It hurts to set you free,
But you'll never follow me,
The end of nights we tried to die,
This is the end...*
I had misread him all along.

I went and sat before the computer, the wallpaper appeared, an evening shoreline, and my eyes became misty, as I looked into the screen and it seemed like the figure moved. He slowly walked away into the twilight...

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Misread . . .

... from
RAZIA SULTANA KHAN

Watermelon Villanelle
A turmuz that's what life is
Don't let the seeds get you; just spit them out.
My grandma's words, may she rest in peace.

My teeth cut into redness,
little grains of fluff juice floods my mouth;
a canvas of color. That's what life is.

A frivolous kiss as soft as fleece:
savor it before time runs out.
My grandma's wisdom may she rest in peace.

Slippery seeds slither and slide with ease.
I focus, gather each and spit it out,
eat the turmuz. She had no peace

trapped fifty years in "wedded bliss"
no way out
but death she rests in peace.

For her granddaughter, twenty-five sufficed,
to leave a sticky taste in my mouth.
A turmuz. Is that what life is?
My grandma's dead. May she rest in peace.

My Favorite Reader

I would have her be a housewife
on a day she cleans the clutter
in her cupboard. The top shelf,
wedding gifts stashed in faded wraps
revealed torn tissues of green and red,
spirits waiting to cross over.
The housewife, let's call her Sakina,
checks gifts for regifting,
pulls out my book of poems, a slim copy,
the first (and only) edition.
A cobweb clings to the jacket,
holding it back.

She flicks to the front page, reads,
"Happy Returns of the Day!
May your wedded life be a poem!"
Squints at the watery blue ink, diluted with time
six years already? Sits on the floor, hunched,
tendrils of hair escaping her tight bun.

The dust motes scintillate the morning light,
settle as she reads, her elongated shadow
squashed, transformed. The chicken curry
sizzles to an amber sauce,
releases a glorious charred smell.
And yet her eyes scan the pages,
seek validation, discover the poetry of her
wedded life.

Razia Sultana Khan is Head, Department of English, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

... from
NEELIMA ISLAM

In Serene Solitude
As night casts its spell of darkness
Over the lush green hills and dales
My thoughts just fly on the wings of a dove
To be with you, touch you furtively
Since then with each breath I take
I get the fragrance of your tender love

The bells of loneliness tolls on and on
In the midst of this sepulchral silence
And the age-old yearning gets hold on me
At such an hour, O' my saviour sweet
Wish you could pass by humming
And twirl my grief into moments of glee

In my festive reverie, I feel your frisky feet
At the doorstep of this forlorn abode
And the ecstatic flow just knows no bound
I find my world blazing bright and full
The gloom all vanish, the cheers revive
My spirit no longer dwells on the ground

Blessed is the heart, which is loved and can love
For the mere word works like Houdini's magic
All you need to possess is that precious 'wand'
There is nothing half so sweet, so entrancing
As falling in love with someone in life
Then embalm the memory with the golden
'band'

Neelima Islam is a writer.

... from
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A Love Poem
I can see your veins
I can see your arteries
I can see how your nerve runs
I can see how vulnerable you are
I can see the carrion eaters making a nest of you
I can see your friends leaving you when you
needed them the most

I was there, when he
dressed you in white
In that cold night
And stripped you
to your bare self
In the next morning
I was there -
Just to ask
Why you had to
Scrawl my piece
Of the sky

You sculptural tree

Shamsad Mortuza teaches English at Jahangirnagar University.