feng shui, literally 'wind-water', were enlisted in order to promote harmony between any construction and the natural environment around it.

"In the past Chinese people paid as much attention to the dead as to the living," says Li. "Graves were built as carefully as houses. The position was important and should receive good sunshine. As we all know, sunshine makes people warm and healthy, especially the elderly. Since Bangladesh is located in the northern hemisphere like China, the headstone should face south."

"The grave can be called an 'armchair' type," Li continues, referring to the semi-circular wall at the northern foot of the grave, which represents an armchair. "It would make someone feel safer and more comfortable to sit in an armchair than on a stool. It was thought to be the same with the dead."

Although it is generally believed she left no descendants, current upazila nirbahi officer Abu Hasnat Mohammad Arafin speculates she might've had a son or daughter who left the district after her death – who else constructed her South Chinese style grave?

There is speculation too about her trade. It certainly wasn't salt. Local suggestion includes chillies, tamarinds or unprocessed rice. Arafin considers she might've traded woven mats, the quality *shitolpati* for which Jhalakathi is renowned, perhaps clothes or other handicrafts – sending goods to Kolkata.

Yet the most common guess is that she traded in betel nut, *shupari*.

"Betelnut is next to rice as far as income out of the betelnut trade is concerned," reads the Bakerganj District Gazetteer. "Betelnuts are collected in October and the trade continues for a considerable portion of the cold weather. The chief seats of this trade were Dulatkhan, Mehendiganj and Nalchiti. The Mugh [Marma], the Burmese and even some Chinese used to come to Nalchiti to purchase betelnut for Arakan."[3]

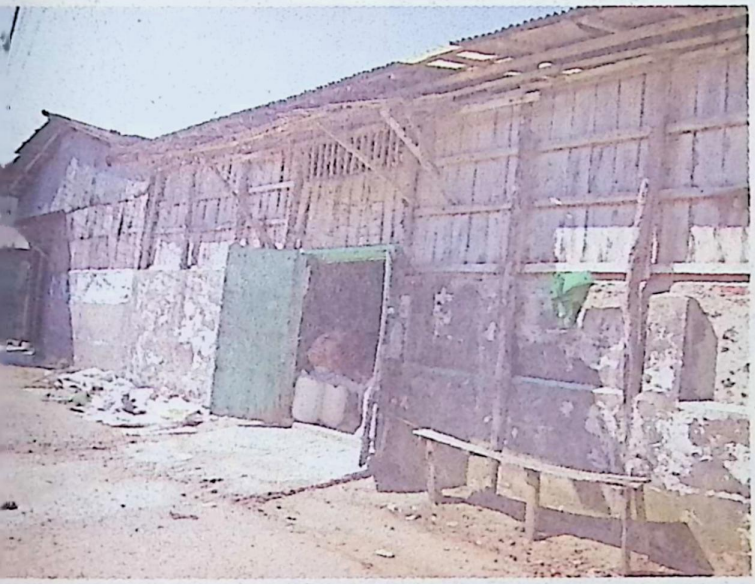
Perhaps N arrived in search of betel nut – from Arakan. Maybe she hitched a ride on a large balam of the Marma. But what was it, then, that made her linger?

N. might have spent some years alone in Nalchity but it is hardly likely she was lonely. Upon acquiring even a smattering of Bangla she must've been rather busy answering the many questions about China and perhaps-Arakan.

I'd hazard a guess she had many well-wishers, because, a good century after her death with the local enthusiasm concerning her grave, she still does – and there can be no armchair surely, to make a deceased as contented and comfortable as that.

The busiest years of flourishing trade in Jhalakathi might have gone. The town might have exchanged its haggle-and-bustle cloak of yesteryear for a more understated and sedate mode of dress. Yet the promise of river-and-sea remains and for Jhalakathi District trade will no doubt continue to be a welcome companion.

PHOTOS: ANDREW EAGLE



Jhalakathi salt has a long history.



Engineer and captain Dalilur Rahman with his vessel that carries salt to Jhalakathi from Kutubdia.

1) *Md Habibur Rashid (ed.), "Bakerganj District Gazetteer," Bangladesh Govt. Press, Dacca, 1981, p.188*
2) *Wikipedia "Jhalakathi Sadar Upazila" description.*
3) *Md Habibur Rashid (ed.), op.cit., p.189*