The Curious Case of the Unending Village

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What were those two men doing, standing in the empty field at dusk, at the very edge of Itna village of Lohagara in Narail? Itna has no neighbouring village – it's situated on a broad finger of land created by a horseshoe bend in the Modhumoti River. Akin to a fish trap, the one road in is the same way out. It's not a place to anticipate being observed by strangers' eyes.

Itna seems thinly populated compared to other villages. Ample are quiet, secluded spots for unheard conversations. In front of the two men were vast stretches of land, some fields dabbed with the tiny flowers of lentil crops or shining green with new paddy. The last of the day's birds overhead were the only conceivable witnesses to any goings on.

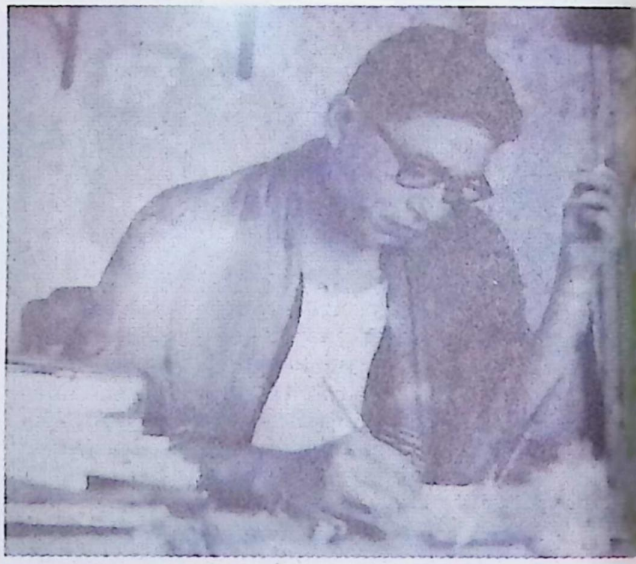
It could've been entirely innocent, but for what motive had those two men covered their faces? What was in the shadowy sacks and boxes scattered about their feet?

There were clues – little clues. Rumours spoke of gold traders nearby. There's an abandoned manor in Itna with dark empty rooms to attract bats. In the Chourasta tea shop where one might expect local gossip the assembly of tea-drinkers and staff had instead confessed they were all actors. They were laughing. Did everyone in Itna wear a proverbial mask?

To identify and assemble the seemingly unrelated puzzle pieces would be a challenge for most of us. But for those few with a flair for detection it's elementary: no riddle can defy solution. With a trained eye Sherlock Holmes would've been able to follow that deduction trail which reveals truth – a trail that in Itna seems without end.

Yet being Bangladesh solving Itna's riddles is better a task for Holmes's Bengali counterpart, Kiriti Roy. Six and a half feet tall, fair and stout, Roy wore his curled hair combed back as a rule – so author Nihar Ranjan Gupta tells us – and black celluloid spectacles made Roy's clean-shaven face handsome.

As might be expected, Roy sported a long coat and cap, enjoyed a puff on a pipe and carried a magnifying glass. Usually accompanied by his trusty associate Subrata Roy, Gupta's sleuth was undoubtedly qualified to pursue escapades from first introduction in *Khalo Bhromor* through around eighty subsequent novels from the middle of the twentieth century.



Nihar Ranjan Gupta.

Of course a detective like Roy wouldn't merely analyse clues that came before him. He'd engage his inquisitive nature, surveying the area, talking to people. In Itna, Roy must've noticed that conspicuous ship's helm, the steering wheel attached to the wall of another, still growing, manor – yes, Itna is an affluent village. What would a ship's helm be doing a great many miles inland?

Roy would've found himself on Modhumoti's bank at night with just a few hobby fishermen and the silvery moonshine for company. Anything sinister could happen in such a scene – but perhaps it was unrelated, just the exquisite nature of Bangladesh with cross-river views to Gopalganj. Perhaps it wasn't more than that reader-anticipated red herring.

There would've been little investigation breakthroughs. Roy would've observed the brick stages at the various clubs and deduced what further conversation confirmed, that Itna regularly stages amateur *jatra* dramas during which the villagers were exactly as they said – actors. It fit. There was nothing suspicious in it.

Roy would've learnt that the gold traders mostly