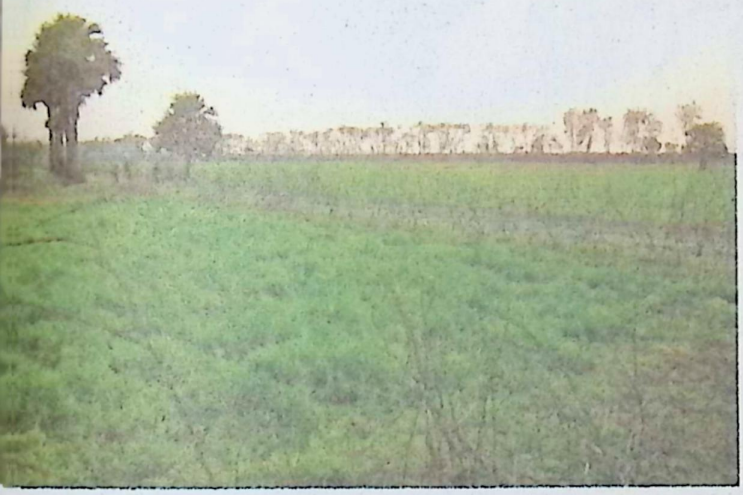
reside in Dhaka tending their businesses – that it was a traditional occupation. And regarding the ship's helm, he would've heard the history of a young man who'd once left for Chittagong to find a new beginning and found his fortune besides. Thereafter he employed many other Itna folk – so the villages say – bringing benefit to his community.

Yet none of this would've satisfied Roy. There was still the baffling situation of the masked men in the field and the abandoned manor – and where chat fails it cannot be an error to find an expert. Mina Razib Ahmed is a retired Bangla literature teacher from Itna Girls' High School and a freedom fighter. It is little wonder he maintains an interest in history.



Itna has no neighbouring villages. It's a not a place to anticipate observation by strangers' eyes.

"On 8 May 1971 the Pakistani army reached Char Batpara village across the river in Gopalganj," he recounts, "When the Pakistanis tried to shoot a farmer, the soldier found his gun had no bullets. The farmer snatched the weapon, attacked the soldier and the army men retreated." After his lucky escape the farmer threw the rifle in the river and swam to Itna. His fellow villagers, fearing revenge, told the Pakistanis he didn't belong to their village but was from Itna.

"On 23 May the Pakistanis attacked Itna early in the morning. 39 people were killed including four brothers from one family," says Ahmed, "The event galvanised resistance."

According to Ahmed, Itna was named by the Raja of Natore's sister who once visited the area. She came by *palki*, sedan chair, and yet found the journey exhausting. When she reached the village once called Ballavpur, she felt it was a village that stretched on forever. The village was *iti-na* – without end: the name that became Itna.

"During the British period the area was coopted into producing indigo," Ahmed says. In the village of Radhanagar there was a *nil kutir*, an indigo compound, and a large river port with up to 360 prostitution houses. "Many girls were kidnapped or lured into working there," says Ahmed, "Anti-British activities were strong here."

Itna is also the ancestral home of novelist Nihar Ranjan Gupta. The abandoned manor, to Kiriti Roy's surprise, is none other than his inventor's family home. But for what motive would a fictional character investigate his very creator's house?

Born in 1911, Gupta studied medicine in Kolkata and the United Kingdom, where he qualified as a dermatologist. While a student his sister died after being stung by a scorpion. But how could it be that a dermatologist wrote novels?

"When he returned from England," says Ahmed, "he brought his British Christian wife. His family said he could not bring a foreign woman into the house so he took a steamer back to Khulna, then Kolkata. He never came here again." His family also moved to Kolkata at the time of Partition.

Indeed from childhood Gupta's dream was to become an author – and his first novel, *Rajkumar*, was published when he was eighteen. Gupta once visited Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan for encouragement; but it was his time in the U.K. that fostered interest in detective fiction – and he met Agatha Christie.

Kiriti Roy came to life upon his return, to become the most prominent character in a career spanning more than two hundred novels, short stories, plays and essays – many of which were made into Bollywood and Tollywood films. Gupta died in 1986.

Kiriti Roy meanwhile would've known that sometimes the best approach is the direct approach. In coming closer to the two men in the field it could be noticed their face coverings were made of netting – what looked like sacks were actually clumps of dried water hyacinth atop boxes which were bee hives. There was no funny business – only honey business.

One of them handed his beekeeper's hat to the stranger who took a few strides closer. Almost immediately a bee landed on his arm. He tried to brush it off but it was late. The bee sunk its stinger into the stranger's skin – a dermatologist would've been horrified.

With that, one of the men brushed the bee aside – and as the bee left a trail of sweet honey remained behind. There was no pain. It was the final puzzle piece! In Itna one may arrive as a stranger but one will not leave that way. Itna had stung him, he knew. It was elementary: another case successfully closed. ■