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THROUGH THE SUBMERGED WORLD
OF BARISAL

Kirtonkhola River

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PHOTOS: ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

I like to think that poet Jibanananda Das derived inspiration for his seminal poem *Banalata Sen* during his times in Barisal.

The dark of the night in this river town is like Banalata's hair, the long neon-green grass of Daruchini Dweep like that of the rice fields swaying in the west winds of Bakerganj and as the day ends, all birds flock home like in the poem.

It was with deep longing, that I embarked on my journey to Barisal, previously known as Bakerganj, former district of the British India. It was the swampy lowlands, the Kirtonkhola River that ran by the town, the backwaters, often slow and sluggish, and the promise of *roshogolla* (a syrupy cottage cheese dessert famous to South Asia) that stirred this longing in me.

"*Ei Surobhi, Surobhi eidi ke, Barisal launch 2 number gate e, Patuakhali launch 4 gate.*" The sounds of Sadarghat will consume you, confuse you, yet somehow the regulars have learned to navigate through this madness. In the bright sunny morning of early August, the ominous Buriganga river busily swirled below the pontoons laid out in Sadarghat—Dhaka's busy river terminal—people carrying everything from rusty orange chickens, sacks of grains to old bikes, were headed in all directions, and we hurriedly looked for our boat—the Greenline catamaran—promising to take us to the southern district of Barisal.

The sonorous horns from the many ferries, freighters, loading and off-loading of goods and the stench of the



Oxford Mission Epiphany Church

Buriganga all add to the eccentric appeal of this place.

The catamaran successfully made its way out of the teeming Sadarghat without a scratch on its body and on the river banks I could see Dhaka slowly wane away. In the cold, air conditioned water bus, I along with the three others I was travelling with fell into a fitful sleep, only to be woken up by the call of snacks: a box containing a hardboiled egg, a cold stale sandwich and a Pran Junior mango juice. By then we were far away from Dhaka, entering a half-drowned world, soaked in rains. The catamaran drifted past flooded islands, past rice fields under siege. Ponds overflowing with grey-blue water, trees drooping under the weight of the weather and the sight of an old man with a black umbrella fighting the rain dominated the landscape.



Floating guava market at Bhimruli over Kirtipasha canal.

By afternoon, we were in Barisal. One thing that will strike someone travelling in Bangladesh is there is always a deep sense of competition; everyone wants to get on and off their vehicles as fast as they can, everyone always spits farther than the other and everyone's betel leaf stains are the most red! Even before we were docked, there was a quick shuffle and everyone was on their feet ready to get down.

Famished and head full of stories of fresh fish and sweet sweet *roshogollas*, we headed off to our rest house, left our bags and quickly went off in search of food. Another funny thing about travelling—if you ask your rickshaw *wala* or an unwitting local for a good place to eat, nine out of ten times, they will lead you to a newly

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opened, dimly lit Chinese (read *deshi* Chinese) restaurant in the city. After much cajoling of locals we were finally led to a famous, and rightfully so, 'Bhaat er hotel' in the centre of Barisal city. Steaming hot plates of rice and oily *ilish mach* in mustardy gravy made up lunch. We were then off to Shoshi Mishti, famed for being here for almost a century, and the sweets did not disappoint. Small cottage cheese balls in a sweet sugary syrup, we downed a dozen among the four of us.

As afternoon proceeded, we went off to the Kirtonkhola River. Here we took a boat to the back alleys of the entrancing river. From wide and expansive, we were plunged into narrow, green and stagnant waters. It is as though life slowed down here, the tiny boat, sometimes touching the banks end to end, meandered through the water. The air was thin, sharp with the scent of rain-soaked leaves and the sky which was barely visible through the canopy of trees was breaking into an orange-blue hue after the rains.

Life at the fringes of this waterway was slow and at times the abject poverty so stark it was hard to look away. A bridge, half-made was abandoned that way. It was hard to imagine, a busy city flourished just a few kilometres away from here. The evening was whiled away in the tiny creeks and as dusk gave way to darkness, our small dinghy boat fell out back onto the main body of the Kirtonkhola River.

The city of Barisal itself is dotted with many treasures; heritage is in a harmonious marriage with nature. Stark in the middle of the city, you will find yourself staring at a majestic red brick colonial structure. Resembling a huge locomotive, the Oxford Mission Epiphany Church was built in the twentieth century by Christian missionaries.

The huge structure fooled me into thinking it was a six- or seven-storeyed building. But once inside, you realise it is just expansive, the church is a play on Greek architecture and the roof so high, it consumes you. I gaped at the large cross on the main altar brought here all the way from Bethlehem. The colonial era structure soothes you, the marble tiles dotting the floor cool under your feet.

Here in Barisal, trade blossomed in its many waterways. Nobody is quite sure when the floating

As we sailed off, Barisal bid us adieu with a final storm. As lightning streaked the night sky, small villages came into sight in the sporadic flash of lights. The wind blew into my hair and I felt the deep romance of rural Bengal.

markets started here, but the locals believe the tradition is at least a century old. We took a bus from Barisal city to a small bazar in Jhalokathi. From here a *tuk tuk* (small motor-run van) took us to the floating guava market in Bhimruli over Kirtipasha canal.

We reached early in the day and all was quiet then and as midday approached, the market came to life. Dinghy boats, wiry weather beaten men with lines etched on their faces snaked through the river body. Boat after boat brought in their haul from the guava orchards that lined the tiny creeks branched from the main river and hauled them into small crates which were then loaded onto waiting vehicles which took them to the city. We took a country boat to the orchards that ran from the main river. It was as if we were

plunged into another time, our boatman who lived in Dhaka for a good part of his life told us stories from his time in the city. The boatman worked in the movie industry here in Dhaka and had rubbed shoulders with the likes of Salman Shah until he decided to quit the glitz and glamour and move back home. The sky began to darken and the guava orchard glistened under the breaking rays of the sun. We gave ourselves a stomach ache as we stuffed our mouths with guavas of all shapes, sizes and colours. Like I said, we Bangladeshis are quite competitive and it comes with health risks sometimes!

As big fat drops of cold rain started to fall on us, we made our way back to the banks. This was our last day in Barisal and we still had two more places to visit,

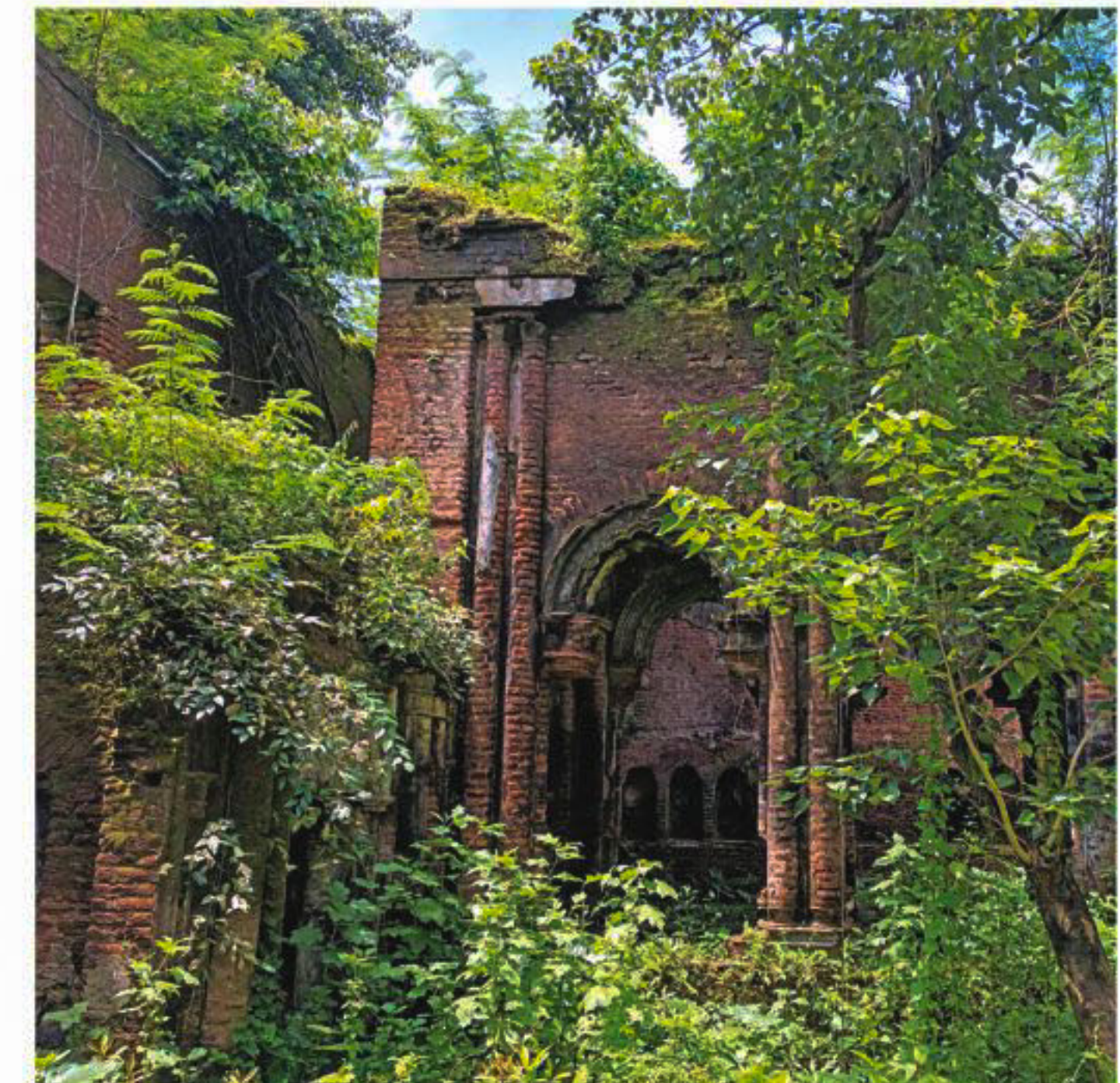
and the world of ethics.

In my mind, I recreated the scenes here, the celebrations of Durga Puja, the play of kids, running after the *mishti wala*, and thought of East Bengal, a changing rural society under colonialism and partition thereafter. The main courtyard where once aunts and grandmas piled up freshly picked mangoes to pickle them, lay empty. Weeds grew over everything, intertwined itself with the house. There was a staircase hanging in mid-air, I imagined it once connected all the floors with each other. Kids must have run upstairs after stealing the pickled mangoes and hid in one of the countless rooms.

The Zamindar *bari* was abandoned around the 1940s and is now in shambles. Nature is slowly reclaiming the



As the market picks up around mid-day, the guava farmers snake through the waters to bring in their produce.



Even in ruins, the Kirtipasha Zamindar Bari is expansive and has the ability to muffle everything around.

Kirtipasha Zamindar Bari and Lakhotia Zamindar Bari. In the 80s, Dibendra Lal Raay Chowdhury, the landlord of Lakhotia Zamindar Bari, gave the building away to the government who has since then used the premises for agricultural purposes such as storing seeds and so on.

It was the Kirtipasha Zamindar Bari that enchanted me. Now in ruins, it is a testament to the social life in a zamindari estate of the then East Bengal.

One of India's most famous scholars, Tapan Raychaudhuri, is famed to have been born here. In his memoir, remembering his childhood, Raychaudhuri unfolds social life in this zamindari estate of the then East Bengal talking of the exploitative relationship between landlord and peasant, family squabbles, rituals

house where once life flourished.

That night, we took the 'launch' (the Bangladeshi term for ferry) back to Dhaka. These are iconic to the menacing waterways of Bangladesh. During Eid holidays, thousands are crammed into the vessels meant to carry only a few hundred. Luckily, it was no holiday and the launch was fairly empty. As we sailed off, Barisal bid us adieu with a final storm. As lightning streaked the night sky, small villages came into sight in the sporadic flash of lights. The wind blew into my hair and I felt the deep romance of rural Bengal.

On an ending note, never miss out on dinners in the launch. *Dal chorchori* (lentils cooked to a thick gravy), *ilish bhajji* (Hilsha fry) and *begun bhajji* (fried aubergines) were served for dinner. ■