

| TRAVEL |

Not quite as famous as the busy and bustling Sayedabad Bus Terminal or Gabtoli Bus Terminal, two of the main gateways out of capital Dhaka, the Mohakhali Bus Terminal manages to look deceptively calm and organised to the onlooker. But it has slowly worked its way into the 'notorious' bus terminals of Dhaka. Chaos ensues as you enter the compound to get your tickets. And one fine Thursday in April, just as dusk was approaching and dust hung low over Dhaka, I along with one of my closest female friends Asma, found ourselves fighting the crowds for our chance at a ticket to Shayestaganj in Habiganj.

This trip was many things all rolled into one, a symbolic rite of passage for us if you will. One of us was graduating college soon, the other a recent graduate and both together grappling with the woes of pre and post 'Graduation Blues'. This was also our chance to get away on our own for the first time. In a country, where women are often chaperoned from birth, first by their fathers, brothers or other male members in the house then by significant others or where we usually travel with some male counterpart, this was our first shot at going somewhere by ourselves. No male friends, no brothers or male counterparts in tow. Albeit, we have travelled many a times with male friends or co-workers and although enjoyable, this was a chance at trying something new.

We were to do everything, book tickets, haggle, stand in lines, cut lines, manage lodging and food in the two days ahead of us and look for ancient ruins, old mosques and walk around what is claimed to be the 'largest village' in Bangladesh and even South Asia.

With these thoughts gripping our minds, we headed inside the bus terminal only to find our ticket booth teeming with people. Lazily swatting flies, the men at the ticket-counter told agitating people that the tickets have run out, there are no more seats. Crushed, we decided to join the crowd, fighting, trying to make our way to the front and after much pleading the tickets were magically available. Why they would reject people and then eventually give out tickets that were there, I fail to understand. Armed with our tickets, we waited on the steel chairs fixed to the mosaic floor, now grey and brown from all the grime. The bus terminal, much like a railway station or an airport, was a fascinating place, a place of transition, men and women ate bananas and peanuts and threw the peels away, someone fanned themselves with a tabloid magazine, a child got her leg stuck in the steel chair and time slowly ticked away until it was 5:00pm and time for our bus.

Continued to page 15



PHOTO: ASMAUL HOUSNA

Inside one of the rooms of the Rajbari, the pink walls beginning to crumble over the years.

# 'O MADAMS', A TRIP TO FIND ANCIENT RUINS AND HAORS

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

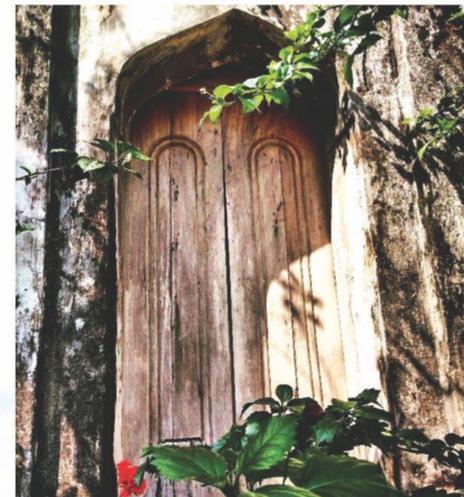


PHOTO: ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

A door leading to an abandoned building beside the 'Ancient Rajbari' Baniachang.



PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED

Looking out over the tea-gardens of Rema in Habiganj.

| TRAVEL |

## 'O MADAMS'

After page 12

As we zoomed out of Dhaka city, the countryside slowly took shape, industries and blue-black dyed creeks reeking of industrial waste slowly gave way to undulating rice fields. Petrol-pumps, garishly decorated, broke the monotony of the highway. It was 11:00pm by the time we reached our destination. A friend's village home would be our residence for two days. Almost empty except for an aunt, the house spoke of stately old times, where conversations flowed well into the night.

A piping hot meal of simple rice, dal and fried fish was dinner. The next day we were headed to Baniachang, long famed to be the 'largest rural settlement' in Bangladesh and even Asia. A local bus ride ironically named 'Birotheen' (no breaks), and a few CNG rides later we were nearing the legendary old village of the Zamindars.

The green-autorickshaw whizzed past the empty fields that rolled on and on, there passed the many haors, Sona, Jaldoba, Baram, now almost running dry, glistening under the sun. Men in starved lungis took puffs of their local 'biri' as they tended their cows in the fields. And the fisherman cast his net as birds of prey came and perched on the long electric lines.

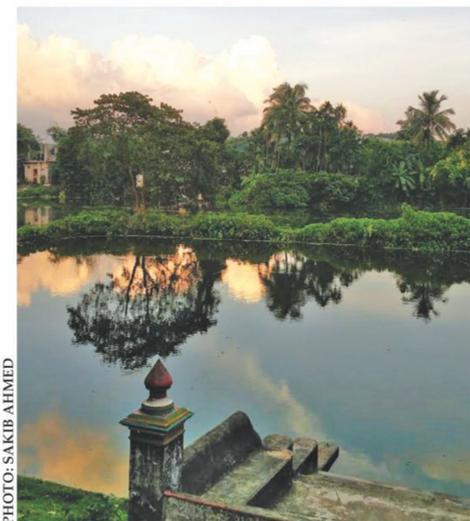


PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED

The 'Ghat' of the old Rajbari.

Baniachang plunges you into the serene quiet village life that you read about in stories. The roads zig-zag through the haors, now somewhat empty, owing to the scorching March that just went by.

Armed with our notepads, Asma and I got dropped off at Boro Bazar (a local market) and started asking locals about the way to the 'Ancient Rajbari' thought to have been built by King Habib Kha during the Baro Bhuiyan Era. An animated discussion over tea later, a little boy offered to guide us to the Rajbari.

We were soon to find out that here 'Rajbari' means a newly constructed, tiled building that some London living expatriate built! After some more looking around and coaxing, we were finally led to the real ancient Rajbari. A huge empty compound led to the crippling mansion. The place was empty except for us. Not many tourists or visitors make it here.

Madrasah children in light blue Punjabis and crew cut hair climbed over the walls to take a shortcut and broke the silence of the mid-morning time to time. There is something humbling about being in an ancient house. It reminds you of all the memories made here. Not much has been documented about this 'Rajbari' but we sat there inside the roofless rooms, quiet and cold,

and thought about the days spent here. Maybe there was a Zamindar here, rich and forlorn, maybe he was kind or was he the ruthless type?

The call for afternoon prayer jolted us out of our thoughts and we slowly made our way out of the 'Rajbari' in search of large ponds, some lunch and haors to while away the afternoon.

While we moved through the village, the locals, mostly men, became impromptu guides. They showed us old derelict mosques, 200-year-old granaries, and told us their stories. Stories of Zamindars, of their large village and how everything in these villages used to revolve around their haors.

When the rains came, the haors would fill up, the villagers would take their boats out and sing songs of the water. Many wanted to know our stories, why, we, two women were travelling around their village? Were we from an NGO, was this work? And when we told them we were merely here for travel, they welcomed us, some with wry smiles.

For lunch, one of the villagers took us in, opened their homes to us. We were fed sticky rice, fresh fried fish, a tangy tomato curry and shutki (dried fish).

With evening approaching, we headed out of Baniachang, in search of ride for our long way back to the village we were staying at. Two 'local autorickshaws' (shared autorickshaw rides) later, we were back where we intended to spend the night.



PHOTO: ASMAUL HOUSNA

Crumbling walls and vegetation take over what remains of the old Rajbari.

Here in the tiny village of north-east night was quick to arrive, most people retired early to their homes to watch cable TV drama, while my friend and I quickly dozed off.

We spent our two days in Habiganj, eating through the town – small mishtis, Binni chal er Payesh (sticky rice pudding), spicy beef curries with Shatkora (the citrusy fruit that lends a unique flavor to curries)—walking through the forests that house the last vultures and sitting under the shade of an old banyan tree and catching some old-time village gossip.

The trip gave us many identities, many names. We were called 'O Madams', got misled into 'Rajbaris' and welcomed into the homes of locals, travelled through small towns and bazaars well into the night, took public transport and sometimes pushed and shoved our way into buses and busy restaurants! We took away a lot from this journey, but the most lasting memory was the constant feeling of liberation that did not leave us once during this time.

And we realised that through mobilisation even within our own social setting, we managed to escape some of our confines and its social norms. We were able to be free because to the locals, we were outsiders.

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## EFFECTIVE CHARITY

After page 16

This conversation isn't easy, especially with the silent poor whose dignity prevents them from seeking help. My parents once invited a family to lunch, and spent a long day hanging out with them, all so they could quietly offer a scholarship to the eldest child without hurting the family's dignity. A scholarship is excellent because education is a great tool for social mobility, and 'scholarship' is a much more dignified word to many than 'donation' or zakah.

### 4. Stop with the shari-lungi

This is a disease. Much has been written of the futility, danger, and un-Islamicness of this practice. Zakah is a tool for poverty alleviation. It is bizarre to think distributing substandard clothes alleviate poverty. A lady once complained to me of her "zakater shari" that was so thin, it became transparent after one wash. But are high quality sharis more useful? No. I have interviewed women in slums who have only one shari, so when they wash it, they stay inside till it dries. But even they won't suddenly stop being poor if you give them a *jamdani*. Instead pay the training fees so she can learn a trade of her choice, introduce her to clients, and buy her equipment to set up a business. Do anything but waste your money on shari-lungi.

### 5. Don't break up your money into little pieces

Unless your zakah is in lacs, it will be most useful to one or two recipients, not many. The temptation to help many is strong, and it is difficult to refuse people. But the quality is dismal. An organisation I work with, Community Action, has a scholarship programme that keeps children in school, and even funds them through university, with consistent sums of Tk 2000 every month. So a student needs Tk 24,000/year (in rural areas, it is less). Suppose Tk 24,000 is your annual zakah, and you divide it into tiny parts: it will reach a lot of people, but it won't help them achieve a substantial milestone like finishing school. Similarly, projects that randomly distribute food—while incredibly kind—are not effective. Childhood stunting is a real problem in Bangladesh, making reducing malnutrition a must. Try and ensure children in a family, or an institution, get nutritious food regularly, instead of feeding a thousand people one meal.

To distribute zakah well, it is a must to know the eight categories of recipients well, including how scholars explain them. Raising overhead costs for charities in Bangladesh is really difficult – people confuse it with corruption. But one of the eight categories in the Qur'an is "employees of zakah", which includes social service workers who identify eligible recipients, collectors of zakah, auditors of the accounts, those who do the secretarial work, those who distribute etc. This is overhead cost! Paying off someone's debts is also an amazing way to use your zakah. The potential harm prevented is enormous.

Charity needs effort and practice. Start with 'even a smile is charity'—If you're refusing a beggar, do so with a smile instead of a frown! My brother always pays rickshaw pullers extra because even a tiny increase makes them disproportionately happy. Inspired by him, I tried this one Ramadan. I was taken aback by how HARD it was to consistently do for a month – pointless bargaining with rickshaw pullers is a cruel art form in Bangladesh. But the result of deliberate practice meant by the end of the month, I had at least learnt to identify the hidden Scrooge in me. That is a win – try it!

Nabila Idris is a University of Cambridge student and the founding president of Community Action. A version of this article was first published in 'Fajr Lifestyle Magazine' (2016).