



Interview 2

Mekligunj Settlement Camp

Interviewers: Sujit Mondal, Parthasarathi Bhaumik, Sucheta Bhattacharya

Date: 01.03.2017

Interviewer: We have heard about your pain and plight a lot. But what I am trying to say is, your plight gets reflected in various ways: the food you cook and the food you have. We are aware of that pain. The everyday struggle that we go through is not only about having food and releasing excreta. We have our clothes, means of education, art, music and other aspects of life and living. Haven't you noticed any impact there?

Anukul Barui: Our children could not flourish much. They could not do so, because for getting admission in schools and colleges, birth certificate was required and the Bangladesh government did not issue those certificates for us. That is the reason why many of us did not even get a chance to study. We have also faced discrimination at various workplaces, failing to establish ourselves. We are neither the citizen of this country nor the citizen of that country. We have faced a lot of troubles due to this. We were not being hired, as we did not have any identity proof, be it the aadhar card or the voter card.

I: Did you people celebrate the birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore?

A: Yes, we did. We also celebrated the Independence day of Bangladesh, along with that 21st February, 16th December and 26th March.

I: The various important occasions which belonged to these two nations were all celebrated together or differently by different localities?

A: The government did not really interfere much, or take much interest in the locality where we stayed. We lived there quite amicably. We cannot call it Bangladesh, as it clearly falls outside the perimeter of the country.

I: Exactly!

A: We are not liberated yet. We are subservient. Now being here, we would not be celebrating 16th December, anymore. We used to celebrate it there. There we used to celebrate both 16th December and 16th August, maintaining our livelihood in tune with the place. We were few in numbers. The village we were residing in had twelve to twenty people dwelling within it. So, we were quite few in numbers.

I: Did you celebrate 15th August or 26th January?

A: No, we only celebrated the important days of Bangladesh.

I: But, you all are Indian citizens?

A: We used to celebrate it all together.

I: No, we understand that. As you said, many occasions were celebrated without the interference of the government, isn't it?

A: True, but we used to celebrate it as a combined effort, we did not have our individual celebrations. We only celebrated certain cultural festivals.

I: What were those?

A: Those were for example Durga Puja or Kali Puja.

I: You people celebrated Durga Puja, all by yourself?

A: Yes! These festivals were not so prevalent in Bangladesh. Some of the villages used to celebrate it, in their own way. It was a homely affair.

I: Your 'chit' was near the Bangladesh border. Were you allowed to get artists from Siliguri and Kolkata, who could perform during these festivals?

A: We were neither in that situation nor in that position. We stayed within the interiors of the village. Even when we had to go to the market, we had to travel for five to six km, and that too, it was a very small market. We used to stay in such a remote place.

I: From where did you get your clothes?

A: We got it from Bangladesh. Basically they had no connection with India. We had no right to cross over and get into India. The B.S.F never allowed us. Also, if we wanted to go to the other side, we were termed as 'chite'r lok'. So, we faced a lot of problems. But still we managed, we survived. Our previous generations suffered more- they were not even allowed to go and shop. They were even threatened and humiliated in many ways. What fault did we have? But it was not a one-sided affair. The fight used to happen both ways. It was not that we did not have power. We too had power. The chit was a nation in itself. It was our nation, it neither belonged to India nor Bangladesh.

I: That nation is lost now, you do not have it anymore.

A: No, it did not get lost, we found our nation in a new way. But that previous nation was good, we had freedom there. It does feel like a made-up story now! It's true that we belong to neither of the two nations. But the one we had, made us feel at home. It was neither ruled by the government of Bangladesh nor by the government of India.

I: What were the facilities that you enjoyed with that independence?

A: The land was ours, we cultivated crops without paying any tax for it.

I: You are cultivating tobacco here?

A: Yes, but it was not done previously. The land was really very fertile. The cultivation of tobacco and weed was illegal. If we wanted to, we could, there was no harm in it, but we still did not.

I: The vegetables that you cultivated, where did you sell those?

A: We used to sell those in the markets of Bangladesh. All the trade and transactions used to happen with them, at a fair price. Hardly people got to realise, it was a no man's land, and as long as they didn't, things ran smoothly. Many people used to stand up in elections, for posts like the Panchayat chief, failing to realise this is a no-man's land, and these things doesn't matter here.

I: Had nothing been done regarding this issue?

A: We are not really aware about it.

I: So, you said you were free, but you were Indian citizens without having any official paperwork. My question therefore is, which situation was better?

A: This situation is better as we do not have to go through any legal hassle. No matter how grave the situation, no legal cases were drawn upon anyone.

I: So you resolved the disputes among yourselves?

A: Yes we did, the cops never intervened. No legal steps were taken.

I: How are you all meeting your days ends? Do you irrigate?

A: There is no land, so we are not being able to practice agriculture. We engage in labour work and provide for ourselves.

I: Isn't the government doing anything? How about the 100 days work scheme?

A: Yes, we get that but it is not something very stable. Sometimes we get those opportunities and sometimes we don't.

I: Do you have ration cards?

A: No, we do not have ration cards. It is not required. The government provides for us.

I: What about aadhar card and voter card? Are those being made?

A: Yes, those are being made.

I: Did you people engage in any kind of protests, representing the chit?

A: At times we did, but not always. The B.S.F were there, so we could not always afford to get into conflicts.

I: I am trying to understand something, this very idea of a nation being there and yet not there, this is something weird, so I would like to know, how do you cope with it your daily life? Does it differ anywhere?

A: If I start saying about my everyday life, I would like to mention, that those were the days, we were happy and content. We had our own land, our own fields, our houses, everything belonged to us. Happiness lived and thrived there. We are deprived of that happiness here. If the government takes certain measures, then we can be happy here too. 190 people among 200 would confirm that we were happy when we stayed at Bangladesh. We are not happy here.

I: Then what do you have here?

A: The only relief here is that, this is our own country.

I: But you still feel your previous country was better, don't you?

A: India is our own country but we used to live in a place that is now, not a part of us anymore.

I: So, why did you choose to leave? You could've stayed there, if that place felt like home. Why didn't you consider staying back in Bangladesh?

A: The government there, did nothing for us, which is quite similar with the Indian government. Also, Bangladesh is a poorer country in comparison to India. It was better to be a part of a richer country.

I: The Indian government did build houses for you, isn't it?

A: Those were temporary houses. We left all our belongings, our fields, our rivers, our houses and are living in these precarious conditions now.

I: If you all are so dissatisfied with shifting then you could've said that you wanted to stay in Bangladesh. Then all your land and rivers would have remained yours.

A: Yes, then it would have been ours.

I: Why did you give up on all those things and decide to settle here?

A: The strife between Hindu-Muslims was another big reason.

I: You could've stated this before, instead of claiming that you wanted to be the subjects of a wealthier country.

A: Hindus hardly have any freedom there. The Indian government made a mistake by giving us land here. If our previous generation did not move out, we too wouldn't have moved here. Then together, we could've stayed there. Our strength would've grown with our growing numbers. We could've been at least ten crores. Like for example, not a single Muslim residing in this country shifted to Bangladesh. They have settled here. They have their citizenship here. They are voting here. In Bangladesh, we did not receive our birth certificate. And we were deprived in many ways. We could do nothing about it. The cops there, did not even lodge our complaints. Whenever a theft happened, it usually took place in a Hindu's house. A Muslim household did not have such struggles. The government was always supportive towards them. We went through a lot of pain and decided to leave. Coming to a decision like this was never easy for us. It involved a lot of pain. We left because of this communal struggle, otherwise we wouldn't have left. The country being rich or poor was not an issue for us.

I: Do you people feel secure here?

A: Yes, we feel secure here but where we stayed, that place is mainly dominated by Muslim population. (Here) We dwell in peace and there are no problems as such. The only thing that causes us some distress is our current economic condition. We used to dwell earlier in Gotamari. We can sustain ourselves with the money we have, but the problem is that, here the price of land is too much. We are unable to afford it. We have sold our land at two, one and a half and even in a lakh, in Bangladesh. While here, the prices range from two and a half, six and even ten lakhs. It was declared that we had to leave by 19th of November. So, we were bound to sell off our land. People were aware about that, and as a result we had to sell our land worth rupees three lakhs in a lakh, only. We had to sell all our lands in less prices, because we had to leave anyway.

I: What are your expectations from the government of India? What can this nation

offer you?

A: We do not demand much, we just want our freedom. Whatever the government wants to do for us, they can do so. A bit of land can be added too on that list, isn't it?

The government would build buildings for us, and give us five bighas of land. How can we help ourselves with those five bighas of land? Instead of giving us flats, it would have been better, if we got individual houses for our residence. That is something we really want the government to do for us. The location needs to be good. Presently, the place where they are building the flats for us, is not at all good. It is near the river and there's a high probability that floods might occur. We do not like the location at all. The place is located at Mathabhanga road, behind the regional office. The river flows through Devi colony, and the flats are being built there. We do not want to go and settle there. The means of transportation is very bad there. Everyone knows about our plight, our demands, but no one is willing to do anything about it. We have talked with a lot of people but nothing worked in our favour. But if we resist this shifting then it will not be possible for them to make us move. We do not want to move. We have decided not to move. If they do not want to give us a flat in a proper location, then we not want it. Where we live, there are no schools, colleges or madrasas.

I: Did any of you or your children study in a Madrasa?

A: The Muslims studied in the madrasas, even the Hindus did. And how will they even study in schools? For that they require official documents which they do not have.

I: People from your community have also studied and flourished in various spheres, be it education or arts. Isn't it?

A: We lived in Gotamari. From our place, the people who opted for higher education, had to disclose their identity and take resort to illegal means. Most people are like that in our community. Many of them have government jobs now.

I: The people who received education and established themselves, didn't they talk about your community, about your people?

A: Yes, they spoke about us, our struggles, the difficulties we have faced. Once they started working in Bangladesh, they could not reveal about their identity, the community where they came from.

I: Hasn't anyone from your community written about your narrative?

A: No, we do not have such records. People from outside documented our life and wrote about us but nothing from our own community. People came and recorded our lives but nothing concrete ever happened after that.

Translated and transcribed by Mahasweta Podder (former student, Dept of
Comparative Literature, JU)