



Sunset makes the Dhepa River, beyond Dinajpur Town, shine.

PHOTOS: ANDREW EAGLE

Tell the river not to flow? I don't think so. In Majadanga beyond Dinajpur Town evening is on its way. The sunset sky makes the river sparkle. She's dazzling! Shall we be blinded by nature's collaboration and call it improper? Shall we tell the river not to shine?

Or does it make sense to simply cross the bridge?

Through fields on the far bank tin houses with shared walls are lined up like soldiers. Trees are planted to beautify the all-too-logically arranged housing. Vegetables are growing, and guava. Something new is being tried.

"We lived as transients," says 44-year-old Bokul, a Hindu. "Three years ago the government gave this land." Together with Laili, 30, and Miss Maya, 24, she's joined us in the shared yard. A small crowd has gathered.

The project is Manab Palli – the Human Village. It has 125 houses, 60 of which are home to hijras – members of the third gender – the remainder house formerly landless families.

"We'd stay randomly in somebody's house for a few days," says outspoken Miss Maya, a Muslim. "Before moving on..."

"Or on the street," adds Laili.

Freedom

ANDREW EAGLE

In recent years the Social Welfare Department has been coordinating job skills training for hijras. Individuals can choose what they'd like to do: some hope to work in garments; others are learning to drive CNGs.

"We have no worries here," says Bokul. "We have good relations. Everybody is nice to us."

"But it's loud when the rain hits the tin roof," says Miss Maya. "I can't sleep!"

I mention that I like that sound. Everybody laughs. I don't think people often disagree with Miss Maya. "Then what about when water comes inside?" she says adamantly, "Do you enjoy that too?"

I ask their full names but they've already been given. "It says Laili – just Laili – on my national identity card. You want to see it?" It was just a question but her answer says she's had to defend her

name. It must be strange to defend one's name.

Oranges and reds, the radiant whites of their saris, the jewellery and painstakingly arranged hairdos – they take pride in their appearance – and they're certainly not sparing with make-up. I imagine all the lipsticks and rouges packed carefully on shelves in sixty of those one-room homes. I wonder how they managed before.

"Things are okay," says Miss Maya, "but we worry what happens when we grow old." She applied unsuccessfully for a job at the medical college. "Sewing or office work," she says, "I don't mind." Ambition they have. She's completed agriculture training.

But for now they're reduced to begging. Local administrators have asked them not to harass the public, and when they speak of it, it's clear they'd like to follow the instruction. It's not yet possible. "If there's no food in our stomachs?" says Bokul.

Nonetheless Dinajpur locals say hijras in their district are less pushy. I'm beginning to understand:

she left.

It's a common history. Bokul has no connection with her parents. They told her to get out – they never wanted to see her face again. "Nobody asks about us," she says.

Only Miss Maya still visits her mother. She's never invited to stay. I imagine the torturous thoughts that must plague her as she travels home. How could she not relive the rejection, not notice neighbours staring? There must be all the "what ifs" to haunt her. Visiting home... how much courage it must take!

"Parents spend too much on their children," says Miss Maya, "For weddings they spend lakhs. We don't want that. We're happy with a little, but we can't even stay. They drive us away."

Not knowing how to respond I feebly suggest their hijra community is a family. They're absolutely unconvinced.

"We're always surrounded by people," Miss Maya continues, "but we're alone. In this world we have nobody."

"You're never alone!" I want to say. But the words are cheap. So I say nothing and her statement just hangs there.

Nor is being alone a temporary state: "Suppose I had a good friend," Miss Maya explains, "who loved me more than his parents. What would I do? People would tease him. People would say he was a hijra's husband. If I really loved him I'd have to withdraw."

Miss Maya has been to India. She stayed for two months, singing and dancing to collect money. "Nobody stops us at the border," she says. She especially liked how Indians called her mashi, aunty, rather than hijra. "But Bangladesh is my homeland."

Thinking of the traditions of hijras attending weddings and the blessings they are thought to bring to the birth of a child, especially a son, I ask if they have any special culture. The answer is a resounding "No."

Miss Maya says young hijras need no advice. "One day they'll see us and join us."

I ask what's best about being a hijra. "Freedom," Miss Maya says. "We can talk to anybody, eat anywhere. What others think, I don't care."

Family expectations, society's expectations – as I leave I think how everybody faces such dilemmas, albeit less starkly. The freedom to be true to oneself, they have that, at enormous cost.

I wonder about another type of freedom: acceptance. They should have that too because hijras are a beacon. They're frontrunners, canaries in the coalmine – their experience is an indicator of how free society really is. Life is hard at the top of freedom. But ultimately, their freedom is ours too.

The regimented housing: it fits. From somewhere hijras need to summon a soldier's bravery. Night time on the river: it's telling. Nature is a promise to keep. It's never an improper collaboration.



Bokul, Laili and Miss Maya. We're always surrounded by people, says Miss Maya, but we're always alone.

Dinajpur is a little tolerant. More than elsewhere, that society seems to be willing to try crossing the bridge.

The sky darkens; the river's shine has left her. I ask if I can ask personal questions. I feel guilty. It'd be much better to live in a world where hijras were so accepted that there was nothing to learn from it. Personal lives are nobody's business.

"You want us to talk in front of this crowd?" says Bokul. She has a point. After asking the onlookers to leave they open up. I'm impressed by their candidness.

"While growing up," says Miss Maya, "I found that I liked to wear women's clothes. I enjoyed male company. I wasn't attracted to women."

"At first I felt really badly about it. Then, as I started to express my feelings my mother started misbehaving." Miss Maya's home life deteriorated. There was anger. There was torture. It became intolerable and