

The Valley with the shadow of death

OSAMA RAHMAN

The serene, lush green backdrop of Sajek valley, the largest union in the north of Chittagong Hill Tracts is touted as an amazing tourist destination, one that whole-heartedly allows an individual to be comfortably cradled in the bosom of Mother Nature itself. Gleaming resorts dot the landscape, punctuating the greenery of nature with the drab, yet luxurious greys of concrete. Come visit, come stay; that's the message tourists are given. Food is in abundance and the local cuisine is said to be remarkable. But a much more sinister, even painful, truth lies beneath the shiny wrappers of the recluse. In recent months, the different villages of the remote Sajek union under Bagaichhari upazila of Rangamati are facing acute food crisis. Where the tourists feast on the fruits of this wondrous land, the locals starve. The fresh air now thickens with the stench of disparity. The shadow of death casts a long shadow. And only a



PHOTO: ANTAR CHAKMA



few souls, true children of the soil, rise to the unfortunate occasion.

This situation occurs not just on occasions but every year. And every year, a large segment of Bangladesh collectively turns a blind-eye, assuming

that such is the way of life away from the protection of the city. Nature is harsh, they claim. But in a country that boasts a great food security programme and is recently even mulling the idea of burning grain to produce fuel, we must

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ask how in such a place there can still be entire communities of people sustaining themselves on wild potatoes and banana leaves, twice a day. A group of students in Dhaka University though have decided to pick up the mantle far

too many have dropped and instead of asking further questions, they are taking action. Dhaka Biswabidyalay Jumma Shikharthi Paribar, a body of students, aims to work for those in need in places like Sajek valley. And they do so without expecting recognition, respect or any rewards in return. It's people aiding other people—the dream that we all had once dared to dream.

The group is currently gathering funds through which they will procure rice for the people of Sajek valley. The mass collection is happening at all the university halls. For awareness, the group even sits side by side with budding musicians at TSC, where they entertain the crowds for free, whilst highlighting their cause. Rebang Dewan, a member of the group, explained their on-going fund-raising, emphasising on the cost-effectiveness of their idea. "Instead of spending

money on bus tickets for five or more people and accommodation cost, we directly send the money to the Sajek Union Chairman, and a well-known headmaster of the locality. They then buy the rice from the farmers in the Marissa upazila. The farmers are also willing to sell at a lower cost when we purchase in bulk," he explained. While, generally, rice would cost 30tk per kg, prices have now shot up to 90-120 tk per kg, making purchase almost impossible. As development forces the people deeper into Sajek, they find themselves without access to road or even fertile land, exacerbating the crises.

The group began in 2011 and have shown a zeal for their work that cannot be summed up in mere words. They started by holding free seminars for people from Chittagong Hill Tracts, explaining the requirements and necessity for university admission. They distributed free calendars for the purpose and have even set up a few schools in remote villages. Additionally, they are actively involved in procuring treatment for those in remote areas who cannot afford the costs. They have also recently distributed food in Sunamganj, another area hit by a sudden food shortage.

The group and individuals like Rebang need to be lauded for their efforts and their selflessness, while not seeking recognition, deserves it nonetheless. The hope is that their passion kindles the embers of empathy in all of us. The hope is that in 2017, we fully commit to ensuring that no individual, on our fertile soil, goes hungry. Change begins at home. Let's start now.

If you are interested in providing help for the community in Sajek, contact Dhaka Biswabidyalay Jumma Shikharthi Paribar at 01856601897.

Constructing a conscious change

ELITA KARIM

Every other street in Dhaka city today has a building or two under construction, not to mention the flyovers that are being built. It is a wonder how construction workers carry on with their jobs, without safety nets or taking precautionary measures, even while working at under-construction high-rises. Little do we know about the worker's plight who not only have to toil an entire day for a meager amount, but also sometimes go without proper compensations if injured on site.

Many individuals and organisations have now come forward to fight for the worker's rights and demand better compensation packages for them, not to mention taking into consideration safety measures. One individual has also introduced the idea of training construction workers so that they can keep themselves and others around them safe on construction sites.

Sheikh Mohammad Nurul Haque is a construction site worker -- "Mistri" as Haque stresses on the Bangla word, roughly translating to a fix-it man who repairs and builds. Dressed in a simple white kurta, Haque, in his late 50s, makes an effort to arrange the newspaper cuttings, labour law documents, training session papers and certificates -- all filed together, while talking about accreditation offered by government bodies. "Construction work is dangerous work," he says. "You cannot see the construction worker, as you would a garment's worker. Here, the risk is higher."

According to reports by Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), almost 2,000 construction workers have lost their lives at the construction sites in the last decade. Construction workers have always been working in work spaces that are not safe and very little has changed today.

However, Haque has been organising training sessions for construction workers since the year 2000. "It was only in 2013 that the government

acknowledged the training sessions and is now officially offering them to individuals who want to work on sites," says Haque. "I am a proud citizen of Bangladesh. I have always been certain that the authorities would listen to my voice." After the training session, the workers earn a certificate and an accreditation from the government in the form of a Sromik Card. "This card is just like an NID," explains Haque. "Construction workers will enjoy many benefits if they have this card. For instance, children of those with the Sromik Card will qualify for education scholarships. In addition, family members will also qualify for medical fee waivers in many cases."



Nurul Haque

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

Haque has also been working as the National Coordinator (construction workers) for the ILO in Bangladesh for the last many years. Before retiring from the post last year, not only did he organise training sessions on a regular basis (which he still continues with help of local funds), but he also worked towards establishing a minimum wage for the workers. The minimum wage for construction workers came into effect on October 2, 2012. "Today, the minimum wage for a first-time construction worker (unskilled worker), working in the cities is 425 taka a day and 375 taka a day for those working in rural areas," explains Haque. "For skilled workers, the minimum wage is 600 taka a day in the rural areas and 800 or more a day in the cities."

For more than a decade, Nurul Haque has been taking steps to bring about small changes in the lives of construction workers and making them better. He has been educating himself about the present labour laws and working with the government to improve and enhance the laws for construction workers in Bangladesh. "Despite all this, only 20-30 percent of positive changes have been made," says Haque. "Everyone has to come together to make a bigger and a stronger change."

Mission to fight famine

RASMIA RAHMAN AMREEN



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Since April, the people of haor in Sunamganj have been hit by flash-flood. On hearing about their ongoing crisis, the volunteers of Bidyanondo organisation set out last Thursday to help the affected people. Immediately after reaching their destination, these volunteers were divided into two groups, one tasked with cooking and serving food and the other arranging and running a make-shift school.

Mr. Faruque Ahmed, a volunteer of the Bidyanondo organisation says, "We heard from different news sources how the people of Sunamganj were facing a loss of five thousand crore taka on crops lost to the flood. So, first, we sent one of our volunteers to the area to survey the situation. We realised that the people of Taherpur would soon be facing famine. Besides that, we also heard how most of the schools in these areas were forced to close due to the situation. Thus, from the 8 branches of Bidyanondo organisation spread all across Bangladesh, 20 of us decided to set out on this mission to help the people of the area."

The volunteers are working non-stop to provide food to the affected people. Almost 2,500 people of the area are being served in two shifts; morning and the afternoon. Apart from the 2,000 eggs

bought from Dhaka, the rest of the food is being purchased from nearby markets in Taherpur.

The make-shift school is providing education to more than 3,000 students in the area. It has also been decided that they would be provided with study materials like books, pencils and more. "As most of our volunteers are students, we realise how important it is to continue studying without taking a break. We have taken the permission of the area administration before starting our initiative here," adds Mr. Ahmed.

Initially, these first set of volunteers would continue helping the people of the haor for 15 days at a stretch, taking necessary measures when the famine hits. "Our motto is to motivate the people during this calamity. We want to strengthen them mentally and assure them that the whole country is beside them during this natural disaster. They are not alone," Mr. Ahmed expresses.

On this mission to fight famine, the volunteers of Bidyanondo are setting an example we all must follow. They teach us that it is not only by providing materials that we tackle problems best. Instead, the motto to survive through such disasters can also come from showing acknowledgment and unity.