

SPOTLIGHT

In April, a tender appeared on the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) website inviting constructors to propose a price to build two sets of three six-storied residential buildings at Ganaktuli City Colony, Hazaribagh. What makes this tender alarming is that the buildings that are to be replaced house one of the most vulnerable populations of our city: Dalit cleaners, many of whom are now on the brink of eviction.

The colony includes a British era hospital, which now accommodates thousands of landless Dalit cleaners. They lived in Azimpur until 1962, when they faced resettlement due to the authority's decision to replace their neighbourhood with a hostel for the students of Eden College. The colony, then an abandoned tuberculosis hospital, has five four-storied buildings, with each consisting of 40 tiny rooms. Currently, each room shelters, on average, 3-4 persons.

Kiran Das lives with his mother and four siblings in such a house comprising three small rooms. His modest house happens to be one of the better ones in the entire building. With a TV in a corner, the first room has a sofa and a bed, whereas the second contains a small Ganesh statue, a table, and a bed. While entering the third room, which accommodates the kitchen and a bed,

here for generations," says Maya Rani Das, a resident. "And now we fear being evicted."

Kiran Das explains that ancestors of all their families once worked for the city corporation and were given the houses in return. But many of the current generation no longer work with the authority. When a cleaner died or was terminated, his descendants did not necessarily replace him, Kiran says, adding that some young Dalits also tend to work in different sectors refusing to adhere to the disparaging ancestral profession. "But there are talks that those currently not working with DSCC will not be given a place after the construction of new buildings."

When contacted, Khan Mohammad Bilal, Chief Executive Officer of the DSCC, referred the reporter to the Waste Management Department, which oversees its cleaner employees. Additional Chief Waste Management Officer, Khandker Millatul Islam, confirms the Ganaktuli residents' worst fear.

"Yes, only those currently working with us will be given a house," he tersely states, adding that the tender procedure will be concluded soon. When asked about the rest of the residents, he simply replied, "We haven't given much thought to the matter."

While the DSCC says it's yet to make a final list of "eligible" workers, data provided by Nagorik Udyog, a leading Dalit rights organisation, estimates that

around 200 Hindu Dalit families of Ganaktuli are currently associated with the DSCC, meaning approximately a thousand people are on the course to be evicted.

Fighting Back

Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive of Nagorik Udyog, a Dalit rights organisation, who has witnessed many ups and downs of the Dalit community over the years, warns that any such eviction would rip the Dalit community apart. "Even if we resettle them, their livelihood will be at stake," he says. "Our so-called 'bhadra samaj' (elite society) will oppose them. Their daily bread, culture and bonding – everything will be in jeopardy."

He invoked the eviction from the Mohammadpur Townhall Colony to support his argument. "They were resettled in Gabtali Beribadh with very little civic facilities, and they have since faced increased discrimination. For example, in my capacity as a joint secretary of an environmental rights group, I received complaints from the local residents who wanted to get rid of the 'dirty' Dalit cleaners. They are not welcome or thought as human beings by many of us."

A research titled "Dalits in Bangladesh: Rights and Accessibility to Education" by Manzurul Islam (et. al.) documented that prior to the eviction, almost 90 percent children of the

Mohammadpur Colony used to go to nearby schools. However, after they were settled in Gabtali, a marginal area, only 4-5 students continued their education.

In Dhaka, Dalits mainly live in 18 neighbourhoods called "colonies" – a term also used to refer to quarters built for government employees. But the two "colonies" are drastically different. Government employee colonies occupy huge spaces and come with adequate

civic facilities such as water, sanitation, utility, etc., whereas the Dalit colonies are one of the least liveable places in the entire city.

Ganaktuli Colony is one of the largest colonies in Dhaka, housing around 14,000 people of 2,000 families. With increase of population, many of them built single-storey buildings in nearby places, which too are very small. Almost 99 percent of the Dalits are landless,

India, the Dalits have faced institutional discrimination. Their children are not accepted in mainstream schools, says Sumon Balmiky, a Dalit from Ganaktuli Colony, because "we are 'jat' (born) sweeper." He also says that they are not allowed to worship in Hindu temples other than their own – a claim echoed by many working on Dalit rights. In addition, many members of the Telegu speaking community aren't naturally

'A vicious cycle'

Within the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) alone, there are at least five thousand registered cleaners and sweepers. Commodore MK Bakhtiar, Chief Waste Management Officer at the DSCC, says that many of the cleaners working under him hail from the Dalit communities. Thousands more are understandably assigned to keep house and buildings clean.

Komol Sarkar, a registered cleaner with DSCC, also works at a corporate office in Dhaka. He spent a lifetime cleaning houses and streets, as did his father and grandfather before him. His son last year got a job – also of cleaning – at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. The hereditary nature of the profession begs the question as to why a specific community is stuck doing these jobs for generations.

While Komol Sarkar didn't feel the urge to send his son to school, it remains indifferent for those who had. A research report titled "Dalits in Bangladesh – A study on Deprivation" by Prof. Mesbah Kamal, Dr. Monirul I. Khan, Dr. Khaleda Islam and Ms. Shereen Khan stated that nearly 72 percent of Dalits sent their children to school, but most of them later dropped out.

Due to extreme poverty, most Dalit children could not continue their education after the primary level, according to the report. Kids, who hail from the "sweeper colony", were documented to have been bullied and disdained by other kids and teachers, resulting in further dropout.

A separate research by Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) and Nagorik Uddyog highlighted the same dropout phenomenon, stating that the primary

sweeper you can't send your kids to school. If you can't send your kids to school, he will become a sweeper like you."

On the other hand, Dalit jobs in cleaning positions are slowly being taken over by Muslim cleaners. "Nowadays the job of a cleaner requires Tk. 2-3 lakh," alleges Kiran Das. "Where will our people get this amount of money from?"

A report by The Daily Star titled "Traditional sweepers face hard time as others take away jobs" published on February 13, 2008 also documented the phenomenon. "From 2006 to 2007 DCC recruited around 1,000 cleaners. But only 300 of them were from the Dalit community," journalist Shahnaz Parveen reported, citing sources.

Altarf Parvez, an independent researcher who extensively worked on Dalit issues, says, "Many Muslim cleaners do not do the job by themselves. Instead, they hire a Dalit to do the job for them for low wages."

All hope is not lost

Back at the Ganaktuli Colony, Johny Das and his fellow activists of the Samaj Seba Jubo Sangha club vowed to object eviction. "We have no choice but stand up."

Zakir Hossain is also optimistic that his campaigners would eventually thwart any attempt to evict Dalits from Ganaktuli. In fact, he is quite familiar with this sort of fight.

In 2011, Dalits in Agargaon PWD Sweeper Colony received an eviction notice. A few days later nearly 500,000 men and women under the banner of Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), of which Zakir is an advisor, Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) and Dalit Women Forum



# NO ROOM FOR THE FORGOTTEN

NAZMUL AHASAN

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

through a narrow aisle, his mother points to the leaking plumbing pipe, which causes putrid water to drip down the walls. "We were forced to shift our dining arrangement," says his mother. "How can one eat in such a condition?"

Alongside the congested homes are drains filled with liquid waste. "Our people clean the city, yet we live in such a filthy environment," Kiran says, adding that it takes little rain to flood the ground rooms with muddy water.

A few blocks away, as many as 15 people of an extended family are squeezed in a few rooms, six people crashing on a bed. There are five or six toilets in each storey for the dozens of people. In the midst of the neighbourhood are some open-sky bath places where men, women and children bathe and wash clothes without any privacy.

With walls evidently fractured and plaster sloughed off, these buildings were labelled as "risky" last year following a massive earthquake. They are to be replaced with new ones, according to the tender notice posted on the DSCC website, but the existing residents worry that they might not be properly rehabilitated. "We have lived



research by Nagorik Udyog shows. "We all have a homestead in our village," says Zakir. "But they have none."

As they were brought in as cleaners or sweepers, municipality or railway authorities in most cases built houses for them in *khas* or government owned land. Otherwise, they were allowed to live in abandoned government buildings, as were the cases of Ganaktuli or PWD Sweeper Colony, according to a report by Isteaque Mahmud for Equity Watch.

Dalits gradually built this community on their own initiatives, with little or no civic facilities provided. Over the years, the government tried to help counter the severe housing crisis, but it was barely adequate.

Dalits and 'Untouchability'

Dalits, a term originated from "Dalita" or "oppressed", in Dhaka city are the descendants of the labourers brought by the British regime during the 19th century from southern Indian states. Since their arrival in Bangladesh, the members of the Dalit community have worked in the tea gardens and performed the dirtiest jobs in the cities such as cleaning, sweeping, handling corpses, etc.

Religiously, they were excluded from the traditional Hindu four-tier varna system, and therefore called and treated as "untouchables". In Bangladesh, like



fluent in Bengali, which has also resulted in their inability to assimilate with mainstream communities.

Bangladesh does not have any specific reference or legal framework to address discrimination against Dalits, according to a report by International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). The government is yet to enact a proposed anti-discrimination act, pushed by rights groups, which specifically protects the rights of the Dalits and effectively prohibits the practice of 'untouchability'.

level dropout rate among Dalit kids was as high as 63 percent as of 2014. Only around four percent of Dalit students completed studying, both reports found. However, even Dalit graduates report of discrimination in the job field, inherently because of their familial occupation and identity. "When our address is written on our job application that we hail from 'sweeper colony', our application is instantly rejected," Johny Das, an activist of Samaj Seba Jubo Sangha, says.

"You can call it a vicious cycle," explains Altarf Parvez. "If you are a

held human chains and demonstrations demanding withdrawal of the notice and safe housing for the people of the colony. Within the next week, they were assured that they would not be evicted.

"I'm already under pressure from locals of Ganaktuli to do something," he acknowledges. "If the government formally notifies people of any eviction, we will show up as we did back in 2011. They are bound to retreat."

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