

How many families are displaced due to industrial development in Bangladesh? Ask someone from the Matarbari island of Moheshkhali and he will be able to give an approximation of how many families have been ripped apart in his neighbourhood because of the coal-fired power plant. An activist from one of the numerous villages being cleared away by the industrialisation of Rampal upazila might also be able to answer that.

The state machinery, on the other hand, does not have a system to continuously monitor the internal migration happening as a result of industrialisation. National census surveys are published once every 10 years, allowing for massive changes to happen without documentation. The long arduous process captures macro details, but leaves out the ebbs and flows of people moving in and out. During the year of the last census in 2011, large swathes of Rampal upazila belonged to big shrimp farmers, who would theoretically have been fewer in number in 2001 when the land existed as small agricultural plots. Similarly,

# HOW EVERYDAY STORIES OF DISPLACEMENT ARE ERASED

ZYMA ISLAM



The silhouette of a coal power plant being constructed in Matarbari, Cox's Bazar

the next census report due next year would show communities shuffling around and moving, as shrimp farms have been sold off as industrial plots. The finer granular details—like who moved where, how much compensation was given, whether there was exploitation or use of force—are lost.

Neither does media coverage of industrial displacement take up column space frequently enough to make for holistic documentation. Affected populations generally belong to marginalised areas far away from sadar or town centres, making access difficult for cash-strapped community media. Case in point, this is what an activist from the Malo indigenous group had to say about the way media covered the assault on the Santal communities last year: "Santals were not the only ones whose homes were attacked. There were other smaller indigenous groups too—we had land there as well." The attack had left around a thousand families displaced.

She proceeds to narrate the incident of a Malo man who was shot in the leg during the attack. "I had to take him to the hospital in the dead of night to make sure the police did not see him leaving and arrest him," she said. This year, too, popular documentation generalised the entire population by using the identity of the largest indigenous group of that area, to refer to all them. A dearth of regular engagement with communities living further inside the villages means that ethnographic details not generally known by mainstream media, stay unknown. This effectively wipes out the existence and experiences of marginal identities. The media oligarchs own almost all of the long-lasting documentation on this issue and are most cited, beginning from research to court cases.

## DISPLACEMENT

displays of power that do not kill, but pressurise communities into moving away. On any legal paper they would be written off as minor annoyances, ignoring the fact that the powerful use these techniques to intimidate communities and grab land.

"Our home is always under water," said a young woman, a college student from the Matarbari community at an event in the capital last week. "Diseases like diarrhea are widespread in our neighbourhood." As the area rapidly urbanised, the locals lost control over when the sluice gates of the embankments are to be kept open, causing water-logging in certain neighbourhoods. The flooding of neighbourhoods is just one of the "minor" grievances—how many more are there that have not been documented?

She was speaking at the launch ceremony of a digital library focusing on displacement. The website, called Digital Archive, is a project by Center for Bangladesh Studies and hopes to document anything and everything—filling in the wide blanks left by existing



A young boy stands with his fishing net directly next to land acquired for the Banshkhali coal power plant

platforms. "Can we become a space for the preservation of memory of those who resisted?" asks Ahmad Ibrahim who is leading the project.

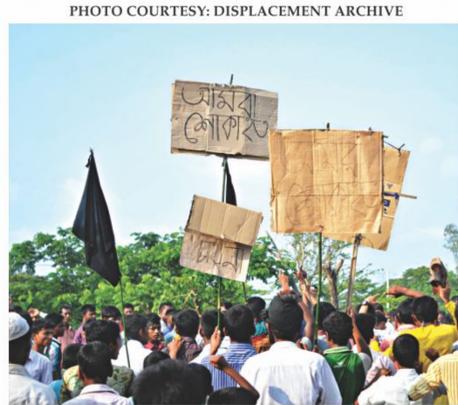
Moheshkhali and Rampal are just two of such examples of course. "We are going through a period where the country is industrialising fast and these cases of displacement are happening more frequently," adds Ibrahim. There's Chunarughat where the construction of an economic processing zone is about to eradicate tea-garden worker settlements.

"We were brought here as bonded labour during the British era and have lived here for over a century. But we have no rights to the land on which we live and are now being displaced," said Biren Kalindi, who identifies himself as the son of tea-garden workers. He too was speaking at the launch ceremony.

Antony Rema, a musician of folk band Madol, and a Garo (although he insisted on using Mandi as a more politically correct term) also added to the experience of displacement. "The Madhupur Eco Park disrupted the access that my people had to the forest. We harvested food from the forest but now it is controlled by an authority, who decides what happens on the land and who enters it," he added.

"Do tourists ever think where the sewage from the hotels in Nilgiri go? They are dumped untreated into the scarce water sources that the indigenous villages are dependent on, forcing them to relocate," added Uchacha-a-Chak, a researcher from Maleya Foundation.

The stories are endless. The ones reported here came out because members of displaced communities travelled all the way to Dhaka to tell them. It should not be this difficult to be heard. ■



Villagers bring out a procession to mourn the death of four locals, who were shot while protesting the plans to build a coal power plant in Banshkhali, Chittagong.

To top it off, by design, journalists live from story to story, and are ill-equipped to serve as continuous watchdogs in the same way as dedicated ethnographers who commit their time to documenting details. Documentation happens only when and how the documenter chooses to do it. Since these communities are not always powerful, or wealthy enough to stage large demonstrations in the capital city and attract the news cameras, their grievances and acts of resistance remain unnoticed unless the fourth estate chooses to shed light on them.

Mainstream narratives also fail to document the "before" stages of displacement, for example, smaller

## LITERATURE

# BEN OKRI: THE WRITER, THE ARTIST

"Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger."

MALIHA KHAN

"Out of the same tube, we are squeezed; with the same pen, we are written. We think we write but the universe writes through us the veiled allegories of our age."

So writes Ben Okri in the introduction to his latest work, "The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age". This is definitely true for Okri himself, who read from his works and discussed his writing process just a month ago in Dhaka, much to the delight of literary aficionados in the city.

"The Magic Lamp" is a collection of 25 short stories by Okri inspired by 25 original paintings by Rosemary Clunie. Okri calls it his "first real unintentional intentional book", after having been spontaneously inspired by one of Clunie's paintings. Spontaneous, however, may not be entirely accurate.

The author consistently emphasised in his talks the importance of "long looking". "There's the world you see on the surface and there's a secret world. Most of us don't take an interest in the secret world of things. I think when you look at something for a long time, after a while you go beyond the surface world and find yourself in the secret world," explained Okri.

"The Magic Lamp" came out of such "long looking". Okri "lived" with each of Clunie's paintings for months before writing stories that seemed to come out of the paintings themselves. The process took over five years. The paintings themselves took the artist 10 years.

That it is not easy to write, or create for that matter, is a given. Described as "fairy tales for adults", Okri writes a fantastical but sinister Arabian Nights-esque prologue where an old lamp is discovered in the attic of a London house. The artists who found it wished that they be gifted perpetual inspiration for paintings and stories. The tales and images that comprise "The Magic Lamp" fulfilled this wish but they soon discovered "that even inspiration comes at a secret and unforeseen cost."

In the first short story, "Birdtalk in a Tentative World", a bluejay speaks: "All things have been talking to you from the beginning of time," it said, "and you've not been listening." Okri echoed this in a



"Return to the City of Dreams" by Rosemary Clunie, taken from "The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age"

talk entitled *Magical Tales* at the recently concluded Dhaka Lit Fest, "Just listen," he said. "The thing about talkers is that we actually interrupt the world from coming to us, you know? How can you tell stories if stories don't come to you? ... We have to be receptive to stories."

Dreams, magic and art are inescapable in Okri's stories. Okri himself however rejects the oft-quoted characterisation of his work as "magical realism", choosing to brand his work instead as "crooked dream logic". In "Gazing Into a Dream", Okri writes:

*When people ask where my ideas come from, I have no answers for them. I am of the tribe of artists. My happiest moments are spent gazing into a dream.*

"The visual has always been part of my work. And when people ask me what my influences are, invariably I talk about paintings. Because I've learnt sometimes more from paintings than from books," said Okri.

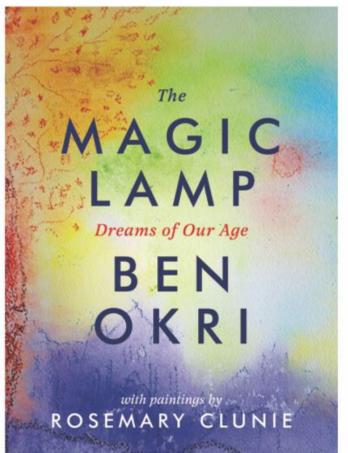
Harsh reality too seeps into Okri's works. "The Mystic Betrothal" talks of a time which seems all too nigh, where "a digital electronic heat has decomposed the colour of the clouds", "gold has lost its meaning", and "only the indifferent get elected". Okri brings out the realities of today's world but in eloquent prose rather like poetry. This, he says, is one of the principles he strives for in his storytelling—"The greatness of a story is more in the telling than in the tale."

Okri does not believe in rushing his work. But there are exceptions. "I am a believer in waiting. I think, with



"L'Époque Magique" by Rosemary Clunie, taken from "The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age"

creativity, unless there is an extraordinary urgency—and every now and again in the life of a writer, there is an extraordinary urgency where you have to respond, if you can, right now. And you put your sensibility on the line and you go for it. That happens very rarely, it happened with Grenfell Tower I think."



The Grenfell Tower fire in west London in June of this year, where at least 80 people died, was such an event. In a powerful poem entitled "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017", Okri writes:

*Those who were living now are dead  
Those who were breathing are from the living earth fled.  
If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell Tower.  
See the tower, and let a world-changing dream flower.*

Okri explained how Grenfell, to him, was extremely personal as it had happened in his old neighbourhood. He says he wrote it out of pure anger in the middle of the night. In another instance of his long looking, he described how what happened at Grenfell had been waiting to happen for 30 years. He narrated from another unpublished poem of his, "Grenfell happened before the first brick was laid... it happened in the minds of people which despised the poor."

Okri stated that he could not write his books, such as his Man Booker Prize-winning novel "The Famished Road", the same way again. A significant piece of writing, he said, takes a heavy toll on the author. "When you have written that book or painted that work, the person is dead. You die into that work. And another person grows in its place... if you have really written a book, there's nothing of it left in you."

"The Magic Lamp" marks, as is referred to in the book, "an extraordinary collaboration between artist and artist." As readers, we can appreciate the work that the artists put into it and take inspiration from Ben Okri's profound words of advice to read and reread until we are able to reach beyond the surface of the tales and images presented so beautifully in the book.

Till then, I return to rereading "The Magic Lamp". ■