



The taziya holds special significance for the community (Left).



A noticeboard hangs on a house announcing that it is protected from demolition by the High Court (Right).

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customers. The project was meant to create affordable home-ownership, but unfortunately, many of these plots are spread out across different Bihari camps. The plot owners filed a writ petition in 2011 and got a green signal to evict the Biharis. The Biharis also filed their own writ petition in 2017 demanding that their homes be saved, and also got a judgment in their favour—putting the entire issue in a stalemate until

somebody decides which court order to uphold.

In both cases, the government is adamant that camp boundaries are being respected, calling the homes that are falling in the line of fire “illegal squatter settlements”.

But the community begs to differ.

“Camps were demolished to build the Journalists’ Residential Area, and the Biharis were relocated elsewhere in Mirpur 11. Camps also had to be demolished to build the road that leads from Kalshi to Mirpur DOHS. These are only two examples, but the community is constantly evicted and rehabilitated so nobody knows the exact boundaries of these camps,” says Bablu. This was also a point raised by the court when the Bihari community filed a writ petition against the road-widening project—he court said that the government must survey the borders of the camps and figure out exactly where they lie, because honestly, nobody knows.

As the phone call from Shahid, the taziya’s custodian, shows, the eviction threat is not a silent elephant in the room. It is very much an active threat that rears its head whenever it finds opportunity.

“The bulldozers come every now and then and we have to show the court order to the magistrate each time. The last one was in February 20, 2019,” he says.

He describes how it happened then. “We woke up around 8 am to find the vegetable carts being scuttled away. When we asked why they were moving, they said that it had been announced in the mosque after *fazr* prayers that the *imambara* will be destroyed because it is against the religion,” says Shahid. Shahid is a practising Shi'a, and hence was not party to the dawn prayers being held at the mosque which predominantly caters to Sunni worshippers. Like clockwork, a bulldozer arrived, along with people from the utility departments who were going to sever the gas and electricity connections.

“I had to convince them that there is

an outstanding court order asking the government to verify the camp boundaries before going on eviction drives. The magistrate was convinced—but the pressure from the ward commissioner is immense,” claims Shahid.

And the pressure—Shahid believes—is fuelled by prejudice against the community. “A day before the meeting at the ward commissioner’s office, he came to the *imambara* with nearly 250 men to persuade me to break down the shrine. He said we were practicing idolatry, which is forbidden in Islam. He also said that if this was a mosque or a madrasa, he would pay for the compensation, but he can’t do the same for the *imambara* because it would land him in hell,” claims Shahid. Three other people who are devotees of the shrine also alleges the same.

The ward commissioner Manik denied, however, denied that such an exchange happened. “It is not about religion, this was built squatting on the road, so it must be broken.”

Squatters, illegal, inconvenient—that’s how the stranded Pakistani community is generally perceived. But perhaps it is time to question how much of this perception is based in the truth, and how much of it stems from our society refusing to include this community in the overall development of Mirpur. Are they being evicted because the roads need to be widened, or because they are a low-income population with limited purchasing power who cannot fully partake in, or contribute to rapid gentrification going on in Mirpur? Who stands to gain if the community can be thinned out, and their homes redistributed as plots to build multi-storey buildings? Does their relevance to the society end only in their capacity to weave wedding saris and maintain the Benarsi Palli—what about their right to inhabit the area? We like the idea of hosting refugees, but we sure don’t know how to integrate them into the society in the long run.



Photo of an eviction drive taken in August 2018

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHsin AGAZ APURBO