



## “Open Stage”

PHOTOS AND TEXT: **SAMSUL ALAM HELAL**

They are cleaners, people say. But I think they are sweepers, because they not only sweep away waste but the dust of civilisation. They keep the city clean. We see them every day, but in our minds we treat them the same as we do waste. We avoid them, calling them ‘methor’.

Between 1858 and 1947, their ancestors were brought to Dhaka from Andhra Pradesh in India. Since then they have lived as citizens here, but are treated as outsiders. They are provided tiny quarters by the government—where between 10 to 16 people live in a tiny room.

When I talk to them, they say they want the lost respect that they are due. In my opinion, they are the original subaltern people of the subcontinent.

This work represents the people of the Dalit community from old Dhaka, who are neglected because of their status as cleaners. The “Open Stage” is a temporary moving studio where families from the colony are invited to have their photos taken. I have explored their lives with colours and the spaces in their compound by converting the space into my studio, where they can feel entirely comfortable.

