

# The weight of UNTOUCHABILITY

## Rabidas community in Bangladesh

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MIFTAHUL JANANT

In the markets of North Bengal, the Rabidas community has long endured prejudice, their cobbler's stools passed from one generation to the next. But when 14-year-old Joy Rabidas was forced to trade his school uniform for his father's tools after a brutal mob killed Ruplal Rabidas on a false suspicion, the cruelty of that inheritance became stark. His story is not just about one boy's lost childhood; it mirrors the systemic neglect towards a community defined by untouchability, social exclusion, occupational stigma, and limited access to land, education, and political power — shackling them to the margins of society.

Scattered with fading roots

The Rabidas community traces its lineage to the Chamar caste, historically associated with leatherwork. Though spiritually linked to the teachings of the 15th-century saint Guru Ravidas, who preached equality and inner purity, the



After losing his father in a mob attack, 14-year-old Joy Rabidas had to take up the cobbler's needle to support his family. With support from the government, NGOs, and the community, he is now back in school, aspiring to become a lawyer.

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COURTESY: SHIPON KUMAR RABIDAS

With steady hands, he repairs worn soles: a Rabidas elder whose craft is both survival and silent testimony to a lifetime of struggle.

community has long borne the stigma of being “untouchable” due to their profession.

The community has a distinct ethnic identity with its own language, culture, beliefs, social system, and even *puthi* literature. Yet in Bangladesh, they often go unrecognised due to the lack of caste-specific data. Over

the years, poverty, lack of education, and insufficient support have eroded their identity. Unable to compete with dominant mainstream culture, they are increasingly discouraged from practising their traditions, pushing a rich ethnic identity towards extinction.

Their ancestral homeland is believed to lie in undivided Bengal, Bihar, and parts of Odisha. During British rule, many migrated here for work, gradually settling across different districts, villages, and even tea gardens. Unlike other backward communities, clustering in a specific area would pose a major obstacle to their livelihoods, compelling them to live in dispersed settlements. The largest concentration of the community is in Naogaon's Niamotpur thana, making it home to the highest population. Other districts with significant Rabidas communities include Bogura, Gaibandha, and Habiganj.

“We have around eight lakh Rabidas in Bangladesh, spread across almost every district and upazila,” said Shipon Kumar Rabidas, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights

Movement (BDERM) and Founding Secretary of the Bangladesh Rabidas Forum. “Our scattered settlements are necessary for our work. But this also means we are invisible, fragmented, and left behind.”

Stubborn face of discrimination

In North Bengal, where the Rabidas are heavily concentrated, the weight of caste remains crushing. Areas like Sundarganj in Gaibandha, Nageshwari in Kurigram, and Lalmonirhat see particularly stark prejudice. “In Sundarganj, the caste-based discrimination is still noticeable,” mentioned Shipon. “Our people are avoided in hotels, served in separate cups, and made to feel inferior. Sometimes visiting relatives cannot even dine out without facing humiliation.”

In schools too, children have faced stigma. There were incidents between 2012 and 2014 when Rabidas children were asked to sit at the back, clean classrooms, or sweep toilets. “Most Rabidas in North Bengal are engaged in the cobbler or *chamakar* profession, which drives the stigma,” Shipon explained.

Though the situation has improved now, many students remain isolated, avoided by peers, and weighed down by poverty. The result is a high dropout rate — a cycle that ties generations to shoe repair, barbering, or at best, low-wage municipal jobs such as cleaning or mosquito control.

Labour without escape

For Rabidas families working in the tea gardens of Sylhet, Habiganj and Moulvibazar, caste prejudice merges with economic exploitation. Mohan Rabidas, a human rights activist and descendant of tea garden workers, recalls how untouchability was once rigidly enforced. “We were not allowed in temples or hotels. Things have changed somewhat, but poverty and lack of education keep us powerless.”

There are 94 Rabidas settlements within tea estates, where children often drop out to help parents pluck leaves. “Schools in tea gardens are informal and community-based, often accommodating students from classes 1 to 5 in one classroom. Estate owners don't want our children educated, because if they study, they won't work in the gardens,” explained Mohan.

He emphasised that education is the community's most urgent need, noting that wherever members have gained access to education and employment, caste-based discrimination has begun to diminish.

Yet, for those who reach higher education, the journey remains uphill. “I, along with a few others, were the first generation in my community to graduate. We had to finance ourselves while supporting families,” said Mohan.

When the odds are stacked

A female member of the community, who grew up facing discrimination in classrooms, recalls being made to clean classrooms and toilets from time to time, while no one else was ever given this task. “Even after entering the professional world, you feel the weight of coming from this community,” she said.

For progress to take root, she believes, the younger generation needs role models — figures who show them that success is possible. In remote areas

like Gaibandha's chars, opportunities are scarce, and many children end up in their fathers' profession because of financial crisis, limited opportunity and awareness. “Education and visible success stories are vital for our children. They must see that someone from their background can succeed.”

Citing a recent incident where a student from her community nearly lost admission at Jahangirnagar University because he couldn't afford the fees, she urged, “Informal help from well-wishers can't sustain a degree. The government must step in with scholarships and consistent support.”

Struggling for dignity and rights

Community leaders have long pushed for legal protections. An Anti-Discrimination Bill (2022) was drafted with provisions to penalise casteist abuse, such as slurs like “son of a cobbler.” But in the final version of the draft, the demands were softened. “We wanted abolition of discrimination, but it was reframed as anti-discrimination,” Shipon said. “Our voices were diluted.”

Meanwhile, access to higher education quotas remains elusive, as most Rabidas students drop out before HSC. “If scholarships and support were extended earlier, at primary and secondary levels, more would reach university,” emphasised Shipon.

A community at the margins

From Naogaon, where 30,000 Rabidas live under one thana, to Dhaka's Wari, where 320 families form the largest urban settlement, the community remains bound by poverty and prejudice. Some have opened small shoe shops or moved into barbering, but systemic discrimination continues to curb mobility. The Rabidas of North Bengal and beyond do not lack resilience; what they lack is recognition, support, and justice. Until the Rabidas are given equal access to education, legal protections, and dignity, the wooden stool will remain heavier than any textbook, and generations will keep inheriting the same burden.

Miftahul Jannat is a journalist at The Daily Star.

# OWLS in peril as forests fall

AFRINA MOMOTAJ

When dusk falls over the countryside, a hush settles on the trees. Once, that silence would be broken by the soft “who-who” of a spotted owl or the eerie call of a barn owl gliding above rice paddies. Now, the night feels strangely silent.

Owls—those mysterious, misunderstood raptors—are vanishing from Bangladesh's landscapes. Their disappearance is not only a cultural loss; it is a warning. The fading of these night hunters signals ecological imbalance and a deepening silence in nature's nocturnal orchestra.

Forests falling, owls fading

Bangladesh hosts more than 20 species of owls, including the barn owl (*Tyto alba*), brown fish owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*), spotted owl (*Athene brama*), and the elusive collared scops owl (*Otus lettia*).

Each species relies on tree cavities, dense forests, bamboo groves, and quiet farmlands to nest and hunt. But rapid deforestation, unplanned urbanisation, and infrastructure expansion are devouring their habitats.

Dr Rafiq Azam, a forest ecologist, notes: “Where trees once stood tall and silent, concrete now echoes. Owls are losing not just their homes, but their very ability to survive in nature.”

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that Bangladesh loses nearly 2,000 hectares of forest annually, and this erosion of green cover is directly tied to shrinking owl populations.

Human fear, folklore, and harm

Superstition compounds the problem. In rural folklore, owls are often seen as omens of death or bad luck. Such beliefs fuel needless killings, especially of barn owls,

whose pale face and haunting calls make them targets.

Some species are trapped for the illegal wildlife trade or used in traditional medicine. Others die from electrocution on power lines, collisions with vehicles, or entanglement in barbed wire as they are forced into human-dominated landscapes.

“We have turned cultural myths into excuses for cruelty. Every owl killed by superstition takes away a guardian of our fields,” laments wildlife activist Sharmin Jahan

Pesticides poison the night

Owls are natural pest controllers, but pesticides have turned their strength into vulnerability. When rats or insects consume poisoned food, owls that prey on them ingest toxins second-hand.

Modern rodenticides—often anticoagulants—cause internal bleeding. A single poisoned rat can kill an adult owl. Nestlings fed contaminated prey rarely survive.

A recent study in India found rodenticide residues in 60% of barn owl pellets examined—a worrying indicator for



Majestic Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl spotted in Hazarikhil, Chattogram.

neighbouring Bangladesh.

Why owls matter

Natural pest controllers

One barn owl family can consume over 3,000 rodents in a breeding season, protecting rice, vegetable, and grain crops. By reducing pest pressure, owls save farmers money and reduce dependence on toxic chemicals.

Ecosystem balancers

As apex nocturnal predators, owls regulate prey populations. Without them, rodent numbers can explode, leading to crop damage, disease outbreaks, and cascading ecological imbalance.

Bioindicators of ecosystem health

Because owls are highly sensitive to environmental changes, their presence—or absence—reflects the health of ecosystems. A

decline in owls is an early warning of habitat collapse and biodiversity loss.

Cultural and educational value

Despite superstition, owls also appear in Bangladeshi folklore and proverbs, often symbolising wisdom and mystery. Today, they serve as “gateway species” for environmental education—capturing children's imagination and linking conservation with cultural heritage.

As Dr Mohammad Ali Reza Khan, veteran Bangladeshi ornithologist, observes: “Owls are misunderstood protectors. If Bangladesh loses them, it loses an ally in farming, in culture, and in biodiversity itself.”

What can be done In villages and towns

Install owl nest boxes in schools, farms, and homesteads.

Launch awareness programmes to challenge superstition and highlight their role in farming.

Avoid nighttime use of rodenticides, especially during breeding seasons.

In forest and farmland

Conserve large trees and allow deadwood to remain as nesting sites.

Promote owl-friendly farming by encouraging organic pest control.

Train farmers to recognise and protect owl species.

Policy and protection

Enforce wildlife laws to curb hunting and trade of owls.

Integrate owls into Bangladesh's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

Support research and citizen science to monitor owl populations and trends.

A final glimpse

Their eyes shine like moons in the dark. Their wings slice silently through the night. For centuries, owls have watched over our fields and forests—unseen guardians of balance. But now, they are watching us with dwindling numbers, slipping into silence.

If we lose them, we lose not just a species, but an entire night chorus—a silence heavy with meaning. The forests grow darker. The nights grow quieter.

Before the silence deepens beyond recovery, let us protect the owls: wise, mysterious, and vital. For in saving them, we save the night itself.

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