

Abdul
Motherland

Interview dramatised by Ursula Rani Sarma

The day Cyclone Aila hit in 2009, I was fishing in my enclosure. It had been raining heavily, there was a storm on its way. Then the news broke that the embankment in Gabura had been broken and that flood waters were pouring in. Within 15 to 20 minutes my entire farm was submerged, it went from the ground to over my neck. We climbed to the roof of our house and watched as our cattle swam away in the flood waters and our chickens were drowned. We lost all our livestock in minutes. Then the roof beneath us started to give way. We saw a boat floating nearby and I had to make a decision. We would all try to swim for it, but we were not the only ones. Friends, neighbours, many people were desperate in these moments. We all were thinking the same thing. Some of us made the boat, some of us did not. We could only watch the others as they were taken away in the current.

When we reached the embankment at Gabura we received some aid, a tent to sleep in, some food and water. We had no choice but to try to live, to get on, but it was impossible to work, to provide for my family. We spent one year living on the embankment, slowly starving. The government tried to rebuild the broken parts but it was impossible, it crumbled again each time. The NGOs sent cargo ships from Khulna with relief; they would anchor themselves in the middle of the river. We would go there and get drinking water with pitchers but we couldn't get enough to wash. My children washed in the river instead and they became ill, got infections. Fever and disease broke out amongst us. As time went on we knew this was no way to live. We were becoming ill; our children couldn't go to school. We didn't want to leave, our hearts belonged to that place, we still had land in our name even though it was now under water. We had no choice but to move.

Our people scattered to different places. To Munshiganj, Khulna, Dhaka and Shyamnagar area. I took my parents and my children and we came to Munshiganj. As soon as we arrived I started to think about earning money again. Then God helped, some people took pity on us and let us shelter in their homes. Then I was able to start to work as a day labourer, I did that for 18 months. Then slowly I started my own business and began to thrive and that is when the problems started. The people in this area, they are jealous now – who is this random man who has arrived as a refugee and is now living well? They don't mind when we are working as labourers but as soon as we start making enough to buy things, new clothes, then they don't like it. These people they contacted the police to try to get me into trouble. They came to my house in the night and said we have a warrant for your arrest.

Why? I asked. Because you are a member of Jamayat, the Islamic political party. Where did you hear that? I asked. People are saying it. I was so angry, 'Fine' I said, 'then arrest me and take me with you'. Then people warned me, if you go with them, they will charge you with false crimes and imprison you. I had no choice, I had to buy them off. All my hard-earned money gone, for nothing. What kind of a place is this? Are we really any better off here? Or are we in hell? These things never happened in Gabura, I never even met the police in the 38 years I lived there. We thought the trouble in our life was the changing weather, the cyclones like Aila. But now the problems created by humans are more severe. We are not welcome here so now we need to think of a new place to live. We want to live a peaceful life with our children and family members. We have no other places to go. We have to stay within Bangladesh.

We didn't want to leave our motherland, our homes, but we had no choice. In Gabura we lived traditional lives. We had paddy fields and a fishing enclosure, chickens and cows. We had land in our own name. Climate change was mainly responsible, the water level increased, storms occurred repeatedly, our embankment could not hold, our land became drowned.

Our country is poor while the more developed countries are doing what they like. The way they are living their lives, polluting, conducting scientific experiments with the climate – we are the ones paying for it. Countries like America, North Korea, Japan, China. They should behave better to begin with and they should offer us some type of protection when their actions affect us directly. Why do these nations turn the other way? We are voiceless but people from these rich countries, they have the power to be heard. Why do they not speak out?

If they thought about us, about the way people are suffering because of their actions, becoming sick because of them, they might become careful. If they could change their ways, perhaps people like us can be saved.