

Komola

Lands of river

Interview dramatised by Ursula Rani Sarma

On our farm we used to cultivate crops like sugar cane, corn, nuts and potatoes in our own fields. I miss working for myself, earning from the farmland. Now I must work for others. The difference is like night and day.

We came to Dhaka three years ago when the river took away our home. The water level had been rising for three years or so, slowly corroding the foundations of the house. Then when the cyclone hit, it destroyed everything we owned in less than ten minutes. We sat on the roof and watched it happen. Our animals were drowning. I jumped into the water to try to save my cow but I became trapped instead, my legs caught in a whirlpool. I was lucky in that a passing boat helped me and I swam to it. Because we are inhabitants of the lands of the river, every one of us knows how to swim. Otherwise we could not survive.

In the flood, 80 or 90 families that I know lost their homes. They were attached to one another in a row, some of them were my husband's uncles and aunts, all were lost. Maybe 250 people were made homeless in minutes. The people who could afford to move then went to other places where they could find a living.

We got the train from Sherpa to Dhaka. At first, we just stayed at the railway station and I tried to find work. We had no money, no food, my children were starving. Then we found my aunt in Mirpur and she helped us. The problem is my husband refuses to do physical labour. He wants to earn his money from business but business requires capital and we don't have any. So, it falls on me to support my family of four. I wake up in the morning and I do all the house chores before I leave. I work as a road construction worker and I also sell collected waste and spinach to get by. The heat is extreme and there is no place to shelter. At home, there were trees in all the villages, if we were too hot we could rest beneath them. Here there is nothing between the sun and you, nothing but open fields.

Today I earned a little money after collecting valuables from waste. Then I bought food. I won't lie, it is almost insufferable. I miss my home. Here in Dhaka, we must pay rent whether we earn or not. In the rainy season, we cannot even leave the house because of the water levels. Then what am I supposed to do? If I cannot work? I have two children in school, I have to feed them, to buy their pens, their paper. Even when I work I don't earn enough and now I am getting older. My physical ability is changing. Before I could lift a heavy bag of concrete up a flight of

stairs but now I cannot. Our income depends on my health and this scares me. My husband doesn't even care. He is unwilling to work for and abide by others. So, it is up to me to do everything. Everyone depends on me.

The mills and factories of rich countries emit smoke which is causing troubles in poor countries like Bangladesh. This is a threat to our survival. The rain falls now more than ever before, the heat is unbearable, the water is polluted, no one seems to care. If they did they would reduce their emissions, they would try to find a better way to live.

All I can say is help us if it is in your power to do so. We are suffering.