

Meherunesa ***A way to save ourselves***

Interview dramatised by Ursula Rani Sarma

When my Father and uncles were alive, when I was still unmarried, the weather here was better. There was still poverty, but the seasons made it possible to live. We had regular rain. We had a dry season. People were happy with what they had. Now there are cyclones all the time, storms tearing us apart. We don't know if we should raise our children here, if we can create a proper life for them. I worry about them so much that I don't sleep any more.

When Cyclone Sidr hit it was about 8 o'clock in the evening. Like always at that time I was at home with my daughters, cooking rice. I put the pot in the hearth and then I went to the canal for water. It was raining and I could see the level of the river was rising. Then I realised that there was a school of fish jumping near us. I told my older daughter to go and fetch my husband quickly so he could catch some for us. The rain kept falling. By the time my husband arrived with the nets, the road was already flooded with water. Within two or three minutes the canal had overflowed and we ran to our house. My husband went to get help and my daughters and I began to gather our things and pile them on the bed.

Our food was lost and the children were hungry. At dusk my sister-in-law brought some rice so they could eat. As the water level rose we climbed on top of the roof and waited. All we could do is watch everyone around us leaving. We saw no one was coming back. Night began to fall, we could hear the call to prayer in the distance. Finally, my husband appeared with a boat. We stayed on that boat for 18 days.

At least at that time we had a boat and a fishing net, we had a way to survive. Then the net became lost in the river and thieves came and took our boat. My husband couldn't cope after that. He lost his mind. If it wasn't for a kind neighbour who took us in, we would have been lost. We lived in his home for four years. I thought, this is what my life will be like now, never owning anything, always relying on other people to take us in. Then he gave us a small patch of his land. I tried to plant trees but they wouldn't grow. Another neighbour gave us seeds to cultivate, wheat and vegetables. I planted them, took good care of them and they grew very well. One day two NGO workers came and asked to take a picture of us tending to our garden. I didn't understand why at the time. Later I understood they may be able to help us. They took our picture and entered us into a lottery for poor people who had lost their homes in the flood. We couldn't believe it when we were chosen. We finally had some money to build a house.

For a while things were calm and we managed. However, the last storm damaged our roof. We tried to fix it but our ladder is broken and we have no way of climbing up to do the repairs. This means we can't live upstairs anymore as when it rains, water pours into the house. Instead we stay on the ground floor, we have dug as deep into the earth as we can, but we can't live like this forever.

The problem is that cyclones like Aila or Sidr, they can come back anytime. There is no certainty. Sometimes the dam collapses again, the water level rises, strong winds come from the south. That is all it takes for the gossip to start, for people to start panicking. They start saying there is another flood coming, that we should pack up our things, gather what food and belongings we can and be ready to go. We have done that four times in the past 12 months. Living with such uncertainty is torture. We worry, will we last this night? Will we see the day light tomorrow? Even if we do survive what about our children? Will they?

What will become of us if we leave? Will the journey cost us our life? Do we have any other choice?

We don't want much, just enough food to eat, to not to be worried all the time, to live in peace. We just want to find a way to save ourselves.