

Renu ***The river took it all***

Interview dramatised by Ursula Rani Sarma

My name is Renu Bibi. I am 85 years old. We came to Dhaka when our home was swallowed. The water came from the north first and then slowly covered the whole area. We had a fine home on over half an acre. Our ponds were full of fish. We had eight cows. We had 200 date palm trees. We made tons of sweets with those. We had coconuts, jackfruit and mango trees. We loved those trees. We had a good life but then suddenly the dam broke and the fish moved downstream, the trees were drowned, our home was destroyed. The river took it all.

The river erosion was happening slowly over months and years but the whole place went under water within one night and day. We had to save our lives. I took my family and ran. Now big ships run through the place where we used to have our home.

After the flood we took shelter in other people's houses. We had no food and my husband was sick and in pain. When he died we were forced to move on. We lived outside. I collected large tree leaves to make a tent so we could rest under it when the sun was hot. I caught fish with my bare hands for my children to eat but it wasn't enough. We were starving. People said to me, 'You'll die if you stay here, you better move to Dhaka'. People usually help others to please Allah. Someone will help you. So we came here.

At first, we had no place to live. We slept in a tent made from paper on the side of the road. I didn't even have rice to cook. I begged salt and turmeric from another house. Slowly we got to know people and they began to help us. I worked as a servant in two homes, I collected bottles, papers and metals to sell but still my earnings were not enough to rent a room. Then I found this place. Actually, they used to keep a goat here. Then when they sold it I asked if I could rent it. I cleaned it out all the dung and dirt and it became our home.

I have suffered a lot and now it is getting even harder. People keep arriving here thinking that they will be able to work and earn money in Dhaka but there are no opportunities here anymore. Before, people would help you but now they tell you to go somewhere else. They are tired of helping. The weather here has changed too. It rains more frequently than it did before and the whole area becomes quickly flooded. Water pours into my room, around my bed, the drains overflow. Dirty water from the neighbour's house passes through my room. The heat has also become intolerable. Before it was cooler, I could manage, now living without an electric fan is almost impossible but I can't afford one. Instead I have collected tree leaves and made a hand fan.

My children are gone now. My daughters were married off and they can only visit me if they are permitted. One of my sons is mad, he has left his wife and moves all the time, living here and there. My other son doesn't help me because he is manipulated

by his wife, he has moved to his in-laws' house and I never see him. I am helpless now, alone, I don't know what to do.

I sit here in the dark, in the heat, and I think of the home we had, the lands, the trees, the fish. I think how all of it has been taken away – my whole life was washed away by that stream. Now I have nothing, no future, no certainties. Who will give me shelter? Who will give me place where I can rest and die?