

Estate of Fear

Fear and silence grip as the government hushes up a communal attack on tea plantation workers. Shudepto Ariquzzaman reports

2014 promised to be a special year for Piyari Das and his family. Piyari was blessed, for the first time in his life with a grandchild, six months ago, courtesy of his daughter Bharati Das. His son Jagdish Das was also about to become a father before the month was over. Piyari considered himself one of the most fortunate human being in the world, grandfather for the first time, twice in a single year. Little did he know that fate or rather mankind had a cruel surprise for



him. Piyari lost his grandchildren, and his daughter-in-law, the expectant mother within two days, victims of a vicious communal attack on October 5.

One of 32 houses damaged by the attackers. © Philip Gain

It was the day after the Durga Puja and before Eid when Bengali miscreants from surrounding villages numbering around hundreds fell upon this tea garden community of Rashidpur Tea Estate of Finlay in Habiganj. Armed with spears, knives, and rocks, they attacked anyone and everyone who stood in their way, regardless of men, women and children. The conflict was rooted in a quarrel two days earlier when tea plantation workers protested harassment by Bengali youths who had come to visit the Puja Mondop. Harassment of tea plantation women by villagers are very common in some neighbourhoods, but for once, the plantation workers had the audacity to protest. The Bengali youth took this protest by this subjugated community as an insult and lusted for revenge. Incidentally the plantation workers are descendants of various ethnic communities, brought into the Syhlet region by the then British rulers of India to work in the tea plantations, four generations ago. They were generally low caste Hindus from eastern and central India. Half a century has passed, but the world outside their labour line remains foreign to the plantation workers.

“They were hiding in the nearby bushes very early in the morning,” says Joyram Lohar, the first victim of the mob, “they attacked as I was taking my bathe, and there were ten to twelve in all.”

Even after a fortnight, Joyram cannot stand or flex his fingers. His bruised body tells it all, the brutal treatment as can be expected from a mob. Roughly one hour later at a few minutes past seven, the mob, this time in hundreds moved along the road and the paddy fields. They divided into two groups, one attacking and looting the outlying houses of the labour line (village of tea plantation workers) situated in Orrissapara, the Northern fringe. The other moved into Santalpara in the west.

“I had sold my cow for 150,000 taka. They took all the money,” says Dewaratti Rabidas, an occupant of Orrissapara. For a poor tea plantation worker, surviving on the fringe of the society, this is an entire life’s savings. Many others lost a huge amount of property as the mob took everything they could get their hands on. “I lost 10 goats and 15,000 taka,” says Meera Bauri, “they even took away the children’s clothes.” More than a fortnight had passed and many people in the outlying areas of the labour line don’t sleep in their homes at night.

Meanwhile terror took hold in Orrissapara. The tea workers had not expected an attack by hundreds of Bengali villagers and thought that Joyram Lohar was a single incident. Following the early morning assault on Joyram, the male members of the labour line were inside the village, south of Orrissapara. So when the attackers came, most of the occupants of Orrissapara were women and children. Everyone left behind took hold of their children and ran. Some left behind were beaten and injured. “I received a blow in the left leg

with a rod,” says Meera Bauri, “I thought they were going to kill me.” Not everyone was as fortunate as Meera.

Six month baby Binda Das had come to visit her grandparents. As the mob attacked, her mother took hold of her and in the panic that followed, Binda fell. It was probably the final memory of her little life; she breathed her last two days later as she underwent treatment.

Expectant mother Reena was also injured when she stumbled and fell when trying to escape. “I didn’t expect her to die,” says her husband Jagadish Das. But Jagdish was wrong, both mother and the unborn child perished in the hospital three days later. In a matter of two days, the Das family had lost it all.

On the other hand, in Santalpara, the police who had arrived on the scene intervened with tear gas canisters only after the tea garden workers tried to organise a belated resistance. The situation calmed only after the arrival of BGB personal.

Piyari Das, also the panchayet chairman of the labour line says that they had tried their best to avoid a situation like this. “Even when the attack was ongoing, our elders were urging calm,” he says. Piyari says that after the squabble at the Puja Mondop two days earlier, local politicians had promised to settle the affair on the afternoon of October 5. The Bengalis were not convinced and decided to attack before any settlement could take place.

A settlement did take place, but it was only after the attack. Meditated by local politicians, government officials and Syed Mohsin Ali, Minister for Social Welfare, the conflicting parties agreed to a settlement under which the attackers would pay a sum of Tk.600,000 to the victims. Also the Bengali villagers have agreed to sign a bond that would guarantee no further attacks on this labour line. They had not done so till date.

The marginalised tea garden community has little choice but to accept the terms and conditions mediated by influential politicians and government officials eager to hush up the affair. One of the nearest relatives of the deceased says on condition of anonymity, “Had this happened to an influential people, or any other community, what would have been the price to pay?” However, the officer in charge of Bahubal Thana says that no one had died as a result of the violence. Also he says that police are conducting their investigation though a settlement has been reached between the conflicting parties. “They are my own people and we have a great relationship with them,” says Moattasir Mia, the local Union Parishad chairman referring to the plantation workers. He says that the final settlements would be made within this week and there will be no further incidents of violence in the area.

But fear has gripped the community and the people are unwilling to speak out too loudly on the issue. Meanwhile, the high school students of the labour line who go outside their locality to attend the Foyezabad High School have not done so since the attack for fear of harassment if they step out of their locality.

In one of the worst cases of sexual harassment, two women of the plantation community were raped by local miscreants a few months ago. At the time, the plantation workers protested the incident and a case was lodged. The perpetrators have not been brought to justice to date.

Rashidpur is only one neighbourhood but incidents of violence and harassment towards tea plantation workers are not uncommon. According to Ram Bhajan Kairi, general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union, the trade union representing plantation workers, incidents like Rashidpur would occur regularly if the workers protested at every incident of harassment directed towards them. “If a Bengali slaps a plantation worker, the worker walks away,” he says. Even after four generations, the plantation workers are foreigners in this land. “The difference in Rashidpur was that our youth protested at the incident,” he says.

On the surface, the tea gardens remain calm, but in many localities there is tension between the mainstream Bengali populace and the plantation workers. There are regular untoward incidences and one of these days, a spark might light up the entire neighborhood as has happened in Rashidpur.

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