

# Last of the Koras

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## A little-known ethnic community with 96 souls may vanish from Bangladesh anytime

### A DAY IN THE LIFE

As the sun sets slowly on the horizon behind, a disappointed uncle and nephew return home with the day's catch: a pair of tree rats. It is a meagre meal, not enough to feed the entire family. In a few minutes as darkness descends, the ethereal cries of the jackal reverberate throughout the distant fields, a creature that could have provided a more wholesome meal. But Keena Kora, father of one of the hunters does not look optimistic.

“Jackals are sly creatures, it is very difficult to hunt them when the field is full of paddy as they conceal themselves,” he says. If he feels disappointed by the day's catch, he does not show it. In his long seventy plus years, Keena, like most of his people, has learnt to master the art of hunger. Like many other days in his life he has not eaten anything from sunrise to sunset.

At the same time, on the other side of the village, the village's most experienced hunter Thopang Kora parks his rickshaw van, the source of his income nowadays. More than seventy years old, Thopang is still agile and fleet-footed, a deadly foe silently stalking his prey with an aim that won't quit.

But it is not his hunting skills with animals that has made him famous in the locality. Thopang is a freedom fighter albeit one without any official recognition. For a man who has sacrificed much for Bangladesh, he had to bear the agony of his brother Saotan Kora, a fellow freedom fighter, fleeing to India after being assaulted and then threatened with further consequences by local Bengali miscreants.

Today Thopang, like many others, survives mostly on a single meal a day. He sleeps in the veranda, as his small hut can barely accommodate his three children. Bangladesh, created for Bangalis, supposedly only by Bangalis, have done little for him and his community.

### THE KORAS

The Koras are a little-known ethnic community residing in the greater Dinajpur area. They speak a dialect of an Austroasiatic tongue, similar to Hindi and Bengali, but have not developed a written script. The Koras practice a form of Hinduism, which is different from the one followed by Bengali Hindus. Their cultural heritage—though extremely rich and diverse—is unknown to the mainstream society.

Once they occupied more than fifty acres of land in Birol upazila in Dinajpur district. Today their numbers have drastically decreased as most of them have fled to the Indian side of Dinajpur after facing threats and lawsuits from Bangalis – who eye their land like the jackals these simple minded folk greatly depend on for survival.

But the Koras have no money, no connections or even recognition, and they have been unable to fend off the land hungry Bangalis who have tried their best to make sure that the last of the Koras migrate to the Indian side of the border. The miscreants have been largely successful. Today there are only 96 Koras left in Bangladesh, crowded in a single village less, occupying less than an acre of land.



Almost all the Koras are solely dependent on agricultural day labour for their livelihood, hunting with their antique bows and arrows, gathering food – not a rewarding venture in a country where development has largely driven out wildlife.

But the development that has improved the lives of many people in the locality has done virtually nothing for this ethnic community. They are still day labourers working in the fields for Tk150 a day and work is not always easy to find, especially in the autumn season. While the infamous seasonal famine of North Bengal, commonly known as Monga, has become history, it is still alive for the Koras.

## **CONTEMPORARY TIME**

Only three Kora families own their land, which is not much, measuring up to six acres altogether. Of the more than fifty acres once owned by the Kora, these are the last six acres, over which there is also a case pending in the local court. Land grabbers are determined to take possession of these last bit of land, as they want the last 96 Koras to leave.

Barring the three families who own land, the others work as day labourers on land, which was once theirs. “All these surrounding lands once belonged to us,” says Krishna Kora, pointing to the lush paddy fields surrounding the impoverished Kora village from all sides. “But nowadays, most work as day labourers in these lands, which is rightfully theirs,” he says. He says that if the Koras had been given their fair share of land, they would be free of extreme poverty that has haunted this community for a long time.

Like most ethnic communities in Bangladesh, the Koras don't have legally recognised rights to the land on which they have resided on for generations. As a result, influential people with ties to the administration find them easy pickings. As recent as 2012, a magistrate came to the Kora village and told them that they have no rights to this land as they didn't have title deeds. An UNO also once declared in a public meeting that there are no indigenous people in the region, an attempt to give the land to the land grabbers. Many government officials are alleged to be in cahoots with the miscreants and have evicted the Koras from their ancient lands.

The government's failure to address the issue of the land rights of indigenous peoples have stirred conflicts in other areas of the country, such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts. However, the Koras are alone and isolated, and have had little choice but to migrate to the Indian side of the border, abandoning their ancient homeland once and for all.

## **A SLUM IN THE COUNTRYSIDE**

Those who live in this village are crammed in threadbare huts, where there is just enough space to lie down, though not for everyone. Keena Kora, for example, lives with his wife in a 6' x 10' room. Others like freedom fighter Thopang, sleep on the verandah, some sleep in the yard.

On rainy nights, family members sleeping outside have to go inside for shelter, which is not always there because the roofs leak. Every available space is taken up at night, it is a slum in the midst of the countryside. Even then, many of the younger people have to leave their home to sleep with their relatives, especially once they get married, as every available space is utilised to the full.

The Koras, in spite of their ultra poverty, are a harmonious lot. Brother shares with sister, neighbour shares with neighbour, even if there is very little to share. They scarcely clash among themselves, and even when there are tensions, matters are cooled off before they reach too far.

For those like Biman Kora, who can extend their homes, there is another different sort of problem. Influential people claim that the Koras are encroaching on their territory. Biman with his five family members reside in a single hut, with some family members on the verandah, and others on the yard. But unlike most Koras, Biman has managed to muster the resources for extending his home. But an influential man who owns a banana field next to the Kora village complains that would be encroaching on his land. “Not only that, he says that part of my existing home is partially on his land,” says Biman. There is a lawsuit pending in this regard.

Keena Kora who faces a similar problem says, “This is my own land but I cannot set foot here.” One of the more vocal women in the neighbourhood, Keena has faced threats to her life but she could not care less.

“They once threatened to cut my tendons,” she says gleefully, referring to land grabbers. Keena says that rightfully, this land and the surrounding lands belong to the Koras who have inhabited this place for generations.

“For indigenous people, it is difficult everywhere,” she says, “even in India, our people are not well off.” But Keena is steadfast in the pursuit of justice for her people and even other indigenous communities.

In recent times, the Koras have been organising non-violent protests against the government to demand for the most ancient of rights – the right to survival in a land they have resided for generations. “We staged a protest rally a year before surrounding the Settlement Office,” says Keena. She says that other adivasi communities in the locality and even many Bangalis joined them. She also gives kudos to a local NGO, the Community Development Association (CDA) for joining their struggle and ensuring that the last of the Koras have been able to survive in Bangladesh till now.



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