

# The Untouchables

Stories of the Harijan community in North Bengal

Shudepto Arikuzzaman | Photos: Rashel Amin Shopon

As the sun descends on the horizon, Manik Chandra Basfor bids a hasty farewell to his friends and begins the walk down the lonely path home. His friends wanted him to stay but Manik knows better. They were about to enter a tea stall, and this is where Manik and the rest of the company must part ways.



In another part of town, little girl Khushi shrieks with shocked surprise as an elderly school teacher ruffles her hair. “Why did you touch me,” she says. “Nobody ever touches me. And why did you call me here? Don’t you know *Methor* children don’t come to school?”

Meet the Harijans, descendants of the lowest of low caste Hindus brought by the British from Central India to keep Bengal clean. Harijans inhabit every town in Bangladesh barring the hill districts. Even in the year 2015, an apartheid system dating back millennia condemns these people to a life of humiliation and disgrace in many parts of the country.

## Ostracised into their occupations

In his younger years, Manik had a vision for his future, not big dreams but the ordinary ones an impoverished young man in Bangladesh dares to entertain. It is this dream that took him to the divisional city of Rangpur to learn mobile servicing and multimedia. He excelled in this field and upon returning to his hometown of Domar, was immediately recruited by a local company. But then the trouble started.



One evening, a ‘respectable’ gentleman in the neighbourhood went to Manik’s shop and told him, “Just because you changed your get-up, does not mean you can change your *jaat* ( status/caste),”

The man went on to say, “you are the son of a *methor*, and you will always be a *methor*, no matter how respectable you might try to look.” He then went on a long tirade, explaining how even if Manik mastered every level of computer skills there is, he rightfully belongs to the sewers, just like his father and grandfathers before him. Every now and then, many Bangalees decided to jump in with their derogatory comments. Manik soon knew that he had no place there. He went back to the community’s age-old profession.

“Here, there is a different problem. The days when Bangalees regarded this profession as beneath their stature are over, and Harijans face stiff competition in a profession over which they traditionally had a monopoly.” In all parts of the country, entering government service requires a hefty bribe, and the cleaners are not exempt. The Harijans, poorer than their Bangalee counterparts, have to stretch beyond their means to gather the required sum. This can be as high as two hundred thousand taka, and as a result, unemployment is rife among the Harijans.

But in many areas, the Harijans are totally excluded from all other commercial activities. In Nilphamari, a Harijan man named Masud Basfor started selling vegetables at the local market. “As soon as they discovered my identity, they would not buy from me anymore,” says Masud. His enterprise failed.

### Less equal than even their friends

Harijans face problems in all walks of daily life, including when trying to get their hair cut. “I can only cut my hair in places out of this town, where I can hide my identity,” says Masud. Sometimes, there are hopes that times are changing. Masud says many younger Bangalees in his neighbourhood, both higher caste Hindus and Muslims, have begun to treat him as their own. But then in a rather embarrassed manner, he reveals the catch. “Yes, they do come to our houses as guests, but they don’t use our spoons and plates. Those items have to come from elsewhere.”



“During my daughter’s marriage, I had to arrange for two different panels,” says Meghurat. Bangalee guests refuse to sit and dine at the same place besides the Harijans. Meghurat had learnt these realities of life a long time ago when he purchased a small plot of land in the town of Nilphamari. “Influential people pressurised me not to build my house here,” says Meghurat. He was driven out.

Meanwhile, for children like little Khushi, it might just be as well she does not go to school. Many teachers often use a handkerchief in front of their mouths when talking to Harijan because they are considered dirty. On the other hand, Bangalee children address them with insulting names such as ‘sweeper er baccha.’

As morning falls and the work day begins, the restaurants become filled with people. The Harijans are sitting outside, not because of a lack of space though. Some restaurant owners defend their position by saying that if they let Harijans inside, other customers will leave. One restaurant owner suggests that if the Harijans want to sit alongside others, they should get a ruling from the High Court. How this can be achieved despite their poor economic conditions and social ostracisation, he didn't say.



**The writer is a research associate for the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)**

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