

Love, Dignity, Struggle

In collaboration with domestic workers, powrakarmikas, garment workers and beedi workers

VOL. 4

The fear of Identity

On 26th October 2019, 59 Bangladeshi migrant workers were detained from their homes, transported in a train and left at the Indo-Bangladesh border in the middle of the night. The migrant workers were employed as waste pickers and domestic help in the city for decades. A few made their way into Bangladesh, returning to their former homes. There is no news of the others. We spoke to the Bangladeshi migrants who were not detained or haven't left for Bangladesh yet. Their experiences raise a pertinent set of questions with regard to identity, labour, religion and the city.

"I came to this city when I was 16 years old. I got down at the railway station in Majestic. My husband and I took an

auto and came to this slum. My husband drives a garbage van in the city. We consider Bangalore our home. I made this house with my own hands, I got the wood for Rs.8 per kg and the tin for Rs.10 per kg. Now they say this is not my house, that I have to leave everything I considered my own."



Reshma is from Bangladesh. For last ten years she has been living in the migrant settlement working as a domestic worker in the high-rise apartment buildings nearby.

"For eight years we have been receiving threats that we are outsiders and we

will be evicted, that we should vacate our house and leave in two days. Earlier only the police used to say it, this time it is the government saying it. That's why we are afraid."

Reshma's husband collects waste from the apartments and offices and then segregates it for recycling. "If I leave the city, who will clean the waste?" he asks. "Will Modi come and pick up all this garbage?" Reshma quips.

Ten years back, Reshma had to pay Rs. 7,000 to cross the India-Bangladesh border. But this time they hear that one has to pay between Rs15-Rs 20,000 to cross the border in night. There is an eerie silence in this migrant settlement colony. Many homes have locks hanging on their doors. The lanes that were once buzzing with action, where people would jostle for space, with fights erupting over water and personal possessions, now lie deserted. There are not many people left to fight with. It is said that earlier about 2,000-

...continued on page 2

EDITORIAL

"This is our country, if they don't let us stay here, where will we go?"

On 18th January, Munni Begum's life changed. When she returned home from work, she and others found no trace of the homes they had built, (some over ten years old), in the flattened bricks, rubble and waste that lay across the ground. The JCB, brought by the police and members of the BBMP stood nearby. Rushing, she and a few other women stood in its way, to protect whatever little was remaining of their home. "Over 4 lac worth of property and business loss" she shares. "We have lost electricity, water supply, and our children have to sleep amidst the destruction."

"We are not animals, we are human beings. How dare they treat us like this?"

"This is our country, if they don't let us stay here, where will we go?" asked a young boy from Assam who has been living in the area for four years.

The demolition was ordered after a video went live, with the news that the settlement was home to 'illegal Bangladeshi immigrants'. In reality, the residents are from North Karnataka, Assam, Jharkhand and Bengal. They work as domestic help, security, construction workers and waste pickers. They show their documents ranging from Pan cards, voter IDS, rental agreements and even the much contested NRC, which clearly shows names of the Assamese families, living in the area. How many more papers need to be shown before citizenship is proved? In the name of protecting national interest, the government appears to be turning against its own citizens. The municipal

authorities have no right to enter private property and take coercive action without the backing of the law, particularly when the residents are not encroaching. With their homes razed to the ground, the damage is incalculable. "We have lost the documents that prove out citizenship, in all this rubble. Now who will believe us when we say we are citizens of this country?" Irrespective of nationality, displacing communities of people who build, clean and service the city shows the governments disregard of poverty and vulnerability. "Modi said he will remove poverty. Well he must be succeeding, because now the poor are dying" shares a young man from the settlement.

This is a microcosm of the fault-lines appearing across the country. "If they wanted to throw us out anyway, why did they make us go through the trouble of registering for the NRC?" asked a man from Assam. Persecutions of this nature are guaranteed to birth new forms of hatred and divisiveness

between people. This can already be seen in the 'anti-Bangladeshi' sentiment across classes of people. The figure of the Bangladeshi has begun to function as a code that defines and assimilates notions of the 'Other'. The arbitrariness with which the demolition was carried out, and the complete lack of accountability from the state is a warning sign for the future, as the government creates new imaginations of citizenship, nationality and identity.

Since the time of writing this article, activists in the city fought for a stay order to prevent further demolitions. The residents continue to assert their right to live here. "We have been here for 10 years, this our home, our city too."

**Based on reports in the media and coverage of the demolition by filmmakers and activists.*

Bevaru is dedicated to the voice, view and experiences of workers in Bangalore. The paper will focus on workers from the unorganized sector. Please share your writings, poems, songs, ideas around labour. Give us your feedback, suggestions and ideas.

For any information, write to us on bevarupaseena@gmail.com or call/message us on 6366646052.

All articles are written by Team Maraa

Maraa is a media and arts collective, based in Bangalore since 2008. The collective works towards freedom of speech and expression by highlighting voices from the margins. We challenge notions of the developing city by representing narratives of exclusion and struggle in different forms.

English Articles: Angarika G, Anushi Agrawal, Ekta M, Nikhila B

Hindi translations: Anushi Agrawal

Kannada translation: Prathibha. R, Mahima Gowda, Basvachar

Layout and Illustrations: Thara M Thomas

continued from page 1

The fear of Identity

2,500 Bangladeshi families used to live here, now there are only three left.

Meena is not ready to leave the migrant settlement yet. She is waiting for things to get better and hopes she will not have to leave her home. "The police has been taking money from us for years, claiming it was for our protection. Why should we get scared now and run away?" But now, it is the police themselves who are pressurizing the owners of the homes, who are Kannada speaking locals, who in turn are forcing their Bangladeshi tenants to leave. As a result, Meena's neighbors had to sell their belongings at low rates, and leave their homes in a hurry.

Everybody is getting various kinds of news through Whatsapp. That people who have been arrested are being tortured by the police, they have been abandoned at the border, that they have been put in jail, that the parents and children have been separated. Consequently, people are scared and have left for their villages in Bangladesh on their own. But rumors are also flying around that the Indian government is arresting people who are trying to cross the border. It is a catch 22 situation for the Bangladeshi migrants where they feel, they are not letting us go but they are also not letting us stay.

What is the NRC? *I don't know*", "I heard about it first 10-15 days ago", "Now they are asking us for our grandparent's documents". The workers have many questions. *Has the detention center been built or not? How will it function? Where will people go from there?* There is a restlessness in everyone; "Why us? Why now? We have been living here for so many years. We work here; we clean the houses and roads in the city; we celebrate festivals here, we pay school fees, water bills and house rents here. We don't steal from

anyone, we work hard and earn our money, the city functions because of our work. Then why are we being dragged out of our homes?"

A few have left for the villages with the hope that one day when things settle down, they will come back to their homes and work in Bangalore. "We have our houses here, where else will we go? There is no source of income in our village. We have set up our world here. There is nothing for us there. We will have to return here.

Most of the domestic workers in Bangalore are not from the city. They have migrated from places like Raichur and Gulbarga. They have never heard of the term NRC. They don't know if anyone has been asked to leave the city or if people are leaving the migrant settlements out of fear. Not everyone knows about the NRC but it has disrupted the lives of many. In such a scenario, whose responsibility is it to make sure that everyone knows about the steps taken by the government?

Reshma is waiting. She hopes that things will get better and she will not have to leave the city. She has already left her work as a domestic worker as she fears that the police will pick up her children while she is at work. At the same time there are people in the apartments who have asked the Bangladeshi workers to leave as they don't want any trouble for themselves. They have asked the workers to get police verification done before coming to work. Everyone has Id cards like the Aadhar and PAN.

A few even have voter Id cards but still no one believes them. Because the Government wants to make the Aadhar card the main document of identification, everyone seems to have it, irrespective of being a citizen or not. "They come to our homes, force us to make our Aadhar card, because that is how outsiders can get work here. It is the local people who got our Aadhar cards made and now they are only questioning the validity of it."

Now there are not many domestic workers left in the area or people to segregate waste as most of the Bangladeshi migrant workers have decided to leave the migrant settlement colony. Almost a month after the 59 Bangladeshi migrants were arrested, resulting in others leaving the city in fear, residents from the apartments nearby are now coming to the migrant settlement desperately looking for someone to do their work, but now there is no one here. It is difficult to say what will happen within the next few months with the NRC and CAA that intend to reconfigure notions of citizenship and identity. In the meantime, the workers are struggling to make sense of the threat to their lives in a city where they first learned to dream and live independently.

"I had made this house with my own hands, I had bought the TV with my hard-earned money. If I have to leave this city, this house, I will burn everything, I will break everything and go. At least I will not have the regret of leaving anything behind. I will destroy everything with my own hands and go."

On 18th January 2020, the police and the BBMP turned up at one of the migrant settlements in Bangalore and proceeded to demolish the settlement claiming it was illegal and that some of the people living there were illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. The houses were razed to the ground within minutes, destroying what people had considered their home, for years.

**Names of people have been changed in this article to ensure their safety and anonymity.*



CLOCK WITHOUT NEEDLES

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled

(With inputs from Jabeena Khanum,
Neralu Beedi Karmikara (R) Union, Davangere)

Half a kg. of Tendu leaves become 1000 beedis overnight. After everyone has gone to bed, she soaks the Tendu leaves in water. She wakes up at 4:00 am. Draws water, cleans the house, cooks breakfast, packs separate tiffins, gets the children ready for school, and sends them off.

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.

It's 9 am. She dries the Tendu leaves one by one. If they are wet, they won't hold the tobacco, if they are too dry, they will tear. One by one, she gently fills in the tobacco and rolls the leaf around it. She ties it up tightly with a piece of thread and bends the mouth of the beedi inwards. 600 beedis done.

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.

It's 4 pm. The children are back from school. She is distracted but she continues. Without losing minutes, she rolls as many beedis as she can. Her target per day is 1,150 beedis. Her hands and eyes are constantly at work. 1,000 beedis are rolled for the day.

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.

By dusk, she meets the company owner. He checks the bunches of beedis. Rejects about 200 on an average - loosely tied, tightly tied, too dry, too wet. For 800-900 beedis, she gets Rs. 120-130/- per day. The daily minimum wage for a beedi worker is Rs. 210/- per day.

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.

Majority of the workers rolling beedis are women. Majority of the women are Muslim women. 20,000-25,000 Muslim women in Davangere alone work as Beedi workers. The least minimum wage is fixed for Beedi workers' sector at Rs. 210/-

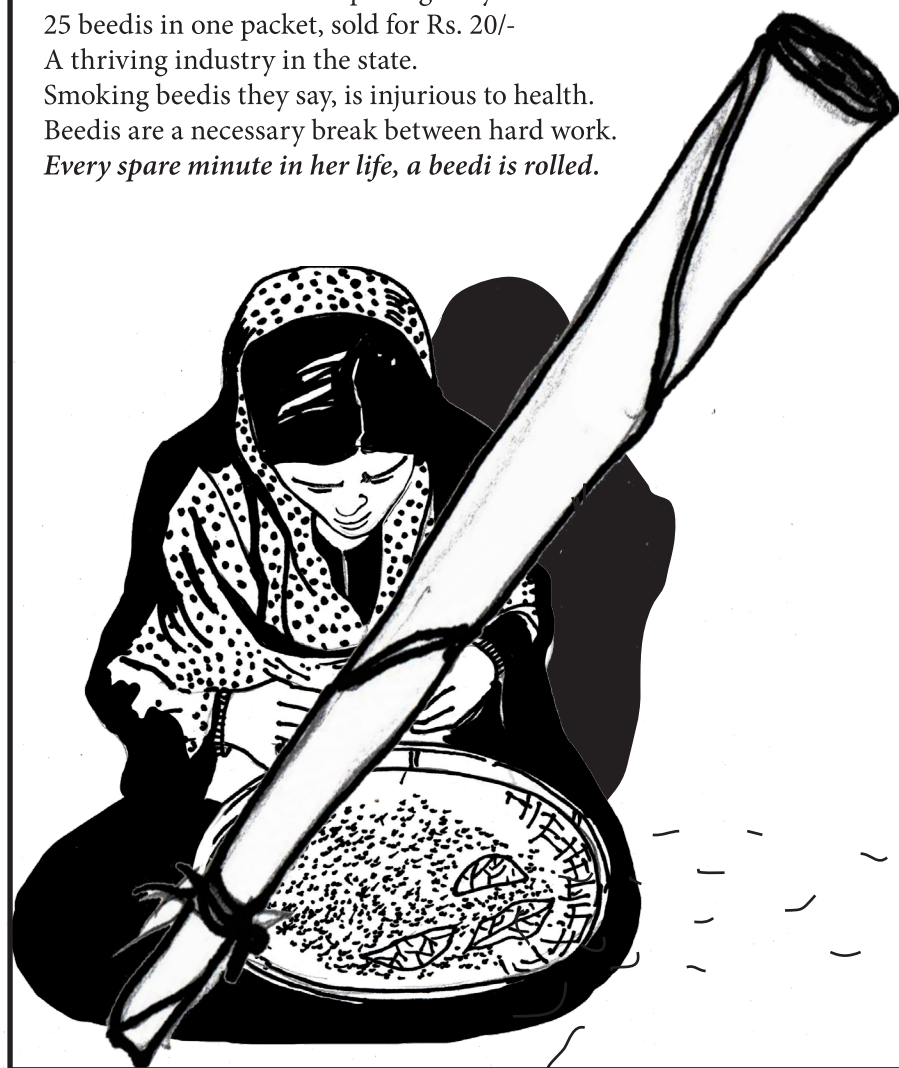
No social security, health benefits, holidays, pension, provident fund. Neither the labour department nor the Government has a count of her. She is invisible. Her home is her workplace. She does not get out of home. She has joined the union. And she just quietly works.

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.

She works throughout the week. Her husband works only 3-4 days a week. He earns about Rs. 300-400/- per day, if he is lucky, as a construction worker, agricultural labour, recycling waste etc. The family is dependent on her income, because it is stable. She cannot spare a single minute.

Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.

The beedis are stored and packaged by the owner. 25 beedis in one packet, sold for Rs. 20/- A thriving industry in the state. Smoking beedis they say, is injurious to health. Beedis are a necessary break between hard work. *Every spare minute in her life, a beedi is rolled.*



CHINMINI CROSS

This is a column dedicated for workers to speak out freely, without fear. It highlights fears and aspirations of workers in the city. Chinmini Cross is everywhere, in every gully and every neighbourhood. It is place where violence, resilience and beauty co-exist.

CLOCK WITHOUT NEEDLES

This is a column dedicated to everyday lives and schedules of workers in the city.

REMINDER

This column is dedicated to protests, figures, moments from the past, we believe continue to inform the present.

ENTRY RESTRICTED

Instruction Manual to be a successful housekeeper

What language do you speak?
Kannada, Hindi, Bengali, Telugu and Tamil.
Are you new to this area?
Yes. First time working here.
Don't worry, you just have to learn the rules of their game.

When you enter the building, remember to use only the lift on the left side. That is for maids and dogs.

When you ring the doorbell, smile. Not too wide, they'll think you're too friendly. Go straight into the kitchen. If she asks if you're menstruating, say no. In the corner, you will find your cup and plate.

If she is in a good mood, you might get some leftover tea.
Never tell them, you eat beef and pork.

The hall is a neutral zone.
Take your time so she doesn't think you're not working hard enough.
Don't touch any fragile objects, their gaze on you can make you nervous.
If something breaks, you will have to pay for it.

The bedroom is a war zone.
Try and clean it while she is around.
Let her supervise your every move else she will accuse you of thieving!

The bedroom is also where he can try anything!
Usually it starts with some comments, brushing past you, but it can go anywhere.
Remember, no-one will believe your side of the story.
Make sure you are never alone with him in any room.
Don't dress up, tie your sari higher up, don't look too beautiful.

The Puja room.
On festivals, don't get too enthusiastic with cooking something

special or doing any rituals.
She will accuse you of trying to be a part of the family.
People like us are considered impure, we are not allowed near their gods.

The children's room.
Don't show affection.
Don't play with their children, they'll suspect you're up to something.

After you finish your work, don't take refuge there.
Leave immediately.
Go to the park in the complex, but don't sit on the benches, the security will chase you out.
There are a few chairs near the common toilet in the building.
You can sit there.

Remember to clean the house like it is your own. Care for their children like your own, cook like you are feeding your own. But do not for once believe, any of it is your own!

LOUD AND CLEAR

We came to streets; we built our lives on streets
We brought along bags of many hopes and dreams.
We resisted the torture of the police and goondas.
We are women; we are here to feel alive.
Among the many communes and communities.
The one that stood up for the women on the streets
To fearlessly fight the discrimination we faced was the one and only Sadhana Mahila Sangha.

- Mangala R,
Sadhana Mahila Sangha

Sadhana Mahila Sangha, based in Bangalore has been working for the rights of women involved in street based sex work for the past 17 years.

OBITUARY

The dead don't die

She was burning your garbage, her sari caught fire and she died.
He was cleaning your manhole, a pipe burst and he died.
She didn't receive her wages, she hung herself and she died.
He was wading through the drain, he inhaled poisonous gases and he died.

**Remember,
The dead don't die.**

When the media turns a blind ear,
And the state is unaccountable,
When there is no money to send his body back home,
and the public is indifferent,
When his family is not given any jobs,
And the city lives on in oblivion,

**Remember,
The dead don't die.**

As you build your new house, carelessly discard your waste,
As you choose your blinders
And preach your progress,

**Remember,
The dead don't die.**

And when you construct your walls,
And lock your gates,
When you look past the filth,
And praise the state,

**Remember,
The dead don't die.**

**This obituary is dedicated to the undocumented and unreported death of waste pickers, sweepers and manual scavengers in the city of Bangalore. The city is witness to more than half of the manual scavenging deaths in the state. The common cause of death is at the workplace due to occupational hazards. In the recent past, workers have committed suicide over non-payment of wages. Their deaths are often unreported, and go unacknowledged, by the government, media and general public alike.*

