

'I Have an Exam Tomorrow'

Bihari settlers in Guwahati face dilemmas and anguish over their identity as citizens as they are evicted from their homes.

SNEHASHISH MITRA

"I have an exam tomorrow," murmurs Mamata Basfor as she helplessly watches her house being torn down by the authorities in the Railway Colony in Guwahati. I hear Mamata and ask if her books are secure. Her mother nods and says, "We will shift to my brother's place in the Harijan Basti and she can study there, we are waiting for the eviction to conclude." My PhD fieldwork is on the issue of land contestation in Guwahati, but never did I expect to witness an eviction first-hand.

Rehana, who has been working with the community as a social worker, had introduced me to the colony. She had narrated the story of the colony to me as we walked through its uneven alleys. "Most of the settlers here are Basfors [a Dalit community from Bihar]. They were brought to Assam by the British to carry out scavenging tasks in a growing Guwahati. The Guwahati municipality employed them and settled them here in the 1950s. The railway line running through this colony was functional till 1962 and therefore this area came to be known as the Railway Colony. But, since the 1990s, they have been facing eviction notices from the railways, with no provisions for compensation. This time around, 100 houses received the eviction notice."

Rehana arranged for a lawyer for the settlers facing eviction notices. But, after the initial stay order, the settlers couldn't afford to take their case any further in the court. Many didn't find their names in the updated National Register of Citizens (NRC) of India. I volunteered with Rehana to help them trace their legacy data and file their claims. Octogenarian Munna Paswan confided in me, "What is happening to us? In this old age, I am facing uncertainty over my settlement and also my citizenship. We have no land in Bihar, I came to Assam after I dropped out of Class 8. God knows where I will go after this."

Munna's house and those of several others in the colony have faced repeated fires in the past that have burnt several of their documents, rendering it difficult to prove the length of their stay in India. It struck me how different their lives were compared to ours. Here were people barely able to keep all their documents together, while we have every document digitised.

Earlier, the lawyer appointed to file the anti-eviction petition had asked for documents which could prove the settlers'

occupation of the land. I was scrutinising the documents and had to repeatedly explain to them why the electricity bill, voter cards, and caste certificates wouldn't be considered as legitimate documents confirming ownership of land. People would, however, insist that they have been living here for around 50 years, with several of them having been born in the colony. I explained with deep anguish that while I believed them, the authorities would require documented evidence. My arguments were met with the blank faces of the settlers, which, to be honest, did take an emotional toll on me. Rehana, on the other hand, was used to such experiences.

I asked Rehana, "I wonder how you go through this? I can't figure out how to explain to them that their citizenship by birth in India is constrained by the amendment in 2003. Whereas they think being born in the colony earns them due right to inhabit the colony." She replied, "What do these people have if not stories and narratives of the past? That's all

they have when they face the question of survival and an uncertain tomorrow. Let them express it, let them hang on to those stories as long as they can."

These conversations ran through my mind as the houses were being demolished in front of me. As dusk set in, Mamata's face looked increasingly gloomy as her mother held her tightly. Mamata's father was not present as he couldn't afford to miss his duty at the municipality, where he is employed as a sweeper on a contractual basis. As the settlers waited out the demolition, perhaps taking in the last of the structures that held their memories, I wondered if the authorities would

stop the eviction if they knew that Mamata Basfor has an exam tomorrow.

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LAST LINES

