

**KNOWN FACE, UNKNOWN LIFE:
VOICES OF TEMPORARY MIGRANTS IN WEST BENGAL**

Abdur Rafique

Visva Bharati University, West Bengal, India

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Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty
University of Sussex

Acknowledgements

I was interested in compiling this book for two main reasons. The first is that, while doing the academic research, I was often faced with the following question from the people involved: 'How will this research help us?' I think that this question is appropriate and pertinent. We, who do research work, have some definite motives. But the people we speak to while doing the research, whose precious time we draw on, do not get anything back from us directly. My wish, in this case, was to make it possible for the people I've spoken with to see their own life stories in the form of a book. Then at least, they could be somewhat happier.

The second reason was that after going over the data I realised that documenting it could lead to a better understanding of the socio-economic status, culture and livelihoods of the Muslims of the Bagri area of Murshidabad.

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Abdur Rafique, Bolpur

Foreword

The publication of this book at a time when ordinary people living in rural West Bengal have been drawn to the attention of a wider public through resistance to large-scale land acquisitions at Singur and Nandigram, is a coincidence but it is particularly apt. Part of a bigger research project about the role of migration in the working lives of men and women in a Murshidabad village, this collection of men's narratives provides a reality check for social scientists interested in analysing the rapidly changing employment conditions and employment relations involved in contemporary forms of capitalism in India.

In the collection thirteen men who have experience of migration for temporary work around the Indian countryside, or from the countryside to towns and cities, tell their stories in their own words. They speak not only of migration, but more generally about the dynamics of living in the Bagri region of Murshidabad, with its intensively irrigated, multiple-cropped agriculture, dense population, ecological challenges and, for many job-seekers, a lack of employment.

The life histories reveal that migration for paid manual work from this region is often a reluctant choice, one made in the face of few alternative income sources. Yet, the stories told here evoke a sense of the agency of workers as they decide whether to go, whom to travel with, and then embark on journeys which may involve negotiations with employers they have never met at labour-market places, or returning to people who have employed them before, or being transported by labour contractors to a road-building or construction site. Agency is also revealed through actions to seek redress from employers who do not pay the amount promised, and from the awareness and use of variations in bargaining power in recruitment when the ratio of work-seekers and potential employers varies over a short period of time.

Each chapter tells a different tale, and the historical approach taken by Rafique as interviewer reveals changes taking place over time. Whereas migration for agricultural work, particularly the transplanting and harvesting of paddy, has been widespread among the men of bagri for decades, new possibilities have opened up in Kolkata for construction work, and the state's infrastructure projects' demand for a workforce has been felt through the increased presence of labour contractors.

Moreover, while migration for agricultural work is still predominant, it is evident from the stories of older workers and former migrants that the meaning of this migration changes over an individual's life-time. A wide range of motivations are revealed, including following the instruction of parents, a desire to learn from encounters with new places, and the need to provide for a young family. Age and health concerns are important in workers' decisions to stop migrating and some of the narratives show a move away from employment into begging for a living.

At the same time, for men who are still young enough and physically fit, there is an explicit desire to move out of the employment relation if at all possible and to move into more independent income-earning through petty trade, which itself involves travelling to other parts of West Bengal and further afield. The men who tell their stories speak also of taking on different enterprises across the year, and of combining trade and employment, just as other members of their households are juggling other kinds of work. Women emerge from the men's stories as active agents too, often (though not always) being the recipients of earnings brought back by those returning from a few weeks away and then working them into their management of household finances.

The stories are wide-ranging and cover issues of how health care and schooling are accessed and the relation of these to different forms of livelihood. Because of the limited quality and quantity of public services, investing in social relations with other households in the village, not just with one's own kin, emerges as vitally important in order to be able to count on support in times of difficulty. Several of the narratives hint at the importance of the particular samaj to which the speaker belongs, how these informal groupings are subject to dissolution and reemergence, their connection with political parties, and the important role of the leader.

Abdur Rafique has carefully built up relations with people of the village over a period of eight years, and this collection is the fruit of that labour. He moved from Bolpur to take up residence there for a year in 1999-2000 and counts a number of people there among his personal friends. There is a regular flow of visitors from the village to Rafique's own house, and his decision to go back to the village in 2005 for a further eight months was enthusiastically welcomed. The stories told here are told to Rafique. The reader is listening into a conversation involving mutual respect and deep familiarity with the struggles of people making a living in rural West Bengal. In the current climate, where the state government has determinedly pressed ahead with its policy of setting up large-scale industrial units in rural areas, it has not only been migrant workers but their small-farmer employers too who have faced new challenges to their livelihoods.

Ben Rogaly

University of Sussex, UK

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Introduction

The people of rural Bengal are mostly engaged either in agricultural work or in low income jobs. From morning till night they work very hard to sustain their livelihoods. Even though these people make up a large proportion of the population, their voices have rarely been put across in print for them to be accessible to society at large. But in the context of a nation's history and the history of its people, the importance of this form of written narrative cannot be ignored. The present book is a small attempt to fill this gap.

The voices that the book presents are those of people who have been temporary migrants, at various times of year; they leave their families behind and go to various villages and cities, mainly in West Bengal, to earn a living. They are mostly engaged in agricultural work, in road and house construction, as daily wage labourers, or in the trading of seasonal agricultural produce. They work away from home, for a few days or for a few months at a time, and then return home. The little money they earn through such work is very important in the lives of these people.

The research that led to the collection of the life histories in this book was begun in the early 1990s.¹ A larger collaborative effort followed in 1999, when the UK Department for International Development funded a two-year multi-site project on seasonal migration for manual work in eastern India.² Part of the latter study focused on migration from the district of Murshidabad in the bagri region of West Bengal.³ A third research project was developed to follow up questions which Ben Rogaly, Janet Seeley and I felt had been insufficiently explored in the first two. In particular, what kind of social protection existed for vulnerable migrant workers? If the state didn't provide it, who did? And how did the women who stayed behind support themselves when men migrated? This was funded by the Development Research Centre on Migration Globalization and Poverty, based at the University of Sussex in the UK, and called Social Protection by and for Temporary Work Migrants in Bangladesh and India. This book presents thirteen of the life histories carried out for that project in India.⁴

The place chosen to carry out the research was the village of Jalpara⁵, in the *Bagri*⁶ area of Murshidabad district. This was the same village in which I had lived in 1999-2000, as part of the team researching seasonal migration in eastern India. The village was selected, because, like many other villages in Murshidabad, there were many people there, mainly men, who migrated to earn money. It was decided, because of the close relations already developed with research participants in Jalpara, and because of the large numbers of people who migrated to earn money from there, that it would also be the site of this third research project.

The population of Jalpara is dependent on agriculture for their earnings, but, even up until the recent past, farming here was quite underdeveloped. When the villagers talk about agriculture over the past 25 years, they keep mentioning how bad it was; how rain-dependent it was; and how most of the land would remain fallow because of the lack of irrigation facilities. However, with the use of shallow tubewells and water pumps and with the recent electrification of those pumps, a revolutionary change has come about. Where it was a luxury to have one rice meal a day, it has now become the norm. Whereas earlier very little land could be farmed, at present the land is cultivated for two or three crops a year, mainly rice paddy, jute, wheat, chilli, mustard and different kinds of leaf vegetables. Despite these changes, farming has not been able to generate enough employment for the local poor people. As a result, most of the household adults, mainly males, migrate, leaving homes and families behind, looking for supplementary earnings. They mainly look for jobs within West Bengal but sometimes go to other cities and villages further afield. This is known locally as going to *Rarh* or going to *bidesh*.

Actually for people here, the area surrounding their own village is perceived as their country and anything outside of it as *bidesh* – from where you can't return home on the same day.

If we look at the agricultural land in and around Bardhaman in different seasons, or at the brick kilns, it is clear that many men and women work there. A lot of them belong to the scheduled⁷ castes or tribes. Many of them leave their villages in other districts and in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand, with their children, to work there. When the seasonal work finishes, they return to their villages. However, the people who are mentioned in the book do not fall in the above categories. They do go out looking for jobs elsewhere from their home areas, just like these people do, but they are nearly all Muslims and men. Women and children hardly ever accompany them.

I stayed in Jalpara for seven months to carry out the research with another researcher, Deeptima Massey. We were guided by Ben Rogaly and Janet Seeley, who led the development of the methodology and trained us in research methods. To begin with, we conducted a census of the village and found that the village consisted of 328 families, of which 90 percent were Muslims and 10 percent were low caste Hindus. Within the Muslim population, there are two divisions – the *Sheikh* and the *Kulu*. The Kulu community's traditional job was to grind oil from seeds. But in recent times they have lost their traditional work and are now employed on farms or are in petty trade. The majority of the families have come from neighbouring villages to settle in Jalpara over the last three decades.

Everyone in the village is linked, either directly or indirectly, to agriculture. But only 16 percent of them earn enough from the land they own to sustain their families. Apart from a few families, most households own less than 10 *bighas*. 56 percent of the families derive their earnings primarily from working as daily wage labourers. Others trade seasonal crops such as *jaggery*, mango tree saplings and so on, or raise income from begging and selling straw.

The government welfare system consists of one primary school, two *anganwadi* centres, and a post office about 1 km away. To access the middle school, primary health centre or a qualified doctor, one has to travel about 6 km. The nearest town is a similar distance away.

One of the key components of the research was to interview some important people from the village, and some from outside, who were familiar with the village. It also involved observing daily life, selecting some families to gain a deeper understanding, and to observe the members of those families in their daily work. One member from each one of these families was interviewed, and the interviews were tape recorded, after gaining prior informed consent, assuring participants of anonymity and confidentiality, and of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. This book documents selected material from the interview transcripts of thirteen research participants. All of them have been to *bidesh* at some point in their lives, or still go sometimes. For narrative flow, I have edited out my own words and prompts. Also, in the process of translation, some minor alterations were unavoidable. By glossing some words or expressions (*italicized*), and inserting square brackets where clarification felt necessary, it is hoped that misinterpretations will have been avoided.

Even though the content of all the conversations centre on going to *bidesh*, they also bring out various interesting aspects about the contemporary social, economic and political situation. The interviews often highlight the relationship between the landowners and labourers. Even though labourers are slightly better off now, they still do not always receive their wages on time. Their

daily wages are not sufficient to take care of their daily needs. In times of emergency they have to pawn their gold jewellery, if they have any, to money lenders.⁸

For the majority of the families, when the only adult wage earner migrates to earn, relationships with relatives and neighbours take on added importance. Women in particular become more dependent on their husbands' parents and other kin. The earners do not really earn a great deal by going to *bidesh* – in most cases the earnings merely supplement the buying of food stocks or clothes for family members. At the same time, when they go to work elsewhere, they face a lot of problems. Pick-pockets are a major issue. Food and lodging are also sources of difficulty. Some types of work carry an inherent risk factor, like working on high-rise construction, which could lead to injury or death. And most importantly, the migrants don't always get paid the wages they have worked for. Sometimes the landowners or contractors simply don't pay up. And most of the time, the labourers can't do anything about it (for more details on this, see the articles referred to in endnote three at the end of this section). A lot of people fall ill working in unhygienic conditions in *bidesh* and thus become extremely vulnerable. They then become entirely dependent on fate or the compassion of others. The feelings and thoughts of the migrants about the families they leave behind have also found a voice here.

The book also deals with issues ranging from the inheritance rights of the women of Jalpara to the realities of the government's development projects and social protection schemes. The book also reflects widespread concern about the proportion of hard-earned money that needs to be spent just to provide two meals, or on health and children's education. Other than this, there are beautiful and significant comments on life, livelihoods, education and culture.

I hope that this book will be accepted as a contribution to the body of contemporary social and economic literature by researchers and scholars in related fields.

¹ B. Rogaly, 1999, Dangerous liaisons? Seasonal migration and agrarian change in West Bengal, in Rogaly, B., B. Harriss-White and S. Bose (eds), *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, London/New Delhi/Thousand Oaks: Sage.

² See B. Rogaly, D. Coppard, A. Rafique, K. Rana, A. Sengupta and J. Biswas, 2002, Seasonal migration and welfare/illfare in eastern India: a social analysis, *Journal of Development Studies*, 38 (5), pp89-114; and B. Rogaly, J. Biswas, D. Coppard, A. Rafique, K. Rana and A. Sengupta, 2001, Seasonal migration, social change and migrants' rights: lessons from West Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (49), pp4547-4559.

³ B. Rogaly and A. Rafique, 2003, Struggling to save cash: seasonal migration and vulnerability in West Bengal, India, *Development and Change*, 34 (4), pp659-681. A. Rafique and B. Rogaly, 2005, Internal seasonal migration, livelihoods and vulnerability in India: a case study, in T. Siddiqui (ed), *Migration and development: pro-poor policy choices*, Dhaka: University Press Ltd, pp359-385.

⁴ Another thirteen life histories (mainly of women) have been analysed as part of her doctoral thesis by Deeptima Massey, who carried out fieldwork with me in 2005-06. The parallel study in Bangladesh published its findings in 2008 in a report by A. Kabir, N. Lipi, S. Afrin and J. Seeley, entitled Social protection by and for temporary work migrants and their households in north-west Bangladesh. It is available at <http://www.migrationdrc.org/news/reports/bmds/session2/index.html>

⁵ The names of villages and interviewees in this book have been changed.

⁶ Area between the rivers Padma and Bhagirathi

⁷ Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are Indian communities that are explicitly recognized by the Constitution of India as requiring special support to overcome centuries of discrimination by mainstream Hindu society. SCs/STs together comprise over 24% of India's population, with SCs at over 16% and STs over 8% according to the 2001 Census.

⁸ A. Rafique, D. Massey and B. Rogaly, 2006, Migration for hard work: a reluctant livelihood strategy for poor households in West Bengal, *Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty Working Paper T17*. Available at http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working_papers/WP-T17.pdf

Chapter 1 BADSHA ALI

Badsha Ali is a thirty year old landless wage labourer. He lives in a one-room mud house with his wife, two sons and two daughters. There is a hand water pump in the front courtyard, next to a small cowshed. His father's brother and father's sister are his next door neighbours. His father lives in the same village but in a different neighbourhood, and his in-law's house is a few kilometres away. His earnings depend mostly on ploughing (he uses two bullocks, his plough and his own labour) for others. He also goes to other districts to cut and transplant paddy. His wife, in her spare time, teaches Arabic to some village girls, without remuneration.

My father was born in Udaypur. His own father wasn't well off, he didn't own much land. My father used to be a handsome man, [he looked] like a prince. When my mother's parents saw him they said they would marry their daughter to him and have him live with them. My mother's father was rich so my father's father agreed. That's how my father got married and moved in with them. He used to work, eat and sleep there. I was brought up in my mother's father's house. We had all hoped that he would bequeath us with some land but he left all his land to his sons. Our family didn't get any.

On the other hand, since my father didn't look after his own father, he didn't inherit anything from him either. Actually since he hadn't taken any responsibility for his father, he didn't even claim his share. Everything went to his brothers. Now my father works as a wage labourer and ploughs for others.

I studied up to about class IV in our village school. As a child, I used to play, go to school and work in the fields from time to time. And then I got married. I was married at a very young age. I've been married for fifteen years. I had a cousin on my mother's side. My mother had always hoped that I would get married to her, and it had been agreed. But later on my mother's sister got her engaged to someone else. My mother was very angry. This led to a big quarrel between the sisters. By chance, my future father-in-law was there at the time. We didn't know him then. He had come to buy chickens as he was a chicken seller. He came forward to mediate and said that he'd find me a girl. Sometime later my parents went to his house but he hadn't yet found a girl. My parents liked his daughter. She was very young then, studying in class V or VI. Her neighbours told her father to agree and so her father agreed.

There wasn't much dowry exchange in the marriage. I got a watch and a cycle, nothing else. What else could they have given? My father-in-law is as wealthy as I am! They don't own anything.

I became *bhinu* after six years of marriage, though I stayed with my father for another six months, and then came here. That was about eight years ago. When I became *bhinu* my parents gave me a *lungi* and one and a half kilos of rice. I didn't eat the rice, I kept it wrapped up. I could have shown it to you, but I've lost it now. It probably got lost when I moved here.

After becoming *bhinu*, I bought this land. It's around one and a half *shotok*. This is part of *temple land*. Adjoining ours, there's a bit of my father's land here too. There are no claimants to this plot now, but there were at the time. It belongs to the Hindu community. I bought it with a proper land deed off ten members of the community. It cost me Rs. 900. I didn't have the money at the time. We are poor. We don't have any savings. But let me tell you how I got that money.

My father-in-law gave me a goat, in fact so did my mother-in-law's father. When I became *bhinu* my family expenses were low because there were fewer people in my household then. I used to work in the village as a contract labourer for nearly 24 hours at a stretch. I was earning a lot of money then. It was the time of the paddy harvest. I had made so much money that I bought my father's brother's cow for Rs. 1600 out of one season's money and from selling the goat. Later on, I sold one cow and bought this land for Rs. 900. I don't remember what I did with the rest of the money, maybe it was all spent on food when I was unemployed. No, I remember now, I paid off an earlier debt.

Now you will ask how I built the house. One year I took a plot of land on *reehen*. The land was about ten *kathas*. I would eat the rice that came from the land and work in a potato field, while labourers would build the house. But I don't know how much it cost to build the house in total. All I can say is that I worked and the house was built. My earnings helped to build the house and also provided for our food.

My father-in-law and my mother's eldest bother helped me a lot. Aside from the wooden posts, everything else which made up the roof of the house belonged to my father-in-law. The rest of the materials on the lower portion of the house belonged to my mother's oldest brother, the whole bamboos, the strips of bamboo, and so on. He doesn't live here any more. He went off to Mongolpara. He is a good man. With my mother's other brothers my relationship is just verbal. They don't care for my well-being. They are only interested in me supporting them. I've stopped doing that over the last few years. That's because I once asked them, "I have cows and a plough, why don't you give me that piece of land over there for sharecropping, since you're not cultivating it yourselves anyway?" They wanted to give it to the sharecroppers. "Give it to me," I said, "and I'll cultivate it and will give you one more *mon* of paddy than the sharecroppers give you. This is because I won't have to spend money on tilling, since I have my own cows and plough." But my mother's brother said that he'd cultivate it himself. Later on I realized that he had leased it out on a share basis to Asish. Then Musa-*bhai* said to go on farming on 10 *kathas*. I said, "I won't go to such a far-off place to cultivate only 10 *kathas*. How will I survive farming 10 *kathas* on a share basis? If I get 2 full *bighas* on a share basis then it's feasible. Even after taking a loan to do the farming, I'd still be left with one *bigha* of paddy for myself, after paying off all the debts, including yours. Whereas if I only farm 10 *kathas*, how could I repay the loans?" I was not given the land. From then on, we stopped visiting them so regularly.

On the other hand I have quite a good relationship with my mother's eldest brother. He has a plot of land beside mine. I grow aubergines on it. I pick and eat them. The crop doesn't get sold, neither do I have to share it. It's helpful to have a bit of one's own farm. I don't own any land, so I work on other people's fields. I have ten *kathas* on a sharecropping basis. It's on a share contract for a season. I'm farming paddy on it. I'll need about one hundred kilos of paddy over the season because I'll have to share whether the crop fails or not.

I can't take land on *reehen* anymore, not only because there are more members in our family now, but also because I've been ailing for some time now. That also requires money. For example I couldn't work at all during the month of Bhadra, I had diarrhea. If something happens with the children you can cope. But if the earner is ill you can't cope, the earnings stop. That's what happened to me. Right now I can't even buy medicines for my ailing cow. I have many problems. I'm debt ridden.

I still owe Rs. 1200. I had borrowed that money from Ilyas – he also lives in this village - by pawning some gold items. Sometimes I pay back the monthly interest, sometimes I can't. I had borrowed Rs. 1500 during *Falgun* to install a hand pump. That was around eight or nine months ago now. I think I have repaid around Rs. 300. With that loan I put in a tube well, but I never got any water to drink out of it. So I had to reinstall it.

I have to pay the loans back gradually. I'm thinking of working in my village to pay them back. But the problem is that wages aren't always paid regularly if you work in your own village. Some pay but often you don't get any wages at all on the day of work. There are some good employers though who do pay you as soon as you've completed the work saying, "You've done the work, so take the money and go. You don't have to come to my house, go home straight from the fields." When I go to work in the neighbouring village, there are some landowners whose house I don't get to see, they pay you in the field. We don't have that kind of people here. If I work one day, I have to wait ten days before asking for my wages. Even then I might not get paid. They pay Rs. 50 to start off with, then maybe Rs. 10, Rs. 20 – something like that. How can that be a good thing?

I have two bullocks – I hire them out for ploughing in this village and in the next village. I get Rs. 80 per day. Generally I hire the plough throughout the year. But when it's not possible, like now, during the monsoon, then I work as a wage labourer.

Sometimes I have to travel over four and a half miles to hire out the plough. I wake up at two at night and feed the cows with shredded rice straw. Then at 4 a.m. when the *Ajan* is called, I read the *Namaz*, and then set off. When I go, I have to take my own food with me - usually cooked rice or *chal bhaja*. I reach my destination at around seven a.m and work till twelve p.m. And then, when the cow is hungry, I let it off for it to eat some grass. After that I start walking back to reach home around two thirty or three p.m.

One of the cows is ill now though. She's eating less than she used to and is slowly fading away. But I still have to work with this cow, somehow. I have to work to eat, don't I? The stomach doesn't listen. I've said to the cow, "Listen, don't take a curse from Allah. He has given you to me so that I can eat through your work. So you have to work, and do as you're told." I've smacked it a few times, out of anger.

It's really ill, but I can't take it to a vet. How much would it cost? At the most Rs. 100–150, but I can't even afford that much. I could take it to the government hospital but they would only write a prescription, they wouldn't provide the medicine. So there's no point in me going. I usually go to Mostafa, the doctor, instead. He takes Rs. 10 for the medicine. So I've decided to go to Tinbajar and get the medicine off him.

These two cows have a history. When I had the goat, I sold it and got Rs. 1600 and bought a cow. This cow had two calves. I kept them till my father sold one of them to my mother's eldest brother. At that time my father had lost one of his cows through illness. How would my father eat then? I had a calf. I told my father to take my cow and use it to plough and earn some money to eat. I had asked him not to sell it though. But he took it and sold it regardless to my mother's eldest brother for Rs. 800.

He never gave me a penny for it. But then I still had the other calf. And I thought, "What will I do with it?" I sent it off to my father-in-law's house. So I was left without any animals. After I'd given the second calf away, I used to work, eat and roam around. What else was there to do?

There was no other work. That was the time when my twins were born at my in-laws' place. I brought my children home. I told my father, "I need money, I need to buy a cow otherwise the children will go hungry." Father agreed that the children needed to be fed. So he gave me Rs. 1800 and I put in Rs. 700, and with those Rs. 2500 I bought another cow. It was a black, city cow. It had plastic bags in its stomach. The more I fed it, the more ill it became. I sold the cow after a while, and was left with the girl calf. I was left with the calf and the money from selling the black cow. At that time one of my brothers-in-law had appendicitis. I gave the money I'd earned from selling the cow to my father-in-law but said to him that I'd take his calf. That's the red calf, I kept it and brought it back here. Then the flood of 2000 came. When the water receded, I said to my mother's oldest brother, "We have to eat now, the land is not ready to be cultivated yet, and it will take time. But since you have three cows, why don't you give one to me?" My mother's brother said, "For how much?" I said, "About Rs. 1400–1500." The cow wasn't well. It was the calf that I'd had and which my father had sold on to him. My mother's brother asked for Rs. 2500. But I said, "No, Rs. 2300", pushed the money into his pocket and took the cow away. I fed it well, so it got better. The other calf that I had left at my father-in-law's was now a bull. After the flood, my father-in-law left the cow and a knife with me. Everything was inundated. What would the cow eat? Is this something that I have to explain? He left the knife so I could cut branches and leaves to feed the cow. The knife was small and I lost it three times. Actually it was stolen three times. I used to cut bamboo strips with that knife and feed the cow with the young leaves. The cow got better on that diet and it's been here ever since. I keep buying and selling cows. In other words, I'm dependent on someone else. This is the crux of the matter. I don't have enough power to activate anything by myself.

I have had two cows since the 2000 floods. I have been ploughing for three years with this cow. By the next *Qurbani*, another one will be for one year. These two may fetch around Rs. 7000. But one of them has become as thin as a stick, all bones. It's a cow's illness, isn't it? The other cow is OK. But you can't plough with only one cow.

I find it very difficult to maintain these twin cows as you can tell. You might wonder then why I keep them. So I can work whenever I want to. A family might give Rs. 80 for ploughing a *bigha*, so ten *kathas* will fetch me Rs. 40. And when I'm ill I can come home. I can plough ten *kathas* and come back home and be at peace. Whereas working as a daily wage labourer does not give me that option. You have to leave at six in the morning and come back at one in the afternoon, when the *Ajan* is called out. But as soon as you get back you have to eat, don't you? The stomach has to be fed first. Then there are also things like *Namaz*.

I keep cows [because it allows me to do] my *Namaz*, even though it's a problem really. There's no benefit in keeping cows if I only get to plough once a year, when I could be ploughing many thousands of *bighas* of land with a pair of cows. On the other hand, there are eight members in our family, six people and two cows, which means that minimum daily expenses come to around Rs. 70. That's the truth – and for Rs. 70, a person doesn't even get two hundred grammes of fish, neither will a cow get two hundred grammes of *khol*. So how do I manage? I spend Rs. 30 on straw and Rs. 40 on vegetables, rice, and cooking oil. Then you wonder how the household runs? It relies on Allah.

Millionaires see themselves through each day and night, so do beggars. And that's how it is for me. This is my story.

I get some help because my parents-in-law look after me. When my wife was seven months pregnant, she found it difficult to move. So my parents-in-law took her in. The twins were born.

Then my in-laws realized that she could not look after the twins and my household at the same time, so she was asked to stay there. Later on when the children could sit up, she moved back here. When they were not at home I used to eat at my father's. Whatever I earned I used to give to him and eat with him. So when my children came here on the 10th of *Chaitra*, I didn't even have a kilo of rice to feed them. I was working at Raju Shah's house, doing wheat work. I was owed two labourers' wages, but I didn't get any at all. So I had no money. What was I to do, how was I to feed the children? They would want some milk. So my in-laws sent over some milk. At that time, I got work with the Bank to water the *khaskhas*. I got the job because I had a class IV literate *employment exchange* card. I used to go to the Bank everyday. That work gave me a lot of respite. I used to earn around Rs. 3000–3500 every month. My children were brought up on that money.

Then came the flood, in the same year. The flood water didn't reach my place but the whole neighbourhood was flooded. I wasn't really affected. [I didn't have anything anyway.] So what could I have lost? But I had a lot of problems, in the sense that all work came to a halt. What would we eat then? I had small savings, and we ate from that. That's the way I managed during that period. I was also given Rs. 100 as someone had sent some aid money to our village – I bought milk for the children with that money. When the floods came, I only had a kilo of milk, and two kids to feed. One kg of milk is only enough for four days' food. What was I to do after that had run out? The prices in the shop shot up. How can a packet of *biri* cost Rs. 5?! It went up to that. So I had to buy biscuits. Never mind the water levels, and thus the prices, increasing, I had to find ways of feeding the children for them to survive. As long as I lived, I would feed them.

If everything had been flooded then we would have all died together. I would go to the shop to buy biscuits; I paid in cash and brought them back for us to eat. I would warm up a little bit of the milk and feed them with that and the biscuits. Allah took care of us and I didn't feel the strain so much. But I never got any help from the state.

A lot of relief was sent to our village. Some families got Rs. 2000 each from the government. Rice was distributed to nearly everyone. Tin sheets were given out. Whatever was needed was given. But I wasn't given anything when I was in need. During the actual floods, I didn't face scarcity, but once the waters had receded, I faced a lot of trouble. I became debt-ridden. No one could tell how scarcity was affecting different households. But surely that's the role of the village elders to find out, isn't it? For example, I'm the elder in my family, my wife is too. So the responsibility to look after our children is ours, isn't it? But in the village no one cared to see how my children and I were faring. No one really bothered.

I never told anyone. What could I have said, tell me? The thing is that you look after your own sorrow, but don't let others see it. Our *Member* took me to Parvatinagar, but actually he didn't take only me. The villagers said, "Let's all go, we may get some rice." So I went, but didn't get anything. After a while, I went to Tuladanga *Panchayat*. Nothing happened there either. Apparently we are listed under the rich category. Since my mother's parents were rich, we are also classed as such. My ration card comes under the rich category, and we only have that one ration card. We're trying to get others, but for us it's always 'no, no'. I have the birth certificates ready. My wife's cards have been transferred [from the office of the village where her parents live]. We've made photocopies and everything. Once I went to the office but the office was closed. So I came back. It's just that to earn enough money to feed our stomach takes up such a lot of time that there's not a spare moment. It costs Rs. 20 to go, on top of losing a day's wage. If I leave my work, that landowner will employ someone else. So I'd lose the job too. It's

a highly problematic situation. Thinking of all this puts me off from going. On the one day I have no work and think of going to the office, it is closed. Like today, I have no work, but the office is closed. So nothing happens.

Doesn't the government run various programmes at different times? Like the *IRDP* under which loans and other types of support were given out. But the government can't say that I've ever been given a single tablet. That's the truth of it. The government can't say that, "Since you are my citizen I gave you medicine when you were dying." But someone could have usurped my name and availed of the facilities, if that person had a similar name. If some money was allocated in my name, you could go and say that you're Badshah Ali. Then your witness could confirm that it's your name, and the money would be given to you, not me. This happens. Otherwise why can't a person like me get government support? How come?

I don't go to government hospitals to see the doctors. If I am ill I go to the village quack. If he can't help, only then do I go to the hospital surgeon. But even if you go to the hospital you'll need money. You can't get any service without money. The way things are, people who don't have money have to pay, and people who have money don't, the world has become a *dada's* world. Whoever is good at being a *dada*, has access to everything. [That's how it is], even in the hospitals. But how can the poor do the *dadagiri*?

What work of the government can I praise? Children need education, but the system is no good. Look at our village school. Light came, but then it disappeared again. When master Ajoy was here, and master Dilip from Topdanga was here, the school had a semblance of discipline, but there's no discipline now. In those days, when the masters entered the classroom, no one could guess how many kids were inside. Now five kids make as much noise as fifty. No one would dare to speak loudly before. You had to be polite. Whoever was rude got a whack. Now the students arrive at ten and the masters at eleven. And then they read the newspapers carefully and drink tea. After that its time to feed the *khichuri* to the students. Actual *tiffin* time should only last one hour, from 1pm. But since the master arrives late, the *tiffin* gets delayed. And by the time *tiffin* is over, it's two-thirty p.m. And at three p.m., the school closes. There should be classes after the *tiffin* period, at least maths or science. We know, we were taught like that. Nothing works nowadays.

The masters arrive at eleven but the students start to come in at ten. They fight amongst themselves. Sometimes I beat them. If you are not strict, then someone might get injured. Someone could fall from the roof for example – that's why discipline is necessary. Sometimes, out of exasperation, I discipline them, but then the *masters* tell me, "Listen Badshah, you were wrong to smack them. Even if the children fight, don't say anything." I say, "Why master *mashai*?" They answer, "The students have come to school and they're under our responsibility now." So I ask them, "Why do you come at eleven? Which government register says that your duty starts at eleven? All government work starts at ten, and you come at eleven – is that right? When you are not there the students fight. I came to discipline them because the school is close by and now you're telling me off. If a student breaks his leg or hand, or if an accident happens, will you come from Topdanga to look after him? Or will I have to leave all my work, leave everything and run to the hospital with the child? I'll have to run with my work equipment, carry the child on my shoulders and go to the doctor. Will you carry him? Listen, you need to know a person before you speak to him. You teach here and bring people from other villages for meetings. [But they're not from here so] how would they be able to change anything here?" This is what I said. There was a young master who was smiling all the time, because he knew I was right. That was the last time I said anything.

I've been to *bidesh* to work as a wage labourer. When I first went to *bidesh*, I was about fourteen or fifteen. All my friends were going so I went along with them. My father also used to go to *bidesh*, but I can't say what he did exactly or how long he used to stay there for. I do remember one thing though. I was small then. My father had gone to drive someone else's bullock cart. He'd gone to sell *naad*, and came back home at the two at night. My father had two cows. Their legs were swollen; they had walked a long way.

When I went to *bidesh*, I thought that I'd be able to buy cows, or a goat, or else hire a piece of land with the money I'd earn. But that didn't happen. I've never been able to do any of those things. Everything gets spent when you're ill. You don't earn much there. Once I brought back Rs. 1400–1500; that was the most I ever earned in *bidesh*. I was away for seventeen days, including the travel. That was during the winter paddy harvest season. Did I mention that I went to Hoogly? So upon returning, I bought some straw for Rs. 1000 and had Rs. 400 left, most of which went on buying medicines for [my wife]. She had brought medicines worth Rs. 200 from the village doctor while I was away – she had to pay that back. On my return, I had to buy another Rs. 100 worth of medicines to make her better. So I was left with Rs. 100. What can you do with that? I had also had a meal in the hotel on the day of my return. I had thought that we'd only reach home late at night and there might not be any rice left, so I ate some rice at the hotel. Some had rice, some had bread and sweets. And knowing the kids were waiting at home, how could I come back empty-handed? They would say, "Father is back, what have you got for us?" So I bought a few sweets for them and then returned home. The kids were happy because their father had come back with sweets.

When I first went, I was young and I suffered. I used to find cow-dung in my puffed rice and in my rice, in many different things. I used to starve from eating irregularly. Puffed rice is dry, so I only used to eat that from time to time.

Let me tell you about my first experience of going to *bidesh*. I was fourteen or fifteen. I didn't like going to *bidesh*. Labouring in *bidesh* is actually bitter work, as they say. You really can't eat the rice they serve you there. Now you see, when you serve rice to someone, you have to be polite, don't you? It doesn't matter whether you're feeding a person or a cow, you have to serve food carefully. Gently. No matter how you eat, food should always be served decently. But the food was dirty - the aubergines had insects in them. One day I found a worm, a big red worm which looked like a train, in my fried aubergines. It was in my mouth. Initially I thought, "What the hell is in my mouth, a prawn?" But the taste was different. I spat out the food. Who can eat after that? I didn't say anything to anyone. If people want to eat, let them eat. Why should they not eat because of me? I stood up from my place and went outside. I was feeling nauseous. So I washed my mouth with water. This is what it's like if you go to work for the Hindus, they are the dirtiest.

They are terrible, terrible. Because you are bound to find cow dung in their rice and puffed rice. It always happens. Sometimes less and sometimes more. Especially in the puffed rice. In our Muslim community, you can eat puffed rice with your eyes shut. But that is not the case with them. Just bring a piece of paper and a pen and then we'll go to *bidesh* together. We'll work in a Hindu household for ten days and a Muslim household for ten days! You will see that Hindu food is bound to have cow dung. There's no two ways about it.

Then people usually have to rest after eating, but the Hindus make us clean the eating place with cow dung. Wherever we eat, we have to clean the place. This is very upsetting. How much

hatred can they have for us, that they make us clean the floor with cow dung? “Poke the ground and clean it with cow dung,” that’s what they say.

Before, we didn’t understand how to do this. How do you poke the ground? There’s no spade around. But there were some sickles lying around. So we used a sickle to poke. They told us to poke, so we poked. “But not with that,” they said. “Put some cow dung and sweep with a broom.” So I cursed them. See this sugar sack? We call it a *bosta*, but they call it a *bora*. I didn’t know that at first. I searched for a *bora* but couldn’t find one. I looked for over an hour. They stack the *bora* below the paddy storage place. I said that I couldn’t find a *bora*, because there was no *bora* plant around, so how was I to find one? In our land *bora* is a plant like a bean creeper. You can eat it. We also call it *lafa*. That is what a *bora* is. So I was looking for a tree. But could I find *bora*? No. Someone from the house said, “Don’t you understand what a *bora* is?” I did understand that you couldn’t store anything in a *bora*. You eat it. I tried to point that out, indirectly. But then the man ran to the house and brought back a *bora* and said, “Here it is,” and I cursed and thought, “What you have is a *bosta*, that’s what we call it in our land.” So I stacked the paddy in it and stored it. The man was really rude. That’s why to be a wage labourer is a bitter experience, especially in *bidesh*.

When I work in *bidesh*, I mostly go to Barddhaman. But this time I won’t go to Barddhaman, I’ll go to Hugli instead. The wages in Barddhaman are lower and the working hours longer. After returning I wouldn’t even be able to buy straw, because the prices here are higher. All the people from our land go to Hooghly. It’s more difficult there but you can earn a little bit more. So, you want to know about Hooghly? I go to the field in the early morning before dawn. Now, imagine that your fingers are cold, it’s winter. Our faces are wrapped with pieces of papers, bits of clothes, whatever — we call it ‘catching the heat’. That’s how we start our day at work. Then, keep working and don’t think about the food break, because the work is contractual, so the sooner you finish the better. At eleven a.m. we eat the stale rice. Even though we cook it ourselves the day before, sometimes I can’t eat it. There’s no time. One person may want to eat, but the others might say, “Not now”. So how long can I survive? One day’s work eats away six months of your life. By dusk, your heart and mind are tired and broken. Somehow, all I can do is eat some freshly cooked rice and go to sleep. Work the whole day, without any food, and then cook, eat and sleep. This is the way it goes. When I think of all these difficulties, I don’t feel like going. I think that maybe I should buy straw by taking a loan. But on the other hand, if I don’t go, then my debts will keep rising. And if you take a loan out, it will still have to be repaid somehow.

Once in *bidesh* I was in great difficulty. There were seven of us at the time, all from the same village, the same neighbourhood. One Hindu household didn’t want to pay us for our work. We eventually managed to get our wages, but only after a lot of trouble. I’ve forgotten the name [of the landowner’s village] now. It was in Barddhaman district. He was a *goonda*. We managed to get our money after a lot of hassle. The man was dangerous. The villagers there didn’t dare intervene. If anyone had dared, he would have had his hand chopped off.

But we managed to get him. After twenty days, as the work was finished and we were planning to go home the next morning, we went to ask for our wages. He said, “Sit down and I’ll get the money from the bank.” And then he disappeared for the whole day. So we started working for one of his neighbours. One day we saw him on a motorbike. So we laid a rope on the ground. As he was passing, we tightened the rope and he fell. We then tied him up and took him to his house. When we reached his house, his eldest son started chasing us with a gun. And we said, “If you kill us it won’t be much good for you. See, your father is lying here. If you shoot us, we’ll

draw all his intestines out. Just give us the money. We have worked very hard. We've come here to feed our hungry stomachs. We haven't come to steal. We've are here to help you and you are being unhelpful. Give us the money. We have worked hard, haven't we?" The whole village was watching us. In the end he gave us the money. The whole amount. And then we let him off and ran away. We didn't take the road out of fear, but went through the fields instead. After a while we saw a lorry filled with sand. We asked the driver to give us a lift to Katwa. He agreed. In Katwa as we were boarding the train we saw the *mastan*. We thought he would take our money away again. He doesn't usually let any of his labourers return with their money. So out of fear we went to the police station and explained our situation. So they said, "All right. Don't worry. Get on the train and go." The police kept an eye on us so he couldn't do anything at the station. And thus, we returned home safely.

Had we not been as young as we were then, if we'd been as old as we are now, we wouldn't have gone through the fields. It is easier to be killed there. But we were young then, so we just ran, thinking, "What can he do to us?" We were all young and immature.

Once I fell ill in *bidesh*. We had eleven days of work then. We used to sleep in the *club house*. It was the month of *Pous*. After seven days of work, I started coughing. The bouts of coughing would leave me completely breathless. I used to say to Allah, "Please don't make me work in *bidesh*. You're the Lord of Death. Kill me before I come to work in *bidesh*." I was also very upset that when these coughing bouts started, none of the people sleeping in the *club house* would wake up and help me. I had to massage my chest by myself. But how can you do it when you are ill? Still, I tried. I was gesturing to others but they wouldn't understand. After a long while, when the cough eased off, I started to cry, "Allah, please do not bring me here to work."

A lot of problems occur when we are in *bidesh*. The family frequently gets ill in my absence, especially the children. This is because they have more problems to cope with. So there's more illness. The family also has to deal with food shortages. When that happens, they go to our friends and relatives and tell them that I will return after so many days and sort it out but, "Give us some paddy now." They usually get some. I always try to save something before leaving, but it never happens. I never seem to be able to leave any money behind. I try very hard to leave Rs. 100–150 behind but I never manage to do so. I don't have it available. So I go, leaving them empty-handed. When I am at home, they cook twice a day, but when I'm away they only cook once a day. And some days, not at all. And that's when illness occurs; this is what I've heard. Then I get angry and say, "Why do you behave like this? I do all this work for us to have food, and you're starving yourselves? The stomach comes before God." [My wife] replies, "I don't feel well enough to eat." There are lots of problems and lots of negative feelings around.

There are other difficulties when I am not home. When there's a young woman at home, then the nights are scary. People tease. I get very upset about this. And I say to Allah, "Do something for me so that I don't have to go to *bidesh* and for there not to be any teasing."

When things like that happen, the only people who would protest are my father and my brothers. But they are far away. When they do find out, they come [but they don't always hear about it]. This is why I don't like going to *bidesh*. Working as a labourer in your home area is different to working in *bidesh*. Even if I slave in my own land, at least I can stay at home. I can at least see what's happening.

Besides all of this, the children suffer too. When I'm in *bidesh* my wife might get ill. But the cows still have to be taken care of. So she asks the girls to clean the house, to do the chores and the cooking and asks the boys to look after the cows. Both the boys go to school, but then they have to work. So their schooling suffers. The crux is that if the earner is not well, then the house is not well either. You will ask, how do I survive? Allah runs it, so it runs. This is the truth.

Chapter 2 ANWAR SHEIKH

Anwar Sheikh is around forty-five years old and his family consists of three daughters and his wife. One of his daughters got married six years ago. The youngest daughter is twelve. He has close to one bigha of cultivable land. He mainly works as a wage labourer in agriculture. They live in a mud house with a tiled roof. In front of the house there's a wide courtyard, at one end there is a hand water pump and at the other, a few goats and two small calves. In one corner of the courtyard is a rickety old cycle. This is most useful when going to work in the neighbouring fields. Anwar, in various seasons, migrates to cut and transplant paddy.

When I was around six or seven years old, my parents had a lot of difficulties. We didn't have much land, only two or three *bighas*. Father used to fall ill frequently. He couldn't work. As a result he used to hire out the land for sharecropping. The land used to produce some years, other years it didn't. The *bhadoi* paddy sometimes gets flattened, and then the crop doesn't yield. So whether you got a crop or not, that was still our share. If there was no crop on the land, what would the sharer have to share? But this is how we used to live. My mother used to feed us with whatever she could lay her hands on. It was very difficult then. We didn't get to eat properly. No one told me to go to school, and I didn't make the effort. At that time we were still looked after, hugged, so nobody would beat us to force us to go to school. Or maybe I was too naughty to go to school. In any case what did I know then? Maybe they told me to go and I still refused to go. I don't remember much. Or maybe there was another reason to it. My parents had twelve children, out of which only six are alive today. The other six, five boys and one girl, died. As all their [previous] boys had died, their first surviving son became quite special. So they probably thought that, even if their boy didn't go to school, it wouldn't matter. There was a kind of fear that if their only child [at the time] died too, who would they beat then? As a result I never learned to read. When I was a little older I was sent to shepherd cows and goats.

Since we didn't own any livestock, I used to shepherd for others. I shepherded cows and goats. The landowner would only give me food, or a pair of shorts. I was not paid any cash wages. [In fact,] I wasn't given any cash wages until I turned fifteen. In our area, no one pays you in cash when you are thirteen or fourteen. I had to live in other families' households throughout the year. Tending goats is a big responsibility. Foxes would prey on them. Even you, who are an adult, would not be able to prevent foxes snatching the goats away.

One day a goat was snatched away from my eldest brother. The owner beat him up saying, "What were you doing when the goat was snatched away? Playing or what?" "No," he replied. "I was bringing them back along the *al* in a line." When you have fifteen or sixteen goats walking on the *al*, in a line, then there's a big distance between the first and the last. One of the first ones got taken away. The family scolded him anyway, and beat him up. He came back angry, and didn't eat anything at all. He was just cursing and saying, "I won't work for them anymore." So you see we always lived in poverty. No food, nothing. We survived on *chatu*. It's very difficult to describe our early days. I would starve for whole days and then would sometimes get one small portion of food, but that didn't stop the hunger.

I worked in that household till I was fourteen or fifteen years old, and after that I started working as a daily wage labourer. After a whole day's work, I would only eat once, in the evening. There were five or six of us eating together. I never got to eat properly. In our area we would work for one month but then we would have no work the next. I used to stay with Alam. Even when I was fifteen, my monthly salary was Rs. 10. How can that be sufficient? So I started to work as a daily labourer for a rupee a day or a rupee and four *annas* per day. The price of rice was Rs. 2½ per kg, so I was actually earning half a kilo of rice to get one meal at home. Otherwise I

couldn't have been fed at home. I also had sisters. So the family could only eat two meals a day. Five to seven eaters. So, if we two brothers could work for one rupee four *annas* a day, then between us we'd earn just enough for a kilo of rice. This meant that the family could then eat a little. And if the three of us, our father and us two sons earned, how much would that come to? It would be Rs. 3 and 12 *annas*. Most days we just spent drinking water and eating little bits. It was never easy.

I got married when I was twenty. I was still under the responsibility of my parents. They provided everything, including the dowry, paid for the loan, the debts, for everything. Later we repaid it all by working. For the dowry, they gave me a ring and a button – one *anna* less than a *bhori*. Nothing else. My father-in-law had about two and a half *bighas* of land. He gave me about ten *kathas* [half a *bigha*] of it as my share.

After my marriage, I stayed with my parents for about twelve to fourteen years. Brothers, parents, we all lived together. And then I became *bhinu*. And after becoming *bhinu*, I kept on living in the same house for a while. My parents didn't give me anything. I achieved everything through my own labour. I bought this land and built the house. I got one sister married. Do you see those two calves? I want to sell them and use the money to pay the dowry for the weddings of some of my other sisters, I think. Or cover some of the expenses at least.

I think I moved here eighteen years ago. I bought this piece of land for around Rs. 10,000 a *bigha*. First I bought ten *kathas*, later on a little more. I got some of my father's land too. Well it is his and at the same time it isn't. He took my wife's ring and the button [gold items] and registered these twelve *kathas* of land in my name in return. So it's actually mine. My father gave me the land in exchange for my gold items. But I also should have received a share of his remaining two to three *bighas* of land, shouldn't I? But I didn't get any. Later on I bought seven *kathas* myself which I sold off afterwards and bought this land, where the house is now.

I farm rice on the land that I have. The crop failed this time, I got only eleven *mons* per *bigha*. I'll plant *rai* next time. It hasn't been sown yet. The land is uncultivated at the moment. I had taken five *kathas* of land on *reehen*. That has been paid back. And this year I got ten *kathas* from my father-in-law. Actually I was due eight but got ten. The plough doesn't turn properly in eight *kathas* so he gave me ten instead. Otherwise it's not really worth the plough's labour. That paddy on the courtyard, that's from that land. Before, when the girls were young, I used take up land on lease. Now it's not possible. How could I, amongst all this poverty?

Look, even during the festive season, during the month of *Roja*, fruit is not an option. I can't even afford the *sarbat* to break the fast, that's how bad it is. When the fast breaks in the evening, there are no vegetables. After fasting for a whole day, is it possible to eat only rice and salt? Even during *Roja*, that's all we have. On top of that, we have debts of around Rs. 3000. Should I repay the loans or buy vegetables?

I have debts with many people. I have a debt for irrigation water, a debt for my wife's eye operation. Now a debt for the plough, a debt for irrigation water, and also for the cart with which I brought in this paddy, that debt. Lots of debts. The festival is coming up soon, I'll have to get new clothes. Shall I sell the paddy to repay the loans or to get clothes? If I get clothes, then we'll be even more in debt.

The debts could have been even higher though. But my brothers and sisters helped us a bit during my wife's eye operation. All of us siblings had shares of a tree - seven shares in total.

But they donated that tree to me and I sold it to pay for my wife's operation – this was of great help. But now, if my siblings want their share of the tree back, then I'll have to sell some land. The tree is located on collective land. I also have a billy goat, which I want to sell. I spoke to a middleman, but the price didn't suit me. I asked for Rs. 1200 and he offered Rs. 1000 and left. With this I could have repaid some of the loans, such as the plough loan for example. I can't repay all the debts by selling paddy, it's not even sufficient to cover the debt for the water. Now it's paddy harvesting time. If I get some work then that should at least bring in enough money for salt and oil. I went looking for work in the neighbouring village, but nothing materialized. Again, in the morning I had thought that I wanted to go, but my heart wasn't ready. I thought of selling the paddy to repay something. People are getting annoyed. In the morning someone came – Jishan's brother Rohid. I owe him money for the cart. He came to ask for it. He belongs to a large *samaj*. Just imagine, there are about two hundred of them. If they came to strangle me, I wouldn't be able to escape. I'm very scared. I don't have a *samaj* here but they do. If they want to catch me, I'll literally have to run away.

We are always scared of taking on more loans. If I promise to repay one today and can't, then the day after I won't get any more loans. So we have to be careful. Whatever I promise has to be fulfilled. Otherwise I'll never get any more loans in the future. We are poor and I'm alone. There are not enough people to back me up. So if I'm rude, I won't get any loans. I can't afford to be rude to anyone. I have to be polite.

Our relatives are not well enough off to give us loans. Only one of them is, but he isn't willing to help us. One of my wife's brothers is quite a 'heavyweight' - he's a rich and respected person. He was head of the *Panchayat*. He never comes to our house though. Maybe he thinks that we'll ask for things and that's why he doesn't visit.

And her eldest brother, well, he died in a bus accident. He used to visit us when he was alive. Was he scared of being asked for things? No. This is because he was poor like us. He wasn't worried about his sister asking him for things. He used to come, but the other one doesn't. My wife cries and says that she doesn't want anything from him, that she just wants to see him – and she calls him, but he doesn't visit. He hasn't come for a long time. The other day when my wife was nearly dying, she called him and he did come, but only after a long time. My wife didn't see him at first. So she was saying, "No, my brother never comes. He won't come." There was a *kaviraj* sitting here who said, "Here's your brother." But still she kept saying, "My brother will not come. He doesn't look after me, he will never come."

My father-in-law is no longer alive, but my mother-in-law is – although she can't move about much anymore. Sometimes she visits us, when we are in need. Otherwise, she doesn't. Only when her daughter falls ill and she's told about it does she come. On the other hand, I have good relationships with my brothers. But see, we are all poor. They can't give us anything. We just see and talk to each other – that's all.

Of my four daughters, I married one off, so there are still three left. Two of them are studying. The youngest is in class V and the eldest is in class VI. She failed once and had to repeat class VI; she failed by five marks. Her classmates all went into the year above. But since I didn't visit the school, she wasn't allowed to go up into the next year. Everyone is corrupt, even the teachers. All they want is to eat, just like the rest of us. They think that if they fail someone, the student's father will come and they might get something out of him. And that's why they fail students. She wasn't allowed into the year above for five marks, whereas some were promoted to class VII even though they were ten marks short. This is how my daughter failed.

The other daughter doesn't go to school anymore. She stays at home. She left school after finishing primary education. We told her to go to school, but she said that she was shy. I spoke to the teacher and got her enrolled. But she wouldn't go. I just couldn't get her to go. I enrolled the youngest daughter for Rs. 2 less than Rs. 70. You also have to buy books though. I had a goat which I sold; that fetched me Rs. 500. Out of that, I paid the Rs. 70 for her school admission, the rest I spent on eating, books and so on, mainly useless things. I had to get a uniform made too, which cost Rs. 200. After all that, I was left with Rs. 150–200. That went on salt, oil and so on, and was all spent.

For a few months she had a private tutor. But she said, "We don't have any money, you can't even run the family. How will you pay for a private tutor? Let's stop the tuition and I'll take the exams without it." That's how the tuition stopped. She had studied with the private tutor for about four months, but I couldn't raise the money to pay the teacher. So it had to stop.

I want them to study. If the girls study, it's good for them. It could help them get jobs, such as looking after paperwork. They could raise the status of their own family. Maybe give private tuition too. And if they have studied well, and if Allah wishes, then they could maybe even run a pharmacy.

The girls have to get married. They have to be given jewellery for the wedding. But how will I get hold of this? You understand what it's like, don't you? I have nothing. My wife has worked in the neighbour's chilli field, and she has made a few earrings. But I can't provide anything extra through my labour. And then, in times of need, I have to pawn things to run the family. Sometimes with the pawn money, I buy some food. When the crops are good however, I earn some money from selling the produce. Or I might be able to sell a goat and that brings in some money, with which I can repay a loan. It happens. But if I can't recover the pawned goods, they get sold off. That's the way it goes.

I married off my eldest daughter in the year 2000. The dowry was around Rs. 9000 in cash, a cycle at Rs. 2000, a watch at Rs. 300, as well as earrings and a nose stud – around Rs. 3000. In total Rs. 14,000. With the wedding feast it all came to about Rs. 22,000. At that point I had three or four cows. Selling them got me Rs. 5000. I also sold four *kathas* of land, got some money and somehow managed to get the gold jewellery made. The crop that I had produced was used for the feast.

Before I used to hire land on lease. Now I can't do that any more. It has stopped. This year has been very difficult. One of my daughters was ill – she was in bed for two months. I had to buy medicines to make her better. Another one of my daughters has also been ill. So she had to be cured with medicines too. Fever, head illness, stomach illness, all sorts of ailments. On top of that, the daughters' mother needed an eye operation. That cost around Rs. 5000. The operation itself was Rs. 3000, and the medicines were around Rs. 2000 but she was weak, so she had to take more medicines, which also cost money. So all of this came to Rs. 5000. And there's still more to be spent, but I've already run up a loan of Rs. 5000.

We face so many difficulties; but still we don't get anything from the *Panchayat* – not even five kilos of anything. The only time we got something was when the *Congress* party was in power – the year of *Milo* eating, before Purno-babu was the *MLA*, we got twenty kilos of wheat. But that was possibly twenty-five years ago. Since then, nothing. Even during the 2000 flood, they never gave us anything. Not even a tarpaulin.

The year of the flood, the ten *kathas* of land that I had got inundated. We had no crops of any kind. But I didn't get anything. Not even five kilos of *bichon*. Neither five *paisa* of aid. Even though the flood affected us seriously, I didn't get anything. See, I have fifteen *kathas* of land here and over there another fifteen *kathas*, so a total of one and a half *bighas*, but I couldn't produce anything because of the flood. And I didn't get any help. I said, "Look, there are so many boxes of aid arriving, give me some," but they didn't. I said, "At least give me the seed." But they replied, "It's not been officially released yet, so you can't have any." The paddy was lost in the flood, so I didn't get any rice out of it, nor did I get any help from anywhere. We were facing severe problems. Sometimes it's so difficult, it becomes unbearable. The people in the village, the rich ones, they don't have any compassion for us – the naked people. They don't respond to your call. I had to take loans from here, from there, from many different people, in order to survive. I haven't been able to cope with it, even now [I still can't repay it]. That debt is still there. Last year the bank loan was repaid. But the village loan remains unpaid.

That's how things work. I repaid the bank loan because I was worried about the rise in the interest. In the village, thanks to friendships, at least there's no interest. That's how I get by. Sometimes I pawn gold ornaments to the moneylender and with the money I buy some food or some clothes. This is what I have to do to get by.

In times of need, we often call upon members of one of the *parties*. But they don't pay us any attention. I mean, we are not a big group - our *samaj* is small. We don't represent many votes. There are only three of us brothers – so three times two, six votes, maximum nine. When they see a group of twenty potential voters, they will help – everything is sorted out in five minutes. But our family isn't like that. We can't even afford to oil our heads. So they don't help us. If we call them for asking for work, they will say, "I don't have time now, I'm off to Topdanga or to Baharampur. I don't even have five minutes to spare. So I can't do anything today." But I need him on that day and he says he'll come the day after. How can I get my work done? This is how the village 'heavyweights' behave with us, the poor.

Now, see, none of my daughters have ration cards. Only the two of us, my wife and I, have cards. My son-in-law keeps scolding me, saying, "Unless you get hold of the card, you'll have to take your daughter back home, I can't get a ration for her from the shop." I can't argue with that. It really is a huge problem. If I can't provide my daughters with ration cards, what will happen when I want to marry them off?

I've tried hard to get the cards. When I ask the *party* leaders, they say, "Not now, later," and so on. "Not during this election, maybe around the next one." They also say, "We are not in power at the moment, so we have very little influence." If I tell the *Congress* party, they say that their quota is over, that there are no cards left. "Let the next elections come, then you'll get it." And when the voting season actually comes, they say, "We can't do the cards right now, we are busy with the elections. How can we spend time on getting the card for you?" This is why it drags on and on. And in the meantime, my daughter got married, but the card never arrived. When I go to the government ration office, they say, "Yes, you'll get your card. But speak to your dealer first." Now I don't know what the dealers say to the ration office authority. But the authority doesn't tell me anything, they keep avoiding me. They keep saying to go to the dealer first and get the form signed by him, only then can the ration card be issued. And when I go to the dealer, he says that there's no rule which says that he has to sign the card first. I don't know whether there's another office which might be more helpful. I've never tried going to any other office.

The ration cards that we have are under the category of *Kha*. But they give us goods under the category of *Ga* which means you only get paraffin oil, nothing else. They usually give us 400 ml of paraffin oil. But sometimes we only get 300 ml, and at other times, 450 ml or even half a litre. Sometimes they give it and sometimes they don't. It all depends on their mood. I don't have time to go and get it though. Should I go to work or to pick up the ration? The girls tend to go and fetch the ration.

We used to be part of a *samaj* in the village. For my eldest daughter's wedding, I had to invite the whole *samaj*. The *samaj* also helped organise it. They are of great help, they really are. For example, I might take the *samaj* leader along with me to negotiate the amount of dowry. Whether the dowry is Rs. 10,000 or 20,000, that's up to the leaders to settle. Then there are the wedding expenses, which the *guardian* of the son or the daughter provides for. But the *samaj* leader will guide us and advise us on how to spend the money on the various things that are needed for the wedding.

For the wedding, I invited all the people from the *samaj*. As well as our relatives, friends, neighbours, everyone. That's how it's done. But we're no longer part of a *samaj*. We don't go to Naoroj leader's *samaj* anymore because of a past incident. Naoroj has a relative, his *Tahoi*, called Safique. My brother had gone to sell land to him. The verbal agreement was Rs. 50,000 per *bigha*. Safique gave my brother Rs. 30,000 as a cash advance. But then he decided later on that he didn't want the land anymore and asked for his advance back. Does anyone give an advance back? If there's an agreement, who returns the advance? No one does.

But Safique wanted his money back. "Why should I give you the money, I will not give it back," said my brother. "I'll sell the land to you. We'd agreed on Rs. 50,000, so let's just get on and do the land registration. And the land will be yours tomorrow. The rate that we'd agreed on stands." So my brother didn't return the advance. Safique and his son-in-law took us to Jeeshan's, where they surrounded us and said that, unless we gave the money back, they wouldn't let us go. That Jeeshan was in it too. They literally tried to strangle us. You know, rich people have the right to do that. We don't really count. That's what it's like.

On matters like these everyone was on their side, including the naked and the poor. They all agreed that the advance had to be returned. Do you understand? We didn't agree. Under such circumstances how could we stay in that *samaj*? How can you ever speak to them again? If someone shows a knife to me, can I stay in good terms with them? Could you? This is the crux of the matter.

Even though we don't belong to the *samaj*, it doesn't really matter to us. The support of friends and relatives is sufficient. They will come forward in times of need. Like my *Bhagne Jamai*. He cares for my sister.

My mother used to live with that sister. She died eighteen days ago. She is buried on the banks of the village pond. Villagers, who knew how to do it, dug the grave. They do it for free; they don't take any money for it. So the digging of the grave was free. But we did have to spend some money on buying the *kafan* and the *Olima*, for example. We had to spend money on those, although I didn't pay for anything, my five sisters and one of my brothers did.

Working here does not bring in enough money to provide for my family, so I go to *bidesh* to harvest and transplant paddy. I go to work in brick kilns, or sometimes to sell mangoes. I went to Kolkata once but didn't find any work so I came back. People go to *bidesh* because things

are difficult here. There's not enough work. We're all poor. The poor here don't get work everyday. Not even for 10 days. We've just come back from labouring in *bidesh* and have no work. Who will employ us? The wages are also low. It's only when someone's in trouble, for example, if it's been raining, then a couple of us might get hired [to harvest the crop faster]. If you have only one day of urgent work, then you'll hire me with slightly higher wages but if you have ten days of continuous work, obviously you're not going to pay me as much. So the wages fall too.

This year when the *Nayanmani* paddy was ready for harvesting, the wages went up a little for two days. That was during the rainy season, when you found out that your neighbour had finished, but you hadn't. If you are a big landholder, you can get labourers for Rs. 30 a day. But since I'm a small landholder, I wouldn't get labour for less than Rs. 50. This is how it goes. People who can employ you for a longer period can get away with paying less; whereas if you are a small landholder, you have to pay double. So sometimes the wages go up to Rs. 50, but not everyone can pay that much.

Before, in our area, people didn't know how to sow paddy, they didn't know how to transplant it. They didn't transplant the paddy, they just used to throw the seeds in low lying lands. If it grew, it did, if not, then too bad. If five *mons* of *Bhadoj* paddy grew, it was enough, otherwise they would sow *boot*. That might give you one *mon* per *bigha*. Otherwise the land would remain fallow. And if there was a drought then nothing could be cultivated. They used to sow *kaon*, *kedor* and *teora* before; but these crops aren't grown anymore. Now all the land has paddy planted on it. With machines and electric pumps, it's become much easier nowadays.

Before, maintaining a family was really difficult. People used to work in the *Rarh* area, carrying paddy, driving carts – and somehow managed to run the family. And before that, there wasn't even any corn or corn flour. No lentils either. That was the situation, a serious problem. I used to eat *mailo* for days on end. Do you know what *mailo* is? You don't know because poverty isn't a problem in your part of the world. *Mailo* is a kind of flour. You can't really eat it. It's completely black. There is a better variety nowadays – slightly cleaner, but more expensive. We have seven or eight people in our household to feed every day – how can one kilo of flour be sufficient? It's only one mouthful a day.

I used to take the train to Katwa to go and work in Bardhaman. From there the landowners would take us to their farms. That's still the case today. When I first went it was to reap, bundle and thresh paddy. There were no threshing machines then. We didn't carry the paddy on our heads. They don't do it that way. They carry it in carts. In Hugli district you have to carry it on your head. At least it's more common in Hooghly.

I've worked in *bidesh* since the age of fifteen. I wasn't married then. Before that I had worked in brick kilns, and did whatever work was available in our area. The first time I went to *bidesh*, it was in Bhatar in Bardhaman District. The landowner was a Hindu, a goon, a rogue. He was a member of the *CPI(M)* party. He was a bit like the *naxals*. Our rate was Rs. 3 per day but he wasn't willing to pay us that much. In the end, after a lot of haggling he paid us a daily rate of Rs. 2½.

When I first went, I was scared, I wasn't confident enough to work in *bidesh*. And that's why I'd never been before. And then I had that experience – see he agreed to Rs. 3 and then only paid Rs. 2½. The villagers over there didn't say anything either, out of fear. He was a kind of mafia-type really. Chief of the *naxals*. Do you remember the *naxals* were around at the time?

Altogether there were twenty seven of us. Our group was made up of my father and me; two cousins; Goffar and Nekbur, the two brothers; and two brothers from near Jeeshan's house. I don't remember who the others were. How can you remember old tales? Oh, there was one more, Jalil. He's dead now. We worked for about sixteen days. I used to like working. But at the end, we had trouble over the money. Apart from that there hadn't been much trouble. I wasn't scared of anything. The fear that I had when I left my village was the fear of not finding a job. And then I ended up working for a goon. My only fear was that the man wouldn't pay us at all. He did pay, but after a lot of hassle and less too. Fifty *paisa* was a lot of money then. In those days, you could buy a lot with that much.

The brick kiln work used to start around the month of *Kartik*. Then it would carry on throughout the months of *Aghran, Pous, Magh, Chaitra, and Boisak*. Seven months in total. But now they don't work for so long, only for two or three months. Some people keep on working for three or four months. Sometimes we were kicked out of the kiln. If we weren't given a contract or an advance to begin with, they could make us work for around fifteen days only and then kick us out. We didn't get any advance on our wages. People who did get around Rs. 500 would get to work throughout the season. It does happen, even now. The kiln owners, through their agents, do sometimes give out advance money to some labourers.

If the kiln was close to home, I would come home in the evenings but if it was far away, then I would stay there. They usually put up tents for the labourers. Some only have walls and they then put either tarpaulin or tiles on top. We used to stay in one of those. The landowners are in charge of accommodation, but we have to do our own cooking. We always had tube wells close by so we would get water from there. In the brick kilns you get paid at a piece rate. See, if you are strong enough, you might cut five hundred bricks out of the clay. However, I might only be able to cut three hundred pieces. So my wage won't equal yours. Whoever produces more gets higher wages. You did three hundred pieces so your wage might be Rs. 300 and I did two hundred pieces so mine will be Rs. 200. So I've effectively lost Rs. 100.

If the clay was good, I could produce up to six or seven hundred pieces a day. But I can't do that any more – after three or four hundred pieces I feel very tired by the end of the day. My bones and joints ache. The pain is so severe around my waist that I can't stand up, I can't straighten my back. When I need to straighten my back, I have to take support on my knees and stand up slowly. Normally I would go to *bidesh* by myself. Sometimes two of us go. We usually don't have any problems. Things only went wrong once. Both of us used to work in a place called Lalbag. The name of the agent was Kali. His name was Kali and he behaved like a *kali* too – a scoundrel. He didn't pay us after making us work for a whole season. He pocketed the whole season's money. There should always be an accounts book, shouldn't there? We took the book to the *party* office in Lalbagh. Two of our group went inside, Safique and my brother Sheru. But when they entered the office they found *Kali* standing there too. I don't know who had told him that we would be going there. Anyway, he just took the accounts book and fled. So there was nothing more we could do. We just went home. We had lost the money – the whole season's money. This happened about twenty years ago. I used to commute daily to work. I used to leave home at two at night. My older brother used to cycle down in the morning. The cycle was rickety but he needed it because he was disabled. He had polio and couldn't walk. I used to mix the clay, I used to do everything. My big brother would only cut the bricks and would then go home. I used to prepare the clay. He couldn't do the clay work.

The last time I went to *bidesh* was to transplant paddy. I didn't work for long. Around fifteen or sixteen days. No, seventeen days. In *bidesh*, the harvesting period is shorter. Before that I had

gone to work in Nadia, for around twenty nine days. It was weeding work, which takes place during the months of *Ashar* and *Shrabon*. Different crops are grown, not only jute. Various vegetables. There's a lot of different vegetable farming. But that takes place in *Chakda*.

Food has always been a problem in *bidesh*, because they don't give us enough vegetables. That time we were staying in *Ghosh's* house, in the village of Tentulia, in Barddhaman district. He wouldn't give us oil on time, wouldn't provide us with proper sleeping places. We used to sleep on straw and when it rained, water would come in from all sides. Sometimes the ground would get wet. And at the end of the contract, he made us wait for an extra day before he paid us. We had to spend our own money on food during that waiting day. Things like this happen. There are other things too, but you can't always remember the details, can you?

Once I fell ill. I had to take medicines worth Rs. 150. I was really very ill. I became frail. Lack of food, you know. I had caught a cold. I nearly fell over because my head was spinning. If you don't eat properly everyday you're bound to get weak, aren't you? Without three meals a day, a person turns into a patient. I coped for twenty nine days like that. I used to force myself to eat something with salt in the morning. In the field we were only given *kochu* and rice. How much of it though? Around one or one and a half kilos. Our group was made up of sixteen or seventeen labourers, so what's your share? How can you share such a small amount? We went through a lot of difficulties in that *Ghosh's* house.

Once I went to Hugli but came back because I hadn't found any work. I went the year before last and looked for work throughout the night. But I didn't find any, nor did I find any food. I starved all night. Well, around three in the morning all the food I had been carrying had run out. It was *Roja* days. I carried on without food and went to Katwa, finally found an employer, and went to Barddhaman to work. I think I worked for about eleven days and then came home for the *Eid Namaz*.

You can never tell how long it will take to transplant paddy in *bidesh*. Sometimes it might take about a month before I can return home, it depends on the work. Some landowners own one hundred to one hundred and fifty *bighas* of land. Sometimes one group of labourers can't finish the work, it happens. For example, we might work for a month and then decide to go home, so the landowner has to find another group to finish the work. On the other hand, smaller landowners can have their work finished in ten to twelve days. You might even be able to go home after only seven days. Yet again, a landlord might pick up labourers promising them work for over fifteen days, but once you're there, you realize that the work is only for seven days. So you are tricked out of your wages. This also happens. Different things happen in different places. Landlords take the labourers for granted.

Once when I went to sell mangoes in *bidesh*, I gambled – and lost Rs. 300. I wasn't sure of making a profit from the mangoes. So I played, and I lost. But after that I stopped. I haven't even bought a lottery ticket since the gambling incident. I don't dare to play, because my family depends on me. No one else earns any money. You do understand, don't you, that if I spend Rs. 10 irrationally, then how will my family survive? I've understood this and that's why I don't play.

When I go to *bidesh*, my wife and daughters stay at home, all by themselves. I have no sons, only four girls. I'm the only earner. So when I leave, this place has no income. But the stomachs still have to be fed, no matter which direction I head for. But I can't stop and think of all the difficulties they might face, and decide not to go. We have to survive, don't we? And to

survive we need food, don't we? So I have to look at all the aspects. I have to go, even if it means some things do go wrong at home.

When they were young, they faced a lot of problems in my absence. Various problems. They used to find getting hold of food difficult. They had to take out loans to feed themselves, to run the household and so on. In my house cooking is done twice if the days are short and three times if the days are long. Say it's eleven thirty a.m.. So you cook and eat your lunch, and if there's any leftover, you eat that in the evening. But if there is less food, then you skip lunch. When I go to *bidesh*, I leave enough behind for my family to have two meals a day, but not for the third one. How do they cope? Maybe they eat only in the mornings and evenings and skip the afternoon meal. If they eat three meals a day, then the food won't last long. So they only eat twice a day. If I'm around, I can get a big loan. But they can't do that, that's my responsibility. They know that if I'm at home, I'll provide food one way or another. But when I go to *bidesh*, what can I leave behind? Transport costs Rs. 20 so I take Rs. 15 and borrow the rest. My family also subsists on smaller loans. I repay them when I come back.

Sometimes I can't leave anything behind, sometimes I can. Last time I went to *bidesh*, I left some paddy, which Naoroj had loaned me. I took another loan of Rs. 100 from Ajoy from the Hindu neighbourhood, to buy salt, spices and so on. For the paddy I had to pay Rs. 10 per *mon* in excess of the actual price, every month. So at the end of the month for two *mons* of paddy I had to pay Rs. 20 extra. Ajoy is my friend, so he said that he would waive the interest for a month.

The money I brought back went straight into repaying the loans. I have to do that myself. My wife is not very good with accounts. She can't do the paying back, I have to do that. There are loans to be repaid for oil, salt, clothes, children's clothes and so on; for food, from salt to oil, garlic to cumin, as well as water, everything has to be bought. All edibles need to be bought, since there's nothing at home that can help us make savings on such costs. I have four daughters so at least I'm the only addict in the house. But the *biris* and the matchboxes will not stop being a cost. And there's the *pan*, I need that too. Those are addictions. Even if I don't get to eat a meal, I still need them.

When I get back from *bidesh*, I have to prepare the land, which means two labourers have to be paid. The rest gets spent on food, buying vegetables and so on. Water also has to be paid for. If I don't go to *bidesh*, I have to sell all my paddy off.

I have some goats. The girls go and get the grass for them, usually the youngest one. When I'm at home, I go and fetch it. But when I am working I don't have time, and then the girls have to look after the goats. There's no other way. And when I'm working on our land my food needs to be brought out to me. Someone has to do that too.

If I'm at home, I feed the cows too. Otherwise the girls could end up with an injury, trying to cut the straw, and if that happened, then I wouldn't be able to go to work, would I? Both my wife and one of my daughters were ill for a month. Everything had to stop, including my work. So we had no money, not even to buy *biris*. I sat around, without any work. I just tended the cow and the goats. That's when debts occur. If you don't work during the work season, it's a huge problem. The other day my mother died. I couldn't work for seven or eight days. And the work season just went by. I also had to take my wife to the doctor in Barrackpur for fifteen days. I was not working and not doing anything. A whole month went by. So now tell me, how am I going to look after the household? A single man has no choice.

Chapter 3 SABIR MIAN

Sabir is a twenty one year old college student. He lives jointly with one of his younger brother and his parents in the same house. One of his older brothers, though recently separated from the family, lives in the same compound. The land, which houses Sabir's family, belongs to his mother, through inheritance. His mother also inherited some agricultural land. His father never owned any land and he now runs a tea shop near their house. Sabir's younger brother helps in the tea shop and also works as a daily wage labourer. Sabir studies, looks after the farm and takes part in the Pulse Polio Immunization programme.

We didn't used to live here actually. We used to in live of Boroga. We moved here eighteen years ago. We left Boroga because all our land is here. Also there's more scope for cultivation here. Some people over there were annoying us. Our house started to get robbed. We were being excluded from the *samaj*. This is the house that we built when we first moved here. My mother inherited this land as her share from her mother. It was one *bigha* and we bought another ten *kathas* off my mother's brother. She also inherited some farmland from her mother.

I started my studies here. As soon as I was old enough, I enrolled in the local school. I must have been around eight at the time. At least seven. I was older than the others in the class to start off with. My friends, who were younger than me, were ahead of me. When they were in class III or IV, I was just starting to learn the alphabet. I wasn't interested in studying at first. But my cousins – Jamshed Mama's children – used to go to the same school, so I just went with them. My mother, as my *guardian*, had gone to the school and enrolled me, that's how I started going to school. I used to go every day. Being with my cousins, I continued schooling. Slowly I started to concentrate on my studies. And when my female teacher found out that I was too old for class I, she allowed me to go up into class II.

When I was in class III or IV however, I started mixing with the naughty boys. As a result I didn't feel like studying. So I decided to leave school. I didn't like studying. This is what was going through my head at the time. So I used to play as other children do, killing birds, catching fish and so on. My parents started scolding me and others did too. I even got smacked. My older brother took me to a paddy field and beat me, to teach me a lesson. After that, I started going to school again and never left. I passed my class IV exams here and joined the Kapsasia School in class V. I had to take an entrance test. I passed that and was admitted into class V, so I went to sign up for admission. It costs money to do that. When I passed the test, my mother gave me the admission fee. So I started studying in class V. My older brother bought the books for me. He had his own family then. I didn't have a private tutor but studied at home by myself. I did that up to class VI or VII.

In class VIII or IX, I had private tuition in Payradanga for three months. I was asked by my parents to do so and it cost them Rs. 40. But later I gave up. It was difficult. I couldn't buy the books for the new class. My older brother used to buy me a few of them with his money. I used to go to school via the fields, on the ridges. It was shorter that way. During the monsoon it was quite muddy. In some places there was mud up to the knees. Some days I would slip and fall in the mud, so I had to wash my clothes, put them back on and go to school. We used to wrap up our school books in a plastic bag. I would tell my teacher upon reaching the school about the mud episode and would get the day off.

That's what it was like, and now I'm in first year of a *BA*. The admission fee was Rs. 850. On top of that, it costs Rs. 50 a month. I haven't bought all the books. I've collected some. I got some from Absar. Someone else also gave me some. So far I've spent Rs. 600 on books. My

family paid for all of this. They run a small business now, my father sells snacks. Farming also brings in some money. My younger brother is also working. And we don't eat the entire crop from this one and a half *bigha*. We sell some of it, maybe half a *mon*, one and a half *mons* or maybe two. We sell it when we are in need. That's how my family provides for my education. I can't only study though. I have to fulfil my family duties too. I have to work, earn money. When I'm free, I harvest paddy or transplant it according to the season. When no one goes, I'm forced to go out to the field – to spray the pesticide. Sometimes I also have to work as a labourer.

My younger brother dropped out of school in class V. That was a long time ago. I don't know why he left. I bought books for him and asked him to study. He left because he wanted to. And then he got in with the 'wrong crowd', started smoking *biris*, like all other boys of his age now. If I try to tell him anything, he might tell me off. That's why we don't say anything to him anymore. The only thing that we say is that going to school would be good for him. But to no avail. So the books I bought, I sold them again.

To continue education is really difficult. There are expenses all around! Weddings, doctors and so on. On the other hand, our earnings are low because we don't have much land. At present we have two *bighas* of land including the house. We haven't bought any land. Whatever we have is what my mother got as her share. And whatever came to us, some we gave to my sisters when they got married. See the land over there; it's uncultivable because there is no water available. Another fifteen *kathas* are lying uncultivated. We've had some problems with the person who sells the water. We used to cultivate all this land. But now we only cultivate about one and a half *bighas* of it. Sometimes we cultivate land under a *reehen* tenancy. We didn't this year, but last year we did.

The problem with the irrigation water owner is not really a serious one. We were planning to sell that plot and since it adjoins the water man's land, we asked him first. If he didn't want it, we would sell it to someone else. He thought that we were trying to sell this land to someone else at his inconvenience. So he created problems. There was a fight in which one of us was injured. And since then, he refuses to sell us water. So we've stopped cultivating it. We've decided not to farm it but to sell it. We are going to leave it fallow for a couple of years and then we will sell it. We don't like fights.

There are seven of us: four brothers and three sisters. Two brothers have become *Bhinu*, and two are still under the responsibility of my parents. The sisters are all married. I'm still not married.

For my youngest sister's wedding we gave a ring, a cycle and a watch. As well as Rs. 5000 and seventeen *kathas* of land. Out of the total share of land we got as my mother's share, we gave seventeen *kathas* away, which means, excluding the land, the wedding cost us Rs. 8000 to 9000. We had a feast at the time of the wedding. The *samaj* that we belong to here helped us. And so did the neighbouring friends, relatives, uncles and aunts. They were all here. We have to invite all of them. They come and help. They cook, serve and so on. People from the *samaj* also help. Without the *samaj* you wouldn't achieve anything. You need the *samaj*. The *samaj* helps during weddings, in times of need and trouble. For example, if someone's ill and there's no-one at home, they will help us carry them to the health centre.

If someone dies in a family, we don't have to call for people to help. Only the relatives from far-off villages will have to be informed. They come as soon as they get the news. But even before that, the neighbours, the people from the *samaj* will come over and help. Not just the relatives,

everyone comes. After viewing the body, they wash it, put the *kafan* over and take it to the graveyard. There are people who dig the grave beforehand, and keep it ready. We don't have to pay them for it.

If someone at home is ill, we go to the village doctor. There are several doctors. They are not proper doctors though. They have some experience of giving medicines but I feel, if someone's ill, you should go to the hospital. The medical treatment is better there. Even if you have to spend more, at least you get cured. About a year ago my younger brother had severe malarial fever. We spent around Rs. 3000 to 4000 in total. I took him to the hospital. He had high fever at home. I got some medicine from the village doctor. It subsided for a bit, but kept going up again. Even with four or five sheets on him, he was still shivering. I realised that his fever just wouldn't get cured at home, so I took him to the hospital. There we spent some money on blood tests and the tests showed that he had malaria.

We showed the test results to the doctor. The doctor prescribed five or six injections, which each cost Rs. 152. We bought those five or six injections. He was treated for three days and also received some free government medicine. After that he was a little better.

If you go through the *party*, the doctor and the nurses treat you better. So that's what we did, we went through the *party*. It has the power to put pressure, which helps with getting a good treatment. Whoever is associated with the *party* gets better treatment. People who speak out also get treated better. We got in touch with the *Forward Block*. Chaya Ghosh was their representative then. If the *party* hadn't given us its support, the treatment wouldn't have been as good. We didn't have any problems. Not everyone can deal with problems, especially if you're poor. No one cares for what the poor have to say.

Everyone is poor in our area and since there's not enough work to go round, our people go to work in *bidesh*. People who own plots of land here finish cultivating their land earlier. There is still some work left to be done but usually three quarters of the work is done by then and you are left with only twenty five percent, which is too little for such a large workforce, so people go to look for work in *bidesh*. For example, the paddy has already been transplanted here. Now you have to wait for a month before weeding it. But you can't remain without work for a month. So people go out to look for work. People don't have any rice stocked at home to feed them for that month. No-one has a salaried job to fall back on. So once your stock of rice is finished, you're forced to look for work. From sowing to reaping, the whole process lasts about four months. But you are effectively unemployed, not earning any wages, for those four months. So what can you do? You are forced to go to Barddhaman to work, to raise the money for the pesticide to treat your own crop.

Nowadays, people from here also go to Kolkata in search of work but even until two years ago people didn't go to Kolkata. They used to work here, on the chilli fields. Or in the jute fields. Both of these crops required labour. But now the cultivation of chilli and jute are not so common anymore. So the number of opportunities for work are also dwindling. That's why people have started going to Kolkata. Recently, even young boys have started working in *bidesh*. They are earning money too.

Normally, people of low class, poor people who can't run their households, go to Kolkata in search of work. They are usually between seventeen and thirty years old. People over thirty rarely go. They stay at home, and work around their homes. They may not be able to cope with

the workload in *bidesh*. It's hard work – carrying bricks, sand, cement. Other than this, there are a few who go to work in brick kilns during the winter – people who know brick work.

I've been to *bidesh* a few times to work. The first time, I started to work as a mason's assistant in Hooghly. I was eighteen at the time. My *guardian* at home - that's my mother - asked me to go, so I went because I understood what the situation was at home. So I went to Hugli to work as a mason's assistant. I was recruited here by a labour contractor. He is a relative of ours – he's my brother-in-law's older brother, Rafique from Lalgola. There were two of us from this village. In total there were around twenty to twenty-five of us, masons and assistants. The first time I went I worked for fifty-two days. The contractor provided us with a room. But we couldn't all fit in. There was a school next door so we slept over there. It was winter so we'd brought blankets with us.

It's tough work there. You have to work really hard to earn your wages. We used to get up at half past five in the morning, go to the toilet for a wash. Then we had some breakfast - they would give us Rs. 5 for that. We could eat whatever we wanted with that money. If there was any leftover rice from the night before, some would eat that and not take that money. Others would eat puffed rice or whatever there was, with the money. We used to leave for work at seven in the morning. Since our work place was not always in the same area, we had to walk for about one or one and a half miles to reach the site by eight or eight thirty in the morning and start to work. In the afternoon, we had some time off to have a bath and have some food, then we would start work again at one or one thirty in the afternoon till five. Sometimes we had to work till seven in the evening, depending on the workload. For example if we were doing the final coat of the flooring, we couldn't really leave without finishing it, so it could go on till seven or eight in the evening.

I didn't like working there much. The labour was intense and wages low. We were under contract for Rs. 1000 a month, excluding food. We only got Rs. 1000 but the contractor would get Rs. 90 per day, per labourer. So if I have to work in *bidesh* again, I will be more wary of the contractors beforehand, and if the deal doesn't suit me, I won't go. This is what I'm thinking. But when I go, it's mostly because I'm forced to. Situations compel me to go.

We used to get cooked food for the afternoon and the evening meals. There was a tube well nearby and we used to cook next to it. Our people used to do the cooking. The assistants would do it. The mason would decide on the cooking schedule.

There used to be a lot of problems over the cooking. The people who would eat first would not leave much for the others. Some didn't get to eat anything at all. The vegetables were not cooked properly. The cooking was meant for twenty to twenty-five people daily. Is it possible to cook well for so many? None of the vegetables were cooked well. We used to have problems with the contractor. He just wouldn't listen to us. We had to cook for twenty-five persons at a time, twenty to twenty-five people! And that was all prepared by one person. How could such food taste good?

That year I was studying in school – in class IX. The school had closed for *Durga Puja*. It was closed for a month, but then I missed another month. So my studies suffered. I got behind with my studies. But there wasn't any other option.

The year I sat my secondary examinations, that year too, the school closed for a month after the exams. I went to Kolkata to work as a mason. But after reaching Kolkata, I came down with

malarial fever. I went to see a doctor and took some medicines. I stayed there, ill, hoping that if I got better, I would still be able to work. But the fever never subsided. After ten days I came home with one of my friends. I had a high temperature for another four or five days at home. I went to see another doctor, but by then I had jaundice. Eventually, I did get a little better.

This year I went to reap the summer paddy. I went because I didn't want to stay at home. I don't like sitting idle, it makes me feel bad. I had just taken the Higher Secondary exams and it would take three months before the results were out. Since everyone else had gone away to work, I decided to go too. What would I do sitting idle? So I went with a group of people.

There were six of us. We went to Kurchi in Bardhaman district. It is next to Bardhaman town. I don't remember the name of the landowner. But he was a Hindu. He let us stay in the upstairs part of his house, a mud house. He didn't ask whether we were Hindus or Muslims. Only at the end, when he wrote our names down, did he realize how many of us were Muslims and how many Hindus. We had a Hindu with us from our same village.

I had left home on a cycle to go to Topdanga; I left it there at someone's house. From there we crossed the river Ganges¹ and then went on to Puranobajar train station. We all chipped in some money for the tickets and sent Naru to get them. It was Rs. 16 per head. But Naru, instead of going to the ticket counter, went to a railway official and got the tickets for Rs. 15 per head instead. When the train arrived, we got on and went to Katwa, where we all got off. In Katwa a large number of labourers and landowners gather. That's where we haggle over the wages. Sometimes we take the initiative and sometimes the landowners do. When there are fewer landowners, the labourers run after them. And when the landowners are in the majority, then they come up to us and say, "Will you come with me? I need 10 people and I'll pay you so much."

It was summer then, it was very hot. We couldn't really work in the fields. We used to get up very early and reap. We were working under a contract. We had to reap and stack a *bigha* of paddy for Rs. 350. We finished the work in a week but didn't work for other landowners. We didn't want to work in the heat. We had decided beforehand that as soon as we had finished our work for the landowner we would go home. So when we finished the work, we didn't go on to work for anyone else, we went home.

While we were working, it rained once. But it didn't affect our work. We threshed the paddy under a new contract and it was all finished in a week. Initially we hadn't included threshing in our contract, only reaping and stacking. Because if it starts to rain, then that's it. We can't bring the paddy in unless it's dry. And we can't thresh unless the paddy is dry, so we don't include threshing in our contract to begin with. If we did we would be stuck till the rain stopped. But if later on, after the reaping and stacking, the weather remains fine, then we work out a new contract for threshing.

The food at the landowner's house was terrible. What can I say? In the morning we got puffed rice. At 9 again - puffed rice. In the afternoon we were given rice, but it was of such bad quality that we couldn't really eat it. It was full of black rice insects. He used to cook it with the insects in. We couldn't eat the rice. There was another problem with it. The rice had so many husks in it that with every mouth full, there would be five or six.

¹ Actually this is a tributary of Ganges and recorded as Bhagirathi. But the local people often refer it as Ganges.

This year we went to plant rice in Bardhaman, on the 22nd of July. Naru came with us. He goes frequently. There were seventeen of us. We went to Katwa by train. We made a deal with a landowner on the spot for Rs. 70, including puffed rice twice, rice twice and eight *biris* per day. I don't smoke *biri*, so I used to give away my share to the other workers. But that wasn't enough for them; they still had to buy extra *biris*.

The landowner took us to a hotel and fed us – rice and vegetables – for Rs. 10 per plate. Then we climbed onto the roof of the bus. He paid Rs. 10 per head for the bus fare. Actually the fare is usually higher. But since we were travelling on the roof and there were quite a few of us, the fare was reduced.

First we were taken to Kamarpara, where the landowner's son-in-law lived. We worked there for a day, and then he took us on to Ichaganj. Rs. 10 more on the bus from Kamarpara. Over there we had to work from six in the morning till five or six in the evening. Even though we were not under any specific contract, we knew what was expected of us. We had to carry the seedlings, sow them, transplant them and so on. At Ichaganj we got four meals a day, but there wasn't enough food for everyone. The owner was a devil. He used to give us *jaggery* and puffed rice in the morning. But the *jaggery* was of very poor quality. And the food tasted horrible. The vegetables were not cooked with the proper amount of salt and spices. Out of those twelve days, we were only given fish once. There was a separate maid who did our cooking. The evening rice used to smell bad. Actually they used to re-cook the rice which was left over from the afternoon meal. We also used to get *dal* and two kinds of vegetable with the rice. But it was difficult to find the actual lentils in the *dal*. To thicken it up, they used to mix rice starch into it. Once, all of us, all seventeen of us, had diarrhoea after eating it. We picked some wood apples from the tree and ate them, just to stop us from having to run back and forth to the toilet. Some of us also bought some allopathic medicine from the village grocer's shop.

Even though we had diarrhoea we never stopped working. One of us was seriously ill, but still he didn't stop working. We used to take him to the field, so that he didn't have to work much and we'd share out his work amongst ourselves. Even the landowner didn't realize.

We were given the Kamarpara Club room to stay in. And at Ichaganj we were given the cow shed to live in. Cows had been kept there before us. The shed was terribly smelly. There was also a stale pond beside it, which also smelt very bad.

This year no one told me to go; I went of my own accord. So why did I go? The Higher Secondary results were due out soon. But the paddy is usually transplanted before the results come out. So I went to transplant the paddy because I was fairly sure I'd passed my exams. I knew I would need money to pay for admission. I would also need to buy books. And, shortly before that, I had lost my new cycle on my way to the *Panchayat* office to get my voter's identity card sorted. So I also needed to buy a new cycle to go to college. So what was I supposed to do, get my admission, or buy a cycle, or what? The results would be out quite soon. I couldn't ask my family to buy me a cycle. I had lost it. And it's not possible to get hold of so much money just like that. So I thought, since my brothers were all going, the older one, the middle one, all four of them, I would go too. If I couldn't cope with the work, then I could always leave. My relatives, my brothers, were all going so they would have bailed me out if necessary. And after returning from *bidesh*, I would either buy a cycle or the books. This was my plan. So I went and worked for eleven days. In those eleven days, I earned around Rs. 800 or 850. And by the time I returned, the results were out.

I don't go to *bidesh* every year. When my brothers are involved in trade, they don't go either. But when the trading doesn't go well, when they incur losses, they go. However, if the trading does go well, they don't go. They run various trades throughout the year. My eldest brother is selling mango trees at the moment. In the winter he'll be selling *jaggery* in Bihar, Patna, Bhagalpur, and Jamalpur. That brother has now become *bhinu*. There are only two of us, my brother and I, who aren't, and are still living under the responsibility of our parents now, Rejaul and I. Rejaul doesn't have a trade, he works as an agricultural wage labourer. Sometimes when I feel like it, I go with him, otherwise I don't.

I once went away to sell mangoes during the mango season. But I didn't stay there overnight; I stayed back at Puronabazar train station. I've noticed that selling mangoes is profitable and you have a lot of freedom too. I liked that trade the best.

In *bidesh* I've worked both as a mason and as a wage labourer. So I know that neither of these jobs is good. They are very demanding. Although in a way, working as a mason is slightly easier. But being a mason also means that you are dependent. You have to work from morning till evening. On the other hand, contract paddy work gives me more freedom. I can cut one *bigha* if I want or less if I feel like it. That gives me independence. But then I can also work harder and earn Rs. 150 instead of Rs. 100 when reaping. There are no hard and fast rules. I am independent. If I stop working for some time during a very hot day, no one will say, "Go on, keep working." No one will say, "You're sitting idle and not reaping!" These problems don't occur. That's why agricultural work, on a contractual basis, is better. Even then, reaping is hard work.

In *bidesh* you're always homesick, but you have to stay. You're in a different place and can't return whenever you want. And what is the point of not earning when you've come to earn money in *bidesh*? So you stay there. But I keep thinking about the family at home: there might have been a fight, or someone might be ill.

Once when I was in *bidesh*, my older brother, who was sleeping at home, was bitten by a snake, or something similar. He didn't worry about it for a few days. He had a *jaggery* trade at the time, so he went to sell *jaggery*. But the venom of whatever had bitten him had spread throughout my brother's body. Selling *jaggery* involves a lot of walking, and as result the poison spread throughout his body. He had to leave the *jaggery* and come back home. He was in a very bad way. The magic doctor² came and said that it was snake venom. I wasn't home at the time. I was informed over the telephone, but I came straight home. I had given them a telephone number to contact me.

I went home as soon as I got the news. My mother's brothers and my brothers-in-law, who were there, took him to the hospital. They gave him saline at the hospital. My middle brother also went along. As soon as he was admitted, the staff gave him saline and wanted to know what had bitten him. Then he was given an injection for snake bites. But even with that, he wasn't getting better. It looked as if he was only getting worse; he had difficulty breathing and couldn't speak. Since his condition was not improving at the hospital, we went to a woman from Parbati Nagar, who cures snake bites. She made him drink her potion. After about four or five hours, he started to speak a little. Very little. [He was still being administered] the injections and the saline. He was better after a day; but we still kept him in hospital for two more days, during

² One who is believed to heal by uttering charms.

which he was given more medicines. After those two days we got him discharged and brought him home.

Once, while returning from *bidesh*, there was an incident on the road. I was on my way back from Kolkata where I had worked for forty days. I was going to catch the train in the morning. The train was at eight fifty-five in the morning. First I got to Howrah, from where I caught the bus for Sealdah station. I got off at Sealdah. At the entrance of the station, there were people selling their wares. But it turned out they were not real sellers. Their real profession was to steal, to pick pockets. They all looked very respectable though, just like people who worked in offices. These people started to pester me to buy spectacles off them. We kept saying no, but they wouldn't leave us alone. During the quarrel they suddenly asked us to prove that we were Indian citizens and not from Bangladesh. They said, "Let's see your identity cards," that's what they were saying. I was saying, "Why should I prove my citizenship to you?" In all this chaos they robbed me of Rs. 500. It was only when I got inside the station and stood in front of the ticket counter that I realized I had been robbed. Luckily, I still had some money in another place, which was safe. Anyway, I went out to look for these men, but never found them. They had vanished. So I returned to the station, bought my tickets and got on the train. I was very upset the whole way. So much money was lost! Hard-earned money!

When we return home all we have is the cash from our employers. There are children at home. I try and buy a few things for them too. If clothes are needed, then I'll buy some. When I get home, I give the money to my *guardian*, my mother. She decides how to spend the money. She thinks it through. There's usually already a plan of what it needs to be spent on. Like the time I went to earn some money to pay either for a cycle or for the admission fees. For the reaping, I had other plans. Before leaving, I had taken out a loan for my studies, which had to be repaid. So I paid it back with that money.

Even when I used to go to Kolkata to work, I would give the money to my family. They would decide how best to spend it. Once, for my sister's wedding we had mortgaged our land. So I brought back some money and got the land back. Another time I bought a goat with the money I'd earned.

Besides studying and working as a wage labourer, I'm also involved in polio vaccination campaigns. I get some money for that too, on the vaccination days. I go to the *Panchayat* office, the *Block Development Office*, to attend polio meetings. I go to other meetings too but not to the *party* meetings. For example if the *CASA* organisation calls a meeting, I'll go. That's an NGO, they hold meetings to raise awareness about floods. That's all voluntary work: how to rescue people from floods, how to help flood-affected people – that kind of work.

I do go to the *Panchayat* office sometimes. The *Panchayat* has never helped us financially though. We never get anything. But if we need certificates or things like that we go to the head of the *Panchayat* and get it. They don't create problems. Whenever I've been, it has been hassle-free. Maybe they behave differently with other people.

But I can't manage to get the ration cards done. There are now four of us in the family. Three have ration cards and one doesn't - my youngest brother doesn't have one. I've told the *Panchayat* many times, but I can't get them to do the card. In the ration shops we only get paraffin oil once a week, one litre per head at Rs. 10 per litre. They don't give us anything other than paraffin oil. People who are enlisted under the 'Below the Poverty Line (BPL) List', get wheat, sugar and rice.

During the year of the flood, the government gave out Rs. 2000 to some families. A tarpaulin and Rs. 2000. Not everyone got them, only some did. We never got anything. We didn't get much help from anyone else either. The CASA organisation did give us some blankets, flat rice, jaggery and so on, but it really wasn't sufficient.

During that year, when the flood water started to rise, no one was home. Initially our area wasn't flooded. We never even thought that it would flood here. The first place to be flooded was in Udaypur. We have relatives there. It flooded there in the morning. We went to fetch their belongings and brought them back here. We thought that our area was safe from the flood. So we went to fetch them. When we got there, the floodwater level had risen so rapidly that we couldn't cross the road to come back. And what force! The water was up to our waists. On our way there it was waist-high but within ten minutes it rose to neck height. Most of us were stuck there. I managed to return home. So I was on this side of the flood and was waiting to see if the water would rise any further. And it did. It reached the road and then came across, towards us. We were scared that the water was not going to subside, and that we would also get inundated. Our house was made of uncooked bricks. There was no-one at home. Everyone was busy moving their belongings to dry places. Some went onto the roof, some to other high places.

When I got home I saw that the water was already in the house. We had paddy and other things stacked in the house. One of my sisters, this sister here, was with me because she was expecting her child to be born quite soon. But we were the only ones in the house. We started moving the paddy. We piled up our clothes and put them in higher places. By then however there was a lot of water. Some people put a tin barrier on our door to stop the water from entering. And after that they came to help us. Those are our neighbours. We put the paddy in sacks and they carried it away and put it in a safer place. There were other things however which we couldn't move. By then the tin barrier had broken down and the water was gushing in with great force. We had managed to move even the bigger things somehow. By that point the water was flowing in and flooded the rooms. Our house didn't really collapse but it started to subside. The bricks were melting in the water, and the house was falling down. We hadn't been able to move the tiles or tins, but they were not damaged. After that we had to stay on that high ground for three days.

We lost a lot in the flood. But we didn't lose any animals. The cows and the calves had been taken care of earlier. The entire paddy crop in the field died though. We had trouble with food for a few days. We had enough rice and *dal* to last for three days. Once we'd eaten that up, we didn't have any more dry boiled paddy. All the rice mills had been flooded. So we couldn't husk the paddy. There were no functioning mills around. We somehow had to boil and dry some paddy, take it to the Talpara neighbourhood, get it de-husked, come back and eat the rice. It was difficult. We were eating only two instead of three meals a day. So we did suffer for a while. This went on for a couple of months. Eventually, we managed to cope with the situation.

With the floods we lost the whole of our crop in the fields. Some people had some left. But that didn't solve the food crisis. People who had some paddy stored at home didn't have any problem. We had a bit and bought some more off a neighbour. We had some money then, which we had saved at home, not in the bank. How could we save money in the bank? The way things are, it's bad enough. It's already difficult to find extra money to pay for my education.

If we need money quickly, then we pawn gold items at the market and get the money. The Topdanga jewellers charge three percent interest every month, if you pawn things. We don't

have much debt now, but we still owe the bank. Some time ago, we took out a loan of Rs. 10,000. We were in difficulty at the time. We haven't paid it back yet, only the interest has been repaid. I can't say how much the interest actually was but we did have to pay that back. We paid for two years, but one year we couldn't afford to. If the government forces me to, then we'll have to pay the capital back too; otherwise, I'll just keep on paying off the interest.

We did something with the money – we repaid a mortgage on a piece of land. Actually, we went to buy a plot of land and gave money to someone. That person disappeared with the money - Rs. 40,000! He never gave us a *paisa* back. We had mortgaged a piece of our own land to buy the other plot. But the rogue disappeared with the money. So when we had to clear our land deed we took a loan from the bank to pay for the mortgage. The villagers never said anything about the man who stole the money. The *parties* divided up the money amongst themselves.

So we're only indebted to the bank. We don't owe anything to money lenders. We might owe a bit to our neighbours, but we have no debts with our relatives. We take loans from neighbours, when we need to. They do the same with us. There's no payment of interest in these transactions.

My grandmother lives in our village. They are much better off than we are. But even then we don't ask them for help. Even if we did, they wouldn't help us financially. So we don't visit her. If we are in need, we resolve it ourselves, us four brothers. Our grandmother is not our real grandmother anyway. After our real grandmother died, my grandfather remarried.

Chapter 4 MOBIN SHEIKH

Mobin is a property-less, helpless, very poor daily wage labourer. He is thirty-six years old. Since he doesn't own anything or have any ties with his natal village, he lives in his in-law's village, in a house, on his wife's very small plot of land. His family consists of his wife, two sons and one daughter. He lives in a one-room mud house with a little verandah. There's also a small courtyard in the front, where they cook when it's not raining. He provides for his family by working as a daily wage labourer. He also has to look for work outside his village to earn. He has experience working as a wage labourer doing different kinds of jobs, on farms, digging earth, on road works, in brick kilns and so on.

If I wrote my memoirs, then a whole exercise book would be filled. Only I know the amount of suffering that I've faced in my life. And it's only my children who give me the strength to forget about them.

My father's father had three brothers. Each one of them had a son. He had inherited a share of his father's, my great grandfather, seven or eight *bighas* of land. But since he wasn't a sharp person, his other brothers cheated him out of his share. As a result, my father didn't inherit any land.

To run the family, my father used to work as a labourer. He also worked as a paid employee for a long time. But at one point my father left my mother. So she had to start begging in the village. Once, while begging she went to the village of Silut-Bhatpara in Barddhaman district. The villagers there told her to start selling lentils. She could buy them in Murshidabad and sell them in Barddhaman. A lot of lentils used to be produced over here at the time. So my mother asked, "Who will buy the lentils?" And they said that they would. So my mother started a lentil business. She would buy them in Murshidabad and sell them around Silut. She got a room in Silut too. Out of her four sons, she took three and her daughter along. My eldest brother was a cattle herdsman in Parvatinagar, so he stayed behind.

When I was around five or six years old, my father came to Silut and brought me back to Parvatinagar. We reached home in the evening. In the morning he said that he was going to his sister's house and left. I didn't see him for the whole day. My eldest brother then went off to work at his employer's home. I was left all alone. There wasn't any food at home, so I starved the whole day. My eldest brother said, "If you stay here, you'll starve to death." So he took me back to my mother the next day.

We were four brothers and one sister. Actually we had been seven brothers and five sisters - three brothers and four sisters died in their childhood. I can remember all of their names apart from one. We buried one of the sisters in Barddhaman. When my mother was in Silut, my youngest sister died. A very interesting thing happened though on the night when my mother and I were looking at my dead sister's body. I saw a snake, a cobra, climbing up my sister's toes and slithering upwards. I said to my mother, "Where did that snake come from?" My mother then tried to shoo the snake away and it jumped out and vanished.

We buried my dead sister in Silut, but we didn't stay there after that. We came back to our home in Parvatinagar. Our *samaj* leaders took the initiative to reunite my parents, which they did, and we started living together again. After a long time of living together, my father died. I got only one *katha* of land as my share of my father's property and that was a few years back too. I later sold that land.

I've been suffering since my childhood. My parents put me in school when I was around seven years old. I didn't have any shorts to wear to school. So I started to work to buy a pair of shorts. I had to shepherd a landowner's goats. On the eighth day of my job, my eldest brother came up to me and said, "Leave the job, I'll buy you shorts", he said. So I left my job and started to study. I was in class 1 then. Even though I had left my job, I would still work from time to time, especially during holidays, on other people's chilli fields. The wage was Rs. 1½. I'd use that money to buy pens and exercise books. It also meant I had some pocket money.

When I gave up shepherding and started going to school, my teacher was Master Hafiz. He liked me a lot. After I left school in class VIII, and I would meet him from time to time and he would still scold me for having given up school. And still does nowadays! When I was studying in his school, he had recommended me to the higher authorities for a scholarship. When I was in class II, Master Hafiz called me to say, "Go to the B.D.O. [*Block Development Officer*] tomorrow with your mother." He gave us a letter to show him. We went to the B.D.O.'s office and showed him the letter. The B.D.O. gave me a school uniform and Rs. 50, and a sari to my mother. The next day, Master Hafiz asked me if I'd been to the B.D.O. From then onwards, I would get the money every year.

Once there was an incident in the primary school. The teacher had beaten up two students, quite severely. Those two left their books and ran away to the nearby mango orchard. From there they started to shout abuse at the teacher. It was pretty bad abuse. The teacher got angry and asked the other students to catch them. Those two then ran away and never came back to school.

When I passed my class IV exams after finishing primary school, I joined Tuladanga High School. Master Hafiz put in a word for me so I was admitted and would keep on receiving my scholarship too. I didn't have to go to the B.D.O.'s office anymore; I could pick up the money at the office of the S.D.O. [*Sub Divisional Officer*]. All I had to do was to show my annual examination mark sheet, nothing more.

When I was in class VI, I changed a lot. I became naughty and left school. My older brother tried many times to send me back but I refused to go. So he got angry and took me to harvest winter paddy in *bidesh*. We were working for different landowners. After a few days I got a bad stomach. I had to run off to defecate very frequently. The landowner's son complained to his father about it saying that I wasn't doing any work. In the meantime a person from my group went and told my brother about my situation, and he said, "Let him die." The person who'd told him about me then tried to convince him by saying, "If your younger brother dies, what will you do? Will you be able to take your dead brother home?" So my brother came to me and said, "If you are willing to study then go back home and start going to school again." I had earned around Rs. 140 and he gave me another Rs. 100. So I came back with Rs. 240.

I was admitted into class VI and started to study well. But again, I got into bad company, and as a result my studies started to suffer. Then after class VIII, I stopped completely. There were two reasons for this. One was the bad company and the other that I didn't have any money to buy English and Bengali books, even though I used to work occasionally as a wage labourer while studying. I became a full time wage labourer after giving up my studies.

Even now Master Hafiz still scolds me for dropping out. Our headteacher was also a very nice person. He used to love all of us. He would always arrive at the school on time. He was never late nor absent. Even in heavy rain when the roads were full of water and mud, he would get

there on time. The school secretary was a good person too. Sometimes he would ask us about the teachers' attendance, who had come and who hadn't. But we would never mention the absent teachers' names. We used to love our headteacher. Once he was supposed to be transferred to another school, but we didn't let him go. We said, "So long as we are here, we won't let you get transferred."

I never failed a single exam. My eldest son is like me. He's never failed. He used to study by himself. But when he passed his class V exams, I could no longer pay for his education. It was around Rs. 1000 a year at the time, the uniform alone cost Rs. 250. On top of that, school fees, books and so on. The history book itself cost Rs. 120; the geography book was about the same. And so were the English and Bengali books. So I got him out of that school and got him admitted into the local *Madrassa* School. He is now in *Madrassa*. He studies *Madrassa* texts and also *Bangla*³ over there. They also have a teacher of *Bangla education*.

My daughter is in class V now. I wasn't around for her admission – I was harvesting the summer paddy in *bidesh*. There wasn't enough money to pay for her fees at home. So my wife pawned my cycle and paid the admission expenses. I came back and repaid the debt and got my cycle back. I had to pay an interest rate of Rs. 10 per month.

I got married two years after I stopped going to school in Jalpara. I was eighteen then. Our 19th wedding anniversary was last year. I got a cycle worth Rs. 700 as my dowry, a gold earring which weighed three *annas* and a ring of four *annas*, as well as Rs. 1100 in cash. I had a feast for my marriage. But those Rs. 1100 were not enough to pay for it; I had to borrow another Rs. 700.

I pawned the earring and got some money. With that money, I leased a plot of land to grow chillis. That year however the price of chilli fell very low. Only Rs. 20–25 for a *mon*. I made no profit. I sowed wheat on that plot after that, but the crop wasn't any good. I didn't even get twenty kilos of wheat from ten *kathas* of land.

One day the moneylender called me to redeem the earring. *Lebu-bhai* was there too. He asked me if he could buy it. When we said that he could, he said he would like to redeem and own it. We couldn't afford buy it back. So the earring became his.

Three years after my marriage, I pawned the ring for Rs. 800. I thought that I would pay it back after returning from *bidesh*. I gave Rakibul Rs. 100 as a loan out of that money. He was so desperate that I couldn't refuse it to him. That year both of us went to work in the *Rarh*. I earned around Rs. 832, and after expenses I was left with Rs. 800. I asked Rakibul to pay back that Rs. 100. He said he would pay it when he got home. But when we got back, he gave all his money to his mother, who refused to pay me. And Rakibul couldn't pay me back. On the other hand, I owed Abid Rs. 100 and he wanted his money back. I requested he wait for a bit, but he wouldn't budge. I said that I needed the Rs. 800 to redeem the ring (actually that was a lie, with the interest it would have been Rs. 950), and I'd only earned Rs. 800 this time. But he just wouldn't listen. Then a man, *Lebu-bhai*, came along and told me to redeem the ring with my Rs. 800 and that he'd pay Abid his Rs. 100. But I actually needed Rs. 950, so I couldn't redeem my ring, but repaid another loan of Rs. 700 that I had taken out for my wedding feast instead.

³ *Madrassa* education gives emphasis on religious education whereas *Bangla* education includes language, maths and science

Now I have nothing left to pawn. I have this cycle, but how much will I get if I pawn it? Maximum Rs. 200. I still owe three grocery shops, neighbours, and the doctor. A total loan of around Rs. 1800. Since I buy things by paying with cash now, the grocers don't say much. The doctor doesn't really pester me either. I'm the one who's embarrassed when I pass him by, though he only enquires about my health.

My wife gets stomach aches frequently. The doctor says that she needs an operation. The private hospital quoted Rs. 2500. But we haven't managed to raise that amount. So the doctor said he'd give me a loan of Rs. 500, and the remaining Rs. 2000 we would have to raise. But we couldn't raise it, so the operation never happened. Even if you go to the government hospital, expenses are quite high. The hospital is free, but we have to buy all the medicines ourselves. The hospital doesn't provide us with medicines. So we can't go to the hospital. I can't get my wife operated on, but on the other hand I've already spent a lot of money on her. So I try to manage without medicines myself. For example, when I went to *bidesh* last year, I wasn't well and I refused to take any medicines. But Mali-*bhai* wouldn't have it. He forced me to buy the medicines that cost Rs. 10. But since I didn't have any money, Mali-*bhai* lent me some.

I took out a loan about six or seven years ago. I had borrowed two *mons* of paddy from a neighbouring woman. I paid her Rs. 250 about three years back, and some more later on. So far I've paid her a total of Rs. 700. But the woman said that the full amount, with interest, was now Rs. 1500. So we had a fight and settled for Rs. 1000, which means I still owe her Rs. 300. But I've decided that I'll only give her Rs. 200.

I mentioned earlier that I got married at the age of eighteen. After the wedding we lived with my parents for two years and then became *Bhinu*. My family didn't give me anything, not even a clay pot. I had to buy everything gradually. I have been suffering since my childhood and still do now. I'm penniless. I've only branches and leaves, as they say, which you don't have to buy. I don't share my sad stories with anyone. Once I told them to a landowner in *bidesh*. Tears came to his eyes. I want to forget all about it. I don't want to remember it. I never had proper clothes to wear in my childhood. And it's still the same nowadays. I still wear torn clothes. It's my fate. It never got any better.

Once I took a goat on a loan from its owner. I thought that when the goat got older and had kids, I could have shared them with the owner. But the goat didn't produce any kids and the owner took it back. I had fed that goat for quite sometime, but the owner didn't bother giving me anything in return. Later, the same owner gave me another goat to look after, but I don't know what happened, he also took that one away after a while. Then I got a cow to look after off someone in Topdanga. But after ten months it got ill, so I returned it to its owner. He didn't give us anything in return either.

After I stopped going to school I started to work as a labourer to help my family. At that time there was no afternoon break. We had to work from morning till evening. The landlord would give us three meals a day. Nowadays you only get food once a day and that is really not sufficient. The labourers don't like to work throughout the day these days. Why would they? You see, before six labourers would toil for the whole day on one *bigha* of land, now the same amount of work is done by four labourers and is finished by noon. They work very hard and then have the afternoons off.

I was regularly going to *bidesh* when I started working as a wage labourer. Before that I had only been once, with my older brother, when I left school in class VI. And the time after that, I

went out of anger at my mother. I had asked her for a watch. But she wouldn't let me have one. So I went to *bidesh* in anger saying, "I won't return till I've earned enough to buy myself a watch." From then on I started to go to *bidesh* regularly. Otherwise how would the household run? If we work in our home village, wages are not paid on the same day. But when we work outside, the earnings help us do things. For example, during the last monsoon season I went to sow paddy and earned Rs. 1100, and now let me tell you how that money was spent.

My eldest son studies at the *Madrassa*. I spent Rs. 250 on his tiffin box, umbrella, clothes and so on. During *Ashar-Shrabon*, I didn't have any money to repair the house, so I pawned my cycle for Rs. 300. I redeemed it for Rs. 360, which also included the monthly interest. I'd also borrowed Rs. 150 from my wife's brother and I paid back Rs. 100 of it. To go to work I needed Rs. 50 for transport costs, which I also had to borrow, so that was paid back. And I had some outstanding loans of about Rs. 150 which I also repaid. I do bring back money after working in *bidesh*, although there might be some difficulties at home too. A child might fall ill. Then people at home will have to borrow money to buy the medicines. Sometimes there's a food shortage in my absence, so the children go out to work in the fields. As a result they miss school.

We also face problems in *bidesh*. Once we went to work for a Hindu landowner. After our meals we were asked to clean the eating space with cow dung. "This was not in our contract," we said, "We won't do it." After the incident, we noticed that the quality and the quantity of the food were deteriorating. So we said to the landowner, "Are we human beings or cows, how can we survive on this food? There are ten of us. How do you think we can work for you with such a small quantity of food? If you don't need us, then let us go. We'll find other landowners to work for." So he went inside and scolded the family. After that the food was good.

Last year I went to Dumdum to work in a brick kiln. A labour agent from the next village took me there. Before leaving, I asked for some cash in advance to leave behind with the family. But he said, "Let's go now, and I'll give your family some money later." But after two days when I rang my mother up on the public telephone, she said that they hadn't been given any money. So I came back after six days with the money that I had earned.

Two years ago, I went to work in road construction. We don't do much in terms of road works. People don't like that type of work because labour contractors on construction sites don't have a good reputation, and the wages are low and the work is very hard.

Now we don't speak to our mother anymore. You see, when I went to *bidesh* during the monsoon season, I asked my mother for some paddy on loan. She asked my wife to dry and boil the paddy at her place, so my wife went there. I don't know what happened between them, but my mother never gave her the paddy. And here I was in *bidesh* knowing that there were eleven kilos of paddy at home, which my children got from their school [under a national programme to provide food to school children]. Also I was under the impression that my mother's paddy would be turned into rice, so I was reassured that there wouldn't be any food shortage at home while I was away. But the situation changed. My wife fought with my mother, and now my mother doesn't speak to us anymore.

Chapter 5 MONIRUL SHEIKH

Monirul Sheikh is about thirty-seven years old. At present, he owns around ten kathas of agricultural land. His family consists of himself, his wife and his three children. His three brothers live next to him. He lives in a mud house with a tiled roof. There's a large courtyard in the front and he also has about four kathas of adjoining land, where he grows different saplings. Monirul used to work as a wage labourer, and has been to bidesh. But presently, once a year, he goes to sell saplings. Throughout the year, he does various businesses. He also sells, according to the season, jaggery, mangoes and so on.

I've been on this land for the past nine or ten years. Before that I used to live in Shibpur. The brother who lives behind me over there had come here earlier. He built a house, which has a roof made of jute stalks. But he didn't know how to build it so he asked me to come over and help. I came and built the house, and lived with him for five or six years. I then built my own house, this one here. And after moving here, I bought this adjoining land.

We had no difficulties living in Shibpur really. In fact if I had stayed there, I might have been better off. I basically came here to build my brother's house. The Shibpur place used to belong to my father. He's dead now, so all of us brothers, have a share over it, including myself - I haven't forfeited mine. My brothers are the ones who are benefiting from it really. Similarly, the place where I now live belonged to my father, therefore my brothers also have a share over it, but I'm using it. We haven't yet demarcated our land. So we don't really know how big our actual shares are. The land in Shibpur, where my brothers are, is slightly larger than the land here. But if all of us start to break up the land, according to our shares, how will it work out? There are ten *kathas*, and we are seven brothers. What shall we do with one or one and a half *shotok* of land each? It wouldn't help anyone. So we've decided that two of us will own the land here and the rest of our brothers will own the Shibpur land. This is beneficial to all of us.

Father didn't have much land. I've only seen around two or three *bighas*. He never looked after the land, the family, or anything else. My mother did all the looking after. We used to grow different kinds of crop on that land, only on bits of it though, and it wasn't enough for the family. Sometimes my mother would hire out the land. Our memory of our father is that of a tea shop owner and my mother as the household minder. Father's life was spent in that tea shop. Out of his earnings, he would sometimes buy cooking oil, fish and so on. He would buy vegetables quite often though. My mother used to carry his meals to the shop.

Father used to spend most of his time chatting away with his friends in the shop. And also fight. He was a very outspoken man so if someone dared to contradict him, there would be a fight. If you agreed with him, then you were a good person, if not, you would have to leave. Say for example, you've just had tea and you wanted another cup five minutes later. My father wouldn't serve you. Instead he would say, "Are you a *Zamindar*, that you have tea so frequently?" He was never interested in commerce, never thought of profits.

When we were young, our parents fed us with whatever they could get hold of. And I used to shepherd the few goats that we owned. I started shepherding from the age of five or six. We never got proper meals then. Our parents had a lot of trouble running the household. In fact I sometimes had to resort to eating rice starch from the neighbours to survive. Our parents didn't have enough money to put us in school. But even though they couldn't feed us properly, my father would say, "Don't worry, just try and go to school." I used to be very scared of the teachers. My older brother used to go to a school in Udaypur. One day he took me along to his school. My fear of the teachers made me run away from the teachers' room, I was so scared. I

was little then. Then this Jalapara school was built. I studied there for a few years. But the school wasn't recognised by the state education system in those days.

We had *master* Lobkumar from Nimta, *master* Mosajem from Udaypur and *master* Samayun from Sonarpur. These three teachers had founded the school. Actually, studying meant playing, tearing up the books and so on. I didn't have a clue about alphabets. The teacher would ask me to write out the alphabets at home. My older sister would write it for me and I would show it to the teacher. This is how it went. So I didn't get to learn anything in school. But now I am quite literate in Bengali. I wouldn't be able to read the newspaper, but if someone wrote something down, I would be able to recognize the letters. This much I learnt from my children. Once I was ill for a month and had to stay at home. I would ask my son to study and I used to watch him and learn. I learnt through him. But even then if a word has more than three or four letters, I wouldn't be able to pronounce it.

Now I ask my children if they've been to school and scold them if they haven't. But in our day, studying wasn't important. We couldn't run our household properly, there was no respite. My sister managed to study up to class V, but I couldn't. Being a boy, I had to start shepherding. The girls didn't have to do that.

So from the age of ten, I started to shepherd for other households. My first wage was Rs. 20 per month. I used to tend the cows and goats for Motaleb Hazi of Udaypur. From morning till eight or ten o'clock at night. I had to herd them, tend them, and feed them, do everything. I also had to take out food to the labourers working in the field.

I worked like that at his house continuously for six or seven years. At first he would pay me those Rs. 20 a month and give me food. Nothing else. For a few years my monthly wage didn't go up. Then they were gradually raised to Rs. 60 a month and after that, when I was about fifteen or sixteen years old and was able to plough the fields, my wages went up to Rs. 120 a month.

They used to own a machine then, a paddy and wheat husking machine. The person who used to run the machine left one day and I took his place. I worked for a couple of years in that mill. I used to do everything including the accounts. I was in charge of everything. I'd take the daily earnings to him in the evening and clear the accounts. Sometimes there was no electricity during the day, so I had to work at night. The night work was taking its toll on my health and my body was suffering. So I left the job and came home. Although he was paying me fair wages for a daily wage labourer, I didn't feel well, so I left. Upon returning, I started cultivating our two *bighas* of land. By then I had learnt all there was to know about farming. When I was twenty years old, I got married in Parvatinagar. My father had arranged the marriage. They are distantly related to us: my wife is daughter of my *nana's bhai*. There wasn't much exchange of dowry. We didn't ask for anything. They gave us what they could. They gave us a cycle and a gold earring worth four *annas*. Nothing more. We didn't give anything much either.

I went to the wedding on Hasem's horse cart. A lot of people came with me. For the *Pan-Sinni* there were around twenty to twenty-five people. And for the actual wedding, around eighty to ninety people. All were my friends and relatives. Our *samaj* is quite small really. Our neighbourhood consisted mostly of our relatives. All from my father's side. Say there are ten families who are related to us, and five who aren't, we can't exclude the five. They invite me to their functions, so we have to include them too. After my marriage, we stayed with my parents for two to three years. Staying at your father's always creates problems, and we had our share.

So we separated. Now my father has passed away, he died five years ago. My mother's alive and lives with my older brother in the neighbourhood adjacent to ours. She comes to our house. We always look after her. She doesn't come to stay here with us though. If she does, then she stays with my middle brother next door. My father used to stay with me.

My father-in-law on the other hand, when he comes to visit us, sits, eats, does everything but he doesn't ever spend the night here. His house is close by. Just over there in Parvatinagar, so he always goes home.

I don't do anything but business now. I went to reap paddy in Bardhaman on two separate occasions, during the month of *Pous*. That was a long time ago. Once before my marriage, and once after. Apart from those times, I haven't been back to work in *bidesh*. I have had a chronic waist problem. If I work in the field I'm in pain. My waist is really painful. When people transplant paddy, my heart also wants to do so, but I can't really do it. I can't even carry the seedlings for a few feet. My waist doesn't allow it.

When I first went to work in *bidesh*, I was a naughty young lad of nineteen. We went in a group – so I didn't have any problems. I worked for a month and came back. I was the youngest in the lot.

After working for a while the others said to me, "Start making noises to go back home. You are young, if you want to go home, then they'll pay us and we can all go home." This is what they told me. But I said, "I've come here to work, so I'll work till the end and then leave. We've come to *bidesh* to earn a bit, not to spend, haven't we? Now if I don't finish the work, no one's going to bring money to my house. I have to stay here, work and then only will they pay me." But there were a few people in our group who didn't like to work for more than a week, ten days at most, after that they would leave. I've been twice but never left before a month. But I also realized that by working as a wage labourer I would not earn enough to run my family. It might run, but not well enough. If I am to look after my family well, then I have to be in the field of business.

I earned my food by working as a labourer, whilst my brothers had businesses. They had no land. But they have bought land now, five or ten *kathas*, by doing business. If they weren't earning enough from their businesses then why are they doing it? I see them buying land with the profit they've made. Whereas I, working as a labourer, can't even provide clothes for my family. And they buy extra clothes too. So I knew they were making money from their businesses, that's why I started too.

I used to have a small business before I came here. After my marriage, I did agricultural work for about four years. Other than working on my own land, I also worked as a sharecropper on someone else's land. I would rent a *bigha* of land on lease for one year for about Rs. 1000, sometimes Rs. 1500. There was no fixed sharecropping rate then. I used to cultivate three to four *bighas* of land. But I realised that there wouldn't ever be any respite in agricultural work. Say I were to rent a *bigha* for Rs. 1000, ploughing it, putting labourers on it, using fertilizer and *pesticides*, after paying for five different items I would only get one crop. After all this labour, I would get one crop which would provide food for two months but there wasn't any extra to sell, no profit to be made. Around that time, one of my middle brothers had a business, I asked him to let me join him. So I started being in business from then on and never went back to farm work.

I've stuck to my business well. I now sell date *jaggery* when it's in season. During the mango season in *Jaisto* and *Ashar*, I sell mangoes. Sometimes I sell palm *jaggery* too. I buy that at Sealdah station and then sell it at Raiganj, Kishanganj, Purnea, Dalkhola, in those towns and the surrounding areas. And during the three months of *Bhadra*, *Aswin* and *Kartik*, I sell [fruit] tree saplings. So I have to spend most of my time away from my village. The *jaggery* business season lasts four months – *Aghran*, *Pous*, *Magh* and *Falgun*. After that I work on sundries for about a month and then it's time for palm *jaggery* in *Boisakh*. That lasts for a month or two. Then it's the mangoes again, which start around the end of *Jaistho*, and go on for about two months, till the beginning of *Srabon*. Which means my business runs throughout the year and I'm always away from home.

The amount of time that I have to spend in one stretch away from home depends on the nature of the business that I'm doing at the time. When I'm selling *jaggery*, I might have to spend five, ten days, or even fifteen days away. There's no hard and fast rule. Sometimes I might sell all my stuff before the *haat* so I just come home. Today is Sunday and not a *haat* day, tomorrow there's one on, but I've come home, because I've already sold everything. Our *haat* days are Thursdays and Mondays. It's the *jaggery* buyers market. If I manage to sell all my ware a day before the *haat*, then I come home. But if I have to sell on a Monday, then I have to go on to the *haat*, which means I can't come back. So I spend the day away from home.

The tree sapling business keeps me away from home more than the *jaggery* business does. This year I went to Majhali. It's in Purnia district in Bihar. I was there for three months. I've sometimes had to stay there for ten, fifteen, twenty, even up to twenty-five days before I could come home. Once I've sold all my stock, I bring the money back and then two days later, I'm off to Nakurtala to buy the stocks and go out to sell again.

When I sell mangoes, if I can catch the six o'clock train in the evening then I can get home by nine in the evening. The next train is at eleven at night. There's no point in catching that one as I wouldn't be able to get home.

I didn't make much profit this year – only around Rs. 7000, after expenditure. One tree could fetch you Rs. 5 and some other tree Rs. 10. The profits didn't go into savings. The money was spent on food and other things. In the *jaggery* business, profits are around Rs. 2000 a month.

When I do the *jaggery* business, I buy one hundred kilos, sometimes one hundred and twenty or eighty kilos. This time I bought it for Rs. 25 a kilo. Last time I'd bought it for Rs. 24 per kilo from the market. This time the *haat* was on an auspicious day so they asked for a rupee extra per kilo; I sell it for Rs. 30 or 32. I go to Raiganj, Kisanganj, Purnia. In Purnia I sleep in a free public dormitory. At Raiganj, I have to pay Rs. 5 per day towards the cost of a room. Lots of other people stay with us. So there are around four or five of us travelling together. This time round, there were ten of us staying in one room. They were all from this village and the neighbouring one. We all know each other. There are a lot of people doing business in the family.

I've been doing business since the age of twenty-five or twenty-six. I first started with apples. I used to buy apples from Baharampur and sell them in villages like this. My middle brother used to be in the same business, so was another brother of mine from the other village. I didn't have much capital to begin with. But as I kept at it, my relationship with the moneylender also improved. You can't judge a person's character by his looks. You can only tell whether a man is alright by talking with him. Apples were not so expensive then. You only needed an initial

capital of Rs. 10. Besides, I used to know and still know people in Baharampur. So I used to buy the apples on a loan. I even buy in Kolkata on loans. But I wasn't given a loan on the first day! I started with my own money. I didn't suddenly start off with a business. I used to be a farmer so I would always have Rs. 200–500 on me. We used to buy one or two boxes of apples for Rs. 200–250 and would sell them in the villages on a cycle.

I started out by buying goods in Baharampur, and did business all the way up to Raiganj, Kishanganj, Purnia. It was trading in pomegranates. I used to buy them on a loan. When I did business in mangoes, I bought them on a loan too. But up till now I have never cheated anyone at any of the markets, not even for five *paisa*.

I have to face up to a lot of difficulties when I'm trading away from home. I have to travel on trains, which sometimes is a problem. We don't sleep properly at night. We always have some anxiety in our minds. About seven years ago, I was robbed of money in Rampurhat. I'd gone to sell mangoes. I didn't have much money though. Only around Rs. 450. When I went to buy a cup of tea in the morning I realized that I didn't have any money. You see this *lungi*, and below it the underwear, which has a pocket in it, the money was in there. The pick pocket had cut through every layer and taken the money.

Another time I was lying in the train, when someone started fiddling with my *lungi* - I had money in my underwear. My brother, who was awake, said, "What are you doing?" The man replied, "I'm looking for a *biri*." Actually he was a pickpocket. But after we caught him we had to pay Rs. 20 to buy our safety! Otherwise, since they operate in the area where we trade, we would be in trouble. We gave him Rs. 20, so that he could buy a bottle of booze. He took the money and said, "Go safely, you will never be bothered again on this route." There are other problems on the trains. I normally buy a season ticket at the beginning of the season. I don't travel without a ticket. I'd never travel without a ticket, no matter how expensive it is. But when we are transporting goods, the railway police always create trouble, so we have to bribe them.

If you can take your goods on a lorry, then that's the cheapest way. The other day I did that and it cost me around Rs. 125–130 to reach my destination, with the goods. The total cost was Rs. 150. Whether I had one hundred and twenty-seven kilos of goods or one hundred and fifty, the cost was only one rupee per kilo. Whereas when I go on the bus it costs me Rs. 3 per kg. I have to pay the porters to put the goods up on the roof of the bus and bring them down and so on. And the bus fare is higher too.

When I'm in *bidesh*, I keep worrying about my family. I wonder about what they might be doing at home, whether they have enough to eat or not – those kinds of thoughts. But now my son is grown up and my relatives are around. I think of them as my closest kin. When I'm away, my brothers, the neighbours, everyone looks after my family. The people around me also support us just by talking with me. In times of trouble they talk with us and ease off the pressure. I do the same. Otherwise, why would they reciprocate? If I have any spare money on me, then I'll bail them out in times of difficulty and they will do the same in return.

At the moment I have an outstanding loan of Rs. 15,000. It's not really a loan; I borrowed that money from my neighbours. From about three or four different people. There's no interest on it because of they're all my friends.

Once I took a loan of Rs. 6000 from someone and went into a litchi business with him, on a share basis. We had bought the litchis here and went to sell them in Raiganj. But after a day

the litchis went bad. I had to throw the whole lot away. So I came back, invested some more capital and went off to sell mangoes. That was also on a share-basis. And it was also a loan. The mangoes were not properly ripe.

Again when I bought this adjacent land, I had to borrow some money. Some had interest attached to it, but the rest of the loan was interest-free. I've paid off the loan with the interest, but I still need to pay the other part, the one without the interest. It has been outstanding for the last four or five years. Even if I say that I can't repay it over the next ten years, no one will ask for it. But I do have a nagging thought over it, that I've borrowed money and therefore have to return it. Those who lent me the money also know that as soon as I get the money, I'll pay them back.

When I have money I buy everything in cash. But I don't always have money available. So I have to take out loans. Right now I don't have any, so I've been borrowing from the grocer. When I return from *bidesh*, I find out how much I owe him and pay up. I have children at home, so before going to *bidesh*, I leave Rs. 100–150 behind and they live off that in my absence. Sometimes a little bit of it is saved too. Then they buy something for themselves. For example they bought this goat for Rs. 330.

They bought the goat about eight to ten months ago. It's a she-goat and has just had a kid that will grow up, and maybe there'll be a few more after that. And then we'll sell the goat and buy a cow. It's not possible to keep a goat here, but it is possible to keep a cow. The cow can be tied up and fed with straw, but you can't really tie a goat up. It doesn't eat straw. It will only eat grass. So it has to be shepherded. But how do you do that? There's no grass land. Every bit of land is cultivated. The boys now bring in grass from wherever they can; sometimes they take it to graze. My middle son does most of the looking after. The older boy brings in the grass. You can just about look after one goat. No more.

We don't own much land. It would be good to have some more. I got a bit of my father's land about three years ago. If we had a *bigha*, we would get thirty *mons* of rice paddy, over two seasons in a year, so we'd have rice throughout the year. And if I kept up the business on top of that and earned Rs. 2000 a month from it, while spending around Rs. 1000 on vegetables, clothes, medicine a month, this would leave me with Rs. 1000 to save a month. But since we don't own much land, I can't save anything. Every rupee gets spent.

The land I got from my father's share has mustard growing on it. After harvesting the mustard, I'll cultivate rice during the monsoon; we don't get water any other way, because of a dispute. I had to fight in court for forty years, but I eventually got possession of the land.

Actually my father's brother was a very educated and cunning man. There was no-one around to equal his stature. But my father was illiterate, and his brother never gave my father the share of the land he was due, he farmed the whole plot for himself instead. Later on my cousins exchanged that plot with Shafik's plot. So the land went under Shafik's control. He's a rich man, a strong man.

Until we won the case, the land had been under their control. It was a double loss for them, since they had rice paddy on it. And we won the land which meant the paddy also became ours. So we said, "You'll have to hand over the land to us now. You don't have to give us all the paddy that's on the land though. However, to show that we're the owners now, you'll have to give us ten *kathas* worth of paddy." They said, "If you can, harvest the entire paddy crop, we

can't just give you part of it." They thought that, since they were the village seniors, to give away both the land and the paddy would be a loss of face for them. But they didn't give us any paddy, so we had to resort to the law again. When they started harvesting it we called the police in. The police didn't allow them to cut it. Seven *bighas* of paddy were completely wasted. And this was the summer crop too, about three years ago.

We've had possession of the land for the last three years. But it's been lying uncultivated. No-one gives us any water. So there's no proper crop. We just sow some seeds on it. Some grow and some don't. Without water, what can you grow nowadays? Sometimes we sow jute but the goats eat it up. Depending on whether water falls from the sky, some things grow, if not, they don't. We have been getting water this year though. This year's mustard grew after being watered twice. It came from Rashid's *shallow*. He wouldn't give us any before.

When the court case [over possession of the land] started, my brothers were young. So a cousin of mine used to go to the court and we would pay his expenses. Then when my brothers grew up, the older one started to go. I don't go to offices, even nowadays. My older brothers do that. They go to the offices when it's required. If I had personal issues and I didn't have a clue how to resolve them, then I'd take my brothers along. But that hasn't happened yet. I've never even had to go to the *Panchayat* so far.

One of my brothers went to the *Panchayat* once before, for a signature. I heard that he didn't get the signature because we hadn't voted for their party. We used to vote for the *Congress*. We'd never voted for the *CPM*. But when we were having problem over the land the *CPM* helped us a lot. So now we have to vote for them. Our voting is very transparent. I will declare my voting preference openly. We can't be saying that we'll vote for you and actually vote for someone else. I can't do that. Whoever I vote for, I'll say it publicly. The *Panchayat* member at the moment is from the *Congress* party. And that's why he didn't sign, because we'd voted for the *CPM*.

So naturally we don't get anything from the *Panchayat*. So far, we haven't received any government help through them. During the flood, they gave money to a lot of people, Rs. 2000 each. But we never got anything. Our house is on higher grounds though, so the flood didn't really affect us. And I didn't own a *katha* of land at the time. So we didn't lose anything.

The flood year caused a lot of trouble for most people. Luckily I wasn't really affected. Just before the floods, I had borrowed fifty kilos of rice paddy from this brother here. I was also selling vegetables at the time – so I had fifty kilos of *kochu* stored in my house. All the neighbours came to my house. Everyone, relatives, neighbours, all. Everyone came here. I left this room for them and went outside to stay on a *macha*. You see, the women have to be provided with a room first. They get priority. We, the males, are used to staying outside. The ladies stayed inside. Most of the people who came were relatives, the others were outsiders. Two of my cousins also came with their families. I fed them as much as my means allowed me to. I had to feed them for four or five days. The cooking was done jointly. That's how we managed.

Now I have three sons. The oldest is sixteen years old, the middle one is thirteen and the youngest is eight. The eldest studies in class VII, the middle one is in IV and the youngest in I, which means he's at the stage of tearing up all his books! They should all be studying in higher classes. But since I'm illiterate – and their mother too – how can we prepare our children for higher classes?

I have a wish and that is to let my children study as much as possible. Because I've never been to a school. If the children go through school, then people will say that even a landless person like me has educated his children. The children will get a bit of fame and so will I.

In addition I wish for them to be educated [because it will open their eyes]. Working away from home has made me realize that they won't be able to achieve anything without education. We are blind from being illiterate. Education is very important. We are completely dependent on our cleverness in the sense that you will do your accounts on a calculator, whereas I'll have to do mine in my head. My head calculations will match the figure on your calculator though. But not everyone can do that. There are always a lot of problems. But education can help overcome those difficulties.

I try my best to educate them, although I can't educate them enough to make them competent in finding a job. But it would help if they were able to read the station names for example. They wouldn't have to depend on their fellow travellers. And they would be better at doing the cash accounting. See, I have a calculator but I don't know which button means what. Now I know a bit, because I've been shown. I can just about do my work on it.

Although I don't have a daughter I feel that girls, just like boys, need to learn everything they can. When the girls go off to other houses, then if something needs to be signed, they should be able to do it or do the accounts. If my wife had been educated, my children would be two classes ahead. I'm illiterate. I mostly work in *bidesh*. She could have gone through their studies, whilst cooking. A person who is educated knows the value of it; a person who is not doesn't realize it.

The eldest boy is studying in Kapasia. And that costs money. When they go to school, they hanker for pocket money, Rs.2, Rs.5. On top of that, there are expenses for books and clothes. I once had two white shirts and a pair of white shorts made for him to go to school. I don't remember how much those cost. Maybe around Rs. 250. Books cost around Rs. 500. Then you have to buy exercise books too. They get them from the shop, and when I return from work, I check the bill and pay the shopkeeper. Since I can't stay at home, when would I buy these for them? The actual schooling is free. You only have to pay around Rs. 75 for admission. For the middle and the youngest sons even that wasn't necessary. I didn't have to pay for their books or clothes either. The school provided the books for free, and the clothes are what they wear at home. The school didn't impose anything else. They did get private tuition for a while, from Nayeem's son Kalim. It cost Rs. 50 a month for the eldest one and Rs. 20 for the middle one. But I don't know if they are keeping it up. But just before the *Eid* he took Rs. 50 from me, saying that he had to pay his private tutor. I can't pay regularly, so I pay him once every two months or so.

I don't always have cash at hand. Seeing his elder brothers going, the youngest also wanted to have private tuition. So I said, "Alright." But I don't know what happened. Later, the child refused to go. Even hitting him didn't help. My children are not really interested in studying. We are forcing them, and they are going out of fear. The oldest will not walk to school. He uses my cycle when I'm not around. But he doesn't go regularly. Sometimes he doesn't go for five days at a time. He doesn't listen to his mother.

Chapter 6 SAJED SHEIKH

Sajed Sheikh, forty-two, was born in the village called Shibpur adjacent to Jalpara. His samaj lives there. His relatives are important in terms of social relationships. The house is made of mud, and the roof is tiled. There's no boundary wall. There are a few small trees in the courtyard. His family consists of his two sons, a daughter and his wife. He used to be a daily wage labourer, but now he has a small business and farms a bit of land, to provide for his family.

My father was a poor man. He never found happiness; poverty would eat away at him. He used to work as a daily wage labourer at other people's houses. He worked farm land, after that he went to brick kilns to make bricks. It was a time of poverty. He owned around ten *bighas* of land. But the land wasn't so productive in those days. There were no water pumps or machines then. And he had more daughters than sons: five daughters and three sons. I'm the youngest of the sons. He had to marry off the girls from his meagre earnings.

When I was two, my father died, and my mother died when I was seven. I had an older sister, who was married here. After my mother died I went to live with my sister. She was my *guardian*. She sent me to school. But without parents you can't really study. Unless they teach you, you don't learn. So I wasn't educated.

I started shepherding goats, after dropping out of school. Sometimes it would look after my brothers' cows. But until I was about sixteen, I mostly used to herd goats. My sister had ten goats. That's why she never put any pressure on me to go to school, if not, who would care for the goats otherwise?

So I started working from a very young age, although there weren't many jobs available. Around *Jaistho, Ashar*, people used to work either on paddy or jute land. There wasn't anything else. So I used to work in the paddy or jute fields. In those days, when things were cheap, I would be paid Rs. 2 and would be given a meal every day. Sometimes they would make me do some unpaid work.

When I was growing up, I used to go to work, but in my area. I still used to shepherd though. We were paid Rs. 6 and one meal per day. Sometimes bread, sometimes puffed rice. There wasn't much rice cultivation then. It didn't grow well here. I used to work from morning till evening. I would eat at home and leave around ten or eleven in the morning, eat the meal provided by the landowner, and then eat again when I got home. Today, they only give us one meal a day but they let us off earlier. Before, while harvesting rice paddy, we were given three meals, but we had to work much longer and harder. We wouldn't be let off until the paddy was brought inside the owner's house, even if it was seven in the evening. But now labourers have their say. They can leave work, whether it's finished or not, also ask for a day's extra wage to complete it. It wasn't as easy as it is now.

It's easier now because there's more work available. There wasn't any summer crop then. No chillies, no cauliflower. There weren't any water pumps either. Water pumps have been in use to irrigate farms for twenty years now. Today, you see, you can farm different crops all year round. But since there's less farming land available and no industries, people don't get enough work. On the other hand there are more landowners in Bardhaman. And that's why a lot of people go there, go to *bidesh*.

People also go to work in the brick kilns. But before, more people would go to the kilns because there was more poverty. Nowadays people in this village have learnt to do different types of jobs. Some do business, some pull *rickshaw-vans* and so on. Before, there were not so many different kinds of trades, people didn't know them either.

I've also been to *bidesh* for work. The first time I went was to the village of Radhangar, in the district of Barddhaman. I was about twenty years old. I went by train – from Puranobazar to Katwa. The price of a ticket was Rs. 8. Labourers and landowners would meet in Katwa. In Katwa, a landowner agreed to hire us for twenty-four days. The wage was Rs. 10 plus food, per day. Three meals a day. The landowner was a Muslim. He was good, but we had to work hard. When the morning prayers were called for, he would take us to the fields, give us puffed rice to eat, which we ate on our way to the fields. And in the evenings, after the sun had set, we would be let off. We had to harvest, stack, bring it in – do everything.

The first time I went, since I was young and inexperienced, I used to get very tired physically. We had to start work early in the morning and finish in the evening. We don't work so much at home. Sometimes I used to fall ill. Fever, amoebiosis, stomach aches and so on.

But when you go to work, you have to work, even if you're ill. Once when I had amoebiosis, the landowner gave me some medicines, which made me better and I managed to finish the work. But at the end, when he paid me my wages, he deducted the cost of the medicine.

I've only been to harvest the winter rice. I've not been in other seasons. I do not go to *bidesh* to do others forms of wage labour. Others go. My son went to Kolkata. He went after taking his class VIII examinations, to work with the masons. He brought his earnings back and spent them on buying books.

In *bidesh*, Allah is always in my thoughts; I don't try and cheat anyone. That's probably why I haven't had much trouble. But when I go to work on paddy farms for harvesting, my body gets very tired and weak. What can I do about it though? I have to work, since that's what I go to *bidesh* for.

In *bidesh*, we would stay in the landowner's living room or under the *verandah*. It was cold, the rags that I'd carried from home were not sufficient. So I suffered.

I've never had to cook in *bidesh*. The periods I spent there, say twenty or twenty-five days, I've eaten at the landowner's place. The food wasn't as good as in our place, but how can you get home food in *bidesh*? For example, they would only put small bits of meat in. The vegetables and the meals were not cooked properly. The *dal* was diluted. But we had to eat it anyway. I've even carried salt from home to my work places.

While working in the fields, I've drunk water from the ponds, and also from the tube-wells. We had to carry the tube-well water, with a lot of difficulty, from the landowner's house ourselves. They wouldn't bring it for us. We had to carry it because we needed it to drink. Pond water is easier to get hold of around Barddhaman. The drinking water comes from the pond anyway. And if you drink outside water, pond water, you will get ill. The pond water is dirty; people defecate around the pond and wash in the same pond. I used to shudder when I had to drink it, but there was no alternative. The worst thing about *bidesh* is not being able to wash. My body was revolting.

While harvesting, I usually work on a contract basis. But the people of Bardhaman don't always do the accounting properly. If we harvest two *bighas*, the landowners will say its one and half *bigha*. If we harvest five *bighas*, they will say four *bighas*. They don't count properly. But what can we do about it? If we call a land surveyor, he'll charge Rs. 300 as his fees, so what's the benefit? We take whatever they pay us. This kind of thing still goes on nowadays. I've heard about it. You don't have any peace of mind, even when you're working. If my Lord keeps me happy then I won't go back to *bidesh*. But it's not so easy. You can't really refuse in times of need.

Ten years ago, I used to go to *bidesh*. But now I do business. Working in *bidesh* doesn't cover the household expenses. But by doing business, I can put my children in school. You wouldn't be able to educate your children these days by working as a daily wage labourer. What can you do with Rs. 30–35 per day? Even though the wages in *bidesh* are a little higher – around Rs. 50 a day, plus food. But even that is not sufficient to run a household. So I started a business. I do different kinds of businesses. In the *jaggery* season I sell *jaggery*, mangoes in the mango season, and mango saplings during *Bhadra* and *Aswin*. I also farm a few *bighas* of land.

At the beginning, I had no idea about business. I have a brother-in-law from Parbatinagar. He was in business. He took me along initially, to trade in mangoes. Staying with him, I gained experience and confidence. I then ventured on my own. Since then I've been trading in different places. After going into business, I gave up working [as a daily wage labourer] in *bidesh*.

These days I go to *bidesh* for business, selling mangoes in the mango season, during *Boisakh* and *Jaistho*. Mangoes are mostly sold in *bidesh*. I'll go to sell *jaggery* next. I'll stay away from home for say, two, three, four days or even up to a week. I've been doing this business for the last ten years. If you want to buy one hundred kilos of *jaggery*, then you need Rs. 2500 as your starting capital. It used to be around Rs. 2000. I carry a hundred kilos of *jaggery* at a time. You can't really carry much more than that. I transport it on lorries first, then carry some of it on my head to sell it.

When I go to *bidesh*, my family have to stay by themselves, since poor people don't have any other option. When I go out to sell mangoes, I sometimes have to stay away from home for a few days. Sometimes I come home on the same day, so I normally buy a monthly ticket. And since I have the ticket, I can't be absent from work for a day. But even with a valid ticket, I have to pay the railway policemen because we carry goods with us, so we have to bribe them. Even when we return late at night and without any goods, we still have to pay them. They are railway police people. That's what they're like. If all of us get together and complain to the ticket inspector, we are told to go to the luggage carriage, which means they won't allow us in the passenger section. But then we can't fit our *jhuri* on the luggage racks. So we have to pay the policemen. But they are of no help to us.

Once I was nearly robbed of my money, on my way back home, about three years ago. The pickpocket cut through my pocket, but fortunately couldn't get at the money. I had Rs. 815. I was coming back from selling mangoes, and fell asleep in the train when this happened. I woke up after he had cut through my pocket, I hadn't noticed at the time. But he couldn't get at the money. Later, I went to Baharampur to buy mangoes which I would then sell Rampurhat. When I tried to take some change out of my pocket, the whole pocket fell off. I'd thought that the pocket fell off because of the weight of the change. It's only then that I realized the pocket had been cut. But he hadn't been able to take the money out.

Another time I had a road accident while I was out selling mangoes. We were actually sitting on the top of a lorry that was transporting us and it crashed into another lorry head on. There were five of us on it. A cousin of mine fell off and injured his eye. He was in hospital for a long time before he got better. I had Rs. 2400 worth of mangoes with me at the time. The whole stock was wasted.

Before when I was absent from home for a few days and my children were young, my parents-in-law would come and stay. But now the boys are big, so they don't come anymore. It's not necessary. But when I'm not around, they do feel scared at night. The house is at one end of the field, it's understandable. But what can you do? The poor can't do anything. If I don't go to *bidesh*, if I don't work, then the household will not run.

When I come back from *bidesh*, I bring back puffed rice, or sweets for the children – I can't really return empty-handed, can I? Sometimes I bring back a kilo of apples, sometimes half a kilo of *Jilabi*. You can't really come back without bringing back anything. When you have kids at home, you have to bring back something.

I give the money to my wife – she spends it on things that she needs, I also spend some of it. With the money, I sometimes buy clothes for the children, or sweaters, or clothes for my wife. This is how the household is run.

In times of cash crises, I have to take out loans too. You can get loans from the market or in town. You have to pay interest on them. If you take a loan without pawning anything, then it carries an interest rate of ten percent per month, otherwise it's three percent.

Working in *bidesh*, working as a wage labourer hasn't enabled me to achieve much, in fact I stayed in poverty all the time. On the other hand, starting a business has helped me. I've been able to pay for my children's education. The household is running alright. This is the only success I can see, nothing else.

But my family's not big. It consists of my wife and my two sons and a daughter. The children are in class IX, VI and III. The girl is in class III. My two sons are studying in Talpara, my daughter goes to school in this village. My parents died when I was very young. They couldn't educate me. I find it difficult to cope with the outside world – these are the difficulties of illiteracy – I can't do my own accounts for example. I don't want my children to suffer the same fate. I want them to understand everything when they're working – this is my wish. But I don't know how they'll sustain their education. The eldest boy goes to school regularly but the younger one is quite naughty. Sometimes he doesn't go to school for a month, sometimes for ten days. He doesn't study properly. If I scold him then he goes off to his grandmother's house. If I'm at home, then I smack him and then he goes to school. His mother can't control him; he needs to study to keep up with the times.

At the high school the fee is only Rs. 70 per student, at the time of promotion. No other fees are required. But it's quite expensive to send the younger ones to school. That's why I haven't been able to succeed in life, because I couldn't go to school. After working so hard, I still have debts.

I've spent around Rs. 1000 on books for the eldest one and Rs. 200 for the youngest one. I didn't have to buy any books for my daughter. The government provided those. She's in class III. She also has private tuition. But I can't pay her tutor regularly. For the three children, it costs about Rs. 100 per month. My two sons used to go to Topdanga but left and started again at

Parvatinagar. The private tuition for them has stopped, because I can't afford it. It's the same with my daughter. Actually village tutors are not very reliable.

Besides I have to buy their clothes. For the boys you need one uniform each. Without the uniform, they wouldn't be allowed in school. It cost me around Rs. 400 per son. Stitching charges were Rs. 80 each in addition to the cost of the fabric. So the uniforms for both the boys came to around Rs. 800. On top of that you have to give them Rs. 2, Rs. 5 pocket money every day. If you don't they won't go to school. The school is quite far. From Jalpara to Talpara – Topdanga. They can't walk it. So I had to buy a cycle for each of the boys.

The primary schools now provide *khichuri* for the mid-day meals. They used to give out uncooked rice – and that was much better. What is now happening is that education is suffering because of them giving out *khichuri*. The children sing 'the food is cooked, we'll get to eat' and bang away on their steel plates. They don't concentrate on their studies but sit at the cooking stove instead. Before there was a resolve to study; that's no longer the case.

I mainly do business. When I find that I'm idle, with no work, then I go out to work as a labourer. Otherwise my business more or less runs throughout the year. I till the land that I own – ten *kathas* of farm land and ten *kathas* of land around the house. The house land here consists of three *kathas* for the house and the rest is for farming. I'm thinking of sowing potatoes on these seven *kathas*. For this I need to hire a labourer otherwise I'd be absent from my business. So I hire a labourer and together we plant the potatoes in one day, and then I can go off to run my business.

To pay for this, I've taken a loan of Rs. 1000 from the moneylender. But I don't think that will be sufficient. The potato seeds themselves cost Rs. 700. And if I don't put in fertilizer worth Rs. 400–500, the crop won't be any good. If the soil is not prepared well then the potatoes don't grow well. But I don't have that amount of money right now.

When I'm in need of money, I take a loan from the moneylender. I might pawn an earring or a ring to borrow money for my business or to work the land. I still owe them a bit. If I have things to pawn, they give me the money immediately. If you take a loan by pawning, then they charge three percent interest [per month]. But if you don't have anything to pawn then they won't give you a loan so easily. Gold ornaments help. We don't go to the banks. There are always a lot of problems with them.

Once I took a subsidised loan from the bank, which was facilitated by Salim Sarkar. I took about Rs. 700, (that was only the subsidised part). I haven't paid it back yet. It's been over fourteen or fifteen years now, but no one has ever come, neither have they asked for it to be repaid. So I don't really know whether the loan has been written off or not. The Bank only gave us Rs. 720, it was actually Rs. 800, but they deducted Rs. 80 and gave me Rs. 720.

I don't go to any other official place, since I don't need to. Once I went to the *Panchayat* office. That was the flood year of 2000, when everything was inundated. That was the only time they gave me a piece of cloth to wear. I went to fetch it. I've never been back to the *Panchayat* office since.

The *Panchayat* office is entirely controlled by the *party*. It's not for us, the menial beings. It's for the people who work there, they benefit from it; it's not for the general public. We don't benefit from it. All the people who are associated with it eat up everything. People like us, the public,

don't get anything. They eat up everything. The 2000 flood inundated us. We are the poor, but we didn't even receive five *paisa*. Instead it's the people who are rich and are associated with the *party* who got everything. They didn't even give us any loans.

The flood destroyed our houses – there wasn't much food around either. These were very difficult times. We had neither work nor food for the whole period. The flood started on the 5th of *Aswin* and I had no work till the end of *Aghran*. For a month and a half, until I was able to start my *jaggery* business, I had to survive on loans. It cost me Rs. 2000 to rebuild the house. But during the month of *Aghran*, I started to sell *jaggery* and somehow managed to repay the loans.

By loan I mean I had a friend who had some paddy. He asked me, "Sajed, how are you feeding your family? You don't have any food – take these two *mons* of paddy for the children to survive." So he gave me the paddy. The government didn't give us anything. Lots of people got money and a tarpaulin during the flood, but so far the *Panchayat* hasn't given us anything. The *Panchayat* members ignore us. You see, there's this government scheme - *BPL Red Cards*. We went to try and get one from the *Panchayat* member. But he keeps saying that they haven't arrived and that they will give us one when they arrive. But I know he'll never give us one. He doesn't take us seriously. Up until recently, we didn't even have ration cards for all of us. My wife and I had one each, but the children didn't. Somehow I eventually got cards for them too. I got them through a person at Sonarpur, who charged me Rs. 140 for each card.

The village leaders, the elders, mostly only look after their own interests. They don't look after our welfare. But in some cases, they do help us. Say if someone dies or there's a celebration, then they will help. Within the Muslim community, this is their duty even if relationships are bad. In times of crisis, they rise above the quarrels and help. They also help with money in times of need. They give money to the poor from the *Fitra* fund or from the *Kurbani* fund. But I've never received any.

A few years back, we had a celebration at home, when my two boys had their *Musalmani*, we held a party at home. I had sacrificed a cow and the whole village came to feast on it. Many different people were invited, friends, relatives, everyone. If I give a *Khana* then I have to invite everyone, otherwise it doesn't look good. They also contribute Rs. 10, Rs. 20 or Rs. 50. The relatives even gave us Rs. 50 as a present, although not in cash. But they did give us presents. We received thirty-five to thirty-six different items – clothes, apparels, drinking glasses, an umbrella and so on.

I wouldn't have been able to manage this big affair alone. My brothers and my brother-in-law helped me. I spent around Rs. 6000–7000. I had to buy the cow, vegetables and so on. But the rice was my own produce. Otherwise the costs would have been much higher.

I have to inform the *samaj* beforehand, otherwise they won't come. You have to have a meeting on the day before and say, "I'll give a cow, so much rice and I need so many people to cook, to manage the event and so on." I have to tell them that this is my budget and you have to manage the event with this. Then people from the *samaj* will come and help, say around ten people. They'll cook and serve the food. They don't need to be paid in cash. But I also have to reciprocate and go when I'm called upon.

For the past few days, I've been staying at home, because my wife's not well. If it's nothing serious, like a cough or a fever, then we buy the medicines in the village. We don't go to the hospital. It's quite far, so I would lose out on business days. But right now she's very ill. I went

to Topdanga with her on a cycle and showed her to the hospital doctor. He wrote a prescription. I bought the medicine and came home. She is very weak. The bottle of medicines cost Rs. 65. He's prescribed two days of treatment. But we have to go back.

Last year, I was ill. You know the place where I trade in Topdanga – the place where I leave my cycle – there was a dog with her new born puppies. When I was taking the cycle out, the wheels ran over the mother's feet, so she bit me. I saw a village doctor to get treated and felt better. And afterwards I also went to the *kaviraj*, who said not to worry because there weren't any signs of infection from the bite. But three months later, I dreamt that I had gone mad from rabies and that I was dying. So I went to a *kaviraj* at Lalgola who said that the poison has set in. He gave me medicines – three doses which cost Rs. 75. He gave me other treatments too. He also said that I should only eat cold things (as opposed to spices), like yogurt, green coconut and so on. He warned me, "Take the medicines but beware, you will suffer from labour pains similar to that of a woman who is about to give birth because you have the puppy in you tummy. But don't go to the hospital because they'll give you injections and you'll die." After saying this he gave me another medicine, to abort. I came home and took the medicine. At around twelve in the afternoon I started vomiting and defecating. I was in serious pain when urinating. It was so bad that I nearly lost consciousness. They had to pour water over my head to revive me.

If I'd been to the hospital, I would have had to spend Rs. 1000–2000, on injections and the injections are not even any good. And I would have suffered from the injections. Whereas the *kaviraj's* medicine is effective. If someone goes mad then his medicine is sure to work. I had it twice and once more to make sure I was free of poison. And it wasn't there. The neighbours came to check on me at the time. But I didn't ask anyone to accompany me to the doctor. Being poor, I couldn't afford expenses like transport and other things.

Chapter 7 SAMSED SHEIKH

Samsed is in his mid forties; he is a landless and poor man. His family consists of his wife, two sons and a daughter. The daughter is the youngest – she is twelve years old. They live in a tiny, one-room mud house with tiles on the roof. Across the courtyard live his brothers and parents. He used to work as a daily wage labourer before but begging is now his profession. His two sons work as daily wage labourers and help run the household. The family's only asset is their two cows.

I was born in Parvatinagar. I came here about twenty-two or twenty-three years ago. There was nothing here then – the whole place was empty – there was only a bit of farming. My father used to work as a daily wage labourer to support his family. Sometimes he would also work in brick kilns. During the lean season, he would do various jobs, working on farms. My grandfather inherited ten *kathas* of land from his father. Later he sold that and now has fifteen *kathas*. I haven't received a share of it, because he's still alive.

I never went to school when I was a child. Now both the government and parents provide a lot of initiatives to get children to go to school. In our days there weren't any such initiatives. In fact there were hardly any schools at all, neither government, nor private ones. There was no school either in or anywhere around our village. There was one in Udaypur, on the other side. But once, when I was going past that school, I saw two children being severely beaten up by the teacher. Seeing that, we ran away as fast as we could. After that, I never went anywhere near a school again. But later on, in my old age, I started going to an evening school when it opened. That school closed down after a while though, and so my studies stopped. Now I can read a bit, but my eyes have become weak and my vision is blurred.

I used to work as a shepherd when I was young and used to shepherd goats for a household in Udaypur. I must have been about ten years old. I didn't have to work for my family – actually there was hardly any work available. Children now work in chilli fields for example, but there wasn't any chilli cultivation then. I had to get to the landowner's house at five in the morning and would return home at seven, sometimes even eight in the evening. I had to feed the cows in the morning with cut straw and then take them out to graze. There were about five or six cows and five or six goats. Even though I was very young, I had to look after them properly; otherwise I would get beaten up. It was very difficult to work for such landowners. They would beat me a lot. I also used to get beaten by the older shepherds, over grazing patches.

The landowners wouldn't pay me any wages then. Only food and maybe a pair of shorts and a vest once a year. That was it. There was no question of any money being paid. Just food. But later, when I turned fourteen or fifteen, once I had learnt to work as a labourer, learnt to plough, I was given wages. But I didn't plough long for them. I left them to start working as a wage labourer. The wages were around Rs. 5 or 10 a day.

When I was about nineteen or twenty years old, I was living with my mother's sister. I also got married there. My mother's sister arranged my marriage. I used to roam around in her village. My future father-in-law lived in the neighbourhood and his daughter used to call my mother's sister *fupu*. So her father spoke to my uncle and got me married to her. They didn't give any dowry, not even a cycle. In the month of *Aghran*, you need blankets – but they didn't even give me any of those. Not even five *paisa*.

After my marriage I lived with my mother's sister for another year. I used to work over there, on jute fields, carrying jute, harvesting rice paddy and so on. But living there was creating

problems. So I came here and started to live with my father. When I became *Bhinu*, I didn't get anything from him. All the things you see here I have acquired myself. I even built this house, although the land belongs to my father.

I have two sons and a daughter, who are alive. The girl is the youngest. I've managed to have all of them admitted into school. The two boys went to the village primary school. But they weren't good at studies, although the younger one was better. I thought of putting him into high school. But I couldn't afford to. I didn't have any money for the admission, and no one loaned me any.

My daughter studies at Kapasia high school. There are a few other schools around, but the admission rules are very strict. The girl is not very bright either. On top of that the other children from the neighbourhood also study at Kapasia so they can all go together. That's why I got her admitted to that school. I went myself for her admission. No one listens to poor people like us. If I told the school authorities to do something, they would just say, "Wait, wait, and wait in the queue." They are very insolent.

My daughter's admission cost me Rs. 200. The admission fee was Rs. 80. But after adding the sundries to that, it came to Rs. 200 altogether. It could have been more, but we bought the fabric for the uniform from the shop of my wife's brother. As a result it was cheap. There are other expenses though. When she goes to school, she needs pocket money of Rs. 2, 3, 4. She also goes to a private tutor in the Hindu neighbourhood. That costs Rs. 40 a month. She has been going for private tuition for a while now. She has had a private tutor since she started in this high school. Before this one, she used to go to another person in the same neighbourhood. He used to take Rs. 25 every month.

I've been going to *bidesh* since I started working as a labourer. My father used to go too. In fact he would take me along. I remember the first time I went. But I don't remember the place; it was far away though – possibly Birbhum. We went to Puranobazar from where we got on the train to Katwa and then caught a bus. After that, I also went to Nadia and Bardhaman to harvest, which involves reaping, threshing, stacking and so on. I didn't know how to transplant rice saplings at the time.

We didn't transplant saplings in our area. We used to sow the rice seeds straight out. I learnt to do the transplanting in *bidesh*. I always used to go with a cousin of mine from Hosnipara. He taught me step by step.

When I first started harvesting, I was scared. I used to feel very unsure about myself and thought that I'd injure myself. Actually I cut myself many times, in our area, and in *bidesh*. I still have the traces of injury.

The food in *bidesh* is not like our food at home. I've never liked it, it doesn't taste good. It's too watery. For example, their vegetable dishes don't have enough spices and they're runny. [It was so bad] you couldn't really eat it. But we had to make do with it. You have to eat to survive.

Once the harvesting work was over, I would go and work in brick kilns. I used to work there from *Kartik* to *Boisakh*, in Lalbag or Lalgola, mostly in Lalbag. We would come home everyday. But if you went beyond Lalbag, then you would have to stay overnight. But we always got work on this side of the river.

When I first started working in *bidesh*, I used to do harvesting work. There wasn't much work around at home – there was a lot of poverty. There were only small jobs and that was mostly women's work. Women didn't used to work in the fields, now they do. They've learnt to do everything. They learnt through working in the chilli fields. Now they do everything. The landowners like to employ women because they are cheaper too. They are paid Rs. 25. In the *colony* neighbourhood, there are many women – all widows. Some of them work as labourers and some leave the village to beg. The younger ones work and the older ones go out to beg.

I've not been to *bidesh* for six or seven years. By that I mean I haven't been to Bardhaman district. But I do get around in our district of Murshidabad. Dhulian, Omarpur, Jangipur, are the areas I go to beg. I stay there for a week. And then I come home. I came back from begging a few days ago, three days before the *Roja*. I beg at other people's houses and bring things home. I can't work on farms anymore. I've not done it for eight years. I'm used to begging now. I've been doing it for eight years, my hands have become heavy. I can't do any other work.

I gave up working because there wasn't any regular work available. The other day, I was doing a job and it just stopped for a month. No work for a month – how am I to survive? But there's another reason. My father's second brother owned some land and I used to work on it as a sharecropper. But that's come to an end and I can't get any other land in the village to sharecrop on. If I could, then a few days of work would be sufficient to feed the family. But we don't have any land. We are completely dependent on our physical labour. The landowners make us work and then keep our wages pending for about twenty days. But if they are unable to pay us, then my family will have no food. People who own bits of land and who have been able to harvest ten or twenty *mons* of paddy can survive without being paid for a while. But for people who only depend on their labour earnings are crucial. So for all these reasons, I started to beg.

Nowadays, my sons go to *bidesh* to work. We've never asked them to go. They go of their own accord. The younger one gives me all his earnings but Hafiz never gives a single *paisa*. Hafiz can't work in *bidesh*, he works here for a few days and then stops. He isn't a good worker. Sometimes he goes to *bidesh*, but comes back after just a few days' work. He doesn't work properly. My younger son Asif however is not like that. He works well and gives me the money.

Last year Asif went to work on a road construction site, but left after a few days. So he didn't get his wages. The labour contractor pocketed the money. So now I don't let him go and work on road construction sites anymore. This year he went to Kolkata and earned Rs. 400. He gave the household Rs. 200 and spent Rs. 200.

I used to go off to work in *bidesh* to escape difficulties at home. But working there wouldn't necessarily resolve the problems. We, as husband and wife, would fight regularly, these were real fights. But when I realized that working in *bidesh* hadn't really solved anything, I decided to start begging instead. There's no pride in such work. It's better to work as a labourer. At least you're respected then. We're not. We eat whatever gets put in our hands. Because we live on alms, we are not respected at all. I feel terrible. Sometimes it's very upsetting, but what can you do? The household wouldn't run otherwise. If my wages get stolen or I get cheated while working in *bidesh* or in road construction work, then it's of no use. Only when I have money at hand can I relax for a few days.

I've never been to *bidesh* to work on road construction sites. But I went to Kolkata a few years ago to work as a mason with a neighbour of mine. I suffered a lot. It was around the months of

Boisakh and *Joisto* and it was very hot. Working in that heat, doing cement plastering work, my head would start spinning and I would run away looking for shade. The contractor would then scold us saying, "Why are you running away so frequently?" I did get my money though, but I had to fight with the contractor. When he hired us, he had promised weekly payments. We were contracted to work for Rs. 65 a day, which included food. But at the site, he didn't pay us every week. I worked there for about 15 days. Then he started creating problems over the money, so I left. I wasn't paid the full amount. He gave me some of it and held back the rest. He did pay up later though, but that was only after a long time, nearly a year later. He came here to pay me. His sister is my neighbour; she's the one who helped me get the money. Without her I wouldn't have been paid the full amount.

We had to cook for ourselves over there. We had to cook for fifteen people at a time. We would all take part in preparing the food. Each of us had to cook on a particular day. The living arrangements were good. We were working in a hospital, where there were many empty rooms, so we used to stay there. And since they had electricity, we had light.

I was ill once in *bidesh*. I was in a bad state and had to stay at the hospital in Katwa for three days. I was lying nearly unconscious. After three days, when I was better, I went home by train. That year we had been to Barddhaman, to transplant the summer rice. There was no-one with me except the son of my mother's sister. I worked for two to three days and then fell ill. Allah saved me. A Hindu got me admitted into hospital.

On that day my brother had already left for work. I was coming back on my own. The train station was about eight miles from the village. On the way I had to defecate five times and was terribly thirsty. I drank water somewhere, but I started to defecate more and more and couldn't really stand up. At that moment, a person was passing by on a bullock cart carrying paddy. He was a Ghosh – a Hindu. He asked me what was wrong, and why I was behaving in that way. I said, "I have a bad cold and a very bad stomach. I can't walk; I can't do anything about it either." A student also came by. So the Hindu man told him to get a *rickshaw van* to take me to the station.

When the *rickshaw van* arrived, he told the driver to take me to the hospital instead. So he took me there. My clothes were all soiled by the constant defecation. The doctor at Patuli hospital said that I couldn't be treated there and advised me to go to the bigger hospital in Katwa. So the *rickshaw van* man left me at the station. I drank some water at the station but immediately threw up. Then, two Hindu fishermen came by and asked me what was wrong. I couldn't even move by then, but managed to explain to them what had happened. So they lifted me up and carried me onto the train. When we got to Katwa station, they took me to the hospital on a *rickshaw van*.

Initially, when I reached the hospital, I was in a terrible state. I was suffering so much that four people had to pin me down to inject the saline. After one bottle of saline, I felt better, and after three bottles, much better. I was in the hospital for three days before being discharged. I came home slowly and eventually recovered.

I've sometimes had to face problems over wage payments in *bidesh*. If the work didn't exactly match what had been expected, the landowner would start to bicker. If he wasn't satisfied, then there would be problems. We would say, "If you're not satisfied, then pay us and let us go elsewhere." Some would pay up, others wouldn't.

This happened once at Bolgona in Bardhaman district. It also happened in another place, where we went to harvest the summer paddy. It was very hot and after two days' work, I got a temperature. I couldn't work anymore. So I said to the landowner, "I would like to go home, pay me." But he didn't, so I had to come back home empty-handed.

I often had to resort to drinking water from the pond over there, against my wishes, but what can you do? Sometimes I would carry water from the village hand pump to the field. But mostly I drank pond water. Nowadays you have lots of utensils like plastic jerry cans to carry water. But eight or nine years ago, when I used to go, there weren't any.

When I'm away in *bidesh*, if any of my family members fall ill, then the village quack treats them. But if it's a serious illness, you have to go to a different place. If you can't go by yourself then someone will take you. If I'm around, I'll take them. If I'm not there, then either the children or someone from the village will go along. Sometimes, someone might be going in that direction anyway, maybe the girl from next door – then you can go with her, whether she's related to you or not.

We used to return from *bidesh* and bring only cash back - we never got any rice or *dal* as wages. We used to eat at the landowner's house and at the end we would work out our wages and get our cash. If we had worked for approximately twenty days – then it would come to Rs. 400 or 500. I would give the cash to my wife and it would stay with her. It still stays with her. Sometimes we decide jointly how and what to spend the money on. Sometimes she decides by herself. But most of the time, it is spent on food - on rice or vegetables. At other times it might be used to repay loans, or maybe to buy clothes. But never on anything big.

Last winter, I went to *bidesh*, within our own district of Murshidabad, to a place near Omarpur, to cultivate summer paddy. Actually I had met a person while on my begging tour, who set up the job for me. You too must be meeting a lot of people on your tours. I got three *bighas* of land to farm last summer. The shallow pump belonged to the people over there. I had to buy paraffin oil, to run the pump and take it with me. The pump owner and the landowner took two *mons* of paddy each for a *bigha*. I bought paraffin oil off people from our village, who got it from the ration shops. It would cost me Rs. 20 a litre, although in the ration shops it only costs Rs. 10 a litre.

The people whose plot I farmed owned a lot of land. They had ten *bighas* of land in one single plot. They are all quite well-known masons who are in *bidesh* and earn around Rs. 300 a day. They have a lot of money. And that is why they can't look after their own land. Because they don't stay at home. They go to bigger places like Bihar, Orissa. Their wages are around Rs. 300, 350, 400 a day. They are good masons.

Out of the paddy that I reaped in Omarpur, I sold forty *mons* and brought home seven *mons* to eat. I travelled by train and had to bribe the ticket man with about Rs. 5. And then I had to hire a *rickshaw van* from this side of the river for Rs. 40. We are still eating from that paddy. Out of the money I got from selling the paddy, I've repaid a loan of Rs. 2000 and bought two cows. I also had a loan of Rs. 4000 to repay, which I'd taken out for farming, from my siblings. I've repaid some of it. There was no interest on it.

I still owe them Rs. 2000. Plus Rs. 500 to a moneylender on the market. When we need cash urgently, then we go to the market and pawn our gold items. The moneylenders treat us well, because they make a profit out of us, so they want us to come back to them. One of my

pawning debts is Rs. 300 – it's been about five or six months since I took out that loan. I owe someone else Rs. 200 and that has been outstanding for the last four months. I needed it for paddy farming, and the interest rate is of three percent every month. I don't pay the interest every month but I'll pay it when I go to redeem my things.

I don't own any land here. When my father's second brother still lived here, I used to till a *bigha* of his land, on a share cropping basis. I used to farm it eight years ago, twice a year. Once chilli and once wheat. Chilli used to be on a contract farming basis. I would be contracted for a certain amount of money for the chilli farming. For the wheat he would get one third and I, two thirds of the crop. All the expenses would be borne by me. But when my father's second brother left for his father-in-law's place, he sold all his land. So I lost the land and had to start begging. I can't manage to get a plot of land, even when I have the money. I only get offered land to buy when I don't have any money, that's how it goes!

Chapter 8 AJAD SHEIKH

Sixty-seven year old Ajad Sheikh is a landless poor. He's a beggar by profession. His family consists of two unmarried teenage sons, two daughters and his wife. He started living in Jalpara in a tiny room in a colony, built by the government. At present they live in a small mud house, with a verandah and a tiled roof. He has acquired an extra plot of land in addition to the portion that was allocated to him by the colony and now has a spacious courtyard. It has a bamboo grove and a hand pump on one side. One of his unmarried sons lives with his family, in the house, in a separate room. At the other end of the courtyard, in a small mud house live his daughter and son-in-law. Ajad Sheikh was once a daily wage labourer but now lives off charity. His two sons also work as daily labourers and contribute some money to the household.

I actually come from Singi. That's my family home - I was born there. My father died when I was two. He'd gone out to catch fish in the night and had come home in a state of shock. He died the next morning. After that we were always short of money. My father's mother also died after a while. So where could my mother go? There was no-one for her to turn to there. So she brought me here to Aopara, to her father's house. I was her only child. My mother's father was still alive. My mother used to cook separately. She used to bring rice paddy from other households, husk it and give the rice back. Those households would then give her some of the rice. That is how she used to run the family.

When I was six or seven years old, I used to loiter around a lot and so was admitted to the school. I only attended school for six or seven months. One day my teacher hit me. I was quite naughty then. Since he'd hit me, I thought I'd hit him back. So I stood there waiting and, as soon as the teacher dropped his stick, I picked it up and hit him. And then I ran away. After that, I never went back to school. That was the end of my studies. How could my mother cope? I would often run away and hide in bushes where she couldn't find me.

When I was around seven or eight, I started to work. I used to feed cows and shepherd them. Each household used to have fourteen to fifteen cows. Not so many goats maybe between five and seven. There are no sheep around nowadays, but there used to be then. Those owners would look for young children to take care of their animals. I had to go to these houses very early in the morning and would come back home after eating at six, seven or eight in the evening. I would get my meals and Rs. 5 as my wage every month.

I did shepherding for two to three years. I gradually learnt to do other jobs. Ploughing and so on. I was around fourteen or fifteen then. My wage was Rs. 20 a month. Money and food. Nothing else. I used to plough, look after the land, but also do all the farm work, including harvesting the rice and jute, feeding the cows and so on. Everything. Then I went to *bidesh* to work. I worked there for three years.

The village [we went to] was Dadpur near Daulatabad in Murshidabad district. The landowners from there used to visit our village; they were related to the family I was working for. They offered me higher wages, so I went. They had offered me Rs. 30 a month. But in the end they didn't pay me the full amount: they only paid me two years' arrears and nothing for one year.

My mother's father died around that time. My mother's brother got my mother married again to his cousin. My mother and my stepfather started living at home together as a family. They would spend all my money but didn't look after me at all. So I stopped giving them money, and as a result, there were always fights at home. When I was about ten years old, I bought a goat

for Rs. 2.50, with my own money. In those days Rs. 2.50 was a lot of money. It would be equivalent to Rs. 500 or 600 now.

I used to play around the house, where I eventually bought the goat from, and would address the owner of the house as 'uncle' and his wife as 'auntie'. One day I asked 'auntie' if I could have the goat. And she said, "Why?" I said, "Since we don't have a goat, I would like to look after one." So she said, "How much will you pay for it?" After bargaining, I bought it for Rs. 2.50 and that was it.

I got more goats from this one. She would give birth to three or four kids at a time. The goat also had a large udder. Really big. Even after she'd fed her kids, there would still be at least 750 gm of extra milk. The goat was of a good pedigree. But I sold the goat out of anger, because my stepbrother wouldn't work at all, whereas I did. But my parents didn't scold him. On the other hand they would beat me sometimes even though I was the one giving them all my earnings. Any mistake on my part would result in beatings. So I sold the goat out of anger.

My mother meanwhile sold our plot of nine *kathas* in Singi, which she had inherited. This is because one of her cousin brothers, who lived in East Pakistan, came over and offered to take my mother there, to which she happily agreed. But then I thought, "Where will I keep my things, my goat?" So I sold everything. But in the end, I don't know what happened, mother never went. I ended up being the loser. The money which they'd got from selling the land at Singi had all been spent. A *khalu* of mine borrowed some of my goat money to buy a cow. He never repaid it though. Another *khalu* borrowed some money off me to take a mango orchard on a lease in partnership with others. The plan was to sell all the mangoes and share the profit between the partners. But he had also bought another orchard in partnership with someone else with the money I'd lent him. He never gave me my share of the profit. As a result I not only made no profit but actually lost my capital too.

I had also invested some money in leasing a plot of land. The deal was for seven years. But I was only allowed to farm it for two years, after that, they wouldn't let me farm it. So I again lost my money.

I didn't get along well with my mother's brother either – he was a different type of person. Actually the house belonged to my mother's mother. So my mother was entitled to a part of it. But my mother's brother refused to give her her share. He took over the whole house. This was the cause of our quarrel. This land measures about nineteen *kathas*, just one *katha* less than a *bigha*. But he never gave us anything.

You see that land, beside that house? It measures about eight *kathas*. The person who used to own it told my stepfather to buy it for my sake. I took a loan of Rs. 18 from the landowner whom I was working for and bought the land. Eight *kathas* for Rs. 18! It had a huge palm tree on it too. So I paid the money but my step father got his name registered on the land deed, and I lost my money. That is how they cheated me. Then they bought two *bighas* of farmland and said that it was meant for me. I had a cow then, which I sold and gave them Rs. 150. The price was Rs. 50 per *bigha*. But I don't know how much it actually cost to register it. I was young then, about fourteen or fifteen years old, so they bought the land in my mother's name. I'd paid for the land but it was registered under my mother's name. It is still in her name. I used to farm that land. I had bought a plough, ploughing bullocks, everything. Then my stepfather died. I got married. I've been married twice.

When I got married for the first time, I was about twenty one. I got married in my own village. But I had a lot of problems with my wife. Our marriage lasted five years. That woman is bad; not counting our marriage, she was married six times. All her other husbands are alive. Her last marriage is still on. I wouldn't have left her but I was getting very frustrated, having to call villagers every now and then to sort out our differences. One of my *nanas*⁴ once hit me with a stick and said that I was stupid not to leave her and that he could get me married the next day, so why was I putting up with this everyday? "Leave her now," he said. Actually, he did swing the stick at me, but it hit the tree instead. That still amounts to beating though, doesn't it? He also scolded me, so I left her. Two years after I left her, I got married again at Hosnipara. My cousins have a lot of relatives there, and they arranged the marriage. I did not take any dowry; on the contrary, I gave some things. Four pieces of jewellery and one and a half *mons* of paddy. Since they had to feed my friends who accompanied me, I gave another one and a half *mons* of paddy. I gave two pieces of gold and two pieces of silver jewellery to my new wife. Gold and silver were much cheaper then. For Rs. 17 or 18 you would get a fat amulet. People used to wear it around the neck. You could buy an amulet for Rs. 17 or 18. I gave her an earring, a bracelet and a chain to go around the waist.

I was living with my mother after the marriage. I used to work by myself on the land, on a share cropping basis. That was enough to run the family. I didn't have to work for anyone.

My mother's brother used to go to Pakistan and once got caught at the border. He was jailed. No one was willing to stand in for his bail. So then my aunt's husband stood as the guarantor. But he got our land transferred in his name, saying that if my uncle were to jump bail, then he would have to go to prison himself. He never gave the land back though. So we lost our land, without getting a *paisa* for it. My mother has no more land left. Neither do I. One of the ploughing bullocks that I had was mine and the other belonged to my stepbrother – my real father's son through his previous marriage. He took his bullock away. He took it to Mongolpara where he lived. So I sold mine off. What can you do with one bullock, you can't plough, can you? After all that I started to work as a mason.

My stepfather was no longer alive by then and I had already married for the second time. My mother had one daughter and two sons with my stepfather. I had to work and support the whole family. But my stepbrothers didn't like me, they were jealous of me. There were always quarrels.

One day there wasn't any wood at home. It wasn't possible to cook. So I told my middle stepbrother to fetch some wood and bring it in to dry, from the forest near Dihipara. He was around fourteen or fifteen years old then. But he just wouldn't go, he kept playing instead. I kept telling him to go, and he kept saying no. So I said, "Fine, but you won't get anything to eat then. I won't be able to provide for your food. You will have to fend for yourself. You're grown up enough to do that." When she heard this, my mother became very angry and said, "If you don't feed him then I'll not eat either." So she didn't eat for the whole day. I went and bought some meat. There was some buffalo meat for Rs. 3 for five kilos. So I bought five kilos. People didn't eat much buffalo meat then, neither do they now. So we bought five kilos of it between three of us. When we got home, the other three said that they wouldn't take the meat, because it wasn't good. So I paid for all of the meat. But when the meat and rice were cooked, my mother didn't eat any of it, neither did she allow my stepsiblings to eat any of it. In the morning I went to do

⁴ Mother's uncles are also called *nana*. The *nana* here was not his original *nana*, but his *nana*'s brother.

my work on a house wall, and came home in the evening. Wall building carries a lot of uncertainties because there's no fixed work schedule. There were five of us and we would share the money at the end of the day. We worked like that every day. But my relationship with my mother never improved. That's when I separated permanently. They were even being unkind to my two sons by then. So I left for the house of my mother's father. I built a house and started living there. From there, I moved here and continued to work as a professional hut builder.

There wasn't very much work around then. I wasn't busy everyday. But if you don't work, then it's a problem. I remember starving for whole days at a time. You see, there weren't any water machines at the time. So there was only one crop a year - during the monsoon season. After *Aghran*, there was no work. The paddy would ripen around *Chaitra* and work would start again. But we never worked during *Chaitra*; we worked building house walls instead.

I used to work a lot. I worked as a watchman for shallow water pumps for five or six years. I had to work nights, start the shallows, protect them and so on. In return, the landowner would give me some land to farm and would provide me with some water from their shallow, free of charge.

I don't do the shallow guarding any more. What can I do with eight *kathas* of land? On top of that, a robber could kill me to rob the shallow. There are a lot of risks involved. Other watchmen get about twelve to fourteen *mons* of paddy for the same work but I don't get any. I have to work on the land to produce the crop. The eight *kathas* fetch me eight *mons* of paddy, four *mons* of which are actually input costs. So why should I work for only four *mons* of paddy? I realized that my job as a watchman really wasn't worthwhile.

The shallow owner would provide land and water, but all other investments were mine. The deal was that the plough, the seeds, the water would be borne by the landowner and I'd bear the costs of fertilizers and so on. That was the deal, but ultimately he gave me nothing but the water.

You see that pond over there? I farmed vegetables around it for a few years. Again, the deal was that the owner of the pond would take as many vegetables as he required for his family and I'd sell the rest, and he wouldn't get any share of the cash. See, I would have to till the land with a spade, not with a plough because the land is on high grounds. So he used to help himself to vegetables, potatoes, cauliflower, pumpkins, whatever I was farming. I had to fence the area off using thorny tree branches and had to watch over it too. Otherwise the crop would get eaten up by animals. After selling the vegetables plus a goat, I bought this bit of land, next to my house. I sold the goat for Rs.700. It would have fetched me Rs. 2000 nowadays. It was a big billy goat so Rs. 700 twenty years back was enough. The land I bought then, about four *kathas*, cost me Rs. 1000.

I don't do vegetable farming anymore because I can't work that hard. My sons couldn't either. The pond owner was jealous of my crop so he wanted a share of it. I refused to share. I said to him, try and have it farmed by someone else, and we'll see if he is as good a farmer as I am. A person took up the land for a year, but left it halfway through and ran away. That land is lying uncultivated now. Apart from that they have put fish spawn in the pond. The people who are fish farming will give half the produce to the landowner and will also bear the cost of water. The landowner of course owns the pond.

When there wasn't much work around my village, I went to *bidesh* to work, to harvest rice paddy, or even to harvest jute. I've also worked stacking paddy, ploughing and doing various other tasks. They are all *Aghran* jobs. We used to go by train and get off at Katwa. If we were going to Nadia district, then we would get off at Ranaghat.

The first time I went to *bidesh*, I was around thirty years old. There were three or four people from that neighbourhood over there that went with me. I didn't have any children then. My wife used to stay with my mother at home. But I've also been to *bidesh* since my children were born. I used to leave some money with the family, before going. Otherwise how would they eat? Sometime, when I left, my wife would go to her father's house. My son was too young at the time, so it was impossible for them to stay by themselves. I had a separate house near my mother's brother's house. There was a small forest and the house was at one end of it. The houses were quite far apart. How can a woman stay by herself? There were also graves around. In those days people used to bury the dead near their houses. There weren't any specific graveyards around.

I've been to *bidesh* with whoever I was friendly with at the time. With my village friends, I've been to Nadia to harvest paddy or jute – I've been there for three consecutive years. We first used to stop at Ranaghat and then in a place called Haringhata from where we would walk to our destination.

The first time we went there, the landowner picked us up from Ranaghat. The next year we went to his house by ourselves. We worked with the same landowner for three years. Then we went to a different place, on the same route but two stops earlier on the train line. We harvested jute. Actually we had gone there to harvest the *bhadoi* paddy but it was already finished, so we harvested the jute instead. And after that we came back.

The jute harvesting was done on a contractual basis: you have to harvest as much as you can on an area of land, which was contracted for Rs. 15 to 16 per *bigha*. The food was provided by the landowners. The first time I went to work, it was on a contract. I had to harvest and stack. Those are two different jobs. The contract was food plus Rs. 8 or 10 per *bigha*. It was a lot in those days. The threshing was done under a separate contract. At that time the wages at home were Rs. 0.50 per day and the price of paddy was Rs. 10 to 12 per *mon*.

I worked for three consecutive years for the same landowner. After that, I stopped going because my friends left. Instead I went to Bardhaman with a group from my father-in-law's place. The place in Bardhaman was very far away. I worked there for a month.

When I'm in *bidesh*, I stay with my friends so it's not too hard really – it makes it easier to cope with problems and difficulties. My sons never used to go to *bidesh*, although the younger two do go now. If there's work at home, they work here but they also go to *bidesh* for work. They go of their own accord. They are good workers and don't need to be told. The older boys used to go too. Now one of them pulls a *rickshaw van*. And this one here used to sell fish. He's left the business and just loiters around now.

I haven't been in *bidesh* for twenty-seven or twenty eight years. I really couldn't. I haven't been able to work since my teenage years. I just can't work. I have serious flatulence problems. I've been sick from gas in the stomach: chest pain, waist pain. I wouldn't be able to do any kind of work. Sometimes I can't eat either. My mouth goes stale and I can't eat.

When I stopped going to *bidesh*, I first used to work in my home area. But I even had to give that up and ate from whatever my children earned. Then one day someone took me to beg around the region of Dhulian. It went on for about eight to ten years. Now I go very rarely. While begging I stay away from home for seven to ten days. The income is good, if I can keep it up. If you can cover a lot of places, then the income is quite good. Say, if I roam for ten to twelve days then I can probably get two *mons* of rice plus Rs. 100 to 150. Also the living conditions are good, like my own house. The places I stay at are just like my home.

I don't really have a schedule or a timetable to follow. I came back during Ramadan and haven't been back since then. I keep thinking of going but can't because of my loose motion problem. It's difficult to defecate in those places because there are not many natural screens.

When I come back from begging, the money stays with me, but the rice goes to the family. The money gets spent on salt, oil and so on. I don't really bring back much cash. Quite a bit of it is also spent on the road. I have to bring back the rice sack too. I can't carry it myself. It costs me Rs. 15 to take it to the station and another Rs. 5 to get it on the train. Then in the train I spend about Rs. 10 on bribes and from the destination station to the ferry point, it costs another Rs. 10. After crossing the river, the rickshaw charges Rs. 25 to my house. So a lot of money gets spent. And that's without buying a train ticket.

I don't go nowadays because of my illness. You see, I have to defecate at least three to four times during the night. Today I have done it at least five or six times, in this cold. The doctors can't cure me. I've had medicines from lots of different places. No one can cure my flatulence. I've had medicine from Nalhati; it's herbal medicine, in the shape of marbles. Lots of other people have benefited from it, but not me. It used to cost me Rs. 10 for a fifteen day course. I've had it thrice, so for forty-five days. But I didn't feel any better, so I never went back.

I've had medicine from the Topdanga Hospital, medicine from Lalbagh, and Baharampur, but nothing improved. I've been to countless quacks too, also bought bottled medicines that you get at the fairs. But nothing has cured me.

The treatment at the hospital isn't good either. They first check your hand (pulse) and ask a few questions and then give out the same medicines to everyone. Maybe some of the tablets are different. But they don't help either. So I don't take those medicines. When I suffer a lot, then I go to the village quack, who temporarily relieves me. It doesn't bring permanent relief though. You see, I had severe chest pain earlier. It was due to gas, very painful. In fact so painful that I couldn't even touch my chest. I also have a lot of breathing problems. At the hospital they took a photo (X-ray) – the photo is still at home. After the doctor looked at the photo, he said that I needed to be admitted to hospital, because they had to take two more photos - one of my heart and one from the back. But I didn't get myself admitted. It's not possible for us. I don't like hospitals; I don't like the smell of the place. I get anxious as soon as I enter a hospital. So I decided to commute daily and since I can't afford the cost of transport, I decided to walk. But the doctor said that it was not possible, that I must get admitted. They didn't take any more x-rays. Neither did I receive any treatment. But I still went back a few times to get some medicines, but nothing happened. I don't understand how those two photos would have helped anyway.

I've been here for twenty-seven years. Before that I used to live in Aopara. At the beginning I didn't have this *colony* house. I didn't have much contact with the *Panchayat* people. Hafiz was our *samaj* leader then. He's not anymore, the *samaj* has split up. There are too many factions

now. He used to listen to us then. I had said to him, "I don't have a house; my stepfather never bought me any land. He bought a house with my money, but it's in their name. I don't have a place to stay, and I live on someone else's land. So do something for me!" And then they offered me a piece of land in Dihipara. I didn't take that. Then he gave me a room in the *colony*, over there on the west side of the road and I moved in, but the next year, they gave me a room here. Since I didn't have any land there, I came here. Actually I wanted to come here. I've now bought some land here too. This place has grown a bit bigger now.

This is the only help that I've received from the government. But there's a lot of difficulty over the ration cards. We do have ration cards but have to renew them all over again. My wife's and mine have been done, but we haven't got them in our hands yet. And I don't have any cards for the children who are living with me. There are six of us here and we only have two ration cards. The other four don't have any.

But in fact we haven't even applied for them. I asked the *Panchayat* member a few times. Without their intervention we can't get the cards. But they do it only for people who they think they should do it for. For some they'll do it, but not for us. You see this red card? They've given it to everyone but not to us. We haven't got the *Antyodaya Card* either. If we are not entitled to it, then who is? Good wealthy people, who are landowners, have their *Antyodaya Card*. But it's not for them, it's for us, the poor people. But no one looks after us.

Recently, about fifteen or twenty days ago, I went to the office of the B.D.O., for the card. The chap told me to bring my *holding* number. I wouldn't need any other documents. So when I went back with my *holding* number, some people at the office then said that the *holding* number by itself was not sufficient, that I needed other documents. They said that I needed photocopies of my voter's identity card, existing ration cards and so on. So I returned home. My neighbour, *Aftabuddin's* son, was there, he also said the same thing. He said that if I couldn't produce the documents, then I would have to produce my land deed. So I came home and never went back.

I don't go to the *Panchayat* office frequently; the government gave me this room and a tarpaulin during the flood about six years ago. And during the last election, they gave a five kilos ration of wheat. I've not been to the *Panchayat* office since then. If they don't call me, if I don't have a need, why should I go to them?

During the flood my house was inundated and washed away. So I had to rebuild the walls. About 200 to 250 roof tiles were stolen. My household belongings were damaged too. I had three or four sacks of paddy on *Aftabuddin's* concrete roof top. One sack was stolen. I know who stole it, but he didn't give it back. It was *Aftabuddin's* son-in-law who took it. No one else had paddy stacked there, apart from his son-in-law and me.

The household has not been restored to its pre-flood state. It has collapsed. The reason being that I can't work that much anymore. I could rebuild the house, because the government gave me Rs. 2000. But I didn't spend it, I kept it with Jalal. I was afraid to spend it all. I built the wall one year after the flood. I spent Rs. 3000 on it. I didn't have to buy the roof tiles, because I had some. I also had some bamboo. I only had to buy nails and pay the labourers.

The government gave us those Rs. 2000 and a piece of tarpaulin, nothing else – and during the elections, about five kilos of wheat. Nothing else, ever. The member only looks after his own interest; he only cares for his own people. When I go to ask for help, he keeps postponing things.

I had gone to him about the ration card. And now he says that since the *Panchayat* is controlled by a different political party, he can't do anything. The present member won't listen to me either. When they do get things to distribute, it's not sufficient because they have to distribute it to say eight people, when actually the goods are meant for four people. So I've never gone back there.

Even with all my problems, I still try to educate my children. The only one who's still studying is my youngest daughter, she's in class V. She's never refused to go to school. But my other daughter refused. I've tried everything including hitting her. But she just refused to budge saying that even if I killed her, she wouldn't go to school. She never did go. The boys have also stopped studying. If they had studied and were a little literate, they would at least be able to read the newspaper. They wouldn't have to go to ask for other people's help. For example, if a letter arrives, we wouldn't need to run to others, they could have read the letter. After their marriage, when the girls move to their father-in-laws' home, I will have to depend on others. So that's not much use to me. Still I want them to be educated.

Maybe if my sons had been educated, something good would have happened. But because of poverty, they weren't and they wouldn't learn anyway. I got them admitted into school but they didn't attend. I never got the oldest two into school, because it wasn't the norm then. There was a primary school, but very few kids went – only a few children did.

To educate girls costs money. You have to buy pens. I have had to buy books and exercise books. The books cost Rs. 190, the uniform about Rs. 200. Exercise books are a recurring cost; three different ones are needed every month, which comes to about Rs. 10. And for the admission, it cost Rs. 150 for the first time.

They walk to school. It's about an hour's walk. When they go, they ask for money, which I can't give them. I'm a poor man. Maybe the other children get some pocket money and eat snacks, but my children don't. So they feel bad. Bad, that is the order of things.

My daughter gets private tuition, which costs Rs. 35 a month. I haven't been able to pay for the last three months. So I need to pay Rs. 105. I'll pay that up. For that, I'll have to go to work in *bidesh*, but I'm not well. Still I have to go to work even though I know that I'll suffer. I'll earn some during *Kurbani*. But I have to walk a lot to earn, otherwise I won't get anything. My sons have gone to *bidesh* but I don't take their earnings. I never do anything with their earnings.

Amongst my children, one died when it was a baby. Two sons and four daughters are married. One of my married sons lives with me but does his cooking separately. The other one lives there, over the pond. Amongst the son-in-laws, one lives just behind me and one near *Aftabuddin's* house. Another got married recently and lives in Gosaipur.

The dowry I took for my sons' weddings was two cycle - one for each of them, plus Rs. 1500 in cash. I didn't really ask for much. For the girls, I had to give a dowry. How can you get girls married without a dowry? For the eldest daughter I didn't give anything, just Rs. 1000 in cash. For the next one, the same. But for the younger two, I had to give Rs. 14,000–15,000. I raised some of that mainly through loans, but the boys also helped with their earnings. That's how I got them married. For the last girl I didn't give much money, only around Rs. 5000. I bring back rice and pulses after my begging trips, which takes care of the food. The sons' earnings are saved, which will go towards repaying that loan.

I didn't really have any celebrations for the weddings except for two of them. For this daughter and for Asad. The eldest got married in Sonarpur. The next one got married in that neighbourhood. They used to be our neighbours. I haven't married my children to any of our relatives. I don't like marriages within relations. If the marriage doesn't work out then the relationship between the relatives also breaks down. I haven't let them marry any of our relatives. I was asked to marry a cousin from Tikiapara. But I refused. At least if you marry outside the family, you gain one more relative. If I had married her and there had been problems, either from my side or from my uncle's side, our relationship would have broken down. That's what I fear. So I'd rather have it as it is.

When I did have a celebration, a wedding feast, I invited all my relatives. My sister-in-law's family and the families over there. I didn't invite my maternal uncles but I invited my mother and my two step brothers. *Aftabuddin*⁵ was the *samaj* leader. So when we came here, we went in to his *samaj*, which wasn't big. Around seventeen or eighteen houses. If there's a social gathering then there has to be a meeting with the *samaj*. If there's a need to do something for someone or if someone gets married then a *samaj* meeting is held. For example, during the *Kurbani* a meeting decides how best to use the *samaj* fund. I've never been called to participate. Only four or five people meet for the discussion. Not everyone's view is taken into account. But if you are in trouble, then they will help.

I don't have any relatives in this neighbourhood because my father was from the village of Singi. This is the country of my mother's father, so my mother's ancestry lives here. One third of the village is probably related to my mother. I don't mix with them. No one is friendly to me. If they are not sociable, why should I be?

⁵ Name of local political leader in the village of Jalpara, he is not elected but able to influence the political system

Chapter 9 RAKIB SHEIKH

Rakib Sheikh is an eighteen years old boy and owns about one and a half bighas of farm land. His earnings are mostly derived from his straw business. He owns a rickshaw van, which he uses to trade the straw around. He's been to Kolkata and Bardhaman to work. His family consists of his wife and three children. He lives in a mud house with a tiled roof, which has a small courtyard. His wealthier uncles live in the same village. His father-in-law and his brother's houses are adjacent. His mother lives with him in a different room.

I didn't even study up to class III. I had class III books with me, but never attended. I was about eight years old when my father left - after a fight with my mother. We carried on for a little while, eating whatever we had at home, but eventually there was nothing left. My father used to work as a labourer, hire out his plough, to earn a living. But he took the cows away with him, to Parvatinagar, where he originally hailed from. This is my mother's village. When our father left, who would feed us? We were very young, who would work, who would feed us? So we went to father's house at Parvatinagar, mother didn't come with us, but father chased us away. He said, "Go back and live with your mother." So mother decided that she'd raise us no matter how [hard it might be] and started begging. She took me with her to Galsi, near Bardhaman town, to beg. Once on our way to begging I got off the train, but mother couldn't, the train had left, it was an electric train. I got lost and went to the next village. I used to go back to the station everyday and sit there. On the third day, my mother arrived. She got off the train, because she had spotted me. If she hadn't, I would have been lost for ever. I can't bear to think what path my life would have taken. We then returned to our village and my mother said that she would raise me no matter what, she would overcome all hardships. So from then on, I would bring back paddy from the Topdanga landlord's house, carrying it on my head and mother would process it and sell the rice, and run the household. The landlord knew my mother from earlier days, in fact before I was born. I don't know how they knew each other, but possibly through my mother's parents, who were actually quite wealthy.

So this is what I used to do. Bring over the paddy from the landlord, husk it and sell the rice. You don't need any capital for this work. For example, I would get the paddy from your house and you say that in return, I would have to give you twenty or twenty-five kilos of rice per *mon*. The landlords, being landlords, wouldn't take the trouble to get the rice out of the paddy. They owned a lot of land in the *Rarh* area. So I grew up doing that work and then started working as a wage labourer. I was about fifteen or sixteen years old then. I hadn't worked as a labourer before that.

My father, who had left us, came back when I was eighteen years old. In between we had had some trouble over my eldest brother. He had become *bhinu*. But after their marriage, we had problems with his wife. She wouldn't come to our house; my brother would go to hers instead. She also had an ongoing relationship with another man. They tried to kill my brother. I saved him and brought him back. That woman now lives with that man, even though she's not divorced from my brother yet. Because of this episode my mother's brother beat up severely two persons from that village. I was very small then. This led to a lot of trouble. Those villagers got hold of my mother's father and beat him up too. This was in 1995. We went to the court, they too. As a result we ended up spending a lot of money. This is one of my stories.

After that event, my brother started living with us but he never worked. He wouldn't work for a living. He got married to another girl here. After that he stayed with us for a while and later started to live separately. Then my father came here with a marriage proposal for me. He hadn't been back. He'd left six years earlier, but hadn't remarried. And I thought that although

he hadn't looked after me, he still had a right over my marriage, as my father. So I said that I was willing to marry, if he were to stay with us, to which he replied yes. So this is how my father came back to our family and I got married.

We didn't have a social function for my wedding, it was formalized in court. We didn't have the opportunity to call our relatives over, because the wedding had been fixed rather suddenly. He had already promised the girl's family without letting me know. He didn't say that to me directly but [I found out] from other people. My response was that if my father returned home, I would marry immediately. When my father heard this, he said, "I'll come back today, but you'll also have to marry today." So I got married.

The wedding expenses were borne by my father, without any dowry from either side. This cow, the gold, they were all negotiated for much later. My younger sisters helped to bring my new wife over, my older sister also came. They ate and then they left.

I was given some dowry later on - twelve *annas* worth of gold. They also wanted to sell their pregnant cow, and give me a bicycle with the money. But I said, "Since I have an old bicycle, I don't need another one. I would rather have the cow, so we can get some milk." So they gave us the cow. So as dowry, I got the cow and twelve *annas* of gold.

That cow gave birth to a calf in this house, but unfortunately she produced very little milk – only five to six hundred grammes. She was very big. But she gave very little milk. It became too expensive to feed her. So I sold her and bought another pregnant cow. Then when she had a calf, I sold it. I kept that cow for two years, but she never got pregnant again. So I sold her too, and bought another one. That cow used to give three to three and a half kilos of milk. I sold her for Rs. 2500. But I don't know what happened to the money, it just disappeared. All in all, the cows weren't a profitable venture at all, apart from the fact that we got to drink a bit of their milk. The bicycle would have been a better option, I would have held on to it.

After I got married, I lived with my father for seven years. Myself, my wife, my mother, father and a daughter of my brother. A blind brother-in-law of mine also used to stay with us. He now lives by begging, but before that he'd lived with us for two years. He'd probably thought that he didn't want to live off his in-laws, so he separated. For two years there were seven or eight of us living together. So when my brother-in-law left with his wife, we were down to six.

I've been working as a wage labourer since I was fifteen or sixteen years old. And then when my father brought in the cows, I started ploughing. He had six *bighas* of land. When he left us, he didn't allow us to farm it. He used to live with his brothers, and farm that land together with them. His brothers in return would feed him and give him clothes. But when he came back to us, we started farming that land again. He had a pair of cows. We used to plough with that pair.

My father became ill while living here. He had water in his stomach. We had to keep him at the Baharampur hospital. He was in the general hospital for fifty days, then in the town hospital for three days and in the Lalbag hospital for two days. We only got him back after he was cured. I had to manage all the problems whilst he was in hospital. Who would otherwise? It was only me, my mother and my brother living together at the time. The female relatives used to visit him. Who else would go to Baharampur after paying money for transport?

Later my father died, that was about five years ago. He died in the year of the flood. He had suddenly turned mad. He would throw anything that he could lay his hands on. We took him to

the doctor, the *kaviraj*, but he wasn't cured. For fifteen days he neither ate nor drank. The first time it happened was during the *Sabebarat* festival. He behaved like a madman. If he had anything in his hand, and someone wanted it, he would throw it at that person. We took him to the hospital, consulted a *kaviraj* – he'd become a skeleton-like. But he was as strong as a twenty-five year old. We couldn't restrain him. At last we tied him up and took him to the *kaviraj* at Hosnipara. I went together with my mother. He died at the *kaviraj*'s place. After he died, there we brought him back.

Three days after his death, we had a *Milad*. The brother-in-laws, sisters, uncles, all came for it. We called the *Maulavi* to do the *Milad*. I spent about Rs. 700. It was not only my money though. My brother and I both paid for it. My share was Rs. 350. And forty days after his death, we had the *Sabina Khotom* and had the loudspeakers erected for it. I called a *Hafiz* – he recited the whole of the *Quran Sharif*. And in the night, I had two *Maulavis* reading the *Quran Sharif* again. I fed my friends fish not meat. It cost me Rs. 2500. My brother and I shared the costs. I don't know how my brother got the money, but I used to trade in vegetables then. The earnings were good. Also our household expenses on food were not high. So I could save a bit, whenever possible.

I spent around Rs. 70,000 for my father [for his medical treatment]. I didn't have that money. I sold a plot of his land for Rs. 50,000, and my cow for Rs. 10,000. For the rest of the Rs. 10,000, I took a loan, thinking that I would repay it by farming my father's land. The land was sold when my father was ill. I was lucky that I could get my father's finger print on the selling deed. I had said to the person who bought the land, "Take the land now before my father changes his mind. You can't be sure; anyone can change their mind, can't they?" This was in 1999, when my father came back from the hospital; he died in 2000.

The extra Rs. 10,000 I spent on my father came from the pawn shop in Topdanga. I pawned the gold which I'd received as my dowry. It fetched me Rs. 6000. I haven't been able to clear it yet. The rest of the Rs. 4000 were loaned to me by my mother's brother: it was interest free and I repaid it within two years. I couldn't pay it all back in one go, so I paid it back gradually. My *rickshaw van* would sometimes fetch me Rs. 1000 or 1500 in a month, out of which I would save Rs. 200 to 500; I would then give that money to him. I've redeemed one item from the pawn shop by paying Rs. 3000. But there's still another one to be redeemed.

My elder brother however refuses to acknowledge the loan. He says, "How can our father run up such a huge debt, when he owned so much land? He didn't leave any debts." Having said that, my brother had taken his share of the land. So I had said to him, "Since our father actually used to live with me, I know the amount of his debt." I was the one who spent it so I knew it but he didn't listen. My brother was already living separately from us at the time. I wanted a year's time to farm on father's land to repay some of the loans. But he took his share away. Father had six *bighas* of land, out of which one *bigha* was sold. So the rest of the five *bighas* was divided away. My brother and I got just over a *bigha* each, and my mother and the three sisters got two and a half *bighas* between them. We divided the land ourselves and while doing it, we gave mother a little more, about two *kathas* more, so that she could sell it in times of need. This is how we divided the land.

My mother had inherited seventeen *kathas* of land from her parents. This house is on that land. She didn't get any farmland [from her parents]. My mother's father gave it to one of my mother's brothers. But he didn't hold on to it and later sold it.

I got twenty-three *kathas* from my father and then bought some more, though the land deed hasn't been registered yet. But it isn't farmland; it's rather land to build a house on. My mother's father registered this house in my mother's name. But he kept a *katha* of land, adjoining the house, for himself.

But even that he registered in the name of my mother's youngest brother, a couple of years back. He gave him a lot of land – a house plus land. I bought this adjoining land from him for Rs. 10,000 per *katha*.

Now I'll tell you how I got the money to buy the land. My real mother-in-law is dead. She had inherited a bit of land from her father. After she died, legally my wife got a share. But my brother-in-law asked us to sell that plot to him. So I sold it to him and bought this plot here.

For five years after my marriage, I had looked after our farmland. I had employed ten to fifteen labourers. I had farmed myself our six *bighas* of land. I have also had, on a share basis, one to two *bighas* of other peoples' land. And this is how I managed my household. In 1999, I became *bhinu* and I told my father he had to pay me Rs. 10,000, which I then spent on his illness. My father said that since I was separating, I could farm his land on a share basis. So I pawned my twelve *annas* of gold and with the money I cultivated paddy on four *bighas*. My father hadn't given me all his land to farm. He had kept one *bigha* for himself, out of his total five *bighas*. So I had four *bighas* plus another three *bighas* on a share basis from someone. The contract on the shared plot was that I would give four *mons* of paddy to the landowner. At that time, we didn't have any money. Children, when they work on their father's farms, get some money without the parent's knowledge. But we couldn't do that. Now I needed money to farm. So my wife told me to pawn her gold. I cultivated seven *bighas* spending only my money. I spent around Rs. 4000. Then came the flood. After all my labour, I didn't reap even a *mon* of paddy. I had spent Rs. 4000 thinking that I'd redeem the gold by paying from the crop off one *bigha* of paddy, and another *bigha* of paddy I'd give to my father. The rest of the paddy would be my profit. But the crop failed. The flood came in the year 2000, destroying everything. So I never got to redeem the gold. It's been five years now, and the interest has piled up. The moneylender came to the house asking for the money. I told him to sell it. I don't have the money to redeem it.

When the flood arrived, I wasn't at home. I had gone to Udaypur. We had a saying in our village, Jalpara, that Jalpara would never be inundated. So we went to Udaypur. All our relatives live there. I thought of checking on them. The water was flowing through the Amtala Canal then. My cousin came to me asking for help, he said that they needed eight to ten people urgently. So I went. He said, "Have some tea and then start carrying the jute to Jalpara." When I was carrying the first load, the water was already up to my chin. I couldn't get the second load to Jalapara. The water was flowing over my head by then. The jute floated away. I was trying to swim back to our house, but couldn't, there was too much water, the house was subsiding. The mud wall collapsed. All our belongings were ruined. When I reached home and was about to enter our house, my mother stopped me from going inside, my wife didn't let me either. So I didn't go inside. My father had already moved the cow and the goat to my sister's house. The few things that I could salvage I put on the roof of my uncle's house. After that we went to the school near our older sister's house. I didn't think that my uncle's roof top would survive.

The school was on higher grounds – I took all my family onto the school roof. I stayed awake the whole night. Around midnight the rain stopped so the water level didn't rise any further after that. The water on the road was up to neck height. My sister's house wasn't flooded though.

We ate there, and slept in various places. We, that's six or seven of us, ate at her place for three days. They had a bit of food stocked.

After the water had gone down, we returned here. We had some boiled paddy at home, about twelve to fourteen *mons* of dried and boiled paddy in big earthen pots. But the flood water had melted the pots and the paddy was wet, so I had to dry it out all over again, spreading it out on a *pati*. After that I got it husked at the mill and we ate it. How can you eat that rice? It was very smelly. We had to eat it; we didn't have any money to buy anything else to eat.

Since our house was made of mud, it was destroyed; it's still there though. I've built a new mud house to live. Then I made this room – I spent a lot of money on it. We already had the bamboos and the tiles. But I had to buy the tin for Rs. 4000. That was all my own money. These doors were made from wood, which again, we already had, so I only had to pay for the carpenter. The total cost for the house was Rs. 14,000. I earned all of it by pulling this *rickshaw van*. The government didn't give us a *paisa*. What I mean is that the wealthy people got some, but not the poor. For example Motalib who owns around ten to twelve *bighas* of land got some help. Then Bula, the person who owns the concrete house over there, he got some, but we didn't. A man visited us. He's probably from this region. He gave us five *rutis* and six bananas. They were dishing it out from buckets. Some of them were also giving out flat rice, *jaggery* and so on, but we didn't get any of that. The blankets, which were provided by the CASA organisation, didn't reach us either. We never received anything. I haven't ever received any government aid in my life. The only person in my clan who has ever received anything is my older brother; he got a bundle of tin.

I first started earning money when I was fifteen years old. For two years, I had a vegetable business. I used to buy the vegetables from Bharampur or Nakurtala, from wholesale shops and take the stock around the villages on my bicycle. But it wasn't bringing in enough income to provide for the family. I realized then that people in the neighbourhood, who pulled *rickshaw vans*, were eating well, they were eating meat. So I asked Kotu whether he would also take me on, since it seemed he was doing well from his *rickshaw van*. He said that I should buy a *rickshaw van*. So for the last two years, I've been pulling a *rickshaw van*. I use it to transport and sell straw. The *rickshaw van* has been very successful.

I did not have the capital to start this straw business initially. But let me tell you a story about how I got it. My mother used to rent out her twelve *kathas* of land on a sharecropping basis. I said to her, "Don't rent out the land, let me lease it out instead, on a *reehen* basis for two years." I took the land and leased it out on a *reehen* tenancy, but for a year only, not two. I earned about Rs. 1200 from farming the land. And I took four *annas* of gold from my sister on loan. I pawned that and got Rs. 2000 for it. There's a person called Bulu here, he owns about ten to twelve *bighas* of land and two water pumps. His family is small and he earns a lot of money. If I ask for a loan of Rs. 100 or 200, he gives it. I took a loan of Rs. 800 from him, without interest. I said to him, "The mustard that's on my land, I'll sell it and repay you. This means you'll have to wait, since mustard can't be harvested before *Pous*." So I took the money from him and bought this *rickshaw van* around *Aghran*. Then I told the other *rickshaw van* drivers in our village to take me along with them. I also requested they give me some money to buy the straw. So Hamidul and Kotu loaned me Rs. 200 each and said that I didn't have to repay it for a month. Kotu is actually my cousin's cousin and Hamidul is my friend.

So this is how I started my business. Slowly it started doing well, and I repaid the man by selling the mustard. And from the money I was earning through my *rickshaw van*, I used some to redeem my sister's gold. That was about seven months after buying the van.

The straw business on the van is quite good. The other day, I bought 1500 bundles of straw for Rs. 515. Now we get twenty-five bundles of straw free for every van load. This is true for any amount of straw that we buy. So I sold the straw for Rs. 830 and my profit was Rs. 315. And to do that, I had to work for two days. I don't make that much of profit every day. Some days it's not even Rs. 100. But on some days it might go up to Rs. 500. On average I make Rs. 100 per day. But I only work fifteen days every month. The rest of the month I can't work. So I earn about Rs. 1500 over a month.

I've already said that I've not studied much. When I was in class III, I started going to beg in the villages with my mother. I got lost in the first year. So I didn't go back. I went home after about a week, and I went to school after that, for a while. Now let me tell you how my schooling came to an end. My cousin used to go to school with me. One day he wrote a letter. I don't know what was written in it. In any case he gave it to me and told me to give it to a girl called Mansura. Mansura also used to study with us. It was during the closing hours of the school. I gave her the piece of paper and started to lock up the school. Mansura read it and immediately gave it to the teacher, who was standing near by. The teacher sent for me and, as any other youngster would do, I ran away. Later my schoolmates said that I'd get a beating. I was too scared to go back to school after that. My cousin also left school. He used to be beaten up regularly by his father. So I took all the blame and told my mother, otherwise my cousin would be beaten up. I said, "Let him go to school." So he started going to school again a year after this episode. He studied up to class VI, whereas my schooling ended in class III. The teacher never came to look for me, but whenever he sees me now, he asks why I stopped going to school. We talk to each other. I greet him and respect him.

Nowadays when I get stuck reading a paper, I think how this mistake will never be rectified; that's why I send my children to school. I have four children. When they reach my age, they'll realize that their father was right to send them to school. So now if they refuse to go to school some days, I beat them and send them anyway.

The eldest son is in class IV and my daughter is in III. I have a plan to see my children through secondary school. But let's see what fate holds. If they get the secondary certificate, that will count a lot, won't it?

I haven't had to spend much on their education till now. The teacher provides the books. I come to know about expenses, when they have to buy books. But I did put them in for private tuition for about six months. Anis taught them for three months. They studied another three months with a teacher from Udaipur, who would come here. In the evenings now, I help them a bit. They're doing well. I haven't put the third boy in school yet. Admission takes place in *Boisakh*. He has his birth certificate, but they won't take him in, till he's five. So he couldn't get in last year – but he will get in this year. He now studies at home and plays around.

In times of need, I've gone to *bidesh* to work. The first time I went, I was eighteen years old. That was before my marriage. I went to Bardhaman. I went on my own, because of my family's needs. I used to go to *bidesh* whilst my father would look after our farm. Whenever I went, except the year before my marriage – my father stayed with our family and I would give my earnings to my mother upon my return.

In *bidesh* you get all your money as a lump sum, which helps. But here in Jalpara if I go to work for you now and do work which is worth Rs. 50, then ask you for the money – you might say, “Wait, I’ll give it you in two days time”. Maybe I’ll get Rs. 2 or Rs. 5 at a time but that’s not much help, that way it all gets spent. But when we’ve worked in *bidesh*, we can bring back all our earnings in one go, and the wages are higher. [A day’s labour] is Rs. 50 here, whereas in Barddhaman its Rs. 60 or 70 plus three meals at the landowner’s cost. You do have to work more there, but then you earn more, and save on food. So I go to *bidesh* taking these factors into account.

When I first went to Barddhaman to harvest rice paddy, I brought back Rs. 300 in fifteen days. The food was provided by the landowner. We used to stay in their spare rooms. They used to give us *chatai* to sleep on; we would lay straw below it and then sleep. I took a shawl from home during the winter. It was difficult and very cold. I used to shut the windows to make it less cold. Twenty two of us went together to a place called Galsi. We could see the railway station from the village – it was called Nayaghar. We were hired in from Katwa station. We went to Barddhaman from Katwa on a direct bus. And from there we took another bus for a fare of Rs. 3 – this was ten years ago.

The place was alright. The landowner would give us food and water. He was a Hindu, so we had to clean our eating area with cow dung after meals. The man wasn’t nice and made us work very hard; he kept nagging us saying that we were not working well and so on. He was quite rude to us. But we weren’t scared of him. After all there were twenty-two of us.

The landowners were two brothers and divided us in groups of eleven each. I was with the older one. He was a rascal, but the younger one was nice. The group working for him had fish and meat everyday. He would catch fish from his pond and feed his workers with it. In fact the brothers had two ponds each. But we never got any fish.

The rice always has stones in it in *bidesh*. You have to pick the stones out while eating. The landowners clean their own rice before cooking, but not ours. We used to eat some days on the *verandah* and other days in the courtyard. We were mostly served by the male members of the family. When the men were out, the women would serve us instead.

There was another time when we went to a Hindu’s house, which I liked. The landowner was Dilip Ghosh. He used to work in a paper factory nearby. I used to plough for him.

He didn’t have anyone to plough his land. He asked us whether any of us knew how to till. They use a different word for tilling – it’s the language they speak in Barddhaman. We all know how to till, but no one was willing to come forward, because of the hard work involved. However I said that I could. So he told me that I’d have to till 1½ *bighas* of land once and even it out twice. And after that I would be free. So I used to go to the land in the morning with the plough. He accompanied me on the first day, with some fertiliser, to show me the plot. Then he went off to his job. I would come back around twelve noon, sometimes at one or two. After that I would clean the buffaloes, clean myself and go out for walks. He used to feed me well. Since I was tilling, he would give me a bowl of milk every evening. The rest of my friends would also get good food but no milk. My food was served separately. I used to ask my friends, “What was your meal like? What did you get today?” It wouldn’t tally with mine, but I would say that, I got the same too. I used to lie otherwise one of them might have wanted my job.

I used to start work in the morning and finish by twelve noon or by two. And then the landowner would take me in the afternoons to spread the fertilizer – around ten kilos of it. After that he would take me around with him till night. He would introduce me as his home labourer. If he had tea in a shop, he would give me some too. I would never be hungry. He would spend at least Rs. 5 on me every day. I liked that place a lot.

I next went to another Hindu home; they were also good. After that I went to another house, which was when I'd decided not to go to *bidesh* anymore. But I still went once more. The last place I went to, had witnessed three murders shortly before I got there. So the police were picking up a lot of people. The villagers left their homes. That year I started to work for a house – Ghosh's house. We had harvested around ten to fifteen *bighas* of land when it started to rain. So he stopped the harvesting and said that we should work for his neighbour instead. We were on a contract then, harvesting and stacking for Rs. 350. The neighbours had offered Rs. 10 more.

But the neighbours were professional drummers and so by caste belong to the cobblers. But being Muslims we can't go to cobblers. When we go to work, we go to the Thakur's or Ghosh's – or after verifying the caste. The neighbour had said to me that he earned a living by playing the drums. So I asked his son if he would repair one of my sandals which was torn at his house. The boy said that yes, it could be repaired at his house. So I thought that they were cobblers, and that I couldn't work at his house. I said to a boy in our group called Johor that I would not stay and he asked me why. I said, "Who works for a cobbler? Have I stooped so low?" After that I took my money from the original landowner, for whom we had harvested fifteen *bighas*, and came home. I never went to *bidesh* again.

The maximum period that I ever spent in *bidesh* was twenty-seven days. Another time I went for twenty six days. I liked both the places. They were Muslim houses and the food was good. That area was predominantly Muslim. A lot of people from here have worked there. They come here to hire workers because of they are familiar with them. You can enter anyone's house, stay as if you're at home, all those things. The meals there never gets disturbed. Everyone's friendly. During our free time, we can roam around till eight at night. No problems. The place is called Bijipur, you have to go via Bhatar to get there.

Once I went to a place called Kaitan. They have a big *Madrassa* there, we used to stay there. A truckload of goods used to arrive everyday. But I don't know who send them. The house we stayed in used to belong to a *Maulavi*, who used to teach Bengali privately. He was good at Bengali. He had an M.A. degree in Bengali. He used to tell us a lot of fables. It was nice to listen to him. I used to sit there during my free time and enjoy it. The teacher used to love us as his own children. There were six of us there. We could roam around freely after our work. The landowner had told the six of us to reap one and a half *bighas* of land everyday. We used to finish at noon or some days at around one o'clock. After that we would just wander around.

We used to finish a lot of work in a short time without shirking. We used to work the full money's worth for the landowner. He used to say, for example, that we should transplant fifteen *gandas* of rice seedlings. There were six of us. Two brothers-in-law, two cousins and my father-in-law. With my father-in-law around, there were no worries. We were all experts at our work. So planting those fifteen *gandas* wasn't a problem.

Once, out of anger, I ran off to Kolkata. That was in 1998; I went to work at an electrical power factory in Budge Budge. I'll tell you why I ran away from there too. When I left home in anger I

had said that I wouldn't return for a year. That was after my marriage. So I went to Budge Budge to work. I used to work with cement, to make concrete. I did cement work, day after day. But the skin on my hands became diseased. I wasn't used to that work. I was used to the plough. While working, I became friends with the middleman from Kalukhali. He told me that my role would only be to start the cement mixing machine, and so I became an operator. My job was to check on the oil level and so on. I'd always been quite keen on machines since my childhood. So I worked as a starter for two days. And then he said to carry sand to the thirty-sixth floor, as much as I could. Two of us were given that task. So I started climbing to the thirty-sixth floor. It was around ten in the morning. There was a thirty-four-floor building adjoining, fenced off by tin sheets. A labourer was painting on the twentieth floor with a safety belt around his waist. While painting he had to move the hook of his safety belt, to go to a different area. When I was climbing down, I was watching him. Suddenly he somehow lost his balance, the safety belt broke, and he fell down. I was on the fifteenth floor then, very near him. As I was climbing down, I could see his body completely smashed on the ground, with blood and bones scattered everywhere. Actually when I was on the tenth floor, I just couldn't move, as if I'd had a heart attack. There was a Hindu boy from our village called Pradip with me; he was working above me. He asked me what was wrong. I said, "A man has just fallen down and I can't walk, help me to get down." So he held me and got me down. The employer I used to work for, was called Ajijul. I said to him, "I won't work here anymore. Give me my money, I won't stay." He said that I wouldn't get my money that day but the next day, when I would have completed a week's work. I had earned Rs. 350 in seven days. He only gave me Rs. 150 – he still owes me Rs. 200.

After the 2000 flood, I went to work in a cold potato storage. I was there for days on end. I had decided not to go to *bidesh* but went because of my friends. We could cook whatever we liked over there, which was an incentive. There were no money problems there. But working in a cold storage is a tough job. My head looked like round potatoes because of all the carrying. You won't believe it, but I earned Rs. 1500 in 10 days after paying for my food! We were in a group of seventy-two workers. There were some from this village and some from the neighbouring one. We went with Montu.

The last time I went to *bidesh* to harvest paddy was in 1998; I've never been back since. After 1998 I started my vegetable business. My father was still at home. I took a loan of Rs. 10,000 from the bank, by mortgaging the land. I spent all the money on a cow and started farming here, sometimes my own land, sometimes on other people's land. I also carry goods for others with this bullock cart. The family started doing well. So I didn't need to go to *bidesh* anymore. The money I earned in *bidesh* was always spent on food and other things. I've never been able to use it concretely.

Chapter 10 HAMIDUL SHEIKH

Thirty-five year old Hamidul is landless and poor. In his childhood, his parents used to beg to support the family. He used to work as a daily wage labourer but now has a rickshaw van and also farms two bighas of land, which he took on a reehen tenancy. His family consists of his wife, a son and a daughter. He lives in a brick house with a tin roof, on government land.

My father has been lame since my childhood. Actually he was a different sort of person, dignified and well respected. Once my uncle – my father’s younger brother – beat up his wife. So the villagers came to hit him back. My father intervened, saying that we should call the *samaj* and let them decide. If the *samaj* found my father’s brother guilty then he would be punished. The villagers kept quiet in front of my father. But later we heard that he had been cursed. He was still in his youth then. But because of his illness, following the curse, my parents’ four to five *bighas* of land had to be sold to cure him. My mother had inherited that land from her mother as her share. My mother’s mother had quite a bit of land in her name. But it was all lost because of my father and now we have no land. All of it was sold to pay for the doctor. The treatment did help to make him stand up a bit. He hadn’t been able to walk until then. My mother made him stand upright.

I was born around the time when my father became lame. And since my childhood I’ve only ever seen my parents begging. My lame and disabled father used to beg on a horse cart. Actually, when he became lame, my mother started to beg to run the household. My mother’s parents’ house was in the same village, so she started begging, at the beginning, from her relatives. Later she moved on to other villages too. This is how she used to run our family, and look after my father. She somehow managed to buy a horse cart for my father, and my father started to beg on the horse cart. My father’s brothers never cared for us. It’s quite common nowadays, unless you feed yourself first, not to look to see if others have had any food. It didn’t used to be like that, but even then my father’s brothers never cared for us. They are quite alright now; they each own about two to three *bighas* of land. They are happy.

Father died about twelve years ago. We were four brothers. One of them died about ten years ago, so now there are only three of us. Hassan [a neighbour], my brother and I bought two adjoining pieces of land off two brothers from the Hindu neighbourhood. There was a fence dividing our plots. The problems started because of that fence. My elder brother cut down the fence. My mother scolded him. He got angry and went to his in-laws house, and killed himself. This is what happened.

We’ve lived in this village for the past twenty to twenty-two years. All my siblings are here in this village. They live over there, in that *colony*. My mother came here because of her father-in-laws’ tortures. She built a house on *government land*. Later she bought some land and built another house, over there. One of my brothers also bought some land there, Hassan’s four *kathas*. It looks really nice now. In total they now own nine *kathas* of land. They are doing well. But I haven’t bought any land yet. The land on which I’m living is a *vested* plot. All the houses around me are built on usurped land. All of us are squatters. We don’t have the deeds yet.

My parents couldn’t educate me. During our childhood, we used to live in the village of Haripur; it had a school, but I never went. My brothers are also uneducated. My parents couldn’t afford to send us to school. Also my parents didn’t realize the importance of education then. I spent my days shepherding!

When I was young, I used to herd goats. There was plenty of grazing land then, little was cultivated. Now it's all cultivated land. That land over there, where we've planted aubergines, it wasn't cultivated before. No one had ever farmed there. So we used to graze the goats – we had a few. Other than that, I used to run errands for my parents, gathering wood and so on. Later they sold the goats. So I used to play around, gather fuel wood. I also looked after my younger brother. It had to be done. Our mother had to leave us to go and earn – father too. So I had to look after the younger ones.

I got married when I was twelve, and started to work as a labourer, at Payradanga, weeding farm land. At the age of twelve, I wasn't strong enough to work on anything else. So I used to weed fields of chilli, wheat, jute and so on. When I grew up and became cleverer and wiser, I learnt other types of work. Washing jute, building mud walls – things like that.

Now let me tell you how I got married. My mother had a friend. They went on a visit to Nasirpur. There she met a girl who is now my wife. She liked her and said that she would marry her son to her. So the promise was fulfilled. She came back and told my father who agreed. So this is how it happened, I was married off. We never received any dowry, neither did we ask for any.

I stayed with my mother after my marriage. I've been separated from my mother for about 12 years. Before that all of us, us three brothers, used to live together. When I became *Bhinu*, I didn't get anything from the joint family. I continued to live in the same house. I only moved here later on. I won't get any share of that house. My mother has willed it to my brothers. Still I have no quarrels with them.

My relationship with them is good. I visit them and they visit us. They will tell me if they are doing something, and will inform me if they are in trouble. I also have friends, whom I visit. But in this village I'm closest to *Aftabuddin*, my mother's relative. He's like a father to me. He really looks after me well. He helps me in all senses including when I need money. And in times of need, he looks after us.

Now I farm two *bighas* of land. The land is on a lease. I'm growing mustard on it at the moment. On another piece of land, my neighbour and I have planted aubergines. That's about twenty two *kathas* actually, it's at the edge of a pond. The pond is owned by the government and is on a lease to the local mosque for a three year term. The lease money had to be paid on the first year. The mosque gave us the land saying that we could have it for three years. On the condition that we even out the pond bank.

I still have to work as a labourer sometimes, especially when the *rickshaw van* doesn't bring in enough money. But for the last five years, I haven't worked as a labourer on someone else's land. Out of my two brothers, one operates a *van* and the other one works as a labourer. He hasn't been able to get a *van* yet.

We have a cow and a calf at home. The cow gives milk, she had her baby about six months ago. Before she used to give four kilos of milk. Now it's less, only about a couple of kilos. I keep a little and sell the rest. The milk sellers take it. I get Rs. 10 for a kilo. All of us feed the cow. During the monsoon we feed her cut grass. My son used to cut it. But now the cow has some problems. So we don't feed her with cut grass but with straw instead.

I've learnt to work from a very young age, which included going to *bidesh*. There's not enough work in our village. How long can I stay without any work? We do need food in our stomach. So

people go to *bidesh*. I worked in a brick kiln for two years, about six or seven years ago. I used to stay over at the kiln. It's more profitable that way, it's more money. At the kiln I used to work the clay – prepare the clay. Others would then cut bricks out of it.

The first time I went to work in *bidesh*, it was in the Bardhaman district, to reap paddy in *Aghran*. I was about fifteen years old at the time. The wages were around Rs. 12 to 15, plus food. My parents had asked me to go. If they hadn't, I mightn't have gone. I first went with Samsed. His son was also in the group. They no longer live in the village. They've all moved to Lalbagh.

We travelled to Katwa from Puranabazar on the train. From Katwa, we would get a bus for a fare of Rs. 6 or 7. It was quite a distance. They used to call the place Bijipur or something like that, by Bhatar Police Station. We cut the paddy, bundled it and stacked it in the *gola*; we stayed there for fifteen days. The point is that these jobs are beneficial to the poor, so we think they're good.

It went well the first time I went to *bidesh*. It was a Hindu household. The next time was also good, but the trip after that wasn't good. That was because the people in that place were not nice – they were always criticising our work. They would always find faults with it. The place was good, we had a separate house to stay in, but it was full of mosquitoes. We hadn't brought any mosquito nets, because they weren't so popular then. They are more popular now, so lots of people take them with them. Though some can't and then get bitten. For example some families might only have one net. So it's left behind for the children or wife. And you end up not having a net, this is the situation.

There are other problems too. The food over there is not good. It can't be like home-cooked food. Now, why would they provide us with Muslim food over there? They eat according to their own customs. After eating we had to clean the floors. What can you do? We have to follow what others do. You can't protest.

Once I was in *bidesh* for twenty eight days. That's the maximum I've ever stayed. That was during the winter paddy reaping season. I've been to transplant paddy twice too. But I don't remember which month that was in. But it was the monsoon paddy. I've never been to transplant the winter paddy.

I've never been seriously ill in those areas. But I've had bouts of fever every now and then. I was in serious trouble once though. That was about seven years ago. I had gone to sell mangoes and after having a cup of tea, I fell unconscious – someone had probably mixed some drug into my tea with the intention of robbing me. I had some money on me, but they couldn't get it, I had already left the teashop and fell unconscious at a place near the Ghorador jetty. Some people there recognized me and sent a message to my family. My mother and *Aftabuddin* came. They took me to the hospital in a *van*. I was in a dire condition. The doctor wouldn't admit me. Eventually *Aftabuddin* did get the doctor to admit me, but he literally had to beg him. A lot of money was spent. *Aftabuddin* paid for it initially and I paid him back slowly. I wasn't so well off at the time, it put a lot of strain on me.

When I used to go to *bidesh*, I would leave my family behind. There was no-one to look after them. Who would? So my family would have to stay by themselves, and would be scared sometimes. There are thieves around, though we've never been robbed, our neighbours have though. But really there never have been any problems in my absence. Sometimes my mother

would come over on a visit and would stay over. Not all the time though. But if any of them fell ill then my sister-in-law or my wife's uncle – who lives over there – they would look after them. But nothing serious has happened in my absence. When I left, I would take a loan out and leave the money with them. In an emergency, friends will help. They never refuse, if they have the money.

I never kept my earnings with me after returning, I would give them to my wife. Later on she might ask me to buy some things out of it. With the *bidesh* earnings it would only be sufficient to buy the rice, vegetables, salt and oil, clothes. Some of it would be spent on medicines too. I've never been able to do anything big with that cash. How would I? I've never earned big money in any case. The maximum that I've brought back is around Rs. 800 or 900.

I've not been to *bidesh* for the last six or seven years. I may still have to migrate but I choose not to go. I've decided to pull a *rickshaw van* instead, which is more profitable. I don't know about the future though, it's all up to His will. The first *rickshaw van* I bought cost me Rs. 2000. I didn't have the whole amount. I was indebted to the van seller, whom I repaid later. I earned enough through the *van* and gradually paid him back in instalments. My brother also has a *van*. His friend's brother had a *van* shop. He had encouraged me to buy one. That first *van* that I'd bought, we don't have anymore. I sold it, then bought a few more and sold them on after having used them for a while.

This one I bought about three months ago. It's become a habit of mine to buy and sell *vans*. This one cost me Rs. 3700 and I sold the other one for Rs. 800. I wasn't satisfied with the old one anymore. The maintenance costs were too high. I owed the shop about Rs. 900, though that has nearly all been paid back, I only have Rs. 100 left to repay.

We carry the straw on the *vans* to sell at Lalgola, Bhagawangola, Topdanga. But we have to buy the straw from outside. People here don't really sell straw. Outside means from Panchgram, Sagardighi, those far-off places. I have to leave home at three in the night. Some days I come home, others I can't. Some nights I sleep in other people's courtyards. It's difficult, but people do let you stay. I stock the straw and go out to sell the next day. The nights I can't come home, I do the selling in the mornings and then go home.

With this *van* I've managed to save some money, even if it's only been Rs. 1 or Rs. 2 at a time. When I used to work as a labourer, the earnings were just enough to keep our stomachs going. There wasn't any question of saving. So with the savings I've made with my *van*, I've taken ten *kathas* of land, under the *takaback tenancy* scheme. I had to pay Rs. 4000. I didn't eat the crop from that land. I would still earn money from my *van*, sold the crop and then took another fifteen *kathas* of land. So this is how things have gone for the last seven or eight years since I bought the *van*. Since last year I have been cultivating two *bighas* of land taken on *takaback tenancy*.

I built this house four years ago. I got the bricks from Kalukhali. It cost me Rs. 1200 for a thousand bricks. The house cost me around Rs. 35,000–36,000 at the time. I didn't have all the cash on me. I had to take loans from people. Otherwise how can you cope? Piyar helped me. He isn't a relative but I call him my brother. Some of my friends also helped me, like Pabitra and Rason. They all have *vans*. The government gave us Rs. 2000 as flood relief. And my father-in-law gave me Rs. 1000. He also came and built the house. He is a builder.

The flood caused me big losses. I still had about thirty *kathas* of standing paddy. All of it was destroyed. Somehow I managed to support my family by working. The *van* was there, so after

about twelve days of floods I started to work with it. During those twelve days, my mother ran the household for part of the time. My in-laws also helped by bringing goods along when they came to visit. Also we had a bit of food stocked. Otherwise how could you manage?

Those were difficult times for me. The house was swept away - I had a mud house then. So we went to my mother's place and stayed there for a week. Mother used to provide the food and we just ate whatever was given. We couldn't save any food in our house. Actually we had been quite sure that the flood water wouldn't reach us. But it did come, rather fast. I only managed to save some paddy.

After staying at my mother's, with a lot of difficulty, for a week, and when the water had subsided and the land dried up a little, we came back here. Initially we stayed under a tarpaulin, which we got from the *Panchayat*. They also gave us Rs. 2000. After about a month, I had built one room. How can you stay for long with your parents? They have their own family; how can I impose my family on them?

Other than the flood relief, I've never had any help from the government. Even now we don't get any rations from the ration shops. My mother has a ration card, which we share amongst us brothers to get some things. We didn't have any ration cards until recently. We only got ours a few days ago. I had to bribe a person to get them done. He was doing it for other people in Aopara. Rakibul, my cousin, knows him. The people in my village told me to get it done now. So I got it done through him. I gave him the money and he did the work. Rakibul didn't do it. Maybe Rakibul gets a cut too, we don't know. He charged us Rs. 300 for four cards, and we got them after three months.

I'm very keen to educate my children. Children from families like ours will not get any jobs. We won't be able to educate them that much. But studying will open their eyes, they won't be blind like us.

Even then I couldn't send my son to the school. He failed in his first year in the high school and refused to study after that. He just wouldn't listen to me. I tried hard to coax him. I try to convince him, both myself and through his friends. I bought him a cycle to go to school, and paid for his readmission, but he wouldn't go. So that money was also wasted. Now he works on farms.

My daughter now studies in class IV, maybe III. Probably in III. I don't know since I'm illiterate. The village school sent her to the high school. I thought that since she wasn't clever, she should have stayed in the village school little longer. I don't have to spend much on her. The only expenses are exercise books and pens. Every month those cost me Rs. 10 to Rs. 15. She also has private tuition, with Jodu from the Hindu neighbourhood. He teaches her five days a week and takes Rs. 25 a month.

I also have to tell the school teachers to teach her well. I've been to see them. The teachers are good. I've said to them to teach my daughter well. So they said that I would need to discipline her as well, at home. I said, "We are not good at disciplining her," and they said, "How can you educate her then? You have to sit with her to do her studies, you've to supervise her and if necessary, you have to scold her." Now they feed them *khichuri* in the school, which is good. The children are happy. Sometimes even when they want to play truant, they still go to school, for the food.

Chapter 11 AJINUL SHAH

Ajinul Shah is a thirty-five year old landless labourer. His small family consists of his daughter and wife. He has a very small house with a verandah. On the same plot, a few steps away, are his father's, brother's and nephew's families. Ajinul at present sells chillies, turmeric, ginger, garlic and other spices in his village and in the neighbouring villages, carrying them on his cycle. He's been to Barddhaman and Birbhum district to transplant and reap paddy and to Medinipur and Bankura to work in a potato cold storage. He's also been to Kolkata to work as a mason.

This is my home. I was born here. I've heard that my father and his family used to live in a neighbouring village called Shibpur but then they bought this land and came over. I don't know why they moved here. My father actually didn't own any land. He only owned a house and the adjoining area of six *kathas*. We are oilmen by tradition. My father used to trade in it too.

We are seven brothers and three sisters. One of my sisters died but the other two are alive. All of us were born here. One of my brothers lives in Lalbagh and another one near the school over there. One of my brothers has a tea shop near the school junction. The other four of us live here. One of my sisters was married in Tinbazar. The other one got married in this village to my oldest brother's *shala*.

I've never studied and I can't even sign my name. My siblings are also illiterate. Only my oldest brother knows some basics. He was admitted into primary school, I wasn't. Education wasn't common in our area. I used to play a lot when I was a child. I would smoke a lot of *biris* while gallivanting. We had some livestock and I used to take them to graze, when I was around eight or ten years old. Some belonged to us and some to others – but mostly they were ours. I would take other people's livestock to graze and they would give me food for it. We were not paid in cash, we were fed instead. So I worked to feed myself.

When I was about sixteen, I started working as a labourer. At the beginning the wage was Rs. 1½ but it gradually went up to Rs. 3. I've seen rice being sold for Rs. 2 per kilo. I used to work at Payradanga, on chilli fields, weeding mainly. I couldn't do all the different jobs at the time. Now I know all of them, but I don't do them all. I stopped working as a labourer ten years ago. I trade in spices now and have been doing so for the past seventeen years. I buy them from the Natun Bazar in Baharampur, and then sell them in the villages. I started this business when I was between twenty and twenty-two years old.

Before that, I traded mustard oil for three years. I used to buy it in the market and then sell it in the villages. So I've been in business since I was twenty or twenty-two years old. My family now runs on my business. My family is small. It's enough, if I make a profit, to buy a kilo of rice.

There was a period when my business was not doing well. That's when I went to *bidesh* to work as a labourer. The first time I went to *bidesh*, I still used to live 'under' my parents, as the same family. I didn't go of my own accord; I went because my parents wanted me to. After I got married, separated from my parents and had my own family, I would go of my own accord. I would frequently leave my business and go to work in *bidesh*. During the rains, business was poor so I would go to work for fifteen days. But I don't do that anymore.

I was twenty years old when I first went to *bidesh* to work. My business was still running when I went in the month of *Pous*. I stayed for a month. The wages were Rs. 10. I went to a village called Polsonda, in the Barddhaman district. I also went three or four times during the summer

and about seven to eight times during the monsoon. I worked both in Birbhum and Bardhaman districts.

I'm still good friends with the person that I worked for in Birbhum. I don't go there anymore, but others go there saying they know me. That person's name is Nurul. I worked five years for him, reaping, bundling, threshing paddy. They own about forty to forty-two *bighas* of land. Very nice people. The food is good. They would feed us three to four times a day. Puffed rice early in the morning, rice around nine or half-past nine in the morning, rice again for lunch and dinner, so that's rice three times a day

People who go to work in *bidesh* do so in groups of say three or four, five or six. So we would sort out our group before leaving. The group could consist of people from our neighbourhood, from another neighbourhood, and sometimes of outside people too. We would plan it over three or four days and then fix the departure date. We would leave on that day. Then we would go to Katwa first and from there to the landowner's house.

Once, during the winter, I went to Bardhaman to work – our group consisted of a person from Sheikpara, one from Katlamari, myself from Jalpara and one from Aopara. So four people from four different villages. We met each other in Katwa, from where we went to work for a man called Ghosh in Maldanga. He hired all four of us and we worked for nine days. So nine days at Rs. 50 per day, that fetched us Rs. 450 each. After that, we went back to Katwa. From there we went to work for a man in Panagar – where the military stay – over there. We worked there for twenty-four days; the wage was also Rs. 50 per day.

I didn't go last year. But before that, for four years, I worked in a potato cold storage, carrying sacks of potatoes. That was in the district of Medinipur and Bankura. Our contractor, Montu from Aopara, would take us. We had to carry sacks of potatoes from outside into the store, and then climb five floors to the actual cold storage. Our wages depended on the number of sack we could carry; for every hundred sacks we were paid Rs. 150. But we had to pay for our own expenses out of it.

Our people in Murshidabad are quite poor. There's not much work available here. So we go wherever we know we'll find work. The money we bring back helps us to run our family. But you can't achieve anything major. You might be able to buy some clothes and so on. But things have changed gradually; people are happier now. There's more electric run shallow tube-wells now. The paddy cultivation has increased a lot too. Before we used to eat *ruti* most of the day and have a little bit of rice in the evening. Now it's always rice. No more *rutis*. This was about fifteen to eighteen years ago. The wage for a labourer was around Rs. 1.20 to Rs. 2.50. This is what it was.

I don't go away without making sure the family have all they need first. I take care of the food first. I never go without securing the food for home first, and ensuring they won't be dependent on others. I calculate how many days I will be away for, and will buy the food accordingly. Whatever money is available I'll buy the food with it. I also leave a few hundred rupees behind for emergency needs, in case they need to buy medicines and so on.

Leaving my wife behind is not really a problem. My other brothers look after. They even help with money, if required. When my brothers go away, we also look after their family.

But even then I still used to be quite worried while working in *bidesh*. I used to worry about their welfare. There weren't any phones in our villages then. Now we have phones, and I could even speak with someone in Delhi. It wasn't like that then. Phones are good. I find out how my family is, by phoning up. I don't like working in *bidesh*. I've been to places where I didn't even feel like eating. For example I've been to Bakreswar, and would eat in a place surrounded by human excrements. In some places I was given rice of such poor quality that I decided not to go there anymore.

I'm actually scared to work in the cold storages. It's very heavy work. If you work for three or four days at a stretch, then you won't be able to stand up. Someone will have to lift you up. You need at least five days' recovery time. It really takes five days at least for the aches to subside. Initially you can't even urinate by yourself. You do little at a time and need someone to help you. Neither can you lie down to sleep, you feel like you're suffocating. This is all because you're carrying loads of fifty to sixty kilos for a stretch of three to four hours.

Once during the summer, I fell ill while working. The place was called Bolgona. I had diarrhoea. I was unable to work for four to five days. The landowner gave me medicine.

Once I went to work during the month of *Pous*, but the landowner didn't pay me. That was a Thakur [Brahmin] neighbourhood, everyone is a Thakur there. It's a big neighbourhood and it's all Hindu. There were no Muslims. He didn't pay [the piece rate for the work we'd done which came to] Rs. 710 per head. It was a contract work, reaping, tying and so on. The rate was Rs. 300 per *bigha* and the landowner would provide the food. So we worked for eleven days but he would always create problems. We would work on a piece of land which measured one and a half *bighas*, but he would say it was only 1 *bigha*. So we said to him, "We won't work anymore. So pay us our wages, let us go home." But he didn't pay us. So we went and spoke to the other villagers. The *Panchayat Pradhan* wasn't there, but we did speak to the *Panchayat* members. They said that it wasn't possible for them to recover the money. So we went back to Katwa without any money. From there we went to work again for a man in Bhatpara and returned after working for ten to twelve days.

It's better to stay in a Muslim household while working in *bidesh*, to stay with people from your own community. Since we are Muslims, we prefer Muslims. The food, the traditions are all same. Eating at the Thakur's house, the food was somehow thrown on the plates; and we had to clean up the eating area after meals. We don't have to do this in a Muslim household.

I also sold *jaggery* for three years, which has taken me to Patna, Bhagalpur, Jamalpur and then to Purniya, Siliguri. I know these places well. Last time I went to sell *jaggery* in Bihar, I did that for three months, and then stopped. This year I couldn't go because of a stomach ailment. I have stones in my stomach. I also felt scared because the numbers of truck accidents on the road have increased. There are lots of accidents nowadays. We sleep on trucks loaded with stones while travelling. The trucks loaded with stones leave Dhulian, Duckbunglow at night, heading for Bihar. And we travel on these trucks. They transport the stones from Pachami. But they only travel at night. If we wanted to travel during the day, it would cost us more because of the bus fares. It would be Rs. 400 instead of Rs. 200. Also travelling at night allows us to sleep and then spend the whole next day trading. So we get the whole day to sell the *jaggery*.

I usually take between one hundred and twenty to one hundred and thirty kilos of *jaggery*, sell it over three days and return. And then I go back to the Islampur *haat*, buy more *jaggery* and go off to sell it again. We are new in this trade; our profit might be around Rs. 400 to Rs. 700 per

100 kilos. The older hands make more profit, from Rs. 800 to Rs. 1000. We have to pay for our own board and lodging out of the money we make too. There are hotels there to stay in; it costs Rs. 50 per day, for three. Three of us usually stay together. Then there are the expenses towards food, hiring a *trecker* and so on. We go by *trecker* in the morning and then sell the *jaggery*. If I finish selling the lot quite early, then I return by *trecker* to the place where we are staying, take out another ten kilos and go out to sell in the surrounding areas.

I was married at the age of twenty or twenty-two. She was about fourteen or fifteen. I used to trade oil then. I came to know her through my business. I eloped with her and got us married at the Lalgola marriage registration office. My two brothers and two local boys were the witnesses. After a few days my father-in-law accepted our marriage and asked us to come back. So we went back. When I got home my *samaj* put pressure on me. They didn't want to recognise the marriage initially. So they decided to re-marry us in front of a *Maulavi*. The people from my *samaj* also wanted a feast. But I couldn't afford one. So I fed them with thirty kilos of sweets and twenty kilos of *ruti*.

Now I am on good terms with everyone. Her siblings even visit us now. We get on with everyone. I go to their village every day but I don't visit my in-law's house very frequently. Maybe once every two or three months. I might go in the evening, have a cup of tea, have a chat and then come back. I don't visit my friend's house often either. I usually just wander around the streets instead, or maybe have tea in the tea shop. Its all about chatting, that's what friendship is.

I separated from my parents after two years of my marriage – there were problems in our household. It was a poor household, you see? Rich people's households are different. We separate after our marriage. We have to look after our parents, give them Rs. 5 or Rs. 10. If they don't get to eat, should we not look after them? My parents now live with my youngest brother. He's not married yet. But when he separates after his marriage, we'll have to look after them.

Now I run my spice business. I do the trading once every five to seven days and whatever I earn, will pay for our food. I keep my earnings in my pocket and never let the money run out – that's how the business runs. I got 2000 Rs. during the flood, and that became part of my capital. The money that I earn from my trade keeps me going. If the trading is good then I earn around Rs. 100 or Rs. 70, or sometimes Rs. 80 a day. I also get loans in Baharampur to buy the goods. Yesterday I bought Rs. 1600 worth of goods in Baharampur, on a loan basis. I'll pay it off with the money I make from the business and then take another loan out if required.

I'm not worried about whether I make a profit of Rs. 200 or Rs. 400 over a week. If I need to spend Rs. 400, I'll spend it. If I have someone else's money, I'll spend that too if necessary. On the other hand, if I owe the moneylender some money, then I'll pay him back, from my business income. So I have to juggle a bit, but that's how it is, you see? Otherwise things don't work. If I make a profit of Rs. 200 and my family needs Rs. 400, I won't give that – it's not like that. If Rs. 40 are needed then I give them for the household. I might have to give money from what I've borrowed from the moneylender. That's just how the family runs. For example I've just performed a *Qurbani*, which cost me Rs. 250, but I still owe Rs. 350. And if my business fails, won't I still have to pay?

Whatever money I give to my wife to run the household, she will save some of it. When our savings reach around Rs. 1400–1500, we'll make some jewellery with that money. My

daughter's earring cost Rs. 1500, it contains three *annas* of gold. We sometimes pawn it, like now. I've had to pawn it because I've been ill. I'll need to pay around Rs. 1500–2000 to get it back but I've not been able so far.

I pawned it to the jewellers in Topdanga, when I was ill, for Rs. 1200, at an interest rate of 3 percent per month. I pay Rs. 10 or Rs. 20 out of my earnings towards the interest. When the loan is repaid I'll redeem it. I also have a savings account now, into which I put Rs. 300 every month. I've taken another loan of Rs. 100 from the jewellers. The interest rate is of Rs. 12 a month.

With the jewellers of Topdanga, you can get instant cash when you pawn an item. You don't need any other references. That's their business. For goods worth Rs. 5000 they'll give you Rs. 3000. If you can't redeem the item you've pawned, then you lose it. When the capital and the interest repayments equal the value of the item then they let you know. But if I can't afford to redeem it, I say so and they sell it off.

On *Eid* day this year I was seriously ill. My father and my brothers had to take me to the hospital. I went by *rickshaw van*. On my first day in the hospital, I had an *aya* to look after me. My brothers also looked after me and the women would visit too. Then when the gates closed in the evening, they would return home. They didn't help me in terms of money but they still took good care of me. I had Rs. 500 or 700 on me when I first went into hospital. That was all spent on various admission expenses. So after three or four days my nephew took the earring and pawned it.

This illness has cost me Rs. 1800. I had pain on the side of my stomach. I'm still taking medicine for it. Doctors have advised an operation, they say I have stones. But I have no money, so how could I? It would cost me around Rs. 8000. It would have to be done in a private hospital. I did get in touch with the government hospital. I was there for nine days. They would write a prescription for the medicine. I would buy it and take it. I still get pain sometimes, so then I just buy the medicine and take it. Ten tablets cost Rs. 95. There are other medicines, which I can buy for it; they only cost about Rs. 11 or 12. I buy goods for my business with loans but the money for my medicines comes out of my profit – that's how it goes.

A few months ago, one of my brothers was nearly dying. He lives over there, near the school. He needed a stomach operation. All of us, brothers and nephews gave money to save him. I gave Rs. 400. We spent Rs. 8000 to 10,000 in total, which we'd collected, and he was saved. The operation cost Rs. 8000. Now you see, he's working and wants to pay us back. But I won't take any money from him for it.

My wife's had minor illnesses too, but nothing serious. If she's ill then she buys medicines from the village doctors. But buying medicines from the shop is always expensive. So sometime she doesn't buy them, even if she's ill. Sometimes she'll go to the hospital at Lalbag, buy a ticket for Rs. 2 and get the medicine for free.

In times of illness and other problems, people in the village look after each other. My neighbours are always the first to arrive. The Shahajjis' are the ones who help most. The people across the road however do not help at all. They think we are their enemies. Our relationship with them is very tense. I don't know what they think of us. They always create problems – we can't cope with them. They will always make issues over the slightest little thing. They'll steal if they get a chance. You can't leave your cycle out and sleep in peace. They'll steal it.

Yesterday, in the evening, we went to a tea shop. They stole my neighbour's telephone in that short time span.

We hired a tape recorder on the night of *Kalipuja* – the machine was worth Rs. 2000–2500. They stole that too, and we had to pay the owners Rs. 1800. They are very difficult people. They can't stand the Shahs. If the Shahs buy land, they will create trouble, saying that they also want to buy that land. They will say, "Let the land be mine, I'll eat off it while you can starve."

Those Shahji's here are my own people, those others are not. When we try and build a relationship with them, they don't respond. They even threaten us sometimes. On the other hand if I ask the Shahjis for something, they'll give it to me. I'll give them whatever they need too, if they ask. They are all good people, my own people. If someone beats me up, they will take my side and protect me. The others wouldn't do that. They will make it into a Hindu-Muslim problem – that is the kind of people they are. That is why they fled their country to come here. They used to create problems there too. We support the CP(M) Party and they - the Congress. That's why they are so angry with us. It's really difficult to live here. They won't let us live here in peace. But we don't have enough power to move anywhere else. My older brothers could, so they moved away. Our *samaj* of Shahs are usually well liked in other places, but not here.

I have only one daughter. She was born after three years of marriage. No other children. Meaning we didn't want any. I've got her admitted in school. She's in class IV. She goes to school but can't read. She spends her day watching CDs and television; she doesn't study at all. And since we are illiterate we can't slap her and make her study. If she reads *O* for *Kha*, we have to accept that. Even if she's not reading correctly, we'll think she's studying. I used to pay for her to have private tuition, but she doesn't go anymore. What good would it be, even if she went? Her teacher says that she just doesn't try.

Her schooling doesn't cost us much. All her books are provided by the school. We might have to buy her an exercise book every month, but that's all. She takes Rs. 2 or Rs. 4 or Rs. 5 to eat, but that's different. The only expense is her pocket money. If the schools run for twenty days a month, then her pocket money comes to twenty times Rs. 2 so between Rs. 40 and Rs. 60 a month.

Sometimes the school also provides some clothes, but why would you wear them? I don't like the way they look. So I buy her clothes. The school also gives food now. The food is good. Instead of giving dry rations of rice they now give cooked food. She only goes to school because of the food. She won't learn anything, but at least she goes to school.

We would be happy if we knew how to read and write. Educated people get more respect. They walk differently. We are uneducated farmers; our language is different. But the language of an educated person is different. It's good. The educated environment would be different for her. It's easier to marry if you're literate. The dowry for an educated girl might not be less, but the expectations would be different. People will say, "The girl has education so when she has children, she'll be able to teach them." Not like us; we don't know anything, so we can't teach her. Education has its advantages in all spheres of life.

Our *party* leader is Mustaq from Parvatinagar. He's from the CPM. Our *Panchayat* member is Suren Haldar. He doesn't do much. Mustaq is the one who does everything. He knows us all

and works for us. He'll do anything for us. Even if we call on him at midnight, he'll respond. For example, if I have problems and ask him to go somewhere, he will go there.

But during the floods, I went to the *Member* many times; I needed help, but he wouldn't give me anything at first. After begging for a few more days however, he gave me two kilos of rice to make me happy. A long time after the floods, the *BDO* office gave me Rs. 2000. Other than that I've not had any other government aid.

During the flood year I suffered big losses with my house, my business, everything. Although nothing was swept away. What is to be swept away from our house? The house was destroyed. Pots and pans are still buried under the mud. Where would they go? I had a stainless steel pot. Some of the baby ducks ran away. Some were stolen by other people. We'd taken shelter in the school and only came back later, after the water had subsided. We were given food by various sources. We would just eat that and stay put. We spent about twenty days like that.

That year we had some money at hand, from having washed jute. On the day of the flood I was paid Rs. 250. I had that money with me. I had about ten to twelve kilos of rice at home and another ten kilos on a loan from the market at Ghorador. We used to cook some of it and eat. We would cook five hundred grammes instead of a kilo. Then the water eventually receded. I took a loan from the husband of my mother's sister and was able to start my business again.

We were given a tarpaulin during the flood. I sold that for Rs. 200. With that money I rebuilt the house. I used four labourers for it. The cost for four labourers is Rs. 240. I paid Rs. 40 after a month. I had some tiles but had to buy more. With the Rs. 2000 that I'd received, I bought a cycle and paid back my loans. That was the time when I started my business again.

The people who didn't get any money got corrugated iron instead from the *Panchayat* member. But actually the corrugated iron was meant for us. Before we could get that, we had to get our ID cards done. The cards are still in the box. The *CASA* organisation was giving out the corrugated iron.

There's another thing that I just remembered. We didn't have any ration cards then. Now both of us have one. We only get two hundred ml of paraffin oil with the cards. The daughter doesn't have a ration card. I got mine done three years ago and my wife's about a year ago. I didn't want to do a lot of leg work, so I just gave someone Rs. 40 and got the cards done. One day I went to the office to get the card made. But I was told to come back seven days later. So I went again seven days later, but I was told, "Not today, come back some other day."

One day I met a tout. His name is Mohosin. I got to know him at the *BDO* office. He procures you with official documents. Someone's ration card, someone's birth certificate. He told me to give him Rs. 40 and he would get the card made. I gave him the money. I'm a poor man, how often can I abstain from work? So I gave him the money and the relevant papers. My brother here later went to fetch the card from the office.

Chapter 12 LOBU SHEIKH

Forty-five year old Lobu Shiekh farms four bighas of land. Other than this, he also cultivates leased in land sometimes. He lives in a two-room house with a verandah. The roof is made of tiles, and in the spacious courtyard is the kitchen shed. His family consists of his wife, three sons and two daughters. All the children are in education. The eldest son studies at university. Lobu Sheikh is a farmer now, but he used to work as a labourer and bought and sold cows. He has been to bidesh to work as a labourer. At present he and his brother, with their two cows, cultivate their own land and sometimes hire out the cows.

My father's house was in Udaypur. He didn't own much land or wealth. He had a plough and would rent it out sometimes, to somehow run his family. That house was like a small cage, so I moved here after my marriage. That was around twenty to twenty-two years ago now. See that plot of land over there? My brother owned a piece of it. He built a house there. Then my brother and I moved into that house and started living together. I was with him for ten years. I bought this plot while I was still living with my brother. Then I built this house – about thirteen years ago now. And I eventually moved here.

I've not studied much. I used to go to school in my childhood. I think I started school when I was older than him, my son. How old is he now? Around six or seven. I studied up to class IV and then was admitted into class V, but I didn't complete the year. I attended classes for three or four months, and then there was no option but to stop. It was the year of *Joy Bangla*, when Bangladesh became independent. It rained a lot that year. The whole area was flooded. It wasn't possible to go anywhere. I stopped going to school at the time, and never went back. We had serious money problems then. The school fees of Rs. 4 had to be paid every month to attend. But we couldn't run the household at that time, so how were we supposed to pay the school fees?

So I left school and started to work as a casual labourer. Up until class IV, I hadn't worked much. Father used to go to plough the fields then, and I would bring him his food. When I grew older, I started to work as a labourer, when I was around twelve or thirteen years old. We used to work in the refugees' chilli fields in Payradanga, I didn't know paddy work. They used to do very large scale chilli cultivation then. You see those twenty-two *bighas* of land under the *sislu* tree? It all used to be one chilli farm. It was mostly the children who worked there for a wage of Rs. 1 or Rs. 1.25. We used to start at six in the morning and work straight up till midday. We were not given any food, only that Rs. 1 or Rs. 1.25 wage. Adults would get Rs. 1.50 to Rs. 2. I used to eat whatever we had at home, like rice and water, and would go to work, carrying some hard puffed rice. This is how it was.

Then I grew up. I got married in Udaypur when I was twenty, to a girl from my mother's side - the daughter of a distant uncle. There was a small feast at the wedding. There were about twenty or twenty-five people from the neighbourhood. We also have to invite relatives, don't we? There probably were my mother's sisters too.

I didn't get any money for my marriage, not even five *paisa*. Nothing. At last, around two or three years ago, I got a bit of a property as her [his wife] share – one *bigha* thirteen *kathas*. I sold that off. With that money I bought a bit of land from the Thakurs [Brahmin] and am educating my sons. The money wasn't much but I still had Rs. 10,000 left after buying the land.

We had a family of Thakurs in our village. You see that land over there, in front of the primary school? It used to belong to them. When they moved, they wanted to sell that plot. But some

villagers didn't want them to sell it. They said that the land should be given to the primary school. So the police came to mediate. The police realized that nearly the whole of the village was in favour of the land going to the school. So the decision was that part of the land would go to the school and the rest would be sold.

I had already given them an advance, because I wanted to buy the land. But Abrar said he wanted to buy it too. The Thakurs said that they would sell it to me since they had already taken an advance from me. So I bought that land by selling my wife's share of the property. With the rest of the money, I'm educating my three sons and two daughters.

The eldest son has started a post graduate course this year and the eldest daughter is in class XI. Another son and daughter are in the high school. The youngest is in the village primary school. I have to spend money for their education. I have to buy them books, clothes, pay for their private tuition – there are a lot of expenses. Sometimes I sell paddy or jute to raise the money, or sometimes I raise it by selling chillies. When I'm stuck, I take out loans. Once for [one of my sons'] admission, I needed a lot of money to buy books for college. I didn't have any cash readily available. So I took out a loan of Rs. jute. 2000 from Naoroz. I repaid that later by selling some of the summer paddy and some

When Surman went into class V, he had to sit an entrance exam at Topdanga high school. He passed the examination and was admitted. But for Sarifa I had to run around a lot. She didn't pass her exams. She's not so clever with studies. So when her name didn't appear on the admission list, I went first to the school secretary. He said that he'd see to it.

But nothing happened. So I went to see our Nur Alam⁶. He contacted the secretary through the party. He also recommended her to the teachers' committee. After that her name appeared on the list. CPI(M) did me this favour. So I voted for them in the school committee election. I said to brother Naoroz, "I'll vote for CPI(M). I truly believe in the CPI(M)", but since Naoraz's brother works for Congress, I vote for them.

Right now I only farm and do nothing else. I have one bullock and my brother has another. When we separated, we each got one as our share. The bullock has been with me ever since. Between the two of us, we have made a plough with those bullocks. He takes it for five days and I take it for five days. That's how we do farm our own land. On top of our own farming, we also hire out the plough sometimes. Sometimes I do it twice and he - four times.

In total I farm about five *bighas* of land; that includes both my land and someone else's land. I have four *bighas* of my own and another one and a half *bighas*, which I lease off someone else. Some land has paddy on it, and some has chillies. I'm farming chillies on one *bigha*. Some land is uncultivated; there's not enough water for it.

The plot of land which is not mine, I farm on a share basis, I share the produce with the owner for it, Rs. 2000 for a *bigha*. I can farm it for a year by which time the revenue cost is taken care of. Nowadays people don't like to give land on a sharecrop basis. Sharecroppers are entitled to *borga rights*. That's why no-one likes to give out land. I've not had land on a sharecropping basis for the last fifteen years. So I do it on a revenue basis.

⁶ Name of local political leader of Panchayat Samiti

But the household really can't run on this, so I have debts and will have to sell some of my own land. My debts amount to at least Rs. 15,000 to 16,000. I also have some gold jewellery pawned. I owe the bank and the fertilizer shop too. The bank loan rate is quite high. I initially borrowed Rs. 10,000 from the bank, but I think the amount to repay has now doubled, because of the high interest rate. I had borrowed it to farm, but couldn't repay it – the flood destroyed everything. I keep thinking of repaying it, but haven't been able to yet. I've had that debt for a long time.

I also pawned gold items worth Rs. 1100 to 1200 about five years ago. I think the total interest repayments on the loan must be close to the actual values of the goods. Once I paid Rs. 500 to cover the interest only. No one understands, but how can I pay? One of my sons is going to college and I give him Rs. 1 or Rs. 2 as pocket money, that itself dries up all the money.

Then I have debts with the fertilizer shop. For example, yesterday I bought five litres of paraffin oil to run the pump off brother Naoroz. I'll pay him back from the revenue from the chilli harvest. He had saved the paraffin oil from his ration quota.

Brother Naoraz helps me a lot, as much as he can. You see, if I suddenly have a problem, my relatives here, my cousins, will come running to help me. And if the *samaj* leaders like Naoroz hear the news, they'll also come to help me. We also go to help other people. If someone suddenly falls ill, they will immediately come to our house on their motorbikes. His brother, Mohibul, is always ready to help. All this is based on relationships. They will look after us and we will look after them. We are not blood relatives. They're much wealthier than us. But our relationship is good. Actually his father's name and my father's name were the same - that's why they were friends.

They are both dead now. But our relationship has lived on. In fact my son was supposed to marry Naoroz's daughter. For various reasons that didn't happen. My son was studying so I had asked them to wait for a while. But then they got an offer from a wealthy family and they didn't want to miss out on the opportunity.

I don't get much help from my brothers though. How would I? They are in the same boat as I am. Only verbal support and advice. What else do they have to offer? My middle brother does do a lot of work for me. Sometimes he waters our land and does other things for us. For example I might tell him that I can't go to the field because someone is coming to visit me. He will then take the machine to the field and water my land. If I sometimes find he has no work to do then I might ask him to put the paddy on the bullock cart, and he'll do it. I don't have to pay him for that. I do the same for him. The neighbours don't help much.

I don't interact much with my wife's relatives. I don't go to my in-law's place anymore. Why would I go? What is there there? Even my father-in-law is not fed properly by his sons. He came to see us the other day. His sons don't look after him. If he doesn't get any care there, how can we expect any? We've never had any quarrels or fights with them. Actually, the youngest son wanted to buy my wife's share of the land, but I refused to sell it to him and after that his behaviour changed. But later he didn't want to buy it anymore so I sold it to someone else.

I was not able to maintain my family by cultivating land before. I had to take out loans to eat, so I used to go *bidesh* to work. While living there, I used work a lot in *bidesh*. This was about

twenty-five years ago. I would trade *jaggery* on my return and repay my debts with my earnings from *bidesh*.

Sometimes I would go out to trade cows. I've been thinking of going this year too. I buy cows in Bihar to sell them in Lalbagh. I take a loan from someone and pay it back after selling the cows. I catch the train at Puranobazar and alight at Rampurhat. From there I have to go to Sorasdanga to a place called Shikari Para. It's now in Jharkhand district. It takes a day to get there. Coming back however will take two days walking. Recently Raju Shah got some cows, and walked back.

I used to go to *bidesh* as well. I never saw my father going to *bidesh* though. We used to go to Bardhaman to harvest paddy. We used to live together as a family then. My brother used to come with me. I've worked a lot in *bidesh*, even since getting married. I've done transplanting, harvesting and so on. The first time I went, I was around seventeen or eighteen years old. My family was in a crisis. My father was alive at the time, but he didn't ask me to go. I went of my own accord, with a friend. My father actually didn't want me to go. Still I went, because of family difficulties. I went via Lalbag, with bedding and a sickle to reap paddy. It was in *Aghran*, in the winter.

I didn't go to Katwa that time. I went on to Kornosuborno from Lalbag station. That is in the Kandi sub-division of the Murshidabad district. People from our area go there, so I went. I worked for ten to fifteen days. It was a Muslim family, quite a rich one. The wages were only Rs. 2 plus food. They would feed us three times a day. We used to stay on the top floor of a mud house. This was about twenty-five years ago.

After that I started to farm on sharecropping basis. The norm was to share out the produce equally, which means half the output each. I had to put in my labour as well as the fertilizer, everything. The owner would provide the land and oil for the water pump, if water was needed. I used to farm around four to five *bighas* of land, and planted the *boro* crop. We also had a little bit of our own farm land. I've farmed between five and ten *bighas* on a sharecrop basis. My father only had one and a half *bighas*. I also used to hire out my labour in the village. On top of that, I started a business. The business allowed me to buy small plots of land. So I stopped going to *bidesh*.

We used to get cooked food from the landowners in *bidesh*. At the end, they would pay us and we would go home. The wages were Rs. 2 then. Once I planted paddy for Rs. 4. We never managed to bring much money home. Over a period of fifteen days I would maybe earn Rs. 60 at Rs. 4 a day, or Rs. 40 at Rs. 2 a day over twenty days. I would give all the money to my father. They would spend it. I wouldn't keep anything for myself.

One year, in Nadia, I worked for a Hindu family. I wasn't paid at all for one part of the land. The man was a bit of a devil actually. I worked for five days and left him. He wanted me to work more, but people around said that it was very difficult to get money out of him. So if I worked for a prolonged period, I wouldn't necessarily get more money. So I left him and went to Ranaghat instead.

Other than that one, all the other people that I worked for paid me my wages. Wages weren't a problem. They never paid less than they'd said they would.

We used to go as a group. Five, seven or ten of us. Sometimes, some of us, one or two, would fall sick or have a bad dream about someone being dead in the family, and would leave to return home earlier. Otherwise the whole group would return together. I've never come back alone. When I had a cold or a cough, I would take medicine.

I couldn't achieve much with the money I'd earn in *bidesh*. It would all get spent on the household or on the few *bighas* of land that I farmed. Even if a child got sick, I wouldn't be able to pay the full doctor's fees.

We didn't live here at the time I worked in *bidesh*. We used to live with my brother over there. So my wife never had any problems, because my sister-in-law also lives there. I would still worry though when I used to work in *bidesh*. It just happened automatically. I would wonder about what might be happening at home and so on.

Last year when I went to *bidesh* to buy cows, Surman fell ill. He was already ill when I left – but I still had to go to buy the cows despite that. When I got back I took the boy to the hospital for treatment. He wasn't treated till I returned. I had told the others to take him, but they hadn't.

In the year of the flood, there were around twenty-five to thirty thousand people who came to stay here on this upland. There were people from various places, as well as cows, goats, ducks, chickens. Our house didn't get flooded. The water came to the bottom of my house. But although my house was intact, the children suffered various illnesses. I had to borrow money to get them treated. There wasn't any paddy in the field. The chilli field was completely submerged. When the paddy got inundated, how were we supposed to get food? Even then we didn't receive any help, neither from the government nor from any private organization. As a result I have a debt of Rs. 15,000 to 16,000. The debt is still hanging over me. I also owe the bank. On top of that, I also have to repay the interest on it. Some people don't add on interest, but some do. The majority of people do add interest on loans. Only people with whom you have a good relationship don't add any interest.

I went to the *Panchayat* office once this year. When we go there, we try to get our work done. I said to the *Pradhan* that my son needed a signature to go to study in Barddhaman. He gave it me quickly. Once I went to get an income certificate. It was Sunday but the office was open. The man said that it wasn't possible for him to give me the certificate. Then a gentleman, an officer who had come to check the accounts, asked me what my problem was, and asked the *Panchayat* man to issue the certificate, because I needed it. So they issued it quickly.

The other day I had a bad experience with government people on my way to Barddhaman to help Sarafat move into his hostel [university managed accommodation]. It was just the two of us, Sarafat and me. We had some bedding and a cycle with us. First we went to book the cycle on the train, but no one would listen to us. The train was about to leave. So we spoke to the guard. He in turn told the *TTE*, who wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to us. We waited a long time for the local train. We weren't allowed to board the express trains, since our tickets were for local trains only. At last a local train came in the evening. But the rail police wouldn't let us board the passenger coaches with the cycle. They told us to take the cycle to the luggage van. We went there to find it locked, with no one around to open it. So we boarded a passenger coach anyway. But we were again turned away by the police. And as we were going back towards the luggage van, the train started to move. I managed to board with the cycle, in another passenger coach, with the help of fellow passengers. Sarafat had boarded another compartment with the luggage. But the police again came up to me saying that it was

illegal to carry cycles in the passenger compartment. So I told him the whole story, and he finally let me stay. Later I had a chat with him. He hails from Malda. He too is a Muslim. I think that since we had the right papers to carry the cycle, the police couldn't ask us for a bribe. So they tried to harass us instead.

I belong to brother Naoroz's *samaj*. He's our *samaj* leader. There are about 80 families in our *samaj*. The *samaj* really doesn't play such an important part nowadays, not like it used to. In the past, if anyone had any problem, then he would go to the *samaj* leaders. But now they go to the political leaders or to the police instead. The *samaj* has lost some of its influence even in social events like deaths, marriages and so on. Before the *samaj* had to be consulted. We had to speak to the *samaj* leaders the day before a wedding and discuss our needs with them. The *samaj* would have to approve it and it followed what was decided.

When deaths occur the *samaj* still comes to help. They dig the grave, buy the *kafan*. They arrange the food for the people who come from outside, people who had come to participate in the *Janaja Namaz* and so on.

During the times of *Eid* and *Qurbani*, that's when you really understand the role of the *samaj*. During *Eid*, donations are collected for the *Fitra* fund and during *Qurbani*, portions of meat and the animal skins are gathered in one place. We raised about Rs. 2500 during *Eid*, from the *Fitra* by eighty families. With that we bought about thirty to thirty-five pieces of clothing and distributed them to the poor widows of the village. The rest of the money was given to the *Madrassa* and to the *fakirs*. During *Qurbani*, each family divides their meat into three parts and then donates one part to the Mosque. Not everyone can afford to sacrifice animals in the festival of *Qurbani*, so the meat then gets redistributed in the *samaj*. For the last two years we've been saving the money which comes from the sale of the animal skins. With that, we're thinking of buying pots and pans. They would be used to prepare the feasts for the families in our *samaj*. This year the *samaj* helped a poor girl with her wedding with some of that money.

I've not been able to get the ration cards done for all the children. We have three ration cards amongst us. The two of us and the eldest son. The rest don't have any cards. I've tried and am still trying. We have been asked to fill in application forms and give them to the *Panchayat* office. So I've submitted the forms but they're still at the *Panchayat* office, they haven't been passed on from there to the relevant authorities. Three elections have passed now. I gave one to a *Member* but he's finished his term. A new *Member* was elected in his place so I submitted the forms again. But then he too finished his term, and consequently another member took up the post. This time I think it will happen. I have an appointment with them on the 18th. Meaning the girl has passed her *Madhyamik* exams and they're saying that people who have passed the *Madhyamik* will get a preference. That's what they say. Without the card, we can't enroll at the *employment exchange* office.

It might be difficult to get ration cards for my other children, unless they pass their *Madhyamik* exams. You don't get much with the cards though. Only oil - paraffin oil. The amount they give is not sufficient for us - two hundred ml per head, which means six hundred ml for a week - not even a litre. Some weeks we don't get any at all. My children have to study. So do we have to choose between lighting the lamps for them or using them to live? That's how the government's scheme of things works.

Chapter 13 PIYAR SHEIKH

Fifty year old Piyar Sheikh lives with his five children, a daughter-in-law and his wife, in a concrete house beside the road. His two brothers live respectively to the north and to the south of his house. He has married off one of his sons to the daughter of one of his brothers. He farms his nine bighas of land to run the household. Between his three brothers and himself, they've installed an electric water pump on his land. Earlier he had to fight serious poverty to maintain his family. He has worked as a labourer on others' land and has also been to bidesh to work.

I was born in the Bengali year of 1360. I'm illiterate. I didn't have the time or the opportunity to go to school. I was brought up under serious hardship. How could I go to school, when we didn't even have enough to eat? When I was around five, my father fell ill. He had a dispute over boundary of a land with a man from the Hindu neighbourhood. The Hindu man left saying, "Since I can't win the argument with you, I'll kill you with a curse." My father wasn't clever and he didn't take any note of the threat. In the past people used to throw curses. Nowadays they don't do it that often. So that man threw a curse on my father six months later. One night his knee became very painful. The pain gradually got worse and became serious. The pain would shoot up his leg, his feet got very swollen and heavy and he couldn't walk any more. His whole body would ache. There was seminal emission in his urine. His face would go dark. We couldn't find a way to cure him. He could barely walk. I'd take him to many doctors, but to no avail. I even took him to a doctor in that far off place called Kalopur. Baharampur wasn't so busy then. There was a man called Anath, who used to give medicines in Puranobajar. And there was a doctor called Rajen in Dighirpar, who would give medicines. This was the situation; there just weren't many doctors or hospitals around at the time. There were some *kavirajes* around though. They used to give medicines too. We had to sell four *bighas* of land to pay for his treatment - although we also bought a pair of calves with that money.

Out of a total of twelve *bighas* of land, four were sold off. Another four *bighas* were uncultivated, so I couldn't farm them. The other four *bighas* were hired out on a sharecropping basis, from which I would get two *mons* of chickpeas and five *mons* of *bhadoi* paddy, nothing more. That is all the produce we would get for the whole year from those four *bighas* of land. The family couldn't live off so little.

So I had to borrow peas from other people, and my sisters would work on the chilli farms. Chilli farming had just started then. I'm talking of the time when the refugees from Bangladesh arrived. It was very difficult to make a living then. My mother would earn money by processing¹ paddy for others. We didn't have the paddy that you see now. Only *bhadoi* paddy. My mother would bring half a *mon* of paddy from the market and thresh it to get the rice out. The villagers would buy a kilo or two to eat. This is what it was like for us.

When I was eight years old, I went to pick chillies for other people. My sisters would take me to the chilli farms. I would pick between two and five kilos of chillies. When I grew slightly older, I started to herd cattle and goats for other people. The landowners would only give me food, sometimes a pair of shorts or a vest and a rupee or two, every now and then.

This is how I used to earn for myself. On the other hand, my sisters would live by picking chillies or threshing paddy and so on. In those days, I was living with my three younger and two older sisters, and my parents.

¹ From raw paddy to rice, ready to cook.

I worked as a herdsman for three years. I used to herd the two calves that were bought out of my father's land money, till they grew up. When they grew up I put the plough on them. I must have been around thirteen or fourteen years old. When I first put the plough on them, the cows would need time to get used to it, and so would I. Both the cows and the ploughman need a lot of practice. I would plough free for other people, so that I could learn. So this is how I learnt to plough and the cows got used to the plough. After that I would hire myself out as a ploughman. The hire charges were around Rs. 2 to Rs. 3. I would buy rice and flour out of that money. This is how the family managed to run somehow.

After I became a ploughman, I took back our land from the sharecroppers. I ploughed the land which was lying uncultivated. So I started getting more crops than before. I used to grow paddy, jute, and chilli and so on, but the crop yield was much lower then. We couldn't always sow the jute at the right time since the land wasn't always ready. We would sow it sometimes in *Boisakh* or sometimes in *Jaistho*, it all depended on the rain. We were dependent on Allah; He was the one who took the decisions. But things have changed. Nowadays, we can even sow jute in *Choitra*, thanks to mechanical irrigation. But before, *Boisakh* and *Jaistho* would pass, and then maybe in *Ashar* the rains would come, which is when we would sow the late jute. But the produce wasn't any good. There were no fertilisers or *pesticides* available then – a lot of the crop would be eaten up by insects. The chickpeas however used to grow better than they do now. No one farms chickpeas anymore. Even if you do, they don't really grow.

Later, people started to buy pump machines [to extract irrigation water] which ran on diesel. From then on land cultivation increased. We also started to plant wheat. We used to eat a lot of wheat at the time. We had to guard the fields night and day – especially at night-times, otherwise people would steal the leaves to make dishes. By selling the wheat, I eventually managed to buy a shallow tube-well and installed it on my four *bighas* of land

We have four *bighas* of land in one place and four and a half *bighas* in another. So I sowed wheat on the four *bighas*, where the shallow tube-well had been installed. I also made some money by selling water for irrigation [from the shallow tube-well]. I used to charge one rupee for an hour. I used to bring Hasim's pump machine and connect it to the shallow tube-well. He used to charge Rs. 4 per hour and I would get one. This is how I would farm my wheat and also make Rs. 50 over fifty hours. So I saved some money and bought the pump machine to run my own shallow tube-well. This was twenty-two years ago. After buying it, I didn't have to pay any rent for hiring in a pump machine.

When the shallow machines arrived, people started to farm rice on five *kathas* or ten *kathas* of land. So did we. But we couldn't really farm a lot because the [already high] price of diesel, and thus input costs, shot up. Later I would hire an electric pump to farm. The rent was Rs. 250–300 per *bigha* of land for the summer crop. Electricity was cheaper than diesel. Later on I applied for an electric connection for my shallow tube-well. Three of us, my brothers and I, paid for it but couldn't afford to buy the engine, which cost Rs. 6000–7000. Two years passed by, as when others were farming, we couldn't buy the engine. Later on, when we were in a position to buy it, the government intervened saying that the deadline by which we should have taken it up had passed and that we had to pay another Rs. 3500 for the connection. So we went to the district magistrate's office, where we were told the same thing and were forced to sell cows and goats to raise the money. After that we bought this engine, that was twelve years ago. We three brothers share it amongst each other. We also share the electricity bill.

After buying the engine we started to buy land. I bought about five *bighas*, but it was bought in bits. At first I bought eight *kathas*, which cost me Rs. 300. Being upland, it was cheap. Then I bought one *bigha*, which was a lowland and hence more expensive and cost Rs. 1100. The next plot of ten *kathas* cost me Rs. 1350. The price of land started to go up and for the next thirteen and a half *kathas* I had to pay a rate of Rs. 4000 per *bigha*. For the next few years I couldn't buy any land, but managed to buy another *bigha* later. I would buy a little and sell a little bit. And that's how I acquired the land that I have now. But all these were bought after I'd acquired the pump machine. Now upland costs more. Before you could only farm the lower fields. You couldn't farm upland. How would you get water onto it? But now you can because of irrigation, so it costs more. You can farm five different crops on upland now. These plots now cost Rs. 50,000–60,000 per *bigha*.

Other than buying land, I've had to get my sisters married – two younger ones and three older ones. It cost me anything between Rs. 500 to 1200 for the dowry. The gold cost Rs. 250–300 per *bhori*.

I only got married after seeing through my sisters' weddings, it was a kind of promissory act. Boys nowadays won't do that. But I've always been dutiful to my family, ever since I was young.

I never studied but got my middle brother admitted in school, first into primary school at Aopara and then at Kapasia. It was quite difficult to do your studies. He didn't have any shorts or shirts, or even food sometimes. We had to pay school fees then. It was around Rs. 5 or Rs. 7 per month. The headmaster would come to our home to collect it, if we were late paying it. I remember this very vividly. After a while I couldn't really afford it anymore. It was becoming impossible to keep it up. The food, the clothes, everything was getting difficult. So he studied up to class VIII and then left school.

I couldn't get my youngest brother to study at all. The household expenditure had gone up, because my younger sisters were also born then, so expenses went up. If I had sent him to the primary school, then our work would have suffered from it. So I would send him to work as a shepherd instead. My middle brother also used to work while studying, in the fields, guarding the pump machine or bringing out my food to me when I was working in the fields. Since he was very young at the time, what other work could he do? We didn't own any cows or goats then, except a pair of ploughing cows. Nothing else. Where would I have got the money from? Can't you understand how I ran the family? To maintain two cows was getting difficult, I wasn't even able to feed them properly. How could I feed the cows when I was unable to feed my family? I used to bring the bad straw in from the field and feed it to them. Since I didn't have any land, I didn't have any straw. Paddy used to grow on lowland then, a tall variety. We used to cut the top off and let the rest of it stay under water. When the water dried up in *Falgun* or *Chaitra*, we used to cut the stalks off and dry them in the sun. We would bring them home in bundles, shake the mud off and leave them for a couple of months till they turned salty. Then we would cut them up and feed them to the cows. What else could I do? This is how I managed things.

Now I'm much better off. I own about six to seven *bighas* of land of my own; with my father's land, I have nine and a half *bighas* in total. I farm about three *bighas* of my father's land. These seven and half *bighas* of land were bought by me. Out of these I sometimes lease out five to ten *kathas* of land, especially when I'm short of money.

This year the chillies which I've planted are not growing, they are all dying. I farm chilli on nearly one and half *bigha* of land, out of which the plants on thirteen *kathas* have died. About fifteen *kathas* of chilli plants have done well, but there are no chillies growing on the plants. The maximum I've produced is one *mon* and they fetch Rs. 5–6 per kilo. I employ young boys and girls of the village to pick them, for which I pay them Rs. 1 per kilo of chilli.

When I farm paddy, I have to employ wage labourers on a per *bigha* contract basis. It's around Rs. 180–200 for a *bigha*, depending on the going rate. They transplant the paddy seedlings. Around harvesting time contract wages go up to Rs. 300 for every *bigha*. This is for reaping, stacking, and threshing. They thresh with foot-operated threshing machines, which could be ours or one hired off someone else. The rent of the machine is ten kilos of paddy per *bigha*.

You can't hire labourers on a daily basis any more. They make more money on a contractual basis. Although the landowners also gain from it, it benefits the labourers more than the owners. They are happier than us. It's very difficult to get labourers to work the whole day, mostly they work half a day and you can't ask for more. They won't do it.

I've worked as a labourer here too. I had to work the whole day. Phew! It was a nightmare. We never knew when or where or how long the landowner would ask us to work for. I used to be paid for a day's work, but I would have to start the pump in the night for free. The machine pumps would be in the fields and the landowner would ask me to guard it at night. These days if someone guards for you, he'll charge seven to eight *mons* of paddy per season. But I had to do it for free, otherwise he might not have employed me the next day. He might have taken someone else on. So we had to do it. The wage was around one and half rupees and I was about seventeen or eighteen years old then. The wages have gradually risen to Rs. 20 and now the minimum is Rs. 35, going up to Rs. 50 sometimes, when the work load is heavier.

I also hire out the plough nowadays, but it doesn't fetch much money. You see everyone is planting mustard now, so ploughs should be in demand, but the fields are all ploughed by tractor now, at a fixed price. If you plough using bullocks it's Rs. 80 and if you plough by tractors it's the same. It also varies seasonally – sometimes it's Rs. 70 and at other times it's Rs. 100. If the land is very muddy then it's Rs. 100 and if it's dry, then it's Rs. 80. Food isn't included. The poor can't give food but the rich families do.

Even during *Roja* days I plough, otherwise how would I eat? I do need to eat something, don't I? We don't have salaried jobs. I go out around four or half past four in the morning and return around half past eleven. I feel awfully thirsty and dehydrated. Yesterday I just couldn't get up. It was so bad that I couldn't say anything to anyone. I couldn't get up till evening. It's very difficult during the *Roja* days. Really difficult. When I can't work, I hire in a labourer and send him out to work with the plough. I pay him his wages and the rest is mine.

Since I farm my father's land, I do need to look after him. Food, clothes, medicines and so on, all of which I have to carry to his house. When we started to living here, my father stayed back in Aopara, so for fourteen years we've had to bring him what he needs. We've had to do this irrespective of the weather. My father never lived with his sons, though he lived with my middle brother for two years. I don't really know what happened, but he told us to feed him and look after him in turns but that he wouldn't live with anyone of us at all. So we all take turns for a month at a time to carry things to his house, even when it's been raining incessantly for several days or when it's winter and cold. So we take turns to look after him and my widowed sister also takes care of him.

I got that sister married in Parvatinagar. Her husband died after consuming poison, leaving a child behind. So she couldn't stay at her sister-in-laws, could she? She came back to her father's house and stayed with us. After a while my father gave her sixteen *kathas* of land saying, "Eat from this land." So now she survives off that land, though the water and the plough are ours. We put in our labour for her. She gets the crop from those sixteen *kathas* of land and somehow survives. Her child is grown up now and works. He works as a wage labourer too.

It's been nearly fourteen years since we moved here. Initially we had bamboo fencing, for a year. Then we erected a wall. We lived there for four years. Since then, I've built a concrete house, bit by bit. I had to buy the bricks, though not all at the same time. Just a few at a time. The price of the best quality bricks then was Rs. 1300 for a thousand. It's only been seven or eight years since I finished the cement work, just before the flood. And that really helped me through it. During the flood, the water was as high as I am. We stayed on the roof, we were scared to go into the house. The whole village including my daughter's father in law stayed with us. The cows, the sheep, the goats, everyone. When the flood came, there were a lot of people with us, and when it stopped and we realised it wouldn't flood any more, they went home because we all realised we couldn't accommodate everyone.

The *behais* ate with us here during this time. We had a lot of difficulty with the food: it's not so simple to feed so many people, is it? A lot of them went without food. Quite a few of them came here to be fed, and many of them couldn't even get any rice here. And there was no end to cooking rice because someone would come and say, "My child is crying, please give me some rice;" someone else would say, "My child hasn't eaten anything since morning. Do you have any rice?" These are all well off people! So I fed them by starving ourselves. I got scolded by my family because of this. They were saying, "What are you doing?" And I replied, "If I don't do it now when will I do something like this." Sometimes I said to people that the rice was finished, and to come back after a couple of hours, but many of them couldn't cope with the hunger.

The flood cost me a lot. I couldn't farm at all. The water in field was as deep as a person is tall. Everything rotted in that water. It was a very difficult situation. I had eight or nine *bighas* of paddy growing, but I didn't harvest any of it – and the same happened with the chillies, which were planted on nearly two *bighas* of land. I only just managed to survive that phase – I lost a lot of paddy at home as well. Later we did manage to husk it; it wasn't really edible because it smelt too much. But we had to eat it anyway. My *behais* lost a lot more than we did, so we had to help them by giving them paddy, which they repaid later. But my son in law and daughter didn't pay it back. They live separately. Whatever money I had I lent to my relatives – these were difficult times. I also had to take loans out for my children's clothes, which included interest: approximately Rs. 4000. This was done on the pawning system, where you pay interest of three percent a month.

I now have four boys and six girls. One of the boys and one of the girls are married. I married off my son to my brother. The daughter is married off in the family to which Naoroj's daughter is married. It's been nearly twelve or thirteen years since she got married. When she got married, they didn't ask for much dowry, but I did have to give a cycle, a watch, a ring, a necklace, an earring and a nose ring. These all came from what we had in the house, which I'd saved slowly over time. I also asked my brothers to help. Some gave me money, some gave utensils, and someone gave me a ring – that's how they helped us. No-one in my brother's family has been married yet excepting their daughter who got married to my son. When the others do get married, I'll also have to help them.

I didn't ask for any dowry for my son's wedding. Instead I gave two *bhori* of gold, and they just gave us a television. That brother doesn't have any sons – both his children are girls. The youngest of them is still young, and I would like to marry her to another one of my sons.

Three of my children go to school – one is in primary, and one is in high school. The one in primary school is in class III in the village school. He goes by himself – we don't have to take him to school. He doesn't get any private tuition; his brother and my daughter-in-law teach him instead. They don't have school fees, but you do have to make donations when the teachers ask. But that's not really much. I don't have to buy books for them either. But exercise books? I have to buy a lot of those. He's quite naughty. I have to spend a lot money on him. His school uniform has been damaged too, so now he wears whatever there is at home. I can't keep having new school uniforms made.

He does get his books from the school, and previously he used to get rice, but not anymore. Now they give them *khichuri* instead, which they have to eat. Sometimes they eat at school, and sometimes they bring it back home.

One of them studies in class VIII in the high school, and the other is in class VI. Those two, the brother and the sister, go to school separately. I don't have to pay their fees every month; I have to pay an annual fee. It varies from Rs. 65 to Rs. 85 per child. The uniforms cost me at least Rs. 400 for both of them. I bought them a cycle to go to school on. But they don't go together – the boy cycles there and he won't take his sister because it's hard work to carry someone. So she walks to school but cries about it sometimes. So I give her Rs. 2 and sometimes I put her on the back of someone else's cycle.

Other than this there's always, "Give me Rs. 5 or Rs. 2," because they didn't want to take tiffin from home. So I do have to give them a few rupees from time to time. At the end of the day, it costs me perhaps Rs. 10 – if I don't spend this, they cry and say they won't go to school. The one who's in class III – I have to give him something as well. There are shops near the school, like tea shops, where they can get something to eat.

Both of them go to Aopara for private tuitions. A Hindu girl from the neighbourhood is their tutor, but I don't know her name. My girl goes to her. And another private tutor comes from Topdanga to teach the boy. Both the tutors get paid Rs. 50 a month. My eldest son has failed his *Madhyamik* examination, and I didn't let him resit his exams because I realised he was already naughty. I realised that passing the secondary exams would be good, so I sent him for private tuitions at Topdanga. But instead of going there, he would go out with his friends – we thought he was studying. Actually he was coming back home having deceived us. That's why he didn't pass his exams, and I was sad. I told him he didn't have to go and take his exams any more. If he had gone through his education, he would have to be able to take care of my assets, be in tune with the present times, and it would also have helped him to run his family. But how can young people understand that?

I have to spend all of this from my household budget, which is quite difficult. I sell the paddy, sometimes I work for others, hire out my plough and so on. If I don't have any money I take a loan from Naoroj. Whenever I get a chance I hire my plough out. When times were difficult, I would go to *bidesh*, but that was thirty years ago. I haven't been to *bidesh* for the last thirty years. When I first went, I was about eighteen years old. No one told me to go, but the difficulties in my household forced me to. It was poverty that made me go, even though I didn't know what *bidesh* was like. I used to go with other villagers from here – they took me with them

to work. I used to go on the train with them to Ranaghat. Many landowners go there during *Jaistho* and *Ashar* looking for workers to transplant jute. But I didn't go very often.

If we went to a Muslim house, they would feed us. But if we went to a Hindu house, some would feed us and others would give us uncooked rice and *dal*, so we would have to cook ourselves. I've never worked in a Hindu house. I've never been to a Hindu house since I was a child - I don't want to. When I'm ploughing I don't eat at the landowner's house, again because I don't want to. Even when I do ploughing at a Muslim's house I might choose not to - sometimes I ask my family to bring me my food to the field. The boys bring it, or sometimes the girls. If the landowner says, "Time to eat now," I reply "Take it back, I've just eaten."

I've only been to *bidesh* a few times. When they started doing roadworks in this area, I worked on all of those road construction sites. I've done a lot of this work, but that was all before my marriage. I've been married for twenty-two years - since I was about seventeen or eighteen. At that time it was only roadworks. They paid us two and a half kilos of wheat, which went up to five kilos. There was no cash involved, only wheat - this was all we got for the work. They called it 'relief' work. I would go out before sunrise and would return around noon. We had to dig 100 cubic feet. If we dug more we wouldn't be paid for it. That went on for five to seven years.

Now I'm acknowledged as the *samaj* leader. We did have a *samaj* when I got married; it was much bigger than what it is now. But it split into two, and I belong to the smaller *samaj*. Our *samaj* is made up of a number of families - so if we are in need, you would help us, and vice-versa. They are not all our relatives, but some of them are. As a leader, I have to look after others, for example when someone dies I have to go to that house. I have to ask him how much he needs to spend, and whether he can afford the *kafan*. If he can't, then I have to do it, with help from others. I also need to provide bamboos, - meaning I borrow these from other people. If there's a wedding I have to go to that house too, where people might tell me, "This is how the wedding should be done," or "This is my budget, and I have to manage within it." This is my responsibility. If someone wants to leave the *samaj*, he can - but then he won't have access to any of the communal facilities. The communal facilities are limited anyway. This depends on individual *samajs*. Our *samaj* consists of no more than twenty-two households, it's a very small one.

Migrants and Us

These migrants' stories clearly bring out the fact that migration is a struggle for migrants themselves, their families and other relatives. Though there are reasons for this struggle, the road is arduous and the reward is so minimal that even if they manage to cope with one serious crisis like food shortage, other crises take over. This is a problem which affects *lakhs* of people. So even if the struggle is personal, can society, the state or we ourselves be indifferent to it?

Very uneven regional development means a large number of people earn very little. These people have to move from one region to another and this journey is becoming more visible over time. But the state is completely indifferent to how many people move and where they go to. This is clearly demonstrated by the lack of state data on these movements. Only a few non-governmental and uncoordinated research activities throw a little light on this phenomenon. Sometimes both governmental and non-governmental initiatives are set up for multi-dimensional development work. But development initiatives in themselves are not sufficient: schemes must include the participation of the relevant people and this is an essential criterion. The participation of poor people in development schemes could heavily influence an individual's decision to migrate or not. It is therefore very important to develop knowledge about this phenomenon and recognise it as a key element in initiating development strategies.

At the same time, we could perhaps consider two possibilities to cope with the problem: short-term and long-term work schemes.

The people of Murshidabad are generally agriculture-dependent. The district is well known for its mango, jackfruit and lychee production. By and large, there is hardly any industry. *Biri* making is the most important industry. Even that is limited to certain areas, and earning opportunities for the poor are limited. Expanding the geographical scope of the *biri* industry and creating more job opportunities within it, and creating more agriculture-based industries, may all help in providing long-term solutions.

Other than in the *biri* industry, the participation of women in wage work is clearly very low. Traditionally, women in this region mostly work within the household and are cut off from the outside world. In this context there is potential to get women involved in cottage industries. What is required is to introduce new but relevant technologies to facilitate the development of such cottage industries, and to provide quality training for the women to get involved. It is also important to provide the raw materials and to market the produce.

It is clear from both governmental and non-governmental data that literacy in Murshidabad is really poor. As a result, people here are only involved in small-scale production. They need to be given higher quality education, based on a grant system, and better adapted to the broader labour market. This is an essential and important criterion.

Other than daily wage labour, many men are also involved in small businesses and other self-employed work to earn their daily bread. A larger section of people should be encouraged to join such enterprises, and these enterprises should be given loans on easier terms. This could be an important step forward.

Short term plans

If the earners of the family, or the earner and *guardian*, are absent over a long period of time, this obviously impacts on the normal running of the household. For example, being dependent

on very little savings for daily food supplies for an indefinite period could result in having to subsist on lesser quality food; increased workload for daily household chores; dependency on others for outside work and so on. There is scope for various governmental and non-governmental agencies to reach out in these areas. The proper and smooth implementation of the government's public distribution and social security policies could play an important role here.

The absence of the earning adult male also has its impact on children's education. The children have to cope with a heavier workload; they are forced to get involved in income-generating activities to supplement the loss of daily earnings. As a result, their school attendance decreases. In such cases, the smooth and proper functioning of existing schemes (the midday meal scheme, for example) can help people to better cope.

The migrants, on their journeys, sometimes fall prey to unscrupulous traders, and sometimes aren't even able to bring their earnings back home. The relevant department should be made aware of this issue. As we have shown in our earlier work (see Rogaly and Rafique, 2003; Rafique and Rogaly, 2005; both referred to in the endnotes to the Introduction), some landowners or labour agents often refuse to pay the wages, or make part payments only. And because of the unequal power relationship between the labourers and the landowners or agents, the labourers fail to obtain a rightful settlement. The local political party, the government administrative bodies and non-governmental organizations should be made to take on a more active role in resolving such disputes.

People face many physical problems in the work place, and the absence of the male means a fall in the health standards of women and children at home. The government and NGO agencies should be more accommodating of people's true needs. It is worth mentioning here that in some areas NGOs, with their limited health resources, have come forward to help migrants. Their initiatives should be encouraged and rolled out more widely.

The migrants on the road face a lot of uncertainties. On the one hand, many daily wage labourers, after spending money to reach their destinations, return home because of the non-availability of work. On the other hand, small traders can lose their wares for various reasons. Migrants should therefore be brought under an insurance scheme.

When they leave home, migrants obviously have worries about leaving their families behind. Similarly, the families also worry about the migrants. The simple availability of telephones in the marginal areas of home and destination could greatly relieve this situation.

Lastly, the migrants effectively have no political organization. As a result they cannot collectively defend their rights. There is thus a need for a special migrants' organization to be set up, for migrants to address the issues they face in an organized manner.

Background Information

The study village, Jalpara¹, is located in the Bagri area of the state of West Bengal, India. According to the 2001 census, the state has over eighty million inhabitants. It is sub-divided into 19 districts, of which Murshidabad is the most densely populated with about 5.9 million inhabitants. Murshidabad district itself is divided in two by the Bhagirathi River; to the East of the river lies the region of Bagri, home to the migrants' village, and to the West, the area of Rarh, which itself extends into other districts. Bagri, whose eastern border is drained by the Padma river, is more fertile than Rarh. Although the district of Murshidabad is flood-prone, Jalpara had not been flooded in the living memory of its inhabitants. However, in 2000, after three days of very heavy rainfall which had swollen the waters of the Bhagirathi River's upstream tributaries, the low-lying lands of Bagri were heavily inundated and caused immense distress amongst the poor families of migrants in particular, as referred to throughout the individual stories in this text.

As highlighted in the 13 migrants' accounts, many families called upon their elected councils, or *Gram Panchayats*, for assistance and relief after the flood. The *Gram Panchayat* (referred to simply as *Panchayat* throughout the life stories) constitutes the grass-roots level of a three-tier system of governance. The district-level assembly of People's Representatives is called the Zilla Parishad. Each district is sub-divided into Blocks, which are governed by Panchayat Samiti; and those are themselves broken down into the final units of administration under *Gram Panchayats*, usually a grouping of several villages. The *Gram Panchayat* concerned with the study village was in charge of an area with a population of more than 26,000 according to the 2001 census. In Murshidabad in particular there are one Zilla Parishad and 26 Panchayat Samiti (PS). Each (PS) brings together several *Gram Panchayats* (GP). The PS in charge of the study area is made up of 6 GPs. This number may vary from one PS to another. In 2007, the Zilla Parishad was held by *Congress*, with a majority of Panchayat Samiti (14) held by Communist Party of India (Marxist) (*CPI(M)*). However, with the new elections in 2008, whilst the number of PS under *CPI(M)* has remained the same, the Zilla Parishad has gone into the hands of *CPI(M)*.

The *Panchayats* are in charge of the local-level implementation of developmental schemes including poverty alleviation programmes both in times of emergency, as during the 2000 floods, and within the framework of longer-term efforts. In the 1980s, in particular, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (*IRDP*) was implemented through Panchayati Raj system. Quotas and budgets were assigned by the Zilla Parishad for each *Gram Panchayat* to apportion part-loan, part-subsidy allocations to individuals engaging in productive activities. A pre-set budget 'per head' determined how many individuals under each *Panchayat* would benefit on the basis of the total budget allocated by the district. It was then down to the elected members of the *Gram Panchayat* to select the individual beneficiaries.

In terms of current poverty reduction strategies, the *Panchayats* are believed to be responsible for delivering ration cards, which, depending on the type (*Antyodaya Card*; *BPL Red Card*), will entitle the card holder to weekly rations of food or other types of commodities (fuel comes up quite often) either for free or at a 'discounted' rate, under the government's Public Distribution System. In fact issuing the ration cards is the sole responsibility of the Food Inspector, who holds office at the block level. The *Gram Panchayat* can only recommend a guideline number of households to receive an *Antyodaya Card*.

The self-defined poverty status of the migrants whose stories are transcribed in this book is often linked to the ownership of cultivatable land. Whilst land is regularly bought from and sold

to external parties, plots of land are often acquired from parents either at marriage – as part of a dowry, upon becoming *bhinu* (see below), or after the death of a land-owning parent. The plots of land owned by the Jalpara migrants are usually very small – from 10 kathas to a few bighas (1 katha = 1/20 bigha and 1 bigha = 1/3 acre). In such a densely populated and highly fertile region, land is an extremely precious commodity, but land ownership alone does not automatically ensure subsistence. Indeed, many of the accounts mention land being left ‘idle’ (uncultivated); this is rarely an intentional choice on the part of the landowner, and usually results from an inability to irrigate, owing either to lack of access to water pumps or of capital to acquire water. Nonetheless, uncultivated land is much less common nowadays, with ever-increasing population pressures on land, and greater use of fertilisers and intensive irrigation for year-round multi-cropping. In many cases, small landowners who do not have the money to acquire water and/or fertilisers will hire out their land.

While the *Panchayats* have an official ‘duty of care’ in designing and implementing poverty alleviation strategies, all 13 accounts make clear the fact that the bulk of the support in times of need is provided by family. In the case of families in which men migrate to earn, the role of relatives becomes particularly important in the absence of the migrant members. Relatives mostly live near by, either in the same village or a neighbouring one. The community of Jalpara mainly comprises nuclear families (parents and children), although there are several extended families (which might include three generations and/or sibling’s family). In this predominantly Muslim area, men migrate to earn, whilst the women stay at home. Important decisions regarding the household however are taken jointly. Nevertheless, whilst no woman in Jalpara had been known to migrate up until 2000, it was observed that by 2006 a few women had migrated to work in potato and rice fields. This is mainly due to agricultural change in Jalpara, in particular the expansion of technology and irrigation which allows for new crops, providing more “woman-friendly” types of field work.

One of the concepts referred to throughout the life stories is that of becoming *bhinu*. It literally means for a young married couple ‘to become separated’ from their parents. Whilst in practice the young couple might still live in the same house or room, sharing with the male’s parents, it means that a joint family becomes two or more nuclear families, even though living together. In effect, becoming *bhinu* implies providing for one’s own cooking arrangements, both in terms of cooking facilities and holding a separate food budget. This separation often occurs after a dispute between the parents and the young married couple.

In West Bengal as a whole, Muslims make up about 24 percent of the population. In Murshidabad district however, Muslims represent over 60 percent of the inhabitants, and in the Bagri (East) area, the proportion is higher than in Rarh (West). The migrants whose voices are put forward are Muslims, and travel to destination areas such as Rarh, or even Bardhaman, where the proportion of Muslims as a share of total population is far lower - less than 20 percent of the population in Bardhaman. It is thus mostly the case in those areas, and this comes across quite clearly in this collection of life-stories, that Muslim migrants will have to find work with Hindu landowners or employers. The ensuing dynamics have been explored in earlier research from which this project developed.² To summarise: in the Hindu caste system, rights and behaviour towards others varies according to the caste of the two people interacting. At the top of the caste-ladder is the Brahmin or priest caste, while at the bottom lie the “untouchables”; members of the higher castes consider “untouchables” as dirty or impure, and have thus developed particular practices in relation to them. For Hindus, Muslims are often associated with the “untouchables”, and will thus also be treated as dirty and impure. This is particularly evident in these accounts in relation to food and cleanliness. Muslim migrants do

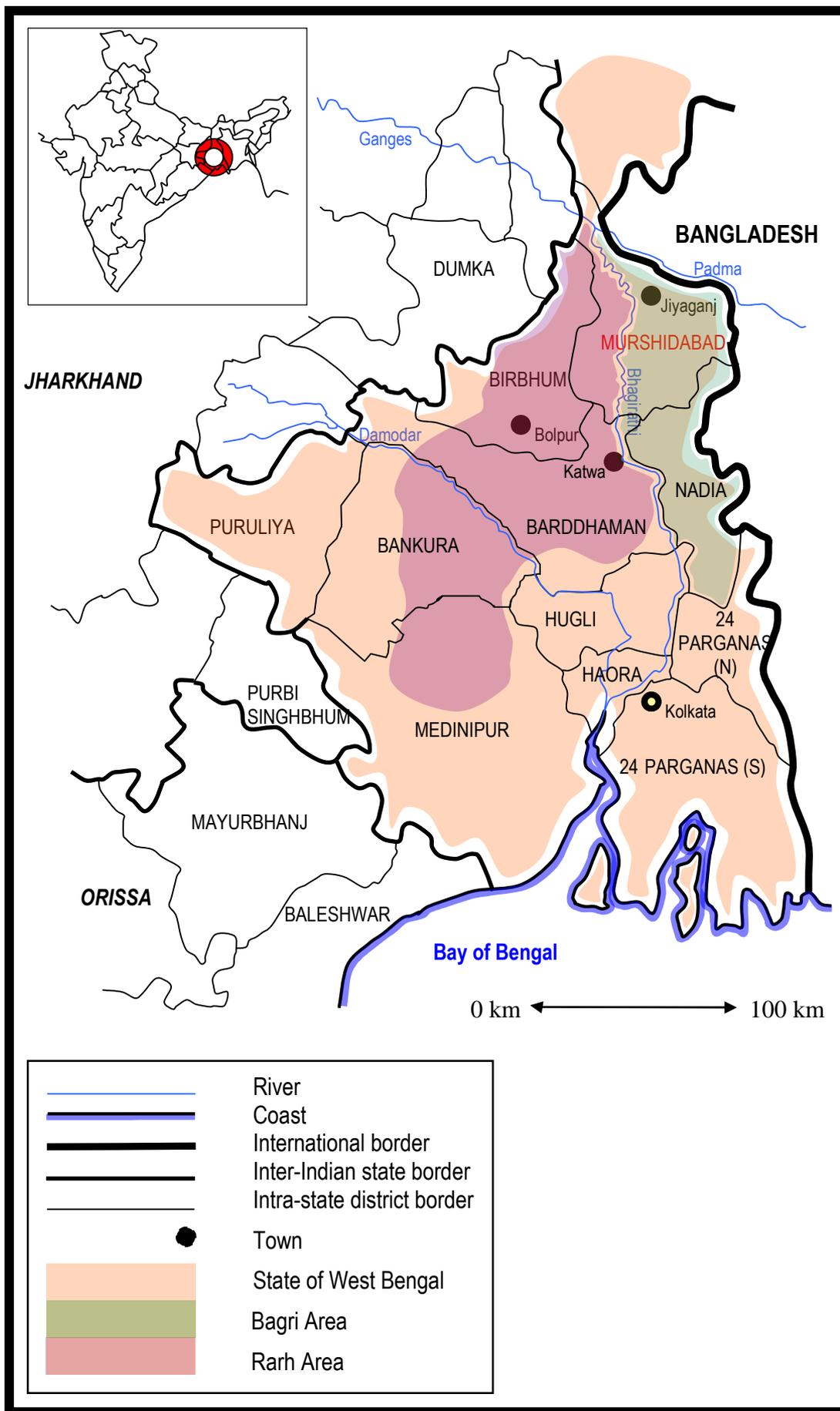
not migrate with their families and do not cook for themselves when away from home, particularly in Bardhaman; meals will usually be included in their work contract. When the employer is Hindu, it is normally expected that Muslim workers clean the eating place with cow dung in order to purify the area. It is also common that Hindu women preparing the food will want to avoid any direct contact with Muslim workers, and might thus throw the food to them.

Romy Danflous

Migration DRC, University of Sussex, UK

¹ The name of the village has been changed.

² B. Rogaly, D. Coppard, K. Rana, A. Rafique, A. Sengupta and J. Biswas, 2003, Seasonal migration, employer-worker interactions, and shifting ethnic identities in contemporary West Bengal, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, ns 37, 1&2, pp281-310. See also the works referred to in the endnotes to the introduction, especially Rafique and Rogaly, 2005; and Rogaly and Rafique, 2003.



Area Map of Murshidabad District in the State of West Bengal adapted from the map drawn by Philip Judge in B. Rogaly, D. Coppard, K. Rana, A. Rafique, A. Sengupta and J. Biswas, 2003, Seasonal migration, employer-worker interactions, and shifting ethnic identities in contemporary West Bengal, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, ns 37.

Bengali Calendar

Boisakh	April - May
Jaisto	May - June
Ashar	June - July
Shrabon	July - August
Bhadra	August - September
Aswin	September - October
Kartik	October - November
Aghran	November - December
Pous	December - January
Magh	January - February
Falgun	February - March
Chaitra	March - April

Glossary

<i>Anganwadi</i>	Institution through which the government provides services related to pre-school education and women and child development programme under the Integrated Child Development Scheme.
<i>Ajan</i>	Loud call in Arabic from the mosque that indicates the start of a particular prayer.
<i>Al</i>	A ridge of earth built around a plot of agricultural land, partly to demarcate the boundary with other surrounding land, and partly to hold water on the land.
<i>Anna</i>	1 anna is 1/16 of a rupee (or of anything), usually used to measure gold or silver in which case 1 anna is 1/16 of a <i>bhori</i> .
<i>Antyodaya Card</i>	Card given to the poorest families, which entitles them to weekly rations of free food and grain.
<i>Aya</i>	Untrained nurse
<i>BA</i>	Bachelor of Arts
<i>-Babu</i>	Suffixed to Hindu names to express respect for that person.
<i>Bangla education</i>	Set of subjects that all students are compulsorily taught, alongside religious studies, such as maths, sciences, languages.
<i>Barga rights</i>	Entitle the sharecropper and successive generations to cultivate a plot of land. The landowner cannot evict the sharecropper as long as the latter is registered.
<i>Behai</i>	Daughter or son's father-in-law.
<i>Bhadoi</i>	Rice that is harvested during the Bengali month of Bhadra.
<i>Bhagne Jamai</i>	Husband of sister's daughter.
<i>-Bhai</i>	Literally means 'brother'. Commonly suffixed to the name of a person who is of a similar age, or up to a couple of years older, than the speaker, to express the relationship between the speaker and the person being addressed.
<i>Bhaipo</i>	Brother's son, nephew.
<i>Bhinu</i>	To get separated from the joint family and make one's own cooking arrangements.
<i>Bhori</i>	Unit of weight to measure precious things like silver, gold, etc. One bhori is 11.667 grams.
<i>Bichon</i>	Seed, seedlings.
<i>Biris</i>	Cigarettes made of leaf and tobacco.
<i>Bigha</i>	Unit of land measurement (1 bigha is 1335.4 sq metres or 1/3rd of an acre) and 1 bigha is 20 kathas.
<i>B. D. O.</i>	Block Development Officer. Administrative head of a block - the level immediately below the 'Sub-division'.
<i>Boot</i>	Type of pulse.
<i>Bora</i>	Big sack to transport by cart or for storage, contains about 60 kg of paddy.
<i>Boro</i>	Rice which grows in summer
<i>Bosta</i>	Same as a <i>bora</i>
<i>BPL Red Card</i>	BPL stands for Below Poverty Line. Delivered to families living below the poverty line; it entitles them to benefits and rations of food grain under the government's Public Distribution System.

CASA	Church's Auxiliary for Social Action, a Christian non-governmental organisation working to support the poor and the marginalised across India since 1947.
<i>Chachato</i>	Son/daughter of father's brother, cousin.
<i>Chal bhaja</i>	Puffed rice.
<i>Chatai</i>	Mat made of leaf.
<i>Chatu</i>	Corn flour.
<i>Club house</i>	House of an association in the village.
<i>Colony</i>	Cluster of housing built by the government for the poor – type of social housing.
<i>Congress</i>	Political party which is currently at the head of the alliance ruling the national government of India. Congress is in power at the block and district levels of government in West Bengal, as well as in several other states in India.
<i>CPI(M) or CPM</i>	Communist Party of India (Marxist).
<i>Dada >dadagiri</i>	One who holds or shows muscle power; equivalent to a bully > bullying.
<i>Dadi</i>	Father's mother, grandmother.
<i>Dal</i>	Lentils or a dish made of lentils.
<i>Durga Puja</i>	Offerings to goddess Durga; this festival goes on for four days, it's an important Hindu festival when people try to buy new clothes and visit relatives.
<i>Eid</i>	Greatest religious festival of the Muslim community, marking the end of the month of fasting.
<i>Eid Namaz</i>	Special prayer on the day of celebration after the month of fasting.
<i>Employment exchange</i>	The Government Office for unemployed youth issues a card for each jobseeker with his/her level of qualifications, which then entitles him/her to apply for particular vacancies declared by the same office
<i>Fakirs</i>	Mendicants belonging to the Sufi order. Here it is used to refer to street beggars.
<i>Fitra fund</i>	Mandatory donation by all Muslims at the end of the month of Ramadan; this contribution is distributed to the poor or used for the common good.
<i>Forward Block</i>	Left-leaning political party; constituent of the current coalition government ruling the state of West Bengal.
<i>Fupu</i>	Father's sister, aunt.
<i>Ganda</i>	Unit to count pieces (1 ganda = 4).
<i>Gola</i>	Structure made with a bamboo frame and mud walls, mainly to store paddy.
<i>Goonda</i>	Thug or bully.
<i>Guardian</i>	Person who is responsible for another, usually a senior male family member, but this depends on the roles in the family. If the mother is inheriting, she can be the guardian. It corresponds to the head of the family.
<i>Haat</i>	Temporary market, mainly for vegetables, spices and ordinary clothes, that takes place once or twice a week for a couple of hours.
<i>Holding number</i>	Each household is given a 'holding number', which is recorded in the registry of the dealer in charge of delivering food and fuel rations.
<i>IRDP</i>	Integrated Rural Development Programme - government poverty alleviation programme in the 1980s.

<i>Jaggery</i>	Molasses made from sap extracted from the date tree.
<i>Janaja Namaz</i>	Prayer, part of the death rituals, prior to laying the dead in grave.
<i>Jhuri</i>	Basket.
<i>Joy Bangla</i>	Year of independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan; also means eye disease (conjunctivitis).
<i>Kafan</i>	Clothes to cover a dead body to make it ready for the grave.
<i>Kali</i>	Goddess whose colour is black [<i>kali</i> means black], although she is often depicted as blue in popular Indian art.
<i>Kali Puja</i>	Annual festival of the goddess Kali.
<i>Kaon, Kedor, Teora</i>	Types of crops, respectively cereal, root, pulse - no English equivalent.
<i>Katha</i>	Unit of land measurement, whereby 1 <i>katha</i> = 1/20 <i>bigha</i> .
<i>Kaviraj</i>	Traditional doctor of herbal medicine.
<i>Kha/Ga</i>	Letters from Bengali alphabet - Ration cards are categorised according to Bengali letter Kha, Ga like a, b, c. There are about 5 different types of cards.
<i>Khalu</i>	Mother's sister's husband, uncle.
<i>Khana</i>	Big feast.
<i>Khaskhas</i>	Thick mat watered and hung outside the windows in summer to keep a room cool.
<i>Khichuri</i>	Food that is made of rice and vegetables cooked together along with spices and other ingredients.
<i>Khol</i>	Type of cowfeed, oil cake.
<i>Kochu</i>	Root vegetable.
<i>Kurbani</i>	Muslim festival of sacrifice.
<i>Kurbani fund</i>	Fund to which families of a Muslim community donate meat and/or the skin of a sacrificed animal. The meat/skin is then redistributed among the people.
<i>Lafa</i>	Vegetable similar to green beans.
<i>Lakhs</i>	One hundred thousand; many.
<i>Lungi</i>	Piece of cloth worn by men to cover the lower part of the body.
<i>MA</i>	Master of Arts
<i>Ma</i>	Mother.
<i>Macha</i>	Raised structure made normally of a bamboo frame with a floor.
<i>Madhyamik exams</i>	Public exam taken by students at the end of tenth grade.
<i>Madrassa [school]</i>	Muslim school established with the objective of imparting a religious education but here it is combined with basic literacy and modern education. It is not necessarily solely religious in mission.
<i>Mailo</i>	Corn flour [imported].
<i>Mama</i>	Mother's brother, uncle.
<i>Mashai</i>	Word to greet teacher [literal meaning of 'Sir'].
<i>Mastan</i>	Hooligan.
<i>Maulavi</i>	Muslim cleric.
<i>Milad</i>	Death ritual that takes place after a couple of days or weeks. The Holy Quran is read in the name of the dead. A number of people are invited for food.
<i>MLA</i>	Member of the Legislative Assembly of the state of West Bengal. There are 294 MLAs West Bengal.
<i>Mon</i>	Unit to measure weight, 1 <i>mon</i> is approximately 40 kgs.
<i>Musalmani</i>	Circumcision.

<i>Naad</i>	Pot made of earth and fired. It is used as a feeding pot for cattle (cows, buffaloes etc).
<i>Namaz</i>	Muslim prayer.
<i>Nana</i>	Mother's father, grandfather.
<i>Naxals</i>	Group of communist revolutionaries, who broke away from the CPI(M) in the mid-sixties and whose support lay in the marginalised and landless peasantry. They tried to follow Mao-Ze Dong's path of armed revolution.
<i>Nayanmani</i>	Variety of paddy/rice.
<i>Olima</i>	Food eaten at the end of the <i>Milad</i> , usually light food in the form of sweet snacks.
<i>Paisa</i>	Unit of currency, 1 paisa = 1/100 rupee.
<i>Pan</i>	Betel leaf – plant which is chewed as a stimulant.
<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	Office of the Local Government; shortened to <i>Panchayat</i> in the text.
<i>Panchayat Pradhan</i>	Head of grassroot level Local Government or <i>Gram Panchayat</i> .
<i>Pan-Sinni</i>	Procedure for the solemnisation of marriage.
<i>Pati</i>	Mat made of leaf.
<i>Quran Sharif</i>	Holy Quran.
<i>Qurbani</i>	Muslim festival when an animal is sacrificed.
<i>Rai</i>	Mustard seeds.
<i>Reehen</i>	Form of tenancy for which the cultivator gives money to the landowner in return for the informal right to cultivate a certain amount of land for a fixed period.
<i>Roja</i>	Month of Ramadan; literally means fasting.
<i>Ruti</i>	Thin and flat bread.
<i>Sabebarat</i>	Muslim festival, a couple of days prior to the month of Ramadan, when special food, mainly sweet dishes, is cooked.
<i>Sabina Khotom</i>	Ritual similar to <i>Milad</i> .
<i>Samaj</i>	Grouping within a community; a <i>samaj</i> looks after the interests of its members in various ways.
<i>Sarbat</i>	Sweet drink made at home by mixing sugar with water.
<i>Shala</i>	Wife's brother, brother-in-law.
<i>Shallow [tube well]</i>	Used to pump water out of the ground to irrigate land.
<i>Shotok or Decimal</i>	Unit of land measurement, 1 shotok or decimal is 40.3 sq metres, i.e. 1/100 acre.
<i>Sishu tree</i>	A tree whose wood is mainly used for furniture.
<i>Sub Divisional Officer</i>	Administrative head of a sub-division, the level immediately below 'district'.
<i>Tahoi</i>	Brother or sister's father-in-law.
<i>Takaback tenancy</i>	Type of land tenancy in which the tenant gives a certain amount of money to the landlord for a defined plot of land and makes use of it (ie cultivates and enjoys the entire crop, nothing to share with the landlord) until the landlord gives the full amount of money back to the tenant.
<i>Temple land</i>	Land which is the property of a Hindu temple. Every temple has a committee, which decides what to do with the land, including selling it.
<i>Tiffin</i>	Small food, snack.
<i>Thakur</i>	Belonging to the Brahmin or Priest caste. Here, it is a family name.
<i>Trecker</i>	Jeep.
<i>TTE</i>	Travelling Ticket Examiner.

<i>Verandah</i>	Part of a house under roof-cover but open to the outside. It usually runs along one wall of the house, and opens onto the terrace or courtyard.
<i>Vested land</i>	The government only allows individuals to own up to a maximum amount of land – anything in excess of that ceiling is confiscated by the government and redistributed.
<i>Zamindar</i>	Person who was entitled by Mughal Emperors and later British rulers to collect land revenue from cultivators.