

CITY CLEANERS

Stories of those left behind



SNV

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Introduction

Our Urban Sanitation & Hygiene for Health and Development product addresses the reality that for the vast majority of cities and towns in developing countries, wastewater and human waste end up untreated back in the living environment. Our work includes the setting-up of facilities and services for waste management through collaboration between the public and private sectors and communities.

Our starting point is the recognition that most cities and small towns in the developing world are non-sewered, or have predominantly on-site sanitation facilities. We work with city authorities to develop business and financial models to address coverage, services and treatment needs, linking where possible to re-use. We work on city-wide coverage, with specific models for vulnerable areas, and include health and safety, regulation and enforcement issues.

With backing from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and UK DFID, our “Demonstration of pro-poor market-based solutions for faecal sludge management in urban centres of Southern Bangladesh” programme is piloting new strategies for faecal sludge management (FSM) in the cities of Khulna, Kushtia and Jhenaidah. The programme aims to improve the living environment of more than one million people. By developing city-wide, pro-poor, accountable,

safe and sustainable FSM services, we set out to reform human waste management, build government capacity to develop and implement FSM services and policies, and increase the productivity and protect the health and dignity of people working in this vital sector.

Presently most of the septic tanks and pits have never been emptied as they are directly connected to the drain or open water bodies, and of the remainder more than 90% are still emptied manually. While the transition from manual to mechanised FSM services takes place, standards setting and professionalization of sludge emptying and transportation is of the utmost importance to restore community health and environmental safety, and to ensure continued capacity of the service providers. Over a 10-month period in 2015 alone, 31 reported deaths of pit emptiers in work-related accidents took place, while even more deaths go unreported. The health and safety issues of these emptiers has never been of concern to either their recruiters or their clients. Those who work for city corporations and other government agencies receive just BDT 1,200 per month, a rate that has not increased in the past five years. Meanwhile, as there is no set rate for freelance pit and septic tank emptying services, the price is generally agreed between the emptier and the service recipient, causing such work often to be undervalued and underpaid.

Pit and septic tank emptiers and their families also face social stigma on a regular basis. They are, for instance, not allowed to eat at restaurants or drink water from the same glass as “the rest”. They are all “Harijans”, mostly addressed as “Methors”, a caste of Hinduism that is socially believed to be lowest of all castes. There are 8 sub-sects within this caste, each sub-sect offering a different service, depending on their surname. The Bansphors, for example, were once bamboo workers, and the Domars were responsible to clean dead bodies off the streets. But most “Harijans” work as pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners now, despite of their sub-sect.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines ‘decent work’ as work that is productive, delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection. Unfortunately, none of these predicaments are addressed where it concerns pit and septic tank emptiers. Most of the ones employed by City Councils have never received any personnel protective equipment that they can garb while emptying pits and septic tanks manually. What they get in return for cleaning our poop, day in day out, is a place to live in a designated ‘sweeper’ community area with free water (only at limited intervals) and electricity.

Through our programme we work to achieve behaviour change and create demand for better sanitation services, but also towards a safe working environment for them. Initially as a pilot in the programme’s three implementing areas - Khulna, Kushtia and Jhenaidah, and then later scaling up to the rest of Bangladesh.

While some of the septic tank emptiers dream of better work opportunities or of a safer future for their loved ones, others feel hopeless and do not dare to dream at all.

This booklet showcases some of their stories, giving insight into the hardships of those often left behind.



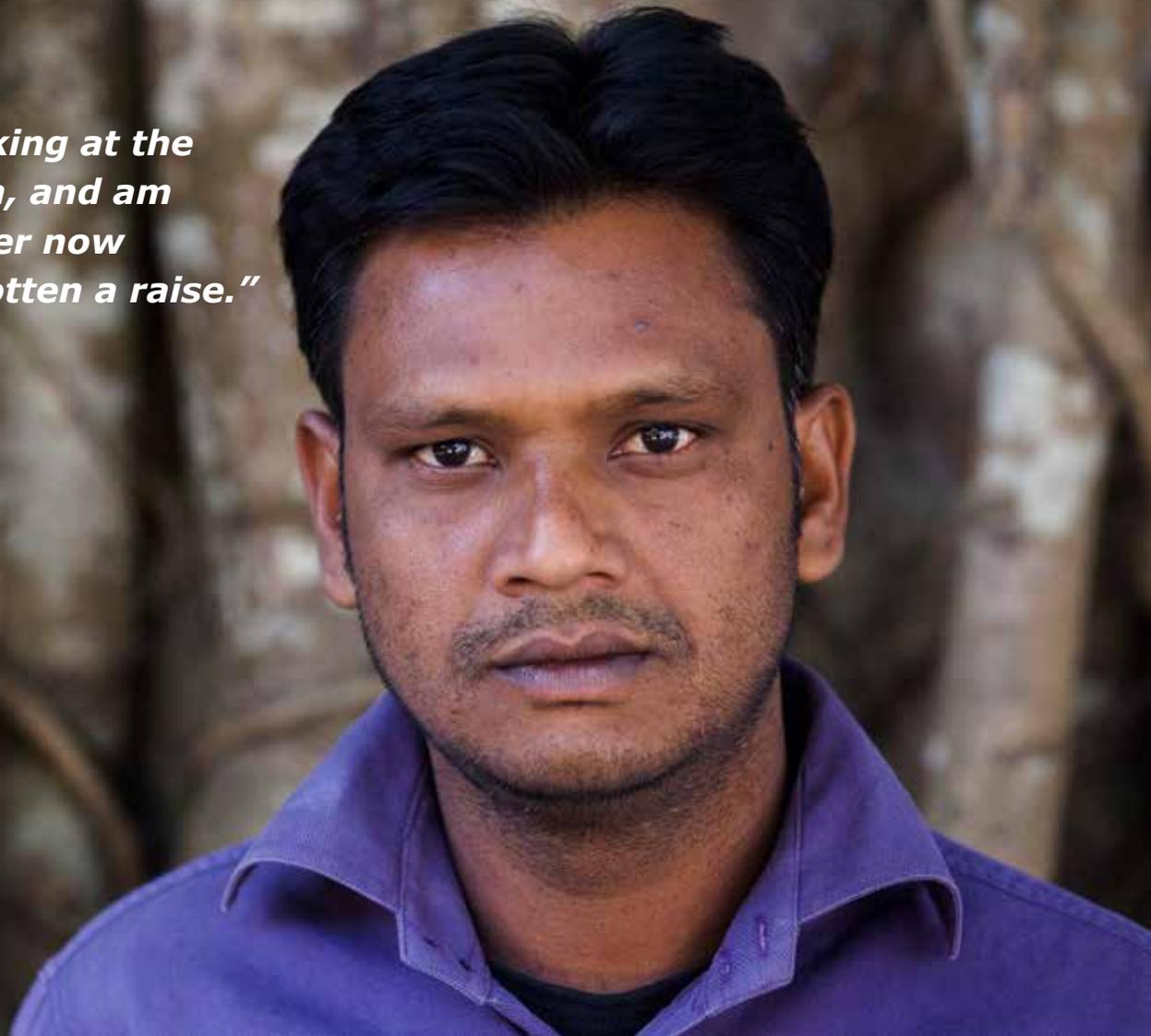


Current Scenario

When it comes to city-wide sanitation services, the septic tank emptiers, who belong to the lowest ring of the economic ladder, but whose contribution in this sector is often the most challenging and undisputable, goes unnoticed. The situation in which the septic tank emptiers live their lives, is far from ideal. Yet, their voices often remain unheard, and their stories untold while they risk their lives everyday, in hazardous work conditions. Although moving from manual to mechanized emptying is of utmost importance, what is also necessary is to provide septic tank emptiers with basic knowledge on health and sanitation standards, as well as a chance to live a dignified and fulfilling life.

"I like working at the Pournasavha, and am even happier now that I've gotten a raise."

- Ajay, Kushtia



Ajay (30) went to school till grade 12, securing his higher secondary certificate (HSC). Back then, sports was his ultimate passion with cricket being closest to his heart. Ajay had been playing cricket since class 8 and had gone on to play inter-school leagues and later divisional leagues. When asked if he still plays now he says, "How can I? Financial difficulties for my family meant that I had to earn a living. And that meant giving up what was dearest to me - cricket".

Before his job at the Kushtia Paurasavha (Municipality), Ajay was working as a Field Organiser at Plan International for about 10 years. When the project he was working on was completed, he was once again on the look-out for other work opportunities. It has been six months now since he started working as a supervisor at the Conservancy Department in the Kushtia Paurasavha and he is very happy with his work there, even more so since he had just gotten a raise. Ajay oversees the work of 35-40 pit cleaners under the Paurasavha. When asked about the kind of problems pit cleaners face on a regular basis, Ajay says, "There are different kinds of problems that one faces. Some house owners for instance, treat the drain outside of their houses like it's their own property, but they forget that the government owns the land. It is very difficult to deal with such house owners while ensuring that the pit cleaners do their work properly." When asked if they are given proper gear to go into the pits, Ajay says, "We have been promised safety gear many times. Pit

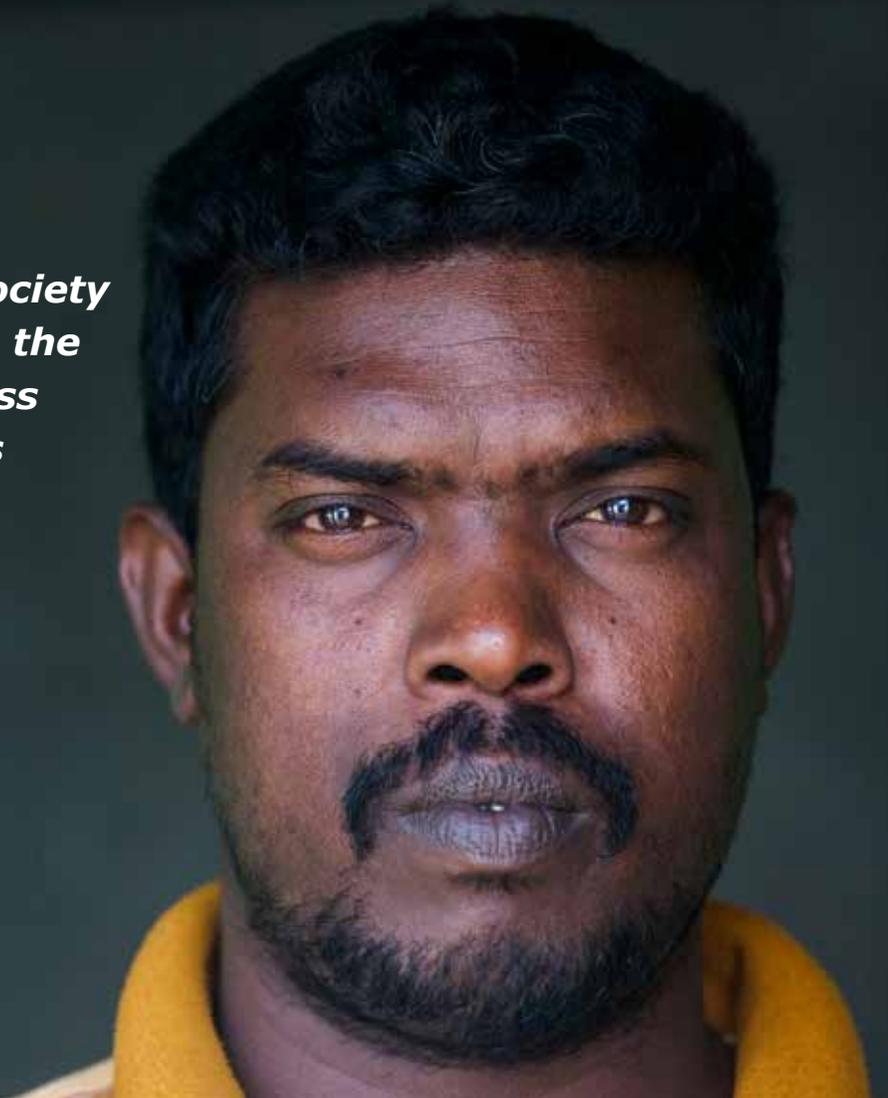
cleaners really need this in order to do their work in a safe and secure way. But we are yet to get safety gear from the government as promised."

When asked if he gets any added benefits since becoming a supervisor, Ajay admits that it would be good for the supervisors if there was some degree of permanence in their jobs and if pit cleaners would struggle less financially. For example, if they were to receive actual festival bonuses as opposed to festival "loans". Of the BDT 5,700 salary he gets every month, Ajay spends much of it on groceries for the family that includes his mother, wife and daughter, schooling for his daughter and other additional domestic expenses. The "bonus" of course is subtracted from his monthly salary.

He feels that he might be socially deprived because of his meagre earnings and is constantly on the look-out for a better paying job that will ultimately lead to a better and secure life. Yet, he has not given up on dreaming for a better future for his daughter. He does not send his daughter to the community school in his area, because the school in the Harijan community has only one teacher who teaches students from classes 1 to 5, all at the same time. His daughter's dream? Akriti lights up at the idea of being a cricketer, just like her dad.

"We are gems for the society as well, right? We clean the cities. But this awareness of our own self-worth is missing in our lives."

- Antu, Jhenaidah

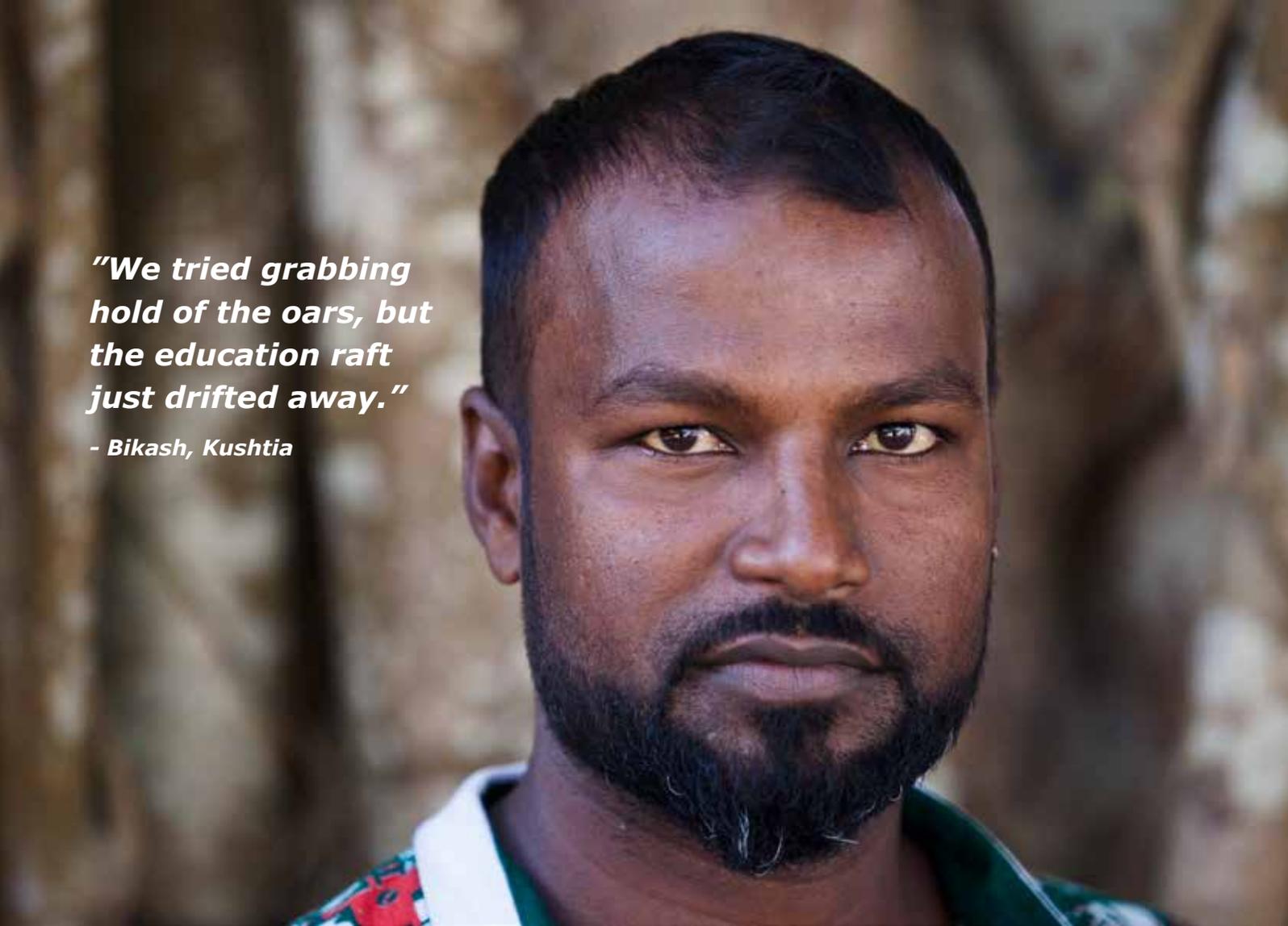


Antu has witnessed and experienced firsthand how alcohol and drug abuse has been rife in his village, allowing outsiders to shun his community more than they already do.

The hopelessness and misery stemming from the nature of their jobs and the relentless poverty, have made addiction a coping mechanism for members of the Harijan community in Jhenaidah. Antu talks about how his neighbours entered into alcohol-fueled fights with people outside of their community, allowing outsiders to further alienate them. He also mentions that a fight that took place in his own home between neighbours when they were all drunk, was witnessed by his children, which affected them deeply. This became a turning point for Antu, and he decided then and there that he would no longer be looked down upon because of his addiction, and he would reflect more on the consequences of his actions.

“We are gems for the society as well, right? We clean the cities. But this awareness of our own self-worth is missing in our lives. We don’t understand that we have rights, that we need to act in a more civilized manner. If I went to any other country, I would be considered an illegal alien. I’m a Hindu, but if I went to India, I would still be an outsider. I was born in Bangladesh, it is my native land. As a Bangladeshi citizen, I enjoy privileges afforded only to Bangladeshis. Why would I let go of that?”

Antu recognises the need for solid change for his community, and displays keen interest in entering into a rehabilitation programme that might allow him to change his life for the better. He acknowledges that the majority of his community is yet to understand this need, but he is not deterred as he looks at his children and their needs. Antu’s daughter is a student of Class 9 and hopes to become a teacher. She is a constant source of encouragement to her father and allows him to dream of a better future for community members of the next generation. Antu mentions how there is a lack of awareness that prevents members of the Harijan community to dream or to foster dreams in their children, but he remains optimistic in his belief that the dreams of their children will be realised.

A close-up portrait of a man with dark skin, short dark hair, and a full beard. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a green shirt with a white collar and a colorful patterned scarf. The background is a blurred, textured wall.

***"We tried grabbing
hold of the oars, but
the education raft
just drifted away."***

- Bikash, Kushtia

28-year old Bikash is keenly aware of current social constructs which might be prejudicial to him and his family, who are part of Kushtia's Harijan or "Methor" community. Yet his outlook remains positive as he recalls his brotherhood with his cricket friends from school. Bikash played his beloved sport until about 9 years ago, when he had to concentrate on his job and earn a livelihood to sustain his family. Despite having dropped out of school, Bikash was still allowed to compete in inter-school competitions as part of the Rajab Ali Khan Club that was nurturing talents such as him. Eventually however, under the weight of family obligations, he had to give up cricket.

Bikash had to forego education to support his family when his mother passed away six years ago from a brain stroke; at the time he was in Class 8. She was the principal earner of the household, working for the government's Family Planning Department - a job Bikash took over following her passing. The weight of supporting his brother, three sisters and his father all fell on his shoulders. His brother regularly uses drugs and earns the bare minimum by driving an Easy-Bike (Tuk-Tuk). As a result, Bikash also supports his brother's wife and child. Of their three sisters, the eldest is working at the Family Planning Department, the second is a homemaker, while the youngest will have her SSC Examinations in 2017. Despite the heavy burdens that have pressed on him since an early age, Bikash remains positive in his outlook and finds

satisfaction in his work with the Paurashava. He does add that it would be beneficial for him and his fellow workers to receive training on safety and safety gear for their work. He notes that where they were earning BDT 1,200 prior to the introduction of the vacutug trucks, they now earn relatively adequate salaries of BDT 5,500 for the same jobs. Previously absent benefits of water and electricity have also been made available to them. While accidents have occurred in the course of their work, they are not greatly bothered by it as all jobs come with a certain degree of risks. Bikash, for instance, mentions the trick of identifying the presence of poisonous gases emitted from the septic tanks using sunlight. They will hold up a matchstick in the sun after the removal of the tank cover and if it lights up (the sun reacting with the methane gases emitted), the septic tank emptiers will allow the gas to dissipate before commencing work. Bikash hopes for a brighter future for him, his fiancée Pinky and his youngest sister. He has applied for a position at the railway, since the government allocated 200 positions for the Harijan community. He hopes that his application will be successful, and that his sister, while educating herself, can continue to help him improve his spoken English.



Md. Moniruzzaman
Mayor of Khulna

“Before SNV came or the start of the FSM programme, we didn’t have any plans for people who were involved in emptying and cleaning pits and septic tanks. Here in Khulna, we had traditional ways of cleaning septic tanks. They clean the city, clean the homes or campuses, and they do this on their own terms. We do have cleaning departments who have certain responsibilities, but proper faecal sludge management is a new concept to us. Things are now coming into shape. We are aware of the needs of the Harijan community now; they are being involved in projects, and are getting trained properly. So I think it’s very positive that in the future we can employ them and organize them to be involved in FSM related work.”

***"All we can do is let you know.
What can you do to help us
now?"***

- Sharma, Jhenaidah



Sharma has been working for the Jhenaidah Paurasavha for a little over 7 years now. His salary of BDT 1,600 is not enough to sustain his family, which has prompted him to seek out private jobs.

Sharma mentions that the nature of his work is so disgusting that him and his fellow workers are often driven to the use of alcohol and drugs. He thinks that the provision of work gear like gloves and boots would allow them to eliminate this sense of disgust to a large extent. However, landlessness, lack of home ownership, lack of savings and minimal earnings are other solid constraints in their wishes to find alternative employment.

“When there’s a dead dog or dead body lying around, or a drain that’s been clogged for 2 weeks, we’re the ones who are called to clean up the mess. Latrines are filled with faecal matter and I have to use my bare hands to clean them because I don’t have gloves. If we had gloves, boots and other protective gear we wouldn’t need to consume alcohol so much. Our hands reek constantly and we can’t stop smelling that. When I come home, despite washing my hands, I still have to eat with those hands, right?” When asked if he would be willing to become an agricultural (or other) entrepreneur, he says “Who is going to eat from my hands? I’m a [septic] tank emptier. I sweep roads, and clean drains, septic tanks and latrines! In order to get into agricultural endeavours you need land. And we do not receive salary if we don’t go to

work for a day. Our monthly salary ranges from BDT 1,000 to 1,600.

The salaries the pit and septic tank emptiers earn increased following the election of the current mayor, but Sharma and his community members are still barely able to meet the minimum essentials. While the community has access to water for free for a few hours a day, they now have to pay BDT 100 per family for access to electricity. The community was pleased, however, to receive one latrine for every three families recently.

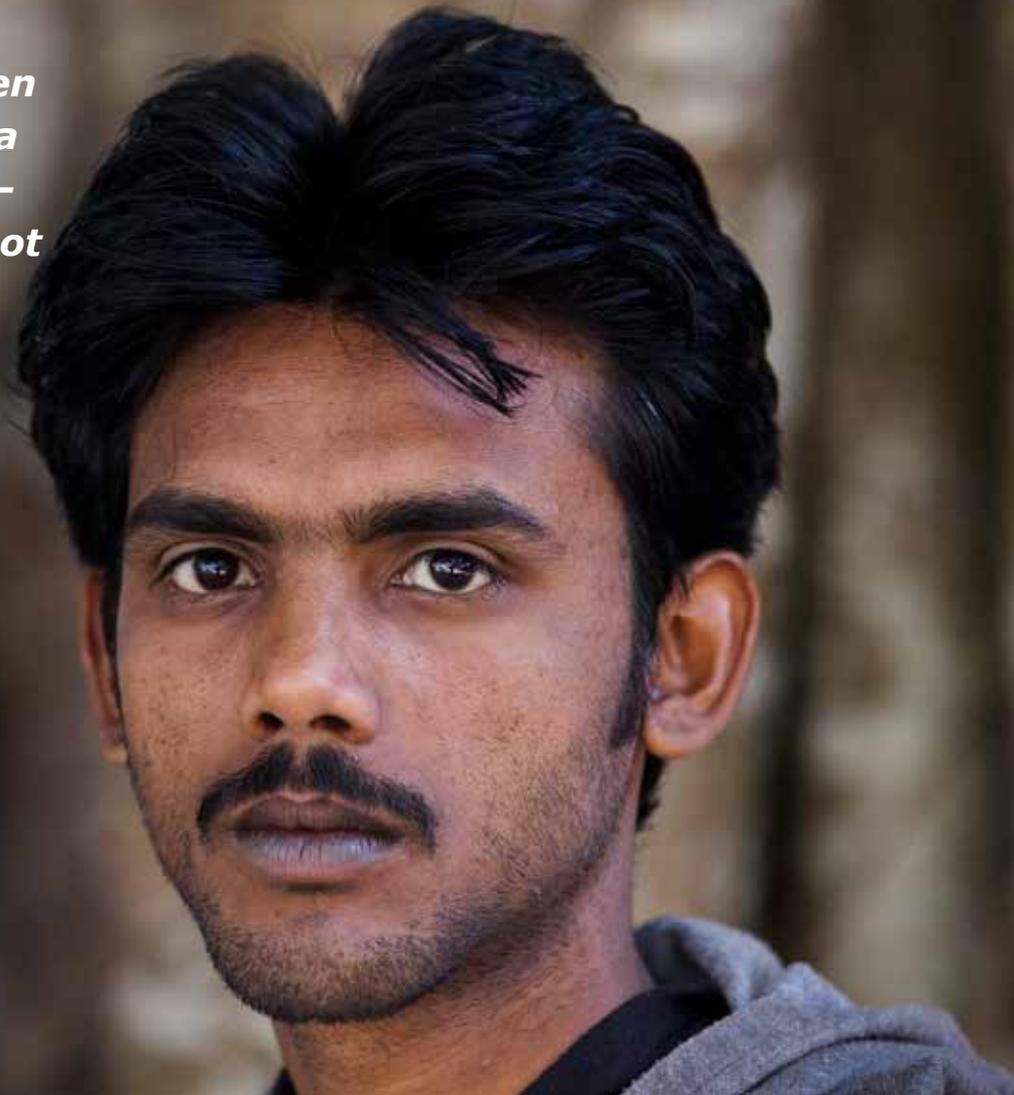
There are two members in Sharma’s community who operate a vacutug truck and are paid BDT 4,000 to 5,000 a month - significantly higher than the manual cleaners. Sharma says that if more of the Harijans were to receive this type of training and were given the opportunity to operate the truck, it would be beneficial for the community at large.

Sharma’s son has no interest in being a septic tank emptier, he wants to be an English teacher. Sharma wants to provide the best for his family, but is unable to realise his son’s dream unless their financial situation improves drastically.

“All we ask for is a raise in our salaries. None of us can get government jobs, because the recruiters keep asking for bribes when we apply. So tell us, how can we ever have BDT 200,000 to pay in bribes?”

***“There was a time when
I dreamt of becoming a
professional musician -
but my life and work got
in the way.”***

- Tapas, Kushtia



Tapas had studied until class 8 when he decided to forego education and enter the workforce. His father was working for the government then, and had suddenly become quite unwell. In order to ensure that he did not lose the job, Tapas took over his father's position for four months. As a result, his focus shifted away from education - something which he now regrets. Looking back, Tapas wishes he had concentrated on educating himself more as he thinks it might have provided him with better opportunities. His father still works for the government while his mother cleans homes and offices.

Tapas has been working as a septic tank emptier for 10 years now. He joined the Kushtia Paurashava vacutug truck cleaning force a year ago and reckons his life has improved since. The work is significantly easier and quicker, and even though he cannot drive the truck and no training has been provided yet for driving them, he is greatly interested in the potential. The BDT 4,000 salary he earns is nowhere near enough to support his family, however, so he needs to rely on the tips they receive when they work at different homes. Since he started working, he has never been promoted or given increased responsibilities.

Working for the Paurashava provides a degree of stability to their lives, and some basic healthcare for when they are injured during working hours. However, these perks are rare

and the septic tanks emptiers more often than not need to tend to their health issues on their own.

Tapas had many dreams in life, but explains that behavioural patterns both within and outside the community counteract the realisation of any such dreams. The Harijan community is still looked upon with disgust by many, and a lot of shopkeepers are still wary of allowing them into their shops. Tapas wonders if it would ever be truly feasible to start their own trades, even in different areas. As soon as someone were to figure out they were emptiers, their business would be over because who would accept anything from a 'sweeper'? He previously applied for government jobs allocated to Harijans which unfortunately yielded no results. Members of his community applied for the government allocated positions in the railway in December 2016, but Tapas refrained from following suit: "What would even be the point?" All he wishes for now is for his son to be educated and to have better opportunities in life than he was given.





Entrepreneurship

It is rare to see female pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners in Bangladesh. Most of them have other day jobs while they empty and clean pits part-time. Many have lost family members in brutal accidents and have had to become the main breadwinner of the family, so they need the extra income to give their children a better education, a better life. Through our programme, we hope to identify individuals who can think outside the box and generate entrepreneurial opportunities for many of these men and women, linking them up to private organisations.



Anwar Ali
Mayor of Kushtia

Though the population of the Harijan community has recently increased, it is not necessarily a problem as they now have more scope to work outside the Paurasavha and outside their current profession as well. Yes, other people might apply to jobs that 'rightfully' belong to pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners. But think about it this way - do you really have the right to prevent someone from pursuing a job? Just as we have no right to stop emptiers and cleaners from studying in universities, you cannot simply take away other rights either.

As part of the City Council, we allocate land and access to free water and electricity to these communities. We also spend a lot of money every month providing treatment for accidents that take place during their working hours."



***"I only ask for my small
business to flourish so
that I can take care of
my grandchildren."***

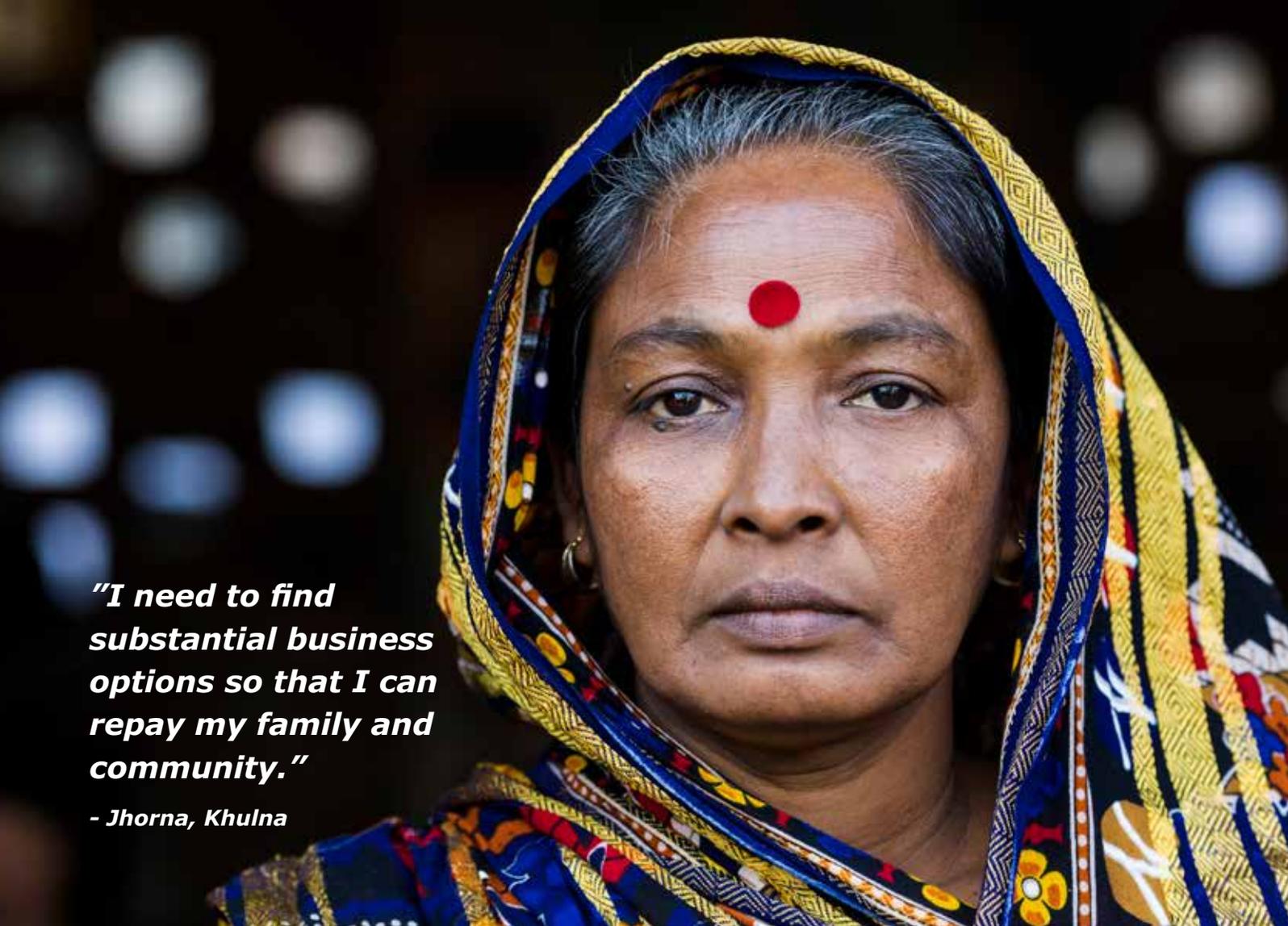
- Champa, Khulna

The overwhelming poverty of and lack of support for her community had not defeated 41-year old Champa. Life has not been easy for this mother of two, after losing her husband to alcoholism (which triggered liver failure) nine years ago. While finding employment as a septic tank emptier had been easy once, Champa and her sons constantly struggle to find work, often for only one day a week. She remains keenly aware of how this affects her three granddaughters, who often do not have enough to eat. Apart from asking for help for her son to find a more stable source of income, Champa also talks about the need for protective gear and adequate healthcare support for septic tank emptiers, noting accidents and her asthmatic problems which have arisen during the course of her work.

Champa recalls a horrific eye disease her younger son contracted once, with black spots appearing on the surface of his eyes after he had gone inside a septic tank. It had taken a long time for him to heal. She also experienced firsthand the dangers of their jobs when she had a deep gash on her foot from her accidentally hitting herself with a shovel. Champa was quick to point out that the homeowner whose tank she was emptying was generous enough to pay for the entire treatment. The salaries she lost out on during her month and a half bed rest, though, were irrecoverable. Unaware of any healthcare programmes for members of the Harijan community provided by the Paurasavha, Champa expresses

a desire for an effective programme to be implemented for the benefit of the community at large.

Champa remains grateful for the sense of unity in her community of 130 families. While many remain wary of entrepreneurial endeavours, Champa has sold some gold jewellery to gather enough finances to open up a small fruit shop. She is not asking for much, she only hopes for her business to flourish so that she is able to better care for her grandchildren.



***"I need to find
substantial business
options so that I can
repay my family and
community."***

- Jhorna, Khulna

The word “survivor” seems to aptly describe 55-year old Jhorna Das. Hidden in an underground den she survived the Liberation War of Bangladesh as a young child, she came out victorious from an accident that her father thought had killed her as a young girl while working to lessen her father’s burdens, and she survived a seemingly fatal diagnosis of ovarian cancer. Jhorna’s misfortunes extend to her spouse Peter, who was rendered physically handicapped following a severe bout of polio as a child. He has recently been so unwell that the neighbours believed him to be dead, but he remained resolute in his will to live.

In her long years of working as a septic tank emptier, Jhorna witnessed many changes. She began her career assisting her father in cleaning wells and latrines, and increasing the depth of the wells when required by helping him dig deeper holes. She would be lowered into the well in a bucket, and she would dig through the soil and send it back up in the bucket. Her first seemingly fatal mishap came about when her father accidentally knocked her out when he was lowering the bucket back to her. Thankfully, she regained consciousness eventually and her father was able to lift her up. Accidents in the workplace, however, do not seem to surprise her. As an adult septic tank emptier, Jhorna squashed her toe when a slab (septic tank cover) landed on it. Her ailments, however, do not end here.

Jhorna’s cruelest challenge came a few years ago when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and was absolutely incapable of working. With great support from her family, and the expenditure of BDT 400,000, Jhorna underwent her surgery and follow-up treatment. A kind priest from an orphanage nearby was generous enough to ensure she was able to care for herself and gave her BDT 5,000 every month for 2 years for the necessary medications. Jhorna, however, believes that her cure came through a miraculous phenomenon - drinking the water from a nearby river. She insisted that it was this that eventually cured her, and the doctors confirmed that she was finally cured of cancer. Jhorna was grateful to be able to work hard again and to repay the enormous debt of her medical expenses.

Peter, Jhorna’s husband, had been unable to contribute much to the family income. The couple manages a public toilet in Prantik Market nearby and charges BDT 2 and 5 respectively for usage of the toilet. Jhorna takes great pride in being able to live on honest, hard-earned money and that they have never had to steal from or cheat anyone. She wants her business to be successful so she can repay her debt to her family and community. She also prays for her nephews to be more successful in life than she and her husband have been able to be.

***“Should I spend BDT
10 on the doctor
today or should I just
bear with the pain?”***

- Putti, Khulna



Once a septic tank emptier, Putti now earns her livelihood cleaning homes and toilets during the day. Every evening, she sells pitha (rice cake) in a little shop she has opened up to earn an additional income. The previous mayor of the Khulna City Council, Mr. Abdul Khaleque Talukder, had provided some government funding for the community to take initiatives to improve their lives. With her share of the money, Putti started a pitha business, which she struggled to turn into a successful venture. She is aware of the fact that the investment money ran out quite quickly but attempts to maintain a positive view moving forward as the principal earner for her family.

Her husband, once a septic tank emptier himself, is unable to contribute to the family expenses since he was permanently blinded in one eye. The children insisted that their father retire following the surgery.

While the couple lives on government allocated land for the Harijans, all costs for building and maintenance of the homes falls on to them to manage, despite not having the rights to own the land they live on. Putti spent BDT 60,000 in repairing their home recently - a steep expense for someone without savings and who spends most of her earnings on groceries and educating her grandchildren. In order to ensure that her grandchildren have better opportunities in life, Putti happily pays for expensive private tutors. She recalls with some embarrassment how her mother, despite having lived in the

British era, was educated up to Class 8 - an opportunity that she and her siblings were deprived from. She is thus determined to ensure that her grandchildren can at least have better opportunities, to be more successful when they grow up.

The nature of Putti's work has brought a barrage of injuries into her life - predominantly skin diseases because of the harsh chemicals she uses when cleaning toilets. For her, it is often a question of spending money on a doctor's visit or suffering through it, and on most days the latter seems to be the more feasible option. She has heard about the City Council's promises of free healthcare for members of her community, but remembers various incidences when they were turned away.

At one time, Putti's brother had broken a rib while removing the slab of a septic tank. Alcohol numbed the pain for a couple of days, but he was in dire need of surgery according to the doctor he visited. Putti quickly started collecting money for her brother's treatment, but he died before they could help him. Later, the doctor informed the family that his death was the result of a blood clot causing an internal infection. His family never received any compensation following his death, and his wife and children have had to struggle to manage on their own. Optimism has become increasingly difficult and Putti can only look to her grandchildren now for hope.



Opportunities

Many of the pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners belonging to the Harijan community were promised better jobs, and also better payment. Many even wanted to join the police force or applied for other government jobs. But who will hire Harijans? Although beyond the mandate of our programme, we hope to raise awareness for these issues and support the concerned authorities in creating better payment structures in the existing framework, better work opportunities, security for future generations and ultimately a move to auto-mechanical emptying. Eventually, we hope that through our work, these pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners will one day get the respect they rightfully deserve.



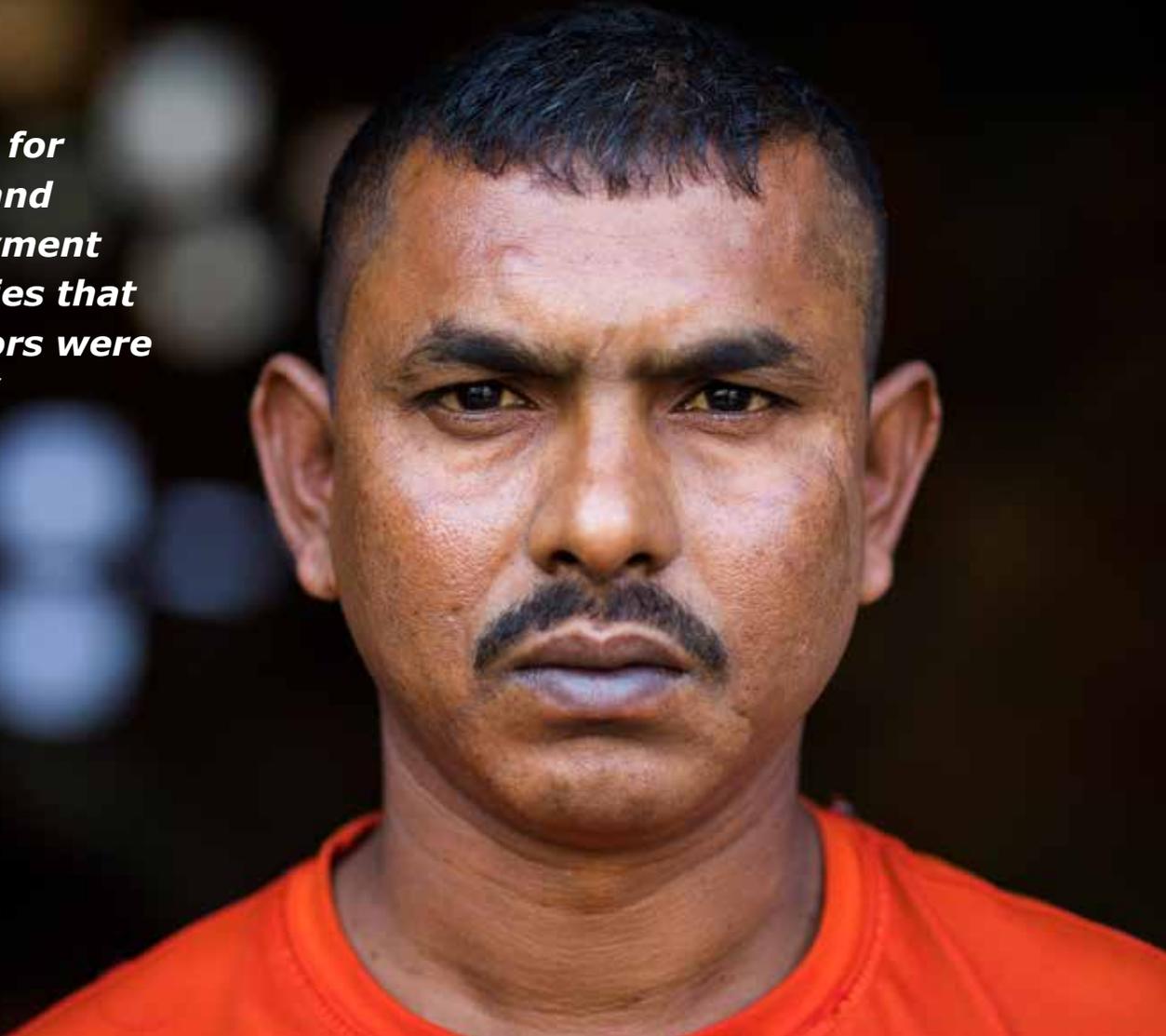


Md Saidul Karim Mintu
Mayor of Jhenaidah

"For their own safety, pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners need to start wearing gloves. Yes, it might not be comfortable for them in the beginning. Even doctors would find it tricky to operate with gloves at the beginning. But continuous use would help them to get accustomed to it and would allow them to work more safely. We are trying to tell them now that it's better to wear the safety gear, especially when working manually. We believe that this training will be successful. Simultaneously, we need to arrange training for safe disposal of septic tank waste."

***"I only ask for
my rights and
the employment
opportunities that
my ancestors were
promised."***

- Bijon, Khulna



It is rare for a community, in this day and age, to live with the knowledge that their purpose in life is working in a singular profession – something which was decided for them decades ago by their ancestors. The Harijan community is perhaps singular in their mandate, knowing of the work their ancestors were brought in to perform in Bangladesh. However, very few members of this community know their history as well as 35-year old Bijon Das does, as he reminisces about the stories he heard from his father and grandfather. He recalls from these tales how the British government of that time, had brought in his great-grandfather and many others from Orissa, Bihar and Madras to Sonadanga in Khulna to clear up the waste around the newly constructed railway lines.

While many remember the British rulers as oppressive, for Bijon and his ancestors it felt like a better life for them under a welfare system for children and mothers that also had them earning small but stable salaries. His ancestors worked as part of the cleaning crew for various government departments, cleaning the city, the sewers and the railway lines. The government provided their families with land and homes, which he admits they still receive but only to a certain extent.

The benefits their ancestors received are almost completely unavailable to them now, and they lead lives of hardship and deprivation. The jobs that the Harijan communities

were promised would be theirs at all times are often given away to other communities, and the pre-existing bias against pit and septic tank emptiers and cleaners means that alternative sources of employment are closed off for them. Lack of employment and earnings have taken a severe toll on Bijon and members of his family, who often find meals difficult to come by. He has to resort to begging for money when his children are sick and Bijon is tired of the lack of opportunities in life. He is happy to work hard and bear the scars from his injuries, only demanding from policy makers the rights and employment his ancestors were promised.

***“Life was like a bowl of
mashed potatoes before
I could find a job.”***

- Kissore, Khulna



While many members of the Harijan community are too shocked by their fate in life to try and change policies, father of two Kissore Kumar Das is determined to raise his voice to ensure a better life for his children and the members of his community. Kissore observes and recognises the trials and tribulations plaguing his community, but while others find it difficult to dream beyond their next meal, he continues to have faith in his God and in the innate goodness of humanity in resolving these issues. He stays faithful to his goal of helping the 130 families in his community to flourish.

The major problem plaguing the community is unemployment, with 90% of the employable people not having any work and barely able to manage three meals a day. This problem arose primarily because their government allocated positions are continually given away to members of different communities. He recalls an incident from around 5 years ago when the Nutrition Department was supposed to hire 49 people from his community. All employable members had applied for this job, providing certificates declaring themselves to be professional septic tank emptiers. In the end, though, the people hired were actually members of the Muslim communities. Kissore stays firm in his attempts at improvement, engaging in various community meetings and meetings with developmental committees in order to tackle these issues.

While Kissore earns BDT 4,000 a month, in order to provide a better life for his family he continues to work as a freelance septic tank emptier as well to support his family. BDT 2,700 of his monthly salary goes towards educating his son while the rest supports his family. He acknowledges that the cost of living in Khulna is relatively reasonable, but goes on to talk about the financial hardships they still endure. This has prompted him to pick up extra work when possible.

While Kissore has given up on his own dreams to join law enforcement, his son and daughter are encouraged by their father to follow through with their father's dreams. The dream never materialized for his daughter, however. While she performed very well in both her written and verbal examinations, she did not have the money they asked for in order to secure a position for her.

"She got 100% in all, but 0% in terms of money. I don't blame the government at all, though; I blame the employers for this."

His daughter now has her own daughter, Brishti, who Kissore proudly declares had won the National Scholarship (Britti). Kissore's son, a student of class 7, is constantly reminded by his father to abide by the law, never taking advantage of or cheating anybody in life. Kissore remains optimistic and devout in his belief that his son will be a respected policeman one day.

***"We're poor people,
we don't know
how to realise our
children's dreams."***

- Shadhon, Jhenaidah



Sri Shadhon Kumar Babu Das is part of Jhenaidah's vacutug truck crew, employed by the Paurasavha. His family consists of five members following the recent death of his mother and now include his father, wife and two young daughters; 2-year old Sriti and 11-year old Jyoti. His eldest daughter recently married and left home. Jyoti is studying in class 3 in the government primary school. As seems evident from the community, it is difficult for their parents to dream beyond what they themselves have experienced, much less encourage their children to dream of vocations beyond manual labour. While she knows that she would like to be employed as an adult, she cannot formulate grand dreams for herself.

Shadhon and his wife have been married for 22 years, with his wife being a homemaker. While he acknowledges that an additional income would significantly improve the quality of life for their family, his pride prevents his wife from seeking employment. As Shadhon says, "I want to live off my earnings for as long as we can." His father used to contribute to the family's income working as a sweeper in an office and a school, until he was having problems with his eyesight and the glasses prescribed by the doctor did not help much. The Paurasavha where Shadhon works, is limited in its healthcare support to these communities.

Shadhon has been working with the Paurasavha his entire working life, spanning over 30 years. He studied up to class

6 in school but joined the work force immediately afterwards in order to support his family. Despite being part of the vacutug crew, Shadhon is still not above emptying septic tanks manually when the Paurasavha demands it or he is on a private job. However, manual labour (and even with the vacutug) poses serious risks to the workers' health and safety at times. Shadhon shows us some deep cuts in his hands - the result of a work accident from a few weeks ago. Since this happened during working hours, the Paurasavha arranged for tetanus shots but as for the rest, he has had to arrange medication and further treatment himself.

Shadhon requests policy changes that will allow them to work with more security in terms of their health and safety. Despite numerous requests for protective gloves and goggles that would protect them from the dust and poisonous gases released from the tanks, the gear has yet to materialise. Shadhon wishes that the government would take note of their requests soon before he experiences a more serious accident.

***"I don't want to be rich,
I just want the very basics."***

- Uttam, Khulna



Uttam remembers the stories his grandfather and father related to him of the arrival of the Harijans from India to Bangladesh. After the riots between the Hindus and Muslims, they had been brought in from Orissa and Bihar to clear off the dead bodies. However, these communities were always faced with immense social stigma and so the government offered them land, homes and permanent stable jobs in order to make the move easier. According to Uttam, however, these so-called stable jobs have been taken over by Muslim communities. The government mandated land for the Harijan community has gradually diminished as more and more Muslim families move in, squeezing away the land allocated for Uttam and his community. Uttam's gripes, however, are not with his neighbours, but with the authorities that did not live up to their promise of keeping his community employed and taken care of.

"Nobody wants to recognize us, or give us our rights. My name is Uttam! I want my rights and to live in a better environment. How can I ever be expected to improve my situation otherwise? How can my daughter ever be expected to have a better life than mine? Nobody looks at us, or thinks about us. I'm not asking for wealth, just the basics – just a little dignity!"

He recalls the lackadaisical attitude of his father and uncle in caring for their families – it seemed evident to him that they were certain of the government keeping their end of the bargain in securing employment for the Harijans which would

explain why they had no savings and could happily spend a large portion of their incomes on drinking alcohol. Such carelessness with finances is not a luxury for Uttam, who has been working as a septic tank emptier since he was 21 years old. His salary of BDT 2,100 is nowhere near sufficient to meet the family expenses of BDT 9,000. This has made it necessary for him to look for employment beyond his working hours, but things have been more difficult for them recently.

The modern drainage technology that makes life easier for the privileged in more developed towns and cities, seems to be impacting these communities for the worse. Jobs clearing septic tanks are to an extent no longer available in cities and Uttam now often travels long distances in order to find additional employment. He is distraught when explaining how he had to beg or borrow for some months as well. Official jobs mandated by the government seem almost impossible to find. Business also seems out of the question for a community that is shunned at large.

"It's all well and good saying things out of compassion, but at the end of the day, would you really touch food given to you by a man who works in the sewers?"

Uttam notes with dismay that as bad as his lot in life is, it seems to him that his daughter will be even worse off. He asks for urgent change in policy that will ensure that his children have access to better facilities and employment opportunities.

**Demonstration of Pro-poor Market-based
Solutions for Faecal Sludge Management in
Urban Centres of Southern Bangladesh**

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