

# Bangladesh at 50: The Silent Revolution

*This post foregrounds the struggle of the Dalit community in Bangladesh against localised practices of discrimination that goes against the foundations of anti-discrimination embedded in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Meghna Guhathakurta illustrates process by which Dalits attain social empowerment and awareness through the cultivation of Gonogobeshona (Peoples Research).*

As a schoolboy in southwestern Bangladesh, Milon Das was reprimanded by community leaders for drinking water from a glass reserved for higher caste Hindus and mainstream Muslims instead of the one reserved for Dalits like him. He was found to be guilty of breaking social norms by a *salish* (arbitration council) led by community leaders of the locality, and asked to apologise to the shopkeeper and pay for the glass that he had 'soiled', a fine that neither Milon nor his father could afford. Luckily for them Milon's large-hearted and socially conscious Headmaster intervened. He heatedly retorted to the leaders that he himself will pay for a new glass if necessary but under no circumstance would Milon be made to apologise to the shopkeeper for using the glass! That was his human right. Milon Das is currently Chief Executive of a Dalit-led NGO called [Parittran](#) (Salvation).

Lily Biswas was a young girl from a [Nomoshudra](#) (low-ranking Hindu caste) family in Jessore who had the spunk to choose to marry beneath her caste to a young man of the *Kaiputra* or *Kawra* caste, a people whose traditional livelihood was to rear and graze pigs in a predominantly Muslim society. Though the marriage took place despite all odds, it was when Lily (having already been educated at her natal home) decided to enrol for a Teachers Training Course run by [BRAC](#) that both she and her husband found themselves thrown out of her in-laws home! She remembers being forced to live in borrowed space in someone else's porch, using borrowed utensils to cook her food before she and her husband could find a new homestead for themselves. Lily became a teacher at BRAC's primary school in the village where she introduced to a whole new generation of young *Kawras* the joys of learning. Lily's daughter pursued her education to become a graduate in Political Science and is now pursuing post-graduate studies at a University.

Chaitonno Das came from a poor Rishi family whose parents were agricultural workers (Rishis are a caste traditionally associated with leather-tanning and other related work). Since his father suffered from paralysis, 10-year-old Chaitonno had to join his mother to work in the field so that the family could be fed. Chaitonno also had to work in two households as bonded labour. In between he tried to pursue an education as best as he possibly could. Being abused variously at work on several occasions, Chaitonno was spurred on to seek dignity in his life. He joined Milon's *Parittran* (mentioned above) in 2002 and sat his Secondary School Certificate Exam in the Open University in 2004. He is now working as a Research Assistant at Research Initiatives Bangladesh, an organisation specialising in participatory action research with marginalised communities. Chaitonno works on the issue of agro-ecology and holistic farming practices to protect the environment. He has continued to be a cultural activist and animator in his own community as well as in marginalised communities around him, encouraging the younger generations to seek education as a form of release from the subjugation that their forefather's were forced to face in their daily lives.

All three persons mentioned above were born in a country that emerged 50 years ago through a bloody struggle and peoples' war to constitute the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh. The Constitution of this country pledged in Article 28(1) that 'The State shall not discriminate against citizens on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.'

Despite this clause, however, the citizens whose stories I mention above did not find this clause reflected automatically in their lives. Only through a long process of personal and social struggle could they attain equal treatment in accessing their fundamental rights of education, health and other services that the state promised them. They found friends and allies on their way. For Milon, it was the Fathers of the Italian Catholic Church who encouraged and aided his education; for Lily Biswas it was NGOs like BRAC who pledged to make education an entry point for development at the grassroots; for Chaitonno Das, it was forerunners like Milon Das who introduced a Dalit-led agenda in the Bangladesh state that came to be known as a test case of development.

My introduction to all three came in the early 2000 through Research Initiatives Bangladesh's (RIB) programme of participatory action research or peoples' research that has come to be termed popularly as '*gonogobeshona*' in Bangla lit. 'peoples' research'). Founded by a group of eminent educationists and intellectuals in 2002, RIB sought to support innovative research on poverty alleviation at multidimensional levels — economic, political and social. It focused on the very marginalised, i.e., those who fell outside the mainstream development agenda of both government- and NGO-led development. The aim of this research was to make it more inclusive of knowledge creation and innovation at experimental, presentational and practical levels, and encourage peoples' orientation to action, advocacy, policy orientation, and social movements. Participatory Action Research (PAR), which has a long tradition in the history of South Asia, was chosen as one of the research tools to address the marginalised but it had to be reinvented and contextualised into the locale.

Several stories which illustrate this contextualisation of PAR within these marginalised communities come to my mind. One was told to me by Milon Das of Shatkhira, with whose story I began this post. After having received a three-day training course from RIB on PAR, Milon went back to his village only to be faced by his friend and guide Father Sergio who demanded to know what he had learnt. To demonstrate that, he took Father Sergio to a village and gathered some women to sit down for a discussion on their lives in general, the problems they faced and ways in which those could be addressed. Father Sergio was satisfied with Milon's work and they both left. But after a couple of days, Sergio came back to Milon bewildered. He said that after having returned to that village, the women had persistently chased him wanting to know when they would next sit down for such a discussion. Milon replied that he had no answer to that but suggested they go back to find the answers from the women themselves. The women readily gave their answer: 'It's not that other NGOs don't come to us to discuss our problems but when they come they come with their files nestled under their arms and what they say goes above our heads. But when Milon came to us it was different. We could contribute to the discussions using our own experiences, our own thoughts.' They then gave an astounding comparison: 'The other NGOs are like *gul* (a substance with which villagers brush their teeth). You can get *gul* in the market, but it is so strong that used on its own, it makes our head spin! So we mix *tamak* (tobacco) with it to soften it. The other NGOs are like *gul* and what Milon made us do was like *tamak*.' After this incident, these village women became Milon's first *gonogobeshoks* in his area.

The localisation of PAR with the marginalised Dalit also produced interesting dimensions in the concepts of research itself. Instead of conceiving of research as a dispassionate process as perceived by many academics, it was internalised through the compassion of these 'people researchers' who drew strength from their personal experiences. One group of *gonogobeshoks* defined research (*gobeshona* in Bangla) by breaking it up in two syllables: *go* + *eshona*, lit. 'desire for a cow'. When asked for a deeper analysis, they said: 'when we lose a cow we search frantically for it in our desire to find it; in research we are frantically searching for the truth or answer to our problems with the same desire.' Many of us used to modernist research paradigms tend to forget this humaneness and compassion embedded in the research process.

The final answers or solutions to their *gonogobeshona* are left to the participants. In Bangladesh Dalit communities have done just that. Some have taken the findings of their research into a social movement, leading NGOs themselves, others into policy advocacy and still others like Lily Biswas and Chaitonno Das have chosen to live a life in dignity in whatever they do and to ensure the same life for future generations to come in their family and communities.

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