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Chronicle of a tragedy foreseen

Way before Dadri and Muzaffarnagar, and the spate of cow-related lynchings, a Muslim family decided to move from Uttar Pradesh to Bengal. They may have presaged a scare that's turning real. Swati Sengupta has their story



Swati Sengupta | Published 02.07.17, 12:00 AM

FEAR-DRIVEN: (From left) Mohona Bibi, daughter Qureshia with her nephew, Ghulam Mian and daughter-in-law Badrunnisa Bibi; Pic: Swati Sengupta

Ghulam Mian is pottering around in the courtyard, while his wife, Mohona Bibi, is resting on a *mora* under the shade of their beloved mango tree. Their home is made out of mud with a straw roof, but in one corner of the courtyard, a separate section - which appears newly built - has a couple of concrete rooms.

Their tree is full of *kancha-meetha aam*, and the fruits on their way to blossom into sweet, succulent mangoes. The couple's teenage daughter, Qureshia, is playing with her little nephew. Their home in Makhra village of West Bengal's Birbhum district looks like every other home of the area.

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But Ghulam Mian had not always "belonged" to this place. "We came down from Gorakhpur in 2004, after selling off our land and everything else we had there," he tells me in Hindi.

I had stopped by because the May sun in Birbhum is too hot if you are riding a two-wheeler (even though I was only pillion-riding), and I wanted to take a break and ask for some water in this place filled with people and chatter.

The family - Ghulam Mian, Mohona Bibi, their two daughters and three sons - used to live in Bikaram Bishunpur village of Uttar Pradesh (UP). "And how glad we are that we left UP in 2004. That state is no place for Muslims," Mohona Bibi grumbles in Bengali.

Bikaram Bishunpur is part of the Gorakhpur administrative division of UP, but it is not under the Gorakhpur Lok Sabha constituency from where the current UP chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, has been elected MP since 1998. The village is under Deoria district - Pathardeva Assembly constituency and Deoria Lok Sabha seat. Yet, Ghulam Mian distinctly remembers Adityanath as the "main leader" of the area and most of their Hindu neighbours as his followers.

Mohona Bibi was born and brought up in Bengal's Birbhum district. Her uncle, who used to work in UP decades ago, played matchmaker and that is how she came to be a Deoria bride. She lived there for more than 20 years. But after three sons and two daughters, she could not take it anymore, she says. "There is no freedom for Muslims. We were fined for everything - if our chicken strayed into others' land, if we ate beef and our neighbours found out... we were treated like slaves by our Hindu neighbours. Moreover, my daughters were growing up, I didn't want them to stay in such a set-up."



Qureshia, who listens to the conversation intently, gets up and admonishes a neighbour who tries to pluck a mango from their tree. "*Ektao aam nebe na, bole dilam!* (Do not touch even one mango)," she tells him in mock-seriousness and bursts into peals of laughter.

Mohona Bibi recalls how they were compelled to quietly bury the bones of buffaloes after they had consumed the meat. "Our Hindu neighbours would poison the fish in our pond, they would object to our eating buffalo meat, steal our chicken. We were miserable. I had never experienced anything similar during the entire time I had spent in Bengal," she says. "Had we stayed on in UP, we may have been killed for eating buffalo meat today."

Ghulam Mian says the decision was taken after years of suffering and careful planning. "It was no hasty decision, and we don't regret it."

So, finally, the family sold all their land and came down to Mohona Bibi's mother's home in Makhra, Birbhum, and purchased four bighas.

One of their sons, Babur, works at a factory in Mumbai. The other two, Anjeb and Tahagar, work as a construction worker and driver, respectively. Both live with them. The elder daughter, Mumtaz, was married off a couple of years ago. Some of the land - about 13 cottahs - was sold off to pay for the wedding. The remaining land has since been given to sharecroppers for farming. "I am too old to work in the fields anymore," Ghulam Mian says.

Makhra, in fact, is one of the most volatile areas of West Bengal, where large-scale clashes between BJP and Trinamul took place in 2014. Things have changed now, in favour of Trinamul, but small clashes still erupt from time to time. Says Ghulam Mian, "We are doing fine, except that the changing political situation in Bengal now is a bit worrying for Muslims."

What significance does the movement of one Muslim family have, in a country where crores of people are migrants for various reasons? A lot, actually.

According to the 2011 Census, there are 45.36 crore migrants in India. The number of migrants in the 2001 Census was 31.45 crore.

The reasons behind migration - as cited in the Census - include "work", "business", "education", "marriage", "moved with household", "moved at birth". Yet another column is marked "others"; but there is no indication of what "others" might include.

Census of India figures do not reflect reasons for which Ghulam Mian and Mohona Bibi permanently left one state for another. There may be many like them who were so distressed to live in a particular place because of their religious identity, it was worth taking all the trouble to move to another state. Most significantly, it was not triggered by any major event such as a riot. This is an indication of how many live in fear but stay on at a particular place for want of alternatives.

When contacted, UP minister Siddharth Nath Singh, who was in charge of BJP in West Bengal till a couple of years ago, said: "It is the job of a state government to ensure the safety and security of persons living in that state. If the family moved out of UP in 2004, the state government in power should be held responsible." Around the time Ghulam Mian's family left Deoria, Mulayam Singh and his Samajwadi Party was at the helm in UP.

Ravi Srivastava, a professor at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, says, "Earlier the Census of India data used to have columns on 'forced migration', but now it is only tabulated as 'others'. The National Sample Survey Organisation data though, has more detailed columns."

According to Srivastava, who has been studying migration for many years, there are recent studies on various aspects of migration, but over all, the reasons and characteristics of migration are not reflected so much through government figures. This is especially true for seasonal migration. "The magnitude of the phenomenon is reflected neither through government data, nor through the limited independent work," he adds.

But data is all that governments seem to want - the impersonality of numbers. After all, the moment you put faces, names, and narratives of displacement against them, the truth becomes too much to handle.

Change of address

From: Bikaram Bishunpur village in Uttar Pradesh

- Falls under Deoria district
- Has been under BJP, SP and BSP MPs over the past two decades
- Bordering Deoria is the Gorakhpur Lok Sabha seat — a BJP stronghold and home to UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath

To: Makhra village in West Bengal

- Falls under Birbhum district
- Once controlled by CPM, a Trinamul bastion post the 2009 Lok Sabha polls
- In 2014, following the general elections, many villagers joined BJP
- Large-scale clashes between BJP and Trinamul followed thereafter; many have now moved to Trinamul from BJP

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