

Swineherders: An Interview with Murtada Bulbul

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Sharon Sliwinski and Anushree Majumdar: For what purpose does swineherding take place in Bangladesh? Are the pork products exported or are they consumed within the country?

Murtada Bulbul: Swineherding occurs mainly for commercial purposes, rather than subsistence. In general, it is Hindu or Dalit men from impoverished backgrounds who take up swineherding. Depending on the size of the herd, the number of men assigned to a herd ranges from three to five. The swineherders take their herd to graze and roam from one area to another. The appointed swineherders receive no money apart from their fee and food expenses, and there is not much to profit from. There are some shops in Dhaka where the pigs are purchased in bulk, and the meat is processed in Ghazipur, near Dhaka. The meat is then sold in shops. Christians and expats residing in Bangladesh are the main consumers of the meat. The meat is also sold locally, for a number of occasions.

SS/AM: What parts of the country do the swineherders cover?

MB: The Dalit population in Bangladesh is throughout the country. There are many who keep a pig or two at home, but the number of Dalit-owned swineherding businesses is small. While there is no specific region for swineherding, Sirajgunj, Pabna, Rajshahi, Jashor, and Gopalganj districts witness a greater concentration of swineherding. Irrespective of which districts or regions the swineherders themselves hail from, they take their herds to areas where there is enough food for the animals. For this reason, they travel great distances.

SS/AM: You describe how Dalit men have taken up the task of swineherding. Is this because swineherding has traditionally been a task for lower-caste men, or is it because pigs are considered “untouchable,” much like the Dalit status on the subcontinent?

MB: The majority of the population in Bangladesh is Muslim. Pork is prohibited by the religion and the swine is considered an impure creature. By habit, swine are very dirty and smell foul. This is why many meat-eaters also don't rear them. There are people who, despite not being prohibited by their religion from consuming pork, nonetheless abstain. This is mainly a personal outlook. Apart from Muslims, Bangla-

desires from other religious denominations as well as favorably placed people don't consider pork consumption respectable.

Just as swine are considered abhorrent by Bangladeshi society, so it is with Dalits. These neglected, uncared-for, persecuted beings support one another, which has only increased society's collective abhorrence of them. Not just occupationally but socio-economically, not much has changed or improved for them in the way they have long been perceived. Thus it's not that the responsibility of swineherding has fallen only on the shoulders of Dalit men in Bangladesh, nor is it that all the Dalit men in Bangladesh are swineherders. Rather, it is due to the lack of sufficient employment opportunities in Bangladesh, poverty, lack of education, and other deficiencies that Dalit men take up swineherding, hoping to profit. For generations Dalits have been employed in this task and it appears that they have grown comfortable with it.

SS/AM: Could you describe the relationship between the men and the pigs?

MB: It's a big challenge to step out of the perspective of a privileged member of society and to try to be objective as a photographer. The intense relationship that has formed between the men and the animals in their charge has never seemed abhorrent to me. After watching them closely, I believe that this relationship between them is one of care. The kind of relationship one has with his or her pets is the same that the swineherders have with the pigs. Some of them fondly name their pigs and call them by those names as well. Given how their livelihood and other employment opportunities are dependent on the pigs, the relationship between the men and the animals is quite personal.

SS/AM: You've said that swineherding already fascinated you when you were a child.

MB: I've always thought that at some point all village boys have experienced a certain attraction to swineherding. It's because pigs weren't a very common sight. But I was attracted to swineherding for a different reason. My childhood wasn't as free as that of the other boys in the village. I had to spend a considerable portion of my childhood within the confines of my house. I had to ask for permission to step outside the house. That is why the freedom of the swineherders, their journeys from one location to another, was so attractive to me; the way they could cook, eat, and live under the open skies gave me the impression that it was almost like a picnic. The child who grew up bound by the very many restrictions imposed by his parents did not know that the apparent freedom of this life was neither desirable nor willingly sought after; this is not the kind of freedom one covets. The truth is that the swineherd's nomadic existence is actually one of separation from his family and relations, of hunger and deprivation, of being at the mercy of the elements, of heat and rain, of storms and cold, of neglect; it is being shackled to the monotony of the quotidian.

SS/AM: What has changed about the way you viewed the life and landscape of swineherders and their journeys through Bangladesh?

MB: In December 2008, when I was returning home by train, I spotted a swineherder after many days of travel. Several questions arose in my mind: who are they, where do they live, why do they roam about with these swine, why hadn't I seen them until

then? Is it because they do not graze their herds as before, or have their numbers decreased over the years? Other thoughts crossed my mind: having not seen them in so long, I wondered if their way of life would last for much longer. It was from these questions and thoughts that the idea to document these swineherds emerged. Later on, while researching for the photo documentary, I found out that these men are known as Dalits in society. From that point onward, my knowledge of them expanded. As a photographer, I found my perspective changing as I came into close contact with them, with the opportunity to watch them and learn about them.

SS/AM: Your work appears to be focused on the common people of Bangladesh: the fishermen, the swineherders, the village women who walk great distances to fetch water, and so on. Is there a venue or platform in Bangladesh for discussing and showing this kind of work? Is there government pressure to showcase Bangladesh in a “positive” light?

MB: In society, in every moment and in multiple ways, humanity is under attack by divisive forces. I don’t want to distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary men. I have grown up amid all these people (the farmers, fishermen, etc.). I know these people and I am most comfortable documenting their lives. That is why my work centers on these underprivileged people.

So far, there isn’t a dedicated platform to publish stories and photographs about these people. A couple of dailies have recently tried to establish weekly photo features as a regular platform for this kind of work. As for taking positive or negative pictures, I haven’t heard of any such directive from the Bangladeshi government. It appears that the government is not aware of such matters. However, among those who are aware, there has always been such a demand.

SS/AM: Whose work are you influenced by?

MB: As a photographer I am always looking at peoples’ work, and I like and am inspired by much of what I have seen. But the first name that springs to mind is Raghu Rai—the famous Indian documentary photographer. I really admire the way he composes his subjects in each frame. At a sudden glance it may appear chaotic, but very quickly one can see how the subject connects with the surrounding elements, one can notice the cadences of the image. And because of the cultural and geographical affinity, I feel like I have known his photographs for an eternity, and I’m eager to take similar kinds of photographs.

SS/AM: What are you working on now?

MB: My work on swineherders remains in progress. Apart from that, I’ve begun a project on the Santals, who are known to be the oldest tribe in Bangladesh. Santals have their own religion, a strong cultural heritage, and traditional village political structures. Their social solidarity, religion, and traditions as a distinct culture are at stake today. A large number of this ethnic minority has converted to Christianity, leaving behind their age-old traditional religion. This conversion to Christianity has brought tremendous change to their beliefs, traditions, and lifestyle. The changes have taken place due to the economic crisis, loss of cultivated land, and the lack of education and alternative skills to sustain their livelihood.