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LOCKDOWN CRISIS

In Assam's Barpeta, a woman lost her four-day-old baby amid struggle to survive the lockdown

'We are barely keeping ourselves alive,' she said.

Abdul Kalam Azad & Kazi Sharowar Hussain

May 11, 2020 · 06:30 am





Women in Guwahati stand in line for food being distributed by volunteers. | Biju Boro/AFP

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Abdul Kalam Azad & Kazi
Sharowar Hussain



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On April 11, one of our young colleagues at the Karwan-e-Mohabbat visited his village in Dhanbanda, in Assam's Barpeta district, to distribute coupons that would enable vulnerable families to buy essential items from grocery stores. To maintain physical distancing and lockdown rules, our colleagues are deploying this strategy across Assam.

The colleague in question went to meet Shajahan Ali at his rented house, surrounded by green paddy fields, where he lives with his wife and their 13-year-old daughter. Shajahan wasn't home.

His wife Mafida, who was pregnant at the time, said they had faced a lot of difficulties over the previous week. "We have no option," she said. "I pick green chillies from the fields, dig up garlic, mash them together and eat it with rice. We are barely keeping ourselves alive."

Shortly after, she gave birth to a son, who died within a week.

No social security

Shajahan works as a mason in Barpeta. His income allows him to pay the house rent, pay his daughter's school fees, buy medicines and food for the family. However, the Covid-19 and the sudden lockdown came as rude shock. The contractor could not pay his wage for a month due to the lockdown. "No one can't go out on the streets," said Mafida. "The police beat people up."

According to an advisory issued by Union Minister of State Santosh Kumar Gangwar, Shajahan should have received Rs 1,000 through the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. In Assam there are an estimated 10 lakh construction workers, of which approximately 7% are registered with the board.

To avail of the benefits, workers need to send their registration card and bank details to the authorities. Shajahan is not registered with the board. However, Barpeta-based labour rights activist Faruk Ahmed said that many registered construction workers had not gotten the benefit either.

Another activist Faruk Khan said there are more than 50,000 construction workers in the district out of which hardly 1,000 to 15,000 workers have received the money.

Over the years, Assam Building and Construction Workers Welfare Board has collected [cess of Rs 454 crore](#) and have spent only Rs 7 crore on the welfare of workers. News reports alleged that the board's top officials [siphoned off Rs 121 crore](#).

A life of struggles

Shajahan Ali originally belongs to Dharmapur char, a river island on the Brahmaputra in Southern Barpeta. In Assam, there are more than 2,200 char villages, which accommodate nearly 10% of Assam's total population. These are temporary land mass formed out of sand, silt and debris, carried by the flood water and susceptible to erosion in the perennial floods.

Shajahan's parents were prosperous farmers here – they grew rice, jute, pulses and vegetables. He spent part of his childhood herding cattle in the char, until his home and 30 bighas – around four hectares – of agricultural land got submerged by a flood. This is a common occurrence in the region, affecting millions of people, especially Bengal-origin Assamese Muslims, who hardly get s



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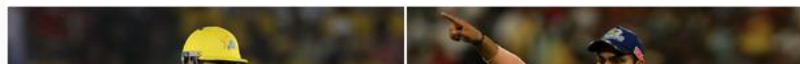
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