



আমাদের চোখে আমাদের বসতি

NARRATIVES OF BELONGING: GABTOLI, DHAKA



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Our Place, Through our Eyes

Since 2020, through the process of 'Let's co-create our community', residents of Gabtoli City Colony, one of the largest informal settlements in Dhaka, Bangladesh, have been working with Platform of Community Action and Architecture (POCAA) to co-create a beautiful, healthy, and creative environment. This process attempts to redefine the image of low-income communities and set an ideal example of building a healthy community with limited space and resources.

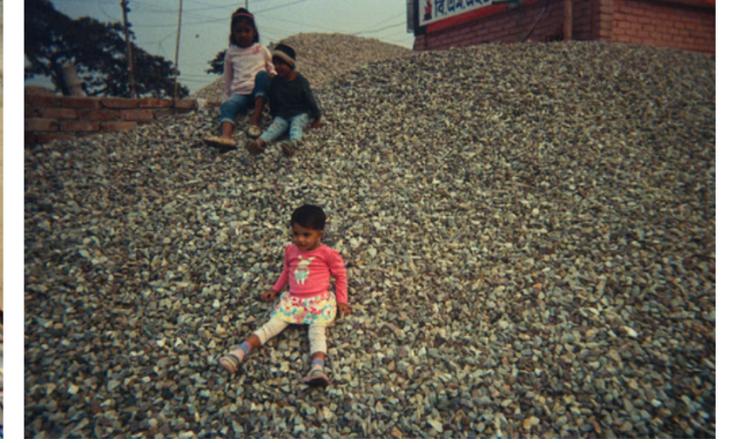
When we think of an informal settlement in a bustling city, the typical images that come to mind are of cramped spaces, poor hygiene, and challenging living conditions. There are likely many more untold stories but the current narrative around these settlements in Dhaka has been built in that way. This has become the single story about urban informal settlements, not just in Dhaka but also around the world, and the danger is that we are not hearing the perspectives of the communities.

In an effort to empower the community and initiate a shift in the narrative, we have been working with POCAA since 2022 to design initiatives aimed at engaging the community and creating a sense of belonging. Drawing inspiration from our [Ghar Par: Dharamshala](#) initiative, we delved into photography as a means to cultivate this sense of belonging. We gave out four disposable film cameras to residents in the colony and asked them to take photos of their surroundings that evoked an emotion- be it happiness, sadness, anger, or excitement. Through these photographs, a lot of emotion emerged, depicting the daily lives of the colony's people, their likes, dislikes, small or big celebrations, and so much more!





"শৈশব"
"Childhood"



"পাহাড় না থাকায় পাথরের পাহাড়েই নাতি
নাতনীদের ছবি তুলে রাখলাম"
"We don't have hills, so took photos of
my grandkids on these 'hills' of rocks."

Among these captivating stories are Jhumur's perspective on childhood, Kulsum's portrayal of the absence of hills, Nurjahan's brother Yakub proudly displaying his love for Argentina through a jersey and a photo of Messi, and Rupa sharing about results day at school on a winter morning. Together, they provide a subtle view of life in Gabotli, going beyond stereotypical depictions.



"ইয়াকুব তার প্রিয় দল আর্জেন্টিনার জার্সি,
কাপ ও মেসির ছবির সাথে"
"Yakub in his favorite team Argentina's
jersey, the cup and a photo of Messi"



"স্কুলে রেজাল্ট দেয়ার দিন"
"Results day at school"



The initiative culminated in a community photography exhibition organized on the school premises on December 1-2, 2023. The event not only showcased the captivating stories but also became a platform for free-flowing conversations between the community members and visitors. The second day of the event saw children from the colony collaboratively painting, expressing their joy, and celebrating their happy places. Over the two days, the entire area buzzed with creativity, as children painted, danced, sang, and celebrated the winter pitha festival.

"দুইদিন ব্যাপী যেই মেলাটা করলাম, খুবই আনন্দিত হলাম। অনেক অনেক ভালো লাগলো। আপনাদের সবাইকে ধন্যবাদ।"

"I felt very happy organizing the exhibition for two days. It was a great pleasure, and I enjoyed it a lot. Thank you all."

Kulsum

"অনেক দিন পর প্রিয় জায়গায় এসে উৎসবমুখর পরিবেশ দেখে খুব ভাল লাগছে। ছবিগুলো সবগুলোই পরিচিত গল্পগুলোকে সুন্দরভাবে উপস্থাপন করেছে।"

"It feels good to come back to a favorite place after a long time and see the festive atmosphere. The pictures all present the familiar stories beautifully."

Anan

"অনেক রকম গল্প অন্যের চোখে দেখার সুযোগ হল। খুব চমৎকার।"

"It is a great opportunity to see many different stories through the eyes of others. It is amazing!"

Atoshi



আমাদের চোখে আমাদের বসতি was not solely an attempt to capture stories; it was a journey in building belonging. The initiative aimed to bridge the gap between organizations and communities. This bridge, built on trust and belonging, empowers communities and facilitates the co-creation of more sustainable, impactful, and resilient solutions.

If you would like to know more about POCAA and their work in Gabtoli, visit [POCAA](#).

If you are inspired to do something similar in your community, get in touch with us at lamia@inserviceofearth.org