

Our excluded and marginalised should not be left behind – Speakers say at a national workshop

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There are a great number of excluded and marginalized communities in Bangladesh. The excluded and marginalized communities can be put into two categories. The first category remaining excluded for their beliefs, ethnic identities, occupations, languages, history and locations include ethnic and tea communities, sweepers or Harijons and Rishis, Kawras (kaiputra), Bede (gypsies), Jaladas (water slaves), sex workers and Biharis.

The second category of excluded groups include potters, fishermen in general, blacksmith, goldsmith, bamboo and cane product manufacturers, carpenters, barber, sweet manufacturers, Teli (oil presser), Napit (barber), Dhopas (washer-man), Tati (weavers from Pakistan who speak Urdu), Darji (tailor), Hajam (unqualified doctors for circumcision), Mazhi/Khottra (boatmen), Behara (carrier of bridal carriage), Kasai (butcher), etc. No matter whatever category an excluded group belongs to, in most case, exclusion is generational and unending.

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) organized a national workshop to discuss the issues of these marginal and excluded communities on 22 August at LGED auditorium. It was part of a three-and-a-half-year project, “Defining the excluded groups, mapping their current status and strengthening their capacity and partnerships” funded by European Union and ICCO Cooperation.

The key message the workshop communicated was these excluded communities—around eight million citizens of Bangladesh—shall not be left behind in Bangladesh’s race for development.

The workshop brought together the high government officials, economists, development actors, human rights defenders as well as community representatives. The day-long workshop engaged participants in sharing information and insights, delving into the causes of exclusion and developing recommendations.

Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser for International Affairs to Honourable Prime Minister, the chief guest at the workshop, shared his frank thoughts. “Our existing laws are discriminatory to the excluded communities in many instances and their needs are not addressed in the right perspective. So these communities remain marginalized and excluded,” said Rizvi.

Dr. Rizvi’s message was clear—Bangladesh has attained significant progress in various areas and the government would address other issues one after another. He advised the organizers to create a forum for those who are yet to be heard. “We’ve to listen to what these people want to say and what kind of help they need,” said the foreign affairs adviser to the prime minister. Talking on the helplessness of the tea garden workers about their land rights, the adviser trusted that a simple amendment to the law could solve this problem.

In his introductory speech Philip Gain, director of SEHD gave a map of excluded communities to be addressed under the initiative and explained how painstaking and significant it is to map and define the excluded groups and their current status. He shared the findings of SEHD’s mapping of the tea and ethnic communities and sex workers. “SEHD’s findings—80 communities in the tea gardens and 37



Dignitaries at the workshop. Photo. Md. Saydur Rahma

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ethnic communities on top of those in the tea gardens, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and government records—set benchmark for mapping exercise on the excluded groups,” said Gain.

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, the keynote speaker, further elaborated on the excluded groups and together with Gain set the tone of the workshop. “Leaving no one behind is a pledge that all the countries have taken under SDGs,” said Rahman. “Bangladesh has successfully reduced general poverty and extreme poverty in the last several decades. But poverty still keeps a class of people trapped into exclusion and marginalization; this exclusion is not only economical or infrastructural, this is about social perception.” Rahman suggested that the excluded people raise their voice and shared the plan of organizers to establish a national resource centre to address the issues of the excluded communities in right contexts.

Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, an eminent writer and a representative of the Jaladas community shared his personal experience and insights about the roots of exclusion and marginalization. He said, “The so-called elites of the society themselves created social stratification and deprived us.” He suggested that the excluded communities be given impetus for themselves to be united and become capable of raising their voice.

Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, former adviser of the caretaker government regretted that the people are living in a state of deprivation due to colour and ethnicity and occupational backgrounds. He mentioned that a key reason for Bangladesh’s massive poverty reduction is that even the poor believe “poverty is not a destiny”.

“It is possible to statistically hide the people who are close to 10 million in number while highlighting Bangladesh’s progress in poverty reduction. But that would not be any human development,” the economist said. “If we want to present ourselves as a model for development, we must bring these people into the mainstream development activities in the most humanitarian manner. That would be a civilized approach to development upholding human rights,” added Wahiduddin Mahmud.

Rambajan Kairi, general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union highlighted the insurmountable difficulties the tea workers of Bangladesh face. “Our weekly wage is too low to meet our minimum need. The garden owners have forced us to a poor life without proper food, education and treatment. So, it is unrealistic for us to dream a better life for our children,” said Kairi. He gave an account of a tea worker’s weekly income that includes wages and fringe benefits (ration at a subsidy), which is Taka 895. “The minimum weekly expenditure of a five-member family is Taka 2100. This income and expenditure disparity keeps the tea workers hungry,” said Kairi.

Import of Sri Lankan and Indian inferior quality tea at a cheap price has further degraded the situation in Bangladesh tea industry and has a negative impact on the lives of tea workers, elaborated Kairi.

Dr. Dipankar Roy, joint director of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics informed that Bangladesh government has undertaken a project to identify all the ethnic and excluded people of the country. “The government cannot do everything. So, the NGOs, civil society and other actors should assist us in our endeavour.”

Dr. Hameeda Hossain, Vice-chairperson, Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), M. Abdul Karim, managing director, Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) also spoke at the workshop as special guests.

Representatives from sex workers' organizations, Bede community, Biharis, Adivasi people, Harijans, tea workers, sweepers, etc. shared their problems and experiences in the second session of the workshop. They all talked about their respective communities, concern and difficulties they face. Some common issues and problems these communities are eviction threats from their land and homes, political insecurity, landlessness, education, extreme poverty and dignity. They asked for help from the civil society, NGOs and government.

Joyanta Adhikari, executive director of CCDB chaired this session. He explained how important it is for these communities to participate in development processes. "Comprehensive development is impossible without the development of these communities. We need to make them capable to be part of development," said Adhikari.

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