Agenda
of the Tea Workers and Little-known
Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh
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Introduction

One hundred and eighteen thousand tea workers work in 156 tea gardens across the Northeast (Sylhet, Maulvibazar and Hobiganj) of Bangladesh as well as in Chittagong and Rangamati. These workers with different ethnic and religious identities were brought to this land during the British era. The British companies brought them from Bihar, Madras, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and other areas to work in the tea estates. Four generations later, although they are all Bangladeshi citizens now, the tea workers are still unfamiliar with the world outside their tea estates. They are isolated from the majority population, and even from other ethnic groups or adivasi communities in Bangladesh. They are the most deprived amongst the marginalized communities and remain “tied” to the tea estates. The way they are deprived of their rights as citizens is in no way acceptable.

Bangladeshi tea workers are also one of the most exploited communities in South Asia in terms of fair wages, education, health, nutrition and other rights. Article 27 of the constitution provides that “All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law”. Similarly, article 28 (1) states, “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.” However, the state is not doing enough to ensure the rights of the tea workers and their communities.

Even in 2009 a tea worker’s daily wage was Tk.32.50, which is now Tk. 69 (May 2014). In Sri Lanka (2013), the daily wage is Rs.550, which is equivalent to approximately Tk.328. Bangladesh’s tea workers are landless. Their children suffer from severe malnutrition and lack access to education. The country’s major political parties are extremely apathetic towards this group. During the 2008 national parliamentary elections, only Bangladesh Awami League’s election manifesto mentioned the rights of the tea workers. However, after the formation of the government, the party did not do anything significant to alter their fate.

The tea worker community is composed of many different ethnic groups. These little-known ethnic groups also have their own identity and heritage. However, a lot of their language, culture and heritage have already been lost. Outside of the tea gardens, many little-known and smaller ethnic communities are found in other regions of the country. Recently,
government has enacted *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (Small Ethnic Group Cultural Institution Act, 2010). This law mentions just 27 ethnic groups. However, adivasis, anthropologists and researchers have rejected this number. Various studies, surveys, opinions and analyses show that there are more than 60 ethnic communities in Bangladesh that have not been mentioned in this law. Many of these unrecognized, isolated and little-known ethnic communities are in the process of being assimilated with other groups. Many of them no longer speak in their mother tongues. Such ethnic communities include the Ahamia, Bagdi, Banai, Bhumij, Bonaj, Dalu, Ho, Hodi, Karmakar; Koda, Kohl, Konda, Lohar, Malo, Mushor, Patro, Rajwar, Shobo, Koch, and Turi. Many such little-known ethnic communities are spread across 12 districts in the Northwest and five districts in the North-central region of the country. Many of these ethnic groups are scheduled in the Indian Constitution. Because of their lack of recognition in Bangladesh, these ethnic groups are losing their language, culture and heritage. Thus, they are being deprived of their fundamental rights as well as of various other rights.

### The Tea Production Areas and Tea Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Upazilas</th>
<th>Valleys</th>
<th>No. of Tea Gardens</th>
<th>Ethnic Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syhlet</td>
<td>Syhlet Sadar, Jaintipur, Fenchuganj, Goinghat &amp; Kanaighat</td>
<td>Syhlet</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, Bonaj Chowhan, Gando/Ganj, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraj, Mushor, Nayer, Noonia, Uria, Patika, Phulfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Gola, Gaur, Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi, Doshad, Rabidas, Tati/Tantabai, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maulvi-bazar</td>
<td>Maulvibazar Sadar, Srimingal, Kulaura, Kamalgaun, Rajnagar and Barlekh</td>
<td>Juri, Langla, Munudoloi &amp; Balshira</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, Bonaj Chowhan, Gando/Ganj, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraj, Mushor, Nayer, Noonia, Uria, Patika, Phulfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Gola, Gaur, Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi, Doshad, Rabidas, Tati/Tantabai, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habiganj</td>
<td>Chunarughat, Bahubal, Madhabpore &amp; Nabiganj</td>
<td>Lashkarpur</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, Bonaj Chowhan, Gando/Ganj, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraj, Mushor, Nayer, Noonia, Uria, Patika, Phulfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Gola, Gaur, Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi, Doshad, Rabidas, Tati/Tantabai, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>Fatikkhari, Rahnuma, Banakhil</td>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, Bonaj Chowhan, Gando/Ganj, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraj, Mushor, Nayer, Noonia, Uria, Patika, Phulfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Gola, Gaur, Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi, Doshad, Rabidas, Tati/Tantabai, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangamati</td>
<td>Kaptai</td>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, Bonaj Chowhan, Gando/Ganj, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraj, Mushor, Nayer, Noonia, Uria, Patika, Phulfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Gola, Gaur, Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi, Doshad, Rabidas, Tati/Tantabai, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmanbaria</td>
<td>Brahmanbaria Sadar</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, Bonaj Chowhan, Gando/Ganj, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraj, Mushor, Nayer, Noonia, Uria, Patika, Phulfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Gola, Gaur, Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi, Doshad, Rabidas, Tati/Tantabai, etc.</td>
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### The Little-Known Ethnic Communities and Their Concentration (Outside The Tea Gardens)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Ethnic Groups</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North-center: Mymensingh, Tangail, Gazipur, Jamalpur and Sherpur districts</td>
<td>Hajong, Koch, Banai, Dalu, Hodi, Shabar, Rajbongshi/Bongshi, Gurkha.</td>
<td>The exact sizes of different little-known ethnic communities are difficult to find. Different sources mention different numbers. The sizes of these communities range from 100 to 60,000.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The tea workers and little-known ethnic communities are part of the “socially excluded” population of the country. This exclusion has a great impact on people’s lives. Regarding this, Amartya Sen has written:

“Being excluded from social relations can lead to other deprivations as well, thereby further limiting our living conditions. For example, being excluded from the opportunity to be employed or to receive credit may lead to economic impoverishment that may, in turn, lead to other deprivations (such as malnourishment or homelessness).”

To fight for the rights of these deprived communities is part of the agenda of the political parties. However, these little-known ethnic communities have little space in the agenda of the political parties due to dearth of accurate information, monitoring, and attention, which is a consequence of the culture of exclusion. In the interest of the overall development of the country, the political parties should be vocal in demanding the rights of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities. However, the past experience with regard to the recognition of rights for these communities is not good. Although some political parties speak about the rights of these communities in their manifestoes, their commitments are hardly translated into reality; even contrary decisions are taken. These political parties do not have clear ideas regarding these people or their rights. In addition, the rights of the tea workers and their communities are neglected in the manifestos of all political parties.

Commitments made in the election manifestos of the political parties in 2008 and their implementation status regarding political protection of the tea workers, adivasis, and undeveloped communities

Bangladesh Awami League, in its election manifesto of 2008, spelled out its support for the rights of the Adivasis. However, the party attached the adivasi issues with those of the religious minorities. In article 18 of the manifesto known as “Charter for Change” the declaration regarding the adivasis was given the name, “Religious minorities, disadvantaged people and underdeveloped areas”. Article 18.1 stated:

“Terrorism, discriminatory treatment and human rights violations against religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous people must come to an end permanently. Security of their life, wealth and honor will be guaranteed. Their entitlement to equal opportunities in all spheres of the state and social life will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to secure their original ownership on land, water bodies,
and their age-old rights on forest areas. In addition, a land commis-
sion will be formed. All laws and other arrangements discriminatory
to minorities, indigenous people and ethnic groups will be repealed.
Special privileges will be made available in educational institutions for
religious minorities and indigenous people. Such special privileges will
also apply for their employment.”

In another article (18.2), it mentioned the Chittagong Hill Tracts and
stated that “The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tract Peace Accord will be fully im-
plemented. More efforts will be directed towards the development of un-
derdeveloped areas, and special programs will be taken and implemented
on a priority basis for recognition of rights of small ethnic groups, adivasis
and other communities and for preservation of their language, literature,
culture, and unique lifestyles and integrated development.”

However, the commitments made in the ‘Charter for Change’ have not
been implemented. After Bangladesh Awami League came into power,
‘there are no Adivasis in the country’ in the eyes of the Awami League
government. The 15th Amendment to the constitution declared all citi-
zens of Bangladesh as ‘Bangalees’ and the government informed the
United Nations that ‘there are no Adivasis in the country’. The Constitution
(Fifteenth Amendment) Bill was presented to the parliament on 25 June
2011. Article 6 of the Bangladesh constitution states that “The people of
Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of
Bangladesh shall be known as Bangaladeshies.” This amendment mentions
adivasis as “tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities”. The bill
was passed on 30 June without any discussion.

Later, on 29 July 2011, the United Nations Economic and Social
Council (ECOSOC) in Geneva gave recognition to the indigenous peoples
of Bangladesh. But the Government of Bangladesh objected to this stating
that this was done without proper jurisdiction, transparency or neutrality.
On 26 July, in a meeting with diplomats and development partners, the
then foreign minister, Dipu Moni, asked them not to address the people
of the three Hill Districts as ‘adivi’ or indigenous people. The Minister of
Foreign Affairs informed: “There is no adivasi in the hill districts. The
inhabitants of those areas are small ethnic groups. That they will be referred
to as small ethnic groups is a settled issue.”

In the Awami League’s election manifesto of 2008, the rights of the
‘working people in the tea gardens’ is mentioned once. However, in the
last five years, there has been no mentionable change in the lives of tea
workers. In January 2009, the government formed a minimum wage board
for the tea garden workers. It was a 6-member board that included repre-
sentatives of both tea workers and tea plantation owners. This board fixed
Tk. 48, 46 and 45 as daily wages for the three categories of tea gardens.
At present, the daily cash pay is Tk. 69 whereas in neighboring Sri Lanka,
the daily wage of a tea worker is Rs. 550. In the last 5 years, there has
been little change in the lives of the tea workers and there has been no
improvement in the areas of education and health and this has threatened
the health and future of the women and girls of the community.

In 2008, during the time of the caretaker government, the Ministry of
Labor and Employment held elections of the trade union in two phases on
26 October and 2 November. It was for the first time that the panchayat,
valley and central committees were elected by direct votes of the workers.
However, before they could complete their term, an ad-hoc committee was
installed in its place in the Labor House with the government’s blessings.
To deal with the discontent of the tea workers, the government committed
itself to hold elections but as of 2014, there has been no election. This is a
serious setback for welfare of the tea workers and their union.

One of the grand alliance members, Workers Party of Bangladesh also
mentions the rights of indigenous people in article 15 of its election mani-
festo. The section is named, ‘Rights of the small ethnic communities and
adivasis’. A total of six pledges were made regarding indigenous people
of both the hilly regions and the plains. They placed an emphasis on con-
stitutional recognition including the right to be educated in ones mother
language. However, the Workers Party manifesto says nothing about the
rights of tea workers and small ethnic communities.

On the eve of the ninth parliamentary elections, the Bangladesh
Nationalist Party (BNP) in its manifesto (paragraph 31) talks of the rights
of the adivasis. However, it uses the word upojati or ‘tribal’ instead. The
section is titled, ‘Communal harmony and preservation of all communities
including the tribal people’. The fourth of its six pledges in this section
states, “The backward hill and tribal populations will be associated in the
national development trend at a greater scale by preserving their cultural
traditions and upholding all privileges provided to them in employment
in state and social spheres including education.” The fifth pledge states,
“Effective measures will be taken to promote development of all types to
improve life and livelihood in the hilly regions”. Paragraph 32 of the mani-
festo, titled, ‘Society and culture’ states ‘Adivasi cultural centers and acad-
emies will be further developed to encourage the cultures of the hill tribes
and adivasi people’. However, BNP’s election manifesto made no mention
regarding the rights of tea workers or the tea communities.

After independence, Bangladesh has progressed substantially.
However, the fate of the little-known ethnic communities has not changed.
(top) A tealeaf picker, busy in tealeaf plucking. (bottom) Labor line in the Udalea Tea Garden (Chittagong).

(top) A Bhumij village in Godagari upazila, Rajshahi. (bottom) A Turi family at Katapara village in Chirir Bandar upazila, Dinajpur.
In many ways, their hardships have increased. However, they still hope that the political parties will consider their pleas for protection and stand beside them. Thus, tea workers and the country’s small and little-known ethnic communities have raised their hopes, aspirations and demands in this agenda.

**Political Protection (Constitutional and Legal)**

- Without any consideration regarding the wishes of indigenous communities, the Constitution was amended to make the nationality of all the citizens of the country “Bangalees”. The constitution is for the welfare of all the people in the country. Bangalees are the majority race in Bangladesh. It must be mentioned that a small number of ethnic entities have been living here with their distinct cultures and languages from time immemorial. Without constitutional recognition of these ethnic communities, it is not possible to protect nearly 40 languages, diverse cultures, traditions, traditional laws, indigenous technologies and knowledge. Because of this, the indigenous and small ethnic communities demand that political parties make the necessary constitutional amendments to ensure recognition of these communities. It is only through constitutional recognition that proper legal mechanisms can be framed for these people who fall behind. One example of such constitutional recognition is seen in the fifth and sixth schedules of the Indian Constitution through which the state has given clear recognition to the small ethnic entities. Commitment is required from our political parties for adding similar schedules to the Bangladesh Constitution. Necessary process should be initiated right away to ensure justice and proper attitudes towards indigenous communities and small ethnic groups.

- The provisions for casual leave and earned leave, eviction from housing, maternity leave, etc. in the Labor Act of 2006 are discriminatory. Workers in other sectors get 10 days of casual leave but tea workers get none. Furthermore, other sectors give one day of earned leave for 18 days of work but tea garden workers need to work 22 days for one day of leave. It is necessary to bring in changes to the labor laws to eliminate these discriminations.

- Since tea workers have no other place to live outside the tea gardens, Section 32 of The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 dealing with residence should not be applicable to them. Section 32 of the Labour Act says "(1) A worker occupying a residential accommodation provided by his employer, whose service has been ceased for any means, shall vacate such

residential accommodation within a period of sixty days from the date of cessation of employment.”

**National and International Laws and Charters**

Several international charters and laws have made provisions for political protection, rights, and decent work conditions and have indicated the obligation of the states, international organizations and business entities.

Major international charters and laws applicable to tea workers and small ethnic groups of Bangladesh include:

1. Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107).
2. Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169).
5. Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention (Convention No. 98).

Bangladesh has not ratified 110 and 169 of the above mentioned ILO conventions. According to ILO convention regarding eradication of forced labor (1957, Convention No. 105), the Government of Bangladesh as a signatory state is under obligation to take effective measures to stop forced or compulsory labor. Though tea workers in Bangladesh may not be considered as forced labor on paper, in reality, they are trapped in the tea gardens generation after generation. There is no way for them to be free from the tea garden labor lines. There are many tea workers who have never seen the neighboring towns. Since there was no opportunity for education and because they live isolated from other communities, it is extremely hard for them to migrate out of the tea gardens. To change these conditions, the implementation of ILO Convention 105 is necessary.

It is important that Bangladesh ratifies or signs the ILO Convention 169 to establish land ownership of indigenous populations and small ethnic groups.

Important among the national laws regarding tea workers and small ethnic groups are:

2. The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950.

Tea workers want the implementation of The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 along with some necessary amendments. Religious minorities and small ethnic groups suffer from the application and misapplication of these laws. They want to see an end to all of these.

Wages and Other Benefits
- According to The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (Section 234), 5% of the profit of a business organization or enterprise has to go towards the labor participation fund and workers welfare fund, for use by joint decision of the workers. Even before the present labor act was passed, the tea workers were entitled to 5% of the profit of the gardens of which they have always been deprived. They want to enjoy the benefit to which they are entitled under the provisions of the present labor act.
- The daily cash pay (maximum Taka 69 in 2013) of tea worker is not satisfactory at all. The wage of tea workers should be decided by taking into account the wages in other agricultural sectors and the wages of tea workers in neighboring countries. The government has to play an appropriate role in this matter.
- Workers who are engaged in risky work like working in factories and pesticide spraying should be considered for extra wage or risk allowance.
- Workers who have worked for many years should not be kept as casual workers but must be confirmed as permanent workers within the timeframe stipulated by the labor law. Ration of tea workers shall not be slashed for the use of land up to one keyar (30 decimals) of khet land. Land tax at pro rata rate of Tk. 500 per acre per year can be collected above one keyar. All regular workers should be given Provident Fund facility and it should be increased at the rate of 15%. All dues including Provident Fund of a tea worker should be paid within 30 days of retirement.
- The agricultural laborers among the landless small ethnic communities become subject to various discriminations including unjust daily wages. This wage discrimination must be eliminated.

Decent Work Conditions
The owners of the tea gardens and the government should especially be concerned about the issues relating to the decent work conditions of the tea workers. Child labor, workers being forced to work against their will, barriers against forming unions, wage deprivation, health and education problems, scarcity of opportunities in human resource development, and lack of suitable environment for skill development in the tea industry create indecent work conditions for the tea workers. The owners have to show that they have good intentions and the government has to impose strict laws to improve the work conditions of the tea workers.

Health
Low quality and insufficient housing, malnutrition and unhealthy sanitation are the general traits of the labor lines, the residence of the tea workers. The majority of the tea workers defecate out in the open whereas only four percent of the total populations of the country defecate in open spaces. The drainage system of the labor lines is in terrible condition. Access to pure drinking water is insufficient as well. Most of the worker families have to use water from wells and streams. The workers suffer from diseases like malaria and diarrhoea for the lack of sanitation. Women and children suffer from extreme malnutrition because of the lack of sufficient amount of food. Furthermore leprosy, tuberculosis, and anaemia are more prevalent in the labor lines than in other regions of the country. Ninety five percent of babies are born in unclean households. In addition, the tea workers spraying pesticides and chemicals without proper protective clothing become victims of many diseases. However, they do not receive sufficient treatment. Even though there are labor welfare centers in the valleys of the tea gardens, most of the time, there are no doctors available. The good health of workers is essential for any industry and so it is the responsibility of the authorities of the tea garden to ensure adequate health care for the tea workers in the labor lines who lead lives in exclusion and have little income.
- It is important to provide sanitary latrines and pure drinking water to reduce morbidity rates in the tea gardens. Health care centers should be established in every tea garden including fari (subsidiary) gardens to ensure proper health care for the ill tea workers. An MBBS doctor should be appointed in each of the health care centers and his presence should be ensured. There should be a hospital with modern and high quality health care facilities in each of seven valleys. In addition, according to section 89 of the Bangladesh the Labor Act, 2006 there should be a dispensary with first-aid appliances in every tea garden and fari garden.
- In most of the tea gardens, masks, hand gloves, aprons and other necessary protective clothing are not supplied to the workers who spray pesticides that lead to severe health hazards. Many workers suffer from chest pain and other respiratory problems. It is the duty of the author-
One health worker for every 50 families should be employed to raise
awareness about diseases and family planning.

- The little income of the poverty-stricken tea workers is not enough to
ensure proper medical treatment for all members of the family. Thus,
the owners of the gardens should make sure that every worker and his
or her family is receiving proper health care. The authorities should
bear all the expenses of the patients under treatment including nurs-
ing services, even if the patient is in a hospital outside the tea garden.
The possible expenses should be given as an advance. In case of severe
disease, the patients should get sick leave till they get well while still
keeping their jobs.

- Ambulances should be available in the tea gardens as transportation
for the patients. Sufficient health workers for the health and medical
treatment of little-known ethnic communities in secluded and remote
areas are also necessary.

Education

There are only six governmental primary schools in 156 tea gardens
in the north-eastern and south-western regions of the country. According
to Bangladesh Tea Board, there are 188 schools run by the authorities
of the tea gardens, all of them primary schools. Furthermore, there are some
schools that are managed by donor-dependent NGOs. The condition
of these schools is also not good. The seating arrangements, teachers, class-
rooms, and furniture are not sufficient. Even attendance copies are not
available for each class. Most of the students cannot afford to buy the edu-
cational materials and many cannot manage to pay the examination fees.
The government does not have any statistics regarding the percentage
of children who are not receiving education or cannot continue to study.
However, it is quite clear that most of the students in the primary level
cannot continue their studies further. The low family income the is rea-
son behind this situation. Furthermore, there are only three high schools
(class six to class 10) is 156 tea gardens. Similarly, the students from little-
known ethnic communities cannot continue their studies for lack of op-
opportunities and negligence. These children fail to keep up with their edu-
cation due to lack of educational materials and teachers. They cannot even
study in their own mother tongue. Necessary steps should be immediately
taken to make enough educational opportunities available for the children
of these ethnic communities as part of the overall development process of
the country.

- It becomes impossible for the NGOs to keep their schools running
when there is not enough foreign donation. Thus, there should be gov-
ernmental primary schools in every tea garden based on demand and
at least one high school in each of the valleys to maintain uninterrupted
educational services. At least four teachers should be employed in each
primary school. It would be productive to hasten the current process of
nationalization of the schools in the tea gardens.

- The parents within the little-known ethnic communities want their
children to learn Bangla as it is used in the schools. By doing so, they
can neither pass on their own languages to their next generation nor
can they absorb the mainstream culture completely. It is necessary to
ensure that students from different ethnic communities can study in
their own languages in primary level to maintain the cultural diversity
of Bangladesh and broaden the spheres of education. The government
should take necessary steps to publish school-books in indigenous
languages and employ teachers who are proficient in those languages. Quali-
fied people amongst the tea workers should get preference in the
employment as teachers in the government schools in the tea gardens.

- Almost everyone in the tea community and the majority of the little-
known ethnic communities is landless and extremely poor. Thus,
books, school uniforms, and other necessary materials for education
should be provided to the students from these communities for free.
Also, quotas for students from little-known ethnic and tea garden com-
unities should be set in higher education levels.

- Stipend money from Tea Workers Welfare Fund and Tea Garden Educa-
tion Trust should be handed out to the students before admission in
secondary, higher secondary, and university level education.

- Arrangements for technical education along with general education
should be made in the tea gardens. Adult education centers should be
established as well.

Land and Property Rights

An overwhelming majority of the little-known ethnic communities is land-
less for various reasons such as lack of recognition of traditional land,
poverty, and political and social powerlessness. Many live temporarily on
the khas (public) land and become displaced if someone powerful grabs
that land. Even if they manage to find some new place to live, they cannot
access minimum cultivable land. They end up working as day-laborers in
someone else’s land. Thus, the people from little-known ethnic communi-
ties are gravely concerned about land entry rights and ownership. Some
ethnic communities have limited rights and some have no rights on land.
They are losing control over land as their rights to traditional land is not recognized.

On the other hand, 115,000 hectares of land has been granted for tea cultivation in the northeast and southeast of the country. These are all government land. Forty-five percent of the grant land is under tea cultivation. However, the tea community has no right over this vast amount of land. Ration is slashed against khet (paddy) land given to families who use it for cultivation. There were also incidents of taking away of the paddy land from the workers.

Some steps to be taken to ensure land rights of the tea workers and other little-known ethnic communities are:

- The ILO convention No.169 relating to land rights should be ratified and made a reality. Rights to land and property should be ensured by forming a land commission for the adivasis of the plains land.
- Land for homestead and khet land should be permanently allotted to every family in the tea community.
- Of the governmental land granted for tea cultivation, 12,441.83 hectares are khet land. Even though the tea workers use this land for cultivation, the control remains in the hands of tea garden management owners. This system is illogical. A process to permanently award ownership of this land to the tea workers should be initiated under the policy and law that allow distribution of the khas land to the landless. The people from the tea community should be included in the governmental list as landless and khas land should be distributed among them.
- A commission should be set up to find out the condition of the land granted for production of tea and to gain better understanding of the land use situation. Monoculture plantation (rubber and others) in the high land where tea is not cultivated should be stopped and this land should be brought under tea cultivation. The natural forest patches that still survive should be protected. The ponds within the tea gardens should be leased to the tea workers. The employment of the little-known ethnic communities and tea workers communities should be secured.

Protection of Women and Children

The female tea workers and their children are the most neglected and oppressed among the oppressed. The women tea workers have to walk two to three miles to go to the gardens for work. They also have to walk for miles in the garden during the course of their work. Even after this extreme hard work, they are deprived of nutritious food. Thus, they suffer from anaemia and malnutrition. The women in the gardens are married off at a very early age. They suffer from different types of complications like frequent pregnancy, lack of treatment before and after child birth etc. Under weight babies are born, and maternal and infant mortality increases because of the mother's malnutrition. Furthermore, there is severe lack of sexual protection for women and children.

- A woman tea worker has to work for hours, standing, even if she is pregnant, which is very risky for health. Maternity leave and payment for the tea workers should be ensured as government law states so.
Also medicine, medical treatment, and nutritious food should be provided to the mother and her child during pregnancy.

- Childcare centers should be built in every tea garden and *fari* garden. Nutritious food and recreational materials should be provided there as well.
- The number of female workers should be increased in the tea gardens. Female *sarders* should be employed in the part of gardens where tea leaves are collected.
- Special arrangements should be made to expand female education.
- The sexual safety of women and children should be ensured.

**Workplace**

Decent work conditions for the workers are yet to be ensured. The tea industry is plagued with many problems including child labor, forced labor, obstacles in forming unions, insufficient wages, obstruction in developing skills, and lack of opportunities for human resource development.

- The right to form trade unions at the garden, valley, and national levels should be ensured in tea industry like in other industries. Necessary legal reform should be taken to ensure this.
- Trainings should be arranged for the tea workers to increase their awareness about rights. The trade union itself should take this responsibility. Employment opportunities should be created by giving vocational training to the unemployed population in the tea gardens. Qualified children of the tea communities should be given priority for employment in all institutions related to the tea industry.
- Qualified children of the tea communities should be given special consideration in employment in all government and semi-government institutions. The improvement of the standard of living of the tea workers should be given special attention in the plans and projects for development of the tea industry undertaken by the state and owners’ organizations.
- The free flow of information related to tea workers, gardens, and tea industry should be ensured.

**Conclusion**

The tea workers and people from little-known ethnic communities have been suffering from severe political and socio-economic problems. Deprived of fair wages, education, and health care for generations, they are not only poor; they are a particularly deprived community surviving on the fringe of society. If they are considered only to be a poor community, they cannot escape from the deep hardships that engulf them. Aside from being deprived of opportunities, they are also cut off from the local communities. In some instances, they are considered untouchables and kept away from the mainstream society. A crucial problem for the tea worker community is that they are not familiar with the workplace and social environment outside the tea gardens. Thus, certain policies, plans and specific services should be guaranteed for these groups. The political parties have a lot to contribute as well. The tea workers and people from little-known ethnic communities should not be considered only as vote banks. It is necessary to give them the opportunity to actively participate in politics. Pledges that the parties made should be analyzed on the one hand, and on the other hand, specific steps should be taken to ensure fair representation of the tea workers and little-known ethnic communities in elections. The conscious people and the civil society of the country should also cooperate to make sure that the political parties and the state fulfill their commitments and responsibilities towards the tea workers and people from among the little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh.

Participants involved in group work at the inception seminar of the project, “Mapping and Capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh” held on 8 September, 2013 in Dhaka.
Article 27 of the constitution provides that “All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law”. Similarly, article 28 (1) states, “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.”

Does the state play its role in ensuring the rights of tea workers guaranteed by the constitution?

A woman tea worker in Srimongol area. A Bhumij in Godagari upazila, Rajshahi.

The Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Bill was presented to the parliament on 25 June 2011. Article 6 of the Bangladesh constitution states that “The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshies”. This amendment mentions adivasis as “tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities”. The bill was passed on 30 June without any discussion.