

# People on the Fringe

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Editor

**Philip Gain**

Editorial Assistants

**James Sujit Malo and Rabiullah**

Layout Assistance

**Prosad Sarker**

Advisors

**Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman,  
Moazzem Hossain, Joyanta  
Adhikari and David Hilton**

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Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)

Green Valley, 147/1 (2nd floor),  
Flat No. 2A, Green Road,  
Dhaka-1215, Bangladesh

T: +880-2-58153846, E: sehd@sehd.org  
www.sehd.org

## Leaving No One Behind

### Convention in Sreemangal on Social, Economic and Political Protection of the Marginal and Excluded Communities



Prof. Wahiduddin is giving chief guest's speech at the inaugural session in Sreemangal convention. Photo: Prosad Sarker

With active participation of all applicants the convention on the theme, 'Social, economic and political protection of the marginal and excluded communities' was held on 22 and 23 November 2018 in Sreemangal of Moulvibazar district. The convention was the second in a row of three.

While the organizers shared summary of the findings of studies and analysis on different excluded communities and draft roadmap, the assembly of around 400 people including leading economists, educationists, officials of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), government officials in the district and upazila administrations,

trade unionists, representatives of excluded communities, human rights defenders and the media shared their experiences, opinions, thoughts and commitment to work together in dealing with exclusion challenges in Bangladesh.

The inaugural session was graced by Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud, an eminent economist, as chief guest. Other dignitaries at the inaugural session were: Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman, Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC); Prof. Farid Uddin Ahmed, vice-chancellor of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST); Nurul Quader, representative of



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Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh; Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU); Md. Tofail Islam, deputy commissioner and district magistrate, Moulvibazar; Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, an eminent writer; Shulekha Mrong, president, Achik Michik Society, Md. Abdul Awal, vice-chairman, Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA); Dr. Mohammad Abdul Wazed, former director general, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Moazzem Hossain, chief executive, Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK).

The final beneficiaries—ethnic communities, Harijans (sweepers), Bedes (gypsies), Jaladas (fishing community in the coast), Kaiputra (pig rearing community), Rishi (cobblers), sex workers, Biharis and other smaller communities—face multi-dimensional exclusion and poverty challenges. While some difficulties that these communities face are common, many are unique to each of the communities.

Two plenary and eight parallel sessions held during the convention covered wide-ranging issues—identity, languages, cultures and constitutional recognition; land rights; labour law and negotiations between tea garden owners and tea workers; working together in achieving SDGs in the tea garden; international instruments and national laws; issues of the Bede, sex workers and Rishi and select ethnic communities; sexual and reproductive health rights and WASH rights of the tea, Bede and Harijan communities; and developing strategies and mechanisms to scale up the capacity to deal with social, economic and political protection of the excluded communities. In all parallel sessions written keynote presentations, papers and investigative reports were shared to engage the participants in effective discussion

and interaction.

Considering the unique difficulties that the marginal communities face what should be done with great attention include: (i) Mainstreaming the discussion on marginal communities. The issue of marginality should become a national agenda. The discussion also needs to be linked to the global level. (ii) Establishing identities of specific communities with statistics and analysis. The work, already done, should be pushed forward. (iii) Policy and intervention related to land and other concerns. (iv) Increasing visibility of the marginal communities and (v) Continued discussion and dialogue among stakeholders. The work to collectively develop the problem tree and solution had begun in the convention in Rangpur in 2017, which was further refreshed in Sreemangal convention.

#### **Cultural festival with Sreemangal convention**

A cultural festival was piggybacked with the convention. In the evenings of 22 and 23 November nine cultural teams from the Khasi, Monipuri, Munda, Oraon, Shobdokor, Santal, Telegu, Bhumij, Bauri, Chasha, Biswas, Rai and Ghatual performed their unique traditional songs and dances and staged a drama. Pathik Theatre, a cultural group consisting of around fifteen youngsters from Chunarughat Tea Garden performed a unique drama on the history, culture and land rights of the tea workers. The artists from Bhumij, Goala, Bauri, Chasha, Biswas, Rai, and Ghatual communities played in the drama, Nij Bhume Parabashi (exiled in own land), which is inspired by the historical event that took place on May 2, 1921 known as Muloke Cholo, a movement of the tea workers to go back to their



Stage performance of a cultural team from tea gardens. Photo: Philip Gain

roots. The objective of the drama was to portray the oppression, deception, and discrimination that tea workers experience in their life. The cultural group received huge applause for their performance from the audience.

What was unique of the cultural teams is that majority of the members were tea workers and their children. The Monipuri and Khasi cultural groups were equally colourful and very entertaining.

What amazed the visitors to the cultural evenings were lectures on languages and cultures of the tea communities and Adivasis of the greater Sylhet that preceded the stage performance. On the both days researchers, writers and educationists spoke on languages and cultures of tea communities and ethnic people of Bangladesh. In their lectures they made it clear that the languages and cultures of Adivasis and marginal communities have profusely enriched Bangla language and Bengali culture. There are 80 communities living in the tea gardens. They speak 14 languages. However, their languages are getting lost under pressure of the majority language and culture.

The speakers also pointed out that the cultural riches of the Adivasi and marginal communities are their strengths in all difficulties, deprivation and sufferings they face. That identities will survive, if cultures survive was highlighted by many of the speakers. □

## NATIONAL CONVENTION Discrimination, Exclusion and Rights of the Marginal and Excluded People

Photo: Saydur Rahman



The guests at the inaugural session are showing the book, “Modhupur: The Vanishing Forest and Her People in Agony” after its official launch.

A national convention on the theme, “Discrimination, Exclusion and Rights of the Marginal and Excluded People” was held on 20 and 21 June 2019 at LGED Bhaban, Agargaon, Dhaka. The convention was the last in a row of three. It was organized to highlight the issues of social exclusion and discrimination in Bangladesh and explore a roadmap to lift these communities out of poverty and enshrine their human rights.

While the organizers shared the summary of the three and half years of research findings, analysis and publications, an assembly of around 400 people including leading economist, educationists, officials of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), representatives of tea communities, trade unions, ethnic communities, and other excluded groups, civil society, community-based organizations, state actors, human right organizations, cultural groups and media shared their experiences, opinions, thoughts and commitments to work together in dealing with exclusion challenges in Bangladesh and enshrine the rights of these groups. The assembly representing more around 30 ethnic and marginal communities also gave their consent to the ‘Dhaka Declaration’ adopted in

the convention to tackle exclusion challenges in Bangladesh and highlight the rights of the marginal and excluded people.

The inaugural session was graced by Prof. Rehman Sobhan, the most leading economist of Bangladesh, as chief guest. Other dignitaries at the inaugural session included: Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman, Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC); Prof. Rounaq Jahan, distinguished fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Audrey Maillot, team leader, governance, Delegation of the European Union; Joyanta Adhikari, executive director, Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB); Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, eminent writer; and Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU).

The marginal and excluded people—ethnic communities, Harijans (sweepers), Bedes (gypsies), Jaladas (fishing community in the coast), Kaiputra (pig rearing community), Rishi (cobblers), sex workers, Biharis and other smaller communities—face deprivation in terms of decent life, job security, income, resources, access to loans, housing, education, skills, cultural capital, welfare state,

citizenship and equal rights before law, democratic participation, human treatment and dignity.

Two plenary and seven parallel sessions were held during the two-day convention and covered wide-ranging issues of the marginal and excluded communities—identity, culture and languages; ways to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the marginal and excluded communities; understanding international instruments and national laws; innovative approaches in understanding and analysing the problems of the excluded communities; understanding micro-realities of forest and commons in Modhupur; land rights of the marginal and excluded communities; and strategies for protection of the marginal and excluded communities. In all parallel sessions written keynote presentations, paper and investigation reports were shared to engage participants in effective discussion and interaction. The book, “Modhupur: The Vanishing Forest and Her People in Agony” was launched at the inaugural session and a session was dedicated for the premiere screening of the film, “Aranyer Artonad (Sylvan Tears)”.

### Cultural festival piggybacked with the convention

A cultural festival was piggybacked with the convention. In the evenings of 20 and 21 June 2019 seven cultural teams from among the Garo, Santal, Telegu, Mandraji, Rajbhar, Monipuri, Baraik, Mahle, Paharia communities and one team from Transgender (Hijra) performed their unique traditional songs and dances. The Santal cultural team welcomed the guests with famous Dasai (welcome dance) of the Santals in the morning of 20 November 2019.

What was unique of the cultural teams was that they were very colourful and very entertaining. The magic of Babul Rabidas added an extra flavour in both convention and



Mahle cultural team at the cultural programme. Photo: Philip Gain

cultural evenings. The Mahle and Paharia cultural teams portrayed

their traditional occupations and religious beliefs through dances and songs. The stick dances of artists from tea garden were stunning.

What amazed the visitors to the cultural evenings were lectures on resistance of ethnic and marginal communities through cultural forms, research and writing. On both days researchers, writers and educationists spoke on Adivasi culture, history of oppression and

forms of resistance. In their lecture they made it clear that cultural symbols—bow and arrow, torches and drums or *madols*, songs and play could be transformed into symbolic icons for resistance for rights. The speakers also pointed out that cultural riches, oral and written history are the strengths of the marginal and excluded communities. □

## Dhaka Declaration-2019

Adopted at the National Convention on Discrimination, Exclusion and Rights of the Marginal and Excluded People

We, different ethnic and marginal people, tea workers, Harijans, Rishi, Jaladas, Kaiputra, Bede, sex workers, Robidas, Transgender (Hijra), Bihari, human rights defenders, government and non-government organizations and researchers who have been working together for a long time and participated in the national convention on discrimination, exclusion and rights of the marginal and excluded people organized by 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) on 20-21 June 2019 at LGED Bhaban, Agargaon, Dhaka have adopted this declaration, which will be considered as Dhaka Declaration.

A significant percentage (approximately six millions) of 165 million people in Bangladesh face discrimination and indignity for their ethnic identity, occupation, casteism, untouchability, cultural differences, geographic locations, captive situation and various other reasons. Bangladesh has drawn attention of the world as a role model of development. However, the marginal people have difficulties in treading the same path of

development as equal citizens of Bangladesh. As a consequence, these communities live in distress under extreme poverty. Bangladesh cannot be a good model of development leaving these people behind. It is to be noted that ‘Leaving no one behind’ is a key commitment of Bangladesh as regards SDGs.

We reiterate our commitment for elimination of all forms of discrimination against the marginal communities through this Dhaka Declaration. Following are our major demands and recommendations.

1. We demand the state recognition for all ethnic and marginal communities of Bangladesh on one hand and on the other want the concerned state agencies to generate accurate statistics on their population. The government, in a gazette notification dated 19 March 2019 under the *Khudra Nri-goshthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010) has increased the number of small ethnic groups to 50 from its previous list of 27 (including three duplications). However, according to recent research, there are still around 50 small ethnic communities who are left out from the government list.

We demand inclusion of these communities in the government list. We strongly recommend that Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) generates accurate statistics on these communities in the upcoming census in 2021. We are committed to provide all possible supports in this regard.

2. We strongly recommend that the government provides constitutional recognition, legal protection and scales up privileges for safety and protection of the ethnic communities and marginal groups.
3. Bangladesh Labour Law, 2006 allows tea workers to unionize only at the national level. This is a legalized discrimination. The labour law is also discriminatory for the tea workers in relation to casual leave, earned leave, gratuity and eviction from the residence. We demand for appropriate and immediate amendment of the labour law to end discrimination against the tea workers and their families.
4. A common problem that the tea workers and Harijans face is wage discrimination and income disparity. We strongly urge the government to immediately take appropriate measures in this regard.
5. We strongly demand for setting up of sufficient number of public primary schools on urgent basis so that the children of marginal communities—tea workers,

Harijans, Bede, sex workers and Jaladas are not deprived of education. We also demand for introducing quotas in universities for the children of marginal people.

6. The people of the marginal communities, in many instances, do not get decent and safe work condition. They are also deprived of government healthcare. We strongly demand for ensuring appropriate work condition, health services and financial incentives to these marginal people.
7. Tea workers and Harijans are completely landless. The percentage of landlessness among other marginal and small ethnic communities is also high. It is urgent to increase their access to *khas* (public) land. We strongly demand that the government provides land ownership to the tea workers and Harijans on land they have been living on and using for more a hundred years. We also strongly support the demand for establishment of a separate land commission at the auspice of the state to ensure the land rights of the tea workers and other landless marginal communities.
8. We strongly urge the government to sign the ILO convention No. 169 to ensure the customary land rights of the Adivasis who have been living on the forest land for generations. We also request the government to implement other international instruments and national laws in favour of the marginal communities.
9. We fervently request the Planning Commission of the Government of Bangladesh to furnish specific information in the next progress report on SDGs about progress made in development of the marginal communities.
10. We strongly demand for separate and special attention

on the marginal and excluded people in the upcoming eighth five-year plan of the Government of Bangladesh.

11. We strongly urge for strengthening prompt the government and non-government response in investigating and reporting on issues related to human right abuses—land grabbing, reservation of forest, land acquisition and requisition, etc.
12. We demand for increased government efforts to protect and promote more than 40 languages other than Bangla spoken by different ethnic groups in Bangladesh and to promote at least primary level education in their mother languages. At the same time we demand that the society and the state work for nurturing and flourishing of the cultures of the ethnic communities.
13. Forest cases are a matter of great worries for the people of Modhupur and other forest areas in Bangladesh. Most of these cases are allegedly false or intentional. We appeal to the Government, Forest Department and the Judiciary to settle these cases as soon as possible.
14. The marginal and excluded people have become weak because of misdeeds, injustice and discrimination they have faced for generations. They need to develop skills through technical training alongside general education in order to participate in the race for development. We request the government to build their skills through vocational training in consideration of needs and demands of different marginal communities with government budget. We also urge the government officials to be more considerate to these people. We strongly demand active participation of the marginal

communities in the formulation and implementation of development projects that involve them.

15. The Government of Bangladesh has different social safety net programmes to reduce poverty. We urge for ensuring legitimate demand and opportunity of the marginal and excluded people in these programmes.
16. We demand that the government commits to ensure civil rights including land rights of the marginal people and we demand allocation of necessary and sufficient budget for this.

Ensuring political, social and economic protection to the marginal communities is a major challenge for Bangladesh. It is not expected that all debates about the definition, identity, number and population size of different marginal and excluded communities will come to an end any time soon. But the state and non-state organizations must play their role right to bring changes in the lives of people who are among the extreme poor and deprived of their legitimate rights. However, all marginal communities do not face the same difficulties. It is to be noted that the difficulties they face are not uniform and there is no single solution for all of them. We expect sincere commitments of the state and others concerned to ensure rights and protection of the marginal and excluded communities. At the same time, we, different marginal communities and those who work with them commit to work from our individual and collective capacities to keep up all initiatives and dynamisms to ensure the philosophy, “Leaving no one behind” in Bangladesh.

21 June 2019

*On behalf of more than 400 representatives from among more than 30 small ethnic and marginal communities. □*

## Photography Exhibition BRATTYAJAN: Social Outcasts, Marginal and Excluded

Photo: Saydur Rahman



Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud is inaugurating the photography exhibition. He is surrounded by (from left) Dr. Shahidul Alam, Moazzem Hossain, Prof. Adnan Zillur Morshed, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, Dr. Harishankar Jaladas and Philip Gain.

There are groups of people and communities that have become victims of discrimination, exploitation and exclusion for generations or for hundreds of years and in some cases for a thousand years. They are spread around the world including Bangladesh. The factors that underline include the beliefs and disbeliefs in fictional realities (religions), ethnic identities, slavery, occupations, casteism, culture, migration, hatred and geographical locations among others. The people, too weak, marginalized and broken can be called BRATTYAJAN. In Maxim Gorky's play, *The Lower Depth*, they are social outcasts and in Hindu casteism or Varna they belong even below the Shudra or in the fifth Varna. Their capability deprivation is deep-rooted and it is possibly the biggest modern-day challenge for Bangladesh, South Asia and many other countries in the world.

The implementors of the project organized the photography exhibition, BRATTYAJAN (The Lower Depths) by Philip Gain from 19 to 25 June 2019 at DRIK Gallery, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

The exhibition brought to light the ethnic and tea communities,

Bede, sex workers, Kaiputra, Rishi, Harijan, Jaladas and Bihari. They constitute most of the social outcasts and excluded people of Bangladesh. Around 200 images showing the identities, lives and struggles of these communities were on display at the exhibition.

The opening of the photography exhibition was held on 19 June 2019. The participants in the opening session—as many as 150—represented ethnic and marginal communities, anthropologists, architect, film makers, researchers, writers and journalists. Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, the chief guest, opened the exhibition with other guests.

A panel of experts spoke at the opening session. They shed light on exclusion challenges and the difficulties these communities face in treading the path of development as equal citizens of Bangladesh.

Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, the chief guest at the opening session, reflected on the condition of the marginal and excluded communities in Bangladesh. “It is very unfortunate that the marginal and excluded communities are undercounted and unnoticed in the government

planning, statistics and national census,” remarked Prof. Mahmud. “In the government planning, their rights and social protection are not adequately addressed. Now it is time to engage them and ensure equality for all.”

“The main objective of recent economic policy in Bangladesh is that there would be no destitute (*Brattyajan*) in the country by 2030. The *Brattyajan* constitutes three to four percentage of the total population. Is it possible to reduce poverty if these number remains unnoticed?” questioned Prof. Mahmud.

The images of 115 communities including tea workers, Adivasis, Bede, Harijan, Jaladas, Rishi, sex workers, Kaiputra (pig rearing community) and Biharis were displayed in exhibition. Besides, 25 exclusive pictures on Modhupur showed how monoculture and other factors have changed the landscape and environment of a unique forest that survived thousands of years.

The chair of the launch, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of PPRC and former advisor to the caretaker government, reminded in his remarks, “Documentation is unavoidable to scale up visibility of the marginal communities, who remain out of sight. The lead photographer of the exhibition, Philip Gain has been working restlessly to bring the excluded and marginal people to light. It is now important for all of us to work together to make them visible.” Dr. Rahman stressed on the inclusion of these communities in the eighth five-year plan of the government.

Others who spoke at the launching were Dr. Shahidul Alam, an internationally renowned photographer; Masihuddin Saker, architect and filmmaker; Professor Adnan Zillur Morshed, executive director, Centre for Inclusive Architect and Urbanism, BRAC University; Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, writer and novelist; Chitta Ghosh, senior journalist, Bede leader Soud Khan and Moazzem Hossain, chief executive of GBK. □

## Roundtable Discussion

### Modhupur Sal Forest: Its Demise, Demographic Changes and Customary Land Rights



The participants at the roundtable discussion. Photo: Prosad Sarker

“The government should formulate national policy reconciling local and other interest groups to sustain the remaining forests. However, without good governance those policies may not work unless laws are enacted to safeguard the forest and its people,” said Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud at a roundtable discussion titled, “Modhupur *Sal* Forest: Its Demise, Demographic Changes and Customary Land Rights” organized on 29 July 2019 at Ban Bhaban in Agargaon. Around 120 participants attended the roundtable discussion.

Prof. Mahmud, chief guest of the discussion also said, “The country’s interest depends on the preservation of the forest resources even though the land and forest resources in our country are scarce. However, forest resources are decreasing in the country, particularly in Modhupur. Now, we are in a situation where blaming each other is fruitless. The government, with comprehensive plan, can save what remains of the forest and solve complex land issues in Modhupur.”

In his keynote presentation, Philip Gain, Director of SEHD and team leader, shared the key finds of a household survey in 44 forest villages in Modhupur *sal* forest area. “The Garo and Koch, once exclusive

occupants of Modhupur *sal* forest are nowadays far outnumbered by the Bangalees. Among the 11,048 households surveyed in five unions (Kuragachha, Fulbagchala, Beribaid, Sholakuri and Aronkhola), 64.61% are Bangalees and 35.39% are Garos,” reported Gain. “Land possession and ownership is one of the most critical issues in Modhupur forest villages. Only 13% Bangalee and 4.19% Garo households have title deeds (CS or RoR) for their homestead land in the forest villages. This means majority of households have homesteads on customary land. Besides, smaller percentage of households has title deeds for other types of land (high land and low land).”

“Social forestry has, in fact, been a major source of forest cases and tension among the local people. In the 44 forest villages surveyed, the number of forest cases found is 3,029, of which 2,157 are against the Bangalees and 872 against the Garos. It is necessary to take proper initiative to save the forests and settle the false forest cases.”

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, the chair of the roundtable discussion and executive chairman of PPRC in his concluding remarks called for affirmative discussions and reconciliation of different interests

between the Forest Department and forest people in Modhupur. “We find three interests regarding the Modhupur forest—forest conservation, agriculture and the demands of the people living there. Modhupur forest will not survive without the coordination of these interests. We have to understand these interests first and then move to a sustainable solution through discussion,” explained Dr. Rahman.

In his reflection on the customary land right of the ethnic people in Modhupur, Dr. Rahman said, “The majority of the ethnic people living in Modhupur *sal* forest area do not have title deeds for their land. If the land issues cannot be solved by means of title deeds, it can be solved from the perspective of Sustainable Development Goals agenda.” He advised the Forest Department to solve compoundable forest cases through discussion and scale up the Garo representation among the community forest workers (CFWs) to save the forest from extinction. He suggested for a tripartite survey on land possession among the Forest Department, Garos and Bangalees.

Those who participated in discussion included: Md. Yunus Ali, former Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF); Theophil Nokrek, Garo writer; Eugin Nokrek, president, Joyenshahi Adivasi Samaj Kallyan Shangstha; Shulekha Mrong, executive director, Achik Michik Society; Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka; Dr. Mohammed Zahirul Haque, Assistant Chief Conservator of Forest (ACCF), Forest Department; Harun-Ur-Rashid, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Tangail Forest Division; Ajoy A. Mree, president, Adivasi Cultural Development Forum; Bikson Nokrek, UP member, Sholakuri Union; Abdul Majid Mallick, development consultant; Farid Uddin Ahmed, executive director, Arannayk Foundation; Akter Hossen, chairman, Sholakuri Union Parishad; and Md. Abdur Rahim, chairman, Aronkhola Union Parishad. □

## Capacity Building Workshop for BCSU and Panchayets

A residential workshop was organized on 26-28 October 2018 in Sreemangal to address the challenges faced by the only trade union of the tea workers, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), as well as to analyse the legal instruments that are used to monitor violations of labour laws and labour standards with special attention to irregularities regarding maternal health. Twenty-eight *panchayet*, valley and garden-level leaders of BCSU from Kamalganj, Sreemangal, Sylhet and Chattogram districts attended the workshop.

The needs for internal communication, constructive criticism and bargaining skills of the leaders were discussed to strengthen the only trade union of the tea workers. The participants prepared a list of sections of the labour laws that are most frequently violated including wage, confirmation of job and appointment letter, ration, housing, utilities and education and concluded that a survey on the irregularities and violation of labour laws is required to map the real situation in the tea gardens. They also addressed the need of a research and publication wing

in BCSU to analyse and monitor violations of labour laws, labour standards and other irregularities. Lastly, special emphasis was given to address sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) of the tea workers including taking care of menstruation, vaccination, child marriage, ante-natal care, nutrition, infant and maternal health and mental health. □

## Workshop to Scale up Capacity of Adivasi Leaders of North-western Districts

Twenty-three leaders from the ethnic people's organizations, student organizations, community-based organizations, village forums of CCDB and GBK (from five districts of north-western of Bangladesh) participated in a capacity building workshop held on 12-14 January 2019 at GBK premises in Parbatipur, Dinajpur. Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) and Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) took lead in organizing the workshop. The objectives of the training were to scale up capacity of leaders to run organizations, strengthen their leadership capacity to address human rights abuses and to explore how diverse cultures in Bangladesh can be promoted.

A panel of experts on organizational management, human rights, languages and cultures shared tips, skills and experiences. The skill and capacity building areas discussed at the workshop included improving financial management and administration of organizations, role of organizations in the protection of Adivasis and techniques of scaling up organizational capacity, ways and means of strengthening communication and networks among organizations that work with the Adivasis, protection of the Adivasi languages and cultures, difficulties the Adivasi organizations of the north-western districts face, laws particularly the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 that protects the land of the Adivasis and the peoples forums of CCDB and how they run. A documentary film, *Matir Maya* (Elegy on land) on Adivasi land rights was screened to show insurmountable difficulties including physical abuses the Adivasis face in protecting their land.

The participants in their group work mapped their strengths, weaknesses in generating funds and their utilization and understanding challenges, constraints and needs. □

## The Project in the End

The three and half year project, "Defining the excluded groups, mapping their current status, strengthening their capacity and partnerships" beginning in February 2016 comes to an end in July 2019. All activities planned have been successfully implemented. The overall objective of the project—promoting participation and representation of the socially excluded groups in social, cultural and political organizations—has been achieved to great extent.

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) and other applicants—Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK)—have implemented the project activities with support from the European Union and ICCO Cooperation. Five associates—Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad (JAP) based in Northwest and umbrella body of all ethnic communities in this region, Jayensahi Adivasi Samaj Kallyan Shangstha (JASKS) and Achik Michik Society (AMS) based in

Modhupur in Tangail district, and Moulvibazar Cha Jangoshthi Adivasi Front (MCJAF) and Bagania based in the tea gardens and working with the tea workers and their communities—actively participated in the implementation of the project activities.

The project implementors, together with the final beneficiaries and targets, worked to define and study the socially excluded groups and map their needs and constraints. Around 17,000 individuals representing all 10 clusters of the final beneficiaries and targets participated in conventions,

workshops, consultations, research and actual survey, analysis, investigations, photography exhibition, and assessment of needs and constraints. Among them 544 are human rights defenders from among the excluded communities, CBOs, CSOs and media who directly participated in capacity building trainings and workshops. These individuals represented 228 organizations (CBOs and CSOs), 7 tea estates and valleys (every tea estate has at least one panchayet, which amounts to an organization) and 100 media organizations.

One key activity of the project was to define and study the final beneficiary groups—ethnic communities of the plains, tea communities, Harijans (sweepers), Kaiputra (pig rearing community), Bede (gypsies), Jaladas (water slaves), sex workers, Rishi, Biharis and other excluded communities. An exceptional survey was conducted on 11,048 households in 44 forest villages in Modhupur, Tangail. The participation of the community members, writers and researchers from among these communities in studies, surveys and investigations was phenomenal. Seven monographs, books, survey reports and other printed materials published and documentary films produced have created benchmarks on the key marginal and excluded groups of Bangladesh. These add tremendous value to the literature on the marginal and excluded communities.

The capacity building training and workshops—one at the national level, one to develop methodology for research and investigation, one for journalist, one for field research

and analysis of the socio-economic situation of the forest villages in Modhupur, one for sex workers, two for leaders of BCSU and panchayat in the tea gardens, two for the Adivasis of the northwest, one for the excluded groups and their organizations in the southwest region, one for human right defenders from among the Biharis and Harijans, one for Bede and a roundtable discussion on the Modhupur *Sal* forest—have been instrumental in strengthening skills, networks and partnerships. Three conventions—one in Rangpur, one in Sreemangal and one in Dhaka—brought together the representatives of the marginal communities and other targets to exchange knowledge, insights and study finds. The cultural programmes were piggybacked with conventions to showcase the cultural riches of diverse ethnic and excluded communities of Bangladesh. As many as 20 cultural teams from around the country participated in the cultural programmes. A mega photography exhibition, titled BRATTYAJAN (The Lower Depth) organized in Drik Gallery, Dhaka brought to the light all final beneficiary groups. Besides a large number of consultations further strengthened partnerships and networks among the marginal and excluded groups. More than 40,000 copies of books, newsletters, posters, flyer, brochure, calendar, training manual and survey report on Modhupur forest villages and monographs have been produced and shared with the final beneficiaries and targets of the project.

A resource centre to serve the alliances, organisations and anyone interested in and dealing with the marginal and excluded communities and the communities themselves

has been initiated at the end of the project.

#### **Publications under the project:**

(a) *The State of the Excluded and Marginalized Communities* (English, 244 pages), (b) *Modhupur: The Vanishing Forest and Her People in Agony* (English, 164 pages), (c) Seven monographs—*Kaiputra: A community in Social Indignity* (English), *The Harijan of Bangladesh* (English), *Jaladas: A Seafaring Fishing Community* (English), *The Biharis: A Community Caught in Camp Life* (English), *Bede: A Floating People of Bangladesh* (English), *The Rishis of the Southwest* (English), and *Halnagad Chitra 2019: Bangladesher Jounapalli O Jounakarmi* (Update on Sex Workers 2019: Brothels and Sex Workers of Bangladesh, Bangla), (d) A volume on *International Instruments and National Laws* (English), (e) *Prashikkhon Upakaran O Sohayika: Prantik Jangoshthi Niye Karmaroto Karmi O Pratishtaner Sakkhamota O Dakkhata Bridhi* (Bangla, 256 pages); (f) *Adivasider Samassya O Proyojon ebong Manobadhikar Karmider Acharanbidhi O Suraksha Nirdeshika* (Needs and constraints of the ethnic communities and code of conduct and safety guide for human rights defenders, Bangla), (g) Project flyer (English, three-fold), (h) Project brochure (two, Bangla, 24 page and 48 pages), (i) Three issues of newsletter (*Prantajan* in Bangla and *People on the Fringe* in English, 20 pages each), (j) Three calendars (2017, 2018 and 2019), (k) Seven posters, (l) Two photography exhibition catalogues (Bangla, 112 pages; English, 36 pages), and (m) Three flyers on cultural programs (English and Bangla).

**Documentary films:** (a) *Sylvan Tears* in English and *Aranyer Artonad* in Bangla (40-minute on forest destruction in Modhupur) and (b) *Pathe Pathe* in Bangla and *Life on the Move* in English (30-minute documentary film on the life and struggle of the Bede or gypsy). □

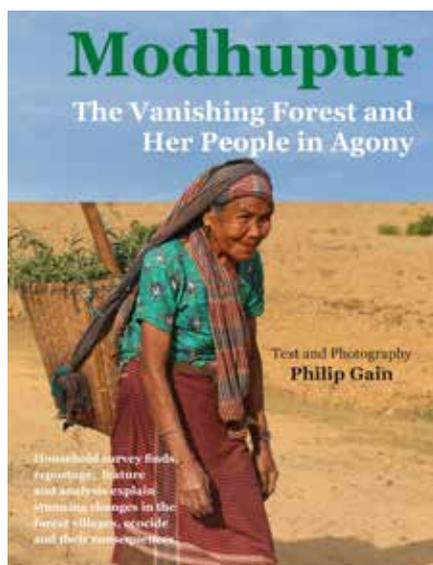


A section of participants at national convention in Dhaka. Photo. Prosad Sarker

## Review

### Modhupur: The Vanishing Forest and Her People in Agony

English, 164 pages. 2019



Modhupur, one of 12 upazilas in Tangail district is well known for its *sal* forest and the Garo and Koch people. Modhupur *sal* forest, officially 45,565.18 acres in Tangail, was dense forest under the zamindari of Maharaj of Natore during the British rule. The Garos, in particular were used to living in the deep jungle of Modhupur. But today Modhupur *sal* forest remains only in its name. The forest, along with its wildlife, has vanished in most part. Commercial scale banana, pineapple and spice plantations have crept on the forest land. Rubber plantation and social forestry, better say monoculture plantation, beginning in the mid-1980s were intended to do public good but in reality they have caused irreparable damage to the forest and environment.

To put the story of the Modhupur *sal* forest in right context, this book compiles findings of a baseline survey carried out in 2017-2018, reportage, features and photographs from early

1990s. The survey in 44 core forest villages show that the Garos, an exclusive people of the Modhupur *sal* forest from the Mughal times, constitutes 33.47% of the population by 2018. The most appalling of all that has happened with the end of the British colonial rule and end of the zamindari system is that the state has denied the people of the forest villages of their land rights. Now there is nothing more important for the people of the Modhupur forest villages to press for than the right to land. □

### Sylvan Tears (Aranyer Artonad)

40-minute documentary film on Modhupur *sal* forest, its demise and the forest people

The documentary film, 'Sylvan Tears' produced by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) shows the current condition of the Modhupur *sal* forest, its demise and strained relationship between the forest villagers and the Forest Department. The stories of victims of physical violence including killings and forest cases and underlying factors for phenomenal destruction of Modhupur *sal* forest is at the centre of the documentary film. Of 5,000 forest cases in entire Tangail district, 4,500 are in Modhupur *sal* forest area. The victims of forest cases narrate their



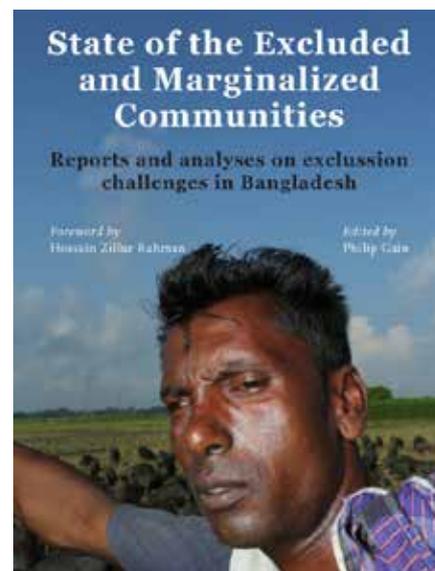
insurmountable sufferings in the documentary film.

The key underlying factors for demise of Modhupur forest are rubber plantation that was initiated in 1986, social forestry beginning in 1989, and commercial scale plantation of banana, pineapple and spices in place of natural forest of *sal-gajari*.

The characters of the documentary film are seen in deep grief. They appeal to the government to save Modhupur forest and the forest people. □

### The State of the Excluded and Marginalized Communities

English, 244 pages. 2019



This is a report on the state of the marginal and excluded peoples of Bangladesh—ethnic communities, tea workers, Bede, Rishi, Harijan, Jaladas, sex workers, Kaiputra (pig rearing community) and Biharis. The report compiles analyses and investigative reports on the condition, difficulties and risks these people face and the strategies to give them political and social protection. □