

People on the Fringe

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Editor

Philip Gain

Editorial Assistants

Asfara Ahmed & Md. Ashraf Haque

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Society for Environment and Human
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1/1 Pallabi (5th floor), Mirpur,
Dhaka-1216, Bangladesh

T: +880-2-9026636, E: sehd@sehd.org,
www.sehd.org

EU AMBASSADOR VISITS LABOUR LINE Condemns Low Wages to Tea Workers



EU Ambassador William Hanna among a tea community in a labour line in Alnagar Tea Estate. Photo. Saydur Rahman

"The workers in Bangladesh tea industry DO NOT get decent wage, this is NOT fair, this is NOT just," the ambassador of the EU Delegation to Bangladesh William Hanna said during his visit to the project titled, "Mapping and Capacity Building of Tea Workers and little known ethnic communities of Bangladesh" implemented by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The European Union finances the project under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. ICCO Cooperation, the Netherlands provides 20% of the total budget of the project.

"This is not just that people should not get fair wage for their work. This is a question of justice. If anybody asks me if I am satisfied; No, I am not

satisfied with what I see. This is injustice. So I will go back to Dhaka, talk to minister of commerce Tofayel Ahmed, I will talk to minister of agriculture Matia Chowdhury and say, what is this injustice (going on) in your country?"

Ambassador Hanna spoke very boldly in front of an audience of tea garden owners, tea community leaders, government officials and reporters of print and electronic media. The meeting took place in the Project Development Unit (PDU) auditorium in Srimongol, Maulvibazar on 17 March.

"Why does the European Union have to come in here and look at this question? Because we are concerned about justice, worldwide. And this particular example is worse than other countries; I have been in Africa, in Tanzania; I have seen the people who



This project is funded by The European Union and ICCO Cooperation. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union and ICCO Cooperation.

work there, I was in Cameroon, I have seen people who work there; and in this country (Bangladesh) they have been treated worse. That's a fact, we all know it. Why are people being paid so little, I don't know, I don't get it," the ambassador continued with apparent surprise. He called upon everybody to work together and ensure that the workers get enough money so they can send their children to schools, have a decent life, have medical care and not live the back-breaking life they live today.

"It is in everybody's interests to ensure that the living conditions of these deprived communities of workers become more humane, so that they can actively participate in the building of a prosperous Bangladesh," said Ambassador Hanna.

Facilitated by Philip Gain, Director of SEHD, others who spoke at the meeting included trade union leaders in the tea industry. Rambhajan Kairi and Bijoy Bunarjee; Golam Mohammad Sibly, chairman of Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) Sylhet Branch; Harun-Or-Rashid, director of Project Development Unit (PDU); Hasna Hena Khan, program officer of ICCO Cooperation; and Nasim Anwar, a former planter and a consultant in the tea sector.

After the meeting, the ambassador visited a labour line in Alynagar Tea Estate to see the living conditions of tea workers with his own eyes. There he was welcomed very warmly by the tea workers and their families.

Tea workers and their communities are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in Bangladesh, being effectively 'tied' to the tea gardens where they work. The level of deprivation is illustrated when comparing their wages to what is paid in other countries in the region. The daily pay in Bangladesh is 69 Taka, a dramatically low pay considering that the daily cash pay of tea workers in Sri Lanka is 550 Rupee (328 Taka), about 5 times as high.

The three-year project "Mapping

and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh" is being implemented in the tea growing areas in the Northeast, Chittagong, North-Centre, Northwest and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It has a target population of about 1.1 million people (600,000 tea workers and 500,000 members of little-known ethnic communities). The project is supported by the European Union and ICCO Cooperation (Netherlands).

By Md. Ashraful Haque



Ambassador William Hanna speaking at the meeting. Photo. Saydur Rahman

THE PROJECT

Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh

The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) works for human rights and environmental justice. "Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh" is a project that started in May 2013 for three years to engage in participatory research with the tea plantation workers and the little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh, raise their issues, and build their capacity.

The tea plantation workers and their communities in "tied" situation in the labor lines of the tea gardens are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups of people in Bangladesh. Among the ethnic communities, there are as many as 60 groups, little-known or invisible to the majority community, and also to the outside world. Capability deprivation of these communities makes their sufferings and the structural abuses generational.

A combination of participatory inventory, investigations, survey, study, and analysis on wage, work, education, and health condition, vulnerability of women and children and other human rights issues of the final beneficiaries of the project will generate information and knowledge, which published,

will give a clear map of these communities. The outcomes of research used as campaign tools will educate the majority community and those who take decisions.

Areas of field research: Northwest, North-center, and tea growing areas in the Northeast and Chittagong where the tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities live.

Key activities: Mapping, inventory, investigations, and analysis; campaign, advocacy, networking and educational work; publication and production of documentary film, training modules and manuals; organizing training, dialogues, convention, and cultural festival; monitoring of implementation of international and regional instruments and national laws; preparation of political and socio-economic agenda of the tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities to highlight their issues, struggles and needs.

This project is a participatory initiative. Together with SEHD, the partner (Gram Bikash Kendra), associates that represent the final beneficiaries, project staff, scholars, other targets, and the final beneficiaries are participating in the implementation of different actions and activities.

The Tea Production Areas And Tea Communities

Districts	Upazilas	Valleys	No. of Tea gardens	Ethnic Communities
Syhlet	SyhletSadar, Jaintipur, Fenchuganj, Goainghat & Kanaighat	Syhlet	19	Baraik, Bihari, Pahan, Telegu, Banai, Bauri, Munda, Been, Bhujpuri, Bhumij, BonajChowhan,
Maulvibazar	MoulvibazarSadar, Srimingal, Kulaura, Kamalganj, Rajnagar and Barlekha	Juri, Langla, Monu-doloi&Balishira	90	Gando/Ganju, Gurkha, Garo, Shantal, Oraon, Kharia, Konda, Madraji, Mushor, Nayek, Noonia,
Habiganj	Chunarughat, Bahubal, Madhabpore & Nabiganj	Lashkarpur	23	Uria, Panika, Bashfor, Kairi, Bagdi, Kalindi, Rautia, Goala, Gaur,
Chittagong	Fatikchhari, Rangunia, Banshkhali	Chittagong	22	Rajbhar, Mridha, Mahle, Patra, Shabdakar, Pahari, Teli, Pashi,
Rangamati	Kaptai	Chittagong	1	Doshad, Rabidas,
Brahmanbaria	BrahmanbariaSadar		1	Tati/Tantabai, etc.

The Little-Known Ethnic Communities and Their Concentration (Outside The Tea Gardens)

Regions	Ethnic Groups	Population
North-center: Mymensingh, Tangail, Gazipur, Jamalpur and Sherpur districts	Hajong, Koch, Banai, Dalu, Hodi, Shabar, Rajbongshi/Bongshi, Gurkha.	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.
Northwest: Rajshahi, Joypurhat, Pabna, Sirajganj, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Nawabganj, Naogaon, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Bogra and Panchagarh district	Bagti, Bhuimali, Bhuiya, Bhumji, Bhujpuri, Gondo/Ganju, Ghatual, Hari, Hajra, Ho, Kadar, Karmokar, Kharia, Koda, Kurmi, Mahle, Lohar, Malo, Muriyar/Munda, Mushor, Palia, Ramdas, Rabidas, Rai, Rajbongshi/ Bongshi, Rajwar, Rautia, Shing, Tati/Tantubai, Telegu, Patni, Gariat, Kol, Koch, Munda, Paharia, Teli, Turi,	

The above lists of communities in the tea gardens and little-known ethnic communities in other areas have been developed with information contained in literature and in consultation with the communities. Any tips, information, and ideas on identities, numbers and locations of the tea workers and little-known ethnic communities will be appreciated.

INCEPTION SEMINAR

“Many ethnic communities of Bangladesh are constitutionally and statistically invisible”

—Says Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman



Guests at the seminar. (front row from left) Prof. Rafiqul Islam, Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Prof. Sakhawat Ali Khan, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, Leonard Zilstra, and Philippe JACQUES. (back from left row) Parimal Singh Baraik, Moazzem Hossain, Anil Marandi, Rambhajan Kairi, and Philip Gain. Photo.Md. Saydur Rahman

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman, Power and Participation Research Center (PPRC) said that many of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh are invisible, both constitutionally and statistically. “This

invisibility must be dispelled so that they can raise their voices and claim their rights,” he suggested in a day-long inception seminar on “Mapping and capacity building of tea workers and little-known ethnic communi-

ties of Bangladesh” organized by The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) in Dhaka on 8 September 2013.

Information and insights about the condition of the tea plantation workers in ‘tied’ situation and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh were shared at the seminar.

Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman was present at the event as the chief guest. Chaired by Prof. Sakhawat Ali Khan, chairman of SEHD, the special guests and commentators were Philippe JACQUES, the head of cooperation, European Union Delegation to Bangladesh; Prof. Rafiqul Islam, professor emeritus, ULAB; Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman, Power and Participation Research Center (PPRC); and Leonard Zilstra, country representative, ICCO Cooperation, Bangladesh Office.

In his chief guest’s speech, Justice Habibur Rahman said, “There are a good number of communities in Bangladesh who do not call themselves Bangalis; without knowing them, we



Participants from ethnic communities.

Photo. Md. Saydur Rahman.

cannot develop their communities. And without their development, Bangladesh cannot be developed.” He applauded SEHD’s initiative to make these ethnic communities known to the majority people.

Philippe JACQUES appreciated the initiative saying, “The project has an exciting approach as it combines action

research and capacity building. All of us are going to learn a lot during the implementation.” He hoped that the living conditions of these deprived communities would become more humane as a result of this initiative.

In his welcome speech Philip Gain, general secretary of SEHD, said that a tea worker in neighboring Sri Lanka

gets Rs 550 per day while their Bangladeshi counterparts receive only BDT 69. Three years back, the daily wage was a meager 32.50 BDT. He also described the miseries of little known-ethnic communities of Bangladesh as people of more than 50 communities are deprived of education and access to land. “To protect the rights, fundamental freedom and political representation, we have to raise consciousness of all,” he added.

Representatives from some 45 communities among others including academics, researchers, development activists and journalists participated in the seminar to share their reflections on how to develop useful tools for study and capacity building of these communities and their organizations

By Md. Ashraful Haque

TEA INDUSTRY

Bonanza for Owners, Misery for Workers

“The labor law itself is at the root of deprivations of tea workers,” said Ram Bhajan Kairi, in a residential workshop organized by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The four-day training workshop titled, “Rethinking Rights of Tea Workers” was held in Komolganj, Moulvibazar from 8 to 11 February 2014. Thirty-five participants, most of them youths from the tea workers’ communities, joined the workshop. Thirteen ethnic communities were represented at the workshop.

The prime objective of the program was to enhance participants’ capacity to write reports and take part in research on issues regarding tea workers and their communities.

Kairi also pointed out that legal remedy to tea workers deprivations have tactfully been kept away from them. “A worker has to go to the labor court located in Chittagong in case of a legal fight, which is nearly impossible for a low-paid labor,” he said.

While the labor law is discriminatory in the case of the tea workers, the owners ignore their legally binding essential obligation. To illustrate owners’ neglect Delwar Hossain, labour inspector (general) Sylhet Division said,

“What we find in the tea garden is that the owners do not issue appointment letter to the workers. This is a violation of law and we are now asking the management to issue proper appointment letter.”

The participants, government officials, tea community leaders, researchers and tea garden officials shared their insights and opinions in the program based on their engagement with tea communities and the tea industry.

Besides sharing information with others and learning from experienced researchers, participants received hands-on experience in conducting focus group discussion (FGD), face-to-face interview, and writing case studies

in the unique training. Each of them was grouped with a small team that visited a couple of labor lines in five tea gardens. Every team conducted a FGD with *Panchayet* (an elected body of representatives of tea workers to look after various issues of a labor line) members and filled in a questionnaire that was designed to collect data on the socio-economic status and the ethnic composition of tea communities. Each participant also interviewed at least one tea worker and wrote case studies on issues ranging from health to education, livelihood to landlessness.

Mohammad Giashuddin, deputy director of labor (DDL) of the Department of Labour, while describing the structure and functions of the departments of the Ministry of Labor and Employment, said that the labor law ensures many rights to the tea workers, but those are not implemented. The



Participants at workshop.



A malnourished tea worker. Photo. Philip Gain

workers lead a very hard life.

“The tendency to deprive the tea workers is a legacy of British companies that brought the workers in promising good fortune, but deceived them,” opined Giashuddin who partially blamed the deprivation of workers on the garden authority.

The session at this point became vibrant as a participant threw a question to the DDL, “While the elected representatives of tea workers union are driven out of labor house [the trade union office], and the government has kept the house under lock and key, where will the workers go to claim their rights?” It can be mentioned here that the first ever trade union elections for the tea workers took place in 2008. But in 2009 the elected trade union officials were removed from office by force and a government-backed ad-hoc committee was installed in their place.

In response to such queries, DDL confessed his limitations as a government official and said that he would hold elections if directed by the government.

Prakash Kanti Chowdhury, ADC (revenue), Moulvibazar said that the condition of tea workers and their community is improving. At least 40 schools have been established in the tea gardens in Moulvibazar district since 2010. Not all the gardens have satisfactory health, education and housing facilities, but the government is monitoring these issues. “There was

a time when we (administrative officials) hardly met any garden manager, but now as they have to come to us for renewal of lease deeds, we have a chance to look into the facilities they provide for workers,” said the ADC.

Reacting to such question, Robiul Hasan, Manager, Kalindi tea garden feared that if tea workers are given ownership to land, they will stop working for the tea industry. He claimed that the tea community is

doing much better than earlier times. “Soon there will be a time when no illiterate person will be left in the tea gardens,” asserted Hasan.

Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid Sarker, director, Project Development Unit (PDU), Bangladesh Tea Board said that the owners of tea gardens make high profits. He opined that if the owners of tea gardens spend more from this huge profit for the workers, it will benefit the industry itself in the end.

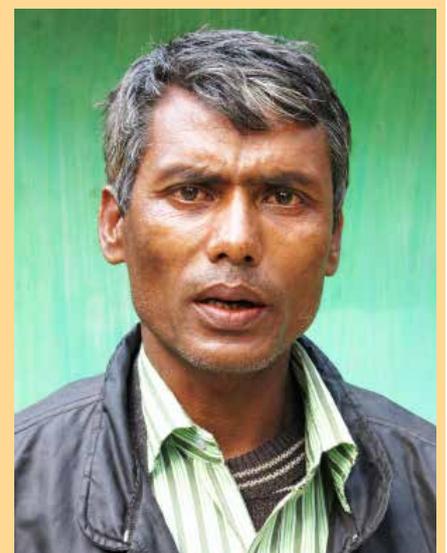
The training workshop designed to share tools for rethinking rights, justice, developing minds among the tea workers in particular was moderated by Philip Gain. To prepare the participants for hands on training Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, associate professor of Dhaka University, this writer and Philip Gain talked on Focus Group Discussion (FGD), case studies, survey, and applied research techniques.

The training ended on 11 February with the participants going back to their communities with confidence and profound enthusiasm to continue writing and reporting on various issues of tea communities.

By Md. Ashrafal Haque

Sham Shundar: Life of a Line Chowkidar at Lungla

Sham Shundar (42) lives a life of strict discipline as a line *chowkidar* (guard) at Lungla Tea Estate in Maulvibazar. Duncan Brothers (Bangladesh) Limited, a subsidiary of the British corporation Camellia PLC. owns the tea estates. He belongs to the Ravidas community, whose origins can be traced back to East India and who were brought to Bengal to work as indentured labourers for the British controlled tea companies more than a century and a half ago. He lives in his family’s small allotment on the residential section of the tea garden known as the Magenta labour line along with his brother and their combined family of eight. He is one of six hundred residents of this labour line, whose lives and fortunes depend on the meagre earnings they receive from working as day labourers at the tea and rubber plantations that occupy the estate. As a line *chowkidar* (guard), Sham Sundar is on duty 24 hours a day but earns the same daily wage of Tk. 69 as other tea workers who work an eight-hour shift.



Sham Shundar. Photo. Philip Gain

He has been working on the tea estates since the age of 18 and this is what his future will be like till he can retire at the age of 60.

His job as a line *chowkidar* entails waking up early every morning at dusk

and ensuring that all the tea estate workers on his labour line are ready to work and know where they are supposed to report to on that day. He is also the eyes and ears of the tea estate managers on his labour line and must report on any problems, maintenance issues or the breaking of rules and carry out administrative duties such as the submission of charge sheets for observed misdemeanours.

He is no stranger to tragedy and the harsh realities of life on the tea estate, having lost his wife Rupmonia to diarrhoeal disease some 16 years ago. He never remarried out of concern for his four children—two girls and two boys ranging in age from 17 to 24. He has also lost his 25-year-old cousin to gangrene and laments about how his life could have been saved if he had access to better health care facilities and was treated in a timely manner.

He talks candidly of the culture of fear within the plantation. The tea estate

workers are ethnically different from the Bangalee inhabitants of the surrounding areas and thus feel constantly under the threat of victimization and exploitation due to their lack of formal status, training and education. In the past, Bangalee inhabitants from the *bostis* (tea communities call a Bangalee village *bosti*) that surround the tea estate have stolen from them and harassed the tea estate girls on their way to school. They are aware that there is little in the way of justice available for them and thus have come to accept their lot in life.

“I want to sleep in a comfortable bed one day but that would cost me over 2,000 Takas, which I will never be able to afford,” laments Sham Sundar. Thus, he has resigned himself to a life of meagre comforts. Tonight he will lay his head on his bed and dream of better things. At dawn the next morning, his day starts once again and nothing is different.

By Asfara Ahmed

Strengthening From Within: Enabling Change for Bangladesh’s Little-known Ethnic Communities

Bangladesh’s smaller and little-known ethnic communities face a multitude of challenges. The *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (Small Ethnic Communities Cultural Institution Act, 2010) recognizes only 27 specific ethnic groups in Bangladesh in spite of information to the contrary from ethnic communities, anthropologists and researchers. Research by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), has revealed the existence of more than 60 distinct ethnic groups in Bangladesh, in addition to the ones recognized by the government.

In June 2011, without any consideration or consultation with indigenous communities, the Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Bill, 2011 was passed, which made all the citizens of the country “Bangalee” by nationality thus forcing homogeneity upon Bangladesh’s ethnically diverse indigenous population and denying them the right to self-identification. Without formal recognition and legitimacy, these groups and their rich distinctive languages, cultures, traditions, technologies and knowledge are in danger of being lost.

Furthermore, *adivasis* (or indigenous people) are at a greater threat of being displaced due to land grabbing by the politically influential Bangalee majority. Such loss of valuable property has great repercussions for the *adivasi* communities as this forces them deeper and deeper into a cycle of unemployment, debt and poverty.

Integral to the protection of little-known ethnic communities is accurate information and monitoring regarding the current state of their population. Thus, the Society for Environment and Human Development recently held a workshop titled, “Study and rethinking rights of little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh” as part of a three year project, “Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh” to help prepare participants to engage in participatory research, awareness raising and capacity building within their communities. The workshop, which was held at the premises of Gram Bikash Kendra in Parbatipur, Dinajpur from 21 to 25 March 2014, was attended by representatives from a number of ethnic communities from the North and North-central region of Bangladesh as well as journalists, activists and development workers from a number of different organizations. The ethnic groups represented during the workshop included the Santal, Oraon, Garo, Mahle, Koch, Hodi, Rajwar, Munda and the Paharia.

Resource persons present at the workshop facilitated by Philip Gain included Mr. Moazzem Hossain, chief executive of Gram Bikash Kendra, Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, Associate Professor, University of Dhaka, Mr. Dulal Chandra Biswas of the University of Rajshahi and Arok Toppo of Caritas Rajshahi. Various *adivasi* activists also attended the event including Rabindranath Soren from the *Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad*.

Participants had the opportunity to learn about different aspects of *adivasi* life and culture from an anthropological

Participants at workshop.



perspective from Boktiar Ahmed of the Department of Anthropology, University of Rajshahi. Furthermore, Clara Tumpa Baroi from SIL Bangladesh spoke about the organization's initiatives to teach and preserve the languages of Bangladesh's ethnic communities and highlighted the importance of language preservation to the greater culture. "If a community loses its language, it loses its identity. Language is essential in the preservation of culture," said Baroi.

The participants also received training in writing, developing case studies and profiles as well as various aspects of field research such as conducting surveys, interviews and focus group discussions followed by practical fieldwork and exercises in various *adivasi* villages around Dinajpur.

Philip Gain, the director of SEHD and Tanzimuddin Khan of the University of Dhaka both highlighted the importance of gathering empirical evidence and the "emic" (bottom-up) research approach to studying these communities wherein those being researched are also the researchers.

Through the workshop, participants gained a deeper understanding regarding the diversity of Bangladesh's ethnic groups as well as the distinctive challenges that they face and must overcome. According to Momota Mankin from the *Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad*, the workshop was an eye-opening experience. "I didn't realize how many small ethnic groups there were in Bangladesh. In Modhupur, where I am from, we see predominantly only two ethnic groups,

the Garos and the Koch. This workshop helped me realize the true ethnic diversity of Bangladesh," said Mankin.

The workshop also helped develop a greater sense of unity amongst the participants in spite of differences in ethnicity, religion, geography and culture. "We must all work together for our common rights," stressed Rabindranath Soren, president of *Jatyio Adivasi Parishad*.

Bichitra Tirki, a prominent *adivasi* land rights activist also highlighted the importance of research and documentation for the *adivasi* rights movement, "We tend to fight for our rights with sticks but we need to do so with words as well, which this workshop will help us do".

By Asfara Ahmed

Chandana Bhunjar: Survival of a Kadar on the Fringe

Chandana Bhunjar (25) from Giriduba village in Ranipukur (no. 10) union in Biro Upazila (Dinajpur) makes a meagre living as an agricultural day labourer in her small community in Dinajpur. She is a Kadar, a member of a small, landless, and impoverished ethnic group whose ancient origins can be traced back to South India. The residents of this community speak Hindi as well as Bangla and are followers of the Karam religion. Their culture is unique and not well understood and they are thus isolated from the Bengali Muslim neighbours around them.

During the bountiful periods of harvest, Chandana earns BDT 150 (USD 2) a day working in the rice fields. She was born in this village. One of five siblings, she is one of the few members of her family to have received an education, having attended school till class seven. Her four brothers did not receive the same educational opportunities that she did as they had to work to earn a living to help support the family from an early age. In spite of Chandana's enthusiasm for education and her fondness for



Chandana Bhunjar. Photo. Philip Gain
studying English, Bangla, social studies and mathematics, she was unable to continue her education. "I wanted to study further but my parents decided to get me married," she said in a tone of regret.

She and her husband now live with her parents and thirteen other family members in their cramped homestead of dilapidated mud houses in a small corner of the village. Seasonal unemployment is a major problem in their community. From September to April, there is a shortage of agricultural work and the family has to endure long periods of time with little or no income. "On many days, we must manage with only one meal a day," says Chandana. Thus, they must rely on loans from others in order to make ends meet.

The impending seasonal storms are yet another cause of concern for the family. With little money available to fix or reinforce the roofing of their home, they are likely to face many more hardships and possibly property damage as the seasonal *kalbaishakhi* (Nor'westers) storms come their way. However, this is just one of the many storms that they must weather in their life of enduring destitution and social isolation.

By Asfara Ahmed

An Eviction Decree, Its Execution, and the Fate of Seven Mahle Families

Photo: Philip Gain



A Mahle woman of Pachondor stands in front of her thoroughly destroyed house.

It is like a scene of war-time devastation in a tiny Mahle village, Pachondor, in Tanor upazila (Rajshahi). Houses with thick mud walls and corrugated tin roofs have been leveled to the ground. Food grain, utensils, beds, clothes, cash, and other household materials are all broken and left mixed with mud. The families are left with nothing. They still have the courage to live around their homesteads in the hope of getting justice.

The seven Mahle families, whose houses had been thoroughly destroyed in an eviction operation under a court decree, report that they have been living on 32 decimals of land, vested property, for a hundred years.

Three brothers from the neighboring village, Sadipur—Fazlur Rahman, Estab Ali and Anisur Rahman—claim they own the land. “We bought the land in DAG No. 84 from Saber Ali Mondol,” claimed Anisur Rahman (65) youngest of the three brothers. “We have not done anything wrong in breaking the houses of the Mahles. We have won the case and got a decree in our favor. The police and the court just assisted us to evict the illegal occupants.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Omor Faruque, councilor of Ward no. 1 of Mumdumala Pourashava who came to save

these houses but was ignored. “The seven Mahle families had last taken yearly lease (DCR) in 2013, which means they are up to date with their lease.”

Two Karmakar families, close to the Mahle families also had their houses in DAG No. 94 partially destroyed.

The Eviction Operation

On the day of eviction, 30 March 2014, according to Johon Hasda (65), who now lives under the open sky with his eight family members, reports, “A micro-bus carrying police stopped at our village in the morning. They were actually giving protection to the brothers (Fazur Rahman, Estab Ali and Anisur Rahaman) and around 150 men. Two more police vans also arrived from Tanor Police Station. They started breaking our houses without paying any attention to our cries.”

Jastina Hembrom (35), standing in the middle of the debris on her homestead, cried and narrated what happened on 30 March: “We were in the field, harvesting wheat, when we heard that our houses were being demolished. We ran to the village. I saw my house being dismantled by around 35 people. I begged them not to destroy

my house. I did not understand what to do. I begged them to give me a few days. But they did not pay any attention.”

“They did not even give us time, we begged to move our paddy, rice and other household materials. Later on I found my four sacks of paddy, two sacks of wheat, two *kuthis* (home-made mud pot to store cereal) of rice scattered and mixed with mud,” said Jastina. She soon became busy with her brother-in-law’s 10-year old daughter Sriti, who got injured from a stone thrown at her. She remained in a coma for three hours in a hospital.

Sicilia Hasda (35), another woman who witnessed her house being destroyed, gave further description of the appalling story. “I was working in the field when the news of demolition came. I ran to the village. I became so shocked to see some twenty people demolishing my house of mud walls with tin roof.

“I was storing 14 *maunds* (one *maund* is equivalent to 40 kgs) of wheat, four *maunds* of mustard, and cash of Tk.5,000 of adivasi women’s organization, GOLAP, of which I am the cashier. I also had 20 *maunds* of paddy of my own. I begged them to allow me to enter my house. But they did not listen. I helplessly watched my house being leveled to the ground. These foodstuffs and cash were all gone with my houses. The carnage lasted up to five in the evening.”

What also astounded the Mahles and their neighbors was that they did not receive prior notice from the court before the decree of 2013 was executed.

The O.C. and the court representatives (Advocate Commission, surveyor, and Nazir) reportedly ignored the appeals of the Mahle people. “We have merely assisted in executing a decree from the court of law,” said S.M. Bazlur Rashid, O.C. Tanor Thana. However, there is allegation that Bangalees along with the Mahle who appealed to the police to spare the houses were threatened with arrest.

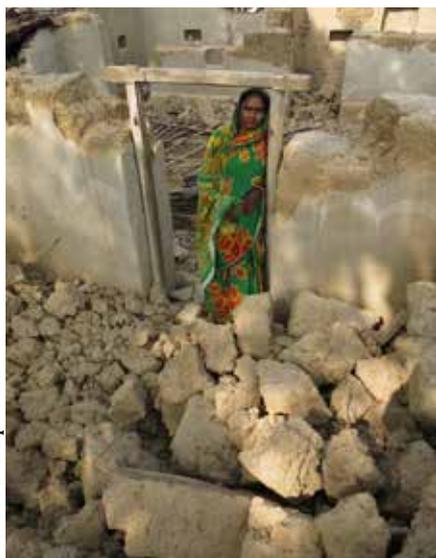
Quite a few social organizations organized human chains and road blockades on 31 March 2014 to protest against the eviction attempt. However, it was only on 21 April that the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Rajshahi, Mesbahuddin Chowdhury visited Pachondor, handed over three checks [Taka 3000 each] to three families and committed to give financial support of Tk.3,000 and 30 kgs of rice to each of the nine Mahle and Karmakar families.

The DC confirmed that the 32 decimals of land that the victims of Pachandor had their houses on is vested property. "It is government property and we will appeal to the court against the decree," the DC reportedly said during his visit to Pachandor.

"We appreciate that the DC of Rajshahi has visited Pachandor and has committed some cash and food grain. These bring little relief. We demand that the seven Mahle families be rehabilitated on the land they have been living on for such a long time," says Rabindranath Soren of Jatyio Adivasi Parishad.

Joseph Mangra Murmu, one of the Mahle family heads says, "We are accepting the relief. But our main demand is that our houses are reconstructed and the lands we live on are permanently settled to us."

By Philip Gain



Sicilia Hasda, stands in the debris of her house.

Santal Village in Dinajpur Attacked

Bangali villagers, in hundreds, reportedly attacked and robbed a Santal village (Raghunathpur) in Bulakipur Union in Ghoraghat upazila of Dinajpur district on 6 June. The factor behind the attack is a dispute over a piece of land, which is a mango orchard. The adivasi inhabitants, mostly Christians, have been passing days in fear of further assaults while some of them have fled the village.

The sons of one Azizar Prodhan of Veline, a neighboring village to Raghunathpur, caught, tied, and beat Nicolas Murmu and his nephew Rabon Mumru at Kanagari bazar on allegation of collecting mangos from the disputed mango grove. The police rescued Nicolas and Rabon an hour later and took them to Bulakipur mission centre. Azizar Prodhan claims he bought 3.06 acres of land from Hopna Murmu, father of Nicholas Murmu. The Dinajpur Additional Deputy Commissioners (Revenue) court is to settle the dispute over the land.

Azizar Prodhan and the people he brought with him allegedly started collecting mangos from the mango grove on the disputed land at about 10:00 am the same day

and in the presence of the police. At one point, Nicolas's brother, Khoka Murmu accompanied by some Santal people rushed to the spot and a clash took place between the two parties. Murshidul Alam, a nephew of the Bangali claimant died on the spot and many others from both groups were injured.

Mahbulul Alam, the deceased's elder brother filed a murder case with Ghoraghat police station (no. 3 dated 06-06-13) against seven including Nicolas Murmu. Alam claims that Murshidul was hit in his chest and testicles. When contacted on 21 July, a month and a half after the alleged murder, the sub-inspector Jahidul Islam, the investigating officer of the case told this reporter that the postmortem report was yet to come.

As the news of Murshidul's death spread, hundreds of Bangalis from neighboring Veline village gathered and attacked the Santal houses in Bagjapara, Tibhipara and Dighipara in Raghunathpur village. They looted 80 livestock and hundreds of kilograms of rice and other produces from the villages. The mob also trespassed upon Bulakipur Mission Centre and threatened



Mongo orchard on disputed land.

Photo. Md. Ashrafal Haque

the church seminarians as the later sheltered some victims.

Seven Santal men were sent to jail on 6 June 2013 on allegation of murder. They were freed on bail on 23 February 2014. They were again sent to jail on 11 April 2014. One of them, a minor, was granted bail and freed but the other six remain in jail. However, none have been arrested for attacking the Santal houses and the mission although two separate cases were filed by Shanti Kisku of Tibhipara (case no. 7 dated 11-06-13) and Father Anselmo Mardy (no. 6 dated 08-06-13 under penal code).

The deployment of a 30-member armed police battalion has brought some relief for the Santal. From a temporary camp inside the mission occupying its dormitory, the police continue to patrol the village. The police were still there as of 21 July. However, many of the looted livestock have been returned to the owners after the local representatives intervened. Meanwhile, unidentified miscreants set Nicolas Murmu's house on fire on 9 June; 3 days after the clash had taken place, despite the presence of police in the area.

The Santal neighborhoods, consisting of at least 70 households, have been living in constant fear as the attackers continue to threaten that they would burn the adivasi village as soon as the police are gone. "We cannot go to the market in fear of being attacked," said Mistri Murmu (65) of Tibhipara. "They may attack our houses again," feared Rajni Hasda (35) of the same village.

Meanwhile, Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad arranged a human chain in Dinajpur town and submitted a memorandum to the deputy commissioner (DC) and superintendent of police (SP), seeking punishment of the attackers and protection of the adivasis and their land.

By Md. Ashrafur Haque and Joshef Hasda

NOTICE BOARD

Solicitation for engaging in research and investigation

Mapping, inventory, and investigations of situation and abuses involving the tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh are significant activities under the project, "Mapping and capacity building of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh". It is through focus group discussions, interviews, and surveys that the research teams are mapping communities and engaging in investigations. A year after the project started in May 2013, we are now looking forward to engaging academics, writers, and journalists in research, investigations, and analyses. The major issues of research and investigations are: land in both tea

sector and other project areas, labor law and labor courts dealing with tea workers' issues, welfare initiatives of the state and the owners of the tea estates, wages and decent work conditions in the tea industry, food security of the tea workers and vulnerable ethnic communities of the plains, language and culture of the adivasis, production cost and auction prices of tea, environmental threats in both tea gardens and in other areas inhabited by ethnic communities, trade unionism in the tea industry, education, unemployment in the tea industry, movement in both tea gardens and in adivasi-inhabited plains, needs and constraints of both tea workers and little-known ethnic communities, etc.

International, regional, and national instruments and laws

There are a number of international and regional instruments and national laws that define decent work condition and provide political protection, equal opportunities and rights to the excluded and indigenous communities. These also define the obligations of the state parties, international bodies, and other parties such as the corporates. Following are these instruments and laws.

International

- Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107)
- Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169).
- United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights 2007.
- Convention on Abolition of Forced Labour, 1957 (Convention No. 105)
- Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention (Convention No. 98)
- The SAARC Social Charter (adopted on 4 January 2004)

National

- The Labour Act 2006.
- The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 (EBSATA).
- The Vested Property Act

In an attempt to explore what exactly are contained in these instruments on the rights and opportunities of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities and the status of their implementation in Bangladesh, we solicit any suggestions and inputs from interested parties. We are keen to engage interested academics, journalists and writers to contribute in the analysis of these instruments and other important research interest areas of the project.

Training and dialogue calendar (up to April 2015)

- Training of journalists interested in tea workers and little-known ethnic communities. August 2014.
- Training of the trade union leaders and those involved in trade unionism in the tea gardens. September 2014
- Three dialogues in Srimongol, Dinajpur or Rajshahi and Dhaka. October, November, December 2014.
- Training of selected executives, officials and members of the organizations that represent tea workers and ethnic communities. March 2015.