

People on the Fringe

A yearly newsletter published by SEHD under a project funded by European Union's Instrument for Democracy & Human Rights (EIDHR)

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

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The newsletter is published under a project, "Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh" implemented by SEHD. Partner: Gram Bikash Kendra, Associates: Jatyo Adivasi Parishad (JAP), Bagania, Moulvibazar Changanj Adivasi Front (MCJAF).

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Tea Workers Facing Perpetuating Injustice



Participants of the workshop in a full session. © Philip Gain

Tea industry is such an industry where the workers can unionize only at the national level. And labor law makes it obligatory that at least 30 per cent of total work force must join a union as members. There is no precedence that a tea worker gets an appointment letter. After retirement, a tea worker silently surrenders gratuity in exchange for holding the residence that s/he was offered. Unlike other industrial workers, the tea workers get no casual leave. They have lived with many such malpractices and injustice for generations.

These and different other relevant issues regarding trade union were discussed by resource persons and participants at a workshop organized to develop the skills and capabilities of trade union leaders and activists in the tea industry. The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) organized the residential workshop from 11-14 December 2014 in Kamalganj of Moulvibazar district.

The learning objectives of the workshop were sharing knowledge on issues related to the rights of the tea workers and trade union; strengthening capacity of the trade union leaders in the tea industry through skill sharing and scaling up communication capability; and connecting tea workers' union with



Tealeaf pickers heading for weighing house with green leaf. © Philip Gain

national and international trade union activism.

Several trainers at the workshop particularly discussed the rights of tea workers guaranteed by the labor act, discrimination against the tea workers in the labor act, and violation of labor laws in the tea industry. Tapan Datta, president of Chittagong Trade Union Center and member of Chittagong Labor Court, mentioned article 183 of Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 and said, "Article 183 is highly discriminatory and it contradicts with the ILO Convention No. 87. This article allows the tea workers to form a union only at the national level, and the law makes it mandatory that to form a union, 30 per cent of the total work force shall its members."

Bijoy Bunerjee, chairman of Rajghat Union Parishad and a trade union leader said, "One trade union is not ideal

Tea industry is such an industry where the workers can unionize only at the national level. There is no precedence that a tea worker gets an appointment letter. The tea workers get no casual leave.



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.

and for the trade unions to play a competitive role there should be two/three unions in the tea sector. It also creates scopes for creation of new leadership.”

In the tea industry, even the simple legal binding of appointment is not fulfilled. Md. Azizul Islam, deputy inspector general (DIG) of Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, said, “The first condition for appointing a laborer is to issue an appointment letter, where all the terms and conditions of the job are written.”

He discussed some basic rights of the workers like appointment letter, identity card, service books, laborer registration, ending owner-worker relationship, leaves according to the law, fair wages and allowances, proper education, housing, and entertainment. He said that these are legal rights of the workers, not demands; and as for the owners, depriving the workers of their rights is a punishable crime. Azizul Islam admitted his limits as a public servant. “Powerful owners, complicated bureaucracy, and weak laws do not allow us to properly carry out our duties,” lamented Islam.

The tea workers do not have land or house of their own. Senior legal counselor of Solidarity Center, Advocate AKM Nasim explained: “The owners deprive the workers of their gratuity or service benefits by offering their children work and allowing them to stay in the labor lines after retirement.” The participants of the workshop held that allowing the retired workers to live in the labor line on the condition that their dependents must work in the garden is forced labor, and it is a violation of the labor act.

The workers of the tea industry are faced with extreme discrimination in terms of getting leaves. Advocate Nasim questioned the labor act, “Why shall not the tea workers get 10-day casual leave annually like the workers in other sectors?”

Deputy director of Directorate of Labor, Mohammad Giashuddin said, “A tea worker’s wage needs to be reasonable. If the same worker works outside the garden, s/he gets Tk.250-300 including one meal. Then why would s/he get Tk.69 for working in the tea

garden? It is only strong trade union(s) that can play an important role in determining just wage of tea workers in accordance with the present market value.”

The participants of the workshop discussed the significance of connecting the tea workers’ union with other national and international trade unions. Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, assistant executive director of Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (BILS) suggested, “The tea workers’ union must communicate or establish relations with other like-minded trade unions.” Ahmed added, “Politicians see our national trade union’s relation with the international ones as a conspiracy. But something that is a conspiracy to owners and the government is ‘unity and solidarity’ to the workers.”

Dr. Pradip Kumar Panday, associate professor of Mass Communication and Journalism of Rajshahi University, conducted a session on communicating tea workers’ issues and grievances to the media and others interested. On the significance of these fundamental tools of communication, Dr. Panday said, “It is necessary to inform people about the problems of the tea gardens and the tea workers. The workers and their representatives should play a role in sensitizing the media to publish more on their issues and plights.”

In the four-day residential work-

shop, a full day was devoted to field-work. The participants, most of them from tea communities, revisited their labor lines to rethink what problems they face in their daily lives and what they need most for change. Some of the key challenges the tea workers face in the labor lines are poor access to sanitation system, lack of decent housing, lack of standard education, unemployment of educated young people, gender discrimination, lack of safety at work, lack of medical care, and most of all, extremely low wages. Economic deprivation is identified to be the prime factor for terrible condition of the tea workers.

In the evaluation session at the end of the workshop, the participants said that the workshop has helped develop deep understanding and feelings about unity and solidarity among the tea workers, leaders, and their union to overcome the abysmal conditions of the tea workers.

Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of BCSU, felt the need for more such workshops for the tea union leaders. “One workshop is not enough for the union leaders. But, this one has shown us the stairs and taught us how to start climbing. Now we have to climb the rest of the stairs ourselves,” said Kairi, who hoped that there would be more such workshops in future. □ *Abdullah Al Mahdee with Philip Gain*

OUR FORGOTTEN COMMUNITIES

Bangladesh can and should take pride in its diverse adivasi, indigenous and ethnic communities. But the state that recently reverted to “Bangalee” nationalism shows its inhuman attitude towards

these communities in awarding them the identities and political protection they deserve. The people of the majority Bangalee also appear to be DIKU (in Santali language it means tormentors or



Participants at the dialogue.

wrongdoers) to them. The speakers observed this in a dialogue on rethinking map, identity, and rights of little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh.

The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), North-Bengal based organization of the ethnic communities, Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) organized the dialogue in Dinajpur on 19 April, 2015. The dialogue was organized as part of the project, "Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities". The dialogue was attended by representatives of some 35 ethnic communities who included rights workers, community leaders, civil society organizations, government agencies, and journalists among others.

The state, through its recent law, *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (Small Ethnic Group Cultural Institution Act, 2010) recognizes 27 'ethnic' groups in Bangladesh. However, fresh inventories and review of existing literature summarized and presented by Philip Gain, director of SEHD and lead researcher of the initiative to map the ethnic communities show that there are as many as 50 such communities in the Northwest, North-center and the tea gardens of Bangladesh who remain unrecognized, isolated and invisible both constitutionally and statistically.

"These communities are faced with severe deprivation. To bring change in their lives, the state and the people of the majority community should feel their deprivation from heart," said Lukas Kispotta, an Oraon intellect of Dinajpur. "These communities deserve special attention because they offer incredible diversity and value to this nation. The state must adopt right policies to protect these communities."

To elaborate the issue of deprivation that Lukas Kispotta raised, Bichitra Tirki (34), an Oraon from Rajshahi, sheds her tear as she talks about oppression her Bangalee neighbors inflicted on her.

"We, the adivasis, are repressed unstopped. But the state does not protect us," accuses Bichitra. "The biggest trouble we face today is attack on our land. The land grabbers are unsettling

our life with false cases. We do not get speedy trial and justice in the court."

Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, associate professor of international relations of Dhaka University reflects on the character of the state and psyche of the majority Bangalee for the inhospitable treatment towards the ethnic communities that are frequently reported. "It is for severe criminalization of the state that it is no more humane. That the state does not want to ratify Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 reflects its inhumane structure," said Khan.

It is not just the land-related and social issues that cause despair to the ethnic communities, particularly the little-known ones, there are serious concerns about their languages and cultures. Aside from Bangla, there are some 37 languages spoken by ethnic communities of Bangladesh (according to Justice Habibur Rahman, 2014 in *Bangladesher Nanan Bhasha*—Different Languages of Bangladesh). The number of languages spoken may increase if proper census is done. There are communities who no more speak their languages and there are others who speak their languages but do not have alphabets. "There are threats of languages spoken by the ethnic communities getting lost. It is important to nurture and preserve alphabets," said Abu Raihan Miah, ADC General of Dinajpur district. "The adivasi youth need to train themselves on how to protect languages. Many languages spoken today may get lost in the future."

Journalists Trained in In-depth Reporting on Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities

The invisible or little-known tea communities and ethnic groups believe that the media can play a significant role in bringing these communities to the light through writing good reports and other productions on them.

To scale up the media attention to these communities the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) brought together a cohort of journalists, researchers and activists in a residential workshop in Srimangal,

"The adivasis are losing much of their tradition, knowledge, festivals and glories of the past. This is a loss not only of the adivasis but also for the nation as well," warned Moazzem Hossain of Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK).

Resolving Land-related Issues

While problems dominated most part of the dialogue, speakers also talked about solution. Abdullah Sarker, *Prothom Alo* correspondent Dinajpur who has been reporting on adivasi issues urged the NGOs, church bodies and the adivasi organizations to assist the adivasis to secure their land title papers. "One big reason for eviction and violence against the adivasis is that their land title papers are not up-to-date."

ADC General Abu Raihan Miah concurred with Abdullah Sarker. "For solution of land-related problems you need to carefully find out what amount of land you have in your name, have a clear idea of the boundary of your land, check the record, *kharij dakhila* the name and then secure the title," advised the ADC General who added, "Adivasis have the same rights like all other citizens of the country. There are criminals around you should stay watchful about."

Rabindranath Soren, the chair at the dialogue and president of Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad (JAP) appreciated the role of women in struggle for rights. "On the one hand, the adivasi women face oppression and on the other, they stay in the frontline of resistance movement for rights." □ Philip Gain

Moulvibazar, from 17-20 October 2014. Twenty-six participants including 17 journalists from Northwest, North-center, Northeast and Chittagong regions of Bangladesh, attended the workshop titled, "In-depth reporting on tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh".

The prime objective of the workshop aimed at scaling up the understanding of the journalists about these communities and having them engaged

in in-depth reporting on their rights and social justice issues.

“The rights of the tea workers have remained neglected for a long time. The journalists, through their professional aptitude, have a responsibility to raise their issues and have them included in the national agenda,” said Rambhajan Kairi, General Secretary, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) at the inauguration of the workshop.

Kairi criticized portrayal of happy images of the tea workers in advertisements printed and aired by the media. Thus the plights of the tea workers remain concealed.

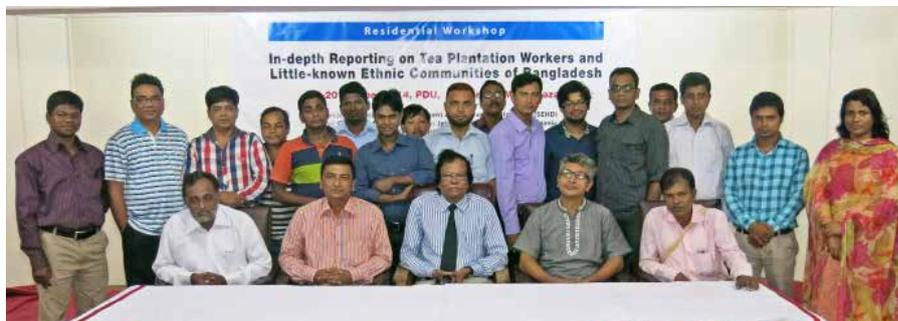
Ranadhir Kumar Dev, Chairman of Srimangal Upazila Parishad confessed, “I cannot play my role for the people (tea workers) who voted me to where I am; I rather serve the interest of the owners. In conflict of interest between the owners and the workers, it is the owners who always control us.”

In addition to skill sharing for journalistic writing and research, the participants themselves (working journalists), officials of the government agencies involved with tea industry, local leaders, university professors, trade union leaders representing tea workers, and adivasi leaders shared their insights and thoughts on the condition and struggles of the tea workers and the little-known ethnic communities.

The tea gardens of Bangladesh (157) in the Northeast and Southeast are established on about 114000 hectares of public land granted for production of tea.

Prokash Kanti Chowdhury, ADC (revenue) of Moulvibazar district said “Nothing is said about the land rights of the tea workers in the lease deeds for land between the tea garden owners and the government. This is a leverage for the owners to stay passive about the rights of the tea workers,”

Chowdhury also mentioned, “40% to 45% of the workforce in the tea gardens remains in staggering unemployment. We have sent a list of 40 ethnic communities we find in the tea gardens to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs so that they get state attention in order for them to access job opportunities outside the tea gardens.”



Participants at the training.

Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid, director of Project Development Unit (PDU), an important wing of Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB) gave his opinions: “The trade union leaders are there to bargain with the owners. The government has little role in this regard.” Bijoy Bunnarjee, a trade union leader disagreed, “The government should play an effective role to ensure the rights of the tea workers.”

“When an Adivasi is killed or raped, we get an assignment to cover,” said S.M. Atik, a journalist from Rajshahi working for *Daily New Age*. “This workshop has opened up our minds and

hearts about many issues on rights, culture, languages, and other pertinent issues of the adivasis and other marginalized communities that we pay little attention to and investigate.”

Chitta Ghosh, president of Dinajpur Press Club, said, “The tea workers are hostage to the owners to a greater degree than any other industry.”

The training ended with the expressed commitment, confidence and profound enthusiasm of participants to cover the rights issues of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities with greater care and attention. □

Md. Rajibul Hasan and Md. Lokman Hossain

Training on Strengthening Organizations of Tea Workers and Adivasis

There are numerous non-government and religious organizations active among the adivasis, little-known ethnic communities and tea workers. These communities also have their organizations promoting social, cultural and political rights. However, the difficulties these communities face are insurmountable. Most of these organizations have no registration, lack financial capability and work with no paid staff or depend only on volunteers.

It is in this context that the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) organized a residential workshop from 16-19 April 2015 in Parbatiapur in Dinajpur. The key objective was to strengthen the scopes and capacity of the rights-based organizations dealing with ethnic, marginalized and excluded communities.

The workshop is part of the project, ‘Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh’.

Twenty-two executives and staff,

including five women, attended the workshop. They represented 16 organizations of the adivasis, tea communities and tea workers.

In his reflection on the tea workers’ condition, Rambhajan Kairi, the general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), said, “The tea workers are living a miserable life. They are deprived of most of the basic civil rights. It is necessary for the tea workers to develop their skills and capacity in order to expose their problems to the policy makers, media, and people in general.”

Challenges of CSOs and CBOs among adivasis and tea workers:

In group work [on the second day], the participants focused on the civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) in the light of the condition of the organizations they represented, the challenges they face, and what they need in dealing with their condition and challenges. The key challenges they identified their organizations face include legal status (of the 16 organizations represented

Participants at the workshop.



at the workshop only five had primary registration and none had NGO Affairs Bureau registration); lack of organizational infrastructure; lack of skills to build resources; geography (many are located in remote areas); lack of communication with others (including the media and administration) and networking; lack of planning; lack of credibility and transparency; lack of participation of women in the activities of the organizations; lack of unity; lack of adequate political awareness and protection; inefficiency in preparing reports; lack of state recognition of the adivasis and other communities who are not Bangalees; hardship; lack of knowledge about ILO conventions that define rights and protection of adivasis and occupational groups; lack of capacity to engage in effective lobby and advocacy; lack of good governance; lack of capacity to be sustainable, lack of ability of mainstreaming the marginalized communities; lack of knowledge about government policies and mechanisms (including their analysis and updates); lack of capacity to study and interpret national and international laws and instruments that relate to trade unions, tea communities and adivasis; and hostility of the people of majority community.

Overcoming the challenges: The participants also discussed what they think about overcoming such wide-ranging challenges. Some of them are: securing registration of the organizations with appropriate legal authorities; updating and putting the constitution of the organization in practice; proper use of IT; organizing special training on research; documentation and publication; engaging in research and publication; collation and preservation of traditions, traditional knowledge and cultural ele-

ments; syndicating reports on deprivation and abuses; training and orientation of organizations of adivasis and tea communities on national and international conventions and laws related to their rights and sharing national and international instruments; establishing legal aid mechanisms; organizing skill and capacity training on specific issues; engaging in issue-based campaigns and scaling up skills for such campaigns; establishing networks among organizations of tea communities and little-known ethnic communities; increasing communication with stakeholders (governmental, non-governmental and donor agencies); training on project formulation and fund raising and developing funds with local resource, etc.

Bhupesh Roy, head of program of GBK, talked about how to improve organizational capacity and accountability. He discussed the essential instruments of an organization. The foremost of these instruments is the constitution (memorandum and rules and regulations). He reflected on how to develop an organizational constitution and how an organization becomes accountable at different levels.

Ahsan Ali, director, finance and administration of PRIP Trust talked about setting up of financial management of an organization in the last day of the workshop. He shared practical tips on different methods and techniques of effective financial management.

Developing Capacity Building Tools (manual): At a session, the participants brainstormed to outline the contents of a capacity building toolbox (or manual) for CSOs and CBOs.

In the last session of the workshop on the third day, Moazzem Hossain, the chief executive of GBK encouraged the adivasis to strengthen their own organizations to fight for rights and protection of diverse cultures. □

Last of the Koras

Thopang Kora (70), the most experienced hunter of a Kora village in Birol Upazila in Dinajpur, parks his rickshaw near his home after a long day. He was a freedom fighter during the Liberation War. Now he survives mostly on a single meal a day and sleeps in the veranda of his small hut. He lets his family sleep inside the hut, which leaves no extra space for him. Most of the Koras left in the plains land have been living like this for generations.

Kora is one of the smallest ethnic communities in the Northwest of Bangladesh with only 96 of them left in three villages in Dinajpur near the Indian borderline. Once there were more Koras in these villages, who had been living on this land for hundreds of year. They occupied 150 acres of land in Birol Upazila. Over time, the local Bangalees have forced most of them to leave their homeland and



Kora woman. © Philip Gain

migrate to nearby Indian villages. With no legal rights to the land and little exposure to the outside world, they have failed to fight off the greedy land grabbers. The government's failure to protect the land rights of the indigenous and ethnic communities has created conflicts in other parts of the country as well. However, Koras are among the most isolated and marginalized communities of the country and most of them ended up leaving their country.

Those who have managed to stay in their native villages lead their lives in hunger and poverty. Most of them work as day laborers in the nearby

land owned by Banglaees, which once used to be their land. Only three Kora families own six acres of land; others together occupy less than an acre of land. The local land grabbers are trying to take possession of this little land as well. Many government officials are allegedly involved with the eviction of the Koras. The land grabbers use threats and lawsuits to take away their land.

"They once threatened to cut my

tendons," said Keena Kora who has been part of non-violence protests to demand land rights for Koras. People from other ethnic communities and even many Banglaees joined in their protests. However, the last of the Koras might be forced to leave Bangladesh as well if the state fails to provide them necessary security. □
Abridged from "The Last of Koras", first published in Weekend Tribune on 12 December 2014.

INVESTIGATION

Tea Workers under Asbestos Roofs at Health Risk

Exposure to asbestos for a long time increases the risk of lung and throat cancer. Many countries have banned use of asbestos in consideration of health risk it poses. Asbestos is not seen used in the cities and villages of Bangladesh anymore. But it's still in use in the tea gardens of the country.

Many tea garden workers, who lived in houses with roofs made of asbestos, had died of cancer. Hardeb Pashi (65), a worker of Doloi Tea Garden in Srimongol, died from cancer in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) of the last Bangla year. A month later, Ramchandra Shukla (55), died too. Samdeo Bhor (60) died a year and a half ago from then. All these three men were neighbors living at the *baro* (big) labor line in Doloi Tea Garden. Each of them lived in houses with asbestos roofing.

Samdeo Bhor's wife, Hemanti Bhor said that he had chest pain and breathing problems. After being bedridden for two weeks, he died at Osmani Medical College in Sylhet. The doctor said that he died from cancer. She added that since then approximately 10 other workers have died from cancer in the same garden. Six of them were from *baro* labor line of the garden. All of them lived in houses with asbestos roofing. However, she doesn't know if asbestos causes cancer.

Prof. Dr. Khaleda Islam of the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science



House in the labour line with asbestos roofing. © Philip Gain

of Dhaka University said that asbestos is a fibrous dust, and these tiny fibers are released into the air. When they are inhaled, they can be trapped in the lungs causing breathing problems and coughing. Exposure to asbestos makes the cells of the body react. To fight this foreign particle in the body, the cells multiply and start to work abnormally. At one point, these very cells transform into cancer after failing to fight off asbestos. If a pregnant woman is exposed to asbestos, it can affect the unborn baby along with the mother. In that case, the newborn baby could be underweight or have other birth defects.

Various tea gardens in Moulvibazar and Habiganj districts have houses with brown asbestos roofing. In some gardens there are rows of such houses, in others the houses are scattered. Some gardens have 50 houses with asbestos roofing, some have up to 300 such houses. Thousands of tea garden workers live in these houses.

There are hundreds of houses with asbestos roofing in Chatalpur Tea Garden of Kulaura upazila and Doloi Tea Garden of Madhabpur upazila in Moulvibazar district. And there are scattered houses with asbestos roofing in Rashidpur Tea Garden of Bahubal upazila in Hobiganj. There are many cancer patients in these tea gardens. Many of them have already died. But no one can tell why those people have died from cancer.

It should be mentioned that out of 157 tea gardens in the Northeast and Southeast, 115 are in Moulvibazar and Hobiganj districts. There are 90 tea gardens in Moulvibazar and 23 in Hobiganj.

Babul Sarkar, manager of Doloi tea garden said that the owners are concerned about the health issues of the workers. He added that there is asbestos left in many houses. These houses were built a long time ago. Asbestos is no more distributed. And the remaining asbestos would be removed.

As they lead somewhat isolated lives, many tea workers do not know that asbestos may cause cancer. The owners also did not let them know about the risks of using asbestos.

Ashuk Miah, a worker at Rashidpur Tea Estate of Finlay in Hobiganj district, said that drops of colored water fall from the roof inside the house during winter. If it falls on clothes, the stain does not come off. But he added that he doesn't know if it's harmful for health.

Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB) is the government authority to oversee the tea industry. Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid, former director of Project Development Unit (PDU), an important wing of BTB, said, "We discourage use of asbestos. The tea gardens owned by the government have already stopped the use of asbestos. However, there are still some houses with asbestos roofing in privately-owned gardens. We will take measures to remove asbestos from these houses."

Asbestos banned in the western countries: New Zealand banned the use of blue asbestos in 1984 and brown asbestos in 2002. Australia banned the use of blue asbestos in 1967 and brown asbestos in 1989. Japan has banned it

in 2004, Korea in 2009, Singapore in 1989 and Turkey in 2011 due to health risk.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates (2014), "125 million people around the world are annually exposed to asbestos in the workplace, and the International Labor Organization says about 100,000 work-

ers die each year from asbestos related disease" More than 50 countries have banned or restricted the use of asbestos since the early 1970's. Use of asbestos in other countries remains to be a concern. □ *Report by Abdullah Al Mah-dee. First published in Bonik Barta, 25 October 2014. Translated and updated by Sabrina Miti Gain with information from websources.*

For the Love of Land: Adivasi Man Killed and Woman Abused

Organized attacks, killings and physical assaults on adivasis in the North Bengal off and on shake us. The key factor for such atrocities is forgery with land. Rajibul Hasan with Philip Gain report on recent atrocities against adivasis in Dinajpur and Chapainawabganj.

Santal Farmer Killed in Dinajpur

His father and his father's brother became victims of secret murder. Now Dhudu Soren himself is killed. A Santal farmer of Kachua village in Nawabganj upazila in Dinajpur, Dhudu Soren (60) was murdered in broad daylight on 2 August 2014. The killers are Abdul Gaffar Ali, his three brothers and other family members.

At about half past nine in the morning, Soren and Solaiman Ali (48) were coming back from nearby Hilirdanga Bazar. When they were passing by Abdul Gaffar's house, Dhudu was held, dragged inside Gaffar's house and brutally assaulted. "Abdul Gaffar and his brother Azher Ali (50) pushed Soren onto the ground from his bicycle and started beating him. Gaffar's three brothers and other family members started striking him with *boti* (homemade weapon), axe, and hewing knife. At the same time the assailants beat him mercilessly with sticks," said Ali.

Later, the Santals and Banglaees of the village rescued Soren from a field near Gaffar's house. Dhudu's eldest son, Robi Soren (23), said, "My father was unconscious when we found him. His whole body was bloodstained. His right hand and leg were broken. They cut the tendon vein of his right leg and it was bleeding." Critically wounded Soren died at about 3:00 pm on the way to Rangpur Medical



Family members of Dhudu Soren.
© Prosad Sarker

College Hospital.

Abdul Gaffar Ali (45), who was in hiding after the incident, claimed on phone, "My father late Gulger Hossain bought 2.75 acres of land from Niglo Hasda, grandmother of Dhudu Soren. But Dhudu Soren sold this land to other people. Yesterday (2 August) when we went to occupy our land, Soren, with some Santals, tried to stop us with bows, arrows, and sticks. A clash took place between the two parties and Soren died."

Robi said, "This is a long-standing land dispute. Their father grabbed our land in 1971 with false document in hand. In 2008 my father (Dhudu Soren) filed a case with the Additional Deputy Commissioner's (Revenue) court in Dinajpur and the court issued a decree in our favor. From that time Abdul Gaffar and his brothers have been giving death threat to my father."

Robi believes that Gaffar's families were connected with the secret murder

of his grandfather and uncle as well. Robi also claims, "My great grandmother or father never sold this land to Gaffar's father. We have original document of this land."

Rabindranath Soren, the president of Jatyo Adivasi Parishad said, "It is not unlikely that Gaffar's family members were involved in the murder of Dhudu's father and his brother." He also informed that there are many land grabbing cases over 33 acres of adivasi land in that area.

Azizul Haque (60), chairman of 9 No. Kushdaha Union Council confirms that Dhudu Soren is the owner of the land for which he has been murdered. "Gaffar illegally occupied this land for a long time. I asked them to show documents to substantiate their claim. Every time they showed false documents," said Haque.

Robi filed a case with Nawabganj Police Station. He accuses that the killers are putting pressure on his family to withdraw the case.

Detective Redwanur Rahim of Dinajpur Police Station informed on 27 August 2015, "We have sent the main accused, Gaffar to jail and submitted the charge sheet of the case. Now the court is reviewing it."

Rabindranath Soren said, "The case is in progress. Gaffar is in jail now. He didn't get bail. However, Hawa Bibi (Gaffar's wife) was released on bail. Robi Soren has filed an appeal for refusal of her bail."

Oraon Woman Beaten and Raped in Chapainawabganj

Bichitra Tirki (34), an Oraon Woman in Chapainawabganj District, recovered the land in 2007 that her husband lost to the land grabbers in 1978. Mongla Sarder, her husband, was traumatized when a gang of land grabbers took control of all his 48 *bighas* (33 decimals is one *bigha*). He died in 1999. The family related the death to shock that Mongla went through for loss of his land.

The land grabbers, lurking around, attacked Bichitra Tirki of village Jinarpur in Parbotipur union by midday of 4 August, 2014 while she was working on her land with a group of some 20 day laborers. They mercilessly beat her and three of the attackers allegedly raped her.



Bichitra Tirki in Hospital bed.

“Led by Monirul Islam Montu (50), Abdul Hamid (62), Afzal Hossain (60), their other family members and some 50 hired muscle men appeared on our land. I tried to resist them and an altercation followed. At one stage a miscreant hit me on my head with the handle of spade; I fell on the ground. Then they tore my clothes and beat in my hands, chest, thigh, leg by handles of spades and sticks indiscriminately,” Bichitra Tirki, in hospital bed on 6 August, described the attack. “They did not stop there. Rejaul Karim (27), son of Montu, and his brother-in-law Akhter Hossain (35) and Akbar Ali (25) [an accomplice of Montu] took me to a side of the farmland and raped me,” accused Tirki.

Jotin Kispotta (60), father of Tirki, said, “They hit me in the head with stick. I fell on the ground and became senseless. When I got back my sense, I found my daughter naked lying on the ground.”

Bichitra Tirki was in hospital bed from 4-30 August (2014). She filed two cases with the Gomostapur Police Station—one for rape allegation and looting and the other for assault.

Officer in Charge (OC) Firoze Ahmed of Gomostapur Police Station gave the latest updates on the case on 27 August 2014, “Most of the accused were released on bail. We have submitted the charge sheet. The case is in progress in court.”

“The attack on Bichitra Tirki proves how insecure the adivasis are in Bangladesh,” says Rabindranath Soren, president of Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad.

Bichitra Tirki said, “The case is continuing in slow pace. A few days after getting arrested, the culprits were released on bail during Ramadan Eid in 2014. I have cultivated my land this year without any trouble. However, they frequently give me death threats and utter unspeakable swear words when they see me.” □

Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Spells Grief for Tea Workers

10 April 2015, hundreds of tea workers of Chandpore Tea Estate in Hobiganj District gathered to speak out against the government plan to establish an economic zone on their *khet* land within the tea estate. The tea workers are strongly opposed to setting up an economic zone on 511 out of 985 acres of *khet* (agricultural) land, which is a crucial source of income for about 1,200 poverty-stricken tea workers’ families of Chandpore Tea Estate. Their fear, they will lose the *khet* land if the government goes ahead executing its plan to establish a special economic zone (SEZ) on land that they have cultivated for generations.

Neither the government nor the owner has formally informed the workers about the economic zone. A high official of Chandpore Tea Estate claimed that the government hasn’t officially informed them either. The tea workers want the government officials and the local elected people’s representatives to come to the tea garden to talk to them and listen to what they have to say. However, the elected president of Luskerpur Valley committee of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) reported that the Deputy Commissioner, upazila chairman and UNO refused to come to the garden area on excuse of ‘insecurity’.

“There is nothing to consult with

the tea workers. The government is the owner of this land. So, the government has the right to use this land whenever it is needed,” was the reaction of additional deputy commissioner (ADC, revenue) of Hobiganj district in his office on 9 April 2015.

The additional deputy commissioner (ADC, Revenue) of Hobiganj district confirmed in April that papers have been sent to the Ministry of Land and Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) has the overall responsibility to establish the economic zone.

New opportunities and production that come along the economic zones will supposedly strengthen national economy. Rambhajan Kairi, the General Secretary of the trade union of tea workers (BCSU) explained that they are not against industrialization and its benefits. But the government has a responsibility towards the tea workers who depend on the *khet* land for their subsistence. “What is development for the nation should not be disaster for the tea workers,” warns Kairi.

A highly placed government official dealing with land leased for production of tea and several other insiders in the government also believe that it is not a wise decision to establish an economic zone on *khet* land or in a tea garden area. □ Philip Gain



Tea workers in protest against SEZ on *khet* of Chandpore Tea Estate. © Philip Gain

Progress of the Project: “Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh”

Funded by European Union and ICCO Cooperation, the project started in May 2013. The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) is implementing the project and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) is the partner. Most of the activities planned for the first two years under the three-year project, starting in May 2015, have been implemented and the results of actions have been significant.

Communities mapped: The tea plantation workers and their communities—one group of final beneficiaries of the project—are “tied” to the labor lines in the tea gardens and are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups of people in Bangladesh. One key activity of the project is to map the communities who live in the labour lines of the tea gardens. The communities in the tea gardens are astonishingly diverse, but they have never been properly mapped before. It is under this project that these communities have been mapped through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interviews and literature review. The research teams conducted FGDs in all 157 gardens.

The findings of mapping of the tea communities have been astonishing. Around 90 communities (indigenous, ethnic and caste minorities) have been found in 157 tea gardens in Sylhet, Hobiganj, Moulvibazar, Chittagong, and Rangamati districts. These communities are: Almik, Orao, Oriá, Kanda, Karmakar, Kalwar, Kanu, Kahar, Kalindi, Kairi, Kumar, Kurmi, Keot, Kora, Kol, Khodal, Kharia, Goyeswar, Gondo/ Ganju, Garait, Gorh, Garo, Gurkha,

Gouri, Goswami, Goala, Giri, Ghatuar, Chasha, Jainti Patro, Jora, Dusad, Nayek, Naidu, Noonía, Telegu, Tongla, Tanti, Teli, Tripura, Pradhan, Patro, Pal, Pahan, Panikha, Pashi, Pandit, Phulmali, Bonaj, Chowhan, Bhokta, Lohar, Banai, Bauri, Barma, Baraik, Banshfor, Bagti, Bangali, Been, Bunerjee, Bihari, Bhuyian, Bhumij, Vor, Bhujpuri, Mridha, Madraji, Marma, Mal, Mahle, Mahara, Majhi, Monipuri, Mushohor, Munda, Rautia, Rajbollov, Rajbangshi, Rajvor, Rajghor, Rajuar, Robidas, Shobdokor, Shobor, Sheel, Shuklaboddo, Sadri, Sadhu, Santal, Halam, Hajra, Relay.

Another group of final beneficiaries mapped are little-known ethnic communities in the Northwest and North-center of Bangladesh. It is though similar methodology that these communities have been mapped in these regions. In addition to the 13 ethnic communities in 14 districts in the Northwest and five districts in the North-center recognized by the government around 45 ethnic communities have been found in these districts. These communities are: Hajong, Koch, Banai, Dalu, Hodi, Shabar, Rajbongshi/Bongshi, Gurkha, Bagti, Banai, Bhuiya, Bhuimali, Bhumij, Bindu, Chowhan, Ghatual or Ghatuar, Ganju Singh, Gorait, Ho, Hajra, Hari, Hodi, Kadar, Kairi, Kalwar, Rai Barman (Khatryio), Koda, Kora, Karmakar, Kol, Koch, Munda, Paharia, Kurmi, Madak, Mahali/Mahle, Lohar, Malo, Mushohor, Noonía, Pahan, Pal, Teli, Robidas, Rajbhor, Rajwar, Tanti/Tantubai, Telegu, Teli, Turi, etc.

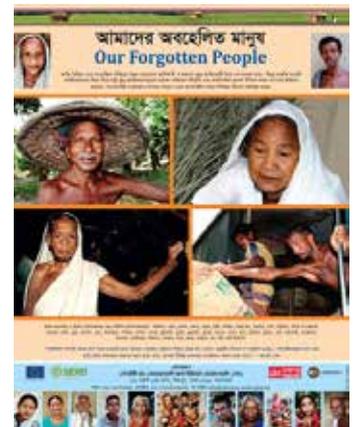
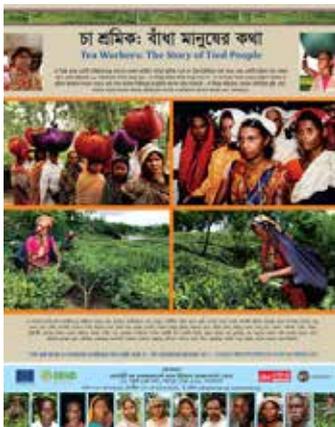
Investigations: One key activity for examination of human rights condition

of the final beneficiaries was investigation. With participation and help of the project staff, associated organizations, final beneficiaries, workshop participants, and journalists, investigations were carried out in many areas. The key investigation areas during two years were: disputes over land of the ethnic communities that led to killings, arson attack, demolition of houses, and physical attack on ethnic men and women; attack on tea workers; education in the tea gardens; special economic zone on *khet* or cropland in the tea gardens; life and struggle of the tea workers and some ethnic communities in very difficult geography and conditions; use of asbestos in the tea gardens; wages and fringe benefits in the tea gardens; abuses related to rubber plantation in the tea gardens; land grabbing; elections of Bangladesh Tea Workers Association (BCSU), etc.

The inventory, mapping, investigation, and research have resulted in reports, knowledge, and analysis, which will be published in books and shared with final beneficiaries, targets and all shareholders.

Skill and capacity building activities:

It is mainly through training, workshops and dialogues that essential knowledge and skills have been shared among the final beneficiaries, targets and stakeholders. During two years of the project, five residential workshops have scaled up skills of the actors dealing with rights issues of the ethnic communities and tea workers, their maps, identities and cultures. Capacity building trainings have also strengthened



ened skills and capacity of trade union leaders in the tea industry and officials and executives of organizations of ethnic communities in other areas.

Publications and productions: For the first two years publications and productions remain limited to leaflet, brochure, newsletter (two issues including the current one), two posters, yearly calendar and investigative reports published in magazines in particular. Preparations are going on for production of two training manuals, one volume on the communities in the tea gardens, one volume on the little-known ethnic communities in the Northwest and North-center of Bangladesh and one photo album on communities in both tea gardens and other project areas. Besides, photos on life, struggles and culture of the both tea workers and ethnic communities will be displayed in two photography exhibitions. A documentary film focused on land issues of the Adivasis and tea workers is also being made.

Important activities to be done in the last year of the project period

Dialogue: A dialogue on 'Mapping and rethinking the identity and rights of the tea workers and their communities' in Srimongol in November 2015.

Final training for selected participants of all targets: A final training for the project participants including the final beneficiaries and selected representatives in February 2016.

Convention: A national convention in January 2016. The final beneficiaries and representatives from all the stakeholders of the project will attend the convention. It is an advocacy program along with a learning program on the rights of the final beneficiaries.

Photography exhibitions: Two photography exhibitions—one on the tea workers and the other on little-known ethnic communities. One will be organized with the convention and the other organized separately. Identity, life, culture and struggle of the tea workers and little-known ethnic communities will be portrayed in photos of the exhibitions. □

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

It is a political manifesto of the tea workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh. Alongside reflection on statistical accounts and geographic locations of the tea workers and little-known ethnic communities, it focuses on their socio-economic condition, structural human rights abuses, social justice and makes various recommendations on their rights. The representatives of tea workers and adivasis themselves have drafted the document

The agenda gives foremost importance to political protection of the adivasis and the tea workers.

There are schools in the tea gardens run by the government, garden owners and NGOs. But most of the schools lack adequate number of teachers and education materials. The tea workers—most of them hard-core poor—cannot bear the education expense of their children. The agenda put forward specific recommendations to provide opportunities of education to the tea workers' children.

Inadequate and poor housing, shortage of pure drinking water, malnutrition and unhygienic sanitation are the common features of the labour lines where tea workers live. Consequently tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, anemia etc. are their common companions. The agenda provides recommendations for regular monitoring and necessary support in this regard.

The agenda gives a list of national and international laws and instruments and brief annotations related

to the rights of the tea workers and little-known ethnic communities stipulated in these instruments. Fair wage, leaves, risk allowance, decent work condition, etc. are legitimate rights of the tea workers. But they are deprived of these rights as well. Recommendations have also been made in the agenda on this issue.

Access to land and other resources has been particularly attended in the agenda.

Women and children are in the worst condition among the underprivileged and marginalized communities. The agenda recommends for special attention to their health, nutrition, and safety issues. Creation of jobs for a large population unemployed has been emphasized. Besides, the agenda aptly emphasizes on participation and representation of these communities in policy making and political processes.

A special attention has been given to how 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 the society. Aside from being deprived of opportunities, they are also cut off from the local communities. 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, conscious people and the civil society of the country should also cooperate to make sure that the political parties and the state fulfil their commitments and responsibilities towards the tea workers and people from among the little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh. □

