

People on the Fringe

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The Project in the End

On the Margins—*Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities*

Elegy on Land (Matir Maya)—*30-minute documentary film on soil and blood in Northwestern districts of Bangladesh*

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Social Justice Crucial for Inclusive Development in Bangladesh

—Speakers Say at a Citizen's Dialogue on Tea Workers' Rights



Participants at the dialogue. Photo: Ehsanul Hoque Chowdhury

Little is known or discussed about the plight of Bangladesh's tea workers. Seldom do we consider the human cost of the industry and infrastructure that goes into creating that perfect cup of tea that is at the centre of Bengali social life. Inhabiting the tea gardens of Sylhet, Maulvibazar, Hobiganj and Chittagong districts, they rarely enter our thoughts. Upon visiting the picturesque tea gardens, we may set a cursory glance upon the thin and frail features of the colourfully dressed women with large baskets on their backs but we quickly look away, the moment passes and the veil of indifference and ignorance remains intact.

On April 19, 2016, the Society for Environment and Human Development, an environmental and human rights organization, organized a citizen's dialogue titled, "Rethinking Identity, Geography and Rights of the Tea Workers and their Community" with Gram Bikash Kendra with financial support from the European Union and ICCO Cooperation. The event brought

together various stakeholders from the tea industry including, tea workers, trade union leaders, labour rights activists and government personnel.

The discussion was moderated by Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman, Power and Participation Research Center (PPRC). The designated speakers included Tapan Datta, president, Trade Union Center, Chittagong; Md. Azizul Islam, deputy inspector general (DIG), Factory and Establishment, Srimongol, Maulvibazar; Shah Khairul Enam, member, Labour, Health and Welfare Sub-committee, Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA); Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, assistant executive director, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS); and Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, lawyer, Supreme Court among others.

Philip Gain, the director of Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) and lead researcher, presented the findings of their research on the geography, identity, and political agenda of the tea communities in Bangladesh.



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Md. Azizul Islam, deputy inspector general (DIG), Factory and Establishment, Srimongol, Moulvibazar, spoke about the discrimination faced by the tea workers with regard to the application of Bangladesh labour law. According to the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (Section 234), 5% of the profits of a business organization or enterprise must go towards a labour participation fund or a workers welfare fund for use by joint decision of the workers. However, tea workers are denied access to these funds. He emphasized the importance of addressing these legal discrepancies to ensure improvements in the standard of living for the tea communities.

The misfortune of the tea communities started with their long and treacherous journeys to the tea gardens of Bengal in the mid 19th century. According to one account, during the early years, approximately one-third of the tea plantation workers died during their journey to the tea gardens and due to the difficult working and living conditions at the time. Upon their arrival, the workers became indentured labourers and the property of the tea companies. They have since been tied to the labour lines of the tea gardens and have remained economically, socially and ethnically isolated from the surrounding communities.

Tea workers are some of the lowest paid workers in the country, earning daily cash pay of just Taka 85 for A-class gardens, Taka 83 for B-class gardens and Taka 82 for C-class gardens. They often work under indecent and hazardous conditions and are prone to exhaustion and injuries. They lack adequate supply of drinking water and water supplies in the tea gardens are often contaminated due to poor sanitation. They are also exposed to dangerous pesticides and are not provided with the required safety equipment. Thus, skin and diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory problems are common health complications suffered by the tea workers.

The speakers also expressed their concerns regarding the government's recent plans to create a Special Economic Zone in Hobiganj on 511 acres of arable land within Chandpore

Tea Estate, which resulted in many incidences of massive protests since April 2015. The protests were attended by thousands of tea workers fighting for their right to continue to cultivate the land as their communities have been doing for over 150 years.

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman reiterated the importance of social justice for inclusive development in Bangladesh and highlighted the need to improve the level of public investment in education for these communities.

Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of the Bangladesh Tea Workers Union, reaffirmed the importance of making workers aware of their rights under the law and of strengthening the labour movement for tea workers. Asha Ornal, a tea worker and research assistant with Society for Environment and Human Development, spoke about the difficulties of life on the tea plantations, "How can a worker support a family and afford three meals a day on a wage of Tk.85 a day. It's impossible". She also spoke specifically about the gender dimensions of the issue. "Women are the tea industry. Without us, this industry wouldn't exist yet we do not have access to proper sanitation, maternity leave or healthcare".

Approximately fifty percent of the total tea workers are women but are underrepresented within the leadership of the workers' union.

They face a number of difficulties such as occupational health hazards, lack of nutrition, long working hours and irregularities regarding access to maternity leave and other benefits.

The tea workers are a politically neglected and disadvantaged group. They are at the mercy of tea garden owners through an exploitative land tenure system supported by the state. In spite of having settled in Bangladesh many generations ago, they have no right to the land and are seen as outsiders by the general Bangalee population due to differences in culture, ethnicity and religion. They have little scope for education or employment outside the estates and are thus tied to the tea estates with little hope of improving their circumstances. They are socially and economically excluded. Although Bangladesh is a signatory to many international laws and conventions that offer protection to communities such as the tea workers, there is little political will to push through rules and regulations to improve their circumstances. Their plight reflects the political realities faced by many minority communities in Bangladesh and offers us some important food for thought. Indeed, when the steam has dissipated and the tea leaves have settled, there is much to contemplate over our next cup of tea. □

by Asfara Ahmed

NATIONAL CONVENTION

Rally to Mark the Opening of National Convention

On April 17 2016, a colourful procession of performers walked through the streets of Dhaka singing and dancing in festive celebration. As they made their way from Asad Avenue to Manik Mia Avenue, adorned with bold headbands proclaiming "Our Identity Our Culture", their message was clear, "We are here. See us. Acknowledge us. Recognize our culture." The rally marked the launch of the national convention on "Rethinking Identity, Geography and Rights of Tea Workers and Little-known Ethnic Communities" held on April 17 and 18, 2016 at CBCB Centre and DRIK Gallery.

The national convention sought to create awareness regarding



Tea worker with drum at the rally. Photo: Philip Gain

Bangladesh's tea workers and the little-known ethnic communities and discuss issues central to their rights and preservation of their unique cultures. During the rally, the participants cheerfully danced and sang in their traditional dresses as they proudly showcased their culture to spectators. It featured saxophone performances by representatives of the Shobdokor community while Santals played drums and *kartals* to accompany the traditional Dashai (welcome) dances.

Participant during the rally included Philip Gain, director of SEHD; Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, associate professor, Department of International Relations, Dhaka University and Bichitra Tirki, noted adivasi leader and land rights activist amongst many others. The National Convention was concluded on April 18, 2016 with a vibrant cultural show that further highlighted the uniqueness and diversity of Bangladesh's small and little known ethnic communities. □

ethnic communities mentioned in government records, SEHD has found 37 communities in the Northwest and North-centre, many of whom are found also in the tea estates. The ethnic identities of the communities in the tea gardens have always remained inadequately attended. What is unique about the tea workers (122,000) and their communities (with a population of some 500,000) is that they belong to many ethnic and caste identities—as many as 80. Of the 80 communities found in the 156 tea gardens (BTB's report, Statistics on Bangladesh Tea Industry-2015 gives a list of 160 tea gardens; however, three-four gardens are not in operation and not inhabited by tea communities and those were skipped from FGDs) nine are mentioned in the government records as ethnic communities.

“All ethnic communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Northwestern region (Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions), North-central region, Northeast, coastal regions in Patuakhali and Cox's Bazar districts, and the tea gardens put together, we find a comprehensive list of 110 ethnic communities in Bangladesh,” said Gain.

Gain's presentation was followed by launching of 232-page photo album 'On the Margins: Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities', which contains incredible faces of all 80 communities in the tea gardens and all other ethnic communities of Bangladesh. Images of other major aspects of life of the tea workers and the ethnic communities are integral part of the photo album. The author of the photo album, Philip Gain, informed that two volumes with details of these communities that were yet to come from the press, would give a comprehensive picture of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh.

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, one key discussant, emphasized on the importance of making Bangladesh's little-known ethnic groups and the tea communities “statistically visible” and increasing their participation in the political and democratic process. “The summary findings of the research presented in the photo album are an outstanding addition to the literature on the ethnic communities of Bangladesh which will immensely

Book Launch and Discussion



Dignitaries at the book launch and discussion. Photo: Ehsanul Hoque Chowdhury

As part of the national convention on the theme, “Rethinking Identity, Geography and Rights of Tea Workers and Little-known Ethnic Communities” the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), in partnership with Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK), launched photo album, “On the Margins: Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities” and organized a panel discussion on 18 April 2016 at CBCB Centre.

Chaired by Professor Sakhawat Ali Khan, Chairman, SEHD, the launching and discussion was graced by Dr. Rafiqul Islam, professor emeritus, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) as the chief guest. Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman, Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC); Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, associate professor, Dhaka University; Moushumi Shabnam, anthropologist, North South University; and Hasna Hena Khan, Program Officer of the ICCO Cooperation commented on the book and reflected on the key findings of studies on identity of ethnic

communities who remain little-known or invisible.

Philip Gain, director of SEHD, in his introduction, presented the summary of the findings of the mapping of little-known ethnic communities of the plains and the ethnic communities in the tea gardens. The government census of 1991 and the *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010) gives a list of 27 *khudra nri-gosthi* in Bangladesh. Among these groups Marma and Mong in the Chittagong Hill Tracts refer to the same people and so are the Tripura and Usai or Usui. In the plains Malpahari and Pahari are also the same people. So, the actual number of ethnic communities is 25 according to this new law and the population census of 1991.

Some organizations of the ethnic groups estimate their number at 45 or more. The findings and exposé of the mapping about the ethnic communities that Gain presented set benchmarks for researchers, academes, media and activists. In addition to

contribute to scaling up the visibility of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh,” said Rahman. “This has also an immense political significance for recognition of these communities that remain largely invisible.”

Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan reflected on the engagement of the tea workers and ethnic communities themselves in mapping their communities and said “that is significant for any research to be participatory and meaningful. The findings of the mapping provide us with information that is first of its kind and will help us in coming to a consensus on the number and identities of ethnic communities in Bangladesh.”

Moushumi Shabnam reflected, “the findings presented today will make us rethink identities of the indigenous communities of Bangladesh and arouse

interest of the anthropologists and researchers for further research on the communities in the tea gardens and other areas”.

Prof. Rafiqul Islam, in his speech as the chief guest, said, “We are amazed to discover that there are so many ethnic communities in Bangladesh in addition to Bangalees. If further research is done on communities in Bangladesh many more surprising facts may surface.” Prof. Islam warned that these communities, their languages, identities and cultural heritages are at great danger today. The languages are getting lost, so are many indigenous peoples. He appealed to the people of the majority community and the state to take all necessary measures to protect these people, their languages and culture that make Bangladesh ethnically and culturally rich. □

The film, on the one hand, tells the stories of soil and blood, on the other, documents the solutions the activists and experts suggest.

Chaired by Rabindranath Soren, president, Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad and facilitated by Philip Gain, a discussion followed the screening of the documentary film. Film critique, activists, lawyer and politician reflected on the film and shared their experiences and suggestions.

Manjare Hasin Murad, well-known in the film making industry appreciated that such a film has been made. “Apart from technicality of making a film, what is important here is the decision of making such a film”, said Murad. “While the television channels and even many development organizations are reluctant to address hard facts about many human rights abuses, one being violence related to land, the choice of cases shown in the film is rare,” he commented. “The producer and the director of the film show courage in dealing with such a complex topic. The film is an eye-opener for the activists and the media.”

Shamsul Huda, executive director of Association for Land Reform and Development and a long time activist on land issue, emphasised the importance of developing legal protections for Bangladesh’s adivasis. “We need a specific law to protect the rights of the adivasi communities” he said.

Philimon Baske, vice president, Bagda Farm Bhumi Uddhar Shangram Committee; Bichitra Tirki, an Oraon woman from Rajshahi and a victim of physical abuse; and Babul Robidas, an adivasi lawyer in Joypurhat assisting the adivasis in the courts, shared their struggle and experiences on ground in struggle for retaining land and claiming the legitimate rights of the adivasis.

Pankaj Bhattacharya, a politician and special guest at the session, also shared his experience of visit to the communities in the Northwest. “The state is not humane and friendly enough to provide necessary safeguard to the adivasis.” He reiterated the common hope of the adivasis and said, “the state, judiciary and the officials in the concerned state agencies exercising their executive powers will ensure justice for them.” □

Premiere Screening of Documentary Film, *Elegy on Land* and Discussion

The evening session, focused on land and adivasis of the Northwest and the tea gardens, begun with the premiere screening of 30-minute documentary film, *Elegy on Land*. The film tells the stories of land disputes involving adivasis. Most of the adivasis who once owned land are landless and impoverished nowadays. They work as agricultural labourers on other people’s land. Based on statistics from different sources the best guesstimate

is that about 80 percent of the adivasis of the North Bengal are landless.

There are laws to protect the adivasi land. But the adivasis and many others allege that these laws are not applied properly. The state administration, however, does not agree with the contention that the state does not take the side of the adivasis. Many in the administration allege that the adivasis do not properly maintain their land documents.



Twin Photography Exhibitions Identity and Marginality of Ethnic Communities Revealed



Visitors at the exhibitions on inaugural day. Photo: Philip Gain

“The dominance of Bangalee identity and culture is the reason behind the marginalization of the adivasis and tea communities,” said Rahnuma Ahmed, noted writer and anthropologist, at the launching of twin photography exhibitions, “On the Margins: Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities” by Philip Gain and others. The exhibitions were launched on 17 April and remained open for all till April 21 at DRIK Gallery in Dhaka.

Reflecting on the marginality and invisibility of the ethnic communities, which were portrayed in the exhibits, Ahmed asserted that anthropology is a field of study invented by the hegemony to examine the “others” or minorities but that now the time has come for the majority to be scrutinized. She posed some pertinent questions including, “Why does this nation not want to acknowledge the existence of ethnic communities? Why does the country not want to give them their basic rights? Why is everyone in the country termed as ‘Bangalee’ in the constitution?” She exclaimed that Bangalee identity is turning into a noose on the neck of the adivasi communities through the power of the state. She went on to say that, “the situation cannot be changed if the ones who are the majority in the country do not protest against this.”

The exhibitions began with a cultural show featuring traditional dances, songs and music of Bangladesh’s adivasi and tea communities. In his welcoming address, Philip Gain, director of SEHD and photographer discussed the stories behind the photos on exhibit, which depict the lives, struggles, work conditions and cultures of tea workers and Bangladesh’s ethnic communities.

During workshops organized by SEHD in 2012 and 2013, it was revealed that there were many unrecognized ethnic communities in Bangladesh, especially within the tea gardens. SEHD’s project titled, “Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little known ethnic communities of Bangladesh” funded by European Union and ICCO cooperation adopted an “emic” approach to investigating these unexplored communities. Field researchers from the ethnic communities played a key role in gathering primary information about these communities by conducting

“The dominance of Bangalee identity and culture is the reason behind the marginalization of the adivasis and tea communities.”

focus group discussions (FGDs) and field level investigation in all tea gardens, 16 districts in Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions, and nine districts in the North-centre and Northeast. Photography was an integral part of mapping these communities who were on display at the exhibitions.

Most of the photos on display were taken during the three-year duration of the project and its research activities. While the government records show only 27 ethnic communities in Bangladesh, SEHD has found as many as 80 different ethnic communities in the tea gardens (70 of them not on the government records) and 37 ethnic communities in other areas that are not on the government records. According to Philip Gain, it is hoped that through SEHD’s research, the information obtained will reach government agencies such as the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics so that these ethnic groups are recognized and fairly represented in the national census.

A constitutional amendment (fifteenth) passed in 2011 declared that “The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshies”. This amendment mentions Adivasis as “tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities” and fails to provide them with the recognition they require to help preserve their unique cultural heritage and languages.

Dr. Shahidul Alam, a photographer of international repute, talked about the invisibility and extinction of the languages of the ethnic communities and said, “We fought for our Bangla language in 1952, then why do we want to take away the languages of other communities?” He also talked about the power dynamics of photography and the importance of being mindful of where we stand when we take and use pictures of others. He praised the photographers of the exhibitions for taking images from the perspective of the ethnic communities.

Chitta Ghosh, president of Dinajpur Press Club; Parimal Singh Baraik,

director of Moulvibazar Cha Jangoshthi Adivasi Front and Sandhya Malo, director of Women Commission for Development in Bangladesh also spoke about the invisibility and struggles of the ethnic communities.

Professor Md. Golam Rahman, chief information commissioner and the chief guest, talked about the diversity in our nation and encouraged the Bangalee majority to embrace a pluralistic society. He said, "Different religions, languages, communities—these are the reality of our state. It cannot be ignored. We have to remember that unity is possible to attain in diversity."

In his concluding remarks, Moazzem Hossain, chief executive of Gram Bikash Kendra and chair at the launching thanked the guests of honour, the organizers, and the audience and reiterated the significance of diversity for our nation. "It's a source of honor for our nation that so many different communities are found in such a small country. We should work to present our diversity to the rest of the world."

Communities and their life, culture,

environment, tradition, economy, etc. featured at the photography exhibitions: Almik, Bakti, Banai, Bangalee, Baraik, Barma, Basphor, Bauri, Bawn, Been, Bhar, Bhokta, Bhuimali, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Bihari, Bindumondol, Buna, Bunerjee, Chak, Chakma, Chasha, Chhatri, Chowhan, Dalu, Dusad, Ganju Singh, Garo, Ghatual, Giri, Goala, Gorait, Goswami, Gour, Goyashur (also known as Ashur), Hajong, Hajra, Hari, Hodi, Jhora, Kadar, Kahar, Kairi, Kalindi, Kalwar, Kanu, Karmokar, Keot, Kharia, Khasi, Khodal, Khumi, Khyang, Koch, Koda, Kol, Kondo, Kora, Kshatriya (one-third of total), Kumar (Pal), Kurmi, Lohar, Lushai, Lyngam, Mahato, Mahle, Majhi, Mal, Malo, Mandraji, Marma, Modok, Monipuri, Mridha, Mru, Munda, Mushohor, Naidu, Nayek, Nepali, Noonia, Oraon, Paharia, Painka, Pandit, Pangkhua, Pashi, Patro, Phulmali, Pradhan, Rajgor, Rajballohb, Rajbhar, Rajbongshi, Rajwar, Rakhaine, Rautia, Reli, Robidas, Sadhu, Santal, Shabor, Sheel, Shobdokar, Suklaboiddyo, Tanchangya, Tanti, Teli (Pal), Tongla, Tripura, and Turi. □

By *Asfara Ahmed and Sabrina Miti Gain*

geography and rights of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities, a cultural evening, "Our Identity Our Culture" was organized in the evening of 18 April 2016 to showcase the cultural heritage of Bangladesh's often forgotten and neglected ethnic minority communities.

The cultural evening gave us a glimpse into the cultural lives of the tea and ethnic communities.

It included traditional dances and songs by the Santal, Mahles, Garo, Koch and Telegu devotional rites including songs and dances. The event also exhibited cultural artefacts from these ethnic groups which gave us a glimpse into their day to day lives and included objects such as baskets, hunting and farming equipment, jewellery and other commonly used tools.

Dr. Rafiqul Islam, professor emeritus, ULAB, a renowned academic and creative writer and Mamunur Rashid, a prominent actor of Bangladesh lectured on the identity, language and culture of the ethnic communities. They spoke about the importance of preserving the identity, languages and cultures of Bangladesh's adivasi communities. Mamunur Rashid spoke about the importance of culture in our lives: "We must keep our culture alive because culture is our identity. It shows us who we are." He also spoke about the importance of diversity and its ability to strengthen a society. Dr. Rafiqul Islam spoke about the importance of preserving adivasi languages as well as our own national language. □

Celebrating Cultural diversity



Santal cultural team performing. Photo: Philip Gain

Bangladesh is a country of an overwhelming Bangalee majority. But there are many other ethnic communities, languages and vibrant cultures in this country. The languages and cultures of these small ethnic

communities have enriched the language and culture of the majority Bangalees in many ways. The vibrant cultures are yet to be explored.

To mark the national convention on the theme, rethinking identity,

There are many ethnic communities, languages and vibrant cultures in this country. The languages and cultures of these communities have enriched the language and culture of the majority Bangalees in many ways.

The Project in the End



Asha Ornal, a community field researcher in project, is seen at work in a labour line.

The three-year project, “Mapping and capacity building of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh” started on 1 May 2013 and ended on 30 April 2016. It has been a unique initiative in addressing social exclusion in a unique way. Engagement of the final beneficiaries and the targets in mapping the tea communities and little-known ethnic communities, raising their issues, investigating their human rights issues, engaging them in advocacy and building their capacity have been very effective as expected. The overall objective of the project, viz., promoting the rights, fundamental freedoms and representation of the tea plantation workers in “tied” situation and of little-known ethnic groups in the wider socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts in Bangladesh have been achieved to significant extent.

ICCO Cooperation, a Dutch donor provides 20% matching fund in the project. One partner in the project is Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) and three associates are Maulvibazar Cha Jangoshthi Adivasi Front (MCJAF), Bagania, and Jatyio Adivasi Parishad (JAP). The first two of the associates represent the final beneficiaries in the tea estate areas and the last one represents the final beneficiaries in the Northwest.

All activities planned have been implemented except that one out of three dialogues was skipped and a ‘Study of land disputes the adivasis (indigenous peoples) of the plains face and laws that relate to their land’ has been done instead. However, the EU ambassador to Bangladesh William Hanna’s visit to Srimongol for him to understand the project action on the ground and to interact

with the final beneficiaries and the targets became a unique dialogue event with all targets.

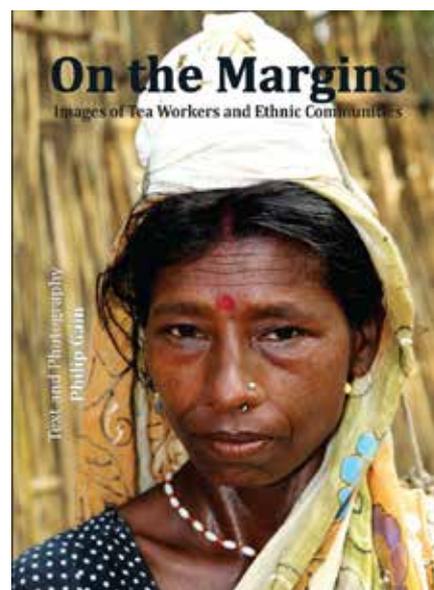
One key activity during the project implementation was mapping of the final beneficiaries—tea communities and little-known ethnic communities—which was successfully completed. According to new findings there are as many as 80 communities in 156 tea gardens in Sylhet, Hobiganj, Maulvibazar, Chittagong and Rangamati districts. Of these communities nine are ethnic communities mentioned in the government census of 1991 and “Khudra Nri-Gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010”. Mapping of the little-known ethnic communities in the Northwest, North-centre, and Northeast also confirms that there are as many as 37 ethnic communities in these regions [outside the gardens] on top of official records. These large number of ethnic communities remain ‘forgotten’ and invisible. The active participation of the final beneficiaries and different targets in mapping, inventory, survey, and investigations was important in designing and implementing the mapping exercise. Now that the profiles of all these communities, their geographic maps and analyses of their deprivation, socio-economic and political condition have been published in three volumes the targets have tools in their hands to engage in informed campaign on the excluded communities of Bangladesh.

All capacity building training workshops—two for youth, community leaders and human rights actors; one for journalists; one for organizations of the final beneficiaries; one for trade union leaders in the tea industry and one for human rights defenders and selected representatives of the final beneficiary communities—were completed.

All publications and visibility materials targeted have been published. These publications and visibility materials include: (i) project flyer (English) (ii) project brochure (Bangla), (iii) three issues of newsletter (*Prantajan* in Bangla and *People on the Fringe* in English), (iv) three calendars (2014, 2015 and 2016), (v) photo album “On the Margins: Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities (English, four-color, 232 pages), (vi) book on the

tea workers and their communities, “Slaves In These Times: Tea Communities of Bangladesh” (English, 400 pages), (vii) book on little-known ethnic communities, “Lower Depths: Marginalized Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh” (English, 220 pages), (viii) training manual (Bangla), (ix) five posters (ix) final brochure in Bangla (16 pages), (x) political agenda of the tea plantation workers and ethnic communities of Bangladesh (Bangla and English, 24 pages), and (xi) photography exhibition catalogue (English). All these publications under the project have also ensured the visibility of the project. □

On the Margins Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities



“On the Margins: Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities” documents life, culture and diversity in Bangladesh’s tea workers and little-known ethnic communities. It gives readers a rare glimpse into the fascinating lives of Bangladesh’s invisible and often forgotten ethnic communities. The book transports us through the tea gardens of Sylhet to the plains of the Northwest and North-centre to the hills of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It is, at its core, a vibrant and colourful celebration of Bangladesh’s geography and unacknowledged cultural diversity.

The book reveals the faces of Bangladesh's hidden and unrecognized ethnic communities and allows us a peak into their daily lives and different aspects of their existence and culture. The album features portraits of individuals from various ethnic communities and depicts key aspects of their lives including their often gruelling working conditions, their colourful and eclectic cultural rituals and traditions as well as their continuing struggle for recognition of their basic rights.

This book is a perfect guide for those seeking a visually appealing and approachable introduction to Bangladesh's ethnic communities. It presents one of the most comprehensive listings of and introduction to ethnic communities in Bangladesh—80 communities in the tea gardens and 43 in the plains outside the tea gardens and those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The album is clearly a labour of love and the product of a long and exhaustive

research process.

One community that is particularly highlighted are the tea communities of Sylhet, Maulvibazar, Hobiganj and Chittagong, where inhabitants represent ethnic communities from throughout the subcontinent, the descendants of indentured labourers who were brought to Bangladesh by the British tea garden owners to work the land. This book transcends the superficial scenic beauty of these locations and delves deeper into the realities of their lives and their continued exploitation and marginalization.

The key message of this book is clear: Bangladesh's small and little-known ethnic communities contribute to Bangladesh's cultural diversity and richness and should be recognized, celebrated and protected. Their vulnerability and oppression must be acknowledged and alleviated so that Bangladesh can move towards a path of just and inclusive development. □

from Kachua village, whose father and grandfather were both killed by land grabbers and saw no justice for their crimes. His story illustrates the cycle of violence, poverty and fear that affects generation after generation of ethnic minority communities amid the lawlessness that is endemic of Bangladesh's convoluted land tenure system.

In Chapainawabganj, Bichitra Tirki, an Oraon woman recounts her struggle to regain control of her husband's rightful property after his death and the terror and constant attacks she had to endure as a result.

In Chirakuta village of Dinajpur, clashes between the Santals and Bangalees over control of land have led to bloodshed and heartbreak for both communities. In the documentary, we are introduced to individuals from both sides of the clash as they recount what they have lost and the pain that they have had to endure as a result of the conflicts. Their stories poignantly illustrate the true human cost of Bangladesh's hunger and obsession for land.

In Gobindaganj upazila of Gaibandha, we are introduced to a local adivasi land rights movement called, *Shahebganj Bagda Farm Bhumi Uddhar Shongram Committee* (Shahebganj Bagda Farm Land Reclamation Struggle Committee) and the activists that are fighting to regain control of the land they lost when the Pakistan government acquired it to establish the now-defunct Rangpur Sugar Mill in 1955.

These stories cover a wide range of ethnic groups and geographies but the underlying themes remain the same. A lack of legal protection coupled with the passivity of the state makes minority groups vulnerable to violence and predatory land grabbers and creates a cycle of landlessness and poverty, which has socio-economically crippled many of these communities.

The documentary takes us through an emotional journey. The ending, much like the subject matter, remains open and unresolved. The ultimate fate of the characters we have met in the documentary remains unknown. In these stories, there are likely no happy endings. □

Elegy on Land (*Matir Maya*)

30-minute documentary film on soil and blood in Northwestern districts of Bangladesh

Direction and screenplay: Philip Gain

Produced and distributed by: Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)

Available in English and Bangla

When politics, religion and poverty collide in the struggle for land, the results can be catastrophic. Such is the nature of the stories described in *Elegy on Land* or *Matir Maya*, a 30-minute documentary film produced by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The film gives a vivid description of the struggles of different ethnic communities of the Northwestern districts of Bangladesh to retain the ownership to their lands. Philip Gain has directed the documentary film and written its screenplay.

The film takes us through the plains of Rajshahi to Dinajpur to Gaibandha and tells the stories of five cases of land dispossession and the subsequent quest for justice. Fear of murder, pillage and destruction

are ever-present throughout this documentary. Its ultimate message is simple: urgent action must be taken to protect the land rights of Bangladesh's impoverished, deprived and excluded ethnic communities.

The documentary starts off with the story of Sicilia Hasda of Pachondor village in Rajshahi, a Mahle woman whose family lost everything when their house was demolished with the help of the local police following an eviction decree based on false claims of ownership by Bangalees from a neighbouring village. Her emotional recounting of her tale poignantly illustrates the current situation and what is at stake for many in Bangladesh's ethnic communities.

In Nawabganj, Dinajpur, we are introduced to Robi Soren, a Santal