

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



Response from audience

A significant percentage of 165 million people in Bangladesh are socially, economically and politically excluded due to their ethnic identities, captive situation, casteism, cultures, geographic locations, landlessness, and eviction from their land. They are deprived of equal opportunities guaranteed by the state laws and are caught in varied social, economic and political impediments. In Bangladesh the victims of casteism (Harijan and Rishi in particular), ethnic communities, tea workers, Bede (gypsy), sex workers, transgender, Kaiputra (pig rearing community) and Bihari are among the major excluded groups of Bangladesh. They are marginalized and are subjected to exclusion and deprivation. They face discrimination in their normal life, employment, income, property, access to credit, land rights, housing, education, gaining skills, cultural capital, welfare, equity, democratic participation, dignity, etc.

Four organizations—Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK), with support from the European—organized a convention in Sreemangal on 22 and 23 November 2018 to highlight the issues of social exclusion and explore a roadmap to lift the marginal and the excluded

communities out of poverty. The participants—as many as 400—represented more than 60 ethnic and marginal communities.

While the organizers shared summary of findings of studies and analysis on different excluded communities and draft roadmap, the assembly of around 400 people including leading economists, educationists, officials of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), government officials in the district and upazila administrations, trade unionists, representatives of excluded communities, human rights defenders and the media shared their experiences, opinions, thoughts and commitment to work together to deal with exclusion challenges in Bangladesh.

The convention had begun with an inaugural session in which a panel of experts spoke. They reflected on the keynote paper presented by Philip Gain and shared their expert opinions and insights from their lifetime professional experience to set the tone of the subsequent workshops in the two-day convention and to put the discussion on exclusion challenges in perspective.



Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud, chief guest at the inaugural session speaking

Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, an eminent economist and the chief guest at the inaugural session, was critical in his reflections on exclusion challenges as well as development in Bangladesh. “Bangladesh has made significant progress in reducing maternal death and infant mortality, literacy of children, and other social indicators. But three to four percent people of the country belonging to different marginal and excluded groups have remained largely deprived of development. Sustainable development is not possible keeping them excluded,” warned Prof. Mahmud.

“According to the sustainable development goals, we want to end extreme poverty by 2030. But if we fail to improve the life standard of our marginal and excluded people and bring them to the mainstream, we cannot achieve our goal to end poverty,” cautioned Prof. Mahmud. “The making of marginal communities happens in different processes. These groups are poor. But difficulties they face are not uniform and there is no single solution for all of them. The difficulties of every community need to be identified separately to explore strategies for solutions.”

In his keynote presentation, Philip Gain, gave an overview of the ethnic and excluded groups and people at the risk of marginalization. They belong to different categories. He particularly reflected on protection of the groups studied under the project—ethnic communities, tea workers, Harijans, Bede, sex workers, Bihari, Kaiputra (pig rearing community), Jaladas and Rishi. These groups are generally deprived of social dignity and many are considered as ‘untouchables’. These communities have varied cultures and they speak more than 40 languages other than Bangla.

In the roadmap for political protection of these communities, the state needs to enumerate them properly according to their ethnic and other identities. Importantly, the state needs to recognize them constitutionally and protect them by amending laws and formulating new laws. The political parties also need to be true to their commitments they make when they beg votes from them.



Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman speaks at the inaugural session

In his keynote paper Philip Gain also shared information and analysis on international and national instruments and laws that protect the excluded communities, responsible state agencies, needs and strategies for scaling up state attention, and economic, social and cultural protection.

The venue of the convention considered, the tea workers' deprivation was especially attended. Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union, highlighted the generational deprivation of the tea workers. "They are exploited in wages and deprived of education, adequate health services, nutritious foods, etc," said Kairi who demanded that the tea workers be ensured proper housing, safe water, sanitation and access to public schooling and medical care from the government facilities.

"The tea workers are victims of extreme exploitation," pointed out the vice-chancellor of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST). "A farmer in the village or a rickshaw-puller in city earns an average amount of Taka 500 a day. But a tea worker's daily cash pay is Taka 102. This is inhuman."



Mr. Nurul Quader speaking at the inaugural session

The vice-chancellor contested the notion that the tea workers must be there to sustain the tea industry. "This is not a good argument. It is more important to provide education to the children of tea workers to mainstream them rather than sustaining the tea industry," observed the confident vice-chancellor. "We have, therefore, introduced quotas for admission of the tea workers' children in our university. We have also introduced stipend for them to continue their study."

Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, an eminent writer, reflected on the use of the word, ‘Dalit’ in Bangladesh. “We, Jaladas, are neglected in society by both upper caste Hindu and Muslim neighbors, because fishing is our occupation. But I am not ready to be branded as Dalit,” said Dr. Jaladas. “We reject use of this term that attempts to brand and perpetuate the idea of a social stigma.”

Others who spoke at the inauguration included, Nurul Quder, representative of Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh; Md. Tofail Islam, deputy commissioner and district magistrate, Moulvibazar; Shulekha Mrong, president, Achik Michik (Garo women) Society, Md. Abdul Awal, vice-chairman of Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA); Dr. Mohammad Abdul Wazed, former director general, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Moazzem Hossain, chief executive, Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK).

The chair of the inaugural session, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and former advisor to caretaker government, reminded in his introductory remarks: “The new idea in the modern-day world is that nobody shall be left behind. We have been working towards achieving that goal. This convention is part of our efforts. Of three conventions, the first one was held in Rangpur in 2017 and the third one will be held in Dhaka next year. These conventions have created scopes for discussions and dialogues to engage the government policy makers on how to bring all citizens of Bangladesh in development process.”

Issues Addressed at Parallel Sessions

Eight parallel sessions held during the convention covered wide-ranging issues—identity, languages, cultures and constitutional recognition; land rights; labour law and negotiations between tea garden owners and tea workers; working together in achieving SDGs in the tea gardens; international instruments and national laws; issues of the Bede, sex workers and Rishi and select ethnic communities; health and WASH rights of the tea, Bede and Harijan communities; and developing strategies and mechanisms to scale up capacity to deal with social, economic and political protection of the excluded and marginal communities.

Identity and constitutional recognition: One major focus of the convention was the invisibility and identities of different ethnic and marginal communities and how the state can recognize them. There are two schools of thought about the identity of the ethnic and marginal communities—one is independent and one is government. While according to the current government estimates as seen in the *Khudra Nrigoshthi Sangskritik Pratishthan Ain 2010*, there are 27 Nri-goshthi or ethnic communities in Bangladesh, the published research findings of SEHD suggest there are as many as 110 ethnic communities in Bangladesh including around 80 in the tea gardens.

Md. Alamgir Hossen, deputy director of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) explained the nature and importance of national-level data of BBS. “Our data make people visible to the policymakers and decision makers of the country. Therefore, if you

are not included in our data, you are not accounted for inclusion in the development process. It is important that you are enlisted in different BBS statistics to have access to different basic necessities and services,” observed Hossen.

Hossen informed that BBS has recently made a list of 51 excluded communities on the basis of a list prepared by a state-sponsored national committee. “BBS can only include the other communities in census 2021 if they are included in the schedule of *Khudra Nri-Gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (Small Ethnic Communities Cultural Institution Act, 2010),” informed Md. Hossen.

It is in this context the researchers and community representatives demanded that the government give pragmatic consideration to independent research findings. They also demanded that the government agencies particularly BBS pay attention in defining other marginal communities independently studied.

A question ponders: how can the state study all communities of Bangladesh? Philip Gain referred to the Anthropological Survey of India that has surveyed 4500 out of 6500 communities in India and has published 44 volumes under a series coined as “Peoples of India”. Newly established International Mother Language Institute (IMLI) has recently studied the languages spoken in Bangladesh (outcome is yet to be made public). Bangladesh government can also initiate an institution to survey and define the communities of Bangladesh. BBS will then be able to enumerate them correctly.

Apart from ethnic and tea communities the organizers shared brief summary of the research findings on other excluded communities studied: Harijan, Bede, sex workers, Kaipurtra or Kawra (pig rearing community, Jaladas, Bihari, and Rishi. These communities have been defined, their size estimated and issues mapped. The research findings will be published in monographs and books.

Land rights: Land management in the tea gardens, land-related disputes between the tea garden owners and the Khasis living in *punjis* (villages) in and around the tea garden areas, transfer of *khet* land (crop land) for an economic zone in the Chandpore Tea Estate in Hobiganj district, reservation of forest land in Modhupur that include villages inhabited by the Garos and others and landlessness of the Bede were discussed at length in a parallel session. The government officials dealing with land management in the tea gardens, trade union leaders from the tea gardens, the Khasi and Bede representatives took lead in the discussion.

Mohammad Ashraful Alam Khan, additional deputy commissioner (Revenue) of Moulvibazar district explained the management of land that the government grants for production of tea. The state in a process has established its ownership over all of 113,663.87 ha of land granted for production of tea in 160 tea gardens in Moulvibazar, Hobiganj, Sylhet, Chottogram and Rangamati Hill districts. Khan informed that in recent times, the government has fixed the lease period—40 years for ‘A’ class gardens, 30 years for ‘B’ class gardens and 20 years for ‘C’ class gardens. However, in case of a new garden, the initial lease period is 10 years.

The ADC reflected on the significance of increasing the actual tea plantation areas. Currently, of the total land granted for production of tea, 51.11% is in use for actual

plantation. “It is in this situation that the government has set a yearly target of increase in plantation, which is 2.5%,” said Khan.

The ADC also referred to the disputes in a few tea gardens between the garden management and the Khasis. “Tripartite (government, garden owner and the Khasi) discussion can resolve the specific disputes between the Khasi and the tea garden management,” suggested the ADC.

Pidison Pradhan Shuchiang explained the dispute between the tea estate owners and the Khasis: “There are 15 Khasi *punjis* in the tea garden areas and we have disputes with the garden management in three of these gardens (Aslam and Kailin in Sreemangal upazila and Jhemaichhara in Kulaura upazila).”

Shuchiang also discussed even larger land conflict between the Khasi and the Forest Department. “Eleven of the 70 Khasi *punjis* in the Northeastern districts are well-established with land titles in the names of the Khasis,” reported Shuchiang. “In all but 15 *punjis* in the tea garden areas and 11 established ones, the Khasis have tension and disputes with the Forest Department. The Khasis claim they have been living on the land from time immemorial that the Forest Department gazetted at a later stage.”

Nripen Pal, Joint General Secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) talked about transfer of 511 acres of *khet* land to Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) and the government’s attempt to establish an economic zone on *khetland* (cropland) that the tea worker cultivate. “Our ancestors have converted the land that are not suitable for tea production into *khet* land that we have been cultivating for generations. We produce paddy and various other crops on this land. BEZA wants to establish an economic zone on this land,” reported Pal. “We, the tea workers strongly protest against such an economic zone on our *khet* land. In 2015 the government has backed out from its attempt to establish an economic zone in the face of our unprecedented protest. We demand permanent settlement of land we live on and cultivate.”

Ramjan Ahmed, a Bede leader from Savar talked on the landlessness and other difficulties of the Bede community. “Around 80% of our community is completely landless. They have no permanent residence. They travel around the country and live in tents that they temporarily set on public or private land,” reported Ahmed. “Because the Bedes are floating, their children are deprived of education and they do not have access to sanitary latrine and safe potable water. They also do not have access to safety-net programs.”

Ahmed also claimed that the official statistics on the number of Bedes are misleading and these need to be corrected. Ahmed demanded that the government allocates *khas* land to the Bede so that they can begin to live permanently.

Ajoy A Mree, president of Adivasi Cultural Development Forum based in Modhupur and a Garo leader spoke on the land-related disputes with the Forest Department. “Many Garos are under acute eviction threat since the reservation of 9145.07 acres of land in 2016. The Forest Department has declared our ancestral land as reserved forest without our knowledge.”

Labour law and agreement between owners and workers: Scrutiny of application of the labour law for the tea workers and agreement signed between Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) that represents tea workers and Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) that represents the tea garden owners exposes anomalies in implementing the legal instruments on the one hand and on the other justifies the necessity of amendment of the labour law. Trade union leaders, lawyers and officials of Department of Labour and Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) took part in the scrutiny.

Bijoy Bunerjee, chairman of Rajghat Union Parishad and a labour leader raised a number of anomalies in the implementation of the labour law. “The tea workers do not get gratuity and compensation. The agreement between the workers and the owners make it obligatory for the owners to provide sanitary toilets to the workers, which is not implemented,” complained Bunerjee. “And workers are deprived of provident funds.”

Bunerjee also pointed out that a company is obliged by law to contribute 5% of its profits for the workers’ welfare. The tea workers have never given share of profits.

Md. Nahidul Islam, deputy director, Divisional Labour Office, Department of Labour, Sreemangal talked in the same line with Bijoy Bunerjee. “There are many sections in the labour law applicable for the tea workers are not implemented. Besides, the labour law is discriminatory for the tea workers,” observed Islam. “There should be tripartite (owners, trade union leaders and Directorate of Labour) dialogue and discussions to end discrimination in the labour law.”

Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the largest trade union in Bangladesh reflected on non-implementation of the labour law related to the tea workers and different aspects of the agreement signed between his union that represents at least 122,000 tea workers and Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) that represents the owners of the tea gardens. The latest agreement effective from January 2017 was signed in October 2018! “Agreement signed between the owners and workers in the tea sector every two years is always a painful experience for the BCSU leaders,” said Kairi.

“We signed an agreement after 20 months of negotiation with the owners,” informed Kairi. “We demanded gratuity for the workers during formulation of the agreement, which the owners do not want to give us. Their lame excuse is that the tea workers live on garden land, so they should not get gratuity. According to the agreement, the workers are to get the benefits of group insurance, which has not been introduced yet.”

The tea workers do not get casual leave of 10 days that the workers in other industry get. “It is a shame and discrimination that the labour law (section 115) provides casual leave to all other industrial workers except for the tea workers,” Kairi criticized the labour law and the people behind it.

He also criticized the current system of health benefits in the tea gardens. “It is unacceptable that the family members of a tea worker do not get health services that the company provides,” said Kairi. “In some dispensaries and hospitals the patients do not even have anything to sit on.”

Kairi suggested that unemployed and family members of the tea workers be provided health services, negotiation between BCSU and BTA be completed within 60 days after it is resumed, labour court be established in Sreemangal, dialogue between the owners and workers be organized very three months, group insurance be introduced in the tea gardens and all discriminations against the tea workers in the labour law be ended.

Uttam Kumar Das, a lawyer by profession and program officer of ILO Dhaka emphasized on the implementation of the labour law. “Implementation of labour law is more important than its amendment. BCSU must play a pivotal role in this regard,” advised Uttam. “BCSU needs to work hand in hand with Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) for implementation of law.”

Uzzal Dev briefly explained how the owners dodge gratuity. “The owners argue that gratuity is not given because they provide house to the tea workers free of cost. They will pay gratuity if the workers vacate houses after retirement,” said dev. “Gratuity is a legal right, which the owners tactfully avoid.”

Tapan Datta, president of Bangladesh Trade Union Centre, Chattogram and chair of the session concluded that many of the facilities that the labour law and rules provide are not given to the tea workers. “On one hand, the labour law is discriminatory and on the other, it is not fully implemented,” complained Datta. “Achieving Sustainable Goals (SDGs) is not possible depriving a population of around half million of tea communities.”

Health and WASH rights: The officials of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Bangladesh, WaterAid Bangladesh, Labor Welfare Centre in Sreemangal, Sreemangal Upazila Health Complex and Amader Foundation discussed sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) of the marginal and excluded communities, especially of the tea communities and WASH rights thereof.

Sexual and reproductive health rights situation in the tea gardens is very poor. Maternal and infant mortality in the tea gardens are higher compared to national level. However, health risks to mother and infants are on decline in the tea gardens, thanks to multiple initiatives taken by the government and NGOs.

Dr. Noor-e-Alam Siddiqui, field officer of UNFPA, stationed at Moulvibazar civil surgeon’s office explained the government health care facilities, maternal health care in particular, made available at Sreemangal Upazila Health Complex that is a 50-bed hospital. With eight doctors, trained nurses and midwives, the hospital is equipped to provide 24-hour service and emergency medical care. The hospital has ambulance and free medicine services.

Siddiqui also spoke on the maternal health situation of the tea communities. “Maternal deaths among the tea communities is relatively very high. Of 10 maternal deaths in Sreemangal up to September 2018 seven occurred in the tea gardens,” reported Siddiqui.

Dr. Nibash Chandra Pal, Senior Medical Officer at Labour Welfare Center in Sreemangal talked about health care facilities that the Labour Welfare Center in Sreemangal

provides to the tea workers. He stressed on the wellness of all the reproductive organs of human body (both men and women) for the well-being of reproductive health.

Geeta Goswami, Former Assistant General Secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) discussed reproductive health rights of the people in the tea gardens.

“Reproductive health right is as basic right like other basic rights. The condition of our reproductive health is miserable due to low literacy,” observed Goswami. She advised both men and women to take care of safe reproductive health and health of children.

Imrul Kayes Moniruzzaman, a director of WaterAid Bangladesh talked about the role of his organization for the protection of health of tea workers and other communities and development. “Access to safe water and sanitary latrine is important for good health and it is a right as well. But the marginal communities, especially the tea communities have remained deprived of this right for a long time,” noted Moniruzzaman.

Moniruzzaman focused on cleanliness and care during menstruation for improvement in reproductive health. He stressed on collaboration between NGOs working in the tea gardens, local government institutions and owners for supply of potable water and improvement in sanitation. WaterAid Bangladesh is one of a few NGOs that works to provide safe drinking water and sanitation in the tea gardens. The international NGO has been working in 23 tea gardens and 23,000 peoples have been benefited from its work.

Md. Shamsuzzaman, Project Technical Officer (Reproductive Health) at UNFPA and facilitator of the discussion noted: “There are many challenges to see improvement in health and WASH situation of the marginal and excluded communities. The government and the NGOs must work together to address these challenges.”

International instruments and national laws: Academics of law and international relations of University of Dhaka and a lawyer of Bangladesh Supreme court took lead in scrutiny of international instruments and national laws that provide protection to the marginal and excluded communities. Anomalies in the implementation of these instruments and laws are common in Bangladesh as it appeared from the discussion.

Sharawat Shamin, lecturer, Department of Law at University of Dhaka referred to four core international human rights instruments—International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948; and Declaration on Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities 1992—and two national instruments (the constitution and Labour Act of 2006) that guarantee rights and protection of the excluded communities.

Countries that have signed these international instruments are obliged to take measures to ensure right to life and dignity, prohibition of forced labor, rights not to be enslaved, fair wages, decent work condition, decent living, right to form and join unions and federations, religious and cultural freedom, freedom of movement and equal opportunity among others.

“The tea workers have remained tied to the tea gardens for generations. They can be categorized as forced and enslaved workers. They are unable to live outside the tea gardens even if they want,” said Shamin. “Bangladesh has ratified seven out of eight fundamental ILO conventions, two of four governance conventions and 33 of 177 technical conventions.”

Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, a lawyer of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh reflected on laws that relate to land rights and other rights of the Adivasis and the difficulties they face. He mentioned East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (EBSTA) as a key instrument that provides protection to the rights of the Adivasis to land. “The officials of the state administration know very little of this instrument,” commented Barua.

Issues of the Bede, sex workers and Rishi and select ethnic communities (Munda, Shobdokor, Patro, etc.):

Aleya Akhter Lily, general secretary of Sex Workers’ Network kicked off the discussion pointing out the extreme discrimination against sex workers. “The sex workers are the most persecuted in the society, yet the men who go to them face no consequences. No woman enters this occupation willingly. They are tricked, deceived or kidnapped and later forced into sex work,” said Lily.

Every girl who enters this work is certified by the notary public and her information is registered with the police. Yet sex work is not a recognized occupation in Bangladesh. Moreover, local people and the police always look for opportunities to evict brothels, reported Aleya.

She also informed that Sex Workers’ Network of Bangladesh is the only platform for the sex workers in the country and there are 29 member organizations, all run by sex workers. According to Ivan Ahmed Katha, a leader of the transgender community, there are five types of sex workers in Bangladesh—brothel-based, floating, hotel-based, residential and transgender.

Sex work is an occupation and sex workers, in many countries are treated as service providers and they enjoy occupational rights. In Bangladesh they are despised. In schools the children of sex workers are humiliated and treated with disrespect. Even when they grow up, they are socially excluded and discriminated against when their background is revealed.

Renting houses outside brothels is a crucial problem for the sex workers in Bangladesh. They are harassed by the locals and are not safe in their own homes. When a sex worker is sick and hospitalized, she is often harassed by the doctors and others (verbally and even physically) because of her occupation.

After a certain age, sex workers cannot continue sex work and they are abandoned by others. Alternative sources of income and rehabilitation of elderly sex workers is rarely ensured. A sex worker is thus deprived of all of her basic rights and she is often dehumanized.

The representatives of sex workers presented four demands: (a) access to proper education and equal opportunities for the children of sex workers, (b) freedom from fear of brothel eviction, (c) access to proper healthcare and (d) proper burial of their community members as often they are deprived of a respectful funeral.

During the discussion on how to achieve these demands, AK Sheram, a researcher, writer and poet from the Monipuri community said, “The social perspective about the sex workers, their children and other excluded communities have to change and we need to give them equal respect.”

The discussants agreed that change in perspective is crucial to end the exploitation of sex workers. Advocacy, awareness raising programs in schools, family campaign programs, social work and letting their stories to be heard are necessary to change social perception about sex workers.

Soud Khan, a top Bede *sardar* (leader) from Munshiganj talked about the multifaceted problems the Bede or nomadic Muslim community in Bangladesh face. “Forty to fifty years ago we used to live in boats, which was our traditional way of living. We never owned land. Now we live in polythene tents as nomads,” Said Khan. “Landlessness is one of the key reasons for their marginalization, similar to other excluded communities.”

“Our children cannot go to schools because we are always travelling from one place to another. Child marriage is also common in our community due to illiteracy and lack of awareness. Our traditional occupations are becoming obsolete and our income sources are becoming scarce. The society even labels us as non-Muslims,” informed Soud Khan.

The Bedes who lived on boats or were floating became voters in 2007 in locations of their choice. “We need quotas for Bedes in educational institutions and employment. We need to be included in the social safety net programmes. Otherwise, we will always stay excluded,” demanded Khan. Most importantly, the Bedes need access to *khas* land to generate alternative income sources and to send their children to schools.

Milon Das, executive director of Parittran—a rights-based organization of the Rishi community in the Southwest of Bangladesh—talked on the debate about defining the Rishi community. “We are traditionally shoemakers and skimmers. We were involved in every step of the shoe making process. Now big companies are taking away our occupation. Yet we are labeled as untouchables.” The Rishis are considered ‘untouchables’, a category even below the lowest rung (fourth) in Hindu casteism. Sex workers, Bede, Rishi and the other excluded communities—all want social respect, dignity and recognition from the state and their neighbours.

Achieving SDGs in tea gardens: In a session facilitated by Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman on how owners and workers can work together in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the tea gardens. Dr. Muzafar Ahmmed, secretary, Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), gave an overview of how tea industry has prospered in Bangladesh. “The life standard of the tea workers in Bangladesh have to be scaled up to the level of other citizens of Bangladesh. A tea worker’s cash pay is Taka 102 but if all

benefits provided are taken into account, his or her their daily earning is Taka 320,” asserted Dr. Ahmmed.

Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of BCSU, contested Dr. Ahmmed. “Our estimate shows that the benefits added to the daily cash pay, a workers’ daily wage is no more than Taka 150.00,” said Kairi who also reflected on larger issues involving sustainable development. “The owners of the tea gardens and the workers’ representatives have lot of work to do for discrimination and deprivation of just wages to come to an end. But the owners do not want to sit with us for dialogue,” complained Kairi.

On relations between the workers and the management in the tea gardens, Kairi reported, “In the manger’s bungalow, there is a position to put on and to take off shoes of the manager. This reminds every day that the managers and owners are lords the workers are servants.”

On labour law Kairi opined “We criticize law on many counts, but there are good aspects in the labour, that implemented, can help us step forward.”

Bijoy Bunerjee, labour leader from the tea community and chairman of Rajghat Union Parishad [in the tea garden area] noted, “Tea workers are aliens in their own country. They do not have any right to land. In the tea gardens, limited number of people get jobs, others are unemployed including those educated. Their life standard is very low. The workers’ family members are deprived of fundamental rights such as health services, education and standard housing.”

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, observed that the owners of the tea gardens claim to be doing many things for the tea workers. But those are not visible. “The tea workers have a charter of demands that needs to be addressed through dialogue. The workers and owners should sit at least once every six months, if not every quarter, to discuss their issues to seek solution to the outstanding problems,” suggested Rahman.

Cultural Festival

A cultural festival was piggybacked with the convention. In the evenings of 22 and 23 November nine cultural teams from among the Khasi, Monipuri, Munda, Garo, Oraon, Shobdokor, Santal, Telegu, Bhumij, Bauri, Chasha, Biswas, Rai and Ghatual performed their unique traditional songs and dances and staged a drama. Actually they started to beat their drums and perform their songs and dances from the morning of 22 November to welcome the guests to the convention.

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

What amazed the visitors to the cultural evenings were lectures on languages and cultures of the tea communities and Adivasi communities of the greater Sylhet. On the first day researcher, writer and educationist from Dinajpur, Dr. Masudul Hoq, spoke on languages and cultures of ethnic and marginal communities of Bangladesh with attention to the tea communities.



A Monipuri cultural team performing at the cultural festival

“The languages and cultures of Adivasis and marginal communities have profusely enriched Bangla and Bangalee culture,” said Dr. Hoq. In reference to research findings of the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) he informed, “There are 80 communities living in the tea gardens. They speak 14 languages. However, their languages are getting lost under pressure of the majority language and culture.”

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman inaugurated the cultural program on the first day. In his brief remarks Dr. Hossain said, “The cultural riches of the Adivasi and marginal communities are their strengths in all difficulties, deprivation and sufferings they face.

On the second day of the cultural festival A K Sheram, researcher, writer and poet from Sylhet spoke on protection of languages and cultures of marginal communities of greater Sylhet. He emphasized on care of mother languages. “No one should forget his or her mother language and keep it in practice,” said Sheram who also pointed out different initiatives for protection of Monipuri language and culture.



A cultural team from the tea gardens performing at the cultural festival

He referred to other ethnic communities particularly in the tea gardens and said that their languages need protection. “Our identities will survive, if our cultures survive,” cautioned Sheram. Dr. Harishankar Jaladas inaugurated the cultural program on the second day.

Strategies and Mechanisms to Formulate Roadmap

A parallel session and the concluding session were devoted for discussion on developing strategies and mechanisms to scale up capacity to deal with social, economic and political protection of the excluded and marginalized communities.

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



Report by SEHD team