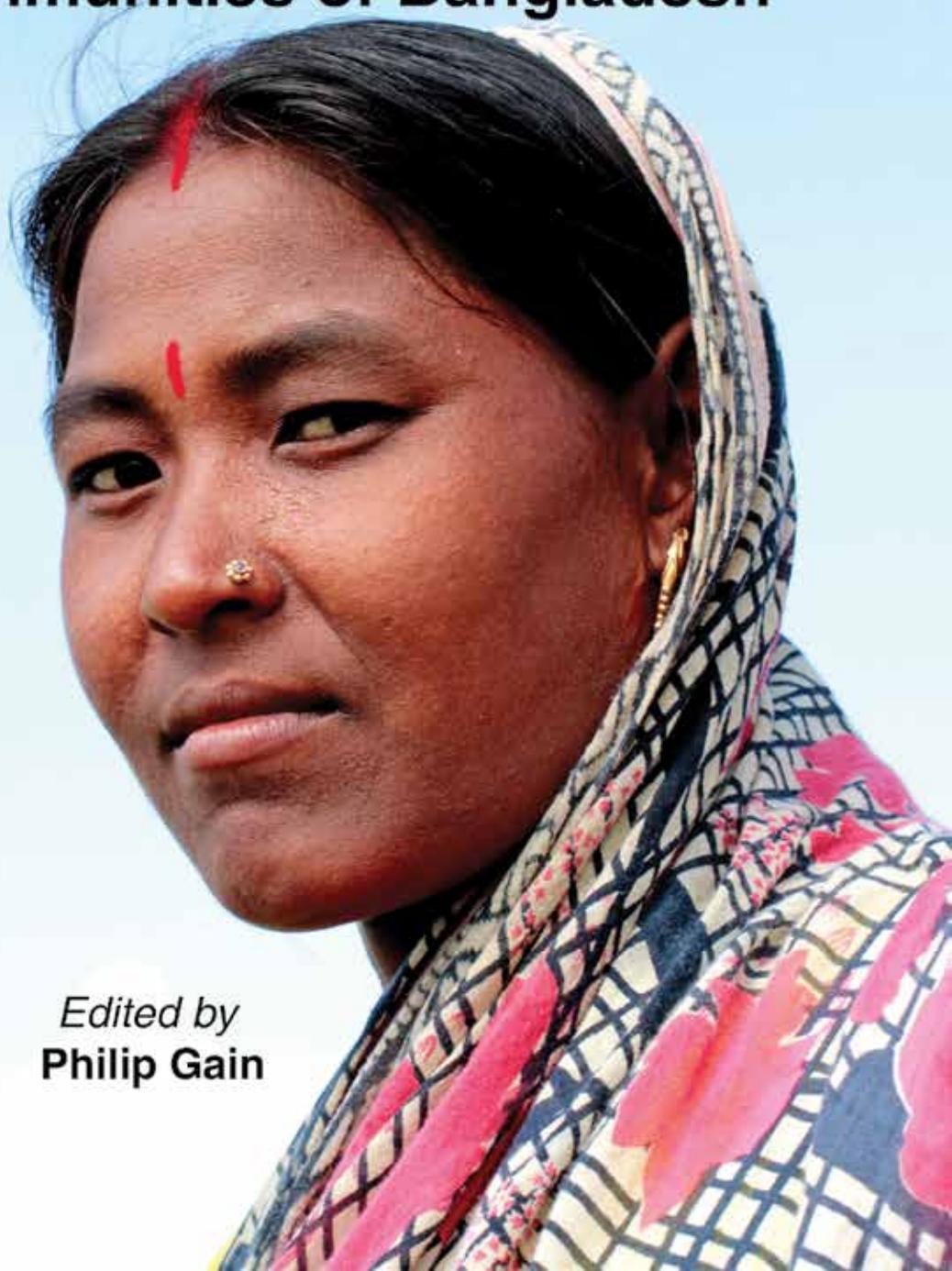


Lower Depths

Little-Known Ethnic
Communities of Bangladesh



Edited by
Philip Gain

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Communities of Bangladesh



Imprint

Lower Depths: Little-Known Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh

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Published by
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1/1 Pallabi (5th Floor) Mirpur, Dhaka-1216, Bangladesh
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Published: 2016

Printing: Jahan Traders

ISBN: 978-984-8952-17-7

Price: 400 USD15

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Preface

This volume focuses particularly on the little-known ethnic communities found in 16 districts in Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions, seven districts in the North-centre and two districts in Northeast of Bangladesh. According to a list in the *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010* (The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010), the number of ethnic communities in Bangladesh is 27 (duplications considered, their actual number is 24). This is actually the latest official record. Some organizations of the ethnic groups estimate their number at 45 or more. Mohammad Rafi in his *Small Ethnic Groups of Bangladesh: A Mapping Exercise* has identified 73 “small ethnic groups” that are merged and discrete. Merged groups are found mainly in the tea gardens. Of these communities 11 live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the others in the plains.

At SEHD, we have been paying attention to the adivasis or ethnic communities and their issues for more than two decades. In our interaction with them, we have always come across an urge from them to map their identities. They think their numbers stated by different sources is not accurate. Their urge considered, we designed a project with those who came together in numerous workshops, national seminars and discussions. Then we looked for financial support that we eventually got from the European Union and ICCO Cooperation to implement a project, “Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities”. It is under this project that we have mapped the ethnic communities outside the CHT.

In our efforts to map the little-known ethnic communities, we have followed ‘emic’, which refers to ‘insider’ or ‘bottom-up’ approach. The communities generally witness top-down or ‘etic’ approach upon them. In our endeavour of mapping, we engaged young members of different ethnic communities.

The findings of our mapping of the communities in the Northwest, North-centre and Northeast have been remarkable. According to official record, the number of ethnic communities is just 13 in these regions. In addition, we have found 37 communities in the Northwest, North-centre and Northeast, many of them are found also in the tea estates. These communities are Bakti, Baraik, Bhumali, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Bindumondol, Chowhan, Ganju Singh, Ghatual, Gorait, Hajra, Hari, Kadar, Kairi, Kalwar, Karmokar, Kol, Kora, Kumar, Kurmi, Mahle, Malo, Modok, Mushohor, Noonia, Rajbhar, Rajwar, Robidas, Tanti, Teli and Turi in the Northwest; Banai, Hodi and Lyngam in the North-centre; and Patra, Shobdokor and Munda in the Northeast. Our exposé may trigger a debate. However, in our efforts to map the ethnic communities that remain largely invisible, we have considered the list of scheduled tribes of India published by Anthropological Survey of India, all other published sources and our physical scrutiny.

These large numbers of smaller ethnic communities—extremely poor and landless—remain largely unrecognized, excluded and invisible. What comes as a big shock to these communities and also to other adivasis is that the Bangladesh constitution does not recognize them as

adivasi or indigenous communities. There are indeed some 37 languages spoken by the ethnic communities of Bangladesh (according to Justice Habibur Rahman, 2014 in *Bangladesher Nanan Bhasha–Different Languages of Bangladesh*) aside from Bangla. The number of languages spoken may increase if proper census is done. There are communities who no longer speak their languages and there are others who speak their languages but do not have the alphabets.

One unique feature of the mapping of the ethnic communities is creation of geographic maps. A cartographer developed a geographic map on each community based on primary data that we collected. The thematic maps show the concentration of ethnic populations mapped. For ethnic communities outside the tea gardens, the data was formatted and coded and summarized for generating thematic maps.

Photography has been an integral part of the mapping of the ethnic communities. All of 43 communities mentioned in table 2 have been photographed. The incredible faces of all these communities in leisure and at work, during cultural events, environment and many other interesting features of their life have been photographed. Each profile has been accompanied by at least one photograph. Portrait of each community and photographs on other aspects of their lives have been presented in a separate photography volume titled, “On the Margins: Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities”. A special photography exhibition has also been designed. All our findings will eventually be found on our website and in DVD.

In addition to the profiles of the ethnic communities, we have designed a chapter with a good number of investigative reports on brutal attacks, killings, arson and other atrocities associated with adivasis in North Bengal. These investigative reports, first published in national and local newspapers and magazines, show the pattern of abuses that the adivasis face.

A special addition to this volume is the agenda of the tea plantation workers and ethnic communities developed with their active participation. First published in 2014, it is actually their political manifesto. Alongside their brief statistical accounts and geographic locations, it focuses on their political protection, wage deprivation, work condition, health, sanitation, difficulties women and children face, education, living conditions, access to land, language and culture, etc.

The key message that the text of this book communicates is that the ethnic communities are one of the most vulnerable people in Bangladesh. They continue to remain socially excluded, overwhelmingly illiterate, deprived and disconnected. They have also lost their original languages in most part as well as their culture, history, education, knowledge and unity. It is in this context that they deserve recognition of their identities and special attention from the state, not just equal treatment.

One consulting this volume, together with the volume on the tea workers and the photography volume on all ethnic communities, will get a comprehensive map of the the ethnic and tea communities in Bangladesh.

Philip Gain
Editor

Acknowledgements

Publication of this book has been possible with support from a great number of individuals, communities and institutions. It is impossible to mention the names of all those who have extended their support to the research teams especially to those who have worked in the field conducting Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews throughout 16 districts in Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions, seven districts in the North-centre and two districts in the Northeast. It is their kindness and hospitality that have made the job of the research teams easy.

The names of individuals that must be mentioned with gratitude are Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, Prof. Rafiqul Islam, Rabindranath Soren, Prof. Sakhawat Ali Khan, Selina Hossain, Julia Jacoby, Philippe Jacques Nurul Quader, Abdul Majid Mallik, Leonard Zijlstra, Promode Mankin, Brother Jarlath D'Souza, Md. Ashraf Haque, Dr. Mohammad Rafi, Shudepto Arriquzzaman, Bokhtiar Ahmed, Chiara Perucca, Lucas Kispotta, Clara Tumpa Baroi, Dulal Chandra Biswas, Pradip Kumar Panday, Soumitra Sekhar, Bhupesh Roy, Moazzem Hossain, Gourango Patra, Gidison Pradhan Suchiang, Bisheshor Banai, Sunil Chandra Barman, Swarana Kanta Hajong, Monoranjan Koch, Eugin Nokrek, Gourango Koch, Promode Mankin, Dr. Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan, Makhon Chandra Dalu, Anil Marandi, Sondhya Malo, Bimal Chandra Rajwar, Sabin Munda, Arook Toppo, Sushen Kumar Shamduar, Bichitra Tirki, Thadidas Biswas, Dulal Tirki, Proshanto Kumar Singh, Salvatur Pauria, Liton Deb Sen, Anil Chandra Koch, Thomas Kerketa, Suvash Chandra Hembrom, Shitol Mardi, Gonesh Mardi, Gonesh Tudu, Anjali Murmu, Minoti Mardy, Bibhutibhuson Mahato, Sulekha Mrong, Sree Amal Dalu, Munni Mree, Lucky Ruga, Dipali Tudu, Sree Uttom Kumar Banshfor, Advocate Michael B. Malo, Nilima Hembrom, Ajoy A. Mree, Anik Asad, Anjoli Murmu, Cisilia, Hasda, Jastina Hembrom, Robert R. N. Das, Sristi Tudu, Krishna Kora, Kaman Kora, Sree Mohonto Chandra Rishi, Prof. Ganesh Soren, Advocate Babul Robidas, Philimon Baske, Zobaidul Alam, S. N. Obaidul Mukhtader, Babul Boiragi, Swarnakamol Barua, Joynal Abedin, Chitta Ghosh, Azharul Azad Jewel, Habibur Rahman Swapon, Rajibul Hassan, Lokman Hossain, Mitali Mrong, Anna Stadler, Nirupa Dwan and Sunil Purification. These individuals and many more assisted the research teams in the field and the staff writers. We are particularly thankful to those who participated in FGDs.

Directly or indirectly many government and non-government organizations assisted the research teams in the field in gathering information and developing analysis on the issues and concerns of the ethnic communities mapped. Among these, foremost are Deputy Commissioner's office in Dinajpur, Tribal Welfare Association (TWA), Caritas Dinajpur and Rajshahi, Jatyio Adivasi Parishad (JAP), Jayenshahi Adibashi Samaj Kallyan Shangstha and Achik Michik Society (AMS).

We are very thankful to Dr. S. G. Hussain, a cartographer, for his incredible patience in developing geographic maps of all communities who are presented in this volume.

Field researchers, staff writers, editorial assistants and data organizers demonstrated their incredible patience in gathering and organizing primary data and background information, writing profiles of the communities, and assisting the editor in language editing and proofreading. They are thanked for their precise work.

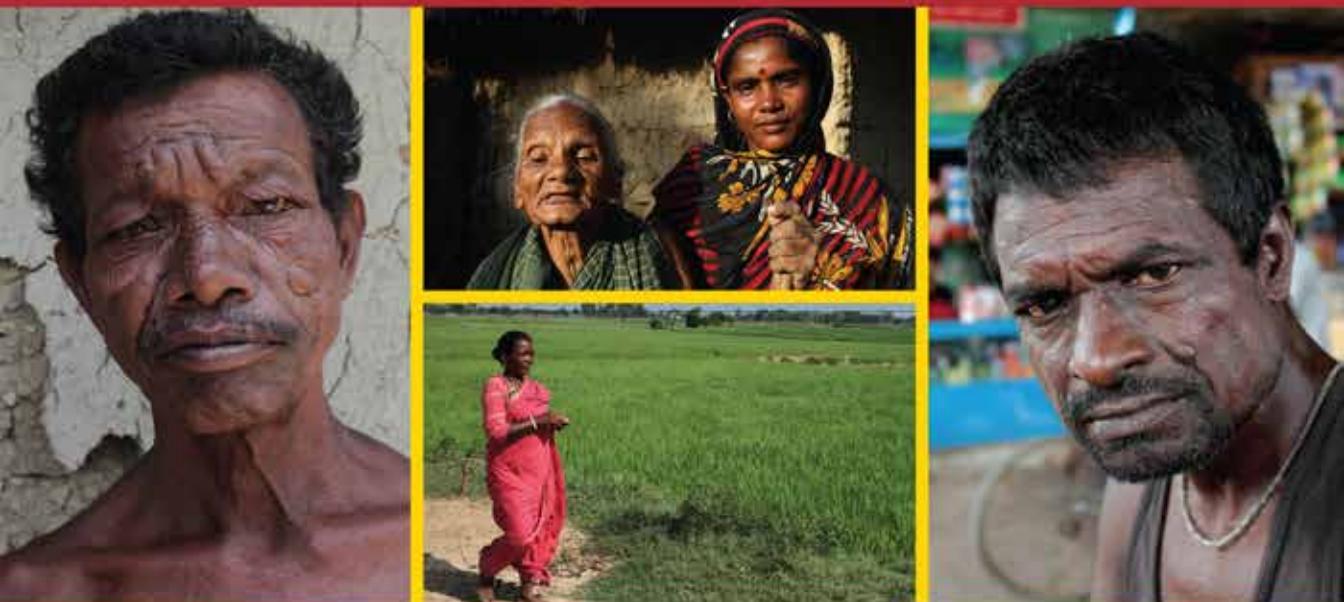
European Union and ICCO Cooperation deserve special thanks for their direct financial support for making this production possible. We cannot but thank MISEREOR, a German donor that has been supporting us for a long time in our efforts in mapping the tea and ethnic communities.

Lower Depths

Little-Known Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh

In the latest government record (2010), the number of the ethnic communities in Bangladesh was 27 (duplications considered, their actual number is 24). The ethnic communities themselves estimate the number of their communities to be more than 45. Of these communities 11 live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In its recent (2014-2015) inventory, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) has estimated the number of the ethnic communities outside the tea gardens and the CHT to be 37 in addition to those on the official record. These communities are concentrated basically in the Northwest, North-centre and Northeast.

This book provides profiles of all these communities accompanied by geographic maps and photographs. Talled with other communities in the volume on the tea communities, one will find that there are at least 110 ethnic communities in Bangladesh excluding Bangalees, which means the government is yet to recognize a large number of ethnic communities. This book and other SEHD publications on adivasis stand unique to assist the government and other non-state actors in coming to a consensus about the number and identities of these ethnic communities.



ISBN: 978-984-8952-17-7

Price: BDT 400 USD 15

