

State of the Excluded and Marginalized Communities

**Reports, analyses and insights on
exclusion challenges in Bangladesh**

Foreword by
Hossain Zillur Rahman

Edited by
Philip Gain



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Reports, analyses and insights on exclusion challenges in Bangladesh

2019



Imprint

Foreword

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Contents

| | |
|--|---------|
| Imprint | ii |
| Foreword—Hossain Zillur Rahman | vi-viii |
| Preface | ix-xiii |
| Abbreviations | xiv-xv |
| <i>Section 1: Research</i> | |
| Discrimination, Exclusion and Rights of the Marginal and Excluded People <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 1-34 |
| Right to Forest and Land <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 35-51 |
| Debates on Dalit: Bangladesh Perspective <i>—Harishankar Jaladas</i> | 53-59 |
| Harijan: Housing, Education and Social Conditions <i>—Harishankar Jaladas</i> | 61-65 |
| Life and Struggle of the Jaladas People <i>—Harishankar Jaladas</i> | 67-94 |
| Among Garo and Khasis, Women Decide Who Gets What <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 95-99 |
| Santal Resistance through Cultural Forms <i>—Prof. Tahmina Ahmed</i> | 101-109 |
| <i>Section 2: Investigation</i> | |
| The Story of A Floating People: A Nomadic Existence <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 111-119 |

| | |
|---|---------|
| The Man with 100 Forest Cases... and Why He Claims He Is Innocent <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 121-128 |
| Dinesh Nokrek—The Last of Sangsarek <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 130-132 |
| Bagda Farm Killing: Chronicle of A Tragedy Foretold <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 135-140 |
| The Invisible Chain Binding the Tea Gardens <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 143-145 |
| Elections in Tea Gardens and the Larger Issues of Tea Workers <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 147-149 |
| Mymensingh Brothel—Story of Alcohol, Fraud, Disgrace and Undignified Life <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 150-155 |
| Untouchable Hearts <i>—Shudeepto Ariquzzaman</i> | 157-160 |
| The Untouchables—Stories of the Harijan community in North Bengal <i>—Shudeepto Ariquzzaman</i> | 161-163 |
| Bihari in Bangladesh: Left Behind and Forgotten <i>—Mehedi Al Amin</i> | 165-175 |
| Tea Workers: The Women's Tale <i>—Sabrina Miti Gain</i> | 177-179 |
| Old Age—The Story of Long Life, Love and Joy <i>—Philip Gain</i> | 180-181 |
| <i>Section 3: Thinking Tother: National Workshop, Conventions and Roundtable</i> | |
| National Workshop in Dhaka: Our Excluded and Marginalized Should Not be Left Behind <i>—Speakers say at a national workshop</i> | 183-187 |

| | |
|--|---------|
| Convention in Rangpur: Challenges of Marginality and Exclusion Discussed at Length | 188-194 |
| Convention in Sreemangal: Social, Economic and Political Protection Of the Marginal and Excluded Communities | 195-208 |
| National Convention in Dhaka: Discrimination, Exclusion and Rights of the Marginal and Excluded People | 209-214 |
| <i>Dhaka Declaration-2019</i> Adopted at the National Convention on Discrimination, Exclusion and Rights of the Marginal and Excluded People 20-21 June 2019 | 216-219 |
| <i>Photography Exhibition</i> BRATTYAJAN: Social Outcasts, Excluded and Marginalized Communities | 220-222 |
| <i>Roundtable Discussion</i> Modhupur Sal Forest: Its Demise, Demographic Changes and Customary Land Rights | 223-225 |

“To be excluded from common facilities or benefits that others have can certainly be a significant handicap that impoverishes the lives that individuals can enjoy.”

—Amartya Sen

Foreword

Exclusion and Marginalization: Poverty's Third Frontier

Hossain Zillur Rahman

When Bangladesh gained independence nearly five decades ago, poverty was the default condition for over eighty per cent of the population. Over the course of the seventies, eighties and nineties, the anti-poverty efforts of the state and society were directed against this general state of poverty. By the turn of the century, rate of poverty had been brought down to below fifty per cent and again to below thirty-three per cent by 2010 and further to around twenty-five per cent by 2016. This was a significant achievement in which multiple actors including government, NGOs, social actors as well as initiatives of ordinary citizens—women, farmers, entrepreneurs, youth, workers—played their roles.

By the 1990s, there was additionally an important new element in the fight against poverty, namely a recognition that while the instruments and policy approaches to combat general poverty must continue, there was a need to consider additional and specific steps for a worse-off groups within the generally poor group. In an earlier publication, we had termed this group the extreme poor i.e. people who were not just poor but subsisted considerably below the poverty line. Our early research at BIDS for example had shown that micro-credit, which was an important instrument to combat poverty was excluding the extreme poor because they often lacked critical capacities to make effective use of general micro-credit. Out of such realization, from 1990s onward, new programming initiatives both by GO and NGO sectors emerged, which were specifically designed and targeted to the extreme poor. These too have borne fruit because not only has general poverty come down, rate of extreme poverty too has come down from a high of 34.3 percent in 2000 to 12.9 percent in 2016.

Notwithstanding this impressive achievements in combating poverty, the poverty challenge still remains large. In absolute terms, number of poor by the 2016 data stood at around 39 million while the number of extreme poor stood at just under 20 million. These are undoubtedly very large numbers, which calls for sustained continuation of anti-poverty efforts. However, beyond the large unfinished business of general and extreme

poverty per se, there is a third poverty frontier that now merits attention. This is the hitherto largely out-of-focus but entrenched problem of exclusion and marginalization.

While economists have understood the problem of poverty and extreme poverty in terms of a lack – lack of income, lack of resources or lack of capabilities. The excluded and marginalized groups may also be lacking all of the above but what distinguishes them from the general category of poor and extreme poor are the walls of discrimination and highly negative social perceptions that not only often render them socially and statistically invisible but also serve to downgrade their own sense of self-worth and their sense of agency. While much of the poor have embraced an aspirational mind-set, which refuses to accept that poverty is destiny, the excluded and marginalized groups struggle to make a transition to such a mind-set.

Having won significant victories in the fight against poverty and extreme poverty notwithstanding the challenges which remain, the policy moment is right for policy-makers, analysts and implementing agencies alike to take cognizance of and prioritize poverty's third frontier, namely, exclusion and marginalization. It is not surprising that recent statistics point towards a slowing down in the rate of poverty reduction after 2010. Arguably this is partly due to the nature of the growth strategy being pursued particularly over the last decade but equally arguably this is due to reaching those strata of extreme poverty who are caught in entrenched poverty traps due to exclusion and marginalization.

The 'No One Left Behind' slogan of SDGs is not merely a programmatic guideline. To my mind, this slogan is the philosophical bedrock on which the ambitions of SDGs stand. The focus has to be not just on those who are racing ahead but also on those at the farthest end of the line often entrapped by statistical invisibility and prevalent negative attitudes within society. It is these groups who constitute the third poverty frontier, which has now to be transformed into a priority if the momentum on combating poverty is to be sustained.

For a long time, the discussion on excluded and marginalized communities have tended to narrowly focus on the plight of hill peoples particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The extensive research by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) and Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and other partners have clearly established the necessity of a broader focus particularly covering a plethora of small communities across the plains of Bangladesh. Many of these communities are numerically small and thus struggle to project a collective identity but together comprise a sizeable population group upward of five million. They include tea workers and some ethnic communities in north-east, Santals, Oraons and many other ethnic communities

in the north-west, Jaladas in the south-east, Bede along major rivers, Harijans in cities, Kaiputra and Rishi in the south-west and many others. Their marginality and exclusion are driven by multiple factors: social and economic discrimination of ethnic minorities and tea workers; stigmatized occupations such as those of sex workers and Harijans; disappearing traditional occupations due to urbanization and economic modernization such as those of the Bede, Rishi, Kaiputra and Jaladas; and finally marginalization due to political displacement such as the Biharis.

Addressing the third frontier of poverty i.e. exclusion and marginalization, requires a multi-pronged approach as championed by SEHD, PPRC and partners. The mutli-year research and consultations pursued by these agencies over the preceding years have underscored if anything the critical need for making the excluded groups statistically visible through credible research as an essential first step to scale up policy and programmatic attention. It is indeed with this objective in mind that SEHD and PPRC are launching the report, *The State of the Excluded and Marginalized Communities* as the start of a possible annual series. The report combines comprehensive mapping of excluded and marginalized groups, analysis of their specific vulnerabilities and needs and strategies to overcome the traps of exclusion and marginalization including capacity-development for self-advocacy.



Preface

This is an analytical report on the state of the marginal and excluded peoples of Bangladesh—ethnic communities, tea workers, Bede, Rishi, Harijan, Jaladas, sex workers, Kaiputra (pig rearing community) and Biharis. We have mapped and defined these communities that constitute a significant percentage of population of Bangladesh. There are of course others such as disabled, people living on the fringe or in *char* land (river island), Bawali and other smaller marginal groups that we have not attended in this report. These people face discrimination and exclusion—socially, economically and politically—for various reasons such as their ethnic identity, situations close to slavery, occupation, casteism, culture, geographical location, landlessness and eviction from their homesteads. They are, on the one hand, deprived of equal opportunities guaranteed by the constitution to all citizens and on the other, they are handicapped by a series of social, economic and political problems.

For three years and half, with support from the European Union and ICCO Cooperation, we have brought together representatives of the marginal and excluded communities we have mapped and defined under a project, ‘Defining the excluded groups, mapping their current status, strengthening their capacity and partnerships’. They have had eye-level exchanges with others from the majority community including civil society organizations, high-level officials of different state agencies, politicians, researchers, top economists of the country, academics and human rights defenders among others.

Now at the end of the three and half year project, we publish this report together with monographs on seven groups of excluded communities mentioned above and many other tools for use of everyone to deal with exclusion challenges of Bangladesh.

The first and analytical section of the report gives an overview of the marginal and excluded communities that we have studied under the current project and another three-year project also supported by the European Union and ICCO Cooperation. We have tried to furnish statistical accounts as clear and accurate as possible. The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) had started scrutiny of the Adivasis, tea workers and sex workers two and half decades ago. In the current three and half year project, Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) and Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK) joined with SEHD. SEHD and PPRC were primarily responsible for study and survey and in defining

the marginal and excluded communities. We have not just produced statistical accounts on the marginal and excluded communities who remain largely invisible, we have also defined their rights to political protection and how the state and non-state actors play their role in securing their economic right, social justice and cultural protection. Special attention has also been given to the right to forest and land of forest-dwelling communities outside the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Most of the excluded communities are overwhelmingly landless. The people who live on the forest land, particularly the Adivasis, remain in continued worries because the state of Bangladesh does not recognize their customary land rights. Dealing with conflict, violence and clash over land—be it the forest land or private land—is a big challenge for the human rights defenders, community based organization, civil society organizations and the state agencies. Some write-ups of this report provide analysis and roadmap about how the concerned state agencies and the people of the majority community can be more humane in playing their role for migration of the excluded communities out of poverty and social indignity. This section sets the tone that true development in Bangladesh is not possible with these marginal and excluded communities left behind.

In his analysis on ‘Dalit’, Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, an educationist, researcher and novelist from among the Jaladas community, has flatly rejected ‘Dalit’ identity on his community. He does not even like use of the word ‘Dalit’; instead he suggests the word ‘antaj’ for the people who are victims of Hindu Casteism and have remained deprived for generations. One thing we have found from our discussions in numerous seminars, workshops and consultations is that most of the communities branded as ‘Dalit’ do not want to be identified as Dalit. The debate on Dalit in Bangladesh contexts, as raised by Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, may draw the attention of those who want to engage in further debate and discussion. The reflective write-up on the housing, education and social conditions of the Harijan draw our attention to a people, who live in situation close to slavery.

Life and Struggle of the Jaladas People, also authored by Dr. Haishankar Jaladas is a literary and quite long write-up giving details about the life and sufferings of a Hindu fishing community (Jaladas) who explore the sea shore and the deep sea to catch fish. This write-up shows the path to other marginal communities the significance of research and writing by the community scholars to make people aware about the marginal communities. In future we want to publish such articles on other communities.

The write-up ‘Among Garo and Khasis, women decide who gets what’ is an exposé that it is only in the Garo and Khasi communities in which women own and inherit family land and other property and decide who get what. In other Adivasi communities,

a woman does not own or inherit land and property if her father or bother who has inherited family property does not transfer it to her. This write-up is a pointer to the fact that in Adivasi communities other than Garo and Khasi, women in Hindu community are unfortunate in inheriting land and property. The write-up may encourage further research and investigation into access of women in land and other property.

Professor Tahmina Ahmed has contributed an unique article on Santal resistance through cultural forms. In her article she explains history and culture as major tools in developing resistance. The insight in her article is clear: if we do not know our history, if our language and culture get lost, we are in serious trouble in standing for rights. We learn from the Santal resistance at different times of history that use of cultural forms such as drama, songs and dances play a significant role in standing together for social and economic justice. Creative arts help reinvent history that strengthen resistance, explains Professor Tahmina. Her article is a pointer to the fact that intellectual clarity about cultures, languages and history should be given utmost significance in the fight for rights, equality and justice.

Original investigative reports, travelogues and features on the marginal and excluded peoples are only occasionally seen in mainstream newspapers and periodicals. We print in section two select reports, travelogues and features that we wrote and published in the newspapers, weekend supplements of newspapers and magazines. These are outputs of our investigation and interaction with communities sometimes piggybacked with survey, study and documentary film making and sometimes done separately. The travelogue on the Bedes “The Story of A Floating People: A Nomadic Existence” was first published in *the Daily Star Weekend*. We visited around 10 spots with Bede habitation, spoke to many Bedes, local people and saw firsthand the condition of the Bedes in their yearly gathering locations or mel, villages and their temporary camps. We occasionally walked with the Bede women and men to see how they do their business. We were amazed to see and photograph their floating life, which has been described in the travelogue. This travelogue is one example of documentation of a community neutrally and without any preconception. It involves time and finance. Such investment is worthwhile.

We publish one detailed report on forest cases in Modhupur and a feature on a nonagenarian Garo, one of 45 Sangsarek (follower of animism, the original religion of the Garos) in Modhupur forest villages [as of 2018]. The forest cases are unique in Modhupur sal forest area; of approximately 5,000 forest cases in Tangail district, 4,500 are from Modhupur. The report made after numerous visit to Modhupur and Tangail court exposes the underlying factors for forest cases and phenomenal destruction of Modhupur forest. The case of nonagenarian Dinesh Nokrek is also stunning because he

holds his forefathers' animistic belief while 99.1% Garos of the Modhupur forest villages have become Christians.

Other investigative reports published in this book are on Santal resistance attempt in Gobindaganj (Gaibanda district) against Rangpur Sugar Mill Authority; condition of tea workers who live a life close to slavery and their struggle for change; the stunning story of liquor, deception, repression and inhuman life without dignity in Mymensingh brothel; Harijans of Dhaka and North Bengal; and the Biharis in Bangladesh who are left behind and forgotten. The key objective of publishing these reports is to show how important is investigation, case documentation and exposé of systematic abuses against the marginal and excluded people of Bangladesh.

We are very grateful to Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, Prof. Tahmina Ahmed, Shudepto Ariquzzaman and Mehedi Al Amin who were not project staff but joyfully participated in research, investigation and writing.

Section three compiles the reports of a national workshop in Dhaka at the beginning of the project, three conventions (the first one in Rangpur, the second one in Sreemangal and the final one in Dhaka), a photography exhibition and a roundtable discussion on Modhupur *sal* forest: its demise, demographic changes and customary land rights. The reports of these six events, in addition to 10 skill sharing training and workshops, highlight the issues of the marginal and excluded communities of Bangladesh and provide thoughtful guidelines for future actions for their well-being and participation in development processes.

A large number of individuals (as many as 2,000) representing as many as 76 communities and all clusters of the marginal and excluded communities, defined and mapped under the project, participated in these events. We are thankful to all of them. Mention of names of all these individuals is not possible. However, we would like to mention some names with gratitude whose support, advice and participation as resource persons made these events meaningful. They include: Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud, Prof. Rehman Sobhan, Prof. Rounaq Jahan, Prof. Gowher Rizvi, Dr. Hameeda Hossain, Prof. Sakhawat Ali Khan, Prof. Shahidul Alam, Dr. Harishankar Jaladas, Dr. Mohammad Abdul Wazed, Masihuddin Shaker, Nurul Quader, Md. Yunus Ali, Dr. Mohammad Zahirul Haque, Mohammad Harun Ur Rashid Khan, Shamsul Huda, Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, Dr. Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan, Dr. Ainoon Nahar, Prof. Mahmudul H. Sumon, Prof. Tahmina Ahmed, Sharawat Shamin, Md. Shamsuz Zaman, Dr. Uttam Kumar Das, Md. Alamgir Hossen, Khandakar Riaz Hossain, Md. Tofail Islam, Md. Abdul Awal, Md. Nahidul Islam, Dr. Kazi Muzafar Ahmmed, Imrul Kayes Moniruzzaman, Dr. Nibash Chandra Pal, Nazrul Islam, Dr. Satyakam Chakraborty, Azizul Islam, Dr. Md.

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We trust this report is not the first and last of this kind. As we are setting up a resource center with possible title Brattyajan Resource Centre (BRC) dedicated to the service of the marginal and excluded communities and the actors who work for their well-being, our target is to eventually issue an annual report on the state of the marginal and excluded communities. We believe this report will refresh the readers on the condition of the marginal and excluded communities and the issues and challenges they are faced with.

Philip Gain
Editor

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|--|
| ADB | Asian Development Bank |
| ACCF | Assistant Chief Conservator of Forest |
| BBS | Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics |
| BCSU | Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union |
| BEZA | Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority |
| BFIDC | Bangladesh Forest Industry Development Corporation |
| BGB | Border Guard Bangladesh |
| BILS | Bangladesh Institute of Law and Labour Studies |
| BTA | Bangladesh Tea Association |
| CCDB | Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh |
| CCF | Chief Conservator of Forest |
| CFW | Community Forest Workers |
| CHT | Chittagong Hill Tracts |
| CPD | Centre for Policy Dialogue |
| DC | Deputy Commissioner |
| DCC | Dhaka City Corporation |
| DFO | Divisional Forest Officer |
| DIFE | Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments |
| DL | Department of Labour |
| EBSATA | East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act |
| ECOSOC | United Nations Economic and Social Council |
| EU | European Union |
| FD | Forest Department |
| FSW | Female sex workers |
| GBK | Gram Bikash Kendra |
| GD | General Diary |
| HIES | Household Income and Expenditure Survey |
| HSC | Higher secondary certificate |

| | |
|-------|--|
| ICRC | International Committee of the Red Cross |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IMLI | International Mother Language Institute |
| MRG | Minority Rights Group |
| OC | Office-in-Charge |
| PDB | Power Development Board |
| PKSF | Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation |
| PPRC | Power and Participation Research Centre |
| RIB | Research Initiative, Bangladesh |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SEHD | Society for Environment and Human Development |
| SPGRC | Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee |
| SRHR | Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights |
| STI | Sexually Transmitted Infection |
| SUST | Shahjalal University of Science and Technology |
| TG | Transgender |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

State of the Excluded and Marginalized Communities

This is an analytical report on the state of the excluded and marginalized communities of Bangladesh—ethnic communities, tea workers, Bede, Rishi, Harijan, Jaladas, sex workers, Kaiputra (pig rearing community) and Biharis. These communities constitute around three percent of the population of Bangladesh. They face discrimination and exclusion—socially, economically and politically—for various reasons such as their ethnic identity, situations close to slavery, occupation, casteism, culture, geographical location, landlessness and eviction from their land.

The contributors to this report participated in research and investigation on these communities and have based their write-ups on analyses and findings from the field. The write-ups, therefore, are original, full of anecdotes and present information, analyses, insights and facts about structural abuses that the excluded and marginalized communities have been facing for generations. The last section of the publication compiles reports of a series of workshop, convention, dialogue, photography exhibition and cultural programmes in which the excluded communities had eye-level exchanges with the members of the majority community including civil society organizations, high-level officials of different state agencies, politicians, researchers, top economists of the country, academics and human rights defenders. This report is a tool for work on exclusion challenges in Bangladesh both in the field and at thinking level.



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