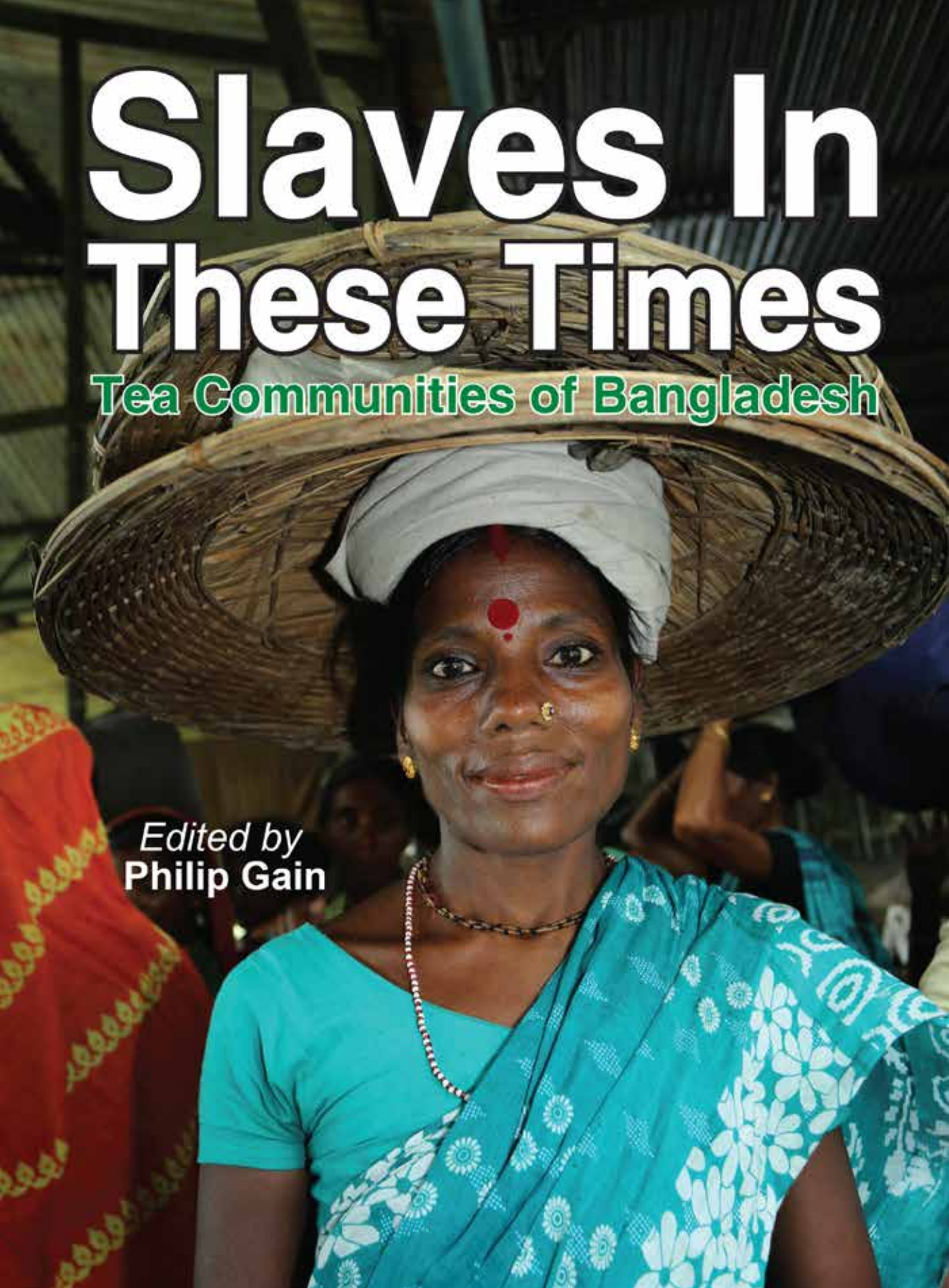


Slaves In These Times

Tea Communities of Bangladesh

Edited by
Philip Gain



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Imprint
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Published by

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)
1/1 Pallabi (5th Floor) Mirpur, Dhaka-1216, Bangladesh
T: 880-2-9026636 E: sehd@sehd.org www.sehd.org

Published: 2016

Printing: Jahan Traders

ISBN: 978-984-8952-16-0

Price: 600 USD15

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Contents

Imprint	iii
Preface	v-vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction to Tea Industry and Tea Workers	1-9
Mapping of the Tea Communities	10-20
Community Index and Communities	21-289
<i>Almik, Bakti, Bangalee, Baraik, Barma, Bashphor, Bauri, Been, Bhar, Bhokta, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Bihari, Bunerjee, Chasha, Chatri, Dusad, Garo, Ghatuar, Giri, Goala, Ganju, Gorait, Goswami, Gour, Goyashur (also known as Ashur), Hajra, Jhora, Kahar, Kairi, Kalindi, Kalowar, Kanu, Karmokar, Keot, Kharia, Khodal, Kol, Kondo, Kora, Kumar, Kurmi, Lohar, Mandraji, Mahale, Majhi, Mal, Marma, Monipuri, Mridha, Munda, Mushohor, Naidu, Nayek, Nepali, Noonia, Oraon (also spelt Orang), Painka, Pashi, Patro, Phulmali, Pandit, Pradhan, Rajballobh, Rajbhar, Rajbongshi, Rajgor, Rajwar, Rautia, Reli, Robidas, Sadhu, Santal, Shabor, Sheel, Suklaboiddyo, Shobdakar, Tanti, Teli (also known as Pal), Tongla and Tripura.</i>	
Investigation: Land and Others Concerns	291-314
Brief Profiles of Tea Estates	316-360
Useful Web Resources and Institutions on Tea Communities	361-368
Glossary, Concepts and Theories	369-379
Tea Estates (TEs) and identity numbers shown on the maps	380-383
Map: Tea Growing Areas of Bangladesh	384-388

Preface

This volume focuses particularly on the communities found in the tea gardens of the Northeast and Southeast of Bangladesh. The communities who have remained tied to the tea gardens and the labour lines for more than 150 years still remain aliens to the Bangalee majority community. What is unique about these communities is that they are not homogenous like in Sri Lanka where all plantation workers are Tamils. Originally, the tea workers of Bangladesh and their communities were people of Bihar, Madras, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and other places in India. The British companies brought them to work in the tea gardens in Sylhet region more than 150 years ago. Now they are *bona fide* citizens of Bangladesh.

We have been paying attention to the rights of these tea workers and their communities for decades. In our interaction with them, we have always come across an urge from them to map their identities in the tea gardens. 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 tea communities.

In our efforts to map the tea 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 members of different tea communities.

The findings of our mapping of the communities in the tea gardens have been remarkable. We have found as many as 80 communities in 156 tea gardens in Sylhet, Hobiganj, Moulvibazar, Chittagong and Rangamati districts (Bangladesh Tea Board’s report, *Statistics on Bangladesh Tea Industry-2015* gives a list of 160 tea gardens of which three to four are not in operation and not inhabited by tea communities). Of these communities, nine are mentioned in the government census of 1991 and in *Khudra Nri-Gosthi Sangskritik Pratisthan Ain, 2010*, which are Tripura, Santal, Oraon, Rajbongshi, Marma, Monipuri, Munda, Mahale and Garo. The other communities [including Bangalees] in the tea gardens—seventy-one—belong to different identities. The use of the term ‘ethnic’ for all communities in the tea gardens may trigger a debate particularly when only nine of them are mentioned in the government records. However, there is a logic for use of the term ‘ethnic’ for all communities in the tea gardens. For example, the Baktis are a community living in many tea gardens; they are different from Bangalees and all other communities. No matter wherever in India the members of a community may have come from 150 years ago, they must have an ethnic identity.

One unique feature of our mapping of the ethnic communities has been creation of geographic maps. We engaged a cartographer to develop a geographic map on each community based on primary data that we collected. The thematic maps show the concentration of ethnic communities in the tea gardens. One interested in further studies on the communities will find the names of all tea gardens a community lives in and a geographic map. In addition, we have included location maps of all tea gardens (including 10 in the

Northwest)—one map on concentration of all gardens and four on concentration of the tea gardens in Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Hobiganj and Chittagong-Rangamati.

Photography has been an integral part of the mapping of the ethnic communities. We have photographed all 80 communities in the tea gardens. The incredible faces of all these communities in leisure and at work, the labour lines they live in, the indecent work condition they go through everyday, dining at work, the toil in their faces under the scorching sun and rain, religious objects and beliefs, *patta* (liquor shop in the tea gardens where carews is sold), environment and many other interesting features of their lives have been photographed. Each profile published in this volume has been accompanied by at least one photograph. A 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 communities, we have also included some write-ups that provide an overview of the tea industry and concerns about the rights of the tea workers. The tea industry, indeed, is such an industry where the workers can unionize only at the national level and the law makes it obligatory that at least 30 per cent of the total workforce must join a union as members. There is no precedence that a tea worker gets an appointment letter. The tea workers get no casual leave. They live on land and in houses that they do not own. They have lived with many such malpractices and injustices for generations. So the story the tea plantation workers were told back home that they would arrive at “a lovely garden in the hill country where they would look after trees with leaves of pure gold which would fall if you shook them” never came about.

The key message that the texts of this book communicates is that the tea workers and their communities are one of the most vulnerable people in Bangladesh. They continue to remain socially excluded, low-paid, 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.

The agenda of the tea communities and other smaller ethnic communities developed with their active participation has been published in another volume, *Lower Depths: Marginalized Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh* in consideration of the size of this volume and because the agenda is common for all ethnic communities of Bangladesh.

One consulting this volume, together with the volume on the marginalized ethnic communities of Bangladesh concentrated in Northwest and North-centre and the photography volume on all ethnic communities, will get a comprehensive map of 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 FGDs and interviews throughout the tea gardens. It is their kindness and hospitality that have made the job of the research teams easier.

The names of individuals that must be mentioned with gratitude are Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, Prof. Rafiqul Islam, 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, Bijoy Bunerjee, Swapon Santal, Bijoy Hajra, Paresch Kalindi, Shudepto Arriquzzaman, Nirmal Das Painka, Makhonlal Karmokar, Sadhan Santal, Luxmicharan Bakti, Piari Robidas, Avirat Bakti, Sumon Singha, Bisnu Mridha, Sanju Adhikari, Raju Goswami, Bimal Karmokar, Rakhil Goala, Mitali Patra, Probin Chisim, Tapan Datta, Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid Sarker, Advocate AKM Nasim, Barriser Jyotirmoy Barua, Nasim Anwar, Sheudhani Kurmi, Md. Azizul Islam, Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, Mohammad Giashuddin, Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan, Prakash Kanti Chowdhury, Robiul Hasan, Md. Delwar Hossain, Ranadhir Kumar Dev, Swopon Munda, Mintu Deshwara, Lakshan Munda, Gidison Pradhan Suchiang, Mitaly Patro, Zobaidul Alam, Moni Bakti, Apu Kurmi, S. N. Obaidul Mukhtader, Lucky Ruga, Babul Boiragi, Swarnakamol Barua, Joynal Abedin, Soumitra Sekhar, Chitta Ghosh, Azharul Azad Jewel, Mehedi Al Amin, Rajibul Hassan, Lokman Hossain, Mitali Mrong, Gita Vor, Gaytri Rajvor, Moni Shankar Bauri, Amirun Begum, Raju Goala, Sobita Goala, Prosad Sarker, Abdullah Al Mahdee, Anna Stadler, Chiara Perucca, Rabindranath Soren, Sajal Koiri, 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 the members of *panchayets* who participated in FGDs.

Directly or indirectly, many government institutions overseeing the tea industry and the welfare of the tea workers have been very helpful to us in gathering information and developing analysis on the tea workers' rights issues and the tea industry. Among these foremost are Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB) and its two subsidiaries—Project Development Unit (PDU) and Bangladesh Tea Research Institute (BTRI), Factory and Establishment, Directorate of Labour, Department of Labour, Deputy Commissioner's office in Moulvibazar, and Srimongol Upazila Parishad. We are very thankful to these organizations and their officials for allowing us to use the government facilities and documents.

Organizations to thank with gratitude are Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), Bangladesh Tea Association, Caritas Bangladesh, Heed Bangladesh, Moulvibazar Cha Janogoshthi Adivasi Front, Bagania and BRAC.

We are very thankful to Dr. S. G. Hussain, a cartographer, for his incredible patience in developing geographic maps of all the tea communities. Furthermore, he has recreated maps of the tea gardens, which we believe, will be appreciated by all.

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.

Slaves In These Times

Tea Communities of Bangladesh

What is unique about the 122,000 tea plantation workers and their communities is that they are not homogenous. Originally, they were people of Bihar, Madras, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and other places in India. The British companies brought them to work in the tea gardens in Sylhet region more than 150 years ago. One striking fact about the tea workers is that they remain aliens to the majority people of Bangladesh. The tea workers are indeed people of Bangladesh, but largely tied to the tea gardens and the labour lines and fall behind as equal citizens.

This book unveils the ethnic identities of the tea communities, which number as many as 80. Brief profiles of these communities accompanied by geographic maps and photographs add significant value to the discussion and debate on ethnic identities in Bangladesh. Furthermore, different write-ups including investigative reports explain the contexts of their deprivation and alienation.



ISBN: 978-984-8952-16-0

Price: BDT 600 USD 15

