

Social Exclusion & Poverty among Tea Garden Workers in Bangladesh

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This paper attempts to unearth the factors underlying the poverty and social exclusion of tea garden workers in Bangladesh. Based on the empirical evidences from two tea gardens in Sylhet, the study finds that tea garden workers are inflicted with chronic poverty and are facing social exclusion. Limited access to work beyond the industry for additional income and distant geographic location forces them to be excluded from many of the social opportunities and civic services. Besides, illiteracy, poor and inadequate healthcare system and dearth of other social amenities also make them socially marginalized. However, workers' miseries remain unheard for lack of collective voice.

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Background of the Study

Bangladesh has a significant history of tea production which started since the establishment of first tea garden in 1854. Tea sector plays a significant role in the national economy through employment generation, export earnings, import substitution and poverty reduction in rural areas. There are 162 tea gardens in Bangladesh which produce approximately 60 million kilograms of tea annually from about 53,259 hectares of land. Nearly 358,550 workers are employed in the tea industry of which almost 75% are women (Saha, 2010, cited in Chowdhury et al., 2011). The supply of labor force to tea industry was historically based on migrant labor who mainly came from different states of India, particularly from Assam during the British regime. Different ethnic sub-cultures kept them to be alienated from mainstream communities. As a result, tea communities are excluded from the mainstream society in many respects, such as employment, education, healthcare facilities, socio-cultural activities, political involvement and other civic services. Therefore, a study based on empirical evidences can provide signifi-

cant insights into understanding the process of marginalization and contributing factors of poverty of tea garden workers. This paper makes an effort to look in to the different aspects of social exclusion and its influence on the life patterns of tea workers in Bangladesh. Drawing on views from the theoretical underpinnings of social exclusion, the paper endeavors to identify the forms and levels of social exclusion in the context of tea garden workers in Bangladesh and end ups with some policy recommendations.

Review of Literature

Academic discussion on the relationship between social exclusion and poverty is not new. Many scholars (e.g.; Golding, 1986; Sen, 2000; Hills, Grand & Piachaud, 2002; Room, 2005; Levitas, 2005; Alcock, 2012; Redmond, 2014) have explored the different dimensions of poverty and social exclusion in global context. However, none has focused on social exclusion and poverty in Bangladesh. Very few studies have been conducted covering the socio-economic situation, healthcare and labor rights issues that have been discussed here.

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Das and Islam (2006) reveal that workers are deprived of getting proper education, healthcare and other basic rights. According to them, about 58 percent of the tea workers are illiterate

whereas 60 percent could not go to school because of poverty. Children of the tea workers are deprived of having minimum basic social support and thus their life choices have been restricted and capacity has been shrunk. A large number of tea workers have direct experiences of being exploited by the management including low payment. However, this study has not directly focused on poverty. Chowdhury et al. (2011) study explores that tea workers are struggling with poor income, illiteracy, poor latrine facilities and iron contained water for drinking. This study also identifies the deplorable condition of water supply and sanitation of tea garden workers.

Ahmed et al. (2006) study focuses on the sanitation and hygiene of tea garden workers in Bangladesh. They find that most of the inhabitants of tea garden have poor income and majority of the workers are illiterate. They do not have access to medical treatment due to serious financial constraints and cannot maintain proper sanitation and hygiene. The study does not address the issue of exclusion though it partially painted the picture of poverty in a circuitous manner. Ahmed et al. (2009) confirms the deplorable conditions of sanitary system due to poor socioeconomic conditions and illiteracy of the tea communities. It is also claimed that tea garden workers have lack of knowledge about health and hygiene. Poverty and superstition are responsible for deteriorated condition of the sanitary system. However, this study has failed to explore how workers' access to health and sanitation are influenced by social exclusion and poverty.

Another study by Alam and Sarker (2009) reveals that majority of the tea workers including the temporary workers do not receive their payment duly in spite of doing hard work. Exploitation and deprivation by the owners are well acknowledged by the workers but still it is unchallenged due to lack of work options beyond the gardens (Pervin et al., 2011). A more comprehensive study was conducted by ILO which mainly concentrates on the working conditions and labor benefits (e.g.; wage, sanitation facilities, maternity protection and childcare, working environment, occupational safety and health), and fundamental rights of tea workers (e.g.; freedom of association, freedom from forced or compulsory labor, child labor and discrimination in respect of employment and occupation) and finds that most of the rights of the workers are denied (Ahmmmed & Hossain, 2015).

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The above mentioned studies have hardly touched the issue of poverty and social exclusion of tea garden workers. The tea workers are marginalized and excluded from mainstream communities over the years but very little attention has been paid by the government, non-government organizations and tea garden authority in order to promote their life and

help them getting out of poverty and fight social exclusion. Therefore, this study has made an attempt to explore the situation of poverty and social exclusion among the tea garden workers.

Social Exclusion: An Overview

The concept of social exclusion is relatively recent origin but it has gained momentum in academic arena, especially in the field of development and policy practice (Scharf, et al., 2000; Sen, 2000). Social exclusion is a multidimensional process through which people face lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services and mostly inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities of the majority of people in a society (Levitas et al, 2007). It is used for describing social division which mostly refers to persistent and systematic multiple deprivations, as opposed to poverty or other experiences of disadvantage (Muddiman, 1999). Social exclusion occurs when different factors work together to trap individuals and cause a spiral of disadvantage (Miliband, 2006). Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional processes that takes into account the participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes. The combination of all these processes creates acute form of exclusion that has spatial manifestation in particular neighborhoods (Madanipour et al., 1998). Silver et al.(1995:63) has identified some issues from where people may be excluded: a livelihood; secure, permanent employment; earnings; property, credit,

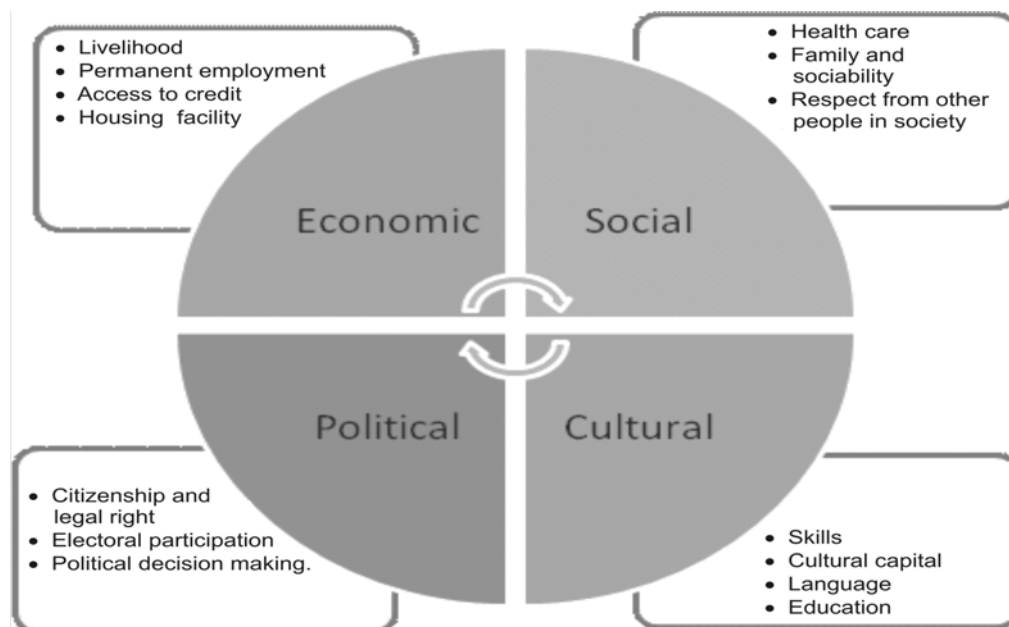
or land; housing; minimal or prevailing consumption levels; education, skills, and cultural capital; the welfare state; citizenship and legal equality; democratic participation; public goods; the nation or the dominant race; family and sociability; humanity, respect, fulfillment and understanding.

Besides, Estivill (2003:19) has defined exclusion as... “an accumulation of confluent processes with successive raptures arising from the heart of the economy, politics and society which gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in a position of inferiority in relation to centers of power, resources and prevailing values.” The consequence of social exclusion is well articulated by Amartya Sen who said that social exclusion leads to social, political and cultural deprivation

of individuals in addition to economic deprivation which leads to poverty (Sen, 2000). According to Sen, social exclusion is closely linked with poverty. Bauman (1998; 37) argues that “poverty means being excluded from whatever passes for a normal life.” Thus social exclusion is considered both a cause and a consequence of poverty (Jalal, 2000).

Drawing on the views of social exclusion, a conceptual model has been developed to address the issue of social exclusion among tea workers in Bangladesh. The theoretical approach of social exclusion indicates that a person is said to be excluded from exercising his/her rights as being out of work opportunity, gainful economic activity, social, cultural and political participation in the mainstream society.

Fig. 1 Conceptual Model of Social Exclusion



The four main forms of social exclusion have been analyzed in this paper. In the first place, economic aspect of exclusion is related with livelihood options, work opportunity and the pattern of job whether permanent or temporal, access to credit, housing facility. Moreover, the economic forms of exclusion also include marginalization of individual from the means of livelihood and confinement to poorly paid or undesirable forms of labor, and deprivation from an adequate standard of living (Kabeer, 2000). While social aspects of exclusion are intertwined with healthcare facilities, social interactions and mutual respect to and from the family members, neighbors and people beyond the community, political aspect of exclusion is linked with citizenship (civic right) and legal equality, electoral participation and political decision making. In the similar fashion, cultural aspect of exclusion is connected with education, individual skills, competences, linguistic capacity and cultural capital. Against this theoretical and conceptual background, this paper has explored the actual picture of poverty and the levels of exclusion experienced and encountered by the tea garden workers in Bangladesh.

Research Methods

The study is conducted in Sylhet, the North Eastern part of Bangladesh bordered by India, which has been dominating the tea production of Bangladesh. Since the British era this region has gained mammoth popularity as one of the tea cultivating districts. Two large tea gardens in Sylhet, Lakkatorah and

Malnichera, are selected purposively for data collection. The study has applied both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The rationale behind choosing mixed methods is that one method does not suffice to explain the situation because there are some issues which need to be explained by using other method (Creswell, 2007). The quantitative data are collected from 100 workers using semi-structured questionnaire. Quantitative data are used to ascertain the demographic and socio-economic conditions of tea workers using simple descriptive statistics. Qualitative data are used for descriptive analysis to examine the relationship between poverty and social exclusion of tea workers. Qualitative data are generated through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and direct observations. An in-depth interview guide has been employed to generate qualitative data from the primary sources. For gaining qualitative data a total of 10 workers are selected using convenient sampling. In addition, 10 persons were selected purposively consisting of management staff, union leaders, local self-government leader and NGO staff for key informant interview (KII). Four focus group discussions (FGDs) have been conducted during the data collection period in order to cross check the data.

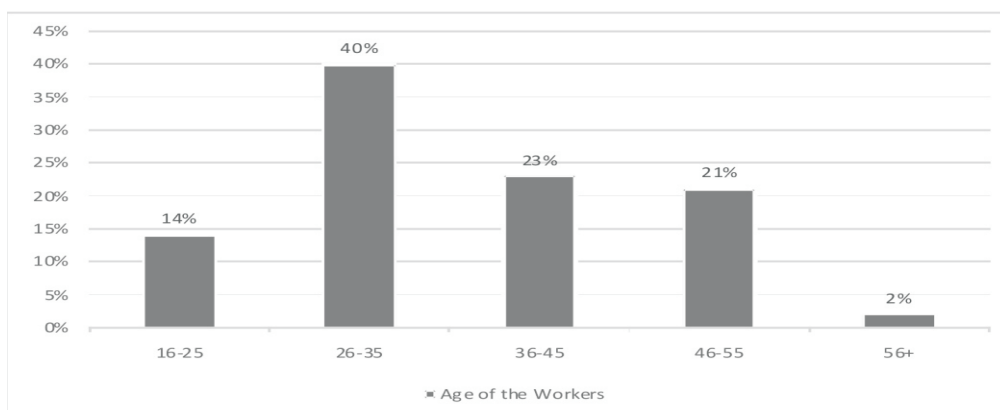
Socio-demographic Profile

The study data shows that among the respondents 70% are males and around 30% are females. Both younger and older workers are employed in the tea gardens but tea industry is dominated by middle-aged workers. Approximately 40% of the

workers are in the age group of 26-35 years. Nearly 23% of the workers are belonging to the age group 36-45, and 21%

are between the age group of 46-55 years, while almost 14% of the respondents are in the age group of 16-25 (Fig.2).

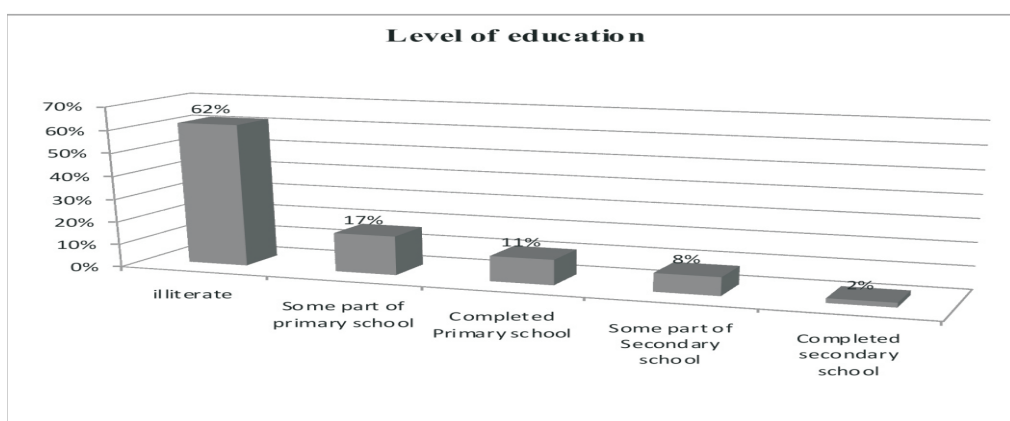
Fig. 2 Age of the Workers



There is also amalgamation of workers in terms of their religious identity. Most of the tea garden workers belong to Hindu community which is a historical trend. Roughly 72% of the respondents are Hindus whereas approximately 28% are Muslims. Both married and unmarried people are employed as workers in the tea garden. The field data indicates that about 94% of the respondents are married and

rest of them are unmarried. The level of education of the tea workers presents the harrowing picture that shows that around 62% of the respondents were illiterate whereas only 17% of them had just completed some part of primary education, 11% workers completed primary school, 8% completed some part of secondary school and only 2% have completed secondary school (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Level of Education of Workers



Process of Exclusions

The ancestors of tea workers of Bangladesh were the poor community in India who migrated and settled in the gardens for employment. While the number of people in the tea communities is growing rapidly, the scope of employment is decreasing. Because of the lack of education, skills and motivation for work outside the garden, their alternative employment opportunities have been very limited. They seem to be like 'bonded laborers' in the tea company. Since the geographical locations of the gardens are away from the local inhabitants, they have rarely found any opportunity to interact with people beyond their commu-

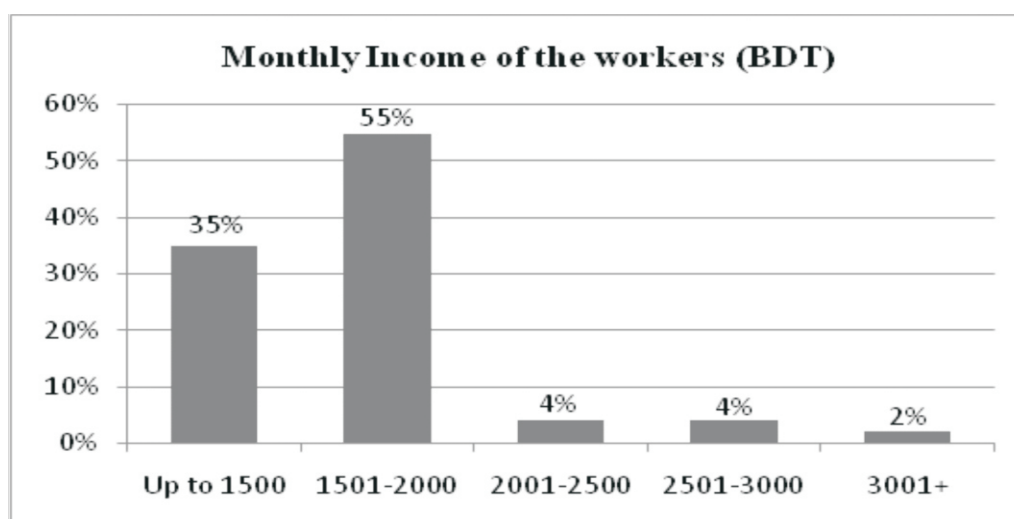
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nities. The kinship bondages of tea communities are also confined to their own ancestral ethnic communities. Their life choices are confined, opportunities are limited, and the social status are undermined. Therefore, the eventual outcome of this process has led the tea workers to be excluded from the mainstream community.

Exclusion in Economic Aspects

Tea garden workers are living under extreme poverty. They work in the tea garden from dawn to dusk but earn very little for which they are unable to maintain a decent living. Approximately 98 percent of the respondents have mentioned that their salary is not sufficient for managing household needs. About 60% workers reported that they do not have meals regularly three times a day. During interviews one respondent said that he is very fortunate who can manage daily meals with this meager income.

Fig.4 Monthly Income of the Workers (BDT)



The bar chart (Fig. 4) shows the monthly income of workers. Nearly 45% of the workers have monthly income less than tk.1500 whereas the monthly income of around 55% of the workers is between tk. 1501 and 2000. Only 2% of the workers earn above tk.3000. This amount is not sufficient to run the family consisting of 4-6 members. Majority of the families consist of 4-6 members (66%). The family consisting of 7-9 members is not so small (17.5%) and even difficult to manage with the meager income whereas 13.8% of the families consist of up to 3 members. An insignificant number of the families are also found with more than 10 members (2.7%). The large family size is considered to be the outcome of the lack of awareness and unavailability of family planning services among the tea community. When asked about how they lead their lives with a meager amount of income, one of the respondents has said about his life condition in the following way:

“We are very needy people. We cannot manage sufficient meals regularly. We are just confined to the garden and there is no way out of this. We have to do whatever our *Babu* (manager of the garden) tells us to do. We give our labor to the garden they give us a bare minimum of salary which is not enough for us to run the family. They provide us ration but it is not sufficient. Actually no one knows except God how we lead our lives. We don’t know where the end of workers’ suffering is!”

Our study indicates that only around 51% of the workers have permanent po-

sition, while rest of the workers is employed on a temporary basis. Temporary workers are not entitled to receive labor benefits provided by the garden authority, such as housing, ration, bonus, medical care and leave. Nearly 66% of the respondents have reported that they are given festival bonus twice in a year but the amount of money given to them is very little (US\$ 10-15). Approximately 65% of the respondents have said that they are not able to get employment outside the tea garden. To suffice their income, a few workers take some goods and products from tea garden and sell in local market without the knowledge of the authority. Approximately 60% of respondents have said that they have no access to formal credit system. Even the garden authority does not provide them with any loan. They could not borrow loan from a commercial bank because of the lack of legal property as commercial banks do not offer any loan without collateral. Almost 83% of the respondents have said that they live in the houses made by the owner within the territory of the garden over the years but they have no ownership over the houses and none of the workers have any land property. Approximately 97% of the respondents have claimed that they are unable to make any savings that can be used for making new houses and buying land property due to their meager income.

Exclusion in Social Aspects

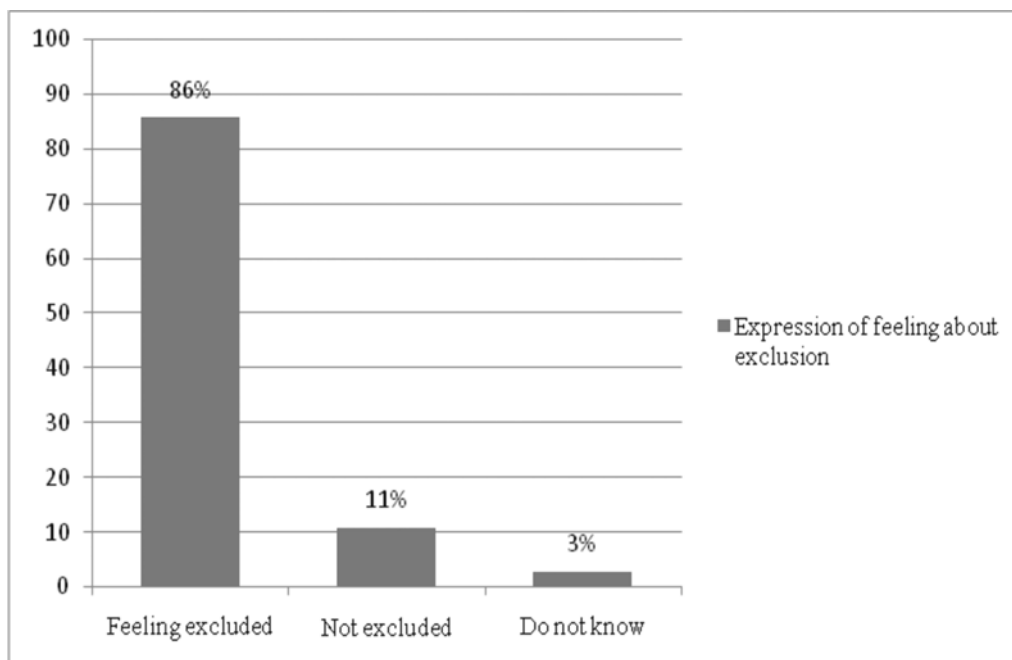
Tea garden workers live in a narrow space of society within the boundary of labor line demarcated by the garden authority. They spend long hours in the gar-

den that influence their relations among the family members. About 43% of the workers said that they find little amount of time to interact with family members. After getting back home spending long tiring hours in the garden, women workers become engaged for cooking and, therefore, they are unable to give enough time to family members and even to their children. Children do not learn how to interact with people within and beyond the community. As a result, they have developed a narrow social space which not only restricts their lives within the boundary of tea gardens but also leads them to be considered as social outcast. Children cannot break the invisible barriers of social exclusion and become the victims of social taboos. Many tea garden workers (about 73%) have reported that people outside the tea garden do not

show proper respect to them. About 86% of the respondents have reported that they are excluded in many ways because they have very little access to employment, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, social safety nets because of their status as tea garden workers which, however, has pushed them to live in a corner of the society. Only 11% of the respondents think they are not excluded and 3% of them do not know whether they are excluded from enjoying their rights as citizens in the society (Fig. 5).

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Fig. 5 Feeling about Exclusion



According to the labor law of Bangladesh, tea garden authorities are supposed to provide medical facilities for workers but available services are very insufficient. About 80% of the respondents have reported that they have access to medical facilities provided by the garden authority but services are confined only to primary care. Most of the workers have complained that medical centers do not provide any treatment for chronic diseases. They usually do not receive treatment from government and private medical hospitals going far away from the garden. The expenses for such kind of diseases are also very costly and even beyond their affordability. In many instances they prefer to remain without having any medical consultation until their health conditions aggravate.

Exclusion in Political Aspects

According to the constitution of Bangladesh, every citizen has equal right but it appears to be different for the tea workers. One of the important aspects of citizen's life is their political behavior and empowerment. The socioeconomic conditions of people determine their electoral behavior. Political consciousness, therefore, influences their access to social opportunities. The empirical evidence shows that tea garden workers are excluded from political activities due to their

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vulnerable social and economic condition. Approximately 67% of the respondents have said that they are systematically excluded from the political process. Nearly 49% of the respondents have reported that they cast their votes in local or national elections. However, 51% of the workers have claimed that the tea garden authority influences their electoral choices. It is also evident that none of them have participated in any local council election to be representatives of the local people. They remain just as vote bank that can be used during different local and national elections by some local tricky politicians. Consequently, they have been excluded from the political processes and unable to bring the major development issues into public attention.

The political agency of citizen is necessarily important for lifting their life conditions. However, tea communities appear to have failed to develop their political agency. The study finds the existence of '*Cha Sramic Union*' (Tea Labor Union) at the tea gardens which is called '*Panchayet*'. The major roles performed by '*Panchayet*' are minimizing the conflict between workers and supervisor (*Tila babu*), ensuring the payment of dues, negotiating with management for any kind of need of the workers. Membership in '*Panchayet*' is automatically ensured as soon as they are registered as a worker in the tea garden. Every member contributes financially but unwilling to participate in '*Panchayet*' activities. The survey data shows that 47.8% workers participate while 52.2% never attend in '*Panchayet*' activities. Workers do not find any interest to involve in union activities due to the

mischievous role of the leaders who use this organization for their own interest. During interview one worker said:

“*Panchayet* do nothing for us. Workers contribute regularly to *Panchayet* fund but nothing is spent for us. I have not received any help from them though I am unable to educate my three daughters. *Panchayet* leaders have very good connection with management and they use it for their own purposes. If I do not work a day, wage will be deducted from me but it is likely for them. They receive their payment as usual. Sometimes, they manage job for their relatives in the garden using their good connection with the management. Actually, no one with us, we are always alone”.

The study finds that workers’ union does not hold any power and eventually cannot resist any effective protest against injustices towards them. Unless they are able to take their own political decisions, the condition of their daily lives would not be changed. Political agency of the workers cannot be developed without creating much consciousness among the workers as it is stated by Kamnath and Ramanathan (2017:254) that “a successful working class movement can only emerge when workers understand their roles in the long and convoluted chain of profits and are able to universalize their situations through concrete political action”.

Exclusion from Cultural Aspects

Empirical evidence shows that tea workers face different levels of economic, social, and political exclusions

which ultimately leads them to be excluded from cultural life and, therefore, contributes to have a marginal social status. It is found that tea garden workers use their own dialect which is most often difficult to understand for other people. They rarely interact with people in the mainstream community. Workers are just confined to the boundary of tea gardens which limit their opportunity for acquiring skills other than tea plucking. A significant number of workers have reported that they have no relevant knowledge, skills and competence for doing jobs outside the factory. About 93% of the respondents have said that they do not get job in any public and private organizations because of the lack of skills and competencies. Consequently, they are bound to sell their labor in the tea gardens which in turn force them to be more vulnerable and lead them to be excluded from accessing necessary life promoting opportunities. Besides, children of tea communities have very little opportunity to receive primary education. The study has found that there is no government primary school inside or adjacent to tea gardens though government has declared universal primary education for all. Only a primary school operated by tea garden authority is found which seems insufficient to provide basic primary education for children of the tea workers. There are also a few NGO schools which provide non-formal primary education but there is no scope for attaining secondary education. A vast majority of the children of tea garden workers could not afford secondary education having no secondary school inside or adjacent to the tea gardens. They cannot bear educational

expenses if children are sent to schools outside the tea garden. Poverty and socio-cultural context do not encourage them for higher education that can help them to secure good jobs in the competitive market. As a result, the educational status of the children of tea workers comes to a halt at primary level that cannot bring about any meaningful change in their lives.

Majority of the workers still consider tea garden as a right place for their offspring.

It is well acknowledged that family having higher level of cultural capital can have a significant influence on the children to improve the competence, skills and linguistic capability that can effectively be used for economic and any other productive purposes. Unfortunately, tea communities of Bangladesh are found to be reluctant for acquiring such quality. They are very often less motivated for different social and cultural constraints. Consequently, the lives of tea garden workers are virtually seen at the horizontal level of social mobility pointing no upward trend of social position. Having no interaction with the mainstream community, tea garden workers appear to have no dream to change their situation. Majority of the workers still consider tea garden as a right place for their offspring.

Results& Discussion

Tea industry is one of the vital economic sectors in Bangladesh where a large number of people are employed.

However, the situation of the workers is deplorable and standard of living is below the minimum (Haque, 2013). From the inception of tea cultivation, workers are forced to sell their labor in the tea garden and are systematically bounded up to be confined within the adjoining areas of the gardens, limiting opportunities of work outside the factory. They are found to be excluded from economic, social, political and cultural aspects of life. They are deprived of human rights resulting from the social exclusion and discrimination (Das & Islam, 2006). Although, they are the citizens of Bangladesh, the civic facilities are still out of their reach. Workers have to survive with meager income, though they work from dawn to dusk inside the garden. Most of the workers are illiterate and only a few of them have primary level of education which does not guarantee them any decent employment outside the factory. Unavailability of secondary school in the surrounding areas is a cause for school dropout. Extreme poverty compel children to be involved in work leaving the school for additional familial income.

Parents are not motivated to send their children to school because they find little success among children (Hossain, 2007). NGO led schools are run by the unskilled and less educated teaching staffs. Poor quality teaching staff is also responsible for dropout of children from school (Islam et al., 2015). Very often tea garden workers are unable to secure good jobs outside the garden because of the low skills and finally come back to the tea garden for employment. On the other

hand, garden authorities are reluctant to employ educated persons because very few posts are available at top and mid-level management.

They experience chronic poverty and economic crises in every step of their lives which in turn keep them excluded from social, economic, political and cultural activities.

The security of their jobs is not guaranteed which is a cause of concern for the social protection of their lives. Workers' wages are not enough for making any savings that can be used for constructing new houses or buying properties. Workers have no access to credit and related facilities from any service delivery organizations. They experience chronic poverty and economic crises in every step of their lives which in turn keep them excluded from social, economic, political and cultural activities. Tea garden workers and their family members are seen to have poor health condition. For the lack of skilled medical professionals at the medical centers, workers are very often deprived from essential healthcare services. Paramedics run the centers that can provide only elementary care for common diseases like cold, cough, gastric, diarrhea, and so on. Workers cannot visit specialist doctors to other private hospitals because consultancy fees are beyond their capacity. They are not given any medical allowances and other fringed benefits. The most pitiable thing is that people of tea garden are not respected by the mainstream community.

The life of tea community is different from others in terms of language, culture, standard of living, pattern of job and social position which have made them socially ostracized. They are confined to the tea gardens. It is not only a world of work but also place of their birth, living, recreation and death. Most hours they spend inside the gardens that limit their interaction to mainstream community. As a result, they are forced to live in long standing poverty, penury and sufferings, and become excluded from the mainstream society as is suggested by Burchardt et al. (1999, cited in Peace, 2001:28) who said that "an individual is socially excluded if...he or she does not participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society".

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

Bangladesh is a promising place for tea production which accommodates a large number of workers, mostly female laborers. Once it earned foreign currency but in the last few decades it failed to meet local demands. Local consumption of tea has increased. Considering the growing demand for tea and environmental feasibility of tea production, a number of small scale tea garden is developed in north western part of Bangladesh in the last few years. However, the deplorable conditions of tea workers remain unchanged. They lead very miserable lives because of pe-

Limited access to life sustaining amenities forces them to be deprived and marginalized.

nurious poverty accompanying with illiteracy, inadequate health care system, poor housing and living conditions, limited work opportunities beyond the orbit of the industry and virtually having no access to credit facilities. Limited access to life sustaining amenities forces them to be deprived and marginalized. Due to lower level of education, the lack of skills and training and motivation for better life, the lives of tea workers remain unchanged for hundreds of years.

Tea workers face double deprivation being a worker and a member of a marginalized community. As workers, they are deprived of labor rights, such as sufficient wage, health, education, recreation, childcare, pure drinking water, sanitation, compensation, pension and fringe benefits. As members of a marginalized community, they are deprived of civic services, and also mistreated and neglected by the mainstream community. Tea garden owners are reluctant to provide labor welfare services and management staffs' role is found to be highly authoritative. Unions are very often incapable and highly motivated for their vested interest while workers are unaware and unorganized. Marginalization and distinct cultural practices refrain them from access to mainstream services and employment opportunities. Because of the lack of knowledge, services and isolation from mainstream community, malnutrition, ill health, child labor, early marriage, and drug addiction are very common among the tea communities. To reduce vulnerability and marginalization of tea plantation workers following actions are needed:

- i. A powerful, vibrant and vociferous trade union is the need of the time for protecting the rights of the tea garden workers who should fight for upholding the collective interests of the workers in a concerted way.
- ii. The management should strictly follow the labor laws. Wages and labor benefits should be provided according to the labor law.
- iii. Improvement of educational and healthcare facilities should get higher priority to create a sustained and enabled community.
- iv. Garden management can arrange monthly sharing meeting with tea workers which can reduce the gap between workers and the management.
- v. Child labor should be prohibited in tea gardens to secure their educational rights. Educated members of tea workers' families should be given opportunity in recruitment based on their academic qualification.
- vi. Regular training should be arranged by labor welfare centers so that the bargaining capacity of both workers and union leaders are increased.
- vii. NGOs and Development organizations need to be engaged to improve the awareness of tea communities about their rights and other social issues that hinder their development.
- viii. The Inspection department of factories and establishments should be strengthened. Regular and frequent visits by the inspectors can safeguard the rights of garden workers.

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