Journalists Trained in In-depth Reporting on Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities

The invisible or little-known tea communities and ethnic groups believe that the media can play a significant role in bringing these communities to the light through writing good reports and other productions on them.

To scale up the media attention to these communities the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) brought together a cohort of journalists, researchers and activists in a residential workshop in Srimangal, Moulvibazar, from 17-20 October 2014. Twenty-six participants including 17 journalists from Northwest, North-center, Northeast and Chittagong regions of Bangladesh, attended the workshop titled, “In-depth reporting on tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh”.

The prime objective of the workshop aimed at scaling up the understanding of the journalists about these communities and having them engaged in in-depth reporting on their rights and social justice issues.

“The rights of the tea workers have remained neglected for a long time. The journalists, through their professional aptitude, have a responsibility to raise their issues and have them included in the national agenda,” said Rambhajan Kairi, General Secretary, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) at the inauguration of the workshop.

Kairi criticized portrayal of happy images of the tea workers in advertisements printed and aired by the media. Thus the plights of the tea workers remain concealed.

Ranadhir Kumar Dev, Chairman of Srimangal Upazila Parishad confessed, “I cannot play my role for the people (tea workers) who voted me to where I am; I rather serve the interest of the owners. In conflict of interest between the owners and the workers, it is the owners who always control us.”

In addition to skill sharing for journalistic writing and research, the participants themselves (working journalists), officials of the government agencies involved with tea industry, local leaders, university professors, trade union leaders representing tea workers, and adivasi leaders shared their insights and thoughts on the condition and struggles of the tea workers and the little-known ethnic communities.

The tea gardens of Bangladesh (157) in the Northeast and Southeast are established on about 114000 hectares of public land granted for production of tea.

Prokash Kanti Chowdhury, ADC (revenue) of Moulvibazar district said “Nothing is said about the land rights of the tea workers in the lease deeds for land between the tea garden owners and the government. This is a leverage for the owners to stay passive about the rights of the tea workers.”

Chowdhury also mentioned, “40% to 45% of the workforce in the tea gardens remains in staggering unemployment. We have sent a list of 40 ethnic communities we find in the tea gardens to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs so that they get state attention in order for them to access job opportunities outside the tea gardens.”

Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid, director of Project Development Unit (PDU), an important wing of Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB) gave his opinions: “The trade union leaders are there to bargain with the owners. The government has little role in this regard.” Bijoy Bunarjee, a trade union leader disagreed, “The government should play an effective role to ensure the rights of the tea workers.”

“When an Adivasi is killed or raped, we get an assignment to cover,” said S.M. Atik, a journalist from Rajshahi working for Daily New Age. “This workshop has opened up our minds and hearts about many issues on rights, culture, languages, and other pertinent issues of the adivasis and other marginalized communities that we pay little attention to and investigate.”
Chitta Ghosh, president of Dinajpur Press Club, said, “The tea workers are hostage to the owners to a greater degree than any other industry.”

The training ended with the expressed commitment, confidence and profound enthusiasm of participants to cover the rights issues of tea workers and little-known ethnic communities with greater care and attention.

*Report by Md. Rajibul Hasan and Md. Lokman Hossain*