

# Those who remain invisible in Bangladesh's political imagination



Tea workers march in protest against the proposed economic zone on agricultural land at Chandapore Tea Garden in Habiganj, 2015.

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The most invisible and unheard communities in Bangladesh include, among others, ethnic communities or adivasi, tea workers, Harijans (cleaners and sweepers), Rishis (cobblers), Kaiputras (a pig-rearing community), Bedes (gypsies), Jaladas (a largely seafaring fisherfolk community concentrated in the coastal districts of Chattogram and Cox's Bazar), sex workers, Hijra or transgender persons, and Biharis. Together, these communities comprise around five million people.

These communities face acute discrimination, wage deprivation, hostility, indignity, and various other forms of human rights violations due to their religion, occupation, ethnic identity, culture, migration history, and geographic locations, among other factors. They are among the over 40 million people in Bangladesh who are multidimensionally poor or extremely poor. What is more troubling is that many of these communities are identified as "untouchables" or "Dalit."

When the interim government embarked on an ambitious reform agenda and began setting up commissions across different sectors with the stated aim of ending discrimination, the communities that suffer the most from social and economic injustice hoped that dedicated reform commissions would

be established to protect their interests.

However, to their deep disappointment, no such specific reform commission was formed, nor were any institutional initiatives taken to address their shared and distinct challenges. Now, with national polls knocking at the door, there is still no clear commitment from political parties towards these communities, who remain largely invisible and whose voices continue to go unheard.

Those of us who have worked closely with these communities for decades are in a position to raise concrete issues and concerns that political parties must take seriously. If political parties genuinely claim to represent the people and all citizens, they have a responsibility to do justice to the country's diversity by formally recognising these communities. This requires clear commitments to constitutionally recognise ethnic communities as "Adivasi" and to ensure dignity and respect for other groups who, because of their occupations, religious identities, or social positioning, remain economically poor and socially and politically excluded.

Some communities are not only subjected to everyday discrimination within social and political culture but are also systematically exploited for the economic benefit of political and business interests. The most extreme examples include tea workers, whose current maximum daily cash wage

stands at Tk 187.43, and Harijans (city cleaners) in Sreemangal Municipality, whose monthly salary is Tk 1,000—up from Tk 500 until December 2024. Many other communities survive on similarly meagre incomes, living hand to mouth. Poverty, combined with the stigma attached to their work and identities, has trapped these groups in cycles of deprivation and exclusion across generations.

"The political parties are coming to us, but we want clear manifesto commitments to end wage deprivation and discrimination," says Rambhajan Kairi, a leading tea workers' union leader. "Tea communities and Harijans are entirely landless and deserve legal rights to the land they have lived on for generations." Tea workers also demand an end to routine violations of labour laws.

The main criticism of current Social Security Programmes (SSP) is that they remain largely nominal, with half or more of the budget benefiting the non-poor. Economist Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman argues that expanding budgets alone is insufficient; what matters is state commitment to combating corruption, ensuring efficient governance, and delivering justice, particularly in programme design and implementation. He stresses the need for targeted support for marginalised communities, women, the disabled, low-income occupational groups, and youth—issues that deserve serious

debate during election campaigns.

One of the most pressing concerns for completely landless and marginalised communities is access to khas (public) land. Bangladesh has an estimated three to four million acres of identified khas land, including agricultural, non-agricultural land and water bodies. Fair distribution of this land to the landless would be a crucial step towards securing entitlements and enabling pathways out of poverty. Yet only a small number of landless households receive khas land, while local elites, politicians and other influential groups benefit disproportionately. Despite its significance, the issue of khas land distribution is largely absent from election campaigns, and landless communities remain weakly positioned to claim their rights.

Equally urgent are long standing land, forest and environmental issues affecting ethnic communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and other forested regions. These communities have received little meaningful attention from the interim government. It is striking that the July Charter makes no reference to "environment", "forest" or "climate change". The erosion of customary rights in forest areas dates

efforts were made to draft legislation to address this problem, including the proposed Anti-Discrimination Act, 2022, which was tabled in Parliament but never passed.

Although more than twenty international conventions and national laws exist to protect small ethnic groups, tea workers and other marginalised communities, implementation remains weak. Many public and private institutions lack clear guidance, while key laws—such as the Labour Act, 2006, and the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950—are frequently misused or violated. This has led to the loss of Adivasi land and the exclusion of communities not officially recognised as "Aboriginals", allowing unlawful land transfers and leaving legal protections ineffective. These pressing realities, largely missing from public debate, must be directly addressed in election manifestoes.

Bangladesh's 13th parliamentary election, scheduled for February 12, 2026 alongside a constitutional referendum, represents a critical moment in the country's democratic journey. The continued absence of concrete policies, commitments and implementation frameworks for the



Fishing boats of the Jaladas community at sea.

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back to the British-era Act VII of 1865 and continues today, as communities steadily lose access to forest commons. They expect political parties to address these concerns in their election manifestoes, but so far there has been little reassurance. Addressing these issues requires political courage and grounded engagement.

Discrimination remains a pervasive reality for many marginalised groups, stripping them of dignity and equal citizenship. Ending discrimination is essential to restoring their status as full and respected members of society. During the previous government,

protection of marginalised and socially excluded communities remains deeply concerning. These groups are still largely invisible in mainstream political discourse. Yet there is cautious hope that political parties will learn from past failures and take meaningful steps to recognise marginalised communities as citizens entitled to dignity, equality and full participation in public life.

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## Bound by dadan

### How debt fuels forced labour in brick kilns

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At the heart of Bangladesh's brick kiln industry lies a recruitment system that quietly sustains inhumane exploitation. Labour recruitment through the sardari system enables systematic abuse by insulating kiln owners from direct accountability through subcontracted hiring and supervision. Within this arrangement, sardars wield near-total control over workers' schedules, movement, and discipline, frequently using violence, threats, and confinement to enforce compliance.

Informal loans taken during the lean agricultural season further entrap workers, as inflated repayment demands are imposed on those unable to complete the full season in brick kilns. Taken together, this debt-based recruitment mechanism closely resembles debt bondage, a recognised form of forced labour under international law. Alarming, such practices persist to this day in Bangladesh, particularly across brick kilns nationwide.

Brick kiln work in Bangladesh usually begins after the month of Ashwin (around October) and continues for about six months. At present, the season is at its midpoint, with kiln construction in full swing—a process that will continue until the onset of the monsoon.

Brick kiln owners rarely recruit labour directly. Instead, they subcontract recruitment to sardars, who hire workers from different parts of the country on seasonal, task-based contracts. Acting as intermediaries between workers and owners, sardars also determine work schedules to ensure that production targets are met within the limited brick-making season.

According to the Department of Environment, 7,086 brick kilns are officially operating across the country; however, the actual number is widely believed to be nearly double. More than half of these kilns lack environmental clearance, and almost none



Rows of freshly moulded bricks dry under the open sky as chimneys belch smoke in the background—an everyday scene in Bangladesh's brick kilns. Behind this production landscape lies the hidden toil of workers bound by debt, forced to endure long hours, harsh conditions, and systemic exploitation to keep the kilns running.

PHOTO: STAR

fully comply with labour laws, particularly those concerning working hours and the prohibition of forced labour.

Pijuash Baulia Pintu, a human rights activist from Bangladesh's deltaic regions, explains that brick kiln labour is recruited through a cycle of perpetual debt, locally known as dadan (informal credit). Towards the end of the monsoon, during the lean months of July and August, dadan agents are commonly found in villages and local bazaars.

These agents target impoverished households by offering small loans—typically between Tk 2,000 and Tk 10,000—similar to those provided by mohajons (moneylenders). Faced with urgent financial crises and limited alternatives, many accept these loans.

Unable to repay the accumulating debt, borrowers are eventually compelled to migrate to brick kilns to work it off, effectively trapping them in an exploitative labour system.

In recent years, agricultural land in the deltaic regions has shrunk significantly due to saline water intrusion. As a result, many agricultural labourers, along with those affected by river erosion, floods, and droughts, are increasingly drawn into brick kiln work as a last resort.

Bappi Mondal, from Shyamnagar upazila in Satkhira, joined a brick kiln in Nabiganj, Savar, early in the season (September) under compulsion after taking an advance loan from a sardar.

Regardless of extreme cold or heat, work

started at the same time each day. "We are woken between 2:45 and 3:00 a.m. After working continuously until 7:00 a.m., we get only a 20-minute break to eat," he said. "Work then continues until around 11:00 a.m. or 12:30 p.m. We return home briefly, but work resumes again at around 1:00 p.m. and continues until 4:30 or 5:30 in the afternoon. By the time everything is finished, it is around 7:00 or 7:30 in the evening. Altogether, we work about 15–16 hours a day, with no weekly holidays."

Such hours are not exceptional but routine in brick kilns. Unable to endure the workload, Bappi fled after three months, midway through the season. As a result, he and his mother were subjected to abuse and violence because he failed to complete the six-month contract, despite having taken an advance of Tk 80,000.

Like Bappi, anyone who leaves before the season ends is required to repay double the loan amount; otherwise, they face abuse and inhuman treatment—an unwritten rule enforced in such cases.

Even when workers fall seriously ill, they are compelled to work. Those who attempt to escape are often caught by sardars, beaten, and sometimes tied with chains or ropes used for livestock. Workers are dragged back and assaulted with bricks, while owners usually remain silent. Most abuse is carried out by sardars, who are under contract to ensure uninterrupted production throughout the season.

Last year, Bappi lost his father to a heart attack after he could no longer endure the excessive workload in a brick kiln. In Bangladesh, there is no reliable survey of deaths in brick kilns, and accidents and fatalities are often concealed by owners.

Mud-made red bricks have long symbolised sustainable infrastructure, from building homes to megaprojects. Yet we rarely pause to consider the invisibilised labour system within brick-kiln manufacturing and the

human cost behind it: the brutal extraction of labour that reduces kiln workers to forced labourers, treated less as human beings and more as labouring machines. The dadan trap binds workers in ways that leave them unable to escape, compelling them to endure excessive and torturous work that often results in slow death through illness and chronic health complications.

Under the Constitution and existing labour laws, all forms of forced labour are prohibited and constitute criminal offences. However, the working hours and recruitment practices in most brick kilns clearly amount to forced labour, yet remain largely invisible. Why do these inhuman labour practices still persist? On this issue, labour law expert Advocate AKM Nasim stated: "The non-implementation of labour law provisions for brick manufacturing workers is widespread. Basic workers' rights, including the issuance of appointment letters, remain largely unimplemented. Workers are also reluctant to seek redress through legal channels such as DIFE (Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments) and labour courts, as these are neither convenient nor accessible to them. Despite the rights guaranteed by law, weak enforcement allows employers to engage workers on their own terms, disregarding legal requirements."

Taslima Akter, another labour rights activist, said that while bonded and forced labour are legally prohibited, such practices continue in less visible forms in brick kilns. Seasonal contracts, she added, effectively imprison workers, making the system inhumane and unacceptable. She called for stronger legal protections, targeted labour policies for informal-sector workers, and special task forces to dismantle exploitative labour contracts.

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