Workers of Kaliti tea garden in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar bring out a hunger procession in the area demanding payment of their three months' arrear dues. *Inset*, tea worker Munni and her ailing husband Jagannath Almik look hapless in front of their hut in the garden area. PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

KALITI TEA GARDEN IN KULAURA UZ

# Unpaid over 3 months, impoverished workers face grave situation

MINTU DESHWARA, *Moulvibazar*

As many as 536 permanent workers of Kaliti tea garden in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila are passing days amid utter hardship as they have not been paid for the last 13 weeks.

Many tea workers' families are surviving on liquid extract from boiled rice taken with mashed tea leaves and chilli while the tea estate authorities are receiving their full-time labour during the ongoing plucking season.

"We have to borrow for survival as we are not getting wages for over three months. My husband, who became paralysed two months ago, could not even arrange his treatment," said Munni, who joined as a worker in place of her ailing husband Jagannath Almik, 34, two months ago.

"My husband lost his ability to speak a few days. A storm badly damaged our tiny house early Sunday, making us even more helpless," said a tearful Munni.

Tea worker Biswajit Das, former president of the garden Panchayat ad hoc committee, said Kaliti tea garden was earlier leased by the government to 'Jobeda Tea Company Limited'.

Each worker receives a meagre daily wage Tk 102 and the payment is supposed to be made on Thursday every week.

"But workers are not getting wages for 13 weeks. Previous wages of many workers also remained unpaid. Retired workers are not getting provident fund," Biswajit said.

"We are not getting any payment despite work. We are not getting any mask and other safety measures for protection from coronavirus infection. We demand our dues, not any relief in the crisis period. People are passing their days unfed or half-fed; some have fallen sick," said tea worker Doyal Almik.

Besides, around 1000 'no work, no pay' based workers at the garden are virtually jobless now.

Uttam Kaluar, secretary of the garden's panchayat committee, said, "Seven percent from each worker's wages is kept for future funds while the owners have to add another seven percent to the Labour Department. But the garden authorities are not doing it."

There are no doctors or treatment facilities in the garden, he said.

Shamvu Chowdhury Das, president of the panchayet committee, said they made a written petition to the deputy director of the Labour Department in Srimangal on January 5, seeking solutions to the problems prevailing in the garden.

"But the problems are yet to be solved, although we observed different programmes including bhukha michhil (march of hungry people). We will go for tougher movement if the government does not take any action within 24 hours," he said yesterday.

Kaliti tea garden's Manager Pranab Kanti Das told this correspondent, "Fourteen officials and employees of different levels at the garden, including me, have not got payment for nine months."

Nahidul Islam, deputy director of the Department of Labour at Sreemangal office, said, "Around 50 lakh taka, meant for the provident fund for the tea garden workers, has not been deposited by the tea garden authority. The managing director and the manager of the tea garden have been warned several times for the payment of arrear wages to workers and the provident fund money but to no effect."

Kaisar Ahmed, managing director of Kaliti tea garden, said, "It is not possible to pay the workers' wages as we are in financial trouble, which is worsened due to the lockdown. However, they are being given ration facilities."

"All the problems of the garden will be solved quickly when the situation becomes normal. I request the government to provide relief to the workers of the garden," he said.

AKM Shafi Ahmed Salman, chairman of Kulaura Upazila Parishad, said, "We will take initiative to solve the problem of the tea garden workers within 24 hours."

# Treatment for rural people through telemedicine

MINTU DESHWARA, *Moulvibazar*

Everything has come to a halt due to the countrywide shutdown to flatten the spread of highly contagious Covid-19. During the trying time, many doctors cannot treat those suffering from common diseases in person due to coronavirus fears. In this situation, some youths and members of Kulaura Association of Medical Students on March 30 launched a free telemedicine service to serve those patients. It is now getting popular among local people.

Seven physicians of the association have been rendering treatment to those suffering from common seasonal diseases like cold, cough and fever every seven hours in three shifts in 24 hours through telemedicine, said Dr Md Al-Rafi Ali Shah, general secretary of the association.

The physicians are Dr Kisholoy Chowdhury, Dr Mustafizur Rahman, Dr Mehedi Hasan Anik, Dr Moshtak Hossain Tanim, Dr Tafhimul Islam Chowdhury, Dr Md Al-Rafi Ali Shah and Dr ATM Redwanul Islam.

The service will continue until the change of ongoing pandemic. They are receiving 25 to 40 phone calls from people of different ages daily. The number of phone calls is now increasing.

Sohana Begum, a resident of Amuli village in Kulaura upazila, said her five-year old daughter was suffering from coughs and fever, but could not visit the doctor due to the ongoing countrywide shutdown.

Sohana added at the time, she learnt about the telemedicine service from a relative. Later, they got treatment by communicating with the assigned doctor using the mobile phone.

Wishing anonymity, an expatriate who came here from Dubai two months ago said "I had been suffering from cough. Later, I came to know details about the disease coronavirus through telemedicine."

Dr Md Al-Rafi Ali Shah said they give advice to those patients suffering from common diseases and if necessary they prescribe treatment over phone.

But if they find any patient with coronavirus-like symptoms, they suggest those to visit the hospital in Sylhet, said the doctor.

There are 28 members of this organisation, he said, adding that most of them have recently completed their MBBS degree.

Anyone can call at +8801300630698 for getting the telemedicine service, he said.

Kulaura Upazila Nirbahi Officer ATM Farhad Chowdhury said it is really a great initiative by the association in the crisis time.

# A ray of hope for Jhalakathi farmers

*Re-excavation work of 10 canals started recently*

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Jhalakathi*

Re-excavation work of 10 canals in the district has begun recently, bringing new hope for farmers.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Jhalakathi, there are around 238 canals in the district. Of the canals, 100 are almost dead now.

The canals, originating from the Bishkhali, Sughandha and Dhanshiri rivers, are the main source of irrigation for agricultural lands and a nursery for various indigenous fish as well in the area, said farmers and fishermen of four upazilas in the district.

Hundred acres of land remain unused during dry season due to lack of irrigation water in Mathbari village of Rajapur upazila, said Shaidul Islam, a farmer of the village.

"I usually planted watermelon on my land during summer but I couldn't cultivate it for over a decade as the canal close to my farming land has been dried up", he said.

"The canal is almost dead but I'm now dreaming of planting various summer fruits and vegetables on my land again as re-excavation work of the canal has begun recently," said Shaidul.

If all the small and large canals in the village are re-excavated like the four-km-long Mathbari canal, the entire village will be covered with various crops and green vegetables, said Mahabub, another farmer of the same area, adding that re-excavation of the canal was their long dream.

Riaz Ullah Bahadur, an official of DAE in Rajapur, said several hectares of land in the upazila went under water during the rainy season due to lack of proper drainage system.

But if the canals are re-excavated, the rainwater will recede fast, he said.

Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation started re-excavating 10 canals in four upazilas of the district over a week ago, said Riaz.

The canals are also used as the source of water for ingenuous fish, he said.

If the canals are re-excavated perfectly, fish production will increase rapidly, said Babul Krishna Ojha, deputy director of fisheries department in Jhalakathi.

Re-excavation work of Mathbari canal in Jhalakati's Rajapur upazila has begun recently. PHOTO: STAR

COVID-19 FALLOUT

# Over 1 lakh Tangail sari weavers need urgent aid

MIRZA SHAKIL, *Tangail*

Over 1 lakh handloom and power loom workers, the ones that weave the famous Tangail saris, are in dire need of help after they went out of work since their factories were shuttered nearly a month ago amid the outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus.

Traders and factory owners are also counting huge losses as they invested heavily ahead of the festivities of Pahela Baishakh and the Eid-ul-Fitr -- the two occasions in a year when the markets see highest sales of Tangail saris.

With no cash flowing in, many weavers have been breaking their lifesavings, while the ones having no savings are borrowing money from local money lenders.

Yet, the affected workers and businesses did not receive any form of food or financial aid from the local administration.

According to Bangladesh Handloom Board (BHB), more than 1 lakh workers are employed in 12 upazilas of Tangail where around 20,000 handlooms and 25,000 power looms are operational at different factories.

Of the workers, 50 percent have their origins in Sirajganj, Pabna and Kurigram, while the rest are locals, BHB officials also said.

This correspondent recently visited some areas in Tangail that are usually found bustling from dusk till dawn, with movement of machinery at hundreds of weaving factories.

While visiting, there was no sign of any activity at any of the factories in Bajitpur in Sadar upazila; Pathrail, Chandi and Dhulutia in Delduar upazila; and Balla, Rampur and Chhatihati in Kalihati upazila.

Several of the workers said they used to make from Tk 300 to Tk 500 every day.

After spending so many weeks without any income, they said, many ran out of cash and had been buying daily essentials on credit from local grocery stores.

Others said many are falling victims to loan sharks and it would be extremely difficult for the poverty-stricken weavers to get out of the debt over a long period of time.

Omar Ali, a handloom worker from Singair in Balla union, said unless urgent assistance is provided, a good number of the workers will not be able to save themselves from the entrapment of the lone sharks.

The situation seems to deteriorate with the passing of each day as the poor weavers are unable to feed their families, said Mohammad Ali, another worker in the same area.

While speaking with this correspondent, Balla handloom owners' association President Mofakhkharul Islam said the situation has turned for the worse at a time when the workers would remain the busiest making orders for the Pahela Baishakh and the Eid.

The loss of sales during the time of peak demand is also causing the factory owners and traders pay a heavy price, he added.

Imranul Haque, liaison officer at BHB's Balla Basic Centre (serving Kalihati, Bhuapur, Ghatail, Gopalpur, Madhupur and Dhanbari upazilas), said a cloud of gloom hangs over both the handloom and power loom industries in the area as the factories remain closed amid the ongoing nationwide shutdown.

In order to support the industry, the BHB has suspended collection of small loan repayments from the weavers. "We are now preparing separate lists of affected workers and factory owners."

The list would be sent to the chairman of the BHB, the deputy commissioner and upazila nirbahi officers concerned," he added.

A piece of famed Tangail sari left unfinished in a handloom in Rampur of Tangail's Kalihati upazila. Thousands of weavers had to leave their factories in late March when the government imposed a shutdown of non-emergency industries and services to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. PHOTO: STAR