

SPOTLIGHT

The contract made between tea workers and tea garden owners expired last year. They spent the last two years fighting for their minimum wage to be increased from Tk 85 per day to Tk 230. This would have brought their monthly cash wages from Tk 2,550 to Tk 6,900, which is approximately equivalent to the minimum wages of the ready-made garments sector.

That didn't happen. The tea garden owners agreed to increase the minimum monthly cash wages for tea pickers by about Tk 17 per day—a mere pittance of what was being asked for. A year after working without a contract, the workers' union said yes to the new wages.

rations at a concessional rate of Tk 2 per kilogram of rice." A statement sent by the BTA to *The Daily Star* further details, "A worker including three dependents get 42 kilogrammes ration of rice per month for which an amount up to Tk 1,548 is spent [by the company]."

While this sounds good on paper, there is a catch. As Bangladesh Cha Shangha's Sylhet division head Radamoni Munda says, "This ration is provided for the worker's wife and children only up till the age of 12 years. If the tea picker is female—i.e. a *pattivali*, which is a majority of the tea pickers—then the husband is not provided a rice ration since he is not considered a dependent."

"Furthermore, if a worker misses a day of work, he or she loses one entire kilogramme of ration," he adds.

This, here, is the problem. While it is



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TEA GARDENS BREWING DISCONTENT

MINTU DESHWARA AND ZYMA ISLAM

Workers will now be paid a minimum of Tk 3,060 per month.

The new agreement was signed between tea garden owners and the sole workers' union representing the eight lakh tea workers. "The workers demanded minimum daily wages of Tk 230, but the owners took into consideration the fringe benefits that are provided to them and decided not to increase it to more than Tk 102 per day," says Rambhojon Koiri, the General Secretary of the Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union.

"We do not accept these wages," says Diponkor Ghosh, the member secretary of the Tea Workers Federation. The Federation is not a registered union and therefore cannot go into negotiations with the tea garden owners themselves. Unlike in the RMG sector, tea workers do not have a wage board overseeing the wage negotiations process; the last and only time a wage board had been convened in the tea sector was in 2009.

The union's decision to agree to only a drop in the bucket being demanded has left the workers disgruntled. For example, ask Durga Moni Baraik, a tea worker what she thinks about the new agreement and this is what she has to say, "The market price for rice is Tk 40 per kilogramme. How can I afford more than the basic rice, salt and cooking oil with this salary?"

The Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), however, argues that tea garden owners provide a lot of employee benefits to the workers, which supplement the worker's wages. For instance, BTA Chairman M Shah Alam says, "Tea workers are provided with

true that the tea garden owners provide a lot of employee benefits to the workers which should ideally add into the minimum wage of a worker, these benefits either prove to be inadequate or are riddled with discrepancies.

For example, no amount of benefits can mask the fact that the bare minimum monthly expenses of a family of six, including two children and two grandparents is more than the minimum cash-in-hand a worker gets. One cannot just live on rice. According to a breakdown of expenses circulated by tea workers, the minimum monthly expenditure of a six-member family is Tk 3,450. This includes cooking essentials like soybean oil and salt, protein sources like fish, meat, milk and eggs, nutritious vegetables and fruits, kerosene for lamps, transport costs, soap, educational expenses, and society taxes. The estimate does not include rice, and for families who are not getting the full 42 kilogramme ration from their companies, there is that added cost too.

Talking about net household income, Bangladesh Tea Association points out, "There is more than one worker in tea workers' families in tea estates. For example, in many instances, husband and wife and son/daughter etc. work in tea estates. Their dependents can also work as casual workers in tea estates."

These casual workers, however, receive payments that can only be called abysmal. For example, if parents put their children to work, they can be taken in as cowherds, messengers, gardeners, washers or sweepers. They are paid a meagre pittance of Tk 85 per month, which is less than the daily wages of a tea picker.

The Tea Association also points out that one or both the grandparents of the family probably receive a pension if they had worked as tea workers in the garden (most of the senior citizens have). This

weekly pension, however, is actually less than the *daily* wage of a worker. The ones who were daily-rated (i.e. tea-picker) workers get Tk 100 per week, while the ones who were monthly (e.g. supervisor) get Tk 150 per week.

"Although the Tea Association is supposed to provide retired workers with residence and basic health facilities until their death, if they have nobody in the family who can replace them as tea workers, they are made to vacate their house within 60 days of retirement," says Rajat Biswas, the General Secretary of

Bangladesh Trade Union Shangha's Moulvibazaar branch.

The Tea Association adds that the workers can also supplement their income by tilling tea garden lands, and it's the tea garden owners who pay the land tax, which is Tk 500 per acre.

"The land tax is all that the owners have to pay for the land they function on, which is all government land," says Philip Gain, Director at Society for Environment and Human Development. "On the other hand, workers who are allowed to farm on their land have to

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give up 112 kilogrammes of ration rice, yearly, for every *kiar* [three decimals less than a *bigha*] they farm on." If the ration rice bought by the company for the workers is valued at the market price, the company saves Tk 11,088 per acre compared to the Tk 500 land tax that the company pays. The arrangement can hardly be called a loss for the tea garden. There is, however, a caveat: food rations and associated benefits are only given to permanent workers who number around 94,000 across the Sylhet tea gardens, according to data provided by the Bangladesh Tea Worker's Union. "In comparison, the entire population is somewhere around eight lakh," claims Pankaj Kanda, the co-president of the union, "and these people simply get the daily wages as cash in hand."

The Tea Association also claims that they go out of their way to provide more days of paid leave than is required by labour law. For example, the workers get three extra days for festivals, six extra days for sick leave, and extra days off for those undergoing vasectomy or ligation. Rajat Biswas, on the other hand, states that tea garden workers get fewer annual leave than general people. "According to Section 117 of the Labour Act, all workers are entitled to one day worth of annual leave for every 18 days worked. Tea workers are given one day of annual leave for every 22 days," says Biswas.

The Tea Association highlights the fact that primary healthcare is freely provided in the gardens, and for those who need more, a patient allowance of Tk 135 per day is provided. While this is

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definitely a commendable service given to the workers, the complaint remains that with the current wages, there is very little money left over to spare for health emergencies. "The tea garden medical units cannot handle emergencies—we can only consult a doctor during certain hours. Ultimately the cost of healthcare is paid out of pocket," says Paresh Kalindi, Bangladesh Tea Worker Union's treasurer. "Essentially, these medical centres have nothing more than the basic saline, painkillers, allergy medication and malaria medication."

A 2015 research paper published in the Canadian Journal of Tea Science Research, and authored by the Director of Bangladesh Tea Board's Project Development Unit and two professors from Shahjalal University of Science and

Technology, evaluated the socioeconomic conditions in the tea gardens.

When the journal article was published, the daily wages were as low as Tk 85 per day. "It is not sufficient for a [sic] people in this time in Bangladesh, because, food price and other goods price increase [sic] in our country. Therefore, they cannot lead a healthy life in the tea garden," states the paper," states the paper, also adding, "This is very much pathetic."

One of the authors, Bangladesh Tea Board's Project Development Unit's Director Dr Rafikul Hoque was asked whether his evaluation would still be same now that the daily wages have been increased by Tk 17 per day. "It is still pathetic, but things are changing," he says, adding the caveat that the tea garden owners are receptive to development.

The main problem is that the livelihood and well-being of tea-workers are completely dependent on how much tea the companies can produce and sell. The workers' homes are linked to their jobs, and their career prospects are shaped by the lack of educational facilities beyond primary schooling in the tea gardens. The Tea Board's research paper observed that most of the workers are completely illiterate and only 13 percent of the families did not have an underage worker participating in child labour.

This is further complicated by the fact that the tea gardens are often the only places of residence for around 80 ethnic communities, as surveyed by SEHD—and their existence, culture and development is wholly dependent on factory production outcomes.

Tea production, for example, is undergoing a slump which threatens the future of the workers. Tea production reduced to 79 million kg in 2017 from a record high production of 85 million kg in 2016. It has to be pointed out, however, that the minimum wage has still been raised during this downward slump. In all possibility, the profits of the yesteryear insulated the workers' demand for higher wages.

In the book titled *Slaves in These Times: Tea Communities in Bangladesh*, Philip Gain writes, "An apprehension in 2007 that Bangladesh would import tea soon came true by 2011 when the country actually started importing tea. The bottom line is tea is no more an important export commodity and Bangladesh plays no significant role in the global tea trade although it [was] ranked 10th among the tea-producing countries in 2007."

"The import of tea was a big blow for us. We cannot increase tea production without undergoing huge investments," states BTA Chairman Shah Alam. Philip Gain's book notes that only 51.1 percentage of land in all the tea-estates put together are actually used for tea production. "The cost of investment is also rising since gas tariffs for tea garden have gone up," adds Alam.

The lives of these ethnic communities are ultimately decided by the weather, their corporate masters, import policies, the government, domestic demands—pretty much everything, but themselves. ■