

PHOTOS: HABIB PRINCE

WHAT OF THE BREAD AND BUTTER OF OUR BAKERS?

This is the first of a series looking into working conditions of informal workers employed at small food processing factories in Dhaka

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Fifty-four-year-old Md Belal Hossain works at a small bakery in Ibrahimpur, Mirpur. He has learnt only one trade in his life—making bread, biscuits, cakes, and confectionery items on the dirty floors of grim bakeries. In his career, he has never seen the floor spotless, the workers maintain proper hygiene while making moulds for cakes or breads, use gloves or aprons for their own health and safety—let alone earn a good salary to support their family.

As a 20-year-old unmarried young man, he first joined the sector with a monthly salary of Tk 1,500-1,600. This has now increased to Tk 7,000. Like many others of his profession, Belal has worked in factories where rainwater flooded the premises and cockroaches and mice would scurry around. In most cases, he had to make packets of biscuits, breads or cakes on a damp floor.

Today, he has a six-member family dependent on him. With his meagre income, he was never able to bring his family to live with him in Dhaka. He

works 11 to 12 hours every day, and has to skip the most important family occasions as it is too expensive for him to go back home to Noakhali.

Belal, in his fifties, lives in a shared room in his factory, with 24 of his co-workers. “My employer provides me food, Tk 30-40 as daily allowances and a soap every month. I don’t have any holidays, but I can take three days of leave every month,” says Belal. “After deducting my monthly expenses, I send around Tk 4,000 to my family. Although it is tough to maintain a family with this money, my children have accepted their fate that they have a poor father,” says Belal. “One day, maybe my luck will change and I will get a job in a factory, which will pay me at least Tk 10,000-12,000,” he says wistfully.

Apart from the 60 big factories listed with Bangladesh Auto Biscuit and Bakery Manufacturers Association (BABBMA), there are approximately 5,000 semi-automated or manual small bakeries. Bakers like Belal constitute

informal workers who do not have the legal protection and benefits enjoyed by workers in the formal sector. They work in small factories, where the number of workers is less than 50. Despite years of experience, they have low levels of skills and productivity, with no training or scope for innovation. They have all but accepted that they have to work long hours in return for a paltry and irregular income.

The safety conditions in these factories are atrocious, to say the least. Most workers don’t use heat resistant safety gloves while handling the hot surfaces of warm trays, ovens, and cooking pans. Moreover, according to Dr Shahriar Hossain, secretary general at the Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO), no standards are maintained for how many hours a worker can work at a stretch in the oven of a baking factory.

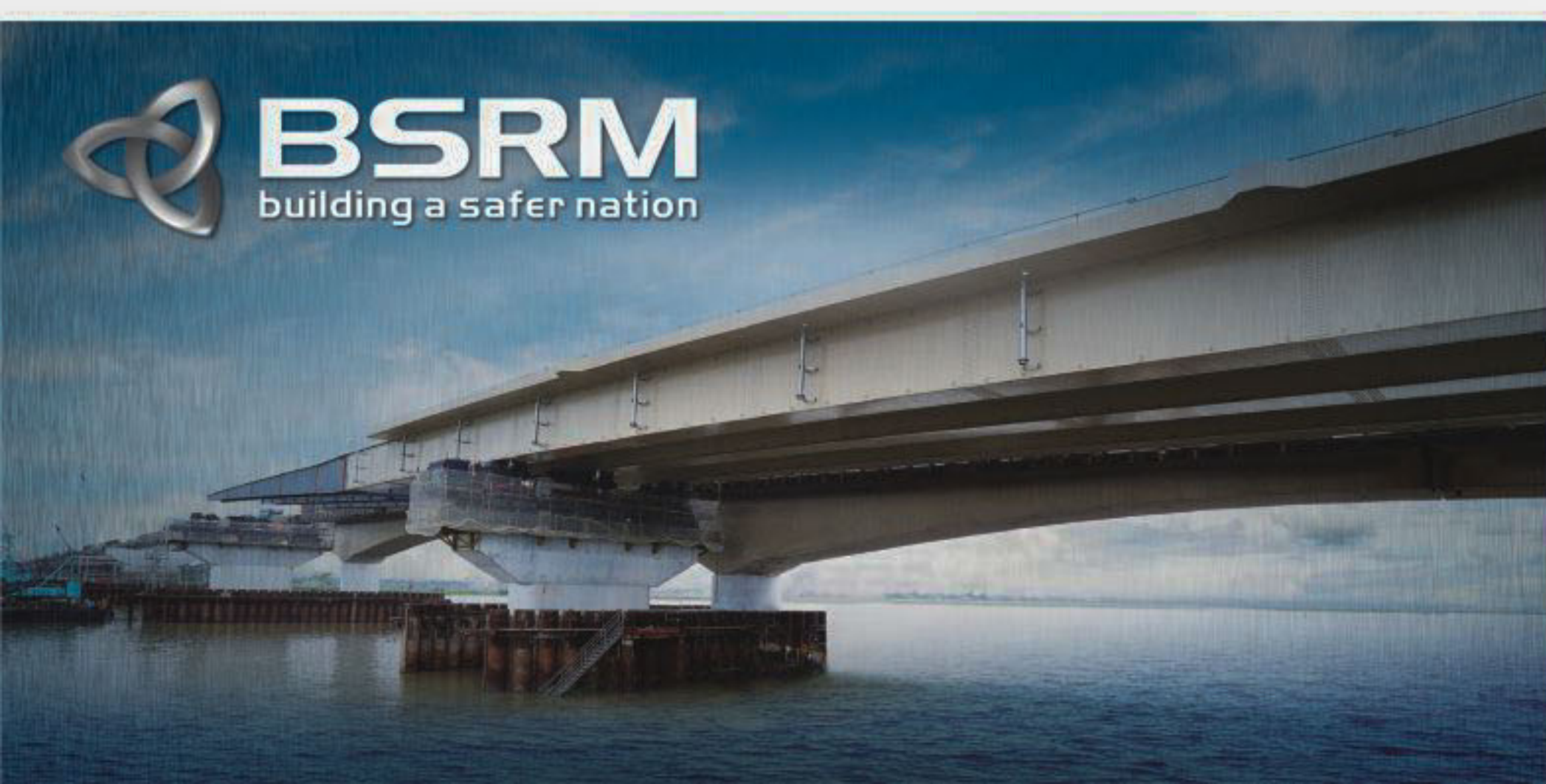
“For example, for the types of ovens used here in Bangladesh, the standard practice is to use them for two hours.

After this period, a worker needs to take a break for half an hour or more. In these bakeries, workers work for nearly 12 hours at a stretch and an overwhelming majority of them don’t get any significant time off, except for dinner. Such long and unusual working hours cause physical and mental fatigue,” says Dr Hossain.

Though some factories use air coolers to control the excessive heat while baking, these too can do little to lower the heat. According to Belal, those who work in the day shift or are new to this profession cannot tolerate this excessive heat, as a result of which, many faint.

According to Dr Hossain, the constant heat generated by the oven can cause calorie loss from the body, which immediately results in depletion of energy. “Under these conditions, if workers don’t eat enough—or consume the right kind of food—they will suffer from malnourishment, anaemia or headache.

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