



**Belal has worked in factories where rainwater flooded the premises and cockroaches and mice would scurry around.**

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**HABIB PRINCE**

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The risks increase if they have already developed high blood pressure or diabetes. The vapour they inhale can create breathing difficulties too. Breathing floor dust causes the workers asthma and eye irritation," he says.

In addition to that, in such factories, the workers are also forced to use different toxic chemicals to make cakes and biscuits to make them look appealing. Most of the time, the workers use the chemicals manually which can easily cause skin diseases. "Apart from that, when the toxic substances enter our bodies through our inhalation process, the food we take, or our lymph nodes,

they can cause kidney, lung or other chronic diseases in the long run," Dr Hossain adds.

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Earlier this year, the Ministry of Labour and Employment made an announcement that an entry level worker of the bakery, bread and confectionery sector will get Tk 5,940 from July onwards. Since 2012, the minimum wage for bakers was only Tk 2,120. However, in most small factories, owners and employees alike seem oblivious of this development.

Mohammad Mintu, an accountant at Rank Bakery, also in Ibrahimpur, Mirpur, says that he doesn't know about any such order. In his factory, entry level workers get Tk 4,000-5,000, although they work 12 hours at a stretch.

16-year-old Sajjad Hossain, a packaging staff at Eva Bakery in the same area, informs Star Weekend that he gets nearly Tk 4,000 a month, for completing 1,500-2,000 packets of biscuit every day. Sajjad seems happy with his wages, having never earned more than this in his life. Like Sajjad, a number of child labourers are also working to create moulds manually.

When asked about the lack of implementation of the wage increase, Shafiqur Rahman Bhuiyan, President of BABBMA, points the fingers at the workers. "Small bakery workers should be more aware of their rights and their wages. We could create a board or direct the owners to declare their wages. But it is not possible for us to visit the factories individually and supervise whether they are following the order or not," he argues.

However, the workers, who are not

covered by the country's labour law, say they have no real platform to raise their voice against any exploitation by their employers.

When asked about the scope of unionising in these factories, Director General at the Department of Labour, Shibnath Roy, says, "These are very small and if there are unions or committees, at least 10 of the workers will take lead to guide other workers and production in these units will be hampered seriously".

So, then, what protections are available for these workers? According to the Department of Labour, there are no specific benefits for the workers who work in the bread, biscuit or confectionery sector. But, like other informal sector workers, if a bakery worker becomes physically unfit or dies, the labour department usually helps them get compensation worth Tk 2 lakhs. This money comes from a welfare fund that was created in 2016. Every year, at least 2,500 informal sector workers in the country receive this compensation.

"If a worker applies to us, a committee scrutinises his application and as per its recommendation, the minister or secretaries approve these and give final confirmation. The money is provided to them directly through their mobile banking account, so that nobody can interfere in the process and grab the money from the poor worker," he adds.

Workers like Belal, after so many sacrifices, are stuck in a dead-end job unable to fulfil the needs of their families. Rather, they take it for granted that their life's work in the bakeries is all their due though they cannot afford their own bread and butter.

*Though some factories use air coolers to control the excessive heat while baking, these too can do little to lower the heat.*



**Most workers don't use heat resistant safety gloves while handling the hot surfaces.**

PHOTOS: ZYMA ISLAM