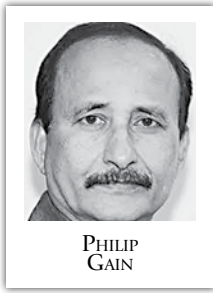


Time to pay just wages to tea workers



PHILIP GAIN

RATAN Shadhu (56), a tea worker from Doloi Tea Garden in Moulvibazar district, earns a daily cash wage of Tk 102 (USD 1.2).

This includes contributions to the employee provident fund, religious funds and the membership fee of his trade union. Fringe benefits added to this cash payment include five kilograms of rice or flour (3.5 kg for himself and 2 kg for his wife) that he gets at a subsidised price (for Taka 2 per kg). As a registered worker, he also gets two yearly bonuses of Tk 4,590. Like other workers, he lives in the labour line and pays no rent for the house. He also gets basic medical care for free. Ratan and his wife have two daughters, aged 17 and 14. The daughters do not get rations, since it is granted to two dependents of a registered worker if they are aged up to 12.

Cash pay and fringe benefits added, Sadhu's monthly incomes stands at Tk 4,202 (USD 50). This excludes house rent and medical care. The owners meticulously calculate their contribution to provident funds and the cost of other smaller items, such as *pati gamcha* (cotton towel measuring 60x40 inch) and *chupi* (handmade hat to protect the head from scorching sun and rain), that are required in picking tea leaves. And thus "a worker's daily wage is Tk 270," asserts a top official of Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) on condition of anonymity. So according to the owners' association, a worker's monthly income is Tk 8,100 (USD 95), which matches the wage of a seventh grade garments worker.

Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), does not agree with the owners' calculation. "A worker gets maximum Tk 170," says Kairi. "This is not anywhere close to just wages."

One may wonder why I am raising such details of tea workers' wages during a global pandemic. A minimum wage board was initiated in October last year, reportedly for the third time in independent Bangladesh, to determine the minimum wage of 122,000 tea workers. There is a two tier mechanism to determine the minimum wage of Bangladeshi tea workers. One is negotiation between

BCSU representing the workers and BTA representing owners, which results in an agreement every two years; the other is the minimum wage board.

Fixing wages and fringe benefits of tea workers is a long-standing and complex issue. That the tea workers have never been paid full wages in cash is manifested in historical facts. Back in the 1880s and 1890s, a tea worker in Assam (today's Sylhet division was part of Assam then) had an average monthly income of six rupees. With this wage, they could not buy enough rice for a month. The price of a maund of rice back then was two rupees, whereas the workers could only afford to pay one rupee for rice. The planters were then legally obliged "to provide rice at below market prices, when these

actual pay. The rations of rice or flour are highly subsidised—whatever the market prices, the workers pay Tk 2 per kg. The owners monetise medical care, housing, contributions to provident fund, festival bonuses etc. However, they remain silent about sharing five percent of the profits they make with the workers—despite labour laws, they have never paid the gratuity.

Traditionally, tea workers' wages have been fixed through negotiations between BCSU and BTA. In independent Bangladesh, the first minimum wage board for tea workers was set up in 1982, which reportedly fixed wages according to wages decided by BCSU and BTA. The second minimum wage board of 2009 fixed the minimum wage at Tk 48.50 (USD

An agreement between BCSU and BTA effective from January 2019 is pending. Both parties have met several times, but no consensus was reached. In the meantime, a minimum wage board was set up in October 2019 for the third time to fix the minimum wage. While the pandemic has delayed negotiations, it is likely the board will announce minimum wage soon.

Now a burning question from the tea workers: what will be their minimum cash pay? Rambhajan Kairi, who is representing the tea workers' union in the six member minimum wage board, is demanding Tk 300 in daily cash pay. This is a big jump from the current daily pay of Tk 102 and Kairi knows the tea garden owners will never agree to this amount.

What I could gather from an official on the owners' side and others who exchanged views with him is that the BTA is keen to see the cash pay increased by at best Tk 15. The official argues that the prices of tea have been very low recently, which is reducing profit margins. "If an unrealistic wage is fixed, we will consider curtailing the facilities that we provide to the tea workers," he said. "We buy rice at Open Market Sale (OMS) prices of Tk 24 per kg and sell it for Tk 2 to the workers. For subsidised food and other benefits to continue, the cash pay must stay within our capacity."

The tea workers, who have witnessed the lavish lifestyles of the managers and owners, do not believe that the owners are under any stress because of the occasional fall of made tea prices. According to Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB), in 2019-2020, the average price of a kilogram of tea was Tk 176.08, which was Tk 262.96 in 2018-2019. The average price of a kilogram of tea for the last five years was Tk 206.248. The pandemic may have contributed to a fall in prices, but they will certainly go up again.

Another important thing to note is that the owners do not disclose their audit reports and profits to the BCSU and workers. BRAC, which owns three gardens in Chattogram, seems to be an exception. In its 2018 annual report, it reported making a profit of Tk 148 million, an increase of 114 percent from the previous year.

BRAC's disclosure gives a hint that all other tea gardens are hiding facts from BCSU and the workers, who remain in the dark when it is crucial to know this information while negotiating their wage. What is obvious is that the tea communities

are left far behind other citizens due to deprivations of many kinds, including wage discrimination. This is demonstrated in a BBS-UNICEF survey (2018) that finds that 74 percent of tea garden households are still under the poverty line, which was 24 percent in 2016 at the national level.

In this context, what shall not be forgotten is that tea workers in Bangladesh are the lowest paid in the tea industry in the whole world. Their average family income is much lower than the poverty level income and household income at the national or rural level. In our two neighbouring countries—Sri Lanka and India—a tea worker's daily cash pay is more than USD 5 and USD 2 respectively, excluding fringe benefits such as housing, childcare and health at no cost, and other mandatory allowances such as attendance allowance, attendance bonus and "over kilo payment" (made for kilos of tea leaf plucked after fulfilling the day's quota).

In 2015, while a kilogram of Sri Lankan tea was sold for USD 2.99, the world market price was USD 2.59 and the Chattogram auction price was USD 2.41. Despite Sri Lankan tea getting the highest prices in the world market, it is clear that the average auction price of Bangladeshi tea is not bad enough to justify the miserable daily cash pay of tea workers. In Sri Lanka, 63 percent of cost of production goes to labour and four percent to staff and management. This should be compared to the situation in Bangladesh while fixing wages.

Lastly, the tea workers of Bangladesh, most of them non-Bengali and tied to the tea gardens for five generations, lack a life of dignity. In most labour lines, many families share their living rooms with cattle. The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees "basic necessities of life including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care" to its citizens, with special care for disadvantaged populations. Both the owners of tea gardens and the authorities have a responsibility to fulfil the needs of the tea workers. They should treat them with dignity, foster healthy trade unionism and work closely with them to explore a win-win situation for all. Sri Lanka, with strong multiple trade unions, is the best example before them.

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Women tea workers during pruning time in January.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

were high and minimum medical facilities," as written in the book *Tea: The Drink that Changed the World*.

It was from this time that fringe benefits such as housing, a piece of land for vegetables etc were provided for free or at subsidised prices. Subsidies to buy rice were crucial for tea workers to survive the famine of 1856 that killed 1.5 million people in Orissa and Bihar, and the 1920-21 depression. All these arrangements proved convenient for the owners to keep the workers dependent and tied to the tea gardens. This is how the practice of subsidies and the dependence of tea workers on owners took shape.

What we see today in the tea gardens of Bangladesh is that the cash pay workers receive is part of their

0.63 then), raising it from Tk 32.5 in 2008. Government mediation and negotiations between BCSU and BTA since 2008 raised the cash pay to Tk 69 from June 2013. From January 2015, this was raised to Tk 85 for A class gardens, Tk 83 for B class gardens and Tk 82 for C class gardens.

The latest agreement between BCSU and BTA was signed on August 20, 2018 (effective from January 1, 2017) and the minimum wage of daily workers was fixed at Tk 102 for A class gardens, Tk 100 for B class gardens and Tk 99 for C class gardens. In this agreement the owners, for the first time in independent Bangladesh, granted weekly holidays with pay and agreed to pay gratuity according to the labour law, which the workers are yet to receive.

Bangladesh takes another step towards tackling global climate change

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

DURING July last year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hosted the Global Commission on Adaptation meeting in Dhaka attended by the co-chairs

of the Commission, former Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon and Kristalina Georgieva, head of the International Monetary Fund. During the bilateral discussion between the Prime Minister and Ban Ki-moon, she offered to host the regional centre of the Global Centre on Adaptation (GCA), which is based in the Netherlands and which he chairs.

Yesterday, the South Asian Regional Centre of the GCA office in Dhaka was launched by the Prime Minister and Ban Ki-moon in an online event. The Prime Minister of the Netherlands and ministers from the countries in South Asia also attended and spoke at the event.

This new GCA office will be located in the new building of the Department of Environment (DOE) in Agargaon and will be an international centre hosted by the Government of Bangladesh. The new GCA Dhaka office marks a significant step in taking Bangladesh's knowledge and experience to the regional, as well as global, levels over the coming years.

The South Asian Regional GCA centre will aim to share knowledge and experience on adaptation to climate change between countries in the region as well as globally. It will have a special focus on locally led adaptation which has become a signature achievement in the region, including Community Based Adaptation (CBA) in Bangladesh and the Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPA) in Nepal. The new Dhaka based GCA Centre will aim to be a global centre of excellence on locally led adaptation.

The other area of special focus will be on ensuring that future development, particularly that of infrastructure, is based on Nature Based Solutions (NBS). One thing that the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us is that all future investments globally

need to be NBS focused if we wish to avoid future pandemics. The countries of South Asia already have some excellent examples of such investments, ranging from the coastal afforestation in Bangladesh, community based forestry in Nepal and Bhutan, marine ecosystem based tourism in Sri Lanka and Maldives, drought management through water conservation in India and Pakistan and many other such examples. The aim of the GCA Dhaka centre will be to help accelerate and scale up all these examples of NBS in all the countries in the region.

Another major focus of the new centre will be to assist the countries in the region to ensure that their cities and towns, which are already having to host an increasing numbers of climate induced migrants, are able to ensure adequate housing, water and protection from heat stress and other health hazards, which are becoming bigger issues in the region quite rapidly.

The modality of work of the new regional centre in Dhaka will be to partner with governments, private sector, development partners, civil society and media in each country,

as well as across the region, and then link to the global level on adaptation to climate change and the collective journey towards resilience.

The fact that Bangladesh currently chairs the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and that the GCA is the managing partner of the CVF will enable the Dhaka office to support the sharing of knowledge and collective advocacy across the nearly 50 CVF countries as well. This will be particularly important as we approach the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021, as well as the Climate Adaptation Summit (CAS) to be held on January 25, 2021.

Finally, the GCA will be making a major effort to galvanise the world's youth through a global Youth Adaptation Network (YAN), which will have chapters at the regional as well as national levels around the world. This global YAN was officially launched yesterday by Saima Wajed Hossain, who is the Special Envoy for Vulnerability of the CVF. It will start by having a series of consultations with



PHOTO: STAR

youth based in every region, starting in South Asia and Bangladesh.

The future success in the battle against human induced climate change over the next decade will need to be fought by the youth of today, who will become the leaders of tomorrow. The youth of Bangladesh will thus have an opportunity to lead this movement in the coming years.

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh.

QUOTABLE Quote



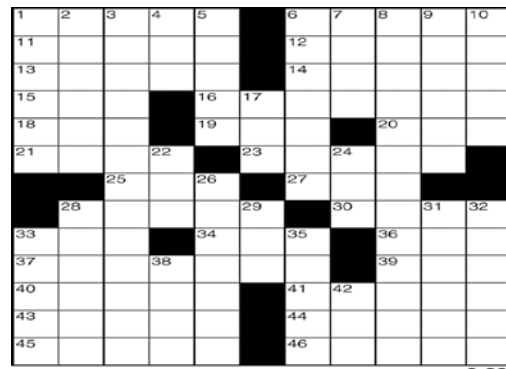
ALBERT CAMUS (1913-1960)

French philosopher, author, and journalist.

Sometimes, carrying on, just carrying on, is the superhuman achievement.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

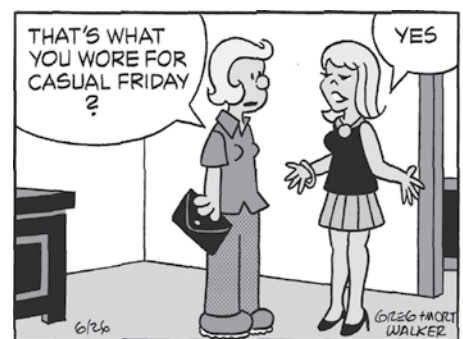
- ACROSS**
- 1 Cuban cash
 - 6 Venomous snake
 - 11 Vigilant
 - 12 Paris divider
 - 13 Daytona entrant
 - 14 Blitzen's boss
 - 15 Polite address
 - 16 Decorated
 - 18 Afternoon hour
 - 19 Golf goal
 - 20 Hosp. sections
 - 21 Brooklyn team
 - 23 Mixes up
 - 25 Deli order
 - 27 Distress call
 - 28 Take exception
 - 30 Comfy spot
 - 33 For each
- DOWN**
- 1 Church leader
 - 2 Galahad's mother
 - 3 Presidential protectors
 - 4 Lode material
 - 34 Frank McCourt book
 - 36 Pi follower
 - 37 Completely enclose
 - 39 Promise
 - 40 Too trusting
 - 41 Full of energy
 - 43 Peptic problem
 - 44 Kitchen gadget
 - 45 Berth places
 - 46 Canary chow
 - 5 Gown part
 - 6 Classifies
 - 7 Precious
 - 8 Set of dishes
 - 9 Keys in
 - 10 Goes through
 - 17 German article
 - 22 Add up
 - 24 Charged bit
 - 26 Household employees
 - 28 Alaskan peak
 - 29 Carnival city
 - 31 Pushed hard
 - 32 Castle parts
 - 33 Confine
 - 35 Ship poles
 - 38 Continually
 - 42 Avoid the truth



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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