



It has been more than a month since Baikunthapur Tea Garden has been shut down. This has pushed the workers and their families' backs to the wall. Exhausting what meagre savings they made from their Tk 120 per day wages, some of them are taking out loans to feed their families. This photo was taken on Wednesday. PHOTO: STAR

Today's meal: salt, water, boiled tea-leaf

Food crisis puts Baikunthapur's tea workers, families in misery

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Habiganj

Mala Santal is an indigenous tea worker at Baikunthapur Tea Garden in Habiganj's Madhabpur. Since December, she has not received a single penny from the ration-wages she's owed. After a period of digging into her savings, she's now exhausted, leaving loans as the only means to sustain her family of four.

"I saved up some money for my three children's education. But without any ration-wages since December, I've spent up all of my savings," she told this correspondent yesterday. "I'm now taking out loans to ensure the minimum of meals for my family, but I don't know how I can pay it back."

Her eldest daughter Smriti Santal was supposed to get into ninth grade in Jagdishpur High School this year. But after the family ran out of money, this had to be put on hold.

In disarray, Mala has decided to leave her vocation of long and started to work as a construction worker these days. Though this new job will be difficult, at least it can pay for her family's meals.

When this correspondent went to visit tea worker couple Parbati and Sagar Kul's mudhouse, he only found their four kids at home, with the youngest sibling, Gaurab Kul, crying loudly.

"Mother and father went out to look for work," said their eldest child eight-year-old Prashanta. "They haven't left any food for us. Out of hunger, Gaurab has been crying non-stop."

Far from being isolated incidents, this food crisis is currently gripping all of Baikunthapur Tea Garden's 400



permanent workers' families. Children waiting out of hunger, their parents running to-and-fro for work, mothers feeding their child a mix of salt with boiled tea-leaf in water, it's as if the entire neighbourhood is crying out in despair.

NO POUSH SANGKRANTI THIS YEAR

The traditional Poush Sangkranti is scheduled for today. One of the biggest festivities observed by indigenous tea workers, the merriment was supposed to begin yesterday night, as the night before the Sangkranti is meant to be spent making pithas for the day.

The day was supposed to see families indulging in delicacies made out of muri, flattened rice, and molasses. But at a time when the families don't have

money to even afford rice, the joys of the Sangkranti will stay further away from Baikunthapur.

ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

The crisis began after the tea garden closed down due to an untoward incident, which cut out the workers from earning their ration-wages.

According to the management and workers of the garden, the debacle began after the firing of tea worker Dilip Keut, a permanent worker of the garden who began constructing a house for himself on the agricultural land inside the garden in November last year. He was expelled earlier this month.

This followed meetings and clashes between the management and workers, which peaked after the workers allegedly

assaulted acting manager of the garden Mohammad Shamsul Haque Bhuiyan, prompting the authorities to close down the garden on December 8.

On December 14, Shamsul filed a case against 12 workers with Madhabpur Police Station.

Garden worker Mira Kairi said, "We work for Tk 120 per day and some ration. This was never enough to run the family, but now we don't even have that."

Talking to The Daily Star, ex-worker Dilip Keut said, "I am a permanent garden worker, working here for 15-16 years."

"As I didn't have a house, I used to live at my brother's. It was too small for both of our families, so I decided to build a house in a vacant place with the garden authorities' permission."

"But as the works neared completion, they suddenly objected, and even expelled me," he alleged.

However, acting manager Shamsul Haque said Dilip hadn't taken permission to build the house. "While the saga was going on, a few workers came to my office and attacked, which left me and another staff member injured. After that, in the interest of our safety, the owner stopped the activities of the garden."

"We have given the workers some conditions, but they're refusing to meet them. We won't reopen the garden until they meet the conditions," he said.

Nahidul Islam, deputy director of the Department of Labour, Srimangal, said, "I have visited the tea garden. Hopefully, both parties will reach an agreement soon."

Harmful bacteria, fungi found in buffalo yoghurt

Reveals research

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

Researchers in Chattogram have found harmful bacterial and fungal presence in various brands of buffalo yoghurt in different districts of the country. Most cow yoghurt from popular brands, however, have been found to be safe with the expected nutrition level.

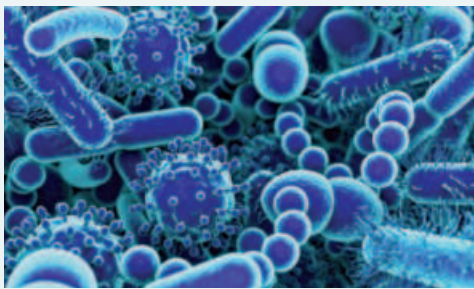
The research paper, titled "Insights into the nutritional properties and microbiome diversity in sweet and sour yoghurt manufactured in Bangladesh", was recently published in the scientific journal – Nature.

Dr SM Rafiqul Islam, professor of genetic engineering and biotechnology at Chittagong University, led the research. Dr Adnan Mannan, associate professor of the same Department, was one of the co-researchers.

The researchers collected yoghurt from different areas including Dhaka, Chattogram, Cumilla, Manikganj, Rangpur, Munshiganj, Bogura and Cox's Bazar for three consecutive months.

"Harmful bacteria including enterobacter, acinetobacter and aeromonas have been found in the buffalo yoghurt," said Dr Mannan, adding, "These bacteria can cause gastrointestinal tract infection."

Different types of fungus, including candida, iodofenuses and trichosporon, have been found in buffalo yoghurt, which can infect skin and intestine, he said.



Buffalo yoghurt collected from Dhaka, Ctg, Cumilla, Manikganj, Rangpur, Munshiganj, Bogura, Cox's Bazar

Bacteria in buffalo yoghurt can cause gastrointestinal tract infection

Fungi can infect skin, intestine

Most cow yoghurt found to be safe

“Buffalo yoghurt is made locally and the milk is not boiled at the ideal temperature while processing.”

DR SM RAFIQU L ISLAM
Prof of genetic engineering, biotechnology at CU

On the other hand, useful bacterial presence, including lactobacillus and streptococcus, was found in moderate amounts in sour cow yoghurt, as microorganisms cannot survive persistently in presence of sugar, said Dr Mannan.

According to Prof Rafiqul Islam, buffalo yoghurt is made locally and the milk is not boiled at the ideal temperature while processing.

The research was initiated in July 2019 and completed in August 2021, said Prof Islam.

Dr Mannan said it is the first research in the country initiated to identify the presence of microorganisms in all sorts of yoghurt available in the country.

Prof Junaaid Siddiki, of Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, and Dr Nazmul Haque, associate professor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University, were also among the researchers.

3 killed, 14 hurt in road crashes

STAR REPORT

Three people were killed and 14 were injured in road accidents in two districts yesterday, according to reports from our correspondents.

In Munshiganj, one person was killed and 10 were injured as a bus hit a cement-laden covered-van from behind on Dhaka-Mawa Expressway in Sreenagar upazila.

The deceased was identified as Md Ripon (22).

All the victims were passengers of the bus. Seven of the injured were taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital in serious condition, said Mahfuz Riben of Sreenagar Fire Service.

The accident took place in Bejgaon area around 8:00am, when the bus driver heading towards Shimulia Ghat from Dhaka lost control over the vehicle.

Police seized the bus, though its driver and helper managed to flee, said Md Humayun, sub-inspector of Hashara Highway Police Station.

In Brahmanbaria, two people were killed and four were injured after a CNG-run auto-rickshaw and a truck collided head-on at Kasba upazila.

The accident took place on the Cumilla-Brahmanbaria regional highway in Kharera area around 8:00am.

Two people – the CNG driver and a passenger – died on the spot, said police.

One of the deceased was identified as Kawser Mia (35), the auto-rickshaw driver, said OC Shahjalal Alam of Brahmanbaria Khantihata Highway Police Station.

The injured were taken to Brahmanbaria General Hospital, said the OC.



One person was killed and 10 were injured as this bus hit a cement-carrying covered-van from behind on Dhaka-Mawa Expressway in Sreenagar upazila of Munshiganj yesterday morning.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

6 members of robber gang held in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Police have arrested six members of an inter-district robbery gang at a hotel in Chattogram city's City Gate area early yesterday.

The law enforcers said the gang used microbus and mugged people in guise of passengers.

The arrest was made in a joint drive after police started investigating the murder of Hossen Master, an expatriate in Dubai and a resident of Mirsarai upazila. He was mugged in similar fashion and beaten to death in Chattogram last month.

However, the microbus used in the robbery is yet to be recovered.

Shah Alam Akon (32), Abul Kalam (47), Jakir Hossen alias Towhid (36), Alamin (29), Nahidul Islam alias Harun (31) and

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