

What's driving up fish prices?

Govt must act as once-affordable staples are getting out of reach

It's distressing to see how nutritious foods that were once accessible to people with lower incomes are fast getting out of their reach. Even traditionally cheap items known as the "poor man's protein" are getting pricier. Over the past few months, we have seen how the prices of eggs followed that of broiler chicken to register an astronomical increase. Another food item to be following the same trajectory is fish, especially pangas. According to a recent report, in 2021, each kg of small-variety pangas sold at Tk 111, but now you have to pay Tk 200-220, with the larger varieties costing around Tk 250.

Prices of other farmed fish varieties such as tilapia, koi, rui, and katla have also increased a lot. The question is, how will the poor access essential nutrition if all available sources of protein in the market become expensive? Lower-priced fish and poultry products used to be considered an affordable alternative to beef and mutton, which have long become the preserve of the affluent (one kg of beef currently costs Tk 750-800 – equivalent to about three days' wages of a rookie garment worker). But those days seem to be over now. According to a study published by the WFP last October, only 17 percent of families in the country could eat enough nutritious food including fish and meat. That number has likely declined further by now.

The abnormal price rise has not been limited to fish and meat, of course. Other essential items like rice, lentils, oil, sugar, and flour have also seen a similar pattern. Recently, prices of onion have witnessed a sharp hike due to a 40 percent tariff imposed on imported Indian onions. The cumulative effect of all this is that people are being compelled to adjust their diets and cut back on consumption. And when once economical sources of protein become expensive, the poor suffer disproportionately, especially children and pregnant women who need them most.

The reasons why fish prices have soured are not unknown. While the fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war and the government's decision to raise fuel prices did combine to drive up prices, an equally significant factor has been the failure of relevant authorities to control market prices. This is inexcusable given the suffering it has caused. We urge the authorities to bring back prices of essential foods within the reach of the poor.

Let's not make a habit of felling trees

PWD shows how indifferent govt bodies are to nature

At a time when the authorities should have focused on protecting and planting trees in Dhaka to lower its rising temperature and make the air a little more breathable, the steps taken by some government bodies in recent months signal a totally contradictory response. In May, the Dhaka South City Corporation felled hundreds of trees on the Saat Masjid Road in the name of beautification. Soon after, the Dhaka North City Corporation felled trees on the median strip of Mohakhali-Gulshan Road in a bid to expand its traffic island. Both corporations stopped their activities only after widespread criticism. But clearly, these incidents have failed to set an example for other responsible departments of the state. If it did, we would not have to witness another onslaught on the city's greenery by the Public Works Department (PWD) recently.

Reportedly, on August 23, PWD workers cut down some 30-year-old trees to make space for a housing block for parliament officials and staff near the Shahid Shahabuddin Road at Agargaon. They, too, stopped their work only in the face of protests from locals and environmental activists. Such assaults on our fast-depleting greenery, by government authorities no less, are outrageous. What makes it more problematic is that the PWD did not take permission for cutting trees from the forest department, which is essential.

Dhaka has already become a heat island and one of the most polluted cities in the world. Its gradual loss of greenery and wetlands owing to mindless development has been the main reason for this situation. While a city must have about 25 percent of green coverage, Dhaka has only less than 8.5 percent of green space at present. Given the rate at which trees are being cut in the city, it may not be long before its remaining greenery too vanishes, making the city totally uninhabitable. We, therefore, urge the government to ensure environmental compliance in any project by any of its bodies, and take active measures to enhance the city's greenery.

Why we need personal boundaries

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RAFFAT BINTE RASHID

Once, on a lunch date with a friend, I had an epiphany: My problem is that I do not know how to say "no" to others. I always feel compelled to please everybody around me and feel the need to be accepted even by a stranger I met a few hours ago. There is an unsaid clingingness that makes me want to be a martyr and accommodate every call, just so someone likes me and holds my hand. I also end up prioritising my responsibilities too much at the cost of my mental peace. And this behaviour has now become a menace for myself.

My counsellor explains how, if my boundaries are open and I always give in to others, I am seeking validation from them. In turn, I am not giving myself the respect I give to others.

Essentially, I am elevating their needs above my own, and it is not a healthy thing to do.

In my personal opinion, these are the repercussions of subtle, deep, and wounded emotions that have laid unresolved in the abyss of our minds, which is a dark, unexplored entity by itself. It determines our emotional, social, and behavioural needs. If, as a child, you were harshly criticised by your parents or guardians, it gives rise to a constant need to be recognised or appreciated in adult life. If your parents had low self-esteem themselves, you may unknowingly mimic that feeling in your social life too.

Most people feel an unspoken need to belong to a certain group, usually one in which you believe you do not belong. It is then that you cross your healthy boundaries and try to bribe your way into acceptance.

Our unresolved issues emerge at the oddest possible times and places, and throw us off guard. An

accommodating nature, at the cost of our self-respect, pulls us into a trap of giving just a little bit more over and over, until we have given away far too much.

It is crucial to be able to say "no" and also accept when someone else says "no" to you. It is one thing

to have a kind heart, but to allow everyone to take advantage of that is never advisable.

I myself have a porous boundary.

As such, I overshare personal information, get too involved in others' problems, and fear rejection in not complying with others' requests, among many other habits.

Just by confessing this, I realise how bad these habits are. This drains me of my enthusiasm for life. Bad days, financial fiascos, sadness, or ill fortunes are all part and parcel of relationships. But you also cannot solve every such issue for the other person/s in a given relationship. You must allow the other one to take responsibility and not be a cushion every time they fall or fail.

Whatever happens, do not compromise your values for the sake of others; and learn to respect your own mind. We must all impose a certain set of personal rules in all our relationships. We must know when to clip off the umbilical cord between a mother and her child or how to establish personal space between romantic partners, and so on and so forth.



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHON

TEA WORKERS' WAGES FINALISED

Owners win, workers lose



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The Minimum Wage Board, which was initiated in October 2019, finally published the gazette on tea workers' wages on August 10. It is a shame that the wage board completely failed in framing and presenting acceptable recommendations on the tea workers' wage structure. Ultimately, the prime minister made a move and fixed the wage of daily-rated tea workers at Tk 170 per day for A-class gardens, Tk 169 for B-class and Tk 168 for C-class gardens.

But why did the wage board take so long to formalise the wage structure and publish a gazette, despite the prime minister's decision going into effect on August 2022?

The tea workers' wage board struggled to ensure consent of the workers' representative on the board, who actually resigned and did not approve of the acts of the wage board. The representative accepted the PM's decision about the wages, but there are a few important issues that they did not approve while the board was completing its formalities. Regarding those matters, the Minimum Wage Board (excluding the tea workers' representative) submitted to what the tea garden owners wanted.

The first important issue that disappointed the tea workers and their union was an abrupt change in a central point of the negotiation between the owners' apex body, Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), and the tea workers' union, the Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU). Traditionally, BTA and BCSU have signed a labour agreement every two years, through which they fix wages and agree on other benefits. The Minimum Wage Board has been an irregular presence in the tea industry and has been formed three times so far to fix the tea workers' wages. Its role seemed insignificant because the wages used to be set based on labour agreements signed between the BTA and BCSU. The last labour agreement expired on December 31, 2020, and no agreements were signed for the 2021-2022 period or the ongoing period. The anomalies in the wage board and the arrogance of BTA led the PM to intervene in setting the labour legislation.

Alas, to the great disappointment of BCSU and the tea workers, the wage board's gazette says that fixing the wages of tea workers will no longer be a negotiation between BTA and BCSU. These bodies can make decisions only regarding benefits and productivity every two years, on a consensus basis. So, it is presumed that, from now on, the Minimum Wage Board will fix the wages every five years, and that the wages will increase at a rate of five percent over basic wages/salaries, according to Section III(5) of the amended Labour Rules 2015.

This was an abrupt change, made at the wish of BTA, in the best interest of the employers, and to the great disappointment and loss of the workers. The change was reportedly proposed by BTA's representative on the wage board, which Rambhajan Kairi (representing BCSU) rejected outright. Kairi's argument was that

will take decisions on productivity and other issues in addition to wages, on a consensus basis, every two years after discussion according to the established custom in the tea industry." Rambhajan Kairi and many others want this custom to prevail.

"But the August 10 gazette clearly shows that the Minimum Wage Board has imposed the owners' wishes," says

gratuity will only be for the staff, and that the workers will get pensions in place of gratuity, according to *dastur*.

But the pension that tea workers get upon retirement is much smaller than the gratuity amount, a grave injustice the hapless tea workers face. The owners' argument for not paying gratuity is that a worker's family does not vacate the house given to them



Tea workers striking in August 2022, demanding a daily wage of Tk 300.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

such a change should have been discussed at length with BCSU and the tea workers. Cornered and disappointed, he resigned from the wage board claiming that the other members (including the chairman) had always sided with BTA. BCSU Vice President Panjkaj Kando, who replaced Rambhajan Kairi, attended one meeting before resigning on the same grounds.

The tea workers – the majority of whom are non-Bangalee, mainly Indigenous or low-caste Hindus – are tied to the tea gardens. Unlike workers in other industries, tea workers get rations at a subsidised price and some fringe benefits including housing, very basic health care, and free primary education. All the fringe benefits plus Tk 170 (the current daily wage of a tea worker) amounts to less than Tk 300, say labour leaders and workers. This, however, is calculated to be Tk 540 by BTA.

"A yearly increment of five percent is a very small amount and unacceptable to us," says Kairi, former general secretary of BCSU. While he was on the Minimum Wage Board, he protested the owners' intention to not negotiate the wage issue with BCSU. "Now, we see the Minimum Wage Board has submitted to the owners' wishes. This goes against the long-time custom in tea gardens," adds Kairi.

The owners not only follow the labour legislations in governing tea workers, they also follow *dastur* or customs that have existed in the tea gardens for a long time. The Minimum Wage Board, in its March 2010 gazette, clearly spelled out that "Cha Sramik Union in the tea garden industry sector and Bangladesh Cha Sangsad [BTA] representing the owners' side

Tapan Datta, a senior trade union leader and chief adviser to BCSU. "Because crucial decisions have been taken in the absence of the tea workers' representative. They have actually been ignored and excluded."

An important addition to the wages is festival bonus. In an MoU signed between BTA and BCSU in May 2023, the owners agreed to pay a festival bonus equivalent to 52 days of wages. The employers started paying festival bonuses from Durga Puja last year at this rate. The wage board has trimmed the festival bonus amount down to 47 days of wages, which is the bonus that workers had been getting before the last Durga Puja.

A lasting concern for the tea workers has been the issue of gratuity, which no worker has ever received. It has always been their demand that they are given gratuity according to the labour law. Instead, they receive a so-called pension upon retirement. This was determined to be Tk 250 a week, from January 1, 2021, and used to be Tk 150 per week before that, and only Tk 20 in 2008. BTA agreed to pay gratuity in the labour agreement signed for the 2017-2018 period with BCSU. But the employers backed out from their commitment and no worker received gratuity.

In the meantime, an amendment was made to Section 28(3) of the labour law in 2018 that exempts tea garden owners from paying gratuity. What the labour agreement signed for 2019-2020 stated was that gratuity would be paid according to the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2013. Labour leaders allege that the owners influenced the amendment. Now, the wage board has brought the issue into the wage structure and has stated that

upon retirement and that they are replaced by a family member. This is a clever way of avoiding gratuity payments, and demonstrates how the tea workers remain a captive labour force, whose forefathers arrived as indentured labourers to the tea plantations.

This situation must change. The tea workers and their communities, tied to the labour lines for five generations, must be treated as dignified people. The government has a pioneering role to play in ending the discrimination of labour legislations and practices.

An overlooked issue in the tea gardens is workers' access to shares in the company's profits. The owners of the tea gardens have never shared profit with tea workers. Now, the Minimum Wage Board has replicated the profit-sharing arrangement in the RMG sector (0.03 percent of sales proceeds) in the tea industry. But this is a very small amount, as 0.03 percent of total sales would be Tk 3,000 for every Tk 1 crore in sales. Secondly, workers' participation in the company's profit is subject to the formulation of a law and rules regarding the creation of a fund and publication of a gazette. It remains to be seen when the government will formulate the law and rules to create such a fund.

What can the tea workers and their lone union do at this critical time? The central union leaders of BCSU wanted the wage structure amended in the aforementioned areas. There is perhaps no other issue more important for them to press for than eliminating the discrimination of the wage structure and the labour legislations, as well as work on their negotiation capabilities (in facing the government and owners) for their legitimate rights.