

Stop exploitation of tea workers and fix the industry



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For nearly seven weeks, more than 12,000 tea workers in 12 tea gardens under the National Tea Company Limited (NTC) have been living in anxiety about the payment of their wages. After they were paid Tk 595 on August 12, which is half of the weekly payment, the payment was halted till September 25, the day they were paid another instalment of the same amount. This is pretty bad for these tea workers as the Durga Puja festivities are set to begin on October 9. Thankfully, the tea workers have not stopped work and production.

However, to keep the management under pressure, the tea workers blocked consignments of made tea out of the garden warehouses. After a negotiation with the management and relevant state agencies, they allowed the release of two consignments from Patrokhola Tea Estate in Moulvibazar's Kamalganj upazila, the largest tea garden of the NTC, and one consignment from each of the 11 other tea gardens on October 1. In exchange, they were paid a week's salary on the same day, confirmed Shipon Chakraborty, panchayat president of Patrokhola. Now the deal is, tea workers will release the next consignments from the warehouses when the NTC management clears dues and bonus before Durga Puja.

What we see in the NTC gardens is bad management. NTC is a public limited company formed in 1978 under the Companies Act, 1913. The state holds 51 percent of the shares, and 49 percent are traded in Dhaka and Chattogram stock markets for the general public. Of its 12 tea gardens, seven are located in Moulvibazar, four in Habiganj, and one in Sylhet.

The NTC management, for which the government is responsible, is polluted by politics. The tea gardens, taken over by the government after independence, are located in a good topographic zone, yet they perform very poorly. According to a news report, between July and December of 2023, the company posted a net loss of Tk 26.66 crore. The company's lousy tea garden management is manifested in the look of its gardens: tea plants are sparse and without enough shade trees, among other things. The company's troubles have gotten worse since the sudden political change on August 5, following which the chairman of the company's board of directors, Sheikh Kabir Hossain, reportedly a relative of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has disappeared and the board has almost collapsed.



Women tea workers of Bawani tea garden in Habiganj carrying green tea leaves, on August 26, 2024.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

The tea workers and their lone union, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), are trying to negotiate with the NTC management. Half-fed or with an empty stomach, these workers have been showing their patience and working regularly in the hope that the management will stay true to its words and clear the full payment of their due wages and bonus before Durga Puja, the biggest festival of Hindus in Bangladesh.

However, NTC now faces many insurmountable challenges. According to a top government official dealing with tea gardens, it has a debt of Tk 380 crore with the Bangladesh Krishi Bank. This year, the company requested for a loan of Tk 150 crore, but the bank sanctioned Tk 86 crore only, which got exhausted by July, said a government official dealing with tea gardens, on condition of anonymity. Per the

arrangement of loan repayment, brokers in auction houses transfer the bank's share of sale proceeds directly to its account. The owners get their shares. But the workers are left with no other option but to block the made tea consignments.

While NTC gardens show serious anomalies—which is typical of state run businesses—there are other private companies and proprietors in the industry that are also

still in production to some extent because of the workers. With a bank loan of Tk 50 crore, the owner is in deep trouble, the government official disclosed.

The official further revealed that 79 tea gardens are in terrible shape. These gardens have not made their due contributions to the Provident Fund (PF) for months. Gas and power lines have been cut off in a number of the gardens for not paying the bills. Many of

to management. The price that the company gets is good. Almost all houses in the labour lines at Zareen Tea Estate are pucca. The condition of houses in other tea gardens of Ispahani are also much better than in other tea gardens. The tea workers get better deals with other fringe benefits, the Ispahani management claims.

It is in the best interest of the tea industry in Bangladesh, not to mention the tea workers, that changes happen for the better. The interim government, which has committed itself to reforms to end discrimination and inequality, should consider giving immediate attention to the tea industry that is in disarray as a whole. The tea workers, around 140,000 of them, and their community of around half a million people have been facing severe discrimination for generations, since the beginning of the industry during British colonial times.

First of all, the tea industry, specifically the tea gardens, need proper mapping. Good gardens and bad gardens need to be identified and the reasons must be explained for chalking out recommendations to bring the necessary changes so that none of the tea gardens are beyond scrutiny for mismanagement, corruption, and financial misappropriation. All parties involved with the tea industry must come under scrutiny and be made accountable.

Second, clear attempts must be made to ensure the well-being of tea workers, who are deprived of equal treatment and dignity as citizens of Bangladesh. To begin with, a just and respectable wage structure must be fixed for the tea workers. The former prime minister fixed their daily cash wage at Tk 170 in August 2022, which is certainly not fair. She was allegedly guided by the owners of tea gardens, and her move was political when the minimum wage board was made to fail. Now the time has come to overhaul the tea industry to ensure justice for the tea workers.

Another concern while dealing with the well-being of tea workers is discrimination in the labour laws and regulations for them, and the owners' routine violation of several sections of the labour legislation, which cannot be justified in any way. While these anomalies have been exposed on various platforms, fresh consultations with tea workers, their trade union and others concerned, will definitely help bring out more details. It is a test for any government to make sure that the state agencies under the labour ministry who are responsible for executing the labour law and rules act honestly.

Tea workers, most of whom belong to minority communities, are largely invisible and voiceless. Wage deprivation and social exclusion from the British colonial times have rendered them a weak population, left behind in terms of education and economic progress. Equal opportunities are not enough for them. They deserve some preferential treatment to help them get out of their current condition. The interim government has a big responsibility here.

We need a local government reform commission



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On September 11, the interim government announced that it would form six separate commissions to carry out reforms in six critical areas: electoral system, police administration, judiciary, anti-corruption system, public administration, and the constitution. There are some other vital areas that may require closer assessment followed by reform efforts, one of which is the local government sector. There is a general consensus in the country about the need to strengthen local government institutions to improve public representation in governance, service delivery and an accountability mechanism.

It is assumed that while the commission to reform the electoral system might cover local government elections, and the one on public administration may also cover it partly, there are many other aspects of this sector that need review and reform in order to improve its overall operation. It is evident that the local government system in Bangladesh functions quite poorly and people do not get the required benefits from it. One of the reasons for that is that, compared to the central government, the local government is not sufficiently funded. Its total annual expenditure varies between seven and eight percent of the total public expenditure.

Therefore, a local government commission is needed to propose measures to strengthen the local government system. After a democratically elected government came to power in 1991, an 18-member commission was formed to thoroughly examine the local government system and suggest improvement in the structure. Again, the government that came to power in 1996 formed another local government commission. Both the

commissions suggested reforms in the system, but those were not properly implemented.

The local government bodies in Bangladesh—union parishads, upazila parishads, zila parishads, hill district councils, city corporations, and municipalities—have specific responsibilities as they are closest authorities to the public and most conversant with local needs and realities. Bangladesh has a unitary system of government with constitutional obligations of local bodies to provide various services to the people within their jurisdictions. Due to this, as per the local government laws, many responsibilities have been entrusted upon the local government bodies. The theory of decentralisation is premised on the principle of allocating public functions to those levels of government which can shoulder them in the best possible manner. Based on the notions of economies of scale and spatial incidence of benefits, certain public functions—such as water supply, sanitation, road and drain construction and maintenance, street lighting, public health, tree plantation, management of bus and truck terminals, slum improvement, etc—are best placed at the local level.

Bangladesh has a fairly long history of both rural and urban local government institutions. The Bengal Village Chaukidari Act, 1870 was the first law to institutionalise the traditional panchayat system in the country. The panchayat was constituted of five non-elected members and was responsible for running the night watch system in the villages and collecting taxes to defray the expenses related to this service, i.e., the salary of watchmen. The next legislation was Bengal Local Self-Government Act, 1885,

enacted to provide wider responsibilities. Union committees were formed under this legislation. A second layer, the district board, was added under this legislation. The third important legislation was Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919, under which union boards (abolishing union committees) with provisions of one-third elected members and district boards with two-thirds elected members were introduced.

upazila system at the thana level with elected representatives was introduced through a new local government ordinance in 1982. Currently, all local government bodies are administered under the Local Government Act, 2009.

The constitution is the legal basis for establishing local government in Bangladesh. The potential importance of local governments was recognised

implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development." Article 60 stipulates, "For the purpose of giving full effect to the provision of Article 59, Parliament shall, by law, confer powers on the local government bodies referred to in that article, including the power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets, and to maintain funds." Article 11 states that "effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels shall be ensured."

The issues around the local government are many, but the most important ones are: i) controversy over party-based election to local bodies; ii) huge gap between responsibilities and resources, causing frustration among the elected representatives and dissatisfaction among the people; iii) discrimination in allocation of public funds to local bodies; iv) shortage of manpower, no recruitment in vacant positions, and low-skilled staff; v) low compliance on the required stakeholder participation which results in misplaced prioritisation of projects; vi) challenges in producing accurate budget and accounts, and management of assets; vii) lack of emphasis on environment and climate change issues and inclusivity in local bodies; viii) poorly managed local information base which is inaccessible to the public; and ix) use of archaic auditing method for finance and projects.

The central government alone cannot take the responsibility of development and service delivery for the large population of Bangladesh. Therefore, building a stronger local government system has been a key focus in five-year plans although adequate measures have not been taken to that end. The local government bodies are well-known for their poor capacity. In this respect, the local government entities must be strengthened so that they are capable of undertaking their developmental and service delivery responsibilities. It is thus proposed that a local government commission be formed by the present interim government to review in details the strengths and weaknesses of the local government bodies and recommend the required improvements for better functioning.



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FILE PHOTO: MASUK HRIDOY

Under the Bengal municipal acts of 1864, 1876 and 1884, municipal governments (town committees) started to operate in Bengal. The 1884 law introduced provision for elected representatives in the urban local bodies. The Bengal Municipal Act, 1932 increased the autonomy of urban local bodies.

During the Pakistan period, local government laws retained union panchayat and zila boards and after independence, the Bangladesh government continued with the same structure until 1976, when a three-tier local government structure—at union, thana and zila levels—were adopted. The

immediately after independence. Article 59 (1) of the constitution specifically states, "Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law." Article 59(2) states, "Everybody such as is referred to in clause (1) shall, subject to this Constitution and any other law, perform within the appropriate administrative unit such functions as shall be prescribed by Act of Parliament, which may include functions relating to: (a) administration and the work of public officers; (b) the maintenance of public order; and (c) the preparation and