

SALT, SWEAT AND SURVIVAL

Where is the farmers' labour in the price?

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There is an old tale, passed down through generations, about a king and his youngest daughter.

When the king asked his daughters how much they loved him, the youngest replied, "Like salt". The king, offended by what he saw as a meagre comparison, banished her to the wilderness.

Only later, when he tasted food without salt, did he understand its irreplaceable value. Filled with remorse, he brought his daughter back, honouring her for speaking a truth he had failed to grasp.

This story is more than a fable; it is a parable about the human tendency to undervalue what is essential until it is gone.

The salt farmers of Bangladesh are the modern-day embodiment of that youngest daughter. For centuries, they have toiled under the sun, harvesting salt from the earth and sea, their labour as vital to survival as the mineral itself.

Yet, like the king, society has often overlooked their worth. These farmers, who produce the salt that seasons food and sustains industries, are trapped in a cycle of exploitation, climate vulnerability and economic neglect.

Their story is not just about salt; it is about the invisible hands that sustain civilisations and the systems that fail to reward them.

Meet Nurul Absar, a 65-year-old salt farmer from Chowfaldandi village in Cox's Bazar. Like countless others, he invests everything – his time, his sweat, his meagre savings – into the salt fields, only to find himself questioning the very value of his labour.

"Where is my cost?" asks the farmer. "Where is my cost for polythene, water and everything I invested in my salt field, let alone the price of my own labour?"

He said that his total investment, including land rent, polythene, field preparation, water and labour, stands at Tk 320,000 for one acre. "If the weather favours, I will get a maximum of 750 maunds of salt."

At the current market price of Tk 250 per maund, Absar's total return at the end of the season would be around Tk 187,500. "If this rate continues, I will suffer a loss of Tk 132,000," he added.

Reflecting on the past three years, he said, "We earned a reasonable amount when the price ranged from Tk 350 to Tk

THE BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

The salt industry in Bangladesh produces enough to meet local demand.

Cox's Bazar district accounts for 87 percent of the country's total salt production, while the remaining 13 percent comes from Banshkhali upazila in Chattogram district. Most salt farmers inherit the profession and rely on traditional methods.

In coastal Cox's Bazar, salt is harvested through a process that uses solar heat and seawater with high salinity. The production season runs from November to May each year.

According to the Salt Industry's Development Office in Cox's Bazar, salt cultivation first began in the region in 1960, covering around 6,774 acres of land and yielding 1.20 lakh tonnes. At the time, farmers produced 17.54 tonnes per acre.

Mohammad Zafar Ahmed Bhuiyan, deputy general manager of the office, said that the then EPSIC (now BSCIC) began salt production in the coastal region using solar methods.

"Until 1986, loans were provided to salt farmers and salt was purchased to ensure fair market prices," he said.

In 2000, the introduction of the polythene method in salt production brought revolutionary success to the industry, said Bhuiyan. This innovation led to a dramatic increase in high-quality salt production and farmers widely adopted it.

In the 2023-24 fiscal year, the country's salt production reached 24.37 lakh tonnes, the highest in history, against an annual demand of 25.28 lakh tonnes. During that season, salt cultivation covered 68,505 acres of land, involving 40,695 farmers.

Bhuiyan said low market prices and high land lease costs have left salt farmers frustrated. The current market price of salt is Tk 247 per maund, while production costs stand at around Tk 321. "High quality, white, granular and mature salt is often not produced due to a lack of farmer training, while the use of diesel-powered pumps in salt fields is driving up production costs," he added.

The BSCIC official said farmers are forced to rely on local lenders, which prevents them from getting fair prices for their produce. Besides, in coastal areas, government khas land is being illegally occupied by various groups, who lease it to farmers at high rates, further increasing production costs.

SWEAT, DEBT AND DESPAIR

Crude salt produced by farmers in Cox's Bazar is sent for refining in the next stage. The industry usually relies on three types of salt mills.

"Vacuum mills account for 65 percent of the country's total salt production, while mechanical factories refine around 25 percent, and traditional mills process the remaining 10 percent of crude salt," said Shamsul Alam, president of the Traditional



Salt Millers Association in Islampur, Cox's Bazar.

According to Alam, there are 15 vacuum salt factories, 42 mechanical factories and 205 traditional salt mills in the country.

"About 65 percent of the salt produced in Bangladesh is used for industrial purposes. Currently, the decline in industrial demand has pushed down salt prices at the field level," he said.

Alam also highlighted key challenges in the salt industry, including the production of immature salt, the dominance of middlemen and rising land lease costs.

Salt farmers also echoed concerns about the increasing cost of land.

"This year, the lease price for 40 decimals of land has almost doubled," said Abul Kasim of Chowfaldandi village. "Previously, we leased it for six months at Tk 30,000, but now it has jumped to Tk 50,000," he added.

Mostafa Kamal, president of the Bangladesh Salt Farmers' Welfare Parishad, said a limited group of people controls vast salt-producing areas in Cox's Bazar.

"They have cleared mangrove forests and turned the land into salt fields. These

individuals lease out the land to small salt farmers and make huge profits. This syndicate is responsible for the rising land costs in salt farming," he said.

Kamal added that if farmers could lease land directly from the government at lower rates, they would benefit significantly.

QUALITY VS QUANTITY

Salt Millers Association President Alam said locally produced crude salt contains around 75 to 80 percent sodium chloride (NaCl), compared to nearly 99 percent in India.

"As a result, the refining cost in our country is higher," he said.

He also mentioned that Bangladeshi farmers often harvest salt within a week, while producing high-quality salt requires 12 to 15 days. "They prioritise quantity over quality, which ultimately affects the standard of the salt," he said.

Salt Farmers' Welfare Parishad President Kamal claimed that the NaCl content in Bangladeshi salt is around 90 percent.

He admitted that the overall quality is slightly lower, attributing it to the country's weather conditions.

Mohammed Wahidul Islam, a farmer from Kutubdia upazila in Cox's Bazar, said low-quality salt reduces their income as demand for such salt is low in the market.

"After getting early warnings about cyclones and rainfall, we are often forced to collect immature salt from the field before it has fully developed," said Islam.

WHO CONTROLS THE PRICE?

Salt farmers are forced to take loans from middlemen or intermediaries at high-interest rates, as accessing formal loans is difficult. In return, they must sell their salt to these middlemen at prices lower than the market rate.

Alam said they buy crude salt at Tk 350 per maund at the mill gate, but farmers receive only around Tk 250 per maund at the field.

"Middlemen are eating up the profit of salt farmers," he said, adding that the market price varies by at least 20 percent from the field due to their influence.

Abdul Kader, a salt farmer from Chowfaldandi village, said they sometimes have to sell salt to middlemen at lower prices because they borrow money from them in times of need.

However, Sarwar Kamal, a middleman from Kutubdia, defended their role. "We collect salt from remote fields, transport it using additional labour, and sell it to millers, making a profit of Tk 10 to Tk 20 per maund," he said.

IMPORTS AND INEQUITY

Salt farmers' associations have frequently raised concerns over imports, saying that large salt industries secure government approval by exaggerating salt production and demand data, contributing to a decline in the price of crude salt in the market.

Kamal urged the government to halt salt imports to protect local farmers.

Alam said that since the salt produced in Bangladesh has a lower NaCl content, the actual refined salt production is lower than the gross production of crude salt. As a result, industries need to import salt to meet local demand.

In the last fiscal year, the demand for salt was 25.28 lakh tonnes, while crude salt production stood at 24.37 lakh tonnes. This year, the country's demand is estimated at 26.10 lakh tonnes.

Kamal also pointed out that industries are importing edible salt under the guise of sodium sulfate, which is used in various industries.

ERRATIC SKIES, UNCERTAIN FUTURES

Nabi Hossen, a 52-year-old farmer from Chanua union of Banshkhali upazila under Chattogram, has been involved in salt farming for 22 years. However, he now faces mounting challenges due to extreme weather events, largely caused by climate change.

He said his production costs have increased significantly due to unpredictable weather patterns, including irregular rainfall and cyclones.

"Erratic rainfall puts us into uncertain conditions. Most of the time, extreme rainfall damages our salt in the field, which puts our livelihoods at risk," he said.

Between 2019 and 2023, at least 10 cyclones hit Bangladesh, causing significant damage to salt farming. These storms destroyed cultivation infrastructure and flooded salt pans, severely disrupting production.

In 2021, Cyclone Yaas washed away 52,000 tonnes of salt in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar.

Abdul Halim, a farmer from Moheshkhali upazila in Cox's Bazar, lost his entire salt yield during the cyclone. "I still carry the scars of the disaster that devastated me," he said, adding that he has yet to fully recover from the losses.