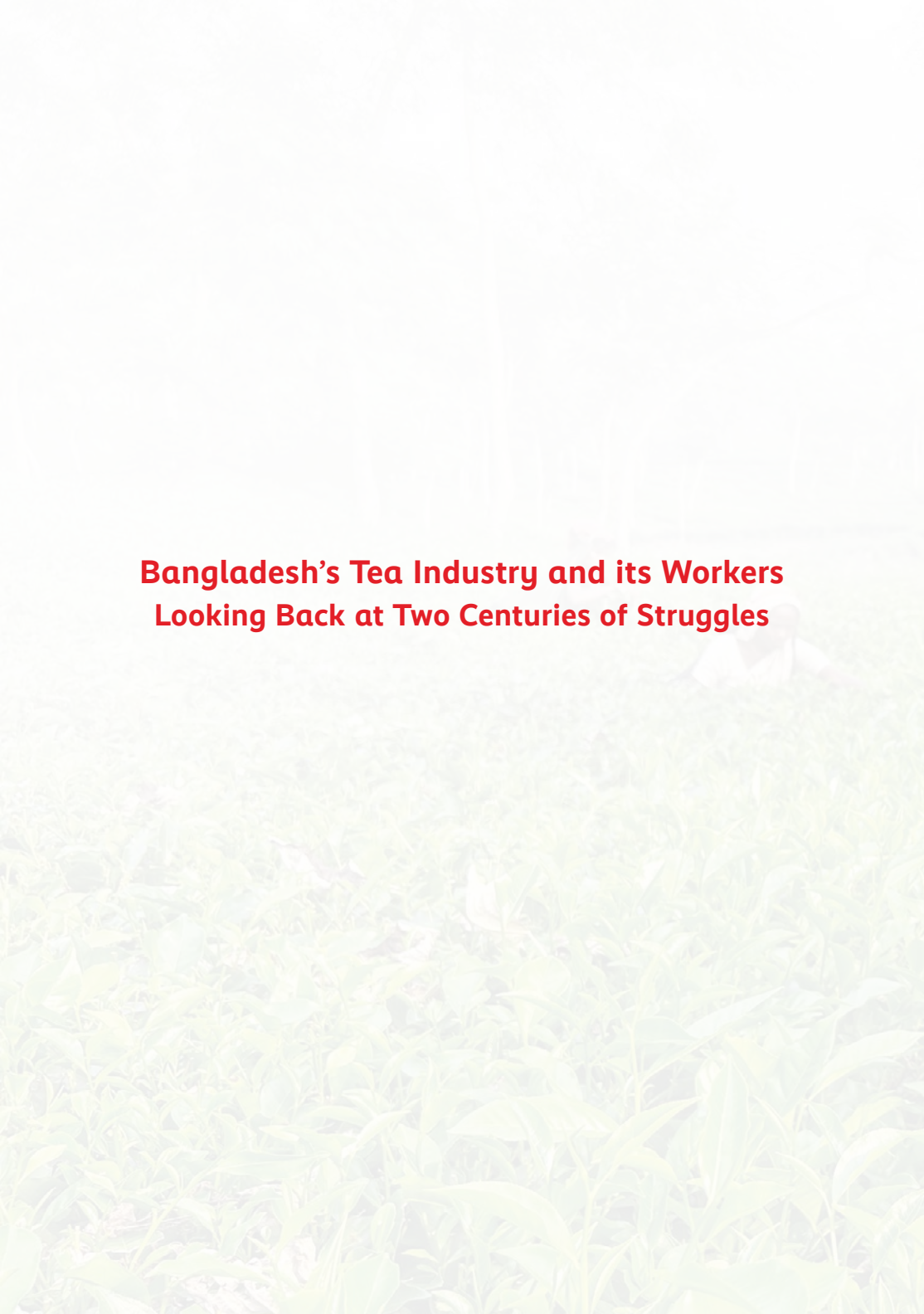


Bangladesh's Tea Industry and its Workers

Looking Back at Two Centuries of Struggles



**Friedrich
Ebert** 
Stiftung



Bangladesh's Tea Industry and its Workers Looking Back at Two Centuries of Struggles

The background of the entire page is a faded, light green image of a tea plantation. In the upper right portion, a person wearing a white headscarf and a light-colored shirt is visible, seemingly working in the tea field. The rest of the image is filled with the dense, leafy branches of tea plants.**Overall Supervision:**

Nazrul Islam Khan

Secretary General, BILS

Coordination:

Nazma Yasmin

Director, BILS

Cover Photo:

Dr. Felix Gerdes

Dhaka, December 2024

Copyright: Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) 2024

Funded by: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Bangladesh

Jointly Published (Online) by:

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS)

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Bangladesh

Designed by:

SR Printing and Supply, Dhaka

We publish this booklet to give the readers a basic understanding of the tea industry in Bangladesh and the conditions of the workers working there. We believe the contents will be helpful to anyone working to advance the tea industry and the rights of tea workers.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) was established in Germany in 1925. It is the country's oldest political foundation, named after its first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925). It operates based on the core values of social democracy: freedom, justice and solidarity, as well as peace. The Bangladesh office was established in 2013. FES Bangladesh promotes decent employment and a fair economy, socially and environmentally sustainable economic policies, economic development, and international cooperation.

The foundation engages in research, training, discussions, and exchanging information and knowledge with its partners. It works on policy development concerning Bangladesh's development and contemporary issues at national, regional, and international levels. Its work addresses complex global agendas by connecting thematic debates and creating opportunities for new ideas and solutions at various levels.

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS)

Established in 1995, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) endeavours to uphold the causes of the country's working people and trade unions. It is associated with 14 of the national trade union federations.

With a view to building a just and democratic society and enabling workers' organizations to act as a major force, BILS builds trade unions' capacity through training, research and information sharing. Protecting workers' rights is the Institute's main objective as it strives to promote just and worker-friendly policies and laws. It also helps build bridges between trade unions, civil society and the government on labour market issues.

CONTENTS

Foreword	7
Map of tea gardens by district	9
Geographic distribution of tea plantations	11
The introduction and development of the tea industry in Bangladesh	13
Legal frameworks for the tea sector	15
The tea worker communities	19
Notable movements of tea workers	21
Tea Day vs Tea Workers Day	23
Labour policies and the living standards of tea workers	25
History and achievements of tea workers' unions	27
The Union: For Workers and Employment	29
Story of a tea worker	33
Quick comparison: Situation of tea workers in India and Bangladesh	41
Tea workers voices: Major concerns	43
About the author	45

Foreword

The history of tea in Bangladesh spans more than 200 years. The industry is one of the country's oldest and largest, in terms of both employment and contribution to the national economy. The tea industry and its plantations have flourished and put Bangladesh on the world map diplomatically and economically; however, it should not be forgotten that this has been on the backs of tireless efforts by the sectors' labourers, most of whom originate from various marginalized groups.

With the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, many workers, including migrants from across present-day India, transitioned from being residents of the tea plantations to citizens of an independent state. But despite their significant contribution to the young country's economy, their living standards have remained largely unchanged over time. Their struggles for basic requirements such as land ownership, education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and cultural recognition persist. Their hard-earned income barely meets their minimum needs. It is essential to recognise the contributions of tea workers to Bangladesh's development and publicize the challenges and opportunities that they continue to confront.

This publication documents the origins of tea cultivation, the conditions of tea workers, and their contributions to the industry. It also includes an analysis of labour conditions, issues related to wages and living standards, the structure of worker communities, and the challenges they face. The document also covers important legal aspects, the role of unions, and global case studies of tea workers' movements and rights advocacy. In particular, it discusses how these issues can contribute to the future sustainable development of the tea industry.

Under the initiative of the BILS, this publication is being released to bring this information to the public, stakeholders, and

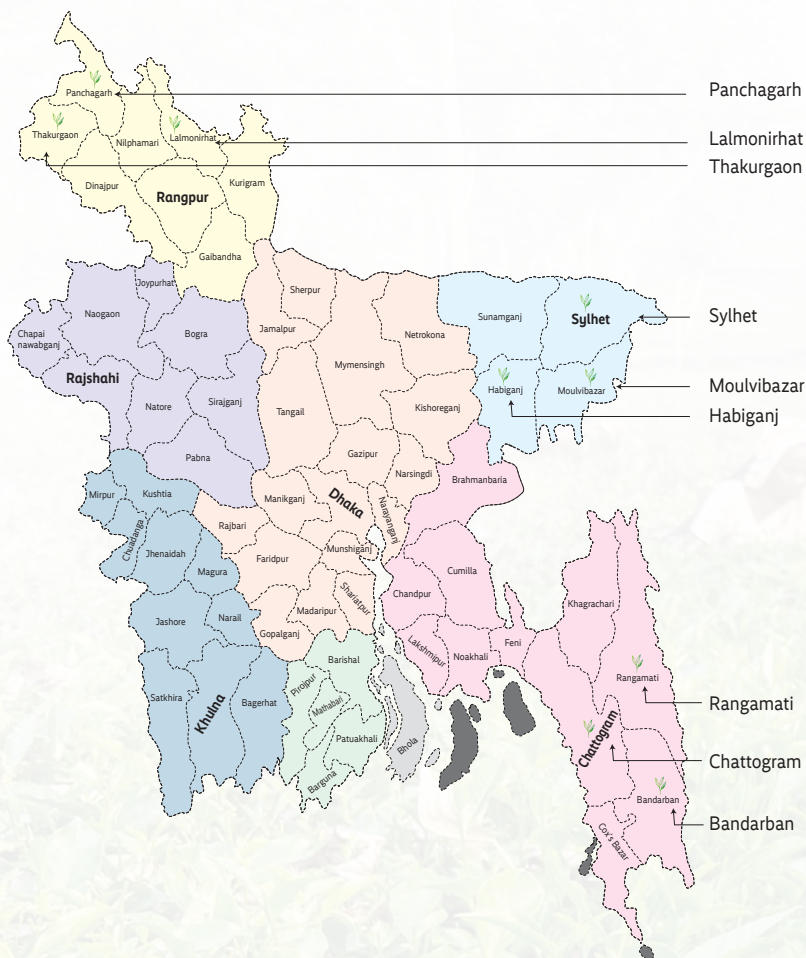
policymakers. The goal is to support sustainable and inclusive development in the tea industry and ensure the dignity and recognition of tea workers in Bangladesh. This document will serve as a useful reference for all those interested in the past, present, and future of the tea industry.

Thanking you,

Nazrul Islam Khan
BILS Secretary-General

Md. Habibur Rahman Siraj
BILS Chairman

Map of Tea Gardens by District



Geographic Distribution of Tea Plantations

Among the primary tea-producing districts of Bangladesh, 90 of the larger tea gardens are located in Moulvibazar and 135 in Sylhet Districts, both in the Sylhet Division in the north-east of the country, with another 23 across different districts of Chittagong Division in the south-east, and 9 across the districts of Panchagarh and Thakurgaon, both in the division of Rangpur in the far north.

There are also many smaller tea gardens, which are grouped into seven valleys: four in Moulvibazar, one in Habiganj, and one in Sylhet, all districts in the division of Sylhet, and one valley in Chittagong. The valleys are named Balishira Valley, Manumdalai Valley, Langla Valley, Juri Valley, Lakshmipur Valley, Sylhet Valley, and Chittagong Valley.

Balishira Valley has 64 gardens, Manumdalai Valley 23, Langla Valley 34, Juri Valley 36, Lakshmipur Valley 23, Sylhet Valley 22, and Chittagong Valley 24 gardens.

The Introduction and Development of the Tea Industry in Bangladesh

In a historical trade context, tea might be referred to as the “golden powder” as jute has been known as the “golden fibre”.

Britain and China feature prominently in the establishment of production and commercial use of tea, as well as the wider industry. Tea became popular in Britain in the early 18th Century, at first mainly imported from China. The British started looking for alternative production sites in their empire, and built tea gardens in several areas of then-India, namely Assam, Darjeeling, and Sylhet. Tea in Chittagong, present-day Bangladesh, was first cultivated in 1840. In 1854, the first commercial production of tea began in the Malnichhara tea garden of Sylhet district. Initially, tea produced in Bangladesh was mostly exported. But with time, the people of Bangladesh started drinking tea themselves, and in most years, Bangladesh now is a net importer of tea. At present, about 90 million to 100 million kg of tea leaves are produced annually in Bangladesh. The production is nowadays almost fully absorbed by the domestic market. Exports have been volatile in recent years and grew to 2.4 million kg in 2024, after falling to a low of 0.6 million kg in 2019. Most exports go to the United Arab Emirates, the USA and Pakistan. After the British ownership, the tea plantations went to Indian and Pakistani owners. The principal owners today are the Duncan Brothers, Finlay's, Ispahani Tea, and the state-owned National Tea Corporation of Bangladesh. Other owners include the NGO BRAC, Transcom Group, Square Group, Akiz Group, City Group, Orion Group, TK Group, Ahmed Group, HRC Group, Hamdard, and Gemcon.

Info Box: Relevant ministries, departments, and other stakeholders

Ministries related to the tea industry and workers are: Ministry of Commerce; Ministry of Labour and Employment; Ministry of Land; and Ministry of Social Welfare.

- The Ministry of Commerce deals with tea production and marketing. The Bangladesh Tea Board is under the Ministry of Commerce.
- The Ministry of Labour is the agency responsible for the implementation of the 2006 Bangladesh Labour Act. This ministry oversees the Directorate of Inspection of Factories and Establishments and the Directorate of Labour. The Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation is under the Ministry of Labour & Employment.

These organizations look after labour rights, health and safety, trade union rights, worker welfare, etc. The Ministry of Land deals with matters such as leasing and allotment of land for the tea gardens.

Produced tea is sold by auction at three centres in Chattogram District (Chittagong Division), Moulvibazar District (Sylhet Division) and Panchagarh District (Rangpur Division). However, tea growers complain that tea prices are low in auctions. The autonomous governmental agency Bangladesh Tea Board stipulates a minimum auction price.

With the change of era, different varieties of tea are now produced and marketed, including Sonali tea and Chandni tea. Chandni tea is prepared by picking and processing the leaves after 10 pm under a full moon. But these improvements to the choice and quality of tea available have seen no parallel change in the quality of life of the tea workers.

Legal Frameworks for the Tea Sector

The 2016 Tea Act relates to the management of tea plantations, and covers the actions of the Bangladesh Tea Board. Under the Act's provisions, the Board is to take appropriate measures for the overall development of the tea industry, to take measures to increase tea production, to control and manage the import, export, and sale of tea, to determine the quality of different types of tea, and to take measures to improve the quality of tea produced. Such measures include collecting information from tea growers, manufacturers, and traders, or any other person related to the tea and tea industry, including with regard to relevant scientific and technical matters. The Board is also to undertake and conduct economic research activities and establish and maintain demonstration farms, assist in the control of insects and pests harmful to tea, and provide any necessary support for the growth of cooperative activities among small garden tea growers or other persons engaged in tea cultivation and garden management. It is required to manage the registration of plantations, factories and plantation owners, tea manufacturers, exporters, blenders, bidders, brokers, tea waste dealers as well as wholesalers and retailers. These responsibilities include granting licenses to vendors, establishing new plantations, taking over and rehabilitating abandoned plantations as per the plan approved by the government, taking appropriate measures to ensure the use of surplus land outside tea plantations, and implementing welfare measures for labourers and employees of plantations, as well as training programmes. Violation of the provisions of this Act is punishable by imprisonment and fines.

The Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 lays down provisions on the rights and entitlements of tea workers as well as the responsibilities of owners. The Bangladesh Labour Rules of 2015 lay down detailed instructions to implement the provisions of the Labour Act. In addition, the Bangladesh Tea Workers Welfare Fund Act of 2016, and the Implementation Policy of Tea Workers'

Quality of Life Improvement Programme have included necessary regulations regarding the welfare and support of tea workers.

According to the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, employers must issue employment and identity cards to the workers, keep the job records or service books of the workers, adhere to fixed working hours, ensure the different leave allowances including weekly, annual, festivals, and maternity, as well as other rest periods and financial benefits. Employers are also responsible for ensuring that wages are equal between men and women, meet the minimum set by the government, and are paid on schedule. They must also maintain a provident fund to cover various expenses including liabilities, compensation or death benefits in case of an accident at work.

Employers' responsibilities also extend to: access to treatment and compensation; unhindered recruitment and operation of trade unions; non-exposure of women and juvenile workers to hazardous work; assurance of special protection for women, disabled and juvenile workers; measures for occupational health and safety of workers including personal protective equipment; clean drinking water for workers; latrines; providing washing rooms and washing facilities; ensuring a safe workplace with hazard-free machinery; various social security and welfare measures for the workers; imparting necessary training to the workers; and providing first-aid materials and training. Female workers should not be exposed to any obscene or indecent treatment, any heavy lifting, or prolonged standing during pregnancy. Trade unions have provided detailed instructions regarding non-dismissal of officials and pregnant women workers and the setting up of children's homes in gardens. There is a peace provision regarding any violation of labour laws.

Employers must also be ensuring housing for tea plantation workers, establishing centres for education, sports, and recreation for workers and their children, operating dispensaries and health

centres including group hospitals for medical facilities, ensuring housing arrangements for workers, establishing hygienic toilets at workplaces and homes, and providing daily necessities to tea plantations. Further obligations include the establishment of co-operative convenience stores, the provision of potable water at workplaces in tea plantations, and the installation of tube wells in residences or otherwise ensuring the supply of fresh water. Furthermore, detailed instructions have been given in the Labour Act and Rules regarding the establishment of children's homes in every tea garden.

The Bangladesh Tea Workers Welfare Fund Act of 2016 stipulates the provision of one-off grants assistance in case of death or permanent disability of tea plantation workers, marriage grants for worker's daughters, education grants for worker's children, and special grants in case of medical or financial distress or other cases.

The most disadvantaged tea workers are further supported by the Implementation Policy of Tea Workers' Living Quality Improvement Program adopted in 2013 by the Department of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Welfare.

The Tea Worker Communities

Life on the land, from cradle to grave

During the British period, ordinary poor people from different regions of present-day India were lured to Bangladesh. They were told that in Bangladesh growing tea was like harvesting gold. The tea workers of Bangladesh came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Madras, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Nagpur, and West Bengal, all in present-day India. They came from hundreds of communities including Kanu, Telugu, Lohar, Ravidas, Goala, and Manipuri. The British lured them with the promise of a better life, or intimidated them into relocating, or even kidnapped them. Many have now been working as tea garden workers for generations, but without any stake or ownership in the plantations.

The tea workers community made an important contribution to the great liberation war of Bangladesh. Tea workers helped refugees and freedom fighters by providing food and shelter.

According to the Bangladesh Tea Association, some 100,000 people work in the 166 tea estates. It is estimated that about 50,000 seasonal migrant workers add to the number at times. Unions put the number of people living on the plantations at about 700,000, though data is scarce.

Notable Movements of Tea Workers

Tea workers are constantly fighting for their protection and rights.

Muluke chalo movement

On 20 May 1921, thousands of tea workers from Sylhet and Assam of then-India gathered at Chandpur, a river port in present-day Bangladesh, demanding to return home in protest at their appalling conditions under the slogan *muluke chalo*, or “returning home”. The numbers are disputed and often estimated at about 9,000, while some put the figure three times higher. The workers faced resistance from the then-European Tea Association and the local magistrate. Gurkha soldiers opened fire on a procession of the workers, killing around 300. Many more died in stampedes when authorities acted to prevent the workers boarding the steamer boats, and when cholera broke out in the crowded unsanitary conditions. The survivors were forced to return to work. The incident, also known as the Chargola Exodus, is commemorated every 20 May as Tea Workers Day.

Tea workers’ land rights movement

Starting in December 2015, workers in in Habiganj District (Sylhet Division) protested against the setting up of a Special Economic Zone (SEC) on tea plantation land. The workers were using land adjacent to the tea plantations for various agricultural activities including paddy cultivation. In the face of the workers’ protests, the government withdrew from the initiative to set up SEZs on tea estates.

Tea workers’ wages movement

On August 9, 2022 during peak season, almost the entire workforce of some 150,000 workers from the tea gardens went on strike demanding that the daily wage be increased from Tk 120 to Tk 300 (then \$1 and \$2.50, respectively). The movement united workers from across the country in a response to the rising

cost of goods and long-term low salaries. The Minimum Wage Board, plantation owners, local administrations, and the Labour Department negotiated with the leaders of the Bangladesh Tea Workers Union and agreed to raised wages to Tk 145 per day. This was rejected by the workers, who increased their strike from the initial two hours per day to a full-time strike from August 13. Two weeks later on August 27, workers returned to work when the daily wage was agreed at Tk 170, following the intervention of the prime minister.

Tea Day vs Tea Workers Day

National Tea Day is celebrated in Bangladesh on June 4, as declared by the government in 2020.

On the other hand, International Tea Day is celebrated on May 21, according to a 2019 agreement between the tea-producing countries Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia and Uganda. The date has also been marked by the United Nations since 2020.

It is worth noting that this is just one day after May 20, which is remembered in Bangladesh as the date of the bloody repression by British colonial authorities in 1921 of an attempt by plantation workers to return home, as described above, and is marked annually in that country as Tea Workers Day.

Info Box: Industry associations of Bangladesh's tea sector

The Bangladesh Tea Association is a non-profit organization representing the interests of the owners and professional planters of tea estates in the Sylhet and Chattogram Districts. Since 1948, the organization has been working in association with the bargaining agent BCSU and the Bangladesh Tea Estate Staff Association, the workers' representative body. The Bangladesh Tea Association also acts as a bridge between the tea industry and other related industries, trade bodies, various government ministries, and regulatory bodies. A 17-member Central Committee leads the organization.

In parallel, the Tea Traders Association of Bangladesh represents the interests of tea traders. A 16-member executive committee leads the organization.

Labour Policies and the Living Standards of Tea Workers

Tea-plantation workers work under the scorching sun when it is hot, the pouring rain during the monsoon season, and shivering in winter. With no shelter, many are injured and killed by lightning during the monsoon storms. Year-round, there is also the real danger of insect and snake bites. Necessary personal protective equipment is lacking. There is no adequate basic health care or clean water at the workplace. The workers have set targets: pick at least 20 kg of tea leaves per day, in some cases 24 or 25 kg. The bags must be carried long distances on the back or the head. The inadequacy of the transport system adds to workers' woes, with frequent injuries sustained while walking the steep muddy paths on rainy days.

Many are injured or killed in workplace accidents, while victims and their families do not receive adequate compensation. Even in the absence of accidents, the wages are insufficient for decent living. Each “garden” (plantation) is required by law to have a group hospital, in accordance with workers' healthcare access rights. But in most cases this is lacking. The law also requires hygienic toilets at each workplace and residence, but these are also most often not present. As a result, workers frequently suffer from kidney and other diseases.

Wages

Although the government formed a minimum-wage board to determine the wages of tea workers, the wages are increased according to the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between the representatives of the industry association *Bangladeshi Cha Sangsad* (Bangladesh Tea Association, or BTA), and labour representatives of the *Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union* (BCSU), or Bangladesh Tea Workers Union. Traditionally the BTA and BCSU have reached a CBA on wages and other benefits every two years.

The daily wage of tea workers has been raised from Tk 32.50 in 2008 by increments to Tk 170 in 2022. Workers have also been demanding a one-off arrears payment of Tk 30,000 each yet received only Tk 11,000 per worker. The latest daily rate of Tk 170 applies to gardens ranked class A, with workers in class B gardens receiving Tk 169 Tk per day, and those in class C a daily wage of Tk 168.

Year of agreement	Daily wage
2008	Tk 32.50
2009	Tk 48
2014	Tk 69
2015-2016	Tk 85
2017-2018	Tk 102
2019-2020	Tk 120
2022	Tk 170

Table 1: Tea worker wages, by year

Working hours

According to the 2006 Bangladesh Labour Act, the working hours of tea workers are set at eight per day. But in practice workers in some fields toil from dawn to dusk.

Holidays

Although the Labour Act provides for 10 days of paid (“casual”) leave per year for other workers, tea workers are not given this right. Further, according to the Labour Act, tea plantation workers are entitled to one day of annual leave for every 22 days of work, while workers in industrial establishments or road transport sector get an annual day off for every 18 days of work, and newspaper workers one for every 11 days worked. Here too, the tea workers are being deprived.

History and Achievements of Tea Workers' Unions

The present-day *Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union* (BCSU), or Bangladesh Tea Workers Union, was initially registered on 3 June 1948 as the *Srihatt Zila* (Sylhet District) *Tea Sramik Union* following a decade of campaigning and action by local communists.

In 1938, communist leaders and activists in the district, then called Srihatta, organized a workers' movement that produced the *Srihatt-Kachhar Cha Sramik Mazdoor Union*. Then local congressmen started an organization called *Surma Valley Sramik Samiti*. In 1946, the *Srihatt Zilla Cha Sramik Congress* was formed, later known as the *Srihatt Zilla Tea Sramik Union*.

In 1972, the year after Bangladesh won its war of independence, the union was renamed as the Bangladesh Tea Workers Union.

Notable founding leaders include Swargiya Purnendu Kishore Sengupta, Jeevan Santal, Mahitosh Purkayastha, Durgesh Chandra Dev, Suhasini Das, and Nikunja Bihari Goswami.

The Central Committee of the BCSU has 30 members. At the next level down, there are seven Valley Committees. Then there are a total of 228 *bagan panchayats* ("garden councils") under the union. Each garden or outpost elects 15 panchayat leaders by a workers' ballot. The Central Committee and the Valley Committees are also elected by workers' votes. The Panchayats are each represented in their respective Valley Committee, and the Valley Committees are all represented in the Central Committee. The BCSU has also made it mandatory to have women leadership in Central, Valley, and Panchayat Committees. The office of the Central Committee is located at Srimangal in Moulvibazar District, in premises known as The Labour House.

The Union: For Workers and Employment

Contribution by Nirpen Chandra Pal

Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) Acting General Secretary

To ensure the development of the tea industry, we need to recognize the issues faced by the workers. Their wages should be increased in view of rising prices in the country. The accommodation in the tea estate should be brought up to standard and made hygienic and dignified. Quality medical care should be provided to tea plantation workers and their family members. Arrangements should be made so that everyone can easily get treatment when needed. The sanitation system of tea estate residents is very inadequate and of poor quality. We think gardens should be brought under 100% sanitation. If we have to keep pace with the way the country is progressing at present, then we need to ensure quality education for the children of tea workers. After all, tea workers are also citizens of this country and should be guaranteed equal rights to those of other citizens.

The target we have adopted of further developing and expanding the tea industry will be realized only if the problems of our tea workers are resolved and their fair demands are accepted. If they can manage their families well with their daily earnings, if they can educate our children, then the tea workers will be encouraged, and will also work harder to sustain the tea industry and take it forward. Progress for the industry will not be possible if the workers continue to be neglected.

The tea worker's trade union *Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union* is working non-stop to take the tea industry forward. Unions act as a link between workers and employers. It is the union that raises the workers' demands with the employers and negotiates to some extent to help the workers to realize their rights. If the workers are financially deprived due to the incapacity or

unwillingness of the owners, the union goes to the plantations and consult with the workers for peaceful resolution of the tension. Many times the tea industry has been on the verge of closure - we at the union have tried our best to sustain the tea industry, giving concessions. Our union has always been positive and working for the interests of the industry, the economy of the country, etc. We will continue all kinds of cooperation on behalf of the union in the future to sustain the tea industry and take it forward.

But unfortunately, some of the owners do not implement the agreements they make with our union. Problems and dissatisfaction are increasing in plantations where owners do not comply with their contracts. We believe that the agreements we reach through bilateral negotiations need to be fully implemented. Besides, if we can implement the labour law of Bangladesh, then the tea industry will go a long way. The most important thing is that the owners have to be sincere, they have to come to the side of the workers, to sustain the industry, they have to treat everyone well, and they have to work in coordination with the labour leaders and representatives. Only if we work all together to implement the laws, contracts, or other good initiatives, as owners, workers, and government, will our tea industry improve, and this industry be sustained for a long time.

At the root of it all is the tea. The price of tea on the current market has not increased in line with other commodities. If the price of tea cannot be increased, then the industry cannot be sustained and the standard of living of the workers cannot be improved. I think a minimum price of tea leaves per kg should be fixed. If it can be sold for more, that is of course helpful for the industry and also good for the workers. But without a reasonable price for tea, the owners cannot meet the demands of the workers, and this is causing major disruption in the tea industry. So I request the government to take the necessary steps to increase the price of tea. Then we will be able to negotiate

and negotiate more rationally with the owners to remove the problems and deprivations of the workers.

For the development of the tea industry, the government should come forward, take more active initiatives, and cooperate in meeting the problems and demands of the workers. Tea workers are also citizens of this country, and their rights should be recognized as such. But the government still has much to do in terms of eliminating their problems, ensuring fair payment, and improving their quality of life. In addition to the owners, the government has its own share of responsibility in meeting the basic needs of the working population. If these basic needs can be ensured for our workers, then we believe that tea workers will be able to make a great contribution to the development of not only the tea industry but also the country as a whole.

For the development of the tea industry, the production of tea must be increased, and the planting of new seedlings or plantations must be increased. For this, the owners have to take the main responsibility, and the workers can only cooperate. There are many areas in the tea gardens where the plants have collapsed and new saplings should be planted. We know there is much unemployed labour available in and around the plantations, which could be more gainfully employed there. Everyone should come forward to apply for these opportunities to work. If everyone doesn't come forward wholeheartedly, this industry will fall behind. Owners must act in the interest of the industry above their individual interests. The owners have to make arrangements so that the workers do not have to protest, so that discontent does not arise in the garden, so that the garden is not closed. The guardians of workers in tea plantations are the plantation managers and management authorities. They should treat workers with compassion and dignity. They also have to come forward with an attitude of cooperation in implementing the demands of the workers. Workers should not be treated as adversaries of industry but as partners. Our union is working with

utmost transparency, working with sincerity. We who are the present leaders would like to emphasize with honesty that we have worked for the development of the tea industry in the past, are working now, and will continue to cooperate one hundred percent in the future.

Story of a Tea Worker

A BILS representative spoke to an elderly retired tea worker, bringing out his history, past and present situation, and thoughts and recommendations. Ganesh Patra is the former president of the Alinagar Cha Bagan Panchayat Committee of Kamalganj Upazila of Moulvibazar District.

How many years did you work in the plantation?

I worked in a tea garden for about 40 or 45 years, can't say exactly.

Were you a permanent worker or a temporary worker?

I was a permanent worker. Once upon a time, I used to get 28 taka as a daily wage. Then when the struggle committee was formed in the union, the wages were increased by agreement with the owners several times. After the announcement of the government, now the wages [on this plantation] stand at 178 taka.

How many people are there in your family?

There are only six people in my family.

How many people work in the garden?

Now only my wife works in the garden, as a temporary labourer.

Does everyone work in the tea garden or do some work outside the plantation?

No, no one works outside.

Do you have any holidays?

We get national holidays in Bangladesh. In addition, I get the leave days I am entitled to at work. These are 14 days a year.

Where can you get treatment if you are sick? Where to go if there is a serious accident or serious disease?

If I am sick, I go to the Bagan (Garden) Hospital first. If Bagan Hospital is not good, we have Central Hospital Camellia. If it is not good there too, we have Moulvibazar Sadar Hospital, we are sent there.

Who pays the medical bills?

We pay some but the companies also often pay.

What rations do the tea workers get?

Permanent workers get rations, as do any of their children younger than 12.

Now you don't have a job anymore, how do you manage your family?

There is suffering, there is a huge problem. The rise of the market price of goods, the low wages, how can the family live with it? Educating children is not possible.

Are you teaching your children? Where are they studying?

I am old. The children have grown up. I gave them a little education when they were young.

I taught my son until he was of college age.

Where is your ancestral home?

My community, ethnic group, and our ancestral home are in Bihar, in the Ranchi province of India, now known as Jharkhand. But now there is no contact with them. There has been no contact or relationship since the independence of Bangladesh.

What is the most difficult thing for you?

Workers have various difficulties in working, many times they have to work with their own tools. And there is a risk of accidents while working. Besides, in all these hilly areas, jungles, and so many animals and snakes, there are various dangers.

Compared to the past, is the situation of the tea garden better now or when you were younger?

Comparing over the years, the current situation seems better. Before, people did not have much inclination towards education; now in the modern era, education is better and workers are also working hard to educate their own children.

How do people cope working in the sun?

If the situation is too bad, the workers can't work anymore. In the sun and rain workers use a *chupi*, which is like an umbrella made of round leaves. Those who pick leaves are given two *chupis* every year.

How hard is it working on the hill?

Many people have accidents while going up and down the hill. Many people fall into the drain after slipping. The worker has a load of 20, maybe 25 kg of tea leaves on his head. It is very difficult to come and go on the hilly road, and accidents happen; many break their legs.

The garden is far from the house. In that case, what kind of arrangements are there for the opportunity to drink water or eat food?

Earlier there was a well in the garden. More recently a few tube wells were installed, but they have run dry. Workers now carry bottled water to their workplaces. Sometimes they also bring tap or spring water.

In light of your long experience, tell me what needs to be done for the workers.

Now our biggest problem is unemployment. Second is the housing problem, then there is an economic problem. All in all, it would be great if our basic problems could be removed. These are rooted in wages remaining stagnant. It will be good if our wages increase. And, to solve the unemployment problem, if the unemployed get employment, then the situation will be better.

The Tale of a Woman Tea Worker

A representative of the Bangladesh Institute for Labour Studies (BILS) spoke to Ms. Khairun Begum, the co-chair of the Alinagar Tea Garden Panchayat Committee of Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar district.

BILS: Approximately how many years have you been working?

KB: I must be 55 or 56 years old. I have been working for somewhere between 30 and 35 years.

Are you a permanent worker or a temporary worker?

I am a residential worker, permanent.

How many people are there in your family?

Seven people.

How many of them work in the garden?

One person.

Does anyone work outside the garden?

No.

How much money do you get daily?

Tk 178 including the added expenses of electricity bills and such.

How many kg of leaves do you have to pick?

20 kg daily.

Do you receive more money if you pick more than 20 kg in a day?

Yes, I do.

What holiday do you get in a year?

The whole year? Many. Qurbani, Durga Puja, Kali Puja... the public holidays are endless.

Where can you go if you are sick?
The Camellia hospital.

Where to go if the disease is complex and big?
Moulvibazar...that one.

Do you receive rations?¹
Yes, 6 kg.

How many are entitled to rations?
Just me and my husband.

How does the family run?
With hardships.

Do the children study? Where?
I educate my children myself.

Where was your house before?
In India. In Gazipur District.

How were the previous workers? Is it better now than it was before?
No, it's much better than before. Why is it so good? For work now they give us tools, towels, and *chupis*.

How is the increase in income of workers?
Much better than before.

How is the accommodation now?
I have a house. If the roof is broken, then the office usually helps fix it.

¹ Ration is a food item support provision in the plantations. Under this provision owners provide food items to the permanent workers at a reduced price. Food items vary, and may consist in wheat or rice.

How is it working in the sun?

We are given a *chupi*, which shelters the head and also the back.

Is it difficult to climb the garden hill?

Nah.. we are used to it. We tread carefully in the rain. There are so many things there...snakes, scorpions. I don't usually hear about accidents. Our God saves.

When you go to work, where do you get water, what arrangements are there?

There is a problem with water. The problem was that a snake fell into the well and died.

What do you think needs to be done for the workers?

If they give us more work beyond this and provide transportation to our work sites on the plantations then we would be grateful because our income could double.

Quick Comparison: Situation of Tea Workers in India and Bangladesh

Wages

The wages of tea workers in neighbouring country India are organized state by state, unlike in Bangladesh. The daily wage of tea workers in the valleys of Dooars, Daraj, or Darjeeling in West Bengal, for example, is 250 rupees, or around Tk 350.

In Assam's Brahmaputra Valley, the daily wage of tea workers is Rs 250, but in the state's Barak Valley it is Rs 228. However, in Tripura in Assam, to the east of Bangladesh, the wages are only Rs 176 as of January 2022, yet still significantly higher than in Bangladesh.

The wages are relatively higher in the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka: a tea worker in Kerala, for example, earns Rs 433 per day. In the northern state of Sikkim the daily wage is higher still, at 500 rupees.

Bonus

A 16-percent bonus was announced for workers in West Bengal in October 2024, slightly short of the workers' demand of 20 percent. In this case, too, they are ahead of Bangladesh.²

Residence

Under the initiative of the government of the Indian state of West Bengal, houses and flats are allotted to the tea workers in their names. In this aspect, the tea workers of Bangladesh are far behind. The long-standing demand of tea workers in Bangladesh is that they should be given land rights, but they are yet to be granted any.

² In Bangladesh tea workers get bonus equivalent to 55 days wage in two installments of 60% and 40%. It is paid on the two major religious festivals of their creed.

Trade unions

However, the workers in India are more politically organized than the workers in Bangladesh. They are also very enthusiastic and active in trade unions, which are numerous.³

As there is not one single trade union like in Bangladesh but rather many. So there is some competition between them. Under Bangladesh's labour law, all the garden-valleys under a given establishment or institution can only form one single trade union on a national basis. They cannot be unionized locally or regionally.

³ Some of the unions are: Assam Tea Workers Union Assam Sanghra Tea Sramik Sangh; Assam Labour Union; Chachar Tea Workers Union; Namni Assam Tea Labor Sangh; All West Bengal Tea Garden Labourers Union; Tea Garden Labour Union; Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union; Darjeeling Terai Duars Chia Kaman Mazdoor; Union; Darjeeling Terai Duars Plantation Labour Union; Duars Tea Garden Workers Union; Himalayan Plantation Workers Union; National Union of Plantation Workers; Terai Sangamri Tea Workers Union; West Bengal Tea Workers' Conference

Tea Workers Voices: Major Concerns

- **Ensuring fair price of tea**

The persistently low prices of tea at auction are not in step with inflation, causing problems for producers and by extension for their workers. The government must take steps to determine the root cause of the relative price stagnation.

- **Ensuring tea workers' land ownership**

The tea workers' community needs to ensure workers' ownership of the land. They are exposed to potential abuse from living on the plantation owners' land. The government needs a special initiative to rescue the tea workers from this situation.

- **Ensuring health care for all**

Every labourer in every plantation must have easy access to health care, as per the law. In this regard, the required number of health centres and hospitals need to be established and the service quality improved of the existing group hospitals and garden dispensaries.

- **Ensuring access to education**

There is a need to identify and resolve the barriers to children of tea workers receiving primary education, which is compulsory up to grade eight (around age 13). Government primary schools need to be established in every garden. Some owners have taken the initiative to establish schools, but these are mostly not running well due to lack of government grants. It is also necessary to establish secondary and higher secondary schools and universities within short distances of the plantations, for the children of workers. There is a need to introduce a special scholarship scheme for children of tea workers to ensure access to higher education.

- **Technical skills education**

There is an urgent need to start technical and vocational schools at the valley or plantation level to provide technical education and employment opportunities to the children of tea workers.

About the Author

Md. Habibur Rahman is associate professor and head of the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the People's University of Bangladesh. He is the founder and president of the Community Social Work Practice and Development Foundation. He is a PhD research fellow in the Department of Social Work at Jagannath University. He conducts research on labour, social security, corporate social responsibility, social work, and other related topics, on behalf of various labour- and human-rights organizations.

In particular, Rahman works to improve the protection of the mental health of children and adolescents through social work. He is a qualified master trainer in qualitative education and research. Since 2014, he has been a part-time researcher in the BILS research programme. An active social worker, he also runs the Facebook page Community Talks BD, the Facebook group Community Social Workers Network BD, and the YouTube channel Community Talks. He has published 20 research papers in national and international journals, and is the editor of the newsletter Community Talks International. In addition, he serves as the executive editor of the People's University Research Journal, and the Community Social Work Practice and Development Foundation Journal.

Bangladesh's Tea Industry and its Workers

Bangladesh's Tea Industry and its Workers explores the 200-year history of tea cultivation and the vital yet overlooked contributions of tea workers from marginalized communities. The book examines labour conditions, wages, legal rights, and union roles, highlighting persistent challenges and pathways toward a more just, inclusive, and sustainable tea industry.

