

Leave No One Behind

Citizen's Platform Briefing Note

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Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

About the Platform

The Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh was established as a civil society initiative to contribute to the implementation of the globally adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Bangladesh. The Platform was formally launched in June 2016 at the initiative of a group of eminent citizens in Bangladesh with the objective to track the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh and embed accountability and voice in its implementation process. The concept of the Platform was informed by participatory and multi-stakeholder approach which was conceived as a crucial element to attain the goals and targets of the SDGs. The Platform currently includes 124 Partner Organisations working on SDG issues across Bangladesh. Platform's activities include mobilising stakeholders for concrete SDG related initiatives with particular focus on 'Leave No One Behind', undertaking research, organising dialogues, disseminating SDG relevant information and other activities to enhance accountability and transparency in SDG delivery in Bangladesh.

Context

Bangladesh is the world's tenth-largest tea grower. Tea has been produced in the country for more than 180 years. Our tea industry dates back to British rule when the East India Company initiated the tea trade in the hills of the Sylhet region. The industry has recently made significant advancements thanks to the prosperous domestic market. However, weak labour rights, low wages and poor non-wage benefits have traditionally been the industry's defining characteristics. This note is inspired by the recent discourse around the plight of tea workers in Bangladesh to raise their daily wages. Despite a marginal increase in their wages as a result of the protest, it is inadequate in the face of current inflation, and their life and livelihoods continue to be under significant strain.

Tea Industry in Bangladesh and the State of Tea Plantation Workers*

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Tea plantation. In 1840, the first subcontinental tea gardens were set up beside Chittagong Club by European merchants. Commercial cultivation of tea began in 1857 with the establishment of Mulnicherra Estate in Sylhet, according to Bangladesh Tea Board. The Surma River Valley in Sylhet region became the epicentre of tea cultivation in Eastern Bengal. Later, plantations also prospered in Panchagarh of North Bengal and lower Tipera (current day Comilla) regions. Tea became a major export of British Bengal. British and Australian businessmen established the Chittagong Tea Auction in 1949. James Finlay and Duncan Brothers dominated the sector during the British regime. The Ispahani family soon after rose to prominence.

Tea workers. The majority of tea workers working in Sylhet, Habiganj and Moulvibazar districts are not native Bengali. Instead, they are primarily the descendants of lower caste Hindus and indigenous people brought here by the British colonists from different parts of India about 150 years ago, according to the Society for Environment and Human

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Development (SEHD). The SEHD identified 80 ethnic communities in 156 tea estates in Sylhet, Habiganj, Moulvibazar, Chattogram and Rangamati in 2016. According to its study, four distinct groups of Tantis, speaking Telegu, Jangli (a form of Bangla), Sadri and Oriya, were brought from the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa, respectively.

When India and Pakistan split up in 1947, the tea workers lost touch with their roots and became stateless. Despite having lived in the gardens for over 150 years and earning Bangladesh's citizenship after its independence from Pakistan in 1971, they still do not have any rights on the lands they live in.

2. THE INDUSTRY

Overview. According to the Statistical Handbook on Bangladesh Tea Industry 2019, there are 166 gardens in the country, on 2,79,507 acres of land, with a total of 0.14 million workers. An average of 67.4 million kilograms of tea is produced annually. The industry accounts for three per cent of global tea production and one per cent of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Tea is grown in the north-eastern districts, whereby the highlands, temperate climate, humidity and heavy rainfall within these districts provide a favourable ground for the production of high-quality tea. Tea-producing districts in Bangladesh include Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Sylhet, Chittagong, Panchagarh, Brahmanbaria, and Rangamati. Currently, the Moulvibazar District has the largest tea plantations in the country. Its cultivation has also expanded in the Northern region, including Panchagar, Lalmonirhat, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur and Chattogram districts in recent years.

Currently, there are five types of tea produced in Bangladesh, Green Tea, Black Tea, Oolong Tea, Instant Tea, and White Tea. According to Bangladesh Tea Board, Abul Khair Consumer Products Ltd., Kazi & Kazi Tea Estate Ltd., Halda Valley Food & Beverage Ltd., M.M. Ispahani Limited, Meghna Tea Company, and the Consolidated Tea & Lands Co. (BD) Ltd are the top six leading tea exporters in Bangladesh. The price of homegrown tea in Bangladesh is determined at public auctions. Currently, there are two auction centres in Chittagong and Srimangal, where the tea produced is sold to various brands through auctions.

Affiliated Organisations. Bangladesh Tea Board is an autonomous body responsible for regulations concerning and encouraging the plantation of tea. It was constituted by the Tea Ordinance of 1977. Its role includes improving the standard of living for tea plantation workers along with the production and valuation of tea. The Tea Research Institute under Bangladesh Tea Board conducts technical and economic research associated with the tea industries. Besides, Project Development Unit (PDU) is a separate agency dealing with various aspects of the development of the tea industry.

Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), Bangladesh Tea Workers Union (BTWU), Tea Traders Association of Bangladesh (TTAB) and Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), among others, are organisations affiliated with the tea industry.

Tea-related Policies and Regulations. Article 28(4) of the Constitution of Bangladesh has provisions for the advancement of women, children, and other vulnerable communities.

A variety of legislative measures have also been established to safeguard the rights of tea plantation workers. The majority of these laws were repealed and replaced by the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 and the Tea Act of 2016.

Tea plantation workers are included in the category of industrial workers as per section 2(61) of Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. In many instances, however, the Act treats them uniquely as tea workers, with provisions distinct from those applicable to workers in other industries. This puts them at a disadvantage compared to other workers whose rights are protected under Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. Their minimum wage, leave policies and other job protections vary from those of industrial employees and other labourers.

Tea Production and Export. Bangladesh Tea Board data revealed that the country's tea output has increased by 81.6 per cent between 2001 and 2021. The year 2021 recorded the highest production of tea (96.5 million kgs) in the country's history. However, despite the increased production, it is still challenging to export tea abroad after meeting the local demand. Tea export comprises just 0.01 per cent of the total export of Bangladesh as per the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB). In 2020, despite being the world's 10th largest tea producer, Bangladesh ranked 61st in tea exports.

Bangladesh is currently a net importer of tea despite being an important exporter worldwide in the past. This is due to the fact that the growth of the middle class in Bangladesh has exponentially increased the domestic demand for tea, but tea production per hectare has remained low compared to other tea-producing nations. Tea Board data revealed that the expected internal consumption of tea increased by a staggering 157.7 per cent between 2001 and 2019, and tea export decreased by 94.7 per cent between 2001 and 2021. On the other hand, Bangladesh produces around 1,600-1,700 kg of raw tea leaves every hectare, whereas India yields 3,000-3,200 kgs per hectare.

Pakistan, UAE and the US have been the top three importers of Bangladesh's tea. However, Pakistan has started to ration their tea due to the ongoing economic crisis, according to Bangladesh Tea Board's September 2022 data.

According to an estimate, by 2025, the local demand for tea in Bangladesh will be around 130 million kgs. Therefore, if it is possible to produce 140 million kgs of tea, it will be possible to export another 10 million kg of tea after meeting the local demand.

It has been suggested elsewhere that Bangladesh has lost its tea export potential, whilst Sri Lanka has the most significant comparative advantage in tea export. India is also making substantial progress. Without major restructuring in Bangladesh's tea sector, including improvement of the condition of its workers, tea exports will slide further down the export barrel.

Modernisation of the Industry. The Bangladesh Tea Research Institute's Five-Year Plan (2017-2021) featured goals to modernise the sector in terms of infrastructure and technology, but they were largely not implemented.

Modernising tea cultivation may boost output, allowing for increased exports after fulfilling domestic demand. Modernisation and product diversification have increased the export potential of tea-producing neighbours. In contrast, Bangladesh's tea industry is continuing the colonial practice of exploiting cheap labour to produce low-quality tea. The industry has challenges such as a shortage of capital and sophisticated machinery, limited use of land, the low market price of tea compared to high production cost and low yield per hectare. The machinery used to prepare tea leaves could be upgraded. If hilly, uncultivated lands can be used for tea growing, tea yield could be enhanced.

3. STATE OF TEA WORKERS

Tea workers face several socioeconomic and human rights challenges and discriminatory wage issues. In August 2022, the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh hosted a Citizen's Consultation in Sylhet, where tea workers from several gardens in the region expressed their concerns regarding such issues.

Wage Scenario. BTA is an organisation of tea garden owners, and the BTWU agreed on a biannual schedule for raising tea workers' pay in 2020. However, the agreement was not implemented, and the tea workers went on strike in August 2022 for a pay raise from BDT 120 to BDT 300 per day. As a consequence of the protest, their daily wages were raised to BDT 170. Nevertheless, this marginal increase is insufficient to cover the basic dietary requirements of their families, as well as medical expenses and child education, especially in light of the continued inflation. Despite the increase, their compensation remains among the lowest in the world. A comparison of the daily wages of tea workers from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya and India revealed that only Bangladeshi tea workers receive a daily pay below USD 2.

Non-Wage Scenario. BTA has published a list of cash and in-kind non-wage facilities such as housing, ration, allowances etc. The garden owners argue that the monetary value of these benefits justifies the low wage of tea workers. However, many of these benefits are not realised in practice. Benefits like housing, sanitation, health and education facilities, maternity and other leaves are extremely substandard in the gardens. It is required by law that employers provide certain facilities to tea workers. The right to a reasonable wage and the right to facilities are co-existent in Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006. Therefore, ensuring one right cannot justify the violation of another. Inadequate wages, along with minimal facilities, have been working as a method of exploitation of the tea workers in Bangladesh.

Education. The education benefits provided by tea garden owners are very minimal. Participants of the Citizen's Consultation in Sylhet mentioned that the schools in the gardens have disproportionate student-teacher ratios. Regrettably, there is no public school in the tea estates. Children of tea workers mainly get admitted to non-government organisations (NGOs).

Health and Sanitation. The Sylhet Citizen's Consultation mostly revealed issues related to the health and sanitation of the tea workers. Access to health services in the tea gardens is limited to diagnosing diarrhoea and prescribing paracetamol tablets. Workers frequently suffer from skin infections caused by chemicals and pesticides in tea gardens. They are treated with over-the-counter ointments at the health centre, and workers are not provided with medications to continue treatment at home. Many workers are forced to use water from nearby water channels, defecate in the open, and clean themselves with sand, as their accommodation is not within walking distance from the estates. As a result, women workers regularly fall ill with urinary tract infections and other reproductive organ-related health issues.

Labour Rights. According to the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006, workers are required to be made permanent after 90 days of working. However, many tea workers have not been made permanent even after working for six to seven years. Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 has a provision for workers to get ten days of paid casual leave every year. Regrettably, it has specifically excluded tea plantation workers from this provision. Other workers are entitled to one day of earned leave every 18 days annually; however, tea workers are entitled to only one day of leave every 22 days. They are not provided with any document as proof of their appointment, which is against the

Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006. They do not get any gratuity. They are thus handled differently inside the Act, which is against both Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 27 of the Constitution of Bangladesh.

In the Sylhet discussion, the participating tea workers unanimously agreed that the housing and other provisions provided by the tea estates are based on their interests of turning the workers into bonded labourers. They advocated that workers should be given ownership of the land on which they live and that there should be an equal distribution of benefits from the economic gains of expanding estates from recent high-value exports.

Human Rights. As the tea workers migrated from different parts of India, their languages, beliefs, religions, and traditions were different from each other and mainstream society. Thus, it was incredibly challenging for them to converse with one another, let alone try to organise to achieve rights. Even now, they are isolated from mainstream society because of the barriers in language, overwhelming illiteracy, geography, and ethnic background. All these factors contribute to the systemic exploitation and marginalisation of tea workers.

It was disclosed in the Sylhet Citizen's Consultation that workers who speak up for their rights are subjected to financial and social threats by employers and other local influencers. In many cases, the tea leaders are politically persuaded into showcasing a "good condition" of the workers when approached by higher government officials. Moreover, tea workers are socially ostracised owing to caste and position, and as a result, citizens are not recognised to be strong advocates for the workers' rights.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tea workers are one of the most oppressed and vulnerable groups in Bangladesh. They are chronically underpaid, with few opportunities for advancement, insufficient nutrition, poor healthcare, and subpar living conditions. The tea garden owners have to realise that the scope and attributes of the industry are changing fast. In order to remain competitive in the global market, it must improve the living conditions of its workforce along with adopting modern technology. Without improving the worker's living standards, the industry would have a hard time retaining future generations in this profession.

Given the present inflation scenario, it is crucial to further adjust their wages. Since women make up the vast majority of the worker population, it is also important that they have access to basic amenities like proper sanitation and paid maternity leave. The tea workers should get the same protections as any other labourers, including paid time off and gratuity.

There must be a transformation in the oppressive mindset that pervades the tea industry toward its workers, and tea workers should be given a voice so they may articulate their concerns. Sustainable growth of the tea industry requires addressing the industry's underlying problems and concerted efforts of all stakeholders, including the government, tea garden owners, and tea garden employees. It is essential to break the cycle of exploitation that the tea workers are trapped in for generations. For the sustainability of the industry, the government, tea garden owners, and tea garden workers' unions must all work together to fix the sector's fundamental issues.

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