

Current Scenario of Tea Garden Workers in Bangladesh: Time Demands to Stop the Zero-sum Game

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to highlight the latest phenomenon of tea garden laborers by outlining a dire picture of Bangladesh's tea industry. This article uses desk-based research and secondary data analysis to illustrate the current situation of Bangladeshi tea garden workers in the agro-business industry. To determine the real circumstances, the researchers studied several public interview quotes. It describes the current phenomenon of tea garden laborers to illustrate the inequality and injustice that exist in Bangladesh's agro-business sector. Researchers have discovered that because of their poor pay, standard of living, and other rights, workers in tea gardens are less happy in the inflationary situation of Bangladesh. Researchers also discovered that both sides lacked accurate information. Researchers may get knowledge about the labor shortage in the tea sector, and professionals can gain knowledge about tea garden-related agro-business in Bangladesh. It is past time to go from a zero sum game to a non-zero sum game where everyone wins. For academics and practitioners, the results have significant implications.

Keywords – Agro-business, Poor pay, Standard of Living, Inflation, Tea Garden Workers, Non-zero sum game.

Introduction

Having hundreds of plantations throughout the nation, Bangladesh is one of the top exporters of tea in the world. The majority of workers in the tea industry are women, who endure difficult working conditions and long hours for very little pay. Tea workers have been systematically taken advantage of by the industry for decades, despite living in some of the most remote regions of the nation. The nations lowest paid workers—nearly 150,000 tea gardeners—demand a 150 percent increase in the daily wage (Almayadeen, 2022). For nearly two weeks, Bangladeshi tea workers have been on strike in order to demand an increase in daily wages in the face of rising inflation. They claim that the current daily wage of 120 taka (\$1.25), or barely enough to buy food, is insufficient to cover even basic needs like health and education (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022). Around 125,000 employees of the 241 tea

estates in the nation have been protesting in order to have their daily wages increased from Tk 120 to Tk 300. (The Daily Star, 2022). For the 16th day in a row, the employees of the nation's 167 tea plantations, including 92 in Moulvibazar, continued their indefinite strike while calling for (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). The workers eventually agreed to a daily wage of Tk 170 after the Prime Minister intervened to break the impasse (Bangladesh News 24, 2022).

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to present the current exploiting phenomena of the tea garden workers in the agro-business sector in Bangladesh. The current scenario of tea garden workers in Bangladesh are presented and the study has shown that - time demands to stop the zero-sum game.

Methodology

The researchers have examined a range of national and international newspaper articles. Secondary data and a desk-based research methodology were used to create this article. To determine the actual situation, the researchers analyzed a large number of published interview quotations. Data on the current phenomenon of workers in tea gardens have been gathered by the researchers.

Scenario of Exploitation of the Tea Garden Workers in Bangladesh

The majority of tea workers in the predominately Muslim nation are low-caste Hindus, who are descended from slaves that British planters imported during the colonial era. The official minimum wage for a worker on a tea plantation in the nation is Tk. 120 per day, or about \$1.25 (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022), but it is only slightly more than \$1 on the open market. That, according to one employee, is hardly enough to purchase food, let alone other necessities.

According to a recent study by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and UNICEF, up to 74% of tea garden workers in Sylhet continue to live in poverty (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). The study found that the lack of basic data on women and children working in tea gardens is holding back progress in the Sylhet division relative to other regions of the nation. Enhancing social protection for female tea garden workers and their families in Sylhet Division, Bangladesh, was the topic of a UN Women Bangladesh webinar where the study's findings were presented. The ILO, UNFPA, and Unicef worked together to organize the survey and two workshops. Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRPB) and social protection of tea garden workers were two of the webinar's main topics of discussion (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

Ram Bhajan Kairi, general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) said that- "Each tea garden worker receives only Tk120 as a daily wage. The government and tea garden owners are not making efforts to increase it. Our grievance is that the law reform committee has not listened to the demands of the tea workers. Only owners are present in this type of consultation." (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

In her speech, Gitanjali Singh, the head of UN Women Bangladesh, emphasized three points: the need to advance gender-responsive social protection measures; the need for transformative financing for gender equality; and allocations that result in real, tangible changes in the lives

of women and girls (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). In Sylhet Division, two workshops on GRPB were held as part of the UN joint program. To address the immediate and long-term needs of tea garden workers and their families, particularly female tea garden workers, the first one was held in December 2020, and the second one in March 2021. (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

In Bangladesh, there are about 360,000 people who work in tea gardens and their families; nearly two-thirds of them are women and girls (UN News, 2021). When they are menstruating, pregnant, or raising children, female tea garden workers experience hygiene-related problems. The program discovered that they put in more than eight hours a day of labor in hazardous weather with limited access to restrooms and rest areas. Additionally, domestic violence, early marriage, and dowries are frequent against tea garden workers, it continued. However, Tahsin Ahmed Chowdhury, chair of the Bangladesh Tea Association's Labour Health and Welfare subcommittee, asserted that there were significant discrepancies in the BBS-Unicef data (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

Ruma Munda, a tea worker stated that- "During my pregnancy, my family planned to help me deliver my baby at home, following in the footsteps of my ancestors. I was never aware that there were alternative, safe methods of childbirth delivery, in health care facilities with clinical specialists. My husband, Sunil, is also a tea garden worker, and we were never introduced to modern medicine or midwives." (UN News, 2021).

Tahsin Ahmed Chowdhury, convener of the Labour Health and Welfare subcommittee of the Bangladesh Tea Association claimed that – "The tea business has been in existence for the last 150 years and it is a seasonal business regulated by the impact of weather. The cost of production is also determined by market forces and that's why we can't always fulfill all the needs of the workers, but we try our best." (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). Because tea garden communities are matrilineal, he also disagreed with the notion that there is gender discrimination there. Currently, the tea garden areas have one acre of land with 27 primary schools, one high school, and seven health centers with qualified doctors (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

Prof Sayema Haque Bidisha of the Dhaka University department of economics said that- "According to various reports, there are 90-93 communities in the tea garden areas. Surprisingly, they live 20 years less than us, which is really very shocking. Our government should take more initiatives and focus on their health, education, and livelihood." (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

Ferdousi Sultana Begum, gender and social protection expert and international team leader at ADB, said that- "Tea garden workers were being neglected. She noted that their problems could be solved if the government wanted." (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

Md Nayeb Ali, deputy secretary at the Ministry of Social Welfare said that- "The ministry provided housing and accommodation for tea garden workers, whereas tea garden leaders said that they had not received any documents that proved the houses had been provided by the government." (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

Ferdousi Begum, deputy secretary (budget and audit) at the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), said that - "By 2025, we wish to support 100% of pregnant mothers in vulnerable communities and we also have the safety net for female tea garden workers in Sylhet, which is ongoing." (Dhaka Tribune, 2021)

A total of 4,40,743 workers and their families resided in 159 tea gardens throughout the country as of 2017, according to the Bangladesh Tea Board's annual report. Of these, 100,6191 were permanent workers (48,611 men and 50,144 women), and 36,028 were temporary workers (13,186 men and 13,192 women) (Dhaka Tribune, 2021) ”

Mohan Urang, a tea worker in Moulvibazar Sadar upazila said that - "We cannot buy two kgs of rice with our daily wage. How can we bear our living expenses with such poor pay? We will not be able to survive without our wages hiked." (The daily Star, 2022) ”.

Bishwajit Robidas, a worker in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila said that - "We are victims of discrimination. We are not paid just wages. We will not resume work until our demand is fulfilled." (The daily Star, 2022) ”.

Anjana Bhuyian, a tea worker stated that - "Nowadays we can't even afford coarse rice for our family with this amount."(Aljazeera, 2022) ”.

She also added that - "A wage of one day can't buy a litre of edible oil. How can we then even think about our nutrition, medication, or children's education?" (Aljazeera, 2022) ”.

Philip Gain, director of the Society for Environment and Human Development, a research group, who has written books on tea workers stated that - "Tea workers are like modern-day slaves" (Aljazeera, 2022) ”.

Later he added that - "The plantation owners have hijacked the minimum wage authorities and kept the wages some of the lowest in the world." (Aljazeera, 2022) ”.

Claim of the Tea Garden Workers

On August 9, 2022, workers from 241 tea gardens across the nation took a two-hour break from their jobs to demand Tk300 as their daily wage. They decided to start a full-scale strike starting on August 13, 2022 because their demand was not met (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). The tea workers' union agreed to resume work on Monday and receive Tk120 as wages for the time being after meetings with tea garden owners and other stakeholders over the previous two weeks, but the general workers rejected that. The workers at the tea gardens are still on strike, as they had previously declared. Workers in Sylhet's tea gardens continued their strike on the 16th day of their protest campaign, calling for an increase in pay to Tk 300 from the current Tk 120 (Dhaka Tribune, 2022).

UNB discovered that tea garden workers were continuing their movement by staging protests and forming human chains in groups throughout Sylhet. The Panchayat heads decided to continue their movement until their demand for higher wages was satisfied following a meeting with the union leaders representing the tea garden workers, according to UNB. The tea garden

workers' union agreed to resume work on Monday and receive Tk 120 as wages for the time being after meetings with tea garden owners and other stakeholders over the past two weeks, but the workers rejected that (New AWge, 2022).

Protest of the Tea Garden Workers

For the thirteenth day in a row, the tea-estate workers protested in demand of a pay increase (The Daily Star, 2022). In Moulvibazar, Sylhet, and Habiganj, hundreds of workers demonstrated. In Moulvibazar, Sylhet, and Habiganj, numerous worker groups staged demonstrations, blocked roads for hours, and formed human chains. They obstructed the Dhaka-Sylhet highway in the Varirpar neighborhood of Moulvibazar for about three hours. On the Dhaka-Bianibazar and Moulvibazar-Sylhet highways, another group staged protests at the same time in Moulvibazar's Rajnagar upazila (The Daily Star, 2022). Around noon, hundreds of workers gathered at Sreemangal's Kalighat Tea Garden and vowed to continue protesting until their demand for Tk 300 daily wage was satisfied (The Daily Star, 2022).

Pankaj Kondo, vice president of the Bangladesh Tea Labour Union stated that- "We, all the workers, have no alternative to continuing the movements as the tea garden owners are not increasing our wage as per our demand" (The Daily Star, 2022) ”.

Meanwhile, some University of Chittagong students created a human chain to show support for the demands of the tea workers (The Daily Star, 2022). Workers from several tea gardens, including Dewracha, Premnagar, Majdihi, Hamidia, and others blocked the Dhaka-Moulvibazar regional highway and held a rally there for about an hour to demand a pay increase (The Daily Star, 2022). From their respective gardens, the workers marched in protest to the Moulvibazar Sadar area, and workers in several other gardens also held rallies (The Daily Star, 2022).

The striking employees vowed to continue their action until the prime minister announced a Tk300 daily wage for them. They went on strike on August 9, 2022. However, in an ongoing effort to persuade the employees to report to work, the district administration and police met with the plantation panchayet committees (Dhaka Tribune, 2022).

The workers at the tea gardens are still on strike, as they had previously declared. With inflation increasing and the value of the currency falling, unions are requesting an increase to 300 taka per day. Additionally, workers in the 232 tea gardens in the nation have reportedly started a full-scale strike after four days of two-hour stoppages (Business Post, 2022).

Sitaram Bin, a committee member of the Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union said that - "Nearly 1,50,000 tea workers have joined the strike today." (Business Post, 2022).

She added that- "No tea worker will pluck tea leaves or work in the leaf processing plants as long as the authority doesn't pay heed to our demands." (Business Post, 2022)

Plantation owners have offered an increase of 14 taka a day, after an 18-taka rise last year. M. Shah Alom, chairman of the Bangladesh Tea Association, said that- “Operators were going

through difficult times with profit declining in recent times. The cost of production is increasing. Our expenses have increased as the price of gas, fertilizer and diesel have gone up." (Business Post, 2022)

After several weeks of hostilities, the prime minister's promise that daily wages would increase by Tk 50 to Tk 170 brought an end to the dispute between estate owners and workers. Following weeks of demonstrations that culminated in a Tk 50 increase in daily pay, Sylhet tea plantation workers have resumed work, reviving the area's estates (Business Post, 2022).

Raju Goala, president of Sylhet Valley's Tea Workers Union said that - "Workers of several plantations resumed work. Of the 23 tea gardens in Sylhet, nine reopened, while the rest were on their weekend holiday. Workers in those other gardens will return to work." (Bangladesh News 24, 2022)

Government Steps Taken for Solution

All tea estate owners have been invited to a meeting at the Gono Bhaban by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. As the prime minister was handling the situation directly, the meeting between the labour and employment minister and the protesting workers was canceled, according to Mohammad Nahidul Islam, deputy director of the Divisional Labour Office in Moulvibazar's Sreemangal. According to sources at the Prime Minister's Office, the prime minister spoke about the ongoing crisis involving the tea plantation workers' strike. They took a two-hour break from work each day for four days, then on August 13, 2022, they went on strike (Bangladesh News 24, 2022). Following assurances from the authorities that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would intervene to break the impasse and an offer from the owners to increase their daily pay by Tk 25 to Tk 145, some of them returned to work (Bangladesh News 24, 2022).

Mithila Farzana, a worker at Alibahar Tea Garden said that - "The prime minister said that other allowances will also be increased proportionately and we have returned to work based on her assurance. Hopefully, the prime minister will keep her word." (The Financial Express, 2022)

The protesters claimed that after they saw no indication of guarantees they could rely on, they eventually joined the others on strike. The workers eventually agreed to a daily wage of Tk 170 after the Prime Minister intervened to break the impasse (Dhaka Tribune, 2022).

Viewpoint from the Zero-sum Game

There are two parties involved in our research. The tea picker is the secondary party; the owner of the tea garden is the primary party. Every garden owner approaches their business from their unique standpoint, which is to increase their profit. The aim of the tea picker is also same which is raising the profile of their employer. However, improving their financial stability is their major goal. From our above discussion, we have seen that the offered allowances are ineffective and unattractive to workers. It is not adequately apportioned in the eyes of the workers. We have found that it is like a game between two people, who want to make as much money as possible while minimizing their losses. The employers and workers are playing a game with this issue. The limiting amount would be the maximum gain for the employer and

the minimum loss for the employee if an employee attempted to maximize profits by restricting employee allowances and financial benefits. It can be defined as **zero sum game** between those because we know in zero sum game one person's gain is equivalent to another's loss, so the net change in wealth or benefit is zero.

For better understanding, assuming that A = tea garden owner, B = tea picker, L_1 = loss of A, L_2 = loss of B, G_1 = gain of A and G_2 = gain of B then according to zero sum theory

$$L_1 = G_2 \text{ Or } L_2 = G_1$$

Unfortunately, we see this zero sum game between tea garden owner and tea workers.

Findings

This paper has exposed some noteworthy findings as follows:

- In Bangladesh's agro-business sector, the tea workers are being deprived in terms of minimum wages.
- They are less satisfied in their work due to poor standard of living and other rights.
- The tea workers' wages are too less to survive in this inflationary market, although the per capita income has increased in Bangladesh but not in their zone.
- It is a unique example of protest in the history of Bangladesh after our independence. They deserve better treatment from the state or authority.

Recommendations

This paper offers the following suggestions to improve the present condition of tea workers in Bangladeshi context:

- It is high time to find out the real scenario of deprivation of tea garden workers in Bangladesh. In this connection, government should monitor and fix their salary according to the standard.
- Researchers should pay an increase attention to the study of agro-business sector focusing the tea garden workers.
- The environment of the tea garden should be like non zero sum game that is, it is not necessary for anyone else to lose if one person wins. Therefore, from the perspective of the tea workers, their goal is to ensure their financial stability. If management achieves their goals, workers will eventually be motivated to work effectively and efficiently.

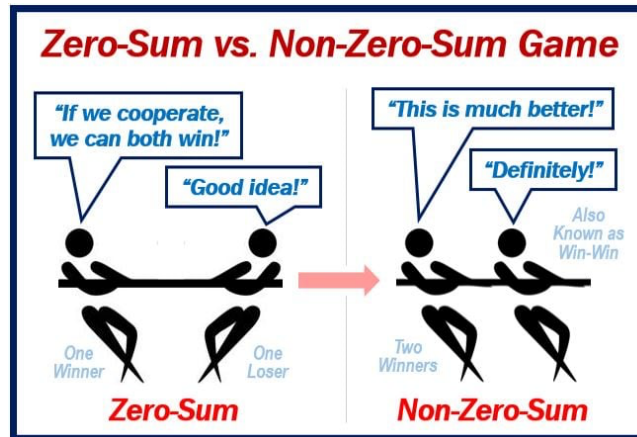


Image created by market business news

(Source: <https://marketbusinessnews.com/financial-glossary/zero-sum-game-definition-meaning>)

Conclusion

Workers in tea gardens have historically been treated like slaves by their employers and today the workers are leading inhumane lives. In Bangladesh, those who work in tea gardens are denied access to basic necessities. They are taken advantage of by the owners of tea estates year after year. Tea workers, many of whom reside in the most remote regions of the nation, have long been subject to systematic exploitation by the industry. They have recently started to demonstrate in order to get paid more. On August 9, 2022, workers from 241 tea gardens across the nation took a two-hour break from their jobs to demand Tk 300 as their daily wage. Nearly 1,50,000 workers at more than 200 tea plantations in Bangladesh went on strike in order to demand a 150% increase in their among the lowest wages in the world, a dollar per day. They made the decision to start a full-scale strike starting on August 13, 2022 because their demand was not met. The workers eventually agreed to a daily wage of Tk 170 after the Prime Minister intervened to put an end to the protest. Because of the contributions made by tea workers, the economy of the entire nation is booming, but their financial circumstances are progressively getting worse. The workers are extremely vulnerable and in extreme poverty. Additionally, the higher authorities failed to take the necessary steps to implement the fundamental rights that the workers are supposed to receive, including food, clothing, shelter, education, and health.

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