

Tea Workers under Asbestos Roofs at Health Risk

Report by Mehedi Al Amin

Exposure to asbestos for a long time increases the risk of lung and throat cancer. Many countries have banned use of asbestos in consideration of health risk it poses. Asbestos is not seen used in the cities and villages of Bangladesh anymore. But it's still in use in the tea gardens of the country.

Many tea garden workers, who lived in houses with roofs made of asbestos, had died of cancer. Hardeb Pashi (65), a worker of Doloi Tea Garden in Srimongol, died from cancer in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) of the last Bangla year.

A month later, Ramchandra Shukla (55), died too. Samdeo Bhor (60) died a year and a half ago from then. All these three men were neighbors living at the *baro* (big) labor line in Doloi Tea Garden. Each of them lived in houses with asbestos roofing.



House in the labour line with asbestos roofing. © Philip Gain

Samdeo Bhor's wife, Hemanti Bhor said that he had chest pain and breathing problems. After being bedridden for two weeks, he died at Osmani Medical College in Sylhet. The doctor said that he died from cancer. She added that since then approximately 10 other workers have died from cancer in the same garden. Six of them were from *baro* labor line of the garden. All of them lived in houses with asbestos roofing. However, she doesn't know if asbestos causes cancer.

Prof. Dr. Khaleda Islam of the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science of Dhaka University said that asbestos is a fibrous dust, and these tiny fibers are released into the air. When they are inhaled, they can be trapped in the lungs causing breathing problems and coughing. Exposure to asbestos makes the cells of the body react. To fight this foreign particle in the body, the cells multiply and start to work abnormally. At one point, these very cells transform into cancer after failing to fight off asbestos. If a pregnant woman is exposed to asbestos, it can affect the unborn baby along with the mother. In that case, the new-born baby could be underweight or have other birth defects.

Various tea gardens in Moulvibazar and Habiganj districts have houses with brown asbestos roofing. In some gardens there are rows of such houses, in others the houses are scattered. Some gardens have 50 houses with asbestos roofing, some have up to 300 such houses. Thousands of tea garden workers live in these houses.

There are hundreds of houses with asbestos roofing in Chatalpur Tea Garden of Kulaura upazila and Doloi Tea Garden of Madhabpur upazila in Moulvibazar district. And there are scattered houses with asbestos roofing in Rashidpur Tea Garden of Bahubal upazila in Hobiganj. There are many cancer patients in these tea gardens. Many of them have already died. But no one can tell why those people have died from cancer.

It should be mentioned that out of 157 tea gardens in the Northeast and Southeast, 115 are in Moulvibazar and Hobiganj districts. There are 90 tea gardens in Moulvibazar and 23 in Hobiganj.

Babul Sarkar, manager of Doloi tea garden said that the owners are concerned about the health issues of the workers. He added that there is asbestos left in many houses. These houses were built a long time ago. Asbestos is no more distributed. And the remaining asbestos would be removed.

As they lead somewhat isolated lives, many tea workers do not know that asbestos may cause cancer. The owners also did not let them know about the risks of using asbestos.

Ashuk Miah, a worker at Rashidpur Tea Estate of Finlay in Hobiganj district, said that drops of colored water fall from the roof inside the house during winter. If it falls on clothes, the stain does not come off. But he added that he doesn't know if it's harmful for health.

Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB) is the government authority to oversee the tea industry. Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid, former director of Project Development Unit (PDU), an important wing of BTB, said, "We discourage use of asbestos. The tea gardens owned by the government have already stopped the use of asbestos. However, there are still some houses with asbestos roofing in privately-owned gardens. We will take measures to remove asbestos from these houses."

Asbestos banned in the western countries: New Zealand banned the use of blue asbestos in 1984 and brown asbestos in 2002. Australia banned the use of blue asbestos in 1967 and brown asbestos in 1989. Japan has banned it in 2004, Korea in 2009, Singapore in 1989 and Turkey in 2011 due to health risk.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates (2014), "125 million people around the world are annually exposed to asbestos in the workplace, and the International Labor Organization says about 100,000 workers die each year from asbestos related disease" More than 50 countries have banned or restricted the use of asbestos since the early 1970's. Use of asbestos in other countries remains to be a concern.

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