

Ill Fate of the Tea Workers and a Union Election with High Promises

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As the tea gardens of Maulvibazar glisten with morning sunshine, the tea workers make their way to work, many of them with the discernible basket tied round their heads. For the many tourists passing by, it is picturesque scenery. For the approximately 118, 000 workers of the tea gardens, it is the start of yet another exhausting and unrewarding day.

Some of them pass under a signboard bearing the words, ‘The company rules over its territory’, an eerie reminder that the colonial era still has a profound significance in this part of the world, isolated from mainstream Bangladesh. Brought from different parts of central and eastern India roughly a century and



A polling center in Sindur Khan Tea Estate. © Philip Gain

half ago, the communities of different ethnic and caste identities who toil the land are one of the most marginalised communities in Bangladesh, deprived of fair wages, education and healthcare benefits. Even in this impoverished land, local Bangalees were mostly unwilling to perform this backbreaking job, thus the arrival of these communities with diverse identities to this land where they were told back home that they were going to work with a wonderful tree that sheds money when it is shaken.

Since then, generations have performed this backbreaking job, living and working in the world of tea gardens from cradle to grave. “We are under the sun all day,” says tealeaf picker Taramoni Roy, who has been at this job for more than two decades, “and when it rains, we are here all day too.” She does not stop her work for a second unless she can gather a minimum of 23 kg per day for which she gets 69 Taka. For most families, this 69 Taka is the chief source of income. Workers often pluck more than 23 kg a day, which entitles them to an extra income. But in practice the management in most tea gardens gives short weight and deprives them even of this small reward. Illiterate workers find it difficult to drive a fair bargain.

The weather and the backbreaking labour are not the only obstacles that Taramoni and her colleagues face. Suddenly a creature slithers by nearby. “Snake, snake,” cries out a nearby worker and for the first time since morning they stop. Taramoni utters some mystical words asking the snake to go away as they have to pick tealeaf. She believes the snake will heed her call. This education-deprived community is a fertile ground for superstition.

For today the snake seems to heed Taramoni’s request. Not so the bugs. Some of the women working nearby are facing a constant onslaught since morning. Taramoni herself wears a thick sweater despite the extremely hot weather; the punishing sun seems better than the insects. “There are bugs, and *binni*, and many other things we face a battle with when we come to work,” she says. The *binni* (hornet) is a large stinging wasp; its sting causes much pain and needs medical attention. Other species of bugs are less threatening. which is not saying much, but in their regard the workers generally don’t bother to avail the medical centre of the tea gardens.

“We are used to the bugs,” says Sobita Pradhan. After a day of sun, bugs and backbreaking labour Sobita would have liked some rest. Reality does not allow the woman of the tea gardens such luxury. Af-

ter work, they are busy with household chores that include a long list---collecting firewood, cooking, cleaning, and tending the children, many of them infants and so on. Their workday closes when they go to bed near midnight, only to wake up in the early hours of dawn to do more chores and then prepare for the work. Sobita has it harder because her husband is paralysed. Sudam Pradhan, her husband has difficulty sitting down, let alone stand.

Like some workers, Sobita leased grant land from the company in exchange for the weekly ration. All permanent workers are entitled to a ration of coarse flour but some workers prefer to lease land instead of taking the ration. This grant land inside the tea estates are used mainly for farming rice and other agricultural produces. For Sobita the decision has not worked out well. Her brother-in-law mortgaged her land to outsiders, took the money and fled the vicinity. Now there is no income from the land, neither does she get the ration.



A tea worker busy picking tealeaf. © Philip Gain

As for her husband's treatment, Sobita says that apart from the occasional paracetamol, she has not received any assistance from the company's dispensary. Many workers complain that whatever the disease or illness, the staff gives them the same tablet. Many illnesses, which could have been prevented if treated at an earlier stage has caused paralysis and often death. The company is bound by law to provide medical facilities for their workers.

Today, however, is a happier day for Sobita. It is August 10, 2014, a day of no special significance for Bangladesh, but a day tea garden workers consider a historic occasion. It is only the second time in the trade union's 66-year old history that they are being allowed to vote. Traditionally the Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union) has been led by a committee chosen by the tea garden owners. As a result, the organisation served the interests of the ownership that chose them, rather than the workers they claimed to represent. Till 2008, the daily cash pay of a tea worker was 32.50 Taka per day.

The first ever elections took place in 2008 only after a long struggle of the tea garden workers. But the elected committee irked the tea garden ownership by demanding higher wages and was technically dissolved by the government only a year after. An ad-hoc committee comprised mainly of the candidates defeated in 2008 elections replaced them. Though elections are supposed to take place every two years, workers would have to wait the five years before they were allowed to vote again. A staggering 94.12 per cent out of the 94, 675 voters showed up to vote.

However, the "very peaceful and participatory" election administered by the government has downsides. According to S M Ashrafuzzaman, Director of Labour (Joint Secretary) who headed the seven-member election commission as the Chief Election Commissioner, the involvement of the government in the conduct of an election of a labour union is peculiar. "In no other industry has the government organised such an election for the workers," he says. Asked on why the government got involved in organising an election of a trade union and how the trade union leaders consented to the situation, he says, "There was pressure from the international organisations, especially the ILO to bring the elected leaders back to the labour house."

It is the same Directorate of Labour Ashrafuzzaman runs today that drove Makhon Lal Karmakar and Rambhajan Kairi panel out of the Labour House that won the first ever elections of Bangladesh Tea Workers' Union in 2008 by secret ballots. In 2014 the same panel won by a landslide victory.

The preparation of the voter list is also controversial. To become a voter one has to become a member of the union. The government has kept the Labour House (office building of the workers built with their own money) sealed for a long time and files on membership to the union and voter list are in great disarray. The owners of the tea gardens made the job very easy for the Election Commission. According to many sources among ordinary tea workers and their leaders, the company organised D-Forms, necessary for the workers to become members of the union and be in the voter list.



Rambhajan Kairi, new general secretary of the union.
© Philip Gain



Makhon Lal Karmakar, new president of the union. © Philip

This situation also confirms how helpless the "tied" tea workers are; and the stigma on Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union that it is a "company" union comes to the surface. None in both winning and losing panels question why the election schedule dated 11 July sets the date for publishing the draft voter list by 3 July.

There were other irregularities. "I am a member of the union but I did not fill in a D-Form. I asked for a D-Form from *Tilababu* (supervisor of field level works) who told me your D-Form has been filled in. He only called me to ask for my father's name," says a winning *panchayet* level leader on condition of anonymity. She further says, "This is how all others have been made members of the union and voters."

Makhan Lal Karmakar, re-elected to the position of president of the union confirms, "The owners of the tea gardens have filled in the D-Forms on our behalf to make the workers members of the trade union." Karmakar, a highly pleased winner, also said on 11 August, "D-Form has been filled in afresh for all workers."

Many see an ulterior motive behind the involvement of the owners of the tea gardens in making the workers members to the trade union and in the preparation of the voter list. As of the 10 August election, the total voters or members of the union are 94,675, which is 80.2 per cent of 118,000 workers in the tea industry. The Labour Law of 2006 allows the tea workers to unionise only at the national level and to form a union in the tea industry 30 per cent of the total workers must be members. So it is unlikely that a second trade union in the tea industry has any chance if the current situation prevails. The 10 August election thus sets the game plan in favour of the owners and the state.

The tea workers who turned out to vote *en masse* expressed their high hopes from their elected leaders. They want to see their wages increased and housing, medical, and other facilities improved. For these changes and improvement, they need strong bargaining agents. Big questions remain if the elected ones will be able to deliver what they have been voted for.

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