

On Human Bondage

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Photos: Prabir Das

A *pati gamcha* (bag for carrying teal leaves) wrapped around her head, Shefali crosses the narrow stream, and heads to work, along the same path that she has walked for a decade and hopes to do for decades more. For Shefali, life outside the tea gardens is unimaginable, this is a world isolated from the rest of the countryside.

Sometimes she looks up at the early morning sun, hoping against hope that the sun will be merciful today. It is a hard work, even harder than agricultural labour, a job that even Bangalee men have traditionally refused to do. But sun, storm or rain, there is no rest for any tea garden worker.

If a tea garden worker fails to gather a minimum of 23 kg, she will be denied the entire daily wage of Tk 69. She frequently plucks more than 23 kg a day, which entitles her to some extra cash. However, the management in most tea gardens have a reputation for short changing their workers. Illiterate workers find it difficult to drive a fair bargain.



Shefali and her fellow workers are here because approximately half a century ago, in backward regions of eastern and central India, the then British rulers managed to convince people of different ethnic groups that they were going to a magical land where the trees shed money when it is shaken. It was a four year contract but since then, four generations have passed and the tea garden workers are still shaking the magical tree which sheds money; Tk 69 a day for them to be precise.

The British minimised labour costs and the workers' facilities were kept to a bare minimum. As a result many of the workers perished on the tiresome journey where they were crammed like animals into small spaces and after arrival, they lived in a wild environment without adequate medical care. The British Raj is long gone but the colonial mentality is still rife in the mindsets of the tea garden management. Often a signboard bearing the proud motto, 'Company rules over the territory' serves as a reminder that in this part of the world, the colonial era is not quite over.

Till 2008, the magical tree shed Tk 32.50 a day for a worker, the increment coming only after a long struggle. According to Azom Khan, a former worker, and currently a small trader in the labour line, the owners take advantage of the villagers' isolation from the outside world to deprive them of justice. "When I escaped the boundaries of the tea gardens, I felt that we had been confined in a dark well whose lid has been shut off to prevent daylight entering," he says, claiming that the owners do not want them to be educated lest they demand for rights, or escape the world of the tea gardens, which will be detrimental to their interests.

"The management treats the women workers especially badly and use abusive language," says Barindra Chasha, a worker in another village, a view echoed by many. Experts say that the tea garden management succumb to the traditional Bangalee mentality that respectable women should work inside the house and not outside, and thus the reason for this abusive treatment.

But her tiresome work day does not end when she returns to the labour line (the villages of tea gardens). A female tea garden worker has no leisure time. Household chores keep her busy from evening till late night and from early dawn till morning when she hurries for work. It is a long list of collecting firewood, cooking, cleaning, and tending to the children.

Once upon a time, education was as foreign to the workers as the Bangali villages in the neighbourhood. The level of education is still low but nowadays illiterate workers want their children to be properly educated and dream of a life outside the tea gardens, an attitude unimaginable a generation back. "Once they did not want to send their children to school," says school teacher and non-permanent worker Ajit Kumar Goyala. Ajit says that once the parents went to work, he used to sneak in and carry off the kids forcefully. "I knew they would curse me but I did not care," says Ajit. In the 90s, the school was in the temple, and sometimes in the open. Later the company provided for a school, after tea garden workers launched a two-week agitation programme demanding better educational facilities.



Nowadays, poverty rather than ignorance remains the biggest barrier to education. There are young tea garden workers who are ready to go a long way to get an education that they hope will guarantee them a decent life away from the darkness of the labour line. Young Saju Bawri is a tea garden worker who toils in the factory from evening till nightfall. Work at the factory is no less tiresome than work in the fields. But side by side, Saju is also getting ready for his SSC examinations.

"Only the Almighty knows how I am managing this," says Saju. He also says that with the daily cash pay of Tk 69, it is almost impossible to ensure examination registration fees, buy books, and so on, while also contributing to the family. "I am not the only one in this situation," says Saju. He also says that there are some men who, after toiling in the tea gardens all day, go to work in the night for some extra income.

The school teachers themselves live desperate lives. Ajit and his four colleagues get Tk 1200 a month, which is less than the monthly income of a tea plantation worker. Ajit himself works the afternoon in the tea gardens where he earns Tk 55 per day, the daily cash pay of a non-permanent worker. "It is extremely hard work," he says, "our wages are not enough." The tea workers unanimously opine that in an era where the prices of essential commodities have skyrocketed, their daily cash pay can scarcely make ends meet and want their pay increased.

Ajit says the tea garden workers of this country should be given the same facilities as their counterparts in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the workers earn a daily cash pay of Rs 550. Additionally many big estates were broken up and 60 per cent of the country's tea production comes from approximately 3000 small holdings managed by the workers themselves. Tea garden land in Bangladesh is not the property of the companies but the government which leases them.

Unless his income increases, Ajit risks ending up like Nobo Das, a veteran school teacher and another pioneer of education in the tea gardens. Nowadays Nobo spends his days rotting away in his dark room, too sick to tell his story and too poor to afford medical treatment. Nobo was also a guard in the bungalow, the lavish residence of the manager.

His neighbours say that the management does not take care of his medical expenses though they are required to do so by law. Nobo's teeth have penetrated his gums and are almost coming out of his chin, and it seems unless something is done, he shall be relieved only by death.

There are other people in the tea gardens waiting for death or living an invalid life. Four months ago, young Ritesh Bhunerjee's left leg started rotting and his flesh started to fall off. Then there is Shurovi Bhunerjee who contracted rheumatic fever when he was about ten years old. Today he is paralysed from waist down. His father Babul Bhunerjee, a temporary worker in the tea gardens contracted tuberculosis a few years back and is an invalid himself. The story goes on and on in every village, in every tea garden.

Meanwhile Azam Khan points to a broken house over the horizon. It belongs to his neighbour Mintu Rikishian. It is a small and ramshackle structure. “The company said a long time ago that they will build us a house,” says Mintu. He grew tired of waiting and took matters into his own hand, building this hut that is shared by his wife, child and their three hens.

The management provides each permanent worker with a house in the labour lines located within the grant area. However, if the husband and wife are permanent workers in the same company, they get just one house. The houses are also supposed to be maintained by the management but this is rarely the case. Joyonto Karmakar, an electrician in another tea garden says that the management only provides them with tin sheds, and in case there is damage from rain or storm, the management does not bother to even repair them. Meanwhile Azam points to house after house in the neighbourhood that has broken down due to adverse weather conditions. All the occupants confirm that the company has been negligent in providing them with new housing.

Typically built to accommodate four persons, as many as ten people cram the rooms and in many cases, alongside cattle and poultry. The roofs of some of the houses are built with toxic asbestos. Some of the people living under these roofs have died of cancer.

The workers are, however, convinced that their lives will be changed. On August 10, 2014, Shefali once again crosses the same path, only this time she is in a jovial mood, without the *pati gamcha* round her head. This is a special day for not only the 118,000 workers but the entire community of approximately half a million. They were being allowed to vote for their trade union, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), for the second time in its 66-year history, the first time being in 2008.

“These elections will be good for us,” says Sanjib Dey. He says if there is a new elected body, they will represent the interests of the people who have elected them. Traditionally the BCSU was selected by community elites, under the payroll of the company ownership. As a result, the organisation served the interests of the ownership that chose them, rather than the workers they claimed to represent.

The first elected committee of 2008 managed to negotiate an increase of daily cash pay from 32.50 Taka and an increase in other facilities. The committee was however dissolved a year later and replaced with an ad-hoc committee comprised mainly of the defeated candidates, the elite that have ruled the BCSU for decades. The second elections have been won by the same panel of 2008 with an overwhelming majority of 78 percent. Although only permanent tea garden workers get the right to vote, this election will have a direct impact on the entire tea garden community of approximately half a million people. Unlike other places of Bangladesh, the tea garden community has high hopes regarding their elected leaders.

But this is a country where many dreams have been dashed and only time will tell if the elected leadership can deliver on the promises they made to this hapless and marginalised community.



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