

The Case of Tea Workers in Bangladesh

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Tea brings much desired cash for Bangladesh, but those who work on the ground to produce it are “captive” laborers and live in near servitude. According to Bangladesh Tea Board (2002) there are 87,534 registered and 20,065 non-registered tea workers who work in 160 tea estates of Bangladesh. Most of the tea estates are located in the Northeast of the country. The British tea company Duncan Brothers established the first tea garden in the Surmah Valley of Sylhet in 1854. Since then all the tea gardens have been established by clearing jungles. Those who did the hard work of jungle clearing were non-locals brought by Duncan from Assam, Bihar, Madras, Orissa and other places in India.

The new arrivals at the tea gardens were told back home that they would arrive at “a lovely garden in the hill country where they would look after trees with leaves of pure gold which would fall if you (they) shook them” (Jones 1986:11).

The story of golden leaves turned into a lie in the end when they got settled in an unknown country that remains a mystery to them even after a century or more.

The tea workers with different ethnic identities are less-talked-about and forgotten peoples. They no more know their country of origin. Their lives in Bangladesh are confined to the tea gardens. They no more speak their languages perfectly and do not interact much with people of other ethnic identities. Most of them are basically illiterate. These are perfect conditions for the profiteers from the tea industry to continue exploitation of the tea workers.

1. The Industry

Tea is an important export item in Bangladesh. In the fiscal year 2004 Bangladesh exported 12.3 million kilograms of tea valued at US\$15.8 million (Bangladesh Bank 2004)). Bangladesh exports tea to 20 countries in Asia, Middle East, Europe and Africa. It also exports tea to neighboring India, the world’s largest tea producing country. Pakistan is the largest tea market for Bangladesh. During 2000-01 Pakistan imported 7.38 million kg.

of tea from Bangladesh, which brought a cash of US\$8 million (Tk.489,900,000).

Bangladesh ranks eighth among the ten largest tea-producing and exporting countries in the world. The country's tea production was 1.80% of the 2,939.91 million kg produced worldwide. India, the largest tea producing country, produced 846.48 million kg tea, which is 29% of the total production. The local market in India is also very large. Sri Lanka is the largest tea exporting county with an export of 262.95 million kg or 20% of the 1,322.49 million kg traded worldwide during 2000. The share of Bangladesh in the export worldwide was 18.10 million kg or 1.4% of the total export.

Tea Production and Its Trade around the World in 2000

Name of country	Production and share in world production (%)		Export and share of world export (%)	
	(in million Kg)		(in million Kg)	
Bangladesh	53.15	1.8%	18.10	1.4%
India	846.48	28.8%	204.35	15.4%
Sri Lanka	306.79	10.4%	280.13	21.2%
China	683.32	23.2%	227.66	17.2%
Indonesia	159.34	5.4%	105.58	8.0%
Iran	50.00	1.7%	3.50	0.3%
Japan	89.31	3.1%	0.70	3.1%
Turkey	170.00	5.8%	42.00	3.1%
Kenya	236.28	8.1%	216.99	16.4%
Malawi	42.11	1.4%	38.44	2.9%
Others	303.13	10.3%	185.04	14.0%
Total	2939.91	100%	1322.49	100%

Source: Project Development Unit. June 2002. Statistics on Bangladesh Tea Industry. Bangladesh Tea Board. Pages 102-103.

2. Tea Estates (Gardens)

Most of 160 tea estates in Bangladesh are located in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh—Maulvi Bazar, Hobiganj, Sylhet, Brahmanbaria districts. There are 20 tea estates in Panchagar District [in the north of the country] and one in Chittagong, a south-eastern district. In Panchagar,

commercial production is yet to start (2004). Owners of tea gardens include both foreign (British or Sterling) and local companies (see ANNEX-1 for details).

In total the tea estates utilize 114,014.39 ha. land. Foreign companies use 34.50% of the land but share 48.32% of the production. While four Sterling companies own 27 estates, Bangladeshi companies and individuals own 133 (Bangladesh Tea Board 3, National Tea Company 13, Private Company 57 and Proprietary 60).

The local companies and individuals possess 74,679 ha. of which 30,551.29 ha are used for actual cultivation. Average production from these estates is 1,147 kg per ha.

The four foreign companies are: (i) James Finlay [having seven estates—five in Moulvi Bazar and two in Hobiganj], (ii) Duncan Brothers (BD) [having 15 estates—10 in Moulvi Bazar and five in Hobiganj], Deundi Tea Company [having four—one in Moulvi Bazar and three in Hobiganj], and (iv) The New Sylhet Tea Estate [having one estate in Moulvi Bazaar District]. These foreign companies possess 39,335.09 ha. and their production is 1,405 Kg per ha.

The estates are categorized into three according to their production capacities. These are:

Category A: All the “A” category estates that have the highest productivity belong to the “sterling” (British) companies [fully or partially].

Category B: The Bangladesh government, Bangladeshi tea companies or Bangladeshi individuals own this category of estates. These owners have the capacity to upgrade the estates but they don’t pursue it because they think it’s not worth.

Category C: The family owned small and low productive estates belong to this category. Wages are minimal in these estates and work conditions are unsatisfactory. They sell tea to domestic markets and have no interest to improve gardens.

Basic Data on Tea Gardens and Tea Workers

Maulvi Bazar District: 92 Tea Gardens

All six Upazilas (sub-district) have tea estates: (1) Sree Mangal—20, (2) Komolganj—14, (3) Barolekha—18, (4) Kulaura—28, (5) Rajnagar—9 and (6) Maulvi Bazaar proper—3.

Baseline Information

District size: 2,800 sq.km

Area under tea estates: 65,051.10 ha.

Tea cultivation area: 30,577.30 ha. (47.01%)

Production (2002): 1,140 Kg/ha

Tea workers: Regular—55,445 (Male 24,415; Female 24,006; adolescents 7,024); Temporary—10,420

Foreign or Sterling company gardens: 17 (Duncan—10, Finlay—5, Deundi—1, and New Sylhet Tea—1)

Hobiganj District: 23 Tea Gardens

Three of eight Upazilas have estates: (1) Bahubal—9, (2) Chunarghat—9, (3) Madhabpur—5.

Baseline Information on the district

District size: 2,640 Sq.km

Tea estate area: 21,973.66 ha

Tea plantation area: 11,217.66 ha (51.05%)

Tea production (2002): 1,340 kg/ha

Regular tea workers: 19,411 (Male 8,271; Female 8,271; adolescents 2,271)

Temporary workers: 3,822

Foreign or Sterling companies: 10 (Duncan—5, Finlay—2, Deundi—3, and New Sylhet Tea—1)

Sylhet District: 20 Tea Gardens

Five of 11 upazilas in Sylhet District have tea estates: (1) Sylhet proper—8, (2) Fenchuganj—3, (3) Jointapur—5, (4) Kanaighat—2, and (5) Goainghat—2.

Baseline Information on the District

District size: 3,490 Sq.km

Tea estate area: 11,574.80 ha

Tea plantation area: 4,738.17 ha (40.94%)

Tea production: 953 kg/ha

Regular tea workers: 6,633 (Male 2,619; Female 2,747; adolescents 1,269)

Temporary workers: 3,192

There is no foreign company in this district.

Brahmanbaria District: One tea garden

One of eight Upazilas in this district—Brahmanbaria Sadar—has one tea estate.

Baseline Information on the district

District size: 1,927.30 Sq.km
Tea estate area: 62.55 ha
Tea plantation area: 29.95 ha (47.88%)
Tea production withheld at the moment
Regular tea workers: 33 (Male 10; Female 23)
Temporary workers: 40
There is no foreign company in this district.

Chittagong District: 23 tea gardens

Five of 20 Upazilas in Chittagong District have 23 tea estates. (1) Fatikchhari—17, (2) Rangunia—3, (3) Hathazari—1,(4) Potia—1 and (5) Banshkhali—1.

Baseline Information on the district

District size: 5,283 Sq.km
Tea estate area: 15,045 ha
Tea plantation area: 3,766 ha (25.03%)
Tea production: 913 kg/ha
Regular tea workers: 5,942 (Male 2,680; Female 2,741, adolescents 521)
Temporary workers: 2,452
There is no foreign company in this Chittagong District.

Rangamati District: One tea garden

One of 11 Upazilas of Rangamati Hill District—Kaptai—has one tea estate.

Baseline Information on the district

District size: 6,116.13 Sq.km.
Tea estate area: 307 ha
Tea plantation area: 140.50 ha (45.77%)
Tea production: 155 kg/ha
Regular tea workers: 80 (Male 42; Female 32)
Temporary: 140
There is no foreign company in this district.

Panchgarh District: 20 tea gardens

Note: Production has not yet started in this district and the locations and other information about tea gardens are still not included in the official documents.

Source: Project Development Unit, Bangladesh Tea Board. June 2002.
Statistics on Bangladesh Tea Industry.

3. Tea Workers in Captive Situation

In 1854 when the tea workers [Santals, Oraons, Munda, Gonds, etc.] from different States of India first arrived they each signed four-year contracts that eventually oblige them to stay on the tea gardens for generations. That was the beginning of hard labor, erosion of cultural identity and captivity that never came to an end. Illiterate, they hardly understood what the document contained (Jones 1986: 10).

A century later they find themselves still as illiterate. Their poor housing conditions, low wages, long working hours [compared to their Indian counterparts], social discrimination, and *de facto* restriction on free movement deprive them of many basic human needs and rights that every human being must have for personal and societal progress. These conditions make sure that the children of tea workers can do nothing else and become tea workers. Deprived, exploited and alienated the tea workers live an inhumane life.

The tea workers are so much cornered that they depend solely on the companies for food, medicine, accommodations, education, etc. They don't have choices about their life and amenities.

The tea workers are completely cut off from their origins in India. They can only partly recall the languages of their forefathers. They speak "a sort of bastard Hindi" that passes as a common language on the tea estates (Jones 1986:14). They also speak in *Deshali*, which is a mixture of Bengali and language of Orissa. Their accents while speaking in *Deshali* testify their cultural corrosion.

They are alienated not just from their past history they are also isolated from the present society in Bangladesh. The local people in the northeastern districts commonly consider them as foreigners. The Bengali tea workers also consider them inferior and maintain a distance from them.

The only social relationship that exists between the tea workers and the Bengalis is one of business. The Bengalis own majority of the shops in the area. On the weekly holiday, Sunday, some of the tea workers work in Bengali houses. But the Bengalis would hardly allow them into their houses. They treat them as untouchables. Glasses, plates or other equipment are generally kept separate for the tea workers. However, among themselves, whatever their identity or origin, the tea worker maintain quite good relations.

Social and economic distance of the tea workers with their Bengali supervisors including the managers is much wider. Francis Rolt, a British

writer, gives a vivid description of the severe discriminatory conduct of the hierarchy towards the tea workers: “The tea gardens are managed as an extreme hierarchy: the managers live like gods, distant, unapproachable, and incomprehensible. Some even begin to believe that they are gods, that they can do exactly what they like” (Rolt 1991: 149).

“Managers have anything up to a dozen laborers as their personal, domestic servants. They are made to tie the managers shoe laces to remind them that they are under managerial control and that they are bound to do whatever they are asked,” writes another British human rights activist, Dan Jones (Jones 1986: 14).

The conditions of the forlorn tea workers depict many kinds of abuse, discrimination and deprivation that are very difficult to overcome. There are constitutional safeguards, laws and mechanisms intended to ensure human dignity, but for the tea workers human dignity is only a dream. Their conditions violate the maximum provisions of the Bangladesh Constitution, different instruments, laws and rules that commit social and economic and human dignity. The SAARC Social Charter, in the hands of the South Asian States, upholds the same commitment. Its implementation is a big challenge indeed.

4. Critique of Policies and Practices Concerning the Tea Workers

Cases show that the tea workers in Bangladesh live an inferior standard of life compared to that of the major tea producing countries in the world. With their income as low as Tk.28 (less than half of one US Dollar) per day they are in most cases deprived of their rights to appropriate housing, medication, education, drinking water, etc. Their working environment is not safe with almost any protective measures against using harmful chemicals in the estates. Even where there are hospitals or health service centers, lack of medicine and skilled doctors are commonplace. Health care for diarrhea, gastric ulcer, etc. are the only service one can expect from these health centers. Teachers in many instances stay absent where there are [primary] schools. Violation of the right to education appears to be normal. The following is brief critical analyses of different aspects where concerned policies fail to protect their rights.

4.a. Living Condition: “We live in place worse than that of the officers’ pets (at the estates). Many of us have only a thin jute mattress to sleep on,” describes a tea worker about her living condition. Living conditions provided to tea workers are generally outrageous and clear infringement of the Bangladesh Constitution. One commitment that the SAARC Social

Charter sets for the South Asian States is to enable its citizens “satisfy basic human needs and to realize his or her personal dignity, safety and creativity.”

The Social Charter also touches upon the “access to basic education, adequate housing, safe drinking water and sanitation, and primary health care”, which should be guaranteed in legislation, executive and administrative provisions, in addition to ensuring “adequate standard of living, including adequate shelter, food and clothing”.

The Social Charter urges that “State Parties underline the imperative for providing a better habitat to the people of South Asia as part of addressing the problems of the homeless.”

While the Social Charter sets principles there are laws and instruments to make it obligatory for the States and different agencies to ensure dignified housing for its citizens.

One such instrument that applies to the tea workers is the Tea Plantation Labor Rules 1977 that makes it obligatory for the owners of tea gardens to provide standard housing to each tea worker. The rules provide: “Every employer shall provide and maintain for every worker and his family housing accommodation to be constructed on dry and well drained land having adequate supply of wholesome drinking water, as near as possible to the place of work. Such houses shall be built at safe distance from swamps and marshes and above highest flood level. It shall be open to an employer to provide such accommodation in the course of several years, provided that such houses shall be built for at least 10 percent of the resident workers every year.” Had this provision been materialized, all the tea workers and their families would have proper houses by 1987.

But the housing of the tea workers did not improve much. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace reported in 1983/84 that only ten percent houses had been improved according to the labor rules in the 6-7 years since it had been passed. It is known from recent (August 2004) visits to some tea estates in Sylhet that only the British Companies like Duncan and the Finlay Tea Estates have partially improved some of the labor houses in some estates.

Typically a single room [in the line house] is crowded with people of different ages of a family. There are still rooms of only 8’x8’, which are now 15 years old. A room of 8’x12’ that can accommodate four persons at the most, is often crammed by as many as ten persons. The walls are generally made up of mud and the roof of bamboo and sun grass. Cattle and human beings are often seen living together in the same house.

Poor and inadequate housing, malnutrition, unhygienic sanitation, and social injustice [common features of life in the labor lines] are evident in the morbidity rate among the tea workers. The occurrence of leprosy, tuberculosis, malaria, and anemia is much higher among the tea workers compared to the national average. Worms are a common problem for children as well as adults.

All these conditions in the tea gardens defy the Bangladesh Constitution, laws, and lately the principles and provisions of the SAARC Social Charter that urges for “ensuring of adequate standard of living, including adequate ... food” among other things. The re-affirmation of the states to “protect and promote the health” of these people should be renewed once again. The commitment to “implement an assured nutritional standards approach towards the satisfaction of basic needs” of these people is to be considered seriously.

The Labor Rules promised to ensure safe water source and sanitation of the tea workers. But to date the only source of drinking water is a few tube wells, which too, is not sufficient. In some cases there is one tube well for 30-40 households; but in one instance eight tube wells were found for 15,000 persons. In some places a tap is provided for 20-25 households that remains open from 6 to 8 AM and again 4 to 6 PM. The surface wells provided get easily polluted with coverlid broken for heavy duty and too many users. Drinking water polluted by faecal matters is sure to make them sick. Using river water to wash and bathe is also dangerous.

According to the Labor Rules the companies were supposed to provide latrines for the tea workers and their families accommodated on the estates. But till now latrines are almost absent; as was in the 1986. People are used to excreting in bushes. Unclean water, inadequate sanitation, damp and overcrowded living affect the workers' health. Diarrhea, dysentery, and other water borne diseases are common in the labor lines.

4.b Work Condition: Working hours for the tea leave pluckers, mostly women, are usually from 8 AM to 5 PM [with break for lunch] from Monday to Saturday. Sunday is the weekly holiday. One can also work overtime on a work day and on holiday for which the pay is double.

Women are mostly employed as pluckers because they have more “skilled and nimble fingers than men” Jones (1986: 15). Men tea workers are assigned to plant trees, clear jungle and other jobs. Eight tea workers work under a *sarder* (supervisor). The *sarders* work under the supervision of *chowkidars* (usually Bengalis), who distribute the job area, i.e., in the estates, in the fields, jungle clearing, etc.

The overseers of these non-Bengali and non-Muslim women tea workers are always Bengali men. They consider these pickers “worthless, rubbish person of low moral standards”, because in Muslim world “respectable women are always working inside the house, not outside” (Jones 1986: 15). Women tea workers face harassment of different types. Young girls are called for household works in manager’s bungalow often at risk of sexual harassment. This is an abuse in defiance of the SAARC Social Charter and many other instruments.

Illiteracy of the tea workers is an obstacle to their growing up self assured. They are vulnerable to unfair dealings of the management. While measuring the days’ collection of leaves, the illiterate workers do not understand the scales and are sometimes cheated.

Article 17 of the Bangladesh Constitution states that, “The State shall adopt effective measures for the purposes of— (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs.” The tea workers are totally deprived of these needs.

State Parties under the SAARC Social Charter are committed to set up mechanisms and institutions to promote the advancement of women as an integral part of mainstream political, economic, social and cultural development. But such mechanisms, if they do exist, are not for the tea workers for sure!

Workers in the estates come into contact with chemical pesticides and herbicides used intensely and indiscriminately in the estates. These harmful chemicals like Paraquat, Glyphocede and many more cause them sickness. They do not take preventive measures to avoid the side effects. It is very unlikely that the tea workers are aware of the harmful effects from these chemicals. It is an obvious threat to healthy living.

4.c Wages and Other Benefits: The daily wage of a tea plucker is Taka 28 per day (about half a US Dollar). However, this varies according to the amount of leaves plucked. It is granted that a person plucks at least 23 Kg. leaves and gets 28 Taka. If she or he fails to pluck that much the supervisor will not accept his or her attendance. But if one plucks more than that he or she gets an additional pay of one Taka per Kg. The day laborers get 20 Taka per day for jungle clearing.

However, wages vary according to age. Adolescents and children get 90% and 80% of the adults’ wage. Parents often prefer sending their children to work in tea estates rather than to school because work brings extra cash for the family. Wednesday is the weekly pay day.

Deprived of “social justice” the only source of happiness of the tea workers’ [who are mostly Hindus] is the religious festival—*puja*. They celebrate the *puja* among themselves. The contribution for these celebrations is cut off (10 Taka every month from each worker) ahead from their salary. This goes into the festival fund.

Other monthly contribution and charges taken from the tea workers are: 10 Taka as trade union fee; 16 Taka for electricity; and 18 Taka for pension fund. Most of the workers are indebted to local shops owned by Bengalis. They often pay more than the market price for buying things in credit.

After ten years of work a tea worker qualifies to become a permanent laborer. The permanent tea workers are entitled to some facilities like two festival bonuses of 250 Taka each; a ration of 3.5 Kg flour per week at the rate of 1.3 Taka. Children under 12 also get this amount at the same rate. However, if a tea plucker fails to pluck the target amount of leaves, she or he loses the ration for that particular month. The workers allege that the company often ignores ration rules. There is also allegation that the management at times does not make a worker permanent even if she or she qualifies to become registered. The companies prefer temporary workers to avoid obligation of granting labor benefits, welfare and medical support. These are injustices against the workers.

However, the temporary tea workers have the opportunity to work outside the gardens. But they are certainly subject to discrimination and are looked down upon. There is also a practice of cattle rearing in estates. A family rearing cattle of others gets share of the brood. This adds a little extra cash to the family. Some tea workers run small businesses like tea stalls or grocery shops to supplement their family income.

In some companies 60 is the age for retirement and pension. Pension of around Taka 40,000 is paid upon retirement. In addition Taka 40 is paid to a monthly paid worker every week. Pension for a weekly paid worker is 32 Taka every week.

Punishment for any misconduct is severe—work as normal without pay for 20 days to 25 days. Officially a permanent worker can be dismissed if he or she is ill for more than two months; absent from the estate for more than ten days; and found guilty of misconduct. Sometimes a worker is dismissed without any reason shown. The most common reasons shown for dismissal are theft, illegal wood-cutting, fishing from the garden’s pond and misconduct. Other estates are told of his or her offense so that they don’t hire that person.

Women workers reportedly do not enjoy the full length of maternity leave. According to a source they work till the eighth month of pregnancy. After delivery a mother quickly goes back to work and often takes the newly born baby with her. The baby is often kept under the shade tree when the mother is at work. This is degrading for human beings and a violation of civic norms as expressed in the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare [in the SAARC Social Charter].

According to the Tea Plantation Labor Rules each estate should provide the workers “with a crèche with toys and play equipments for their children.” This is a far cry yet. And “the managers see it as one of more utopian idea of the requirements of the Rules,” explains Jones (Jones 1986: 31). “The best interests and welfare of the child shall be the paramount consideration and the guiding principle in all matters involving his or her life” this provision in the SAARC Social Charter is far from consideration in the tea gardens.

According to the Tea Plantation Labor Rules the workers are entitled to a full paid sick leave and maternity leave. Under the Rules one doctor is supposed to be assigned for 850 patients. On larger estates at least one doctor must be woman. A set up of technical necessities such as X-ray and ambulance facilities should be provided. One can come by a very beautiful hospital in the tea estate region but the health and medical services are absent in compliance with standard that Tea Plantation Rules sets.

The SAARC Social Charter talks about “special services” that shall be provided “for the child and its mother, including pre-natal, natal [especially delivery by trained birth attendant] and post-natal care, immunization, early childhood care, timely and appropriate nutrition, education and recreation.” This is only a dream for a woman tea worker.

The Charter also provides that “states parties shall take action to ensure reproductive health, reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates and also provision of adequate facilities to enable an infant to enjoy the warmth of love and support of his/her parents.”

However, the tea workers in captive situation hardly dare to hope for more than what they are used to. They cling to the limited security and facilities that the tea companies offer and are often cautious about standing and claiming their rights for fear of losing jobs and homes and then facing an unknown future in a hostile world.

4.d Social Condition: The tea workers are obviously socially excluded people. They are ignored, sometimes treated as untouchables and are kept at a distance by the local Bengalis. The Bengali tea workers, who are much

smaller in number, do not live within the labor lines of the non-Bengali tea workers. They consider themselves superior to the non-Bengali tea workers and indicate that they don't belong to the labor lines, a filthy place. This is consciously or unconsciously a demonstration of disrespectful attitudes and intolerance contrary to the value of "tolerance, non-violence, and pluralism" embodied in the SAARC Social Charter.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh guarantees its citizens an equal treatment in the Article 27: "All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law." Similarly Article 28(1) states that "The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth." The state does not help much in materializing these constitutional guarantees in the lives of the much exploited tea workers.

Social justice that a human being deserves from others is not in practice in the tea estates. This is a culture that the tea estate authorities have failed to establish among the tea workers of different cultural background. "Non-discrimination in respect of diversity within and among societies" that state parties should promote according to the SAARC Social Charter is grossly defied in the tea estates.

Education, an important ladder for transformation of a community or society for better is at the root of social exclusion of the tea workers. It is almost deliberately planned that an overwhelming majority of the children of the tea workers drop out from school before they can use education to step into other professions and thus have to enter the tea gardens as laborers. Children are also reportedly teased and discriminated in schools. This painful experience drives children to the tea gardens leading them into life without self-esteem and dignity.

The extremely poor condition with education in the tea estates puts the tea workers in tough struggle for claiming their legitimate rights. The state's inaction in this regard demonstrates how it fails to provide political protection to one of the most disadvantaged communities of Bangladesh. The South Asian states commit [in the Social Charter] to become "deeply conscious that education is the cutting edge in the struggle against poverty and the promotion of development" and "re-affirm the importance of attaining the target of providing free education to all children between the ages of 6 - 14 years". For Bangladesh this commitment is only a rhetoric.

In the Social Charter the South Asian states "affirm the need to empower women through literacy and education recognizing the fact that such empowerment paves the way for faster economic and social

development". The State of Bangladesh is yet to become sincere enough in trying to affirm this need.

The SAARC Social Charter urges the state parties to "find ways and means to provide youths with access to education, create awareness on family planning, HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases, and risks of consumption of tobacco, ALCOHOL and drugs,". But alcoholism, particularly among men, is a common picture in the estates. "Home made alcoholic beverage was introduced by the British rulers," explains a tea worker, "to restrain us from saving money."

The tea workers have no land of their own. They have no other skills to explore an alternative income source. This perpetuates their underdevelopment. Some workers now save Taka 5 each week through tea workers' trade union.

The Bangladesh Constitution guarantees its citizens in sections (a) of Article 15 and (b) of Article 17 that "It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people with a view to securing to its citizens—(a) the provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing education and medical care." This Constitutional Guarantee constantly mocks them.

5. Actors and actions

Meaningful interventions for development and welfare of the tea workers particularly to establish their legitimate rights are rare. Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (Bangladesh Tea Workers Union) is the key organization of the tea workers to claim rights related to socio-economic condition, working environment, wages, industrial peace, better relationship with the management, etc. There are other smaller organizations--Cha Chattra Jubo Parishad (Tea Student Youth Council) and Duti Pata Ekti Kuri Sangskritik Parishad (Two Leaves and One Bud Cultural Council) to name a two--trying to establish the rights of the tea workers. However, achievement of these organizations is minimal. The union is allegedly well under control of the employers. Under the British imperial laws trade unions were forbidden on the estates. The ones attempted were seen as trouble makers and were accused of interfering. The workers' unions that took shape through the 60s and 70s were mostly affiliated to political ideologies if not parties directly.

Some Tea workers' Unions in the past were accused of being company union. One was also accused of being linked with CIA through America-

Asia Free Labor Institute (AFLCIO) and providing support to whichever government was in power. Thus, union leadership is accused of corruption (Jones 1986: 40).

Chittagong Cha Bagan Sramik Union (CCBSU) is a Chittagong based union of the tea workers. CCBSU was established shortly after independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and is linked with the Bangladesh Trade Union Center (TUC), the largest and the most effective of all the traders' union federations.

The private organizations provide some services for the welfare of the tea workers. Notable among these is the Health, Education and Economic Development, Bangladesh (HEED,B) which runs a Leprosy Hospital in Komolganj. The incidence of leprosy among the tea plantation workers is high, all it is now reportedly declining. There are NGOs for offering micro-credit. But development of the tea workers with micro-credit is highly questionable. There is criticism that micro-credit program of the NGOs make them dependent on the providers of loans. NGOs pay little or no attention to the rights base-approaches in their work.

Support provided by the human rights groups and political organizations to the tea workers in their struggle for dignified life is meager.

6. Conclusion

The tea industry is a labor based one. Although socially, culturally and politically isolated and excluded, the workers are an essential part of the industry in Bangladesh, and a large part of the workers are women. They comprise a community of multi-cultural people from different parts of India. These people, living within the political borders of Bangladesh have lost their identity and origin. Perhaps they are unaware of the changes that are taking place around them and the rights they are entitled to.

Recent interviews with the tea workers show that many of them haven't heard of the Tea Plantation Labor Rules 1977. The tea workers still dream of a better future for their children but they are stuck with the notion that "There is no way out, but we don't want our children to be tea workers," as a tea worker explains.

Because of language barrier they can hardly communicate well with others let alone stand for rights after discovering that they have become captive labor force in the tea estates. The policies and instruments that are supposed to ensure their rights and provide justice for the tea workers are yet to be effective. Without proper mechanisms in place, principles and

commitments expressed in the SAARC Social Charter have no meaning. The National Coordination Committee for Implementation of the SAARC Social Charter in Bangladesh has just been formed and an action plan [addressing health, education and women] has been worked out, which will be tabled during the next SAARC summit (2005).

The committee, which has only started “stock taking” will take a year or two from January 2005 to prepare the action plan. However, the content and priorities of the action plan can be a concern because it is being prepared in conjunction with the controversial Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) that is designed allegedly to serve the interest of the donor countries.

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Policy Critique

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