

Books Explain Tea Workers' Deprivation

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The story of tea plantation workers of Bangladesh is one of captivity, deprivation and exploitation that has no end. Descendants of the indentured labour force, they remain tied to the tea gardens. Most of them are non-Bangalee, lower caste Hindu, Adivasis, Bihari Muslims, and their ethnic composition is unique.

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) has been closely following the tea workers and the tea industry for two decades now. Its research, investigation and visual documentation have resulted in volumes of publications, investigative reports and three documentary films.

Its latest two books—*Cha Sramiker Katha* (The Story of the Tea Workers) edited by the writer and *Cha Sramiker Mojuri: Maliker Labh, Sramiker Loksan* (Wages of Tea Workers: Owners Win, Workers Lose) authored by the writer—were launched on 11 November 2023. While *Cha Sramiker Katha* is about the overall condition of the tea workers and the tea industry of Bangladesh, the other book concentrates on the tea workers' wages and their unprecedented 19-day strike in August 2022 for a daily cash pay of BDT 300.

A group of tea workers including their top leaders traveled to Dhaka to attend the book launch ceremony and narrated their ordeals. A panel of economists, academics,

and trade union leaders spoke strongly in favour of the tea workers. They concurred with messages that the books transpire and added their insights.

“Soon after the release of the second edition of *Cha Sramiker Katha* in 2022, an unprecedented 19-day strike appeared as an upheaval in the tea gardens. The strike came to end only after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina intervened and fixed the daily cash wage of workers at BDT 170, a rise from BDT 120. Although this increase did not fulfill the tea workers demand of BDT 300 in daily cash pay, the tea workers accepted it and went back to their work. *Cha Sramiker Mojuri: Maliker Labh, Sramiker Loksan* reviews and analyzes the events leading up to and after this unprecedented strike,” said Philip Gain, author and editor of the books and director of SEHD.

Fair wage is always the most pertinent issue and concern of the tea workers. “It is at the incitement of the owners of the tea gardens that increase of wage fell much short of what we demanded,” said Nripen Paul, the acting general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the lone trade union in the tea industry. It is also the largest trade union in Bangladesh.

“We are deprived of our legitimate benefits including legal entitlements and protection,” added Sreemoti Bauri, vice president of Juri Vally of BCSU, one of the seven valleys in

the tea growing districts.

The second book on workers' wage and unprecedented strike of August 2022 that brought the tea industry to a standstill elaborately discusses the wage issues of the tea workers. In this book, the author explains how the owners' calculation of daily wage of a worker that amounts to more than BDT 500 (USD 4.5) is seriously flawed. Benefits that the labour legislation allows to be added to the cash pay is less than BDT 300 (USD 2.7).

This wage is around half of what an agricultural worker in Bangladesh gets and lot less than what lowest grade workers in other sectors get.

"The employers unjustly calculate the wages. They ignore the labour law in their calculation," said Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, a lawyer practicing in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. "This attitude of the employers must change."

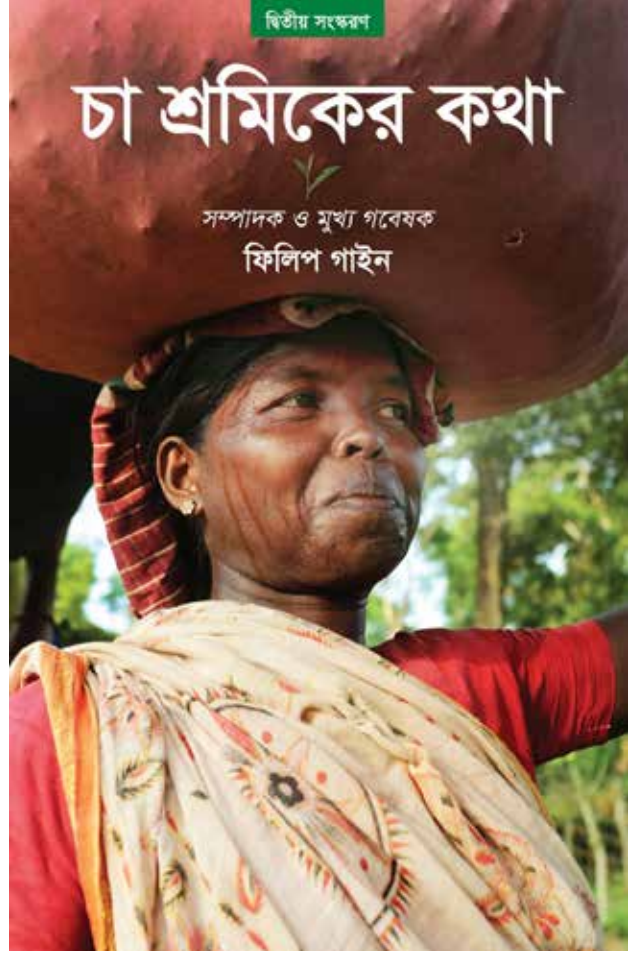
On the minimum wage issue, Professor M.M. Akash, Chairman of Bureau of Economic Research (BER) of Dhaka University said, "Whenever it comes to increase tea workers' wage, the owners say it is not possible. It is an eyewash." He directed a question to the owners, "Why, you big companies, are taking over the tea gardens if you are not making good profits? If you do not make profit, why would you invest in the tea industry?"

"Tea workers' job requires hard work. So, they should be paid enough so that they are able to nourish themselves adequately to be strong enough to work for eight hours. This major issue has to be taken into account while fixing their minimum wage," Prof. Akash added.

"An audit of profit and loss of each tea garden must be carried out and made public before the owners claim 'we are unable to pay more than this'. Because their luxurious lifestyle is telling something else," remarked the editor of United News of Bangladesh (UNB), Mr. Farid Hossain.

Prof. Akash also pointed out how the poor economic status of the tea workers affects their fate. "If the workers had been financially well-off their 19-day strike would have lasted longer and workers could secure BDT 300 instead of BDT 170. Unfortunately, they are the 'poorest among the poor'."

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, a senior economist and chair of the book launch, talked on how important it is to pay just wages to the tea workers. "We are dreaming of turning



Bangladesh into a middle-income country. To see that dream come true, we must free our policy-sphere,” said Dr. Rahman. “We cannot become middle-income country with cheap labour such as the tea workers.”

Slashing of tea workers’ arrear is another facet of deprivation alongside their unjust wage. After prime minister fixed their daily cash pay at BDT 170, they were supposed to receive around BDT 30,000 in arrear for 20 months. But each got BDT 11,000. “Such a big slash has been possible because of maneuvering of the employers and failure of the union leaders in the tea sector,” Prof. Akash observed.

“The tea workers do not have much liberty to choose their work independently outside the garden. To try that they have to leave their houses inside the plantation, which they cannot afford because the country outside the tea gardens is unknown to them and they are completely landless,” remarked Prof. Akash. “All these factors compel them to remain tied to the tea gardens at least to secure a place to live. This condition restricts them from competing for jobs with others outside the plantation.”

Barrister Barua echoed this land rights issue in his discussion: “If owners follow Section 32 of labour law diligently, then why do they not pay heed to the benefits provided by Fifth Schedule of the Labour Rules 2015? Law cannot be used only to the employers’ convenience.

The industry will develop in the right direction only when owners will consider workers as assets, not just the gardens.”

“Two books that are launched today are encyclopedic for journalists,” observed Mr. Farid Hossain. “While exploitation and hardships of the tea workers are documented in these books, some of their success stories are also highlighted. Our journalists should also focus and report such human-interest stories of tea workers.”

On the significance of struggle of the tea workers in the field, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman said, “When the fight in field is joined by the fight with knowledge at the national level, the voice of the tea workers gets stronger. And I think with the books launched today, we have set the stage for such a collaboration. So, let us leave this publication ceremony with a feeling of strength.”

“The books launched have unveiled the tea workers situation,” said Tapan Datta, a life-long labour leader and adviser to BCSU since 1970. “These publications are another struggle like that of tea workers. It is for SEHD that tea workers’ land rights issues have come to the fore.”

Among others who spoke at the book launch included Prof. Tanzimuddin Khan and Prof. Sanjida Akhter of Dhaka University; Dhona Bauri, BCSU leader; and Abdullah Kafee of CPB. □

