

Spotlight on Tragic Wages of Harijans and Tea Workers

Philip Gain and Fahmida Afroze Nadia



Chief guest Dr. Hossain Zillur speaking at the discussion. Photo. Sanjoy Kairi

What a tragic story of wage deprivation! A Harijan in Sreemangal Municipality, who cleans the streets, gets a remuneration of taka 550 a month! Sukon Bashfor, a Harijan cleaner, employed by the Sreemangal Pourashava, told her appalling story with tear in eyes in a May Day celebration on 30 April 2024. “We work four hours a day and we work every day of the year whatever the weather is,” said Sukon. “There is no holiday for us even on May Day. And our monthly remuneration is only taka 550. To finish the target of cleaning my portion of the streets, my son and my husband join me with broom in hand.”

The Stories of Sukon Bashfor and other Harijan cleaners who live in hovels of Sreemangal Poura Colony were unearthed by two research staff of Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)—Rabiullah and Sylester Tudu—and shared at the May Day celebration. The celebration organized by SEHD, Brattyajan Resource Centre (BRC) and Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) also highlighted the wage deprivation of the tea workers. While the story of tea workers’ wage deprivation has been widely discussed in recent times, the stunning story of wage deprivation of the Harijan cleaners was as if heard of for the first time.

A hush descended over the audience when Sukon Bashfor and other delegations from the Harijan community from Moulvibazar and Sreemangal spoke.

There are 36 Harijan sweepers in Sreemangal who get this appalling monthly salary for keeping the capital of tea clean and habitable. The jamadar (supervisor) gets taka 580 a month. The Bangalee cleaners who reportedly work eight hours get a daily wage of taka 400.

Kanti Lal Bashfor, the president of Bangladesh Harijan Yokkha Parishad (BHYP) reported that in Habiganj Municipality, a Harijan cleaner gets a monthly salary of taka 900 for the same work, which is taka 3,500 for those of the Harijan community employed by the Moulvibazar Municipality. He also shared information on monthly salaries of Harijans in eight municipalities and one city corporation in Sylhet division.

Frustrated Kanti Lal Bashfor shared in angry tone: “The occupational skills of cleaners does not improve when the income is so meagre. When we go hungry, many of us lose their sense and engage in selling alcohol and marijuana.”

Sagar Harijan, the jamadar in Sreemangal added, “We

Harijans do not get any health protection, pension and even any compensation or leave in emergencies such as accidents.”

The salaries of Harijan cleaners sweeping the streets in municipalities range from taka 550 to 4,000 and taka 3,000 to 17,000 in city corporations around the country. Among the cleaners who clean drains and transport waste in trucks are little better paid. Those who work in government offices, universities, colleges, hospitals, railway, etc. are on get government scales and get salaries between taka 12,000 and 25,000.

The key demand of the Harijan cleaners is that they get unified respectable salary scales. They also demand that the prime minister’s directive to provide 80% of cleaning jobs in municipalities and city corporations to the Harijans who allege that currently others are taking their jobs.

In his keynote presentation on the question of tea workers’ just wages, Philip Gain, researcher and director of SEHD, focused on the wage deprivation of tea workers. The current daily wage of a tea worker (Taka 170) which was fixed by the prime minister in the backdrop of an unprecedented strike in the tea garden in August 2022 is still inadequate. The tea workers’ wage has never been just. During the 1880s and 1890s the average monthly

wage of a tea worker in Assam (Sylhet division was part of Assam back then), was six rupees. With this little income, they were not able to buy enough rice for the month. Back then a maund (40 kg) of rice would cost two rupees. The tea workers could spend one rupee. The owners then would add one rupee. Thus, the owners introduced subsidy for staple. Some other fringe benefits including medical care was also introduced. Thus, the owners invented techniques to keep the tea workers tied to the tea gardens in the post-slavery era. However, many see the tea workers and Harijans as modern slaves.

In Bangladesh the owners have followed the same techniques to not give the just cash wages to the tea workers and to keep the tea workers, most of them low caste Hindu and non-Bangalee, tied to the tea gardens.

What is most painful for the tea workers of Bangladesh is the owners have never paid them gratuity, shared company profit and have routinely violated several important sections of the labour legislations that are supposed to ensure decent work conditions, standard education and medical care among others. Violation of labour legislations indeed is the single most important factor for unjust wages and indecent work conditions.

The speakers from the tea community and their lone



Women tea workers in a rally during the August strike in 2022. Photo. Philip Gain

union, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) spoke on different aspects of wage deprivation and indecent work conditions, their causes and consequences.

Mr. Rambhajan Kairi, vice chairman of Kamalganj Upazila and trade union leader talked about how employers in tea gardens abuse labour legislations in their best interest and are not held accountable even though there are flagrant violations at their end. "In Bangladesh, legislation is used to deprive our tea workers," Mr. Kairi remarked. "Whenever the price of tea falls, every tea worker has to bear the consequences. But when profits are made, that never reach the workers."

Ms. Jasmine Akhter, vice president of BCSU commented on the status of women tea workers. "Despite the fact that majority of the tea leaf pluckers are women, they are not valued and respected either in the gardens or in their families," said Ms. Akhter. "If they demand a just wage, they hear all about owners' loss. And if they protest against injustice, they face trouble in every possible way."

Mr. Paresch Kalindi, the treasurer of BCSU and Mr. Nripen Pal, acting general secretary of BCSU also spoke to raise community voice.

After the community voices heard, a panel of researchers, academic, lawyer, government official led the discussion into a root cause analysis and shared their thoughts on what needs to be done to pull the Harijans and tea workers out of their current appalling condition.

Mohammad Mahbubul Hasan, Deputy Inspector General of Department of Inspection for Factories and

Establishments (DIFE) in Sreemangal reflected on what his agency does for the workers. DIFE indeed is an important government agency to ensure implementation of labour legislations and well-being of the tea workers in particular. In his discussion he highlighted particularly how DIFE helps in getting financial aid to university students from tea gardens.

Katyayani Chandola, a lawyer from India represented NAZDEEK, a US-based advocacy group supporting work with tea workers in India and Bangladesh talked about the wages of tea workers in India and the plight of those in Assam. "Currently in Assam, the daily wage of a tea worker is Rs. 250, which however, is more than Rs. 400 in several other regions such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Now the tea workers of all the states of India are demanding that the minimum wages be fixed for all the states using the Supreme Court's formula," reported Chandola. "If wages were determined using the formula, the minimum wage would now be more than Rs. 500."

Prof. Tanzimuddin Khan of University of Dhaka spoke on how to minimise the anomalies with wages. A country should put a standard in place to ensure just wages. "What we see in tea gardens and with Harijans is severe disrespect to social justice and dishonour to the spirit of the May Day," said Prof. Khan. "Instead of different wage structures for different sectors, all unions should come together and demand a universal minimum wage for all sectors."

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, the chief guest at the celebration, reflected on wage deprivation of the Harijans and tea workers and how different actors can play a right



Women tea worker return home after day's hard work. Photo. Philip Gain

role in giving them honour. "It is very important to specify the problems of our marginalized groups and work on solutions through strategic thinking," said Dr. Rahman.

"The most harmful aspect of marginalization is when people feel marginalized and powerless," remarked Dr. Rahman. "It is very important for them to have the ability to show their potentials. Brattyajan Resource Centre (BRC) is helping the marginalized and excluded communities and giving them a platform through its continuous research. Journalists also have a responsibility in strengthening research and investigation."

The Harijans and the tea workers have a similar history of migration to their current locations from different parts of India. The Harijans are traditionally known as sweepers and many of them consider themselves social outcasts or 'Dalit'. The term, 'Dalit' is used to define the status of those who are outside the four Varnas in the Hindu Casteism, which means they belong to the so-called fifth category. The members of the Harijan community work as cleaners in the cities and municipalities all over the country except for three districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). They are among the most neglected in society and most deprived of all social privileges. Cleaning has been their main occupation for more than 200 years now. The Harijans with a population of around 100,000 are among the most marginalised communities who are afflicted with a variety of social and economic problems.

The 138,000 tea workers and their communities of half million people, most of them Hindus and considered the fifth category in the Hindu casteism, also migrated to

their current locations to work in the tea gardens. Tied to the tea gardens for five generations they now work in 160 tea gardens in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions. The British companies had started bringing them from Bihar, Madras, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and other places in India to work in the tea gardens in Sylhet region from the 1850s. Engagement of these non-local communities was a post-slavery innovation to address the labour needs of colonial capitalist enterprises. The misfortune of these indentured labourers started with their journey to the tea gardens. The tea workers, belonging to as many as 80 ethnic identities, are also among the most deprived, exploited, alienated, excluded, poorest and marginalized peoples of Bangladesh.

The tea workers have many sad stories to tell. But their cultural riches demonstrate their inner strength. The songs, dances and a drama that the artists of 'Pratik Theatre' displayed to kick off the celebration on 30 April amazed everyone in the audience. Pratik Theatre, a premier cultural group among more than a dozen of them in the tea gardens, is based in Deundi Tea Estate. Established in 1986, the group now has more than 60 artists. Pratik Theatre is famed for nurturing cultural riches and making people aware of social, economic and political injustices that the tea workers face. It routinely organizes cultural events inside and outside the tea gardens to promote rights of the tea workers. □

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A Harijan colony in Mymensingh, flooded with rainwater. Photo. Philip Gain