

# Increasing Trend of Unemployed Workers and Their Rehabilitation in Tea Industry of Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** Bangladesh Tea industry is menaced by the growing number of non-workers in 163 tea gardens stretching over greater Sylhet and Chittagong tea districts. The indentured tea workers brought during British era from various famine-stricken areas of Indian subcontinent alluring better income and living condition now stands at 437619. As tea industry is labor oriented and needs very cheap workers for its sustainability, a ratio of 1:1 has to be maintained at the maximum to deploy workers in an acre. Hence there is no scope to increase number of tea garden workers from existing 122840. Huge non-workers are the sources of various troubles in tea industry. There is only 7000 hectares are left for new plantation. The existing tea plantation comprises about 50% area old and are becoming unproductive. There is no adequate measure to replenish old areas with new planting materials. In absence of development work in the gardens such as infilling, block infilling and replacement replanting in a massive way in old areas huge number of tea gardens workers are rendered jobless. From a total 314779 jobless workers a good number would have been employed had there been development work in tea gardens. A section of unemployed workers might be employed in export processing zones which are created by the government near to the tea gardens.

**Key words:** Indentured, non-workers, ratio, yield, replenish, hectare, planters

## I. INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial tea has been eulogized in so many ways. According to eighteenth century English poet William Cowper, "It is the cup that cheers but not inebriates". And it is this very fact that has made tea such a wonderful beverage, popularity of which never seems to diminish. (Nahar, 2011). Tea is a labor-oriented enterprise as it is agro-based. It requires labor at every stage of its work right from clearing fields and running the machinery in the factory.

Tea is a commodity with a colonial legacy in Bangladesh. The British companies initiated its production in what is now Bangladesh. Once it was predominantly an export commodity. But today most of the tea produced in 163 tea gardens in Bangladesh is consumed locally. (Gain, 2009).

In Bangladesh, tea cultivation started in the 1840s (near Chittagong Club, Chittagong). Malnicherra Tea Estate, Sylhet, is the first tea garden of Bangladesh established in 1854 and in commercial production in 1857. (Amin, 1990).

From Bangladesh Tea Board statistics it is observed that size of actual labor force in Bangladesh tea industry has been reduced compared to requirement four decades ago although land under tea has been increased substantially during the same period. This means efficiency in labor management (cost effectiveness) has increased but dependents (male & female) have also increased from 138752 in 1969 to as many as 314779 in 2017 (Bangladesh Tea Association 2017) against 100843 workers in permanent role and 21997 in casual role totalling 122840 workers in work role. The labor wages, their fringe benefits, living conditions, subsidized foodstuffs and other facilities are determined at the bipartite agreement between Bangladesh Tea Workers Union which is the apex body of tea workers and Bangladesh Tea Association which is the apex body of tea garden owners. So, in Bangladesh tea industry a total 100843 permanent workers have fixed jobs, regular income, trade union, bargaining power, housing, medical facilities which are governed by bipartite agreement while a total 314779 non workers do not have fixed job, regular income and hence they are completely dependent on 100843 permanent workers income and other facilities.

## *Use of Tea Garden Land:*

Right now, Bangladesh has 163 tea gardens (including seven in Panchagarh where tea cultivation started only recently) with 36 of them considered "sick." One unique feature of the tea industry is that the entire land mass (115,707.89 hectare excluding Panchagarh) granted for production of tea is government land. It is also for the colonial legacy that our tea gardens are huge in size and the management administers the gardens with the legacy of British tradition. Out of total grant area of 115707.89 Hectares the use of 51.52% areas (59609.43 hectares) for tea plantation and 48.48% (56097.57 hectares) not used under tea is a key concern. (Philip Gain, 2009). This is obviously true that presently 48.48% of total grant area are remaining unused, i.e., 56097.57 hectares do not produce tea. Out of this area only 7677.87 hectares are suitable for tea cultivation. Rest (56097.57 - 7677.87) = 48419.70 hectares are comprising of essential infrastructures such as tea factory, bungalows, staff quarters, labor shed, other cash crop, stream, football field, forest, graveyard, paddy land etc. which are indispensable for each and every tea garden. (Source: Bangladesh Tea Board and Bangladesh Tea Association).

*Human Resources of Tea Estates – 2016*

Table -1

Category of Workers	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Resident Workers on Permanent Role	46118	46435	6020	2270	100843
Casual Workers	9877	10520	600	1000	21997
Non-workers (Dependents)	76926	79575	78350	79928	314779
Total Population (2016)	134521	136568	89570	89298	437619

Source: Statistics on Bangladesh Tea Industry – 2015

*Tea Area and Population of Tea Industry in Bangladesh*

A total of 314779 non-workers are languishing their life in tea industry without any job, wages, housing and medical facilities. The category of 314779 non-workers who are unemployed whole year are as follows:

Hence, labor distribution in Bangladesh tea industry is as follows based on 1:1 (labor: acreage) ratio.

Total area under tea cultivation= 59609.43 Hectare =147235.29 acre

Total permanent labor deployed for 147235.29 acre = 100843 workers

Total casual workers deployed = 21997 workers

Total workers (permanent and casual) in tea industry of Bangladesh = 122840

- Out of 437619 population in tea industry, only 122840 population provided with job, rest 314779 are unemployed
- 72% population in tea industry remain without job

*Increase of Tea Garden Population in Bangladesh*

(Figures furnished by Bangladesh Tea Association) 1969

Table -2

Category of Workers	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Resident Workers on Permanent Role	46050	41593	6379	7838	101857
Casual Workers	2280	220	1164	3340	8914
Non-workers (Dependents)	10009	11971	15363	101409	138752
Total Population	58339	55764	22903	112587	249593
1979	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Resident Workers on Permanent Role	39577	36576	7513	4980	88646
Casual Workers	2533	2768	3142	4003	12446
Non-workers (Dependents)	18736	20807	33967	97107	170291

Total Population (1979)	60846	60151	44296	106090	271383
1989	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Resident Workers on Permanent Role	37279	36606	7247	5622	86754
Casual Workers	5560	5649	3910	3986	19105
Non-workers (Dependents)	36271	38574	38137	90120	203102
Total Population (1989)	82243	81318	49294	100202	313057
2012	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Resident Workers on Permanent Role	44406	45515	4236	1577	95734
Casual Workers	11501	12242	3085	1669	28497
Non-workers (Dependents)	62699	67654	47681	85827	263861
Total Population (2012)	118606	125411	55002	89073	388092
2016	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Resident Workers on Permanent Role	46118	46435	6020	2270	100843
Casual Workers	9877	10520	600	1000	21997
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*Increase of Tea Garden population in Bangladesh*

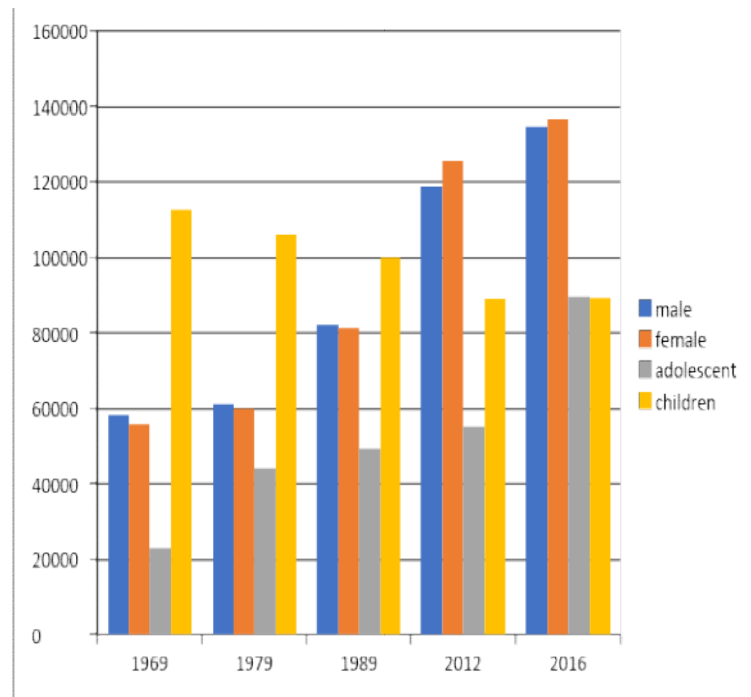


Figure -1

Category of Unemployed Workers in Tea Industry of Bangladesh

Table- 3

Retired workers above 60 years (1)		Dependents of permanent workers but unemployed (above 25 years) (2)		Dependents of permanent workers but unemployed (below 25 years) (3)		Unemployed dependents to permanent workers (adolescent and children) (4)		Total unemployed workers in tea industry (5)
Male	female	Male	female	Male	female	Male	Female	Total male and female
4500	5600	27600	29200	45326	46375	77250	78928	314779

Category of Unemployed People in Tea Industry of Bangladesh

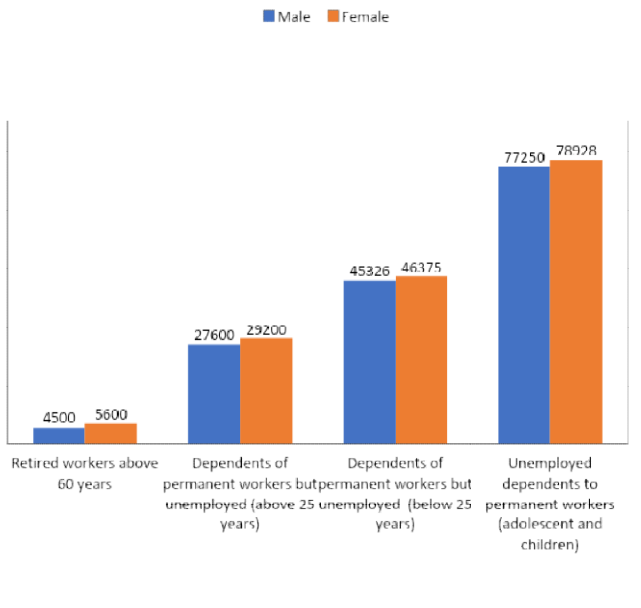


Figure - 2

How Tea Plantation is being depleted by overpopulation (non-workers):

Shade Tree Cutting and Pilfering: Shade trees are mainly pilfered by non-workers in the garden. Because they are free from any service rule of labor code being non-workers and in case of investigation they are out of reach from the management. Another reason of pilfering shade tree is that it has got timber value and when it is sold, they will get higher price which will provide them secured living for some days. The third reason is shade trees are cut for using as fuel for cooking food.

Types of shade trees:

Table 4

Name of Shade Trees	Life span of the tree	Timber extract from the tree when matured	Timber value per cubic feet	Total value of the tree
Odoritic ima	40 years	20 cubic feet	BDT 2000.00	BDT 40000
Lebok	40 years	15 cubic feet	BDT 1600.00	BDT 24000
Darris Robusta	20-30 years	Fuel wood	BDT 200 for 1 maund = 37-kilogram fuel wood	BDT 20000

A total 7287 tea plants are directly dependent upon 50 shade trees in one-acre tea plantation. In absence of them tea plants will become malnourished and ultimately will die. If in this way tea plants are dying; the garden will become extremely vacant. The following bad affect will start in the garden due to creation of vacancies of tea plants.

Table - 5

Effect on tea plantation	Caused by	Remarks
Casualty of tea plants creates vacancy in the garden	Absence of shade trees in the garden	Shade trees are stolen and pilfered by non-workers
Maintenance cost very high in vacant gardens (less than 7187 tea plants per hectare is called high vacancy)	Tea garden with high vacancy of tea plants and shade trees	The more garden is vacant the more is the maintenance cost
Tea production declines in vacant garden	The more tea garden is devoid of tea plants and shade trees the more tea production is lost.	The more garden is vacant the less is the tea production
Permanent workers cannot complete task of various works in vacant gardens whereas plucking output is low	The more tea garden is devoid of tea plants and shade trees workers in large number will be unable to complete their task.	The more garden is vacant the more toughness in fulfilling task by the workers such as plucking, sickle weeds etc. Labor unrest will crop up.
Labor trouble starts for receiving less payment for non-completion of tasks in various works in the garden	The more tea garden is devoid of tea plants and shade trees the more outgrowth of weeds and less growth of green leaf which leads to non-completion of tasks in cleaning weeds and plucking green leaf according to task.	In vacant places growth of weeds is tremendous while production of green leaf will be less due to absence of tea plants and shade trees. In this way tea garden becomes sick.

The non-workers between the age group (18-45) are the root of all evils for the wholesale destruction of tea industry. They influence the registered permanent workers to indulge in the destructive activities. But permanent registered workers very rarely participate in those criminal activities as there is a

service code for them under labor act. So, any permanent worker is found to be accused of misconduct, garden management may take disciplinary action after conducting domestic inquiry in which the accused is given all types of opportunities to defend himself and prove that he is not guilty. On the other hand, non-workers have no service rule and hence management has no control over their activities. Only measure is that management sometimes orders them to leave the garden for doing criminal activities but they do not comply. The non-workers after becoming adult (over 18 years) from adolescence are ceased to avail all the facilities which includes staying with their parents, availing subsidized dependent foodstuff from the garden of their parents who are the permanent workers of the garden. Once they are deprived of the facilities and no chance to avail job in the garden, they resort to criminal activities like cutting shade trees which are indispensable in tea production.

## II. PROBLEM ARISING FROM INCREASE OF POPULATION

Redundant non-workers in tea industry pose threat to the management having no job or fixed income as they stay in the garden and share facilities meant for permanent workers in tea gardens. It is the prime reason why morality of workers declined attributed to low productivity, low quality, and misuse of resources leading to inefficiency arising out from the attitude of lack of responsibilities and belongingness through inhibition of their facilities such as housing, electricity, medical services and various resources being shared by non-workers. A number of authors have tried to link worker morale and attitudes to labor productivity. Katz, Kochan, and Gobielle [1984] seek to attribute declines in labor efficiency (as they measure it) and product quality to deterioration in labor morale as measured by the frequency of grievances, disciplinary actions, absenteeism, contract disputes, and by the general climate of worker-employer relations at the plant level. Weisskopf, Bowles, and Gordon [1984]. Problem statements are as follows:

Firstly, despite more than sufficient workers live in tea gardens, insufficient measures are being taken to reduce growth of old tea areas and vacancy percentage by earmarking those areas for uprooting old tea to be followed by replacement replanting, block infilling works in order to increase productivity.

Secondly, women workers form the core labor force in the plantations. They not only work longer hours plucking leaves but they also do most of the household labor, as well as 'ritual or religious work', described as a 'triple burden' (Phillips, 2002; Kurien, 1998). (Biyawila 2006).

Thirdly, Bangladesh tea is a small player in the world tea scenario, but has a mentionable role in the national economy and employment sector. During the last twenty years, there has been no significant growth in production, and there has been a gradual fall in the export during the corresponding years. (Hossain 2011)

Fourthly, tea is no more an important export earner of the country. Due to rapid increase of internal consumption and on the other hand production has failed to keep pace with the rapidly increasing internal demand as such there is little scope for export now and in the near future unless a massive development program is implemented (Hossain, 2011)

The work condition of the tea workers who spend most of their working time under the scorching sun or getting soaked in rains is a concern. A woman tea leaf picker spends almost all her working hours for 30 to 35 years standing before she retires. The working hours for the tea leaf pickers, mostly women, are usually from 8 AM to 5 PM [7-8 hours excluding break for lunch] from Monday to Saturday. Sunday is the weekly holiday. To earn some extra cash, the extra work brings additional grief.

In tea industry items of work from laborers is realized through accomplishment of tasks. If the task is not accomplished wages deduction is in practice which is the starting point of feudal relation between labor and management. All these attributes to bring frustrations among workers who resort to indulge in country liquor which is a common practice in tea gardens now to the great health hazard of entire work force in tea industry and creates law and order situation inside tea gardens.

## III. CONCLUSIONS

In an inter-Ministerial meeting held at the Ministry of Land sometime in December 2007, the Ministry of Labor and Employment suggested that following points are to be considered prior to renewal of the lease deeds:

- a) Tea planters are to guarantee that they would bring the old gardens (41%) immediately under re plantation. It would increase their per acreage production to 2000 kg by 2025 and also will involve more casual and unemployed workforce.
- b) Presently 45% area of the tea gardens remain unutilized. The planters are to guarantee that they would increase areas under tea plantation through cultivation of unutilized land.
- c) Production has to be increased, which will decrease the cost of production leading to export increase. This could only be done by re plantation of old gardens, which is 41% of the total land area.
- d) Planters are to ensure improvement of the living conditions of the workers- proper education, medical, accommodation, drinking water and toilet facilities. The tea garden owners are to guarantee that.
- e) All permanent workers are to be brought under the Provident Fund. Workers' portion of the provident fund usurped by the estate managers must be returned immediately in order to avoid legal measures against them.
- f) Workers are to enjoy trade union rights. Regular election to tea Workers' Union should take place.



Bangladesh Cha Sangsad members are to guarantee helping the union to hold regular elections.

- g) Governments initiative to establish economic zones near to tea gardens would be able to minimize unemployment rate to some extent especially for the non-workers of tea gardens. Chandpore Tea Estate in the Habiganj district is a case in point. Garden management, trade union and the non-workers and their guardians may strive hard to avail the job opportunity for the non-workers in economic zones ending an age-old tradition of staying inside garden despite their hardship of no work and income.

#### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS REHABILITATION OF UNEMPLOYED WORKERS

The above-mentioned government policy may be termed as recommendations will continue to be in action as precondition for an implementation of recommended activities to be done by the owners of tea industry to the great favor to the workers against renewal of the land lease deed for another year. Here government has kept provision for the owners in three categories of renewal of lease deed of tea garden land. The owners who has done excellent job for the overall development of the tea garden viz: vacancy fill-up by infilling, block infilling and replacement replanting, factory development by installation of modern and sophisticated machinery, development of labor houses from mud houses to concrete house with corrugated iron sheet ceiling, making water reservoirs, sanitation , planning forest in order to make better environment and upgrading workers life style will get 35 years land lease renewal at the highest. Next 20 years lease renewal will be granted to those owners who could not meet the government target of development his garden and workers lifestyle. Rest one-year retention renewal is allowed to those garden owners who could not do any progress. In this way there has been a tendency grown up with the tea garden owners to develop their gardens under government set up criteria. Earlier from British era when the gardens were set up government used to allow them 99 years lease every year irrespective of whether they had done some development work in their gardens or not. But now it has become a policy of the government to compel the garden owners to develop their gardens as per government set up criteria as a precondition to get his lease deed agreement extended maximum at 35 years. Alongside developing of tea plantation in order to increase per hectare yield and to get the land lease renewed, garden owners need to look after the welfare of the workers to be strengthen for improvement of their life style through getting electricity, gas connection in their houses, primary school establishment in workers colony to provide their children elementary education, garden hospital to be modernized with new supply of medical equipment, appointment of qualified doctors, paramedics and nurses. General health of the workers to be improved significantly by improving sanitation, drainage in the labor line, providing drinking water from garden own supply tank, maternity benefit restricted to female workers to two children only. All

the expensive developments will be possible if yield per hectare is increased entailing cost of production is decreased. Increase in yield per hectare is possible only when vacancies are filled in the plantation by ordinary infilling, block infilling and replacement replanting according to the requirement of the tea plantation policy.

Since growing tea in southern and western aspects of the hill slopes in tea gardens are not possible unlike plain land, garden owners may develop other products there such as Rubber, Pisciculture, Forestry, Horticulture, Bamboo to the great advantage of diversified cropping which are essential cash crop in those aspects of hilly areas. In this way several job opportunities can be created in tea industry inside the garden. As government is establishing economic zone comprising of few hundreds of lands, some tea estates have become beneficiary due to their advantageous location near the economic zone. Redundant workers are easily getting job in those economic zones comprising of producing export items like garments, children ware, glass and ceramics, fruit juice and drinks, toys and games, denims, jute products. Redundant tea workers do job in economic zones in the position of general workers, technicians, welders and so on.

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