

# Green Leaf Price: A Case Study of Dhamai Tea Estate, Maulvibazar

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## ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh, a total 100000 acres of land are under cover of tea plantation with a permanent labor force of 100000. Female workers are mostly preferred for plucking green leaf because of their sensitive fingertips suitable for tea plucking and lower inclination to unionism (Sharma and Das, 2009:69-70). Tea by its own characteristics requires cheap workforce which is a prerequisite for running the industry. Hence, workers-management feudal relationship is a commonplace which generates from labor wages especially in plucking green leaf. Workers want to pluck coarse and long leaf for increased weight as against management puts an embargo on it and restricts to pluck only tender leaf that makes best quality tea. Wages cut for lack of compliance by the workers in plucking tender leaf is a regular phenomenon creates frustration among workers, management's policy to adopt piece rate in plucking in a garden where plucking is done on task basis from time immemorial are issues which involves entire work force to resort to create extreme law and order situation like strike, lockout, violence and even murder of garden owners.

**Key Words:** indentured laborers, green leaf, wages, unionism

## INTRODUCTION

Tea gardens in Bangladesh are categorized as A, B, C classes according to their total yearly production. Gardens are categorized as "A" producing 1,80,000-kilogram tea annually, categorized as "B" producing 1, 10,000-kilogram tea annually and categorized as "C" producing 90,000-kilogram tea annually. Gardens are categorized as unclassified producing below 90,000-kilogram tea. "C" classified gardens and unclassified gardens are mostly proprietary concerns and are large in number.

Dhamai is a "A" class tea garden in Jury upazila in Maulvibazar tea district having yearly production of 700000 kg made tea. To make 700000 kg made tea in the factory, this tea garden needs to pluck at least 2800000 kg green leaf in the field at a rough calculation of ratio between green leaf and made tea as 4:1. Green leaf plucking is the major tea plantation job in tea garden in the season time when 70% workforce is deployed everyday in green leaf plucking. Rest 30% workforce are deployed in other cultivation jobs in the garden. But in case of inclement weather in the peak season of tea production, sometimes it has become necessary to depute 95% workforce in plucking green leaf. Proper management of green leaf plucking from March to December in a tea garden is the determining factor of quality and quantity of production of a tea estate. Hence it is a very crucial and important job both for the owner of the garden and the workers of the garden. During harvest time workers earn 2/3 times higher wages than normal period just from plucking leaf. All matured tea bushes have to be plucked once a week, i.e., seven days plucking round has to be maintained to get quality leaf, i.e., two leaf and a bud is the ideal green leaf to be harvested to get quality made tea because of presence of important ingredient in tea leaf which is "caffeine" available 65% in tender leaf (two leaves and a bud) and the percentage of caffeine reduces at the subsequent lower leaves which

are coarse leaf. For commercial point of view leaf size is allowable up to three leaves and a bud. Hence, coarse leaf constitutes more than 3 leaf and a bud yields no quality tea which is withdrawn in the international tea auction. Tea is the only commodity which is not sold at the factory gate. The entire production of tea is sent to the international tea auction at Chittagong where it is sold through bidding to the buyers who comes under the auction hammer with highest price offer. Tea quality is maintained right from plucking quality green leaf in the field to manufacturing quality green leaf in the processing machine in the factory. The processing machine need to be very sharp to cut, tear and curl the green leaf in CTC machine, then oxidation, drying etc. Total time of processing tea from green leaf to made tea requires one and halfhour. But before the green leaf put in the machine for processing, green leaf has to be conditioned in the withering house for 10/12 hours just to remove 25-30% water content from the green leaf by blowing air from the centrifugal fan through the green leaf kept in the withering trough. While drinking tea, a customer wants good flavor, strong liquor and bright color in the cup. All these characteristics will be made possible if utmost care and seriousness is taken both in the field and factory to pluck quality green leaf and processing in sharp CTC as described above.

The labor wages of green leaf plucking in tea garden is very complicated which is best understood by the workers and the management. Normally a worker has to pluck 20 kg green leaf to earn full wages of Tk 100. If he plucks more than 20 kg, he will receive Tk 5 for each kg as incentive. On the other hand, if the worker could not fulfill his task, i.e., 20 kg, then for each kg his wage will be deducted @Tk 10. This task is applicable for pruned area, where prune means trimming tea bushes at deeper measurement once in a year to get late leaf in the season. In the same garden skiff area green leaf plucking will have 23 kg task because of early arrival of green leaf in the season in those areas where trimming is done at a higher measurement on the tea bush. So, skiff areas yield early crop and pruned areas yield late crop in order to balance crop throughout the tea harvesting season from March to December. Incentive and deduction of wages for excess plucking and less plucking respectively are simultaneously maintained in plucking both skiff areas and pruned areas.

## Body

The owner of Dhamai Tea Estate has another sister garden named Sonarupa Tea Estate just 2 miles distant. That garden was very high yielding which means in an acre plucking in season time, management had to depute at least 10 green leaf pickers which is almost double the requirement. To control green leaf, management at Sonarupa Tea Estate announced piece rate unlike task in Dhamai Tea Estate plucking, i.e., workers can harvest as much as green leaf and earn @ Tk 12 per kg green leaf. So, according to workers calculation Sonarupa workers were benefitted just earning Tk 100 with plucking only 8/9 kg green leaf. On the other hand, Dhamai workers are plucking on task basis and had to endure in the field to earn Tk 100 completing task of plucking 20 kg green leaf and more. Question arises why two gardens under same management would follow two different policies to pay green leaf wages to the workers?

Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) and Bangladesh Cha Srimik Union (BCSU) are the two separate entities in Tea Industry representing owner's union of 163 tea gardens and tea workers union representing 125000 registered tea workers respectively. An agreement is signed between BTA and BCSU once in every two years highlighting terms and conditions of new rate of wages, festival bonus, and other facilities to the permanent workers of tea gardens for next two years. Fringe benefits include in the agreement comprises various allowances, incentive, rations, access to khet land for production of paddy (those accessing such land have their rations slashed), medical care, provident fund, pension, etc. BTA calculates the cumulative total daily wage of a worker at Tk.125. The newly elected leaders in BCSU have a different calculation, which is lower than that of BTA. In tea industry items of work from laborers are realized through accomplishment of tasks. If the task is not accomplished wages deduction is in practice as per agreement which is unfortunately the starting point of feudal relation between labor and management. Terms and

conditions in the agreement include among others, working 8 hours in field starting from 9 am, fulfilling task in field work such as plucking green leaf, sickling jungle, hoeing, drain cleaning, planting tea sapling, and many other works. Plucking task at Dhamai Tea Estate 20 kg green leaf for pruned area and 23 kg at skiff area has been fixed based on terms and conditions of agreement signed between BTA and BCSU. But the piece rate of Tk 12 per kg plucking green leaf as followed by Sonarupa Tea Estate is a mutual agreement between owner of Sonarupa and workers of Sonarupa Tea Estate flouting BTA/BCSU agreement to their mutual benefits. Unless both labor and management mutually agree on some issue, flouting BTA/BCSU agreement is not possible. The piece rate of Tk 12 for plucking each kg green leaf has been agreed by both labor and management at Sonarupa Tea Estate because of high yielding plantation at Sonarupa. If task is imposed here workers will leave the work after fulfilling task only and they would not be interested on the incentive of Tk 5 for each extra green leaf pluck. The plantation would remain unplucked with ready green leaf leaving tea quality deteriorated for remaining in the tea bush beyond 7 days to the great loss of the tea company. Tea industry cannot compromise with the quality and quantity of tea production by deploying less requisite number of tea pickers in the field. Once it is done entire chain of command for quality harvest is broken down. On the other hand, frequency of plucking entire plantation for 40 times a year will meet a great fall resulting in 10 days plucking round allowing green leaf to become coarse in tea bush yielding poor quality of made tea. If incentive of picking extra green leaf is raised from Tk 5 to an acceptable level noready leaf would have been left in the bush like piece rate plucking. Here both workers and owners on piece rate are benefitted because of more earning for the workers and more production for the owners respectively.

Observing production accelerates at piece rate at Sonarupa Tea Estate, owners thought it was high time to transform the system of task rate into piece rate system at Dhamai Tea Estate, where very seldom production accelerates at task rate. If production does not increase rapidly in tea garden, cost of production will be increased and it will be very difficult to sustain a tea garden. Practically it has been found that cost of production at Dhamai Tea Estate was higher than cost of production at Sonarupa Tea Estate and quality of tea at Dhamai was inferior to Sonarupa because of coarse leaf being plucked at long interval in task rate system. But both the two gardens were identical gardens under same management of almost equal size of 800 hectares. Important point is that tea bush population of 20000 plants per hectare may vary from garden to garden due to various factors. In Bangladesh context due to soil, weather and pests and blights conditions there might be vacancies in the garden ranging from 5% to 20% and more and hence there exists much smaller number of tea plants than 20000 per hectare. In that case it had been estimated that Dhamai Tea Estate had more vacancies than Sonarupa Tea Estate in respect of population of tea plants per hectare. Before imposing piece rate in plucking at Dhamai Tea Estate, owner of the garden took massive program to infill the vacancies just to bring Dhamai at Sonarupa level in order to possess equal bush population per hectare in both the gardens. This program made the owner to invest huge capital expenditure for Dhamai Tea Estate to raise tea nurseries of high variety of tea plants, nurturing the plants in nurseries for one and half year to bring the height of plants at requisite level, transferring the ready plants from nurseries to tea sections in order to fill in the vacancies like ordinary infilling and block infilling. It is very tough to survive tea plants which are young infills inside the matured tea plants, because of competition between new and old tea plants in growth. Owner of the gardens left no stone unturned to make Dhamai raising its yield per hectare at par with the Sonarupa by massive infilling in order to impose piece rate in plucking at Dhamai like Sonarupa.

By 1983, Company Owner, Mr. Asaf Ali brought Dhamai Tea Estate at equal capacity of Sonarupa Tea Estate in respect of area under plantation, equal population of tea bushes in hectare etc. But the yearly production of the two gardens remained wide apart unmatched to his mission of making two identical gardens in respect to all parameters. The reason of production gap was clearly evidenced that Dhamai Tea Estate is unable to go parallel with sonarupa Tea Estate in respect of production for reasons of their plucking green leaf on task basis in which workers were no longer interested to pluck extra leaf after fulfilling task

ensuring their full wages of the day. Extra leaf @ Tk 5 per kilo could not attract pickers in their plucking duty. On the other hand, piece rate at Sonarupa Tea Estate @ Tk 12 per kilo prompted workers pluck indefinite quantity since they did not have target of 20 kg to fulfil task. The management took the matter very seriously to impose piece rate in plucking green leaf at Dhamai Tea Estate. Manager of the garden tried to convince the workers to adopt piece rate and earn Tk 12 per kg and they did not need to pluck 20 kg to earn 120 TK. If they follow piece rate they may earn 120 Taka by plucking only 9 kg within half day. Rest of the day they would earn another 120 Taka. But no amount of persuasion could change the attitude of Dhamai workers. Management then tried to convince the collective bargaining agent of the garden which is called in garden language as “Panchayet”. Panchayet members instead of showing proactiveness became reactive and declined to follow their sister concern Sonarupa Tea Estate with an excuse that they were unable to convince 5/6 hundred female workers at a time to change old tradition of plucking on task basis. Actually, it is a very common phenomenon in tea garden that “Panchayet” never go in favor of management decision which will make a permanent change in the working behaviors of garden workers. But Mr. Asaf Ali, the owner of the gardens would not succumb to the workers choice of plucking in task basis. He insisted workers, panchayets, managers to introduce piece rate in the garden in various ways for 4 years from 1983 to 1988 to no effect. Lastly, he started persecuting workers, panchayat leaders on false cases, police action, dismissal from garden work without any fault and procedure but piece rate could be never be introduced in Dhamai Tea Estate. A very tragic end of life down on the owner, Asaf Ali in 1988 when disgruntled tea workers hacked him to death with sharp weapon in broad day light in his bungalow.

## CONCLUSION

The tea garden laborers, who mostly live in the tea garden cool lines, which are more or less isolated from the mainstream political and economic development process in the state, have gradually begun participating in the movements by creating several types of organizations to raise their demand for the development of the community. (Saikia 2008). Attempting to change workers working conditions that they follow from time immemorial especially in a vital work like green leaf plucking in which almost all female workers are engaged plus male workers in case of necessity through pressurizing, coercion, intimidation by the management concern in a most rigid way was the wrong policy. Working conditions are subject to change in some works in tea garden where involvement of workers is very less. They felt comfortable plucking 20 kg on task and earn full wages by completing task. As they were not interested to pluck extra leaf, they should not have been pressurized on various ways by management for more than 4 years. Feudal relations with management started from this issue and lastly ended with tragedy. Since the 1860s, when the first batches of indentured laborers were brought into Assam from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, there have been occasional clashes between the management and the tea garden laborers in Assam (Barbora, 1999). Although these clashes between the management and the laborers were mainly over wages and bonus, in the 1990s, the focus shifted to other developmental issues concerning the tea garden laborers in the state. (Saikia 2008). The rude actions resorted by Dhamai Tea Estate management to their workers in this century might be compared to the actions done by British managers against their workers dates back nineteenth century in Assam tea garden of greater India. The plantation embracing immigrant workers was a kind of enclave in isolated regions. In these enclaves, ‘living and recreation were integrated in a single system of control. Not only did laborers work in this system, but they were also born, grew up and married within the system; they had children here, brought up their families and died’ (Alawattage and Wickramasinghe, 2009: 710). Nobody, not even policemen, could enter this kingdom without permission from the planter or managers. According to a report written in 1919, even if a manager assaulted or insulted a laborer or took girls from laborer families as his mistresses, there was no recourse to dispute the manager’s actions or authority (Singh et al., 2006: 16). During British rule, the planters were above the law; they treated their laborers inhumanly and ruled them tyrannically, considering them ‘uncivilized black barbarians’ (Singh et al., 2006: 67). (Makita 2012).

## Questions

1. Why plucking green leaf is the vital work in tea garden?
2. Dhamai Tea Estate Management failed to convince workers to follow new rule of plucking green leaf. What was the correct way to convince huge number of workers at a time in this situation?
3. Do you agree rule of British managers in tea plantations are still applicable during this present time in our tea plantations? Why?

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