

Exploring the Dynamics of Trade Unionism in the Tea Industry: Perspectives from Bangladesh

Mohammad Fakhru Salam[†]

Abstract

Tea garden labourers in Bangladesh constitute a highly marginalised community, characterised by limited access to educational opportunities for their children and heightened vulnerability to severe health risks. This research employs qualitative descriptive analysis to examine the dynamics of unions within the tea sector in Sylhet, with a focus on issues such as health, education, bargaining capabilities, gender representation, and access to social services. The study highlights a multifaceted scenario where internal fragmentation and collaboration challenges often hinder unions from effectively advocating for employees' interests. Overall, the research underscores the crucial role of labour unions in promoting the rights and well-being of tea workers. By fostering a deeper understanding of these dynamics, stakeholders have the potential to collaborate more effectively to establish a more equitable and supportive environment for tea workers in the Sylhet region.

Keywords: Tea Industry; Trade Unionism; Exploitation; Tea Labour; Collective Bargaining; Sylhet Region; Bangladesh

[†] Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet-3114, Bangladesh

Email: salam-pss@sust.edu

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Introduction

The tea industry is one of Bangladesh's oldest export-oriented industries, dating back more than 170 years, and is a significant contributor to the country's economy. Bangladesh now has 167 registered tea gardens divided into two categories: tea estates (which have their own plantation, manufacturing, and marketing facilities) and tea gardens (which have over 25 acres or 10.12 hectares of land-covered gardens). Tea estates and gardens are located in the Sylhet division, such as Moulvibazar (76 estates and 15 gardens), Habiganj (22 estates and three gardens), Sylhet (12 estates and seven tea gardens), Rangamati (1 estate and one garden), Panchagarh (8 tea gardens), and Thakurgaon (1 tea garden). In 2021, Bangladesh produced 3% of the world's tea production and earned 180.57 million BDT from tea exports.

The tea industry makes a substantial contribution to the national economy through employment creation, export revenues, import substitution, and poverty reduction in rural areas (Ahmad & Hossain, 2013). Tea exports contribute 0.11 per cent of the GDP and roughly 3.3 per cent of total industrial employment in Bangladesh (BTB, 2012; Haque et al., 2012). More than 35 million predominantly women work directly or indirectly in these gardens, and low-income labourers have been employed in the sector for generations (Ahmed et al., 2010). The tea industry is currently facing several issues, including inadequate irrigation systems, high production costs, a lack of effective marketing techniques, traditional manufacturing processes, declining market prices, insufficient government assistance, and the impact of climate change, all of which must be addressed to save the industry. A massive investment is required to increase production to meet domestic demand, boost export volumes, and ensure long-term sustainability. Along with producing quality tea, the owner should also improve the facilities for medicine, food, and healthcare for workers and implement cost-management policies. Government subsidies and monitoring are also required to overcome

the challenges (Ahammed, 2012; Ali et al., 2020; Chowdhury, 2019; Khisa & Iqbal, 2001; Raza, 2019).

Tea plantation workers across South Asia, particularly in Assam (India) and Sylhet (Bangladesh), share strikingly similar socio-economic vulnerabilities due to their shared colonial plantation legacy and enduring structural inequalities. Dutta's (2021) study in Assam highlights that tea workers live in dire socio-economic conditions, with limited access to anti-poverty social security programs, welfare schemes, and formal financial services. A parallel situation exists in Sylhet, as both regions were historically part of the same colonial tea plantation belt established by the British East India Company in the 19th century. The recruitment of labourers from marginalised and landless communities, often brought from central India, created a transboundary population of workers who remain economically and socially disadvantaged to this day (Gain, 2009; Shahadat & Uddin, 2022).

In Sylhet, like Assam, tea workers are trapped in low wages, lack legal land rights, and remain largely excluded from mainstream development initiatives and formal banking systems. Field studies and reports from Bangladeshi tea gardens (e.g., Ahammad, 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2011; Rahman et al., 2018) confirm similar patterns of deprivation, occupational hazards, and exclusion from state welfare support. Thus, while Dutta's study specifically examines Assam, its findings resonate strongly in Sylhet due to shared historical roots, comparable labour recruitment processes, and persistent neglect by state and corporate actors in both contexts.

Tea labourers face discrimination in various ways. The workers' situation regarding basic needs such as health, sanitation, housing, nutrition, education, wages, and service benefits is despicable and sadistic. Tea labourers continue to be exploited, and their voices are not heard by the State (Das & Islam, 2006; Hossain et al., 2017; Majumder, 2002; Majumder & Roy, 2011; Saha et al., 2017; Sobuj, 2016). The majority of workers are unaware of their legal

rights. Although Bangladesh labour law stipulates certain safeguards for tea workers, their strict implementation is largely lacking (Repon et al., 2015).¹ Efficient social discussions are not taking place regularly among the Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the Tea Owners Association, and the government. Tea garden labourers are typically barred from various state-sponsored facilities, as they believe that tea garden authorities are responsible for their care (Ahmad & Hossain, 2013). Tea workers are socially marginalised for a variety of reasons, including remote geographic residency, limited opportunities for work outside the garden, and a lack of bargaining power, which perpetuates their plights (Al-Amin et al., 2017). A 2025 UNDP report indicates that among Bangladesh's 360,000 tea garden workers and their family members, nearly two-thirds (approximately 64%) are women and girls. Women workers in tea gardens are undervalued financially and socially despite putting in long hours and being denied necessities such as adequate nutrition. In some places, the conditions of children and women in tea gardens are far worse than those of their peers in other industries (Barakat et al., 2010; Ahmad et al., 2025). Sexual harassment and abuse of female workers by supervisors is a severe issue, and some supervisors force female workers to fulfil their physical desires. If anyone does not, they falsify other charges against women workers and punish them, such as attaching them to dangerous plucking zones (Rahman et al., 2018).

In Bangladesh, regardless of whether an industry is small, medium, or large, wage labourers are often deprived of their fundamental labour rights, including fair wages, safe working conditions, and access to basic facilities. This widespread exploitation is primarily attributed

to the workers' low levels of education and limited bargaining power compared to higher-paid employees. As a result, violations of employees' legal rights occur regularly and on a significant scale nationwide. Factory owners openly express their discontent with the formation of trade unions if they allow most of the circumstances formed by their supportive labourers to control the bargaining process intentionally. This is not the end; employees who wish to form a union are fired or threatened by the employer. The company's owners violate workers' legal rights by engaging in criminal acts or abusing political power (FIDH / ODHAKAR, 2020; Hossain et al., 2010). According to a report released by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in 2021, Bangladesh has been ranked among the world's ten worst countries for workers for the fifth consecutive year. In the labour rights index, Bangladesh was cited as having a total lack of decent work, scoring 47/100 (The Business Standard, 2021). This study aims to reveal the State of trade unionism practices in the tea gardens of Bangladesh, addressing the existing and future challenges of employee-employer relations, which will be beneficial for the sustainable growth of the tea industry.

This study is structured into five main sections to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of trade unions in Bangladesh's tea industry. Following the introduction, which situates the tea sector historically and socio-economically, the second section elaborates on the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of trade unionism and labour rights within the South Asian context. The third section details the methodology adopted, highlighting the qualitative descriptive approach, field sites, participant selection, and data collection

¹ Minimum wage entitlements and timely wage payment (Sections 121–123);
Regulated working hours and overtime pay (Sections 100–108);
Provision of weekly holidays and annual leave with pay (Sections 115–118);
Access to maternity benefits and protection against workplace discrimination (Sections 45–50);

Right to trade union membership and collective bargaining (Chapters XIII–XIV);
Mandatory employer responsibility to ensure workplace safety, sanitation, and basic healthcare facilities (Sections 51–61).
Despite these statutory protections, research shows widespread non-compliance in tea estates, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation.

techniques. The fourth section presents the findings, organised thematically to reflect workers' lived experiences, gendered participation, collective bargaining processes, and power relations within trade unions. Finally, the concluding section synthesises the key insights, discusses their implications for labour rights advocacy and sustainable industry practices, and offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening trade unions and improving working conditions for tea labourers in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study examines the dynamics of trade unionism among tea garden workers through the lens of trade union models and theories. To capture the complex realities of worker representation and labour rights struggles, a qualitative descriptive approach was adopted, emphasising lived experiences and contextual narratives over statistical generalisation.

The research was conducted in five tea gardens within the Sylhet division of Bangladesh. Three of these gardens Malnicherra Tea Estate, Lakkatura Tea Garden, and Ali Bahar Tea Estate are located in Sylhet Sadar, while the remaining two Kalighat Tea Estate and Fulchara Tea Garden are situated in Srimangal, Moulvibazar. This selection ensured representation from both urban-adjacent and remote plantation areas, where labour dynamics often vary.

A total of 50 participants were purposively selected from different stakeholder categories, including trade union leaders (garden level), central trade union representatives (BCSU and affiliated political organizations), general tea garden labourers, human rights and labour rights activists, and legal specialists (see Table 1 for distribution).

Data was gathered using multiple qualitative techniques to capture a wide range of perspectives and ensure depth in understanding the dynamics of trade unionism within tea gardens. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 participants, including trade union leaders, central representatives, and legal specialists, to gather detailed insights from

individual participants. In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KIs) were conducted with five senior union leaders and labour rights activists who possessed extensive experience in advocacy and dispute resolution. To facilitate collective discussion, three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organised with groups of 5–6 general tea garden workers, allowing them to share their experiences, challenges, and views on the effectiveness of trade unions in a supportive setting. Complementing these methods, direct observations were carried out across each tea garden to document workplace realities, labour conditions, and informal interactions between workers and management, adding valuable context to the narratives collected through interviews and FGDs.

Most primary data collection was conducted in Sylheti dialect and Bangla, as these are the native languages of tea workers in Sylhet. Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by detailed field notes. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim in Bangla, then translated into English for analysis. Care was taken to preserve the nuances of participants' expressions during translation, ensuring that their voices were authentically represented.

The data was analysed through descriptive and narrative analysis techniques, focusing on identifying recurring themes, power relations, and lived experiences of workers related to trade unionism. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of how workers negotiate labour rights within a historically hierarchical and paternalistic plantation system.

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed verbal consent was obtained from all respondents before interviews or FGDs. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms used in reporting their views. Sensitive discussions, particularly regarding workplace harassment or union politics, were handled with discretion to avoid potential repercussions for participants. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for social research in vulnerable communities, ensuring

that no harm came to respondents as a result of their participation.

Table 1: Sampling Distribution		
Respondent Category	Number of Respondents	Total Respondents
Trade Union Leaders (Gardens)	12	50
Central Trade Union (Bangladesh et al. (BCSU and Political Parties Affiliated Organisations))	13	
General Tea Garden Labourers	20	
Human Rights and Labour Rights Activist	03	
Law Specialist	02	
Source: Compiled by the Author		

Conceptual Considerations

Labour-Management Relationships and Union Dynamics in Bangladesh

In contrast to typical labour-management relationships, managers in Bangladesh often exhibit greater support for unions than employees do. However, this dynamic raises question about the unions' actual representation of worker interests, as union officials frequently maintain close political ties with factory owners. These connections create scepticism among workers regarding the unions' loyalties. While workers in Bangladesh's tea gardens, including Malnicherra Tea Estate, have local trade unions as their labour representatives, these unions often fail to function effectively as channels for worker voices. Employees frequently perceive union leaders as aligned with management, acting more as agents of the firms than as advocates for labour. This perception is particularly troubling given the union's supposed role as a rights-based organisation.

The respondents from Malnicherra Tea Estate reported that their lives have seen little improvement despite the presence of unions. Businesses often suppress worker interests in collaboration with union officials, thereby undermining workers' capacity for individual and collective bargaining. This weakens their ability to assert their rights and safeguard their interests. The perceived cordial relationship between management and union leaders' fosters mistrust and suspicion among workers.

Over time, this erodes the bond between union leaders and their constituencies, weakening community cohesion and diminishing the collective power of the unions. The resultant fragmentation leaves workers feeling disillusioned and disconnected, further undermining the unions' potential to advocate for meaningful change.

Political Influence within Unions

The local trade union, meant to represent the labour force, often fails to serve as an effective voice for workers. Its performance is hampered by structural and political challenges, leaving workers feeling marginalised. Workers frequently perceive trade union leaders as agents of the corporations, more inclined to advance the interests of management than those of their members. This perception is reinforced by the firm's collaboration with union officials to suppress worker interests. Consequently, the workers' capacity to protect their rights and advocate for their interests, whether individually or collectively, remains underdeveloped.

The perceived collusion between union leaders and authorities erodes workers' confidence in their representatives, fostering a climate of mistrust and skepticism. This growing distrust weakens the relational bonds that are essential for effective collective action. As faith in leadership diminishes, the sense of solidarity and shared purpose within the workforce gradually disintegrates, undermining the union's

capacity to advocate for meaningful and transformative change.

Social Exclusion

Local trade unions in tea gardens function as labour organisations but often fail to represent workers effectively. These unions rarely act as true conduits for workers' voices, as the workforce frequently perceives their leaders as agents of the businesses. Rather than advocating for employees, union leaders often prioritise advancing corporate interests (Salam, 2025). This dynamic is further exacerbated by the companies' collaboration with union officials to suppress worker interests.

Workers' capacity for both individual and collective bargaining remains underdeveloped, leaving them unable to defend their rights or advocate for their interests fully. The perceived close relationship between union leaders and company authority fosters deep mistrust and suspicion among workers. Over time, this erosion of trust strains the relationship between workers and union leaders, weakening the sense of community and collective power among employees (Nissen & Jarley, 2005). Since the inception of the tea industry, workers have faced systemic discrimination and exploitation (Gupta, Musto, & Amini, 2019; Jannat, 2017; Jalil & Oakkas, 2018). Generations of tea garden labourers have lived in poverty and vulnerability while working in these plantations (Islam & Al-Amin, 2019; Zaman & Abir, 2018). Traditionally, the children of tea workers, often unskilled and without access to education, continue the cycle by entering the same workforce.

In Bangladesh, approximately 300,000 people are employed in tea gardens, most of who lack formal education and are deprived of basic freedoms (Repon et al., 2015). These workers are distinct from the surrounding population in ethnicity, colour, religion, language, and culture. Their isolation is compounded by their residence in company-provided housing within the tea garden premises, creating a physical and social separation from neighbouring communities. Living in poverty and vulnerability, tea workers face significant barriers to exercising agency and accessing fundamental human rights (Islam & Al-

Amin, 2019). Their unique position within Bangladeshi society, coupled with systemic discrimination, leaves them marginalised and unable to break free from the cycle of exploitation.

Women's Autonomy and Freedom

In Bangladesh, both men and women have a variety of worldviews that encourage people to base their life decisions on their knowledge and understanding. They learned that women's contributions to significant family issues are typically overlooked or underestimated while males make crucial decisions. Women were also unable to make decisions for their families or take any action without first consulting their spouses.

Political Participation

It has been shown that Bangladeshi tea garden labourers participate in politics the least. They have political rights and are national citizens. They typically do not participate in any organised parties, however. Their involvement in politics is primarily limited to voting in elections, such as local and presidential elections. Politics generally does not interest them. Politics is generally avoided by employees, particularly women workers. Many workers have negative perceptions of politics. For them, politics is a repugnant phenomenon that entails violence, strife, quarrels, and other undesirable behaviours. Many more people concur that they are ignorant of politics.

Recognising Power Dynamics

The employees maintain a split personality: they speak one way when the owners or supervisors are present and sing a different tune when they are with their groups. In the presence of strong supervisors, the powerless employees must strike a strategic attitude (Al-Amin & Islam, 2020; Scott, 1990). This axiom regarding the balance of power between employers and employees advances the interests of business owners. Workers in tea plantations often adapt their behaviour strategically as a way to cope with exploitative and hierarchical workplace conditions. To protect themselves from punishment or retaliation, they carefully adjust

their speech and behaviour in front of supervisors, maintaining a façade of compliance. In private, among trusted peers, they express their real frustrations and employ subtle forms of resistance. This dual approach enables them to survive within an oppressive labour system while minimising risks and preserving their dignity.

The employees put up a front of modesty and submission to the managers. When employees meet with managers in their office, they stand up without being asked to sit down by the managers. In tea gardens, it is common practice to forbid employees from sitting near supervisors. If they choose to sit, they must do so on the floor and not in a chair. It is regarded as an affront to the authority and prestige of managers for employees to sit in their presence.

Trade Unionism Issues and Labour Movement Regulations

Workers' organisations, known as trade unions, exist to preserve and enhance their living and working conditions (Webb & Webb, 1898). Over time, the role of trade unions has expanded beyond wage negotiations to include broader advocacy for workplace democracy and social justice (Freeman & Medoff, 2004; Schmalz, Ludwig, & Webster, 2018). Trade unions are created voluntarily to advance and defend the interests of all employees through collective action and teamwork. They play a crucial role in structuring the interaction between owners and employees in contemporary industry (Taher, 1999). Trade unions are ingrained in a country's interconnected political and economic institutions. A country's social, political, and historical trajectories can be reflected in the form, techniques, and objectives of its trade unions. Bangladesh's trade unions, like those in other developing nations, are not professionally organised and draw their influence on favourable relations with political parties and management (Islam & Al-Amin, 2019; King, 2015; Moses, 1990). In Bangladesh, trade unionism is prevalent in the tea industry. Each tea estate has its local trade unions, known as panchayats. They could perform better. According to the vast majority of our

respondents, Panchayat leaders have unofficial and unauthorised liaisons with management for their own self-interest.

Trade Union Practices in the Tea Industry in Bangladesh

The recognition of freedom of association as a fundamental human right is a significant aspect of International Law. This right is upheld by the majority of civilised nations, including the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as enshrined in its Constitution, which serves as the highest legal authority in the country. The establishment of trade unions serves as a viable mechanism for the practice of the freedom of association, with the primary objective of safeguarding the rights of workers.

Constitutional Framework of Trade Unionism

According to the Constitution of Bangladesh (1972), the State's primary objective is to achieve a socialist society free from exploitation through democratic processes. This envisioned society upholds the principles of the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, equality, and justice in both political and socioeconomic spheres, ensuring these rights for all citizens. The Constitution explicitly guarantees the fundamental right to freedom from coerced labour, with violations subject to legal consequences. Additionally, it ensures the fundamental right to freedom of association.

The Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) provides the main legislative framework governing trade unionism in the country. Under Chapter XIII of the Act, both employees and employers can establish trade unions through registration. The Act also permits the creation of federations of labour unions, which are authorised to affiliate with international organizations and confederations of workers' or employers' organisations. Workers' trade unions regulate interactions between workers and employers and among workers themselves. Similarly, employers' trade unions regulate interactions between employers and workers and among employers. The implementation of trade unionisation offers significant benefits to the labour force. Trade unions play a crucial role in

addressing workers' concerns about hazardous working conditions, inadequate pay, and exploitation by unscrupulous employers (Khan & Rammal, 2022). While social compliance mechanisms rely heavily on external actors and have demonstrated limited efficacy, trade union mechanisms are more practical as they operate internally within organisations. These unions empower workers with tools to advocate for their rights and secure their benefits, functioning as counterbalances to employer exploitation.

Despite these advantages, critics argue that unions can be ineffective in enhancing productivity and fostering economic growth. Some economists assert that influential labour unions in the United States contributed to the decline of profitability and sustainability in certain sectors, leading to decreased investment and growth, and ultimately prompting businesses to relocate to other countries (Hirsch, 2004). Additionally, in some cases, union officials have been accused of creating parallel administrations within organisations, influencing staff appointments, promotions, and transfers.

South Asia, including Bangladesh, has a long history of political party influence over labour unions (Gupta, 2013; Streeck & Hassel, 2003). This intersection of politics and labour often leads to unions engaging in political activities within workplaces, which can negatively affect investment and economic growth. The Bangladesh Tea Employees' Union has faced a decline in its influence over tea plantation workers due to the ineffectiveness of its leadership during recent wage negotiations. Union leaders' failure to advocate strongly for workers' rights during talks with the government and estate owners has eroded trust among employees. Although an agreement was reached to establish a fixed daily wage, workers continued their protests, rejecting the outcome (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). This discontent has given rise to new labour organisations, which many view as a tool for estate owners to exploit workers by dividing them (Stephenson & Wray, 2009).

According to Narayan (pseudonym), a worker at the Malnicherra Tea Estate in Sylhet:

Our leaders lack the courage to advocate for labour rights. If they think we will continue to accept their decisions without question, they are mistaken.

Workers' grievances stem from their leaders' perceived submissiveness toward plantation owners and management. Should new labour organisations emerge, conflicts could escalate further, increasing the risk of exploitation by plantation owners in the future.

Political Engagement in the Mainstream

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, race, language, religion, or geographic region. In contrast to the general Bangalee population, tea garden employees appeared to be subjected to discrimination in several ways, including political participation. The majority of tea garden workers in Bangladesh are not affiliated with any political parties (Ahmed, 2020).

The Labour Situation within the Tea Industry

The exploitation of tea plantation workers has persisted for decades, drawing widespread attention only recently, after large-scale protests demanding a daily wage increase to 300 BDT (approximately USD 3.15) (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022) from a mere 120 BDT (approximately USD 1.25). Workers have suffered from low wages, rising inflation, and limited access to medical and educational resources in remote areas. Historically, labourers were recruited from marginalised tribal populations with promises of better living conditions, creating a generational low-wage workforce spanning 170 years (IDS/GSDRC, 2018).

Tea garden owners claim to provide USD 4 daily, including benefits, but workers receive only 3 kg of flour weekly, leaving them in constant hunger (Hossain et al., 2017). Alarming social issues, including 46% of adolescents facing child marriage and 15% of women suffering from cervical cancer, exacerbate their plight. Although

the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, intervened by raising wages to 170 BDT, doubts remain about its sufficiency in meeting workers' basic needs. SEHD director Philip Gain has labelled these labourers as 'modern-day slaves' highlighting the urgent need for government intervention to ensure access to healthcare and sustainable livelihoods (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022).

Findings of the Study

Effectiveness of Trade Union Practices in Collective Bargaining

Trade unions were ineffective in negotiating significant improvements for workers, as evidenced by respondent Rangalal Mudi's account. Workers' wage increases were only achieved through external intervention. This reflects the limited negotiation power of trade unions and suggests an over-reliance on external political influence. Addressing structural weaknesses and enhancing negotiation skills are crucial to making unions more effective advocates for workers.

Women's Participation in Trade Union Practices

Despite women forming the majority of tea workers, their participation and representation in trade unions are low. This highlights gender disparities and the need for inclusive strategies. Encouraging women's involvement in union leadership and decision-making could address their specific concerns and foster equity (Al-Amin & Mathbor, 2019).

Trade Union Practices and Social Services

Social services such as marriage support, recreation, and cultural programmes are underprovided. Workers like Ananda Chasa find the union's efforts lacking in addressing non-labour issues. Incorporating social welfare initiatives into trade union agendas could enhance workers' overall well-being and foster a stronger sense of community and support.

Conflict Resolution and Collaboration

Trade unions prioritise conflict resolution through dialogue and mediation but face resistance from management. This approach demonstrates potential for fostering a

collaborative environment. However, strengthening communication channels and addressing power imbalances are essential for long-term success.

Issues Raised by Management

Management frequently delays addressing workers' concerns, citing bureaucratic hurdles. Such tactics weaken the bargaining process and contribute to worker dissatisfaction. Streamlining negotiation procedures and ensuring accountability from management are necessary.

Democratic Decision-Making in Trade Unions

Trade unions involve workers in democratic processes, but management perceives these as counterproductive. Democratic practices enhance legitimacy and inclusivity but need to be accompanied by strategies to address resistance from management.

Division Within Trade Unions

Factions within trade unions, such as the Shang Ram Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee, weaken collective bargaining power. Unity among trade union factions is critical for effective advocacy. Bridging ideological differences through dialogue and mutual goals could strengthen their influence.

Hidden Agendas and Collusion

Alleged collusion between trade unions and management compromises workers' interests. This undermines trust in trade unions and calls for mechanisms ensuring transparency and independence in their operations (Burns, 2012).

Power Dynamics and Manipulation in Negotiations

Management and government alignment manipulates negotiations, diluting workers' rights. Addressing these imbalances requires external oversight and empowerment of trade unions through legal and institutional reforms.

Role of External Influences

Political and economic factors influence trade union practices, diverting focus from workers' concerns. Reducing external interference and

focusing on workers' welfare are essential for restoring the unions' credibility and effectiveness.

Lack of Transparency and Accountability

Workers express concerns about the lack of transparency in union leadership, affecting trust and confidence. Implementing transparent decision-making processes, regular updates, and financial disclosures can rebuild trust among workers.

Concluding Remarks

Tea garden workers in Bangladesh experience significant social and economic exclusion, compounded by limited employment opportunities and marginalisation due to their affiliation with low-caste Hindu communities. This group is often stigmatised by the broader population and typically resides and works within tea gardens. Although the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 (amended in 2013) grants important rights to tea garden employees, their entitlements to casual and earned leave remain notably inferior compared to those in other industries. A critical issue lies in the inadequate enforcement of labour rights. Internal conflicts have led to workers affiliating with multiple unions, thereby diminishing their collective bargaining power. Although the tea industry now has a single prominent union, its effectiveness is hindered by insufficient resources and the influence of union officials who are aligned with tea garden owners. Political parties have shown limited interest in addressing the plight of tea workers; for instance, the 2008 election programme made only brief references to their rights. While some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide educational and healthcare services within tea gardens, broader support for tea workers remains minimal. Women in the tea industry face particularly harsh conditions, often spending over eight hours a day plucking tea leaves. Meanwhile, men typically occupy roles such as supervisors or security guards in tea factories. Information regarding the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the tea industry is virtually nonexistent.

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Ethical Approval

This manuscript was prepared in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant ethical research protocols. The study did not involve any interventions, clinical trials, or the collection of sensitive personal data. The research was reviewed and approved by the SUST Research Centre, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh. Since the study relied primarily on interviews and publicly available secondary data, formal ethical clearance beyond departmental approval was not required.

Conflict of Interest

I hereby declare that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or non-financial, related to this manuscript. Additionally, I confirm that the manuscript was not prepared using AI-generated text and that no figures or illustrations were created using AI-assisted tools.

Author Contribution Statement

Dr. Mohammad Fakhrus Salam is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for conceptualisation, research design, data collection, data analysis, literature review, theoretical framework development, interpretation, and drafting of the manuscript. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agrees to its submission to the *Journal of Space and Culture, India*.

Informed Consent

Prior to data collection, verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in interviews and discussions. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality measures in place. Since no personal identifiers or sensitive information were disclosed, formal written consent was deemed unnecessary.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and the need to protect participants' privacy, some portions of the raw interview transcripts cannot be made publicly accessible.