

## **OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING TOWARDS THE ERADICATION OF ILLITERACY OF THE TEA-GARDEN WORKERS IN BANGLADESH: Problems and Prospects**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Development of a society means the accumulation of improvement of all units of the society whatever it is small or large and important or less important. Needless to say that education goes identical with development. We have a large number of marginal people in different sector and region. Tea garden workers are one of them who are working silently for the improvement of the nation but they are not getting any educational degree in spite of their noble intention. Most of them are illiterate. Even they cannot make simple calculation of their household. Moreover, tea garden worker are low paid. About 56 percent labor work six days and 23 percent in seven days in a week but most of them are paid monthly less than 2500 taka for each. Yet they (63 percent) want to study again though they face financial problem (77 percent) and rest of them say about communication problem, unavailability of schools, adjustment problem with the schedule of the school, unwillingness of the authority and limited scope for the aged and dropped. Few of them claim against the management authority who often reluctant to give any chance for their betterment. It is impossible for them to avail conventional education. Resultantly it seems that only education through open and distance learning will be effective for them. In this study, it will endeavor to explore strategic issues and prospects of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provided by Bangladesh Open University for the tea garden worker in the different regions of Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning, tea-garden worker, illiteracy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Different kinds of study concerning tea garden workers of Bangladesh reveals that tea worker lead the most miserable life remaining unattended. As a marginal group of people tea garden workers need to educate urgently.

By getting education, they can change their lot. They also cannot taste the life beyond tea gardening. Working in tea garden has become their hierarchical profession. Bangladesh Tea

Board various local, national and international NGOs have explored the tea garden area to find out socio-economic condition of tea-worker to take necessary initiatives for their development. Ministry of Labor and Employment has noticed few of them and tried to ensure tea worker's rights and opportunities. But the situation is yet not changing. Education, an important ladder for transformation of a community or society can easily improve the life of any section of people. According to the Bangladesh Tea Board report 2004, in 156 tea gardens (excluding those in *Panchagarh*) there were 188 primary schools with 366 teachers and 25,966 students. Bangladesh Tea Board works as the primary body about monitoring and improving their rights and opportunities. Partha Sankar Saha (2009) works on the issue of tea workers, claims that it contains very few information about the tea workers socio-economic condition especially there is no detail information about their educational condition. There is no data like number of eligible school goers, number of drop out, number of teacher and their salary etc. It revealed that the employers provide education in few gardens due to lack of the number of government schools. In the recent times, the NGOs have been operating significant number of primary schools. By this way tea garden worker become deprived of all kinds of basic rights.

These deprived tea garden workers are involving with different crimes of the society and they are being burden of the country. Deprived, exploited and alienated, the majority of the tea workers live an inhuman life. Bangladesh belongs to developing country. About 40% people live below the poverty line whose per capita income is less than 1000 dollar. Besides this, scarcity of resources has exacerbated the entire situation. As a result government can not take necessary initiatives to focus the light of education for all citizens every time, everywhere. Government looks forward to spread education in all section of people by engaging every possibility. Bangladesh Open University plays vital role by imparting formal, non-formal, technical and professional education.

Now a days Open and Distance Learning is applying fruitfully all over the world in spreading education among the deprived, dropped, disadvantage and professional group. Bangladesh Open University is the only public institution in Bangladesh which is imparting education through Open and Distance Learning for all class of people. Bangladesh Open University has been serving the nation with this motto through its six schools and a network of 12 regional resource Centres, 80 coordinating offices and more than 1,341 tutorial centres and more than 21,000 tutor nationwide (Bangladesh Open University *Porikrama*:2013). So it's one kind of responsibility of this university to reach education to the door step of this tea garden worker in everywhere of Bangladesh. Considering the above facts, with a view to importing need based education, the objectives of the present study was considered-

- To scratch out the socio-economic status of tea-garden worker
- To identify the strategic issues of educating them through Open and Distance Learning

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study has conducted through quantitative and qualitative approach. In our study, we have collected data from interviews, observations and reviewed different types of documents and websites related to this study.

The objectives were set in a manner that enables to open up avenues for further research in the field investigated, rather than draw any definitive inferences.

At present about 5 lacs of people are engaged in the 163 tea garden in different districts in Northern and South-eastern part of Bangladesh. Few ancient tea gardens from *Sylhet* district and new tea gardens from *Panchagar* district have been selected for this study.

There are as many as 20 tea gardens existing in *Sylhet Sadar Upazila* and 7 large gardens in *Panchagar*. Out of 27 tea gardens, six were selected by random sampling method considering the size and location of each garden. The selected tea garden are *Tarapur*, *Lackaturah*, *Alibahar* tea estate of *Sylhet Sadar Upazila* and *Moli* tea garden, *Salinan* tea estate, *Korotoa* tea garden of *Panchagar Sadar Upazila*.

It maintains the involvement of the tea garden personnel, leader of tea garden, local representatives and facility provider in the tea garden and researcher on tea garden. Age, marital status, income, educational status, surroundings of their working and living place have been considered close to identify the challenges rendering open and distance learning for them.

#### **DEFINING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)**

The term open and distance learning and its definition are relatively new in the field of education, having gained prominence only in the past 15 to 20 years. Among the more commonly used terms related to open and distance learning are the following: correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, distance teaching, self-instruction, adult education, technology-based or mediated education, learner-centred education, open learning, open access, flexible learning and distributed learning. Open and distance learning system can usually be described as made up of a range of components; mission or goal of particular system, programs and curricula, teaching/learning strategies and techniques, learning materials and resources, communication and interactions, support and delivery system, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment, and evaluation. (UNESCO, 2002)

In short, ODL is the system of education where learners learn by themselves in any age, any time and in any where or absence of classrooms. Teachers are separated from the students – students do not get any personal touch of the teacher. A wide variety of media are used to serve numerous educational programs to students.

#### **TEA WORKERS OF BANGLADESH**

Tea industry gets priority among the highly labor oriented industry. Tea industry can hardly imagine without worker. Preparing land, plantation, nursing the plant, pesticide, picking tea leaves, tea process in multi stages a large number of worker is necessary for this industry. We often only see the worker in tea leaf picker. But in various sections from seed bed to consumption of tea thousands of tea workers involve here.

Once upon a time tea worker are defined as 'Coolie' which means Indian or Chinese rental labor. Literarily Coolie means the unskilled labor from India and China who works

temporarily with low wages. Term coolie was then known to Assam Bengal Railway labors who also engage in Chittagong railway too. According to Oxford English Dictionary Coolie an offensive word for a worker in Eastern countries with no special skills or training.

The workers' requirement in the tea industry can be classified into three categories: those for plucking, those for field maintenance and those for capital field development. The operation of plucking, which includes the bulk of labor absorption, accounts for as much as 70 percent of total workdays (Sivram, 1996). Plucking is primarily done by women. Sometimes men are employed in this job in peak season.

Men are generally employed in the field maintenance and capital development. The job of field maintenance includes fertilizing, weeding, pruning, mulching, spraying insecticide and irrigation. Women are also sometimes employed in these operations, particularly in fertilizing, weeding and pruning. Capital field development involves three activities: new planting, replanting and filling of vacancies. Generally men are employed in all these activities. When they came first, they got into four-year contracts with the companies. That was the beginning of their servitude.

More than a century and half or four generations have passed since the tea plantation workers settled in the labor lines. Their lives and livelihoods remain tied to the labor lines ever since. They are people without choice and entitlement to property. In addition to the wages, which is miserably low, they get some fringe benefits. The houses in the labor lines are given by the employer that comes first on the list of fringe benefits. One worker gets one house that is supposed to be maintained by the employer.

The wages, daily or monthly is the single most concern. The maximum daily cash pay for the daily rated worker in 2008 was Taka 32.50 (less than half a US\$). This is a miserable pay having a severe effect on the daily lives of the tea workers. Although the workers get rations at a concession, a family can hardly have decent food items on their plate.

They indeed have very poor quality and protein-deficient meals. Their physical appearance tells of their malnourishment. Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) (*Bangladesh Tea Labor Union*) that represents the workers and Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) that represents the employers sign a memorandum of agreement every two years to fix the wages.

The last memorandum of agreement went into effect on 1 September 2005. The two-year period of effectiveness of the agreement ended on 31 August 2007 [during the state of emergency in the country]. It was due to the state of emergency and squabbles between rival groups in Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union that no agreement between the two parties was signed in due time.

However, in the absence of any agreement, the owners increased wages by Taka 2.5 as an interim arrangement. What is important to note here is that BCSU in its charter of demands placed to the owners have demanded increase of wages by up to 100 per cent, but the owners increased it by Taka 2 every two years, which the BCSU accepted in the end. The newly elected leadership (in 2008) of the BCSU, in its charter of demands of 2009, demanded that the cash pay of the daily rated workers be increased to Tk.90.00 from Tk.32.50.

It is yet to be seen how the employers respond to the demands of BCSU. Fringe benefits other than houses include some allowances, attendance incentive, rations, access to *khet* land for production of crop (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.73. The newly elected leaders in BCSU have a different calculation, which is lower than that of BTA (Philip Gain, 2009).

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 tealeaf picker spends almost all her working hours for 30 to 35 years standing before she retires. The working hours for the tealeaf 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. The key questions to ponder: How longer will the tea communities stay confined to the labor lines? Will they continue to live as people without choice and entitlement to a land they have tilled for four generations? The employers probably want the status quo maintained for a steady supply of cheap laborers. But the tea communities, little more conscious now than before, want justice done to them. They want strategic services from the State and NGOs in the areas of education, nutrition and health, food security, water and sanitation, etc. They also want to see their languages, culture, and social identity protected.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Socio-Economic of the Tea-Garden Worker

The tea workers are not just poor, they are a particularly deprived marginal community in captive situation. They have limited scope to integrate with the people of the majority community and they face great difficulties in exploring livelihood options outside the tea gardens.

Table: 1  
Socio-Economic Status of the Tea garden worker of Bangladesh

Sex	(%)	Age range	(%)	Marital Status	(%)	Service Type	(%)	Salary (takeMonthly)	(%)
M	63.3	0-20 yrs	28.3	Unmarried	25.8	Daily	45	1500-2500	45.8
F	36.7	20-40 yrs	53.3	Married	73.3	Weekly	33	2500-3500	3.3
		40-60 yrs	15.8			Monthly	21	3500-4500	30.0
		60-80 yrs	1.7			Daily	45	4500-5500	9.2
		80<yrs	.8			Weekly	33	5500 <	10.0

The above table: 1 depicts that 63.3 percent of the respondent are male and rest of the 36.7 percent are female. Generally the male worker performs all kinds of tea garden related duties while the female workers mainly engage in picking tealeaf. Female worker often sees to engage in cleaning the tea garden, watering seed bed, plantation of tea plant etc. women worker also works dawn to dusk as well as perform the family duties. Most of the tea worker

belongs to the age group of 20-40 years which is 53.3 percent while below this range is also available. About 28 per cent of the tea workers are below 18 years old. They can not go to school due to financial constraints. They have to support his family's earning wheel. Besides their parents can not meet up his/her basic needs as a result he is forced to work in the tea garden with minimum wages. Most of the workers marry in the very early age. So the rate of married worker is higher (73.3 percent) than unmarried (25.8 percent).

Service period of the worker vary on the basis of region. In the old tea garden workers are working from generation to generation while in the new region (*Panchagar*) most of the workers are temporary and daily basis. Most of them are working there for less than one year. On the other hand worker in *Sylhet* region are working for their lifetime on weekly and daily basis. As an export oriented industry tea worker get the lowest salary. At present it is very hard to find a labor with taka 69 in Bangladesh except tea worker. Most of the tea worker (45.85 percent) in this research gets only 69 taka daily or 414 taka weekly or monthly 2500 taka (table-1).

Authority pays the wages mainly on daily basis as a large number labor works in temporary. Only 30 per cent of workers get salary of 3500-4500 taka monthly. A large number of workers also get salary on weekly basis.

#### Constraints of Receiving Formal Education

Tea garden worker do not get minimum facilities for livelihood, receiving education is beyond question. The fact has found out from this study. They really lead a miserable life to think about education. They speak out mainly about the following constraints (table: 2) during the survey.

Table: 2  
Types of constraints of the Tea garden worker in Bangladesh

Type of constraints	Percentage		
	<tk 2500(46%)	tk 3500-4500 (30.0%)	-
Low income	<tk 2500(46%)	tk 3500-4500 (30.0%)	-
Capacity to bear expenses	No (83%)	Yes (5%)	-
Lack of time (in a week)	6 days (76%)	7 days (23.3%)	-
Work in extra hour	Yes (56%)	No (44%)	-
Proper education institution in proper place	Yes (25.5%)	No (72.0%)	Other (2.5%)
Timing of educational institution	Yes (2%)	No (69%)	-
Chance for dropped or aged	Yes (25%)	No (72%)	Other (3%)

In the table: 2, we find that about half of the tea garden worker earn monthly less than 2500 taka by which anyone can hardly lead his life as result 83 percent of the labor cannot bear the expenses of education.

They also do not get time as they have to work for most of the days in a week. Often they work for extra hour.

A mentionable number of workers (72 percent) speak out about the lacking of proper educational institution in proper place. Tea worker cannot adjust with the timing of these institutions. Besides these there are a few scopes for the aged, dropped or deprived to admit in these educational institutions.

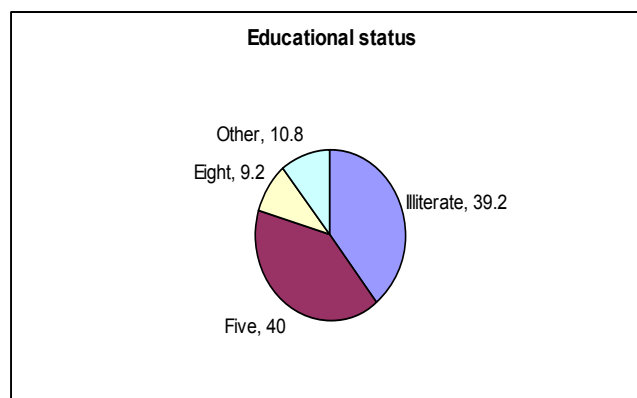
The case study and observation of their living area, few other problems have been found such as unwillingness of the authority, lack of effective governmental initiatives, lack of willingness of the labor, big family size, shyness in case of dropped or aged which will be considered as predicaments in receiving education.

### **Educational Status of the Tea-Garden Worker of Bangladesh**

Where livelihood is uncertain, education is far cry. This study has intensively explored the educational condition of the tea garden workers which are presented in figure: 1.

The figure depicts the educational scenario of the tea garden workers. Most of them live hand to mouth.

We see also the reflection of their life in this figure as about 39 percent worker are illiterate while only 40 per cent have gone to school for class five that means maximum worker could not overcome the primary level. The study is also found that 72 of the respondent have heard about Bangladesh Open University (BOU).



**Figure:1**  
**Educational status of tea-garden worker in Bangladesh**

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**Table: 3**  
**NGO's and the chances for tea garden workers in receiving education**

		Yes	No	Other
<b>1</b>	<b>Availability of NGO</b>	<b>72.5%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>22.5%</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Chance for the target group</b>	<b>25.5%</b>	<b>72.0%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Response about hindrances</b>	<b>85.0%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>

There are few renowned NGOs (72.5 percent) which are working to provide education for worker's children.

But it is a matter like "water and water everywhere but there is not a single drop to drink" as most of the NGO provide education for the children and only up to primary level.

As a result, the adult workers who have been dropped out due to various reasons can not study there.

Only few child labors (25.5 percent) go to those NGO operated school and most often they also dropped out. 85 percent of the respondents say about their problems to start education or receiving education.

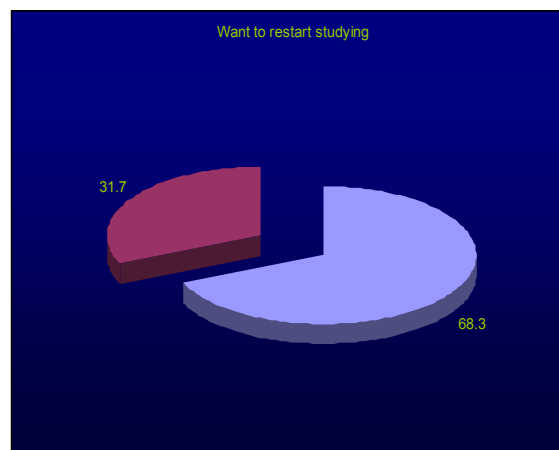
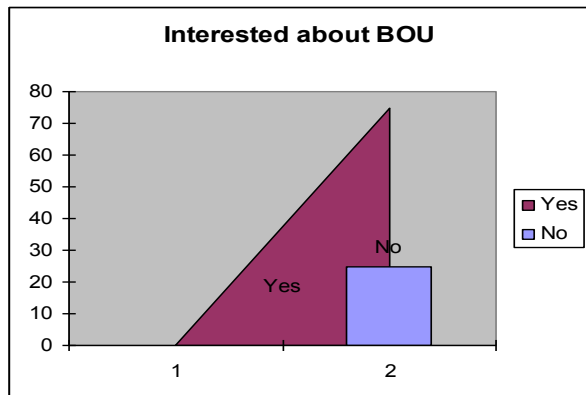
**Table: 4**  
**Familiarity with Bangladesh Open University (BOU) program on television**

		Yes	No
<b>1</b>	<b>Opportunity to watch TV</b>	<b>94.2%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Use mobile</b>	<b>17.5%</b>	<b>82.5%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Watched BOU program on TV</b>	<b>17.5%</b>	<b>82.5%</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Interested about BOU</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>20%</b>

In the labor line worker (94 percent) has the opportunity to watch television for a fixed period but always it's not possible to watch whenever they want. Often the management does not favor it.

They also claim that in most of the labor line there is no electricity facility. As a result, they can hardly watch BOU program. Besides, this they like to watch recreational program on television.





**Figure: 2**  
Interest about Bangladesh Open University and Restarting of Study

Tea workers (72 percent) express their enthusiasm to study at BOU. They urge us to offer eligible program for them and talk to authority about their interest. They think that owner can help them a lot to avail this opportunity.

It makes us happy that tea worker like to restart study after a long break, dropped or despite being disadvantaged. About 68 percent worker like to start study again while only 31 percent think it's as impossible and assert various kinds of problem which has already defined by them.

### STATISTICAL TEST

The result of the study reveals that the tea garden workers are leading a miserable life. lack of basic needs among their facilities have been deemed their opportunities for receiving education from any sources. In this section an attempt has been conducted to show statistically whether this constraints and status are significantly impact their way in restarting education.

**Table: 5**  
Cross tabulation on educational status vs changing intention current profession of the tea garden worker of Bangladesh

		Desire to change current Profession				Total	Symmetric Measures(c)		
		Yes	No	Other	Missing		Phi	Value	Sig.
Educational status of the respondents	Illiterate	32	14	1	0	47	Phi	.265	.753
	Class Five	40	7	0	1	48			
	Class Eight	9	2	0	0	11	Cramer's V	.265	.753
	Other	12	1	0	0	13			
		1	0	0	0	1			
<b>Total</b>		<b>94</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>120</b>			

The chart figures out that maximum worker are illiterate only a few percent is five passed so it's very difficult to change their job concerning their educational status. Both Phi and Cramer's V test reveals the same result that is insignificant ( $>0.05$ ) which will be suggesting that it requires more education for changing their current profession.

**Table: 6**  
Cross tabulation on wages of the respondents and restarting of education

		want to restart education		Total	Chi-Square Tests			
		Yes	No		Value	df	asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Monthly wages (tk) of the respondents	1500-2500	33	22	55	Pearson Chi-Square	225(a)	4	.521
	2500-3500	3	1	4				
	3500-4500	26	10	36	Likelihood ratio	3.303	4	.508
	4500-5500	9	2	11				
	5500 through highest	9	3	12	No of valid cases			118
		80	38	118				

Payment of the wages varies from garden to garden or authority. In few garden tea workers are paid on daily basis and in few garden on weekly basis. In the above chart wages have been converted into monthly basis. The Chi-Square test of their salary and restarting education shows insignificant ( $Chi-Square > 0.05$ ). That means it is quite impossible to carry out the educational expenses or other types necessity about education with low income. In this study most of them ask for financial support to restart education.

**Table: 7**  
Cross tabulation between the worker who have heard about BOU and their interest

		Interested to BOU		Total	Chi-Square Tests			
		Yes	No		Value	df	asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Heard about BOU	Yes	76	10	86	Pearson Chi-Square	32.610 (a)	3	.000
	No	13	18	31				
	Other	0	2	2	Likelihood ratio	30.971	3	.000
		1	0	1				
		90	30	120	No of valid cases	120		120

We have already got primary idea result about their interest on BOU. Pearson Chi-Square test also reveals about their interest on BOU. It seems very much rational ( $Chi-Square\ value < 0.05$ ).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS IN BRIEF**

Every stages of this study have been accomplished according to the objectives. Major findings can summarize in the following:

- Tea workers have no minimum opportunity of food, residence, treatment. Recreational and educational opportunities are far behind to mention. Thus, this study claims that they are truly belongs to the vulnerable group.
- Only 40 percent of the worker went to school once upon a time in their life and now most of them earn only 1500-2500 taka monthly by working in the tea garden.
- In the study area 72 percent worker have heard about Bangladesh Open University and about 68 per cent of the worker are interested to start education again. They also emphasize on education to in favor of their interest on changing their profession and life.
- There is mentionable number (72.5 per cent) NGOs working in the tea garden but a little scope for the aged to study there.
- Tea workers identify financial constraint as another important problem in the flow of getting education. Their monthly income does not ( $\chi^2 > 0.05$ ) support their interest about restarting studying.
  
- Tea workers claim that they are leading a miserable life. Union leaders do not care about their problems at all. They urge the government to interfere directly easing their sufferings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Plainly speaking a lot of plan, study and research have been conducted concerning the tea garden worker but they have got few facilities recommended. The concern authority seems quite reluctant for the development of this group of people. Most of the managements think that if they become educated they won't work in the garden. We do not agree with this view because it is government's responsibility to provide all kinds of basic need for its citizen, how he will return it that can not be the question at all. But it can speak boldly that state will get something better.

From this study, we have got many evidences that this group of people undoubtedly belongs to a vulnerable group. They do not get the minimum requirements for their life. They have no sufficient food, house, clothes, education and medicine is so far to mention. More than 50% of the labors get only 69 taka as daily or 414 taka weekly and 50% of the workers are absolute illiterate who never attend any kind of school to study. But we see the ray of hope because about 40% of the worker has studied up to class five. We can uphold them for better life. If we can't do that at least we can do something for their children. Generally Project Development Unit, Education Trust and Labor Welfare Fund operate the educational program for the tea worker along the government side while different types of NGO's also provide education for tea garden workers.

Among the many recommendations found from this study we came to know that they need financial allowances for the continuation of their study. From the field work it seems to us

that if Bangladesh Tea Board and Bangladesh Open University (BOU) jointly take any initiatives for tea worker, fruitful something may happen. They expressed a breath of surprised and satisfaction hearing about Bangladesh Open University (BOU) working as for disadvantaged, dropped, and aged. They earnestly request us to do something for them from the BOU. Everybody will agree that it is high time to go for pragmatic action for this thousand of marginal people in the tea garden.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From this study researcher has identified the following recommendations need to materialize as early as possible-

- Tea worker should be defined as labor under the Labor Act 2006. They should give all kinds of benefits under this Act. Department of Labor, Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishment and the Labor Court should be played active role in ensuring the rights of tea worker.
- Tea Board, Bangladesh Tea Research Institute, Export Promotion Bureau and Bangladesh Tea Association, Labor Welfare Fund should monitor locally whether tea worker are getting their labor value or not.
- Living condition in labor line is too much unhygienic, crowdie, gloomy and poor. Controlling and monitoring authority should ensure it that garden management will arrange a minimum living place. Electricity, gas and pure drinking water should provide in the labor line. Family planning team should pay attention in the labor line to give advice and medicine on population control and reproductive issues.
- It has been seen that one more NGO is operating primary education in the same area whether there is no secondary school. As a result a five passed student has to stop his study. The NGOs should work articulately.
- The NGOs which are already in operation can extent their service for the aged and up to secondary level. In a cluster of garden a secondary school can run smoothly.
- Trade union like *Bangaldesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU)*, *Chittagong Cha Sramik Union (CCSU)* should raise their voice strongly.
- Bangladesh Open University can easily offer junior school certificate (JSC) program for the five passed 40% tea worker. It has the opportunity to offer different non-formal programs like livestock, fisheries and other agro-production for the interested tea garden worker.
- Bangladesh Open University can support different local NGOs which are already operating in this area and set up tutorial centre mainly in the high density of tea garden area which may be more effective.

**Acknowledgement:** Unattended sufferings of the tea worker had stirred me a lot during my visit in the tea garden few years ago. Tea workers live an excluded life deprived from the basic needs of a human being. I possessed the feelings silently in my heart. At last Bangladesh Open University (BOU) offers the opportunity by giving a nod in the proposal of working for the tea garden worker. So, heart feel gratitude first goes for BOU. It is the outcome of a team work which has accomplished both from primary and secondary

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#### **BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of the AUTHORS**



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