

# Life in a Tea Garden



To most people in the West, the phrase “Tea Gardens of Bangladesh” conjures up an image along the lines of “The Hanging Gardens of Babylon” – somewhere lush and beautiful, with gently rolling hills full of bright green bushes being picked by a happy, colourful group of women. As is often the way, reality is somewhat different.

The tea gardens are managed by large corporations such as Finlay's, Duncan's, Nestle, or possibly a Bangladesh government enterprise. The approach road is often not finished with tarmac and usually develops into a rutted, dusty dirt track which soon takes its toll on any car. In the rainy season the road turns to mud with shallow drainage ditches on both sides. The entrance to Kalighat Tea Garden has around, interspersed with spindly trees. However, the tea gardens are usually on more hilly ground.



On entering the tea garden village or colony, one is confronted by a series of side tracks between rows of timber framed shacks, clad with tin roofs and walls supported on a packed mud plinth. The plinth needs constant maintenance using a combination of cow dung and sand mixed quite literally by hand. The same goes for the approach path to the doorway and for the floors inside the homes. Inside the typical home are two rooms, one used for communal family sleeping and living, the small side room as a kitchen. A few tin basins or plates are stacked in one corner as cooking pots. The toilet is a communal latrine serving half a dozen families, sheltered by a wicker or linen/cloth fence for privacy but no more than a hole in the ground. Cooking is done using sticks collected from nearby trees.



Water for washing is collected from what is basically a large puddle dug to a depth of about two metres until the water table is reached. Water might possibly be available from a shallow tube well, but this is heavily contaminated by iron and even arsenic. New bore holes, which are rare, are sunk to a greater depth and these at least produce clean water. Those fortunate to live by a river can use it for bathing and for washing clothes, hanging the clothes on bushes to dry.

Plots of land are available for cultivation and production of a few tomatoes or marrows, but lack of water makes it difficult to produce a worthwhile harvest particularly during the dry season.



It is common for three generations to live in one “home”. Often the older men have died, leaving a widow to help look after the children while their mother works as a tea picker. Father usually seeks casual work in the local village or town, earning 250 BDT (£2.20) a day, but often finds nothing to do. Meanwhile Mum works from 8am to 4pm, six days a week to earn 120 BDT (£1.05) per day. In order to retain tenancy of the home, she has to pick 23kg of tea leaves each day and returns home exhausted and weak from malnourishment. Often the children or grandparents have to help out in order to fulfill their daily quota.

Older children frequently have to stay at home to look after younger siblings or even neighbour's children, thereby missing school. Primary education may be available but school uniform is a requirement which many cannot afford so the children remain at home, and in any case the quality of education is very patchy. Some tea garden schools are well run with caring staff but many are simply token gestures by Government to satisfy UNICEF demands. Many children remain illiterate as are their parents and grandparents.



Photo Above: Weighing up at the end of the day.



Photo Above: 7 year old looking after younger sibling.



Although it is available on a meter, most families cannot afford electricity. Rice is predominantly rice and a few vegetables, meat is unaffordable or unavailable. The family might own a goat but this would be used to produce kids to sell for income rather than for milk which is too rich, and some may own a single chicken to produce eggs.

The tea garden families are mostly Hindu which means 36 festivals each year, of which only 12 are paid holidays. The remaining 24 are unpaid – deep rooted religious belief trumps food!

Medical facilities are scarce and often too far away to be accessible. Even within the medical centre there are minimal facilities, medicines or qualified staff, once again a token nod towards acceptability.

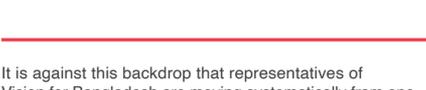


Photo Above: Rimly giving advice to pregnant mother.

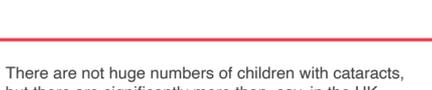


Photo Above: Seema carrying out eye tests.

It is against this backdrop that representatives of Vision for Bangladesh are moving systematically from one home to the next through a colony to search for pregnant or young mums and their pre-school children in order to give primary eye assessment. Some older children are also found suffering from cataracts and since they cannot see adequately they do not attend school and would therefore be condemned to a life of blindness.

There are not huge numbers of children with cataracts, but there are significantly more than, say, in the UK. This is due to genetic influence, childhood disease and malnutrition during pregnancy. If these children can be found before they reach the age of 5, help is available and surgery provided to prevent life long blindness which is a tragedy.



Photo Above: Rimly giving advice to pregnant mother.



Photo Above: Seema carrying out eye tests.

Bangladesh has a population of almost 170 million of which 1million are blind. This number continues to rise at the rate of 60 – 70,000 every year, in spite of the efforts of government and charities to bring the situation under control. Vision for Bangladesh is working solely in the tea gardens where no one else is helping the most impoverished people in Bangladesh society. Tea garden workers do not have the means to seek medical help for themselves – we have to take the help to them.



So far in 2022:

**2673**  
Childrens Eye Examinations

**743**  
Adults Attended Eye Camp

**96**  
Sight Saving Surgeries

**206**  
Pairs of Glasses Issued

Since the beginning of January, 1803 children have been examined in their homes and 51 were sent to the BNSB hospital for further assessment and treatments for conjunctivitis, blurred vision, squint and cataracts. School eye screening camps (clinics) have been held in four tea gardens where BNSB hospital staff were able to check 870 children's eyes. Vitamin A capsules were given to every child - a supplement which is stored in the body for a long period of time - and glasses issued to those who's sight was restricted. Three adult eye camps were held and 743 men and women of all ages attended of whom 96 were transported to hospital in Moulvibazar, received surgery for the removal of cataracts and then returned home next day, all paid for by Vision for Bangladesh donors. In total 206 pairs of glasses have been given to adults and children in the same period.

Thankfully Covid restrictions have finally been lifted in Bangladesh and we look forward to a regular programme of school eye screening camps and adult eye camps in the coming year.

Two more of our sponsored girls, Sumi and Seema, are currently being trained by the BNSB eye hospital in Moulvibazar for primary eye care assessment, and join Rimly in seeking out needy children as Eye Healthcare Assistants. All of them continue to provide education on nutrition and personal health matters and to give iron and vitamin supplements. Mom has been promoted to the position of Eye Healthcare Manager, responsible for day to day activities of all of the team and for liaison with BNSB hospital for team and surgery. We trust this will take some pressure off Ivan Samadder, allowing him to concentrate on his own schools work and pastoral care within the tea gardens. We are delighted to be able to sponsor these young ladies and we ask for you, our supporters, to pray for them and to be in partnership with us as we seek to eliminate avoidable blindness in Bangladesh.



Photo Above: Sumi giving vitamin supplements.

On behalf of the Tea Garden people - thank you for every prayer and every pound. We cannot do this without your continued help.