

From Geneva to Guwahati: demanding fair wages for Assam's tea workers

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As the UN meets in Geneva to discuss human rights the tea workers in Guwahati are standing up for theirs.



Assam's tea workers protest for higher wages and better conditions on 27 November 2017. Photo by the All Adivasi Women's Association of Assam. All rights reserved.

On 27 November, throngs of people attended the first day of the [UN Forum on Business and Human Rights](#) in Geneva, Switzerland. The three-day forum will see participants from business, government, and civil society have heated debates – over hot cups of tea and coffee – on how to protect human rights in a business context.

Thousands of kilometres away, tea workers, their families, and allies gathered for a rally on the same day in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, which is India's largest tea growing state and home to the ubiquitous Assam tea. The rally is part of a larger wage campaign in Assam launched earlier this year, involving unions, student organisations, women's organisations and intellectuals, all calling for higher wages for hundreds of thousands of permanent and seasonal tea workers who earn woefully low wages.

This concurrence of gatherings on 27 November – from Geneva to Guwahati – is a reminder that companies across the tea supply chain continue to fail workers, in violation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, a set of standards that require businesses to avoid infringing human rights.

Assam's underpaid and exploited tea workers

While the tea industry is the pride of Assam, it's one million, mostly female workers and their families live in abject poverty. Most present day workers are descendants of Adivasis (or Indigenous Peoples) forcefully brought under British colonial rule in the 1800s from central India. While many multinational corporations have stepped into the colonisers shoes, the reality facing tea workers continues to be grim. Workers endure back-breaking, long hours in the harsh sun for six days a week, sometimes seven. Tea pluckers must pick 24 kilograms of tea leaf per day or face possible wage penalties. Pesticide sprayers often do not have access to protective equipment or training, and are exposed to hazardous chemicals. And at the end of the day, workers come home to dilapidated housing, dirty drinking water, and inadequate healthcare. Due to the absence of functioning toilets, many openly defecate, exacerbating disease, which along with malnutrition is disproportionately high on Assam's tea plantations.

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At the root of workers' continuing inter-generational exploitation is their disturbingly low wages. In 2017, across the state of Assam, tea workers received a cash wage of only 137 rupees per day (about \$2). This wage was the result of negotiations in 2014 between the tea industry and one government prescribed union, which many workers feel are not representing their interests. The wage is significantly below the state-mandated daily minimum wage for unskilled agricultural workers – currently set at 250 rupees (nearly \$4) – even though tea plantation work requires much skill.

The UN Guiding Principles violated on Assam's tea plantations

Complying with the UN Guiding Principles would require Assam tea plantations to respect workers' rights and provide a living wage. Unfortunately, tea companies in Assam have thoroughly failed on this front.

In November 2016, the World Bank Group's (WBG) independent watchdog, the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), released an investigation confirming alarming conditions at Assam's second largest tea producer, Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited (APPL). APPL is majority owned by the Tata Group, and the WBG owns approximately 16% of the company. The CAO found that wages were so low on APPL's Assam plantations that the WBG's labour standard, which requires upholding "workers' fundamental rights while paying them a decent and fair wage", was being violated. A year has passed, but little progress has been made at APPL to address the CAO's findings.



The UN Forum on Business and Human Rights on 27 November 2017 in Geneva, Switzerland. Photo by author. All rights reserved.

In fact, tea plantation companies in Assam have shirked their responsibilities with respect to fair wages *en masse*. They have sought to protect themselves by acting as a collective on this issue, with individual companies lending unflinching loyalty to the 'brotherhood'. Even though the current wage is below the state-mandated minimum, no company has shown the leadership or willingness to depart from it. The industry claims that when other services they provide to workers under the Indian Plantations Labour Act, 1951 are accounted for, the overall calculation rises above the minimum. Under the act, the responsibility for providing social services like healthcare, education, and housing at a reasonable standard lies with the companies. Yet several high-profile investigations have uncovered sub-standard services and many companies systematically flouting the act.

To make matters worse, the industry has callously acted to block steps taken by the government to improve the welfare of workers. In July 2015, when the state government attempted to increase the cash component of workers' wages, the industry blocked the increase by approaching the Guwahati High Court and ultimately succeeded in staying the government's proposal.

From Guwahati to Geneva and beyond

With the negotiated wage agreement in Assam set to lapse at the end of 2017, thousands of people gathered in Guwahati on 27 November to demand that Assam tea workers' be paid at least 350 rupees per day (about \$5) in the

upcoming wage negotiations. Ensuring that tea workers in Assam are paid a living wage is required by the UN Guiding Principles, and is central to the long-term sustainability of the tea sector.

The UN Guiding Principles do not apply only to the tea plantation companies in Assam that are directly causing abuses. They also apply to companies that contribute or are linked to human rights abuses. Global tea buyers, who hold considerable purchasing power over wages and other working conditions in the plantations, are required by the UN Guiding Principles to use their leverage to make improvements. Justice for Assam tea workers require global buyers of Assam tea to influence local suppliers to push for fair wages in upcoming wage negotiations. International tea buyers must also assess their own sourcing practices to ensure they are not contributing to the suppression of wages in Assam.