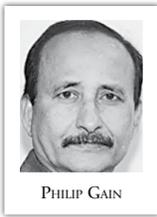


The strong women of tea gardens

Despite working in extremely difficult conditions, the female tea workers of Bangladesh persevere



PHILIP GAIN

It was midday on October 6, 2018. A woman was sitting under a mahogany tree at Sreemangal Upazila Health Complex in Moulvibazar. Another woman was holding a newborn wrapped in a blanket. A few men were also around. I approached them out of curiosity, only to learn of a stunning story. The woman sitting under the tree was Mithila Nayek, 22, a tea worker at Hossainabad Tea Garden in Sreemangal upazila. She looked pale and in pain. She had actually given birth to the baby girl just an hour before. Maya Tanti, her relative, was taking care of the newborn. Mithila's baby did not cry at birth; she was having trouble breathing. The health complex doctors referred her to Moulvibazar district hospital. Mithila's

complex, because her water had broken the night before and all the fluid had drained out, but the untrained midwife she had gone to could not deliver her baby throughout the night. Mithila and her family went through an ordeal to go to the health complex. The condition of the road was bumpy, and she had to travel in a CNG autorickshaw. The privately-owned tea garden did not provide any vehicles, let alone an ambulance, even during the critical condition of a woman giving birth. It was sheer luck that her baby survived. There are thousands of women like Mithila, working at tea gardens across Bangladesh, who suffer the same when giving birth. They also have a tough time throughout their pregnancies, and it is due to the remoteness of the areas, superstition, cultural practices, malnutrition, poor housing, tough and indecent work conditions. The female tea garden workers are often in ill health, with cases of cervical cancer, tuberculosis and other diseases

work), women keep working in the gardens until sunset. The job of tea leaf picking requires the workers to keep standing all day—be it under the scorching sun or in the rain. They normally walk four to five kilometres to reach the section where they pick tea leaves. They work fast to fulfil their daily *nirikh*. Women pick tea leaves in groups all day. It is not just that they pick the tender leaves—they also clear unnecessary creepers and weed that they come across while working. Thus, they also tend to every tea plant. Between morning and lunchtime, a tea leaf picker (*pattiwali*) is likely to complete two rounds of submission of tea leaves at collection points. Each time, they walk two to three kilometres to reach the collection point and then go back to their designated sections. The collections during morning hours sometimes go well over the *nirikh* of the day. The lunch break provides for quite a scene. Usually, they sit in groups under

toilets). This means women defecate and urinate in the open. This is again a clear violation of the labour law. Upon finishing lunch, they get ready for the afternoon shift. While preparing, many are seen rubbing kerosene or other solutions on their legs and feet. This is to protect their bare feet and legs from leeches and insects. By the time they drop off their final headloads of green tea leaves at

animals, fetching water, taking care of children and helping her husband in agricultural work. She has no time to rest after all these chores that she routinely performs. Women do all these quietly. What do they get in return for all their services to their families, society, and the tea industry? Can they raise their voices at social organisations, trade unions and other forums? Women are indeed made to work extremely hard, but patriarchy overshadows their lives and contributions. For example, women are just a third of 3,200 members of 230 *panchayats*, the garden-level local councils aligned with their lone trade union, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union, which has a central committee of 35 members—in which only nine are women. In none of the central and valley committees and *panchayats* is a woman in the position of chairperson, general secretary or treasurer. Women have the opportunity to get elected in seats reserved for them. No woman has ever been placed in the positions of chairperson, general secretary or treasurer in any panel for elections at any level. Men say women are incapable and do not have time—a claim that women refute. Furthermore, women face extreme discrimination during recruitment at the workplace. Almost all *sardars* (supervisors) in the tea gardens are men. The office employees—around 3,000—include only a few women. They also report that they are subject to a variety of physical and mental abuse at work, home, and society. These include verbal abuse by their employers and supervisors, abuse in the hands of their husbands (particularly when they are drunk), coercion, sexual harassment including rape, involuntary abortion, and sexual assault on children and teenage girls. The tea workers, most of whom are non-Bengali Hindus, are considered social outcasts because of their caste status, and face severe wage deprivation and income inequality. The current daily cash pay of a tea worker is Tk 120. Adding all fringe benefits (rations at subsidised prices, free housing and treatment in particular), it stands at around Tk 200. The tea workers have never received gratuity at retirement or their share in the companies' profits. Furthermore, they face deprivation of many other kinds as citizens of Bangladesh, because of their isolation from the mainstream population. Women are the worst hit by the discrimination at tea gardens. A high percentage of them are skinny and malnourished. But they do not consider themselves as victims; they continue to show their strength. They demonstrate their skills in managing their families with meagre income and scanty opportunities. They are the ones who bring air of hope and imagination for their children, whom they want to see educated and not become tea workers. They are the ones who are determined to break the tradition, "Children of tea workers become tea workers."

The female tea garden workers are often in ill health, with cases of cervical cancer, tuberculosis and other diseases common among their communities.



Women tea workers walk in queue towards a tea leaf collection point.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

husband Narendra Nayek and brother Madan Nayek were looking for a vehicle to take her to Moulvibazar. An ambulance parked afar in the complex would cost Tk 500—a big sum for the family. Narendra finally found a CNG autorickshaw after a half-hour search, and took the mother and the baby to Moulvibazar Sadar Hospital. Both of them survived. Mithila had the baby after suffering three miscarriages. Most of the women working in the tea gardens give birth with the help of untrained midwives (*dhatris*), and the cases of deaths at birth, stillbirths, and maternal deaths are much higher in numbers in the tea gardens than the national average. Mithila went to the upazila health

common in their communities. Compared to other agriculture-based industries, the male-female ratio in the labour force of the tea industry is different, in that 51 per cent of around 139,000 workers in the 158 traditionally large tea gardens—located in Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Chattogram and Rangamati districts—are women. When we visit the tea gardens, we see mostly women in the green valleys, busy picking tea leaves. From a distance, the scene of tea leaf picking is picturesque. But we probably cannot fathom how laborious picking tea leaves with your bare hands, and sometimes on bare feet, can be. While most men disappear by midday after fulfilling their *nirikh* (daily quota of

the open sky or a tree. There is no shade for them to sit under and eat lunch or take rest if someone falls sick—which is a violation of the labour law. The staple for their lunch is usually homemade bread or rice, while they eat potatoes, fried chilli, onion and *chanachur* sometimes. They also carry bottles of cold tea that they normally make with low-quality tea leaves. Many simply soak the bread in cold tea and eat it for lunch. At the places they eat lunch, they start a small fire to keep mosquitoes and flies away. The indecencies do not stop there. There is also no toilet or any washing facilities in the sections where the tea garden workers work (although one tea garden recently reported setting up

the collection points, the sun sets on the horizon.

The most distressing part of this scenario is that women pick an additional 20-25kg or even more of tea leaves to make some extra money after meeting their daily target of 22-25kg. The wage they get for picking up the additional tea leaves is not fair. In other words, female tea workers are pushed to work excessive hours to earn extra income, while the working hours for the male workers are generally fixed. This is a deceptive strategy to make women work harder and longer hours than men.

Women tea labourers face the toughest time during their pregnancies. They keep working till the very end of their pregnancies. Hard work and fall during work often cause miscarriages. They generally take their maternity leaves after giving birth. They save their sick leaves, which they take just before childbirth, and stay home two to three weeks before delivery.

The additional pressure on women is that many are married off at an early age, and they give birth to children even before they are physically ready to do so. Besides, women are the ones who use all birth control methods. In a 2018 survey on 60 pregnant women, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) found that 29 of them had been married off before 18 years of age. Twenty-nine of those 60 women used birth control methods. But none of their husbands used any contraceptives. These and many other factors lead to miscarriages and maternal deaths at much higher rates at the tea gardens compared to the national average.

Women in the tea gardens—housewives or tea leaf pickers—are in charge of endless household chores. Before everyday work in the tea gardens, a female tea worker has to finish all the morning chores. After returning home from work, she gets busy with household chores again. She has a long list of household chores that includes cooking, collecting firewood, washing, cleaning, taking care of domestic

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QUOTABLE Quote

GEORGE ELIOT
(1819 - 1880)
English novelist

Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

10-1

ACROSS

- 1 Spice from nutmeg
- 5 Forks over
- 9 Golf bag group
- 11 Brighten
- 13 Have faith in
- 14 Chair worker
- 15 Pinnacle
- 16 Ketchikan native
- 18 Distended
- 20 Print units
- 21 Goffer Sam
- 22 For fear that
- 23 Machinery part
- 24 Big bird of myth
- 25 Cronies
- 27 Natatorium features
- 29 Ring great
- 30 "Patton" and

DOWN

- 1 Catchers' needs
- 2 Quiver contents
- 3 Thrifty shopper, maybe
- 4 Print units
- 5 Praline nut
- 6 Weary sigh
- 7 19th-century sailing ship
- 8 Prepares broccoli
- 10 Prison camp
- 12 Painter Max
- 17 Was ahead
- 19 Some July babies
- 22 Aerobatics feat
- 24 Perches
- 25 Half of a '60s rock group
- 26 Homecoming group
- 27 Chasm
- 28 Plot
- 30 Saloon orders
- 31 Borders
- 33 Entreaty
- 37 Backer's vote

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SIDE STRAW
PROMS LEAVE
RANUP ARCED
ITO LEMMING
GERBIL SUE
ANKA TED
CENT BASS
SAX SASS
ATA GOPHER
HAMSTER ALE
ALIKE BRIDE
RONIN SATED
AGENT WIRY

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
District Primary Education Office
Jashore
E-mail: dpeojosso@gmail.com

Memo No: dpeo/Jas/adv/2021/2176
Date: 23/12/2021

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