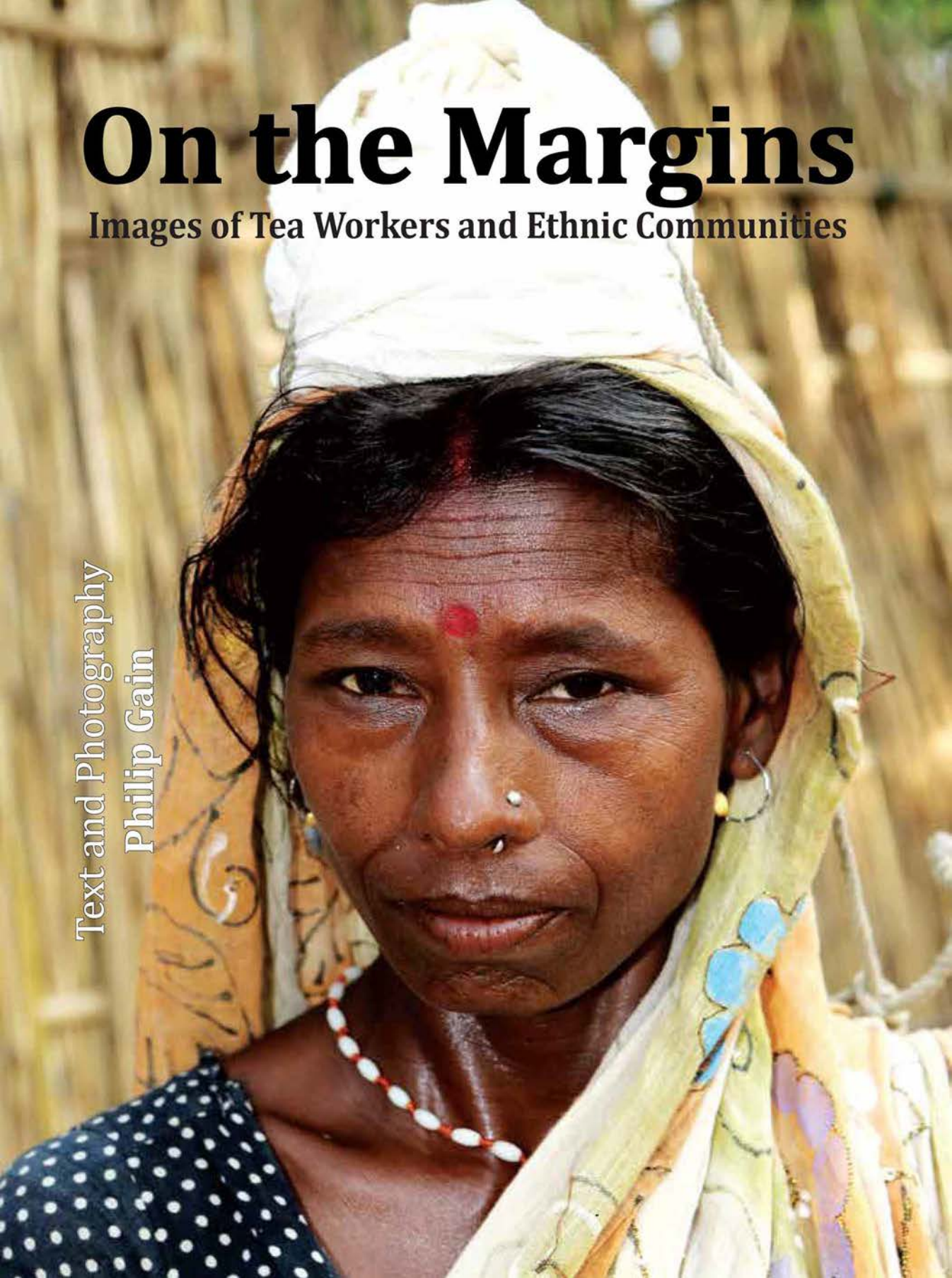


# On the Margins

Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities

Text and Photography

Philip Gain



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## **Imprint**

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## Preface

We, at the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), have always taken great interest in making images of people we have been working with and the issues we have dealt with. Use of images has made SEHD publications attractive. Powerful images also have had impacts. The project, 'Mapping and capacity building of tea plantation workers and little-known ethnic communities of Bangladesh' funded by European Union and ICCO Cooperation that we have been implementing since May 2013 for three years has given us an outstanding opportunity to photograph the tea workers in all the tea growing districts and little-known ethnic communities in the Northwest, North-center and Northeast of Bangladesh.

Photographing the tea workers and their surroundings were particularly exciting. The managers of the tea gardens and the *sardars* who are always there in the gardens at working hours do not like any photography in the tea gardens. But we could not resist ourselves from photographing the workers who belong to as many as 80 communities. They represent amazing faces and diverse cultures. Yet, kind of aliens to this country and tied to the tea gardens, the tea workers undergo systematic human rights abuses at work place and in the labour lines where they are made to live. We believe that portraits of all 80 communities and images of many other aspects of their life and struggle that we present in this volume will give a full picture of the tea workers of Bangladesh that was not seen in photographs before.

Part of this volume is about ethnic communities with special attention to the little-known ones who remain invisible. How many of us know that there are a few hundred Kaders, one of the oldest indigenous people of the Indian Sub-continent, live in Dinajpur? They have a language and culture although they are in great dismay with almost not cultivable land and living with a very indecent income. There are many such other ethnic communities—as many as 33—in the Northwest, North-center and Northeast of Bangladesh who remain unknown to the people of the majority community because they are not be found in official records. Bakti, Bhuimali, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Bindumondol, Chowhan, Ghatual, Gorait, Kol, Kora, Kurmi, Mahle, Malo, Modok, Mushohor, Noonia, Rajbhar, Rajwar, Turi, Banai, Hodi, Lyngam, Patra and Shobdokor are among them. We photographed these communities and their surroundings with great interest as part of our mapping of these communities. Portraits of these communities and images of human rights abuses they undergo, their cultures, habitat, occupations, etc. have been part of this volume.

To make sure that the users of this volume see the images of all ethnic tea communities in one place, we have also selected one portrait of every community that is found in official records.

We are amazed to discover that, the tea communities taken into account, there are as many as 110 ethnic communities in Bangladesh in addition to Bangalees. If further research is done on communities in Bangladesh many more surprising facts may surface. We are aware that our finds about the numbers will provoke debate. But imagine that 'Almik' is a community of the tea gardens who are Hindu but not Bangalee. Can we then not identify them as a separate community from Bangalees and others? We are not drawing any conclusion about the numbers but we believe this book of images will arouse some interest of the anthropologists and researchers for further research on the communities in the tea gardens and other areas.

We believe that this book will also draw attention of the photographers, researchers, anthropologists and others to the concerns of the tea workers and the ethnic communities such as their work conditions, environment, struggle, life, culture and beauty of diversity.

*Philip Gain*

## Acknowledgements

The publication of this book has been possible with support from a great number of individuals, communities and institutions. It is impossible to mention the names of all the individuals who have extended their support to the author and his team during their journey through the tea gardens, Northwest, North-centre and Northeast of Bangladesh for research and search offices of diverse identities and cultures. It is their kindness and hospitality that have been most inspiring behind the production of this book of images.

The names of individuals that must be mentioned with gratitude are Rambhajan Kairi, Sanjoy Kairi, Silas Gaddi, Parimal Sing Baraik, Asha Ornal, Luxmi Rani Kairi, Prodip Das, Bijoy Bunerjee, Swapan Santal, Bijoy Hajra, Paresh Kalindi, Nirmal Das Painka, Makhonlal Karmokar, Sadhan Santal, Luxmicharan Bakti, Piari Robidas, Avirat Bakti, Sumon Singha, Bisnu Mridha, Sanju Adhikari, Raju Goswami, Bimal Karmokar, Rakhal gola, Mitali Pattra, Probin Chisim, Lucky Ruga, Liton Deb Sen, Bikash Chandra Hajong, Anil Chandra Koch, Joseph Hasda, Santosh Hembrom, Sylvester Tudu, Baburam Baske, Noresh Hembrom, Ratan Tapno, Bhupesh Roy, Moazzem Hossain, Azaharul Azad Jewel, Gourango Patra, Tapan Datta, Md. Haroon-Or-Rashid Sarker, Rabindranath Soren, ZuamLian Amlai, Ranglai Murung, Supriyo Chakma, Dhung Cha Aung Chak and Gidison Pradhan Suchiang. These individuals and many more assisted the author and his team particularly in the field.

A great team at SEHD office in Dhaka comprised of Sabrina Miti Gain, Quazi Monzila Sultana, Raiyana Rahman, Goutam Basak and Tania Sultana patiently assisted the author in selecting images, writing captions, proofreading and editing the texts. Mazaharul Islam and Prosad Sarker have shown their incredible patience and skills in setting up pages in a very short period of time.

The author is particularly thankful to Prosad Sarker, Sanjoy Kairi and Joseph Hasda who have contributed some images at the last moment.

European Union and ICCO Cooperation deserve special thanks for their financial support for making this production possible.

# On the Margins

Images of Tea Workers and Ethnic Communities

The tea workers, descendants of indentured labour force, are still unfamiliar with the world outside the tea estates. They are isolated from the majority community and even from other ethnic communities outside the tea gardens. 'Tied' to the tea estates they belong to as many as 80 identities. In addition to the ethnic communities on official records, there are a large number of communities in the Northwest, North-centre and Northeast who remain invisible and unrecognized. These communities have their own identities and heritages although many are in the process of being assimilated with other groups. Socially excluded, the tea workers and these invisible communities are among the most marginalized and impoverished people of Bangladesh.

This book of images presents incredible faces of tea workers and ethnic communities on the margins, their surroundings, habitat, work condition, struggle, tradition and a lot more.



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