

# Assam's tea garden labour are champions

This is the first time the industry is recognising the skill and output of its workforce

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BORJULI

Tabi Bhengra's ancestors were brought to Assam by British tea planters more than 170 years ago. She doesn't even know which part of central India her ancestors came from. But thanks to a skill passed down across six generations, she now knows that she is her family's first tea-plucking champion.

Ms. Bhengra, 30, is not the only one though. Seven other pluckers from 17 estates of one of the largest tea companies in Assam have received recognition for their unique skill: consis-



**Working on:** Tabi Bhengra and seven others have been honoured for plucking 21 kg every day. ■ RAHUL KARMAKAR

tently plucking around 21 kg of the highest quality tea leaves every day. "It feels nice to be awarded for something that I have been doing routinely for 13 years," said Ms. Bhengra, one of

about 1,200 permanent and casual tea pluckers at Borjuli Tea Estate, located in Sonitpur district, 200 km north-east of Guwahati.

The 566.56 hectare Borjuli garden is one of a cluster

of five tea gardens owned by the Apeejay Group.

"Plucking indeed is a special skill. The quality and quantity of tea we produce depend on how Tabi, Gumi and the other workers pick the best leaves," said Somnath Nandi, Borjuli's manager.

Ms. Bhengra beat Gumi Sanga of an adjoining estate for the local awards that were announced during the plucking season of April-November, 2018. The award was based on attendance, and the quality and quantity of leaves. Plucking is mainly done by women, with a worker putting in eight

hours a day for six days a week.

Ms. Bhengra's attendance was 97% and she plucked an average of 2,489 kg every two months, with 62% quality.

The benchmark at Borjuli is 60-65% of tender leaves, of two leaves and a bud, or an unopened leaf at the tip of a stem.

Karan Paul, Apeejay's Kolkata-based chairman, said the industry had been slow to recognise the workforce. Thirteen workers, including eight champions, would be handed over a certificate and cash prize ₹5,000.