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Shades of Blue in the Green Tea Gardens

The tea-gardens represent a very niche community among all other regions of India and have their own set of benefits & challenges.

The [Plantation Labour Act \(1951\)](#) mandates tea plantation ownership to allot suitable land and housing facilities for tea plantation workers and their families. However, garden [workers do not legally own the land](#) or houses they have occupied intergenerational.

This system of [intergenerational bonded labor](#) in tea gardens dismisses the rights of land to workers who worked in gardens through generations. It is mandatory for **one person from the family to work in the tea garden or else they will not be given any facilities including a house**. There are roughly around **6,00,00 workers** in the tea-garden region of North Bengal.

Livelihoods in this region are influenced by multiple stakeholders- tea-management/plantation owners, labor welfare unions, Tea-board of India and local community level administrative bodies in addition to the government. The community has been suffering from complex social, political and economic challenges ever since the plantation labor act came into operation.



Our team visited tea gardens in the three districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling and had the opportunity to hear diverse human stories with challenges that are so unique yet binds all the youth of the country. These stories serve as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the youth who continue to strive towards a better future.



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Silence of Ages, Hoping for Light



Pratiba, Happy Valley Tea Garden, Darjeeling district

This is Pratiba who has been working in a tea garden as a tea-plucker since the age of 13. She lost her partner a few years ago when he succumbed to an illness he acquired due to similar work. Pratiba has 4 children - 1 son, and 3 daughters of which 2 are married. She remembers her initial wages to be INR 12/- per day when she started working back as an adolescent. Wages rose marginally over the years but continued to be low and barely sufficient for the couple to provide good education opportunities to their children. However, she mentioned that she never wished for her children to work in the tea garden; she is proud that they work in the hospitality industry.

She is about 57 years old and has been following the same daily routine for as long as she can remember. She wakes up at 5:00 am for household chores and then leaves for work, making sure she is never late. Late entry usually results in absenteeism, resulting in a pay cut for the day. She works all day and returns around 5:00 pm. Despite being exhausted by the daylong labour, she prepares dinner for the family. Sometimes her children have dinner with her; at other times, she eats alone.

When asked, *“Abhi jab aapke bachche kamaa rahe hain, aap kyu tea garden mein kaam kar rahi hain?”* (Now that your children are working, why do you continue to



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work in the tea garden?), she replied - “Pension *ke liye*” (For the pension). With a helpless expression on her face, she expressed her will to continue working in the tea garden for another 4 years until she reaches retirement age, so that she is assured of receiving her pension thereafter.

(Author: Dhanashree Gurudu, Program Development Lead at Pratham)



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From Tea Leaves to Dreams: The Youth of Tea Gardens



Women at work in Chengmari Tea Garden, Jalpaiguri district

As one ambles along the meandering roads of tea garden quarters, one is taken in by the lush, verdant beauty of the landscape around. There is a permanence to this beauty so apparent to the naked eye, symmetrical houses dotted on both sides of the road, lashing rains, trees swaying, and the cackle of the kids, almost everything in rhythm. You heave a deep sigh and wonder if you can live all your life here.

You can't.

Like anywhere else in India, the youth face a daunting challenge here. With limited opportunities for higher education, jobs, and upward mobility, they are looking to escape the fate of their parents of being confined to the tea gardens and engaging in manual, tedious work in lieu of minimum wage and basic benefits.

Tithi is one such youth, an arts graduate preparing for the Government competitive exams for the past 3 years. She stresses two issues that assail the youth here - a lack of information/guidance on which career path to take and inadequate access to basic



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facilities. She looks at the road across her house and shares a poignant lament,

*'Desh ki maati, Desh ki ghat,
Desh ke van aur Desh ke baat,
sab saral bane'.*

Roughly translated to English, it means:

The land of the country, the hills of the country,
The forests of the country, and the stories of the country,
All should be made simple and accessible.

As the conversation progresses, she is brimming with ideas. She talks about the possibility of setting up camps for women in the area that would provide guidance on career navigation, job opportunities, and financial management skills, empowering women to take charge of their lives and futures.

(Author: Oshin Lakhani, Manager at Pratham)



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Getting Clogged in the Spiral of Joblessness and Delusion



Monika and Partha, Toorsa Tea Garden, Alipurduar district

Partha is 17 years old, one of the youngest members out of a family of 7 aspiring to get some livelihood opportunity and support his family. He was black-listed from his school 2 years ago for not attending classes for a few days due to family constraints and could not join any other school due to lack of administrative documents from his previous school. Only one member of this family (Monika's husband) is engaged in informal labor trying hard to make ends meet for his family. Monika is still waiting to hear from local tea factories for her card to be issued for tea-plucking labor work. Partha and Monika's frail and weak body shows how sustenance has been a constant struggle for the family.

"Agar padhai kiya hota, toh hi hume koi job dega (If we had adequate education then only someone would have given us jobs" - says Monika with a sad grin. Partha wants to study further but is helpless given the complexity of administrative processes and does not know what are the alternative pathways to get himself educated enough for a job. Most of Partha's friends of his age indulge in alcohol and drugs being depressed about not getting a job. Lack of direction and support is leading youth like Partha's friends into delusion creating suicidal tendencies and challenges for their families.



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Both Monika's and Partha's eyes gleamed with joy as we shared about the skill development opportunity that will translate into an actual job for free! There is enough drive and aspiration in the tea-garden communities to pursue different types of livelihood opportunities, they just need an enabling environment!

(Author: Toral Parmar, Senior Manager at Pratham)

*Names of actual participants have been changed to maintain privacy.