

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A TEA GARDEN RESIDENT

- Preeti Khandulna, Graduate Student
From Tezpur, Assam

Childhood is said to be the best phase of a person's life. But I wonder if the labourers of a tea garden are included in this section of people whose best phase of life is the childhood. For as far as I remember, more than playing around or enjoying my time with my friends, I remember the early waking up and getting on with household chores. Times when I have to rush to the garden to make it in time to give my mother her lunch is more vivid than of my lazing in the sun.

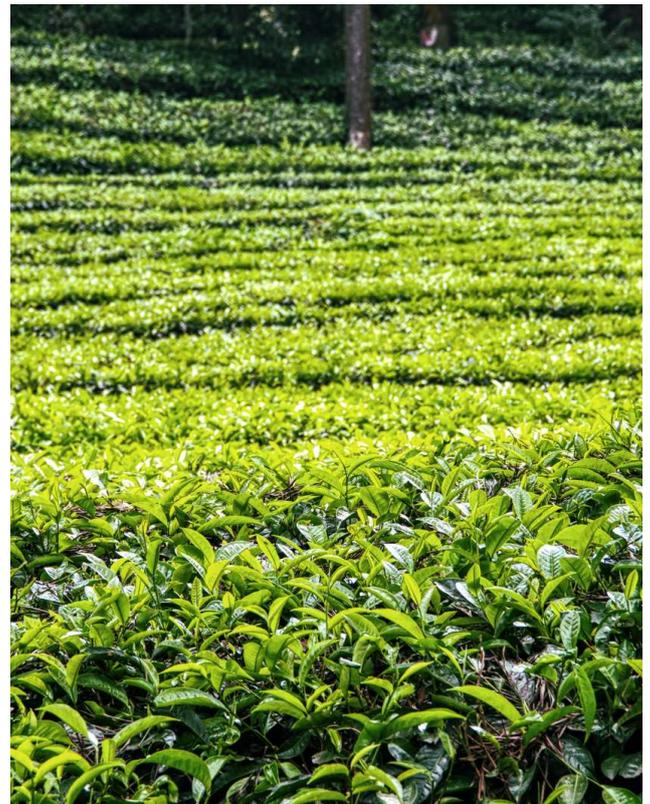
We are a family of eight where, I am the eldest among us six siblings. My father was a permanent worker in the tea garden and my mother a temporary garden worker. When I was the only child, my parents left me under the care of my maternal grandmother while they went to their workplace.

Those times were fun as my grandmother let me play to my heart's content and feast upon the vegetables she cooked. But as I neared three years of age, my mother gave birth to another daughter and my days of frolicking came to an end. I had to take up the responsibility of looking after my sister while my parents worked.

Most of the times, I accompanied my mother to the tea garden where she plucked tea leaves and I played with my little sister under the shade.

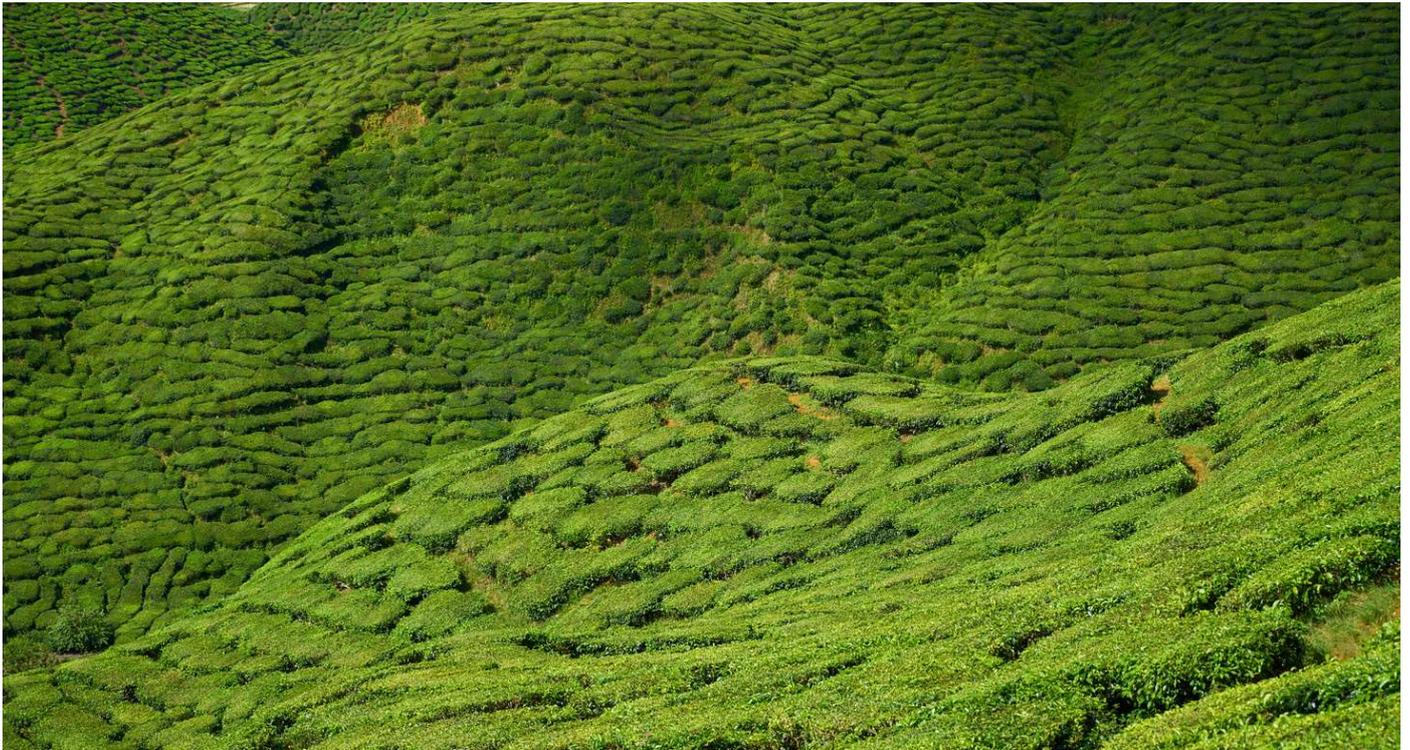
Except me and Santi, who is three years younger to me, all the rest of my siblings have just a year gap between them. I had a busy childhood being a nanny to my siblings and helping my mother with household chores and so I couldn't attend even the primary level of education. But my two brothers had the chance, thanks to the Anganwadi workers and lower primary teachers who visited my parents and explained to them the importance of education.

Why just my brothers? Patriarchy is the answer. As they say locally - "a boy will run the house in the future but a girl will only end up cooking in someone else's household". But with the financial belt tightening around us, even they had to give up their education after middle school and take up to doing various odd jobs around the neighbourhood like tending to the cattle, or working in their fields.



I might not seem right when both the parents are working so how could they not manage to properly feed the children. But with an earning of Rs. 130 -150 per day, it's rather difficult to fill the stomachs of a family of eight. My two younger sisters were sent out of states to work as a housemaid later on when they were barely 7-8 years old.

We did not have the emotional connection with our father because he was most of the times away at work. We also did not have land to cultivate on our own and so had to depend on the tea garden rations, which was barely enough to feed all of us. My mother tried to keep the vegetable garden in our backyard in good condition because at least that would reduce the household budget to some amount.



But life wasn't so bad always. We had our happy times when our good neighbors invited us every now and then to have food, or during the month of October when our parents bought us new clothes from their bonus salary. We lived in financial frugality but my parents did buy us pakoras and goppoos from the market whenever they could manage. Children in our neighbourhood played together in groups no matter their age. During festive seasons, we went around the village dancing with a make-do drum made of big plastic tumblers.

Most of the teenagers in the tea garden get to working in the tea garden as temporary workers. Those near the age of 15, most of the time change their date of birth and start working permanently. As my father's retirement drew near, I took up his post and started working full time in the tea garden.

Life right now, is a monotonous routine of waking up, doing household chores, going to work at 7 and then off duty at 5. Reaching home, it's time to clean up the house and courtyard, other miscellaneous chores and finally preparations for breakfast. Electricity in this part keeps fluctuating and there are more hours of no electricity than the no. of hours when there's electricity. Hence, we try to get things done before it gets too dark just so that we do not use too much of kerosene while lighting the lamp.

As the day ends, when one is supposed to be resting, I worry if tomorrow will be any better than today. Whether tomorrow we'll have enough food on our plates to eat. Or what if tomorrow something happens and I lose my job, what would happen to my family. As I worry, I lull myself to sleep.