



# TEA ACTION PROJECT

Empowering Tea Growing Communities

Newsletter 2021





# HELLO 2021!

If 2020 was the year of the accidental apocalypse and the world was torn down, then maybe 2021 is the year we build it back up again. This is the first year the Oxford dictionary didn't name a word of the year. They described 2020 as a year which cannot be neatly accommodated in one single word. The word used by Merian Webster for the year 2020 is 'pandemic'. Other words from various online dictionaries are lockdown, quarantine and emergency. While all these words describe the nature and limitations of our physical environments in 2020, none of them come close to describing our tumultuous inner worlds. That brings me to my most favourite word of 2020- 'Meraki', which is the pursuit of small, simple pleasures that add up to a sense of bliss and belonging. Whether it was learning to cook for the first time, brewing endless cups of tea to get through the day, a cancelled zoom meeting, watching sunrises and sunsets with loved ones, enjoying quiet walks through the tea gardens, Meraki reminds us no matter how hard, anxious or dreadful the world may seem at the moment, we must always remind ourselves to turn towards the sun and find our joy in the smallest and simplest blessings in our life.

In the face of what we have all gone through in 2020, it feels almost futile to make long term plans for 2021. Just the act of surviving through life seems good enough for now! But if we had to pick a theme for 2021, it would have to be the appreciation for all the little things we took for granted before. We are all different now. We have renewed respect for our health and bodies and are more intuitive with our food choices. We don't take for granted the enormous efforts farmers take to grow and produce our food. We are more thoughtful about our environments, wildlife and better understand how each is dependent on the other for their survival. We are less judgmental and critical of family, friends, colleagues, employees and workplaces. Patience and acceptance have become our new mantras now.

Taking this new learning forward, the focus of our work in our tea gardens this year has been health and environment. One of our first and most special projects though this lockdown year has been promoting mental health and wellbeing of our community members in the tea gardens. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in India has brought out the worst in all of us and has now led to the spread of behavioural changes that are evident in the form of increasing cases of anxiety, depression, domestic and substance abuse. To address this, we partnered with a specialist organisation called Manauta from Darjeeling to design and develop a holistic community development program through positive mental health and wellness practices.

One of the severe casualties of the pandemic has also been environmental regulations globally. As governments across the world seek to recover from the economic recession, the pressure to dilute environmental protection will now be severe. As an organisation we believe that the pandemic has been an opportunity for us to invest in accelerating the shift towards sustainability, and not to abandon it in the name of short-term economic recovery at any cost. In our efforts towards climate positivity we have switched to solar lighting in our villages, reduced our dependency and usage of non-renewable energy sources, and ingeniously use cover crops to improve soil health, control weeds and sequester carbon. In 2020 we celebrated our first milestone on this journey when our tea garden - Snowview in Darjeeling became certified carbon neutral. Our endeavour is to eventually have net-zero or negative emissions across all our tea gardens.

There is great potential for tea gardens in India to lead the way forward towards biodiversity conservation and we believe that organic farming is one such positive step in that direction. Not only does it have a positive effect on biodiversity but also provides the foundation for economic growth, human health and prosperity. It creates biodiverse ecosystems that protect us from natural disasters, disease outbreaks, regenerate our soil and water. Our fate as a species is deeply connected to the fate of our natural environment. As ecosystems are increasingly threatened by human activity, acknowledging the benefits of biodiversity is the first step in ensuring that we look after it. We have a long and arduous journey ahead of us to get there but we believe with utmost sincerity that the future of our planet is ours to mould and we can make it whatever we want it to be.





# UNLOCKING AWARENESS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health in India is a shunned and taboo subject. It is one of the most neglected aspects of health and well-being in our country. According to a National Mental Health Survey of India conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), common mental disorders including depression, anxiety and substance use disorders affect nearly 10% of the population, with 1 in 20 people in India suffering from depression. The survey reported a huge treatment gap, a problem that is spread far and wide across urban and surprisingly also rural parts of the country.

On October 10th 2020, the World celebrated Mental Health Day and the theme this year was to increase investment in Mental Health owing to the harsh effects the pandemic was having on people globally. India experienced the strictest lockdowns in the world for 3 months and as a nation we were just not set up to respond to the growing mental health crisis after the lockdown. The impact of COVID-19 on mental health is complex and affects all parts of society equally. The serious gaps in mental health care made us prioritise and ensure that everyone in our community has access to quality health support going forward.

Community members in our tea gardens who tested positive for COVID-19 have had to cope with severe fear, anxiety, stigma, discrimination, as well as the deep emotional and physical discomfort of being separated from loved ones. The process of de-stigmatising mental illnesses in a community and providing treatment to those who are suffering requires a strong nexus of partners to make progress in a holistic manner.



On November 10, 2020, we partnered with Manauta, an organisation that is focused on creating positive Mental Health and wellbeing practices in Darjeeling. The pilot project was launched in our most remote tea garden in Darjeeling called Samabeong. Manauta believes mental health should not be a taboo and that our psychological, emotional and social wellbeing affects how we think, feel and act. Their logo is the Serotonin molecule. Serotonin is a chemical that has a wide variety of functions on the human body. It is sometimes called the happy chemical, because it contributes to well-being and happiness, which in turn is critical for economic resilience and mobility of communities.

The first workshop we scheduled was with the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) health workers who are responsible for primary health care of women and children, primary school teachers, caregivers at our creche facility and Anganwadi workers who conduct and supervise immunisation and medical programs in the community. We believed that this would be a good first step as training healthcare workers and primary educators for spotting intellectual disabilities, autism, anxiety, depression, and other such issues will foster tremendous benefits at a grassroots level.

Emotional wellness of children was another huge focus area of the program with Manauta. We need to recognise that the pandemic and lockdown has also been incredibly hard on our children. School closures, restrictions and zero playtime outside has been a big disruption for them. When children feel emotionally vulnerable or experience a mental health crisis, they behave a little differently and might not show symptoms like adults. Hence, it was important to open the conversation and address these issues with the help of parents and caregivers in the community. Our goal with this program was to use a child driven approach to help the kids identify and express different emotions and build better coping mechanisms through fun outdoor exercises, art therapy, breathing practices and mindfulness techniques.

The next step was to design and develop programs around alcohol and substance de-addiction, anxiety, panic disorders, depression and postpartum wellness in the wider community. Our biggest challenge initially was getting the groups to embrace a conversation around these topics. While people recognised the existence of these problems, they feared talking about it would lead to social stigma. The workshops were curated and designed on the ground after assessing the needs of the community.

The Manauta team worked incredibly hard over many weeks, sometimes trekking to remote corners of the tea garden offering individual counselling sessions to men, women and senior citizens. In addition to this they also conducted yoga classes, organised a health camp to check the overall physical health of the community, conducted mindfulness and meditation workshops for both adults and children, cognitive behaviour therapy sessions for anxiety prone members and personality development workshops for all age groups.

As we are reviewing the success and challenges of this program, we realise that we have barely begun to scratch the surface in the area of mental health wellness. However, a conversation that was once difficult to start with our community members in the tea gardens has now gathered support and a positive outlook from the community itself.

**“what mental health needs is more sunlight, candour and more unashamed conversation”**

and our goal in the coming months and years is to further enrich these dialogues around mental health because only when we eradicate decade-old myths and superstitions around mental illnesses, will India experience true development at both rural and urban levels.







Gender is a critical determinant of mental health and mental illness. The patterns of psychological distress and psychiatric disorder among women are different from those seen among men. Most women working in the tea industry are the breadwinners in the family. In addition to this, they are also the primary caregivers of their families and have gender bound responsibilities at home. Manuta designed and conducted a mindfulness workshop for women on stress management. Each person was given balloons in different colours which they labelled with their emotional triggers. Towards the end of the workshop the group participated in a simple and fun activity of passing and releasing the balloons. The intention of this was to communicate that if you share your thoughts and worries with the people you love and trust, the burden on one person becomes much lighter and that you aren't alone in this fight.







A group of children displaying their drawings from the art therapy workshop with Manauta. The experiential learning workshop was conducted outdoors and the children learnt to explore and express emotions through colours and sketches.







## THE FUTURE IS FEMALE!

3 years ago, we embarked on a journey to find an innovative and sensitive way to begin a dialogue with our community in the tea gardens around a sensitive issue pertaining to menstruation and menstrual hygiene. We collaborated with a specialised organisation called Unipads, founded by Ms. Geeta Solanki. While working as a child birth educator in India, Geeta would come across many women from varied social and economic backgrounds. The lack of knowledge and awareness on menstrual hygiene and wellness among them led her to start an organisation that would focus exclusively on providing healthy menstruation solutions to underprivileged women through affordable and reusable sanitary pads.

This year Unipads visited our communities in Darjeeling to conduct workshops on menstrual awareness. Tea Promoters India bought and distributed 4160 packets of reusable sanitary pads to all their women pluckers in the tea gardens. Geeta Solanki is also our featured guest writer for the 2021 issue and talks about ***'The Growing Relevance of Ecofeminism in India – Its implications on rural women and the environment'*** in her article below.

Ecofeminism is not a word that one might often come across. The term was first coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s which recognises the intrinsic link between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the environment by the forces of male domination. How can the Ecofeminist concept apply to us on an everyday basis?

Many research studies show that, on average, women are more likely to be concerned about environmental issues than men. This environmental consciousness guides women's shopping choices, which leads to inculcating eco-friendly habits into everyday life. India has always had a culture of conservation and sustainability when it comes to the environment. In a nation that prides itself on worshipping female deities it is quite ironic that women have often been subjected to exploitation and abuse; now more than ever. While keeping all this in mind, it is important to note that one must look beyond such phrases as "motherland", "Mother Nature", and "Mother Earth" which regard women as being "motherly" or "nurturing" through a narrow and stereotypical lens.

A vocal proponent for Ecofeminism in India is Vandana Shiva, who is an environmental scholar-activist who speaks out against what she refers to as "capitalistic patriarchy". She believes that both women and the environment are devalued and seen as passive or voiceless beings. The worth of nature and women are reduced to their reproductive capacities. She concludes that nature has an intelligence that needs to be respected, just as the life of every girl and woman needs to be respected and protected. Ecofeminism is a unique platform for seeking both climate justice and gender justice and putting forward a moralistic and empathetic viewpoint for the future.

The migration of rural men to urban regions has led to feminisation of agriculture in India. While not being given an active role in decision-making, women — especially marginalised, rural women — find themselves most impacted by the changes of environmental destruction, such as fall in agricultural productivity (desertification, soil erosion, etc.), depleting ground water levels, and intensified climate change disasters like floods, droughts and cyclones.

How can the feminist perspective help our environmental concerns? How can the environmental movement help our feminist cause? The common experience of oppression can help inform each other and our shared struggle. It is only by changing the value system and power structure in the socio-political economic context that we can hope to empower women and conserve nature. We need to revisit our roots of non-violence and being ecologically mindful in our day-to-day existence.







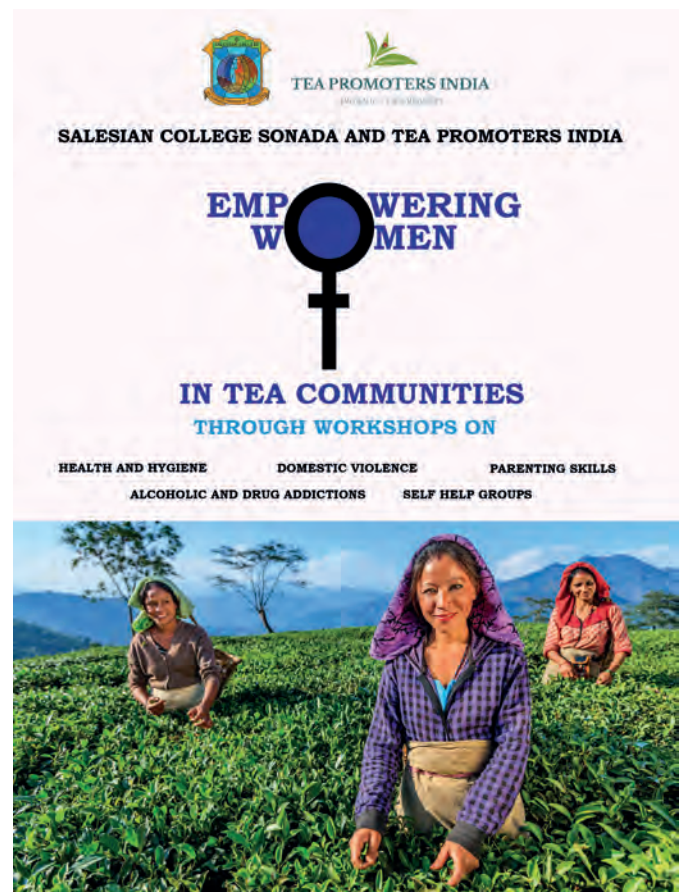
The Unipads team with Geeta Solanki conducting workshops with our community of tea pluckers.





# MORE POWER TO HER!

In January 2021 we partnered with Salesian College in Darjeeling to design a program to create awareness about issues and challenges that confront female workers living in tea communities. The program aimed at making women healthy, confident, respected and self-reliant leaders of family and society. A group of 30 women were selected from various TPI tea gardens to participate in this 2 month long training program. The first segment focused on health and hygiene of women and giving them hands-on experience in first aid, home remedies, nutrition, child care, and sanitation. The second module centered around domestic violence, abuse at home and in work places. The third segment was aimed at discussing parenting skills and raising empathetic children in the digital world. The fourth and fifth segment of the program focussed on issues such as alcoholism, drug/substance abuse, addiction as well as preventive care and rehabilitation programs for those who might need it. Towards the end of the program the group was encouraged to take action by forming self-help groups amongst themselves.



# GROWING TEA POSITIVELY!

Organic is not just a way of life for us at Tea Promoters India. Our commitment to this ideology goes beyond producing high quality teas. We believe in an agricultural model where our produce should have a positive impact on both people and the planet. So we rolled up our sleeves and embarked on a journey 3 years ago to calculate our carbon footprint in our tea gardens. Our pilot project was in Snowview Tea Garden. We traced the emissions in our transport vehicles, electricity consumption, fuel consumption and other non-renewable sources of energy use. Every negative emission created was calculated so we could make sure to offset whatever we produce.

We have planted large numbers of trees to improve carbon sequestration and soil quality. We have also reduced our dependency on non-renewable energy by installing solar lighting in the villages within the tea garden. In addition to this, we have now restored a hydroelectric turbine which provides electricity to the entire processing unit.


A specialised agency was appointed to calculate our carbon footprint and after collection of the relevant data points, Snowview tea garden became the first Carbon Neutral tea garden in Darjeeling for the year 2020-2021. Our goal as an organisation is to take action towards climate resilience, waterways protection, erosion control and biodiversity conservation. This is just the beginning of our work towards climate positivity and sustainability but we are only going to get stronger and better from here!











Tea Action Project is a Non Profit organisation founded in 1995 by Tea Promoters India. Our objective is to work closely with tea farmers and workers in India to make tea trade a vehicle for positive social and environmental transformation.

We endeavour to inspire conscious tea consumers to support our efforts to grow tea responsibly and develop the tea communities on our farms. We undertake projects in the areas of health, education, sanitation, wildlife conservation, climate change and sustainability.

For more information: [www.teaactionproject.org](http://www.teaactionproject.org)  
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