

Art and Tea Leaves

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[Photos: Anuradha Sengupta](#)



[Children at work in the studio.](#)

[In her studio in Darjeeling, meant for the children of tea garden workers, Hemlata Pradhan has made natural history the basis of art lessons](#)

Nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, in the village of Relli in Darjeeling, is a unique school. Located in the middle of mountains and surrounded by resplendent greenery, botanical illustrator Hemlata Pradhan's studio serves as a space where the children of tea garden workers can learn about natural history art.

Pradhan had always dreamt of starting a school of natural history art in her home town of Kalimpong in Darjeeling district, where she could teach children and the local community at large about various art forms involving nature and natural objects. "I initiated a charitable trust with seed funding gifted by Lady Lisa Sainsbury to begin the art school," she says. "The trust is at present building the Himalayan Institute of Natural History Art in Kalimpong, where nature will form the basis of learning."

Pradhan's own education was in England, at the Royal Botanic Gardens, and the Royal College of Art. She has won the Royal Horticultural Society's Gold Medal for her paintings of Indian Jewel Orchids and Indian Wild Orchids. Although the institute may take some time to begin functioning, Pradhan has already begun conducting hands-on workshops and classes in natural history art for children from underprivileged families using art forms such as textile and ceramic work.

Most students at these classes come from the nearby villages. "These children had never touched colours in their lives nor were they aware of art," explains Pradhan. "And their parents did not want them to waste precious time learning art when they could be better off helping around the house or earning an extra rupee doing odd jobs. I knew then that I had a tough challenge ahead."



In an effort to deal with the situation, Pradhan made some thumb rules that were simple and practical to follow: “Rule No. 1: This art school expects you to leave all your worries and problems at the gate; don’t bring the baggage in. Rejoice in being here and just enjoy creating and having fun in the process. After classes, we can discuss your problems and see if we can find solutions. Rule No. 2: I promise, dear diary and sketchbooks, to maintain you with respect and dedication. Rule No. 3: It is compulsory to complete all your homework, studies and house chores before you sit down with art.”

At the beginning of each new session, the children are presented with diaries and sketchbooks in which they are expected to create drawings and sketches of the flora and fauna that they see during field visits. This helps them become more observant of their surroundings, increase their vocabulary and communication skills, bond with nature and, of course, improve drawing skills. Educational field trips form a vital part of the curriculum at the studio. Pradhan also encourages different schools to visit so that children can interact and learn from each other.

The children work hard— they complete morning chores, sometimes waking up as early as 4:00 am to cut grass for the cattle, graze them, and sometimes even clean and cook for the family. “They go to school at 8:30 am and they are back by 4:30 pm, excited to be here. Each one is eager to relate his or her story of the day,” smiles Pradhan. Most days they stay with Pradhan till as late as 9:00 pm, drawing, painting, studying and even dancing and singing. But if they have evening chores at home, they leave by 6:00 pm, albeit reluctantly. “I have seen these children metamorphose into responsible human beings, showing talent and dedication to art. Their knowledge of the natural world and their surroundings comes from the daily chores they carry out like cutting grass and collecting firewood. They know a lot about indigenous medicines from local plants and trees. What we have added to that knowledge is the power of observation through drawings, lectures and field trips with the help of professionals in art, botany and natural history.”

Over time, these children have not just learnt about art and natural history, but have also gained confidence and self-belief. Their relationships at home have changed for the better, and the parents are beginning to see the value of what the children are learning.

Pradhan keeps a diary about the school. An anecdote from it illustrates what the studio has meant to the children: “Celestina Lepcha, a 13-year-old girl, came back from school all flushed with excitement. She told me that she had seen a giant bird on a fig tree near her school. The very next day I could see all the children shouting with excitement outside the art school. Just as I came outside to see what the hulla-bulla was about, I heard and saw a huge bird sweeping past the school building. It was the Great Indian Hornbill. It was a rare sight and a treat for us all. Celestina told me later that this was the very bird she had observed on the fig tree eating the fruits.”

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