



TEA PLANTATION WORKERS



CONTOUR
OF LIFE

The Story of Tea Pluckers

Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka



Ceylon Tea



Ceylon tea is the symbol of Sri Lanka. The premium quality of Ceylon tea lies in the hands that work behind the scenes. From plucking, processing, to manufacturing of the tea, there are 1.5 million people working in the tea plantation sector to create the premium quality tea.

The ancestry of Tamil tea workers nowadays dates back to the 19th century when the British brought them to Sri Lanka from India to work in the tea estates. They are considered the underclass at the time, separated from other Tamils in Sri Lanka, living a secluded life in the estates.



Tea pluckers brace strong winds, the cool weather and the Sri Lankan monsoon rain, plucking around 18 to 20 kilos of tea every day, carrying their bags on their heads, or on their shoulders. They are paid half their wages if the production quota is not met.

Working on the steep slopes, workers could easily slip and fall with their usual attire of slippers (or sometimes without) and rexine. Exposed ankles are prone to leech bites, as leeches are common in the field, especially in the wet rainy seasons.



Tea Pluckers



A lot of women start to work as a tea plucker as soon as they finish their compulsory education at the age of 18. It is believed that women working in the tea trade sector have better marriage prospects in the tea estate community.

Most prefer working as tea pluckers for a more regular working time to take care of their children. Yet during the peak seasons, they might need to work throughout the weekends to earn extra money.



Children under 5 years old are put in Child Development Centres (CDCs) during the day as a safe and secure place to stay when their parents are out for work.

Like a nursery, children are taught arts and crafts and alphabets, which does not push them to learn but to let them explore.



Children have developed spinal problems after staying in hammock beds for a long period of time, in a cramped manner. So now, iron baby beds are used. Consider how easy a small change in the type of bed is able to protect so many children from permanent harm.



Living Condition

For Better or Worse?



Line Houses

Housing condition continues to be one of the biggest challenges faced by the management of tea estate. Once the tea estate provides a line house for the family, it is theirs to own - an asset passing on from parents to children, from generation to generation.

Only around 20% of the population living in the tea estate are actually working for the estate, the rest are retired workers and family members of the workers, who also enjoy the benefits provided for their family or ancestors.



Seldom are there jobs that provide working welfare that includes their family members, such welfare contributes heavily to the high cost of production. Is this then a sustainable business model to the tea estates? How could we strike a balance between quality of life of the workers and business sustainability?

In this particular family of five, three children sleep on the bed, and parents sleep on the floor on thin mattresses. During cold and rainy days, floods and leakage are common, as the tin roofs could not withstand the Sri Lankan monsoon for long.





On average, a family of five lives in one line house which has two rooms and one kitchen, sometimes up to 10 people. Most houses have two windows. The problem of privacy is a big concern especially for girls and women who do not have their own rooms.

Latrines are usually shared among a few families, and flush latrines are usually unavailable. Often, the nearest toilet available are around 100-150 metres away. Imagine how difficult it would be to go to the latrines at night when your need hits.

Water supply usually comes alternately from line to line, some in the mornings, some at night, even if they have a tap. However, does having a tap means having a secure and protected source of water?





Access to nutrition should be easier compared to the past. However, some families mentioned how the rising cost of living makes it more difficult for families to afford meat, increasing the possibility of malnutrition or other health problems than the children in previous generations.



Some families could afford to use a gas stove, some continue to use firewood to cook. They are susceptible to respiratory problems in the long-run. Most line houses have a separate kitchen. However, there are still some families that keep their gas stove inside their bedrooms, because having a raw fire beside gas bottles are dangerous.

People's daily diet usually consist of rotti, curry, rice, hoppers and grains. Consumption of meat is rare, a modest family can only afford chicken or beef once a week after receiving their monthly wage.

Government now provides loans, which cover half of the construction fee, for people to build houses on land provided by tea estates. But is this policy an advancement? There are families that take the loans and use the money for other purposes; and not all families could afford to repay the debt.



Students in the tea estates have a more arduous road to higher education. Sometimes, four to six classes of different grades share a classroom with poor lighting. Can you imagine studying in such an environment?



Students face more challenges in learning, especially in difficult schools - schools in regions of low accessibility, progress of lesson is slow due to noise, poor facilities and subpar teacher quality.



Every brick is but a composition of perspiration
that which prospers with the fluidity of dreams,
up above the clouds that moisturises the green.
The castle, established upon the aroma;
the precious beverage brought forth from afar,
burning passions that nurture a sparkling tip.
The star shimmers, the tale spreads,
the angelic sip is one from heaven.





To protect the workers, various tea certifications are created to guarantee a better quality of life for workers in the tea estates. Learn the promises behind the labels and logos on your tea, show your care to the ones who contributed to the fine tea. When you look at the pack of tea, it is never going to be the same again: it is more than a product, it is about the people who work hard to support their family and make you the finest beverage.

Acknowledgements

Department of Comparative Literature, The University of Hong Kong

Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong

Pedro Estate

Save the Children (Sri Lanka)

Save the Children Hong Kong Limited

Shwen Estate

St. Coombs Estate

St. Coombs Maha Vidyalaya, Talawakelle

Editor: Vikki Shum

Copyeditor: Jason Chan

Photographer: Toni Ng

Design & Layout: Nora Wong

This edition published 2016

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Society does not consist of
individuals but expresses
the sum of interrelations,
the relations within which
these individuals stand.

KARL MARX

