

Commercial Farming – How to Make Tea



On the Moray Estate in Maskeliya, Sri Lanka, it is evening, and Sivalinga Ambiga is helping her two sons with their homework. Before bed she will iron their school uniforms - she is lucky because unlike some of her neighbours she has electricity in her small, single-storey estate house high on the mountain. Outside in the dark a breeze ruffles the waist-high carpet of tea that covers every hillside, and Ambiga can hear the distant roar of a waterfall cascading into the reservoir below.

It won't be long before Ambiga turns in: she gets up at 5am to cook breakfast for her family before starting work in the tea garden at 7.30am. Ambiga is expected to pick 19 kilos of tea a day, gathering the leaves in both hands as she moves slowly along the hillside between the carefully-pruned rows. As she works she braces a huge wicker basket on her back, holding it in place with a strap across her forehead. "I was born and brought up on this estate," she says. "I went away to school but I came back to marry my husband, Jayaraman Murthi. He lived here, and so I was very happy to come back."

Ambiga, who is 25, is four months pregnant with her third child. She takes home about 90p a day. Once it has been dried and processed, her daily output weighs about five kilos. So put another way, Ambiga is paid two pence to pick the amount of tea needed to fill a £1.70 box of Afternoon Tea bags.

Does she ever take a tea break? She and the other women laugh shyly, then they produce a bottle of tea, with milk and sugar, from which they sip while they work the hillsides. They drink five or six cups a day, they say.

While the women pluck, the men prune, weed and spray. About 15% of the estate's expenditure goes on pesticides and weedkillers. There seems to be a different bottle for every ill. The men wear the gallon-sized plastic bottles like knapsacks on their backs, but they don't choose to wear the protective clothing the estate provides, working instead in thin trousers and, like their wives, in bare feet.

School finishes at 2pm and in the afternoons Ambiga's sons, seven-year-old Vinoshan and five-year-old Gagendran, often help with the plucking. At busy times of the year every pair of hands is needed, for the estate is suffering from labour shortages. Ten years ago there were 1,400 workers here; now there are just 1,200. In the 1920s, when the British

founded the estate, these Tamil workers were little more than slave labour, the estate superintendent, Rajiv Bandaranayake, tells me. Now children growing up here can leave, and many of them choose to do so. Some go to garment factories or into domestic service in the Gulf states; a few have even gone to university with the support of the estate.

Bandaranayake, like many of the top people in tea, was born to the job. His father was a tea planter when the British were running these estates, and his bulky form spreads comfortably into the big armchair in his airy lounge. There is a huge bay window with view over a carefully-tended garden to the mountains beyond. But although the colonial-style manager's bungalow remains, things have changed, he says. The estate now offers maternity leave and a clinic to its employees, and the owners would like to do more to improve the workers' ramshackle tin-roofed accommodation which, he admits, is substandard.

There are a number of different catalysts for change. Some workers choose to leave; others choose to stay and demand better conditions. Last year there were riots here, during a strike over pay which went on for a month. At one stage the water pipes to Bandaranayake's bungalow were cut and he feared for the safety of his family as angry workers circled the house.

"They wanted to kill us. Our lives were really in danger," he says smiling, as the lunchtime sun hits the floor at his feet. "We really had a lot of violence. Now both sides have realised fighting isn't the answer. Wages can only go up if our companies can make money."

The plantation workers were angry because their counterparts in the garment sector had been given a cost-of-living allowance of 400 rupees, about £2.85, per month. The plantation management companies said their workers weren't entitled to any more because they already had their own collective agreements. In the end the employers agreed to pay an "attendance allowance" of 150 rupees, £1.07, per month to workers who turned up for more than 75 days out of every 100, and the trouble subsided.

And so the plantation workers of Maskeliya are back at work, plucking the tea and transporting it down the hill to the estate's processing plant where it can be dried, rolled, fermented and then baked before being packed in large brown paper packages. But there are other clouds on the horizon. Though Moray produces some of the best teas in the Dimbula region and its price is kept high, the price of tea across the world is being forced down as new and bigger players flood the market with cheap, mass-produced leaves. Vietnam, for example, has become a serious tea producer in recent years. Uganda has increased its production by 20% since 1995. Even the tea trade, already international in its habits, is not immune to the effects of globalisation.