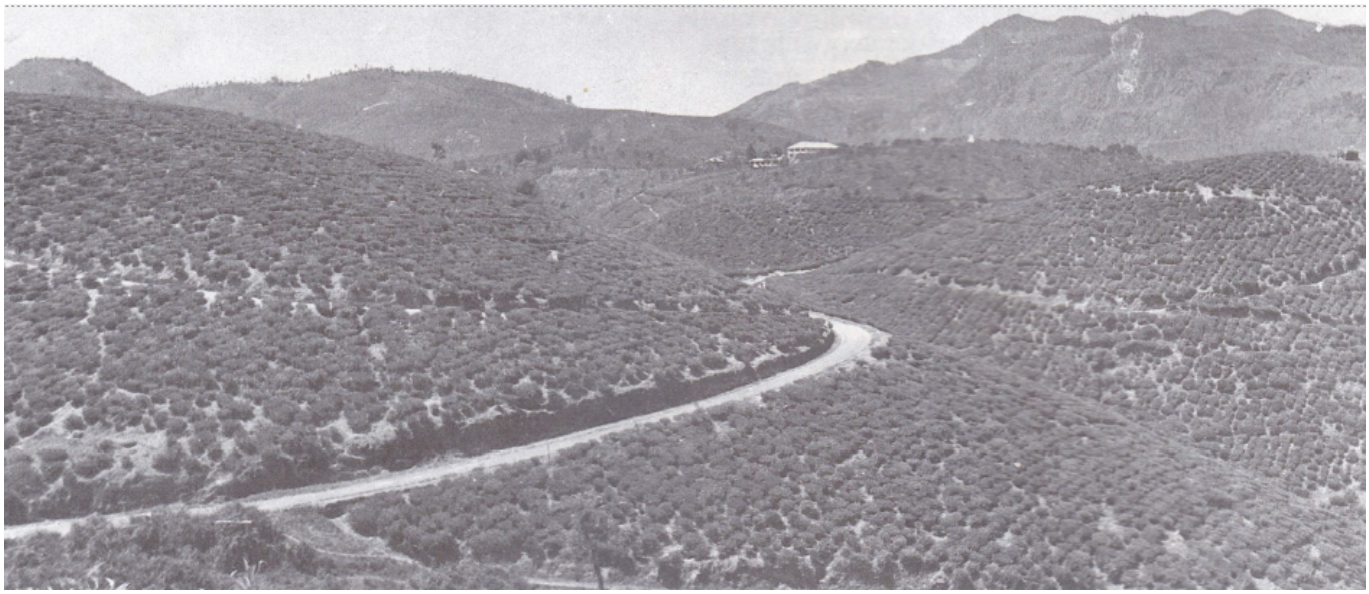
Plantation Life in Sri Lanka’s Tea Country

Posted on

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The twisting, narrow roads of Sri Lanka’s central highlands snake through seemingly endless hillsides covered with tea – over half a million acres of it. Stiff, short-cropped tea bushes stand sturdily shoulder to shoulder in contoured rows. In between the tea, tall, leafy trees provide shade and green litter for the plants. Tamil women tea pluckers move with agile grace on the steep slopes. Their hands are deft and quick as they pick only the tender leaves, tossing them over their shoulder into baskets strapped to their backs. A silver-roofed tea factory gleams in the sunshine. It throbs and rumbles with the sound of machinery, spreading around the aroma of fermenting tea leaves.

Sri Lanka’s tea country was created by the British who opened up thousands of acres of tropical forest to plant tea. They also took over small farmer landholdings and joined them together to create the plantations. As tea requires intensive labour, the British imported thousands of South Indian workers who still form the backbone of the tea industry. Today, most of Sri I.anka’s tea lands are administered by the

State. The last expatriate tea planter left the island only last year.

The work routine of a tea estate involves both men and women workers. While the women do all the plucking, the men are given the task of tending to the fields and the factory. Each tea bush must be pruned carefully to induce the ‘flush’ or growth necessary for plucking. The fields must also be kept clear of weeds and fertilized regularly. In the factory, a team of workers is led by the tea-maker who monitors every stage of the manufacturing process. The factory is at the heart of life on a tea estate. In the early morning hours, often in biting cold, the workers gather here for the ‘muster’. Their attendance is checked by the planter or his assistant who also hands out the day’s work schedule. To the Tamil workers, the estate superintendent is the ‘Periya Dorai’ or Big Boss while the junior planter is the ‘Sinna Dorai’ or small Boss. Interestingly the British adopted the worker’ terminology and referred to planters as ‘P.D.’s and S .D. s. After the muster, the workers head for their designated fields in groups. The women pluckers are accompanied by a ‘kangani’ or supervisor who watches over their progress. He is always dressed in the standard outfit of shabby dark coat, cloth turban and baggy shorts or sarong. When the baskets are full, the pluckers return to the factory or, if it is too far away, to a nearby weighing shed. The leaf is checked on weighing scales and transported in ‘leaf lorries’ to be processed at the factory. When any part of the estate is in ‘flush’, the new tea must be picked at once no matter how harsh the weather. In the wet season, the women wear hooded polythene capes that protect them from the rain while leaving the hands free to work.



Tea pluckers at work. Sri Lanka produces the world’s best tea, grown at elevations above 30 ft.



The workers congregated before a day’s work. Pushpakumar Mathugama

The freshly picked tea has to be processed immediately. When a new batch of tea is brought in, the factory workers stay through the night if needed to complete the

manufacturing. The plantations are self-sufficient communities demanding the full-time participation of the workers. They seldom leave the estates which are frequently located in remote areas of the hill country.

Workers are provided with estate housing called ‘Lines’. These long, low-slung rows of rooms face a common area where families cook, dry their clothes and rear a few chickens and goats. In more recent years new housing has been built to gradually replace the old ‘line’ system. The estate management also provides cooperative stores for shopping, as well as dispensaries and schools. When the tea is being pruned workers are given free access to the prunings for firewood.

It is a common sight to see women and children carrying bundles of twigs along the estate roads to their homes. A typical Tamil estate family will work on the plantation all its life with children taking over from their parents. Marriages are also contracted with other estate families. Apart from weddings and other family celebrations, religious festivals play a major part in providing entertainment and recreation on the plantations. As the great majority of the workers belong to the Hindu faith, an estate always has its own Hindu temple and attendant priest. During festival time, the quiet of the hills is shattered by amplifiers playing devotional and popular music. Groups of chattering women and children dressed in their brighest clothes walk together for long distances to the temple. Sometimes a chariot carrying an image of a Hindu god, decorated with coloured lights and glittering garlands, is pulled by men or drawn by oxen along the estate roads for several days and nights. Ceremonies are also performed at the factory which the workers look on as the life-blood of the estate.

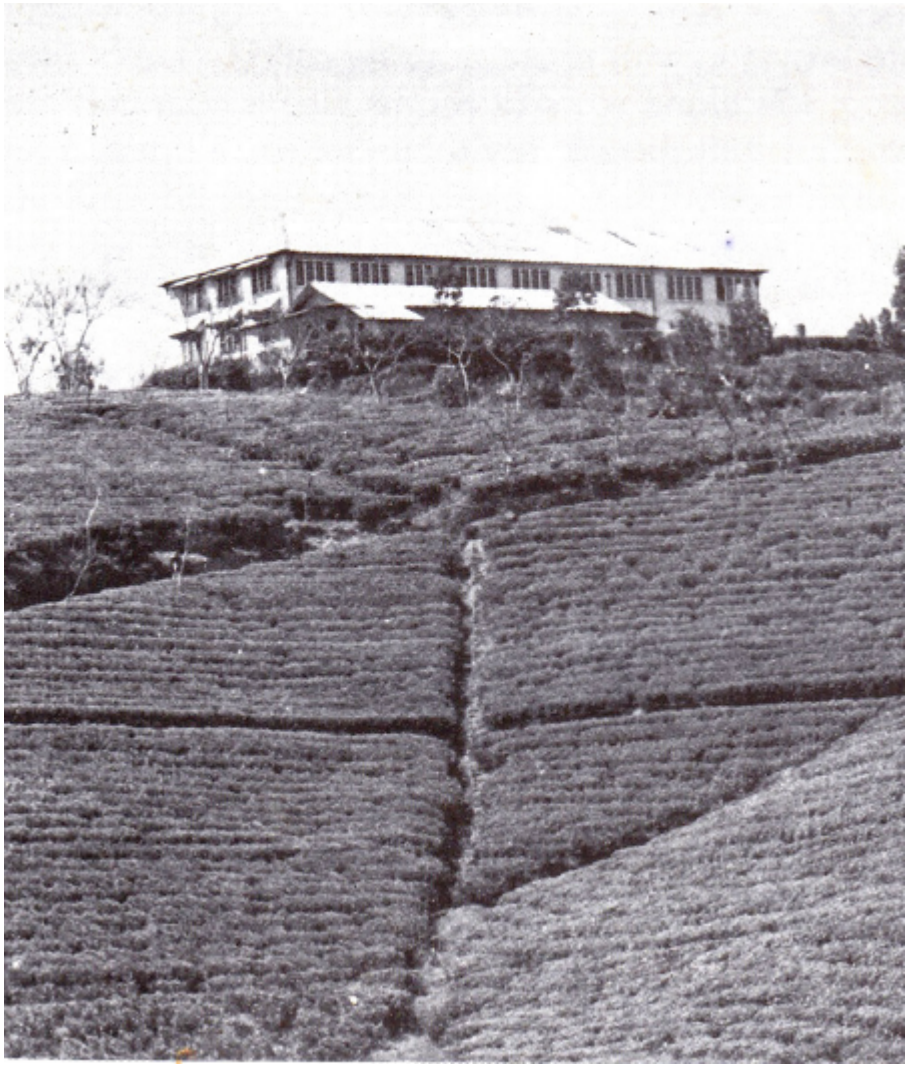
Crowds of workers cluster around the priest as he chants prayers to call down blessings on the estate. The superintendent is often given special mention in the prayers and is present at the ceremony to receive a smear of holy ash and saffron paste on his forehead. A new piece of machinery is also inaugurated with prayers, garlands and incense so it will bring good luck to the estate. The lives of the planter and his workers rarely cross except at work or some special estate function. A select few workers, however, are admitted into the privacy of the planter’s bungalow as his personal staff. After the factory, the most important centre of activity on the estate is the superintendent’s residence.

Almost all the bungalows in use today were built during British times. Located on hilltops with a splendid view, but also secluded amongst its own trees and hedges, a typical bungalow is a sprawling, luxuriously built edifice which can only be

maintained by a large domestic staff. A planter’s salary includes allowances for a cook, houseboys, gardener, watcher and, sometimes, even a cowherd. He usually dines on fresh eggs and vegetables from his own garden, surrounded by home-grown roses and anthuriums. The wives of planters have long been known for their excellent marmalades, jams and cheeses. They are also accomplished hostesses through dispensing years of hospitality. Tea estates are a favourite holiday location for friends and relatives living down in the hot, humid coastal plains. Planting families, as a rule, warmly welcome visitors as there are plenty of guest rooms to spare in these isolated hilltop retreats. Many estate bungalows take in tourists as paying guests.

Unlike the workers who live in close confines with one another, the planter has to travel miles to meet a fellow planter. Planters’ clubs were founded by the British with sports facilities and well-stocked bars for recreation. The club remains the venue for dances, Christmas parties and other get-togethers as in the old days.

As we sip a cup of well-flavoured tea, we do not normally reflect on the vast movement of people, the enormous geographic and economic changes that brought about that cup of tea. Nor do we think that the small, dark fragments of tea in the tea bag or tea strainer were picked by hands which have the experience of generations on the job; or that a solitary planter paced around his estate and factory to ensure just the right taste in our cup of tea. A Sri I.ankan tea estate is well worth a visit to see for oneself the whole process of tea manufacture and to absorb the atmosphere of this estate life-style.



A tea factory overlooking acres of tea bushes.