



Fairtrade Foundation

Stockholm Tea Estate, Sri Lanka, November 2003

Talking with tea workers

The large tea estate extends over 304 hectares of steep hills covered in densely planted tea fields and lush forests. Well-made tarmac roads wind through the estate carrying estate traffic as well as local vans, buses and auto rickshaws passing through on their way to or from the nearby town of Hatton to the many tea estates and villages further 'up-country'.

Nestling by monsoon-fed streams are hamlets of tea workers' houses, home to almost 750 workers and their families, a total of 2,000 people. Teams of female tea pluckers can be seen on the steep slopes nearby, working at the neat, terraced tea bushes or emptying sacks of green leaf into baskets at collection points near roads. The winter days are pleasantly sunny and warm, the landscape beautiful, but it is hard to imagine any reward that would induce you to swap places and put in six or more hours of back-breaking work on this unforgiving terrain.

- Mr Arumugam Vijayaraman is a 52-year-old general field labourer from Stockholm Division. His job is weeding, pruning, spreading fertiliser, and spraying the tea bushes with pesticides and herbicides. In many ways his life is typical of the hundreds of families on the estate. He is married to Sivanammah and they have two sons and two daughters. Like most tea workers, both his and his wife's family originally came to Sri Lanka from Tamil Nadu, South India, many generations ago. His own family have lived and worked at Stockholm Estate for three generations and he met his wife Sivanamal, 51, when she worked as a tea plucker at another division on this estate. No-one from their families has ever moved away from their estate community.

Mr Vijayaraman gets up at 6am and helps with the chores before starting work at 8am. He usually finishes at 1.30pm, which fulfils the minimum hours required for a day's pay. Like everyone, he works a six-day week and does overtime when required. After taking a bath, he usually spends some time in their small garden tending vegetables for the family's consumption, but he has plenty of other things to occupy his time. He has a strong belief in working to help his community and is always ready to support neighbours whether it is in arranging a funeral or helping with wedding preparations. As deputy union leader for the Ceylon Workers' Alliance he organises meetings with workers or management to discuss various work issues. The union is currently negotiating to reduce the workload for crop sprayers when they are working on steep fields or ones a long walk from their homes.

He was also elected by colleagues onto the estate's Joint Body (JB) which is responsible for deciding on social projects that can be funded by the Fairtrade premium. The JB, which meets up to three times a month, is made up of 11 elected workers' representatives and three management representatives, including the estate manager, Mr Lasantha Ranasinghe.

From a personal perspective, Mr Vijayaraman's membership of the JB has improved the way he feels about himself. He says: 'Before, I and other workers were scared to talk to management, but now we have a good relationship and can talk openly and freely about any issues or problems in the community. And I no longer need to ask others to act on my behalf when I have to deal with authority figures such as hospital bureaucrats or Electricity Board officials'.

He is proud that he has learnt how to manage the JB funds and of the projects they have funded to help improve the workers' lives. Like many, he took out a loan to install electricity in his home which means they no longer use kerosene lamps which are a fire hazard. The family can now do more things in the evenings, which get dark around 6pm. His family hope to buy a TV soon, but now Mr Vijayaraman enjoys listening to sport and music on their sound system. It helps keep him informed about the political situation in Sri Lanka and around the world, as he says: 'I now know which politicians lie less than the others!'

Mr Vijayaraman is very pleased that the JB had sufficient funds to build the new recreation halls. When his daughter got married he had to take out a Rs10,000 loan to pay for a hall and catering in a nearby town. Now they have all the facilities right on their doorstep and only need to hire a cook for really big functions. His one regret is that the halls hadn't been built a year earlier!

He is pleased too that the JB has been able to fund the new ambulance. Before they had one, if a neighbour needed to see a doctor they sometimes had to walk seven kilometres to the surgery at Scarborough Division if they were unable to get a lift from one of the estate vehicles. The ambulance is particular important for getting pregnant women to hospital in time to give birth. Before, women often had to give birth at home with little medical attention. This was a cause of much tension on the estate and the workers had gone on strike several times in protest at the lack of transport.

The loans financed by the premium for small income generating schemes are very popular: 'Estate wages only provide the basic necessities so the extra income is badly needed'. There is the additional benefit of the repayments being returned to the fund to earn interest and provide new loans. The maximum loan of Rs10,000 is equal to around four months' pay and will buy a calf or part-payment for a full-grown cow (Rs30,000). A good cow produces 10-15 litres of milk per day that sells for Rs11 per litre, and any calves produced can be either kept or sold. The outgoings are Rs50 per day in food for the animal and its dung can be sold to be dried for fuel. Others have taken out loans to buy chicken and goats for their eggs, milk and meat.

A neighbour took out a loan to build a shop extension to his home, with a counter and shutters. He sells food items such as biscuits and sweets and the extra income helps with the costs of keeping his two children in school. He intends to take out a further loan to buy a fridge so that he can stock perishable goods such as ice cream as well as milk, eggs, chicken and goat meat which he can buy from neighbours. He is confident this would be successful as his neighbours have to travel to shops about 8km away to buy some of these products.

Until recently, all six of Mr Vijayaraman's family lived in their tiny two-roomed house. Though spotlessly clean and tidy, it is extremely small by western standards. The front room doubles as a bedroom at night. It is furnished with a table, plastic chairs, a glass cabinet with ornaments, and a small hi-fi; several pictures cut out from glossy magazines adorn the walls. The sparse back room contains only a couple of beds and leads to the rudimentary kitchen. It doesn't have running water, they collect it from a standpipe down the lane. Like most of their neighbours, the family want to extend and upgrade the home and improve their living standards; they would like more lighting and cupboard space, comfortable furniture, and a better kitchen. Mr Vijayaraman hopes to fund these improvements with the help of a Fairtrade loan, but must first finish repaying a loan he took out to pay for his daughter's wedding.

Their three oldest children all left school at 16 because, even with two wages coming in, he and his wife couldn't afford to keep them there. Although there are no school fees, parents have to pay for bus fares, uniform, pens and writing books. Many parents also pay for extra private tuition to help their children pass A-level exams.

Their 26-year-old daughter, Arujothy, was married in January this year and now lives with her husband at nearby Norwood Tea Estate where he works. She didn't want to work as a tea labourer and hoped to find a good job outside the estate, but has only been able to find work as a stitcher at a local garment factory. The factory pays less than tea estates and has none of the security. No housing, healthcare or pension scheme is provided, and her income is precarious because she is only offered work when the factory has enough orders.

Their son Vijayakumar, 24, and daughter Vijayalilitha, 21, still live at home and work as a labourer and tea plucker at Stockholm doing exactly the same work their parents.

With four of the family now working on the tea estate, the household has a monthly income of around Rs10,000 and can just about afford to keep the youngest boy Chandraboss, 20, at school where he is studying for A levels. He hopes this will help him to get a white-collar job with a good future, on or off the estate, but he is adamant that he won't work as a tea labourer. The family hopes that he will be the first member of the family to have a career in banking or a similar profession.

Most tea workers have similar dreams of their children getting qualifications and finding a good job outside the estate. But even passing A-levels is no guarantee of this. Unemployment is high nationally, commercial opportunities are largely restricted to Colombo, secure government jobs are becoming scarce as more and more services are privatised, and the economy is not growing quickly enough to create jobs for the thousands of well-educated but unemployed young people. In fact, those educated to A-level and above have the highest unemployment rate (16.7%¹). In the plantation communities around 300,000 youths are either unemployed or underemployed. Among those unemployed are more than 25,000 successful A-level and 75,000 O-level students².

When their daughter Arujothy got married it was an expensive occasion for Mr Vijayaraman and his wife. They had to take out loans to pay for the ceremony and wedding party, and also had to provide a dowry of jewellery, furniture, a bed, and kitchen utensils. It cost Rs100,000 in total and will take several years to repay. This scenario is likely to be repeated in the coming years as they are now trying through marriage brokers to find a husband for their younger daughter, Vijayalilitha. They hope to find a tea worker because of the security of work and home that would provide.

Their son Vijayakumar also hopes to marry soon. Now that the estate is operating the new housing scheme, he is looking forward to taking out a loan and building his own three-roomed house, complete with its own kitchen, toilet and garden plot.

Like most young people, Mr Vijayaraman's sons enjoy playing cricket and watching Hindi films on their neighbour's TV; sometimes he cycles to the local cinema with friends. Vijayaram enjoys giving free maths and English classes to younger children.

Mr Vijayaraman said 'I am pleased and grateful for what has been achieved from our partnership with Fairtrade. We hope Fairtrade can sell more of our tea in the future and improve our lives. We will sell our best tea to Fairtrade and ask a fair price in return. We want Fairtrade to be known all over the world so that poor people can be helped – we hope Fairtrade continues for a hundred years!'

¹ Sri Lankan Government, Department of Census and Statistics, 2002

² (Sri Lankan) Daily News, 15 May 04

- Mr J Devasagayam, 41, is an estate supervisor whose job is to oversee plucking teams in Lower Crudon Division where he lives. His wife is a tea plucker and they have three school-age children. He says it is a struggle to meet school expenses, even with two wages coming in.

He has been a member of the JB for 10 years. He says: 'We all work together on the Joint Body; management and workers' representatives are equal in status, I don't feel intimidated by the presence of the manager.' His valuable experience means that fellow workers often approach him with ideas for new premium fund projects. He is interested in adding value to existing schemes; one idea is for workers to take out loans to establish a workshop to buy milk for cheese and yoghurt production. Other options could be to make ice cream, or pack and distribute Fairtrade tea directly to the international markets. He is hoping to initiate a feasibility study to research the market potential and distribution chain. The bonus would be that some of the many unemployed and unskilled young people on the estate could be trained and employed in the business.

Mr Devasagayam says: 'Fairtrade is raising our living standards. But just as importantly, it is changing people's attitudes. We used to ask the estate manager or the government to do things for us to improve our lives; now we're trying to do it ourselves'.

- Mrs Kathan Thanaletchumi, 45, lives and works at the Scarborough Division. She has been a tea plucker all her working life. Her husband Sandanam Suppiah, 49, has had to give up his job as a labourer because of problems with his eyesight. Their daughter Vijaya, 20, also works on the estate as a tea plucker. Their two sons, Joseph, 24, and Rathnam, 18, both work as casual help at a shop in Colombo, seven hours drive away. The family very much regrets that they couldn't afford to keep the boys at school and are sad that their sons have no prospects of getting good jobs.

Life is tough for the family now that her husband isn't working and she often worries about the future. She hopes her daughter will find a husband on the estate and get married in two or three years. That would make her happy, but the cost will be a big problem. A wedding can easily cost Rs100,000, almost four years' wages, so she would have to pawn her jewellery and take out a bank loan which she estimates would take her 8-10 years to pay back at 15% interest.

She also worries about her husband's health. If the hospital refers him to a specialist they will have to pay consultation fees and may have to pay for some of his medicines.

Mrs Thanaletchumi gets up at 6am to cook breakfast and lunch before starting work at 8am. She and her plucking team usually work in fields within walking distance so she goes home for lunch at 12.30pm. She returns to work by 2pm and finishes at 5pm. She says it is very difficult to make ends meet on her wages so she often works on Sunday, her only day off, because it is paid at time and a half. Each day she must pick a minimum of 15kg of green leaf, but most days she picks 40kg and receives Rs3.75 for each extra kilogram. She says it's very hard work, especially the steep conditions and when it rains. They are provided with waterproof clothing but constant contact with the dripping wet tea bushes means they are wet most of the day even after the rain has stopped.

Mrs Thanaletchumi is a member of the Joint Body. She says: 'I am happy to give my time to this work as it's a way of helping improve the lives and welfare of my fellow workers. The loan schemes provided by the Joint Body are making a lot of difference to peoples' lives'. She took out a Rs5,000 loan herself to start a kitchen garden and now sells carrots, cabbage, leaks and beans to her neighbours. She has repaid the loan and bought a TV with some of the profits. She has applied for another loan to expand the garden and hopes the profit will

enable her to extend her home to include the kitchen which is several feet away on the other side of the yard.

Mrs Thanaletchumi says the decision to install electricity has improved their lives. She enjoys watching Tamil films on her TV; but more importantly, she is relieved they no longer have to use kerosene lamps – two neighbours died in kerosene fires. The ambulance, too, is a godsend. Only today, one of the tea pickers collapsed and was rushed to hospital when lightning struck a nearby tree during a thunderstorm. Fortunately it was no more than a case of shock. Mrs Thanaletchumi remembers a 10-year-old boy dying from an asthma attack a few years ago because they couldn't get him to hospital in time. His father was so grief-stricken that he committed suicide.

Mrs Thanaletchumi is looking forward to using the new recreation halls. Apart from social events, she and her neighbours are planning to hire tutors and hold tuition classes for local children.

- One of her neighbours is Vijaya Kumara, 35, a general labourer on the estate. He has three sons aged 14, 12, and 2. He bought a cow with his loan; it provides such a good income that he has repaid the loan and intends to take out a further loan to buy another cow. He can now give fresh milk to his children, and no longer has to buy milk powder for his youngest, which is very expensive at Rs125 for 400g. But, ironically, most of the milk is bought by a middleman who sells it on to Nestlé. He sells the cow dung too - it is collected by a local trader who pays Rs1,000 for a small truck load. The beauty of it is that his cow is also a form of insurance policy; if he had an emergency he could sell it for at least Rs15,000.

He says the whole community benefits from the loan scheme - some have used loans to buy poultry to sell eggs and broilers to neighbours, while he sells cow dung to Mrs Thanaletchumi as manure for her garden. He says the extra income makes a big difference to his life. It means he can keep his children in school which he hopes will enable them to get good jobs – he doesn't want them to work on the tea estate like him.

- Muruthmurdu Muniyandy, 26, is also a general labourer on the estate. He is married to Chandra Kumari, 23, and they have a three-year-old boy called Clinton. Mr Muniyandy has shown great ambition and enterprise in using his Rs5,000 loan. He proudly showed us the beautiful garden he has created on a plot of unused estate land where he grows different vegetables for the family and for resale. But it's his chilli crop which has been the greatest success. He gets six harvests a year, each crop producing 45kg-50kg of chillies which he sells for Rs45/kg – a potential income of Rs13,500 a year. He is now in the process of expanding the business by clearing and planting adjacent land and taking out another Rs5,000 loan to buy a water pump and tools.

- Mrs Sivanu Sakundaram, 41, has worked as a tea plucker on the Stockholm division of the estate all her working life. She is married with three children. Her 24-year-old son works as a field supervisor at Stockholm. Her 22-year-old unemployed daughter still lives with the family; although she studied to GCE level, she hasn't been able to find work and is now waiting for a vacancy on the estate. Her other daughter lives with her tea worker husband on a nearby estate.

Mrs Sakundaram is one of eight women who sit on the estate Joint Body (JB) along with three male workers and three management representatives, including the estate manager Mr Ranasinghe. The JB meets up to three times a month to discuss and decide on social projects that can be funded by the Fairtrade premium. She says she was elected by her colleagues because they are aware from her duties as a trade union leader that she is confident in speaking to management and workers and that she knows how to get things done. She describes Mr Ranasinghe's role as that of a patron who encourages free discussion of issues.

Mrs Sakundaram sees the JB as a means of solving some of the workers' problems. The new ambulance ensures patients can get to hospital quickly and more comfortably than before when they had to try and find any available estate vehicle. The installation of electricity to workers' homes has been good for their leisure time as they nearly all now have a TV or radio. She herself took out a Rs5,000 loan to buy a sewing machine which she and her daughter use to bring in extra cash by stitching clothes for neighbours.

She says: 'In my opinion the workers work hard to make good quality tea. I appreciate what the Fairtrade system is doing and hope they can increase sales as this is a way to raise the living standards of poor people'.

Further reading:

Stockholm Tea Estate Organisational Profile.