

Behind the Fairtrade Symbol

By Rebecca Baker

(www.saef.net / www.beaconhillventures.org)

Allow me to paint a picture for you... lush green corduroy-textured tea hills, with scattered trees defying gravity springing up amongst the bushes, the mist rolling down from on high... and just around the curve of the landscape, several brightly coloured dots moving with purpose. As we zoom closer in to view these curiosities, we recognize tea pluckers at work. The closer we get, the bright colours of far away resolve themselves into tattered saris and plastic sheets draped for protection from the wind and rain that accompanies the rolling mist. Hands are busy, plucking away the requisite kilograms of tea needed to receive their daily wage, throwing the leaves over their shoulders into the baskets hanging from their foreheads and down their backs. The faces of the women are set, determined, frozen in concentration – their hands move with the certainty of habit, their minds dwelling on the futures of their children, perhaps searching back through their own misty memories of the past generations of tea-plucking mothers that came before them. Are the lines that groove their faces the result of their years of hard labour and struggle, or are they simply the inheritance of their ancestors?

Tea workers in Sri Lanka have a hard lot. They did not choose their profession, it was chosen for them when their ancestors left India at the promise of work from the plantation owners over a century ago (no native Sri Lankans would do the work of tea plucking, it had been discovered). These ancestors left their poverty and hardship for what they hoped would be a better life... upon their arrival in Sri Lanka many, if not most, were forced to walk all the way up into the mountains, barefoot and for many, bare-chested. For the women, their new lives consisted of a full day spent in the fields of tea, relentlessly plucking through any weather. They returned in the evenings to their bare and cold row houses, whereupon, in order to cook a meal for their family, they needed to first return to the woods to scavenge firewood for the fire. Cooking, cleaning, scavenging wood (and often food), and the longest work hours – all of these (and perhaps much else that is unmentionable) were the lot of the tea plucking women. Not much has changed over the intervening century... with the exception that the women plucking the tea bushes today are the great-grand-daughters of the women who originally chose to come here. These descendants were not given a choice in this life: they did, in a very real sense, inherit it - and with a lack of any other option, were stuck with it.

For many of us wanting to make a difference in the world around us, a popular way to do so these days is to purchase fairtrade products. We have learned to look for the fairtrade symbol before buying many items available in stores these days... and we trust that by purchasing that product, more money will be paid to the labourers than would be if we purchased the non-fairtrade items sitting beside it on the shelf. Most of us feel a sense of achievement to be able to thus directly contribute to the well-being of unknown faces (such as these beleaguered tea pluckers) halfway around the world. But how many of us really understand what is going on behind the fairtrade symbol on that box of tea, chocolate, or hand-crafted purse?

I work for a non-profit charity directing a free school for young adults in the hills of Sri Lanka. In 2005 we decided to start a “tea project” in the hopes of creating a measure of self-sufficiency for the school. One thing we were sure of: having seen first hand the hard life of tea pluckers, we wanted to produce “socially and environmentally conscious” tea. We were determined to produce fairtrade organic tea.

I was astonished to learn from a tea broker in Colombo that only a handful of plantations on the island (out of many hundred) are considered fairtrade. When I asked for some samples of fairtrade organic tea, I was met with a blank face. I could have one or the other, but a plantation that offered both didn't exist. Disappointed, I took some samples of fairtrade tea, and some samples of organic, and went to drink my way to a decision. The organic tea emerged as the winner, specifically that which had originated from a plantation called Koslanda, located high in the hills of Sri Lanka.

Shortly thereafter, I was doing surfing through the US Fairtrade website (www.transfairusa.org) and stumbled upon a profile they had done for a tea plantation in Sri Lanka... lo and behold, it was on Koslanda plantation! I stared at the cup of tea in my hand – bingo! The tea itself had led me to what the tea brokers didn't know... there was at least ONE plantation in Sri Lanka that offered fairtrade AND organic tea!

Jump six months into the future. Our first production of tea had been completed and well received, and I was getting curious to see with my own eyes just how Koslanda managed its estate. I had heard and seen more than enough during my time in Sri Lanka to know what generally happened in most plantations on the island; I wanted to know what the inner workings of THIS plantation were. How did it implement on the ground the concepts of fairtrade? I decided to pay Koslanda a visit.

A couple from the UK who had spent decades working in the fairtrade movement, joined me as fellow “researchers”. On our way we picked up Mr. Godwin Rajendranath, a friend and consultant for Beacon Hill Tea, with extensive experience in social work on tea estates. The trip took us about 2 1/2 hours from Nuwara Eliya. Koslanda is located about 30 minutes' drive from the towns of Haputale. Haputale is situated on a ridge where the land sweeps down from the Nuwara Eliya mountains towards sea level... an astonishing view that stretches to the coast when the day is clear. Koslanda is positioned partway down the ridge, perched facing the southern coast.

As we neared Koslanda, the first signal of our destination was a sign amidst the tea bushes reading “Non-Toxic Zone.” While we wound our way up the crumbling road toward the plantation offices, I looked at the surrounding tea bushes, noting two differences from the usual Sri Lankan plantation scene: 1) Koslanda was located far away from most traffic, and therefore there would not be so much pollution from vehicle exhaust that many other tea bushes must suffer from, and 2) the tea bushes looked a little more scraggly, and had more little trees, plants, and weeds growing around them. Instead of the usual corduroy-carpeting of tea bushes, it looked rather like a tea jungle!

Upon our arrival at the manager's quarters, Mr. Wickremesinghe invited us into his beautiful old colonial bungalow to have a chat and, of course, a cup of tea. Mr. Wickremesinghe shared the background of Koslanda estate with us, which I can now share with you:

When the Koslanda organic project was begun, the land (with its old tea bushes) had lain fallow for ten years. As such, they were able to begin organic cultivation immediately. Their organic methods include the growing and use of specific herbs that can be used to control pests. Mr. Wickremesinghe shared that in general the organic tea bushes had proven to be much hardier in resisting diseases that were usually the bane of "regular" tea bushes. As for fertilization, all unusable material (sticks etc.) that is drawn out during the tea-making process is recycled into compost. Organic tea grows at a slower rate than chemically-enhanced tea, which makes for a slower pace of life overall on the plantation. The "tea-jungle" I originally noticed coming into the plantation is very representative of the difference between organically cultivated and chemically treated tea bushes: the latter fling their glossy leaves up with abandon, trusting in chemicals to nourish and protect them, while the former grow with strong and stately deliberation.

When the Koslanda organic project began, Mr. Wickremesinghe did a brief survey of the surrounding fauna. He found approximately 15 varieties of birds attendant on the plantation. After several years of "green" operation, a survey was once more conducted – and close to 60 species of birds were now found! This was about the time the wild elephants began coming back, as well. Evidently elephants have a keen nose, and avoid the chemically treated land, preferring to keep to the virgin forest. At Koslanda, however, they have found a haven... and as they are partial to salt and other goodies kept by humans, they now come daily for a snoop and a snort – occasionally causing some havoc as they try to get into the workers kitchens! Mr. Wickremesinghe insists the plantation has a friendly relationship with these wild elephants... he tells a tale of watching one such elephant from his bungalow window as it felled a tree next to his house – very carefully guiding it so that it would not hit the house itself!

From Dec '06 to Jan '07, there was a big tea-workers strike in Sri Lanka. The unions demanded the government raise the daily wage for a tea plucker to Rs. 300 (around \$3 US). The government eventually reached a compromise with the union to pay the workers Rs. 260 per day. I asked Mr. Wickremesinghe whether this strike affected Koslanda estate. This is when I discovered to my chagrin that even fairtrade tea estates do not have the freedom to pay their workers what they wish... all estate workers are bound up in the unions island-wide, and managers must follow the government-established daily wage. The strike did not cause the havoc in Koslanda as it did elsewhere for two reasons: 1) the workers feel well cared for by their management and therefore did not use it as an excuse for destruction or mayhem, and 2) since organic tea grows more slowly, while other plantations lost a lot of revenue over the one month strike and had extreme difficulties getting things going again once it was over, Koslanda fared just fine – the tea had grown out a little more than usual but it was easy enough to pick up where they'd left off once the strike had ended.

Since the workers still struggle with a pittance for a daily wage, I asked Mr. Wickremesinghe what exactly he does to make this plantation considered “fairtrade”. The answers lay in the abundance of extra opportunities and facilities provided to workers that are funded through two means: the profits that come from the selling of Koslanda tea and the special funds donated by fairtrade companies who have partnered with Koslanda.

This is where the real power of fairtrade comes into play. Socially conscious companies who want to have an impact on the lives of estate workers cannot be content with just having a label that says they are “fairtrade”. By buying tea from Koslanda we support the general infrastructure of the plantation, but it is through the specially donated funds that we have the greatest impact. By a kind of partnership agreement, companies give a certain amount to a fund at Koslanda plantation that is for the sole purpose of improving the general living conditions of the estate workers. Projects that have been initiated by these funds include:

- Re-building or renovating the cramped and broken down living quarters of the workers that have been unchanged for decades.
- Investing in new community buildings or repairing the older ones.
- Building new sanitary facilities for workers homes (toilets, and bathing areas)
- Providing new water tanks and wells for workers.
- Low or no-interest loans made available for estate workers, with which they are able to purchase items such as gas cookers, sewing machines, cows, and seeds for farming.

It is easy to imagine the benefits of rebuilding workers homes, but sometimes imagination is insufficiently dramatic. Consider the following: the first time I visited a tea plantation (many years ago), I was ushered into a narrow and dark row house (one of about ten). The “front room” was only big enough for a bench and narrow table and had the sole window of the house. A larger room lay behind, its cracked walls and floor brooding in the damp darkness, a single pallet lying forlornly on the cement. Out the back (for these two rooms were what the house entirely consisted of) was a door to a fetid-smelling drain, over which a fire was burning and our lunch was being cooked. The house, and those surrounding, were a desperate portrait of squalor.

Now contrast this with what I found in Koslanda: Mr. Wickremesinghe took us to visit row houses where some of the units had been renovated. The jauntily sari-clad woman who lived there eagerly ushered us into her outer room where “Welcome” was painted joyfully across the wall. The overall size of the house was the same as the one from my memory, but the rooms had been laid out better. There were bright coats of paint on the wall, lightbulbs in and on (in other words, they had electricity), a proper Sri Lankan sitting room separated from the bedroom (which had a real bed)... and the kitchen was a marvelous thing, made for wood-burning, but so earthily neat and pretty! The lady proudly showed us her new gas-cylinder that she is now able to cook with, and her sewing machine that rested in the corner. I saw hanging up in one room a telltale sign of hope: a young girl’s school uniform, gleaming white and pressed, ready for school. While having a seat in the sitting room, I saw they had a TV, a phone, and even a small stereo system.

What did I see in this house? It was OPPORTUNITY that brought tears to my eyes.

Consider for a moment the items estate workers usually get through loans provided through fair-trade subsidies. First, gas cookers: having a gas cooker means the overworked women can subtract “forage in the forest for firewood” from their daily list of duties. Second, sewing machines: having one means women are able to make clothing for their family, and perhaps earn something for the family on the side by doing a little tailoring. Thirdly, cows: aside from the milk they give, the cow’s dung is purchased by the estate and used as fertilizer for the tea plants! Lastly, farming: workers are given place and opportunity to grow their own vegetables, thus providing a cheap source of food and an avenue of income. All of these items have something in common: providing opportunity for the worker to diversify their skills and income.

Estate workers often live far from other villages, deep in the heart of their estate land. My first visit took me to a row of houses without much else around them. At Koslanda, the short drive through the workers’ community took me by a Hindu temple, a salon, several Mom and Pop stores, a community centre, a games field, a daycare center, and community gardens. It was a happy, growing place.

Let us return to the first image ... the misty corduroy-carpeted hills with the hardened and determined women. If we continue around the curve of the next hill, perhaps we will find Koslanda’s tea jungle, where the tea pluckers work with a few less lines grooving their face, and as they pluck, dream of the hopes that lay before them for their children.