

From PG to PC

How a global revolution is
brewing in the world of tea

BY VERONIQUE MISTIAEN

THEIR FINGERS FLUTTER OVER THE TEA BUSHES, plucking the tender green leaves and a bud from every branch. Fast and precise, the women work in silence, moving at the same pace along the tea bushes, which grow high on the Nilgiris, the mountain range that

CHARLIE WATSON/RAINFOREST ALLIANCE



stretches down the south-western tip of India, from Kerala to Tamil Nadu. Every slope is covered in dense bushes arranged in long, neat rows or little circles—and interspersed with silver oaks, which protect the plants from the sun and the wind. The air smells sweet and fresh.

The view is breathtaking, but plucking is hard work. “You are on your legs all day long, rain or shine, and your hands have to move fast. You need strong muscles,” says Packiyam Muthusamy, 50. She has lived on the Havukal estate, a tea plantation on the eastern slopes of the Nilgiris, since she arrived with her parents at the age of four. Her friend Sellamal Pirumal, 48, came when she was just a year old. At ten, they started working on the plantation, weeding around the bushes. At 18, they became pluckers, like their parents. “It was what everyone else was doing,” explains Sellamal.

Both women now wish they could have had a good education and worked in an office or hospital like their own children do—but they are happy on the estate. “We have been on the plantation so long it feels like family,” Packiyam says. “We feel secure here.” On a good day, they can collect about 70 kilograms

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of leaves. “Some of us pluck even more. There’s a healthy competition among us,” laughs Sellamal.

Both men and women work in the plantation’s factories, where the tea is processed and packaged for sale at auction houses. Most pluckers, however, are women. The basic salary is about 117 rupees a day plus benefits, which adds up to about £1.50, more than twice the local minimum wage.

“We are lucky compared with people in other industries,” says Raja Chinathamby, who works in Havukal’s factory and sits on the workers’ committee. “We have houses with water and electricity, our children are educated for free and we have medical access.”

HAVUKAL, THOUGH, IS NOT A TYPICAL TEA PLANTATION. It is one of eight estates in the Nilgiris—the others are Warwick, Kairbetta, Parkside, Coonoor, Sutton, Dunsandle and Glendale—that have decided to produce their tea in a sustainable and ethical way. Together, the eight form India’s largest manufacturer of Nilgiris tea—often referred to as “the fragrant one” because of the special flavour and scent that result from being grown at up to 8,000 feet above sea level.

These plantations are at the forefront of a movement that might revolutionise the tea industry the same way that sustainability and Fairtrade swept the world of coffee a decade ago. They are the first tea farms in India, and among the first anywhere, to have gained the Rainforest Alliance Certified seal.



RD author Veronique Mistiaen with the women workers at the Sutton tea plantation

RAINFOREST ALLIANCE OR FAIRTRADE?

While Fairtrade concentrates more on tackling poverty and how crops are traded, Rainforest Alliance focuses on how farms are managed.

According to Lipton’s Michiel Leijnse, Unilever chose Rainforest Alliance because: “It was a good fit with the experience we have gained over the past ten years with our own sustainable agriculture programme. Fairtrade was founded as an alternative marketing system designed to give disadvantaged, small-scale farmers a guaranteed price for their products. Rainforest Alliance engages with all types of farms—from small family farms to large estates owned by large corporations—as a means of promoting change at many levels and of ensuring that workers are well treated.”

To achieve certification from the Rainforest Alliance, more than 90 strict criteria set by the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN), which strives to improve commodity production in the tropics, must be met.

Certified farms are re-evaluated every year by SAN-authorized auditors and must score at least 50 per cent in each of the ten standards and 80 per cent overall.



JOKE AERTS/RAINFOREST ALLIANCE

Certification is a rigorous process that covers social, economic and environmental factors, including water conservation, wildlife protection and soil management. It also means better conditions and higher wages for workers. The Nilgiris estates’ move towards certification was prompted when Unilever, the world’s biggest tea company and

their own main buyer, decided in 2007 to start sourcing all its tea from sustainable plantations.

Unilever’s aim, which involves half a million tea farms across the world, is to have every Lipton Yellow Label and PG Tips tea bag sold in western Europe certified this year, and every Lipton bag sold globally to follow suit

by 2015. (Lipton is the world's best-selling brand, and PG Tips the UK's number one.)

Because Unilever buys 12 per cent of all black tea and sells the finished product in more than 100 countries, the scale of its conversion will have a major impact on the whole industry. "Sustainability is not only good for the environment and the workers," says Jagjeet S Kandal of Hindustan Unilever Limited, "but it makes good business sense too. When you look at more efficient ways to use your water, soil and other resources, your costs go down and productivity increases. In ten years, sustainable tea will be the norm."

According to Jagjeet, certification will also enable growers to obtain higher prices and a guaranteed market, with Rainforest Alliance tea expected to command prices ten to 15 per cent higher than those currently paid at auction. "People increasingly want socially responsible brands," he says—and certainly when McDonald's switched over its entire coffee supply to Rainforest Alliance two years ago, it reported

coffee sales up by 20 per cent. It also cited growing awareness of issues such as the environment and worker welfare as part of the reason.

Unilever has chosen not to pass on the additional costs incurred to its consumers. "We see this as an investment that we can recoup through increased consumer loyalty and our ability to win new business," explains Michiel Leijnse, global brand director for Lipton. "For example, we won the tea account at McDonald's in 12 countries partly based on the fact that we could supply tea with a Rainforest Alliance certificate."

WHILE MOST TEA FARMS WOULD NEED TWO OR THREE YEARS to gain Rainforest Alliance certification, the eight Nilgiris estates took just one. Their practices were already reasonably good because India's Plantation Labour Act of 1951 gives tea workers the right to housing, education, healthcare and safe working conditions (although not all plantations respect this) and Unilever has been issuing guidelines for sustainable cultivation for many years.

Still, to obtain their certification, the estates had to improve their housing and their health and social services—building new roofs, moving toilets indoors and offering HIV and breast-cancer screening. Now 21p from every kilogram of tea produced goes towards social programmes. Together the eight plantations



VALENTYN VOLKOV/JALAMY

run three hospitals, 13 schools and 24 crèches for the 3,500 workers, their families and the local communities.

On an environmental level, substantial changes were needed. The Glendale estate, for example, dug trenches to trap water, installed solar panels on the factory roof and reduced the use of pesticides, switching to a vegetable-oil-based formula whenever possible.

On the Havukal estate, there was a huge push to combat pollution, says Raja Chinathamby: "Before, the estate was full of plastic bags and some of the water was polluted. We didn't mind. We didn't even see it. Now even my six-year-old son will reprimand me if I drop a plastic bag on the floor. And the men who spray pesticides have to wear protective clothes and change and wash in a separate room

because otherwise they would bring the pesticides home. As a result, there is much less sickness than a year or two ago."

According to Shilajit Roy Choudhury, manager of the Dunsandle estate, "Our workers are constantly learning more about the environment and changing the way they have gone about their lives for many years. They don't burn plastic any more and, since certification, we now see more wildlife: sambars [large deer], elephants, leopards and a huge diversity of birds."

And Surrendra Mohan, Havukal's manager, adds: "When you see how climate change is affecting the planet, we know that in a small way we are helping the best we can. The certification has opened our minds to thinking about the future, not just today."

CARTOON



"Hey, you're right. This is fun!"