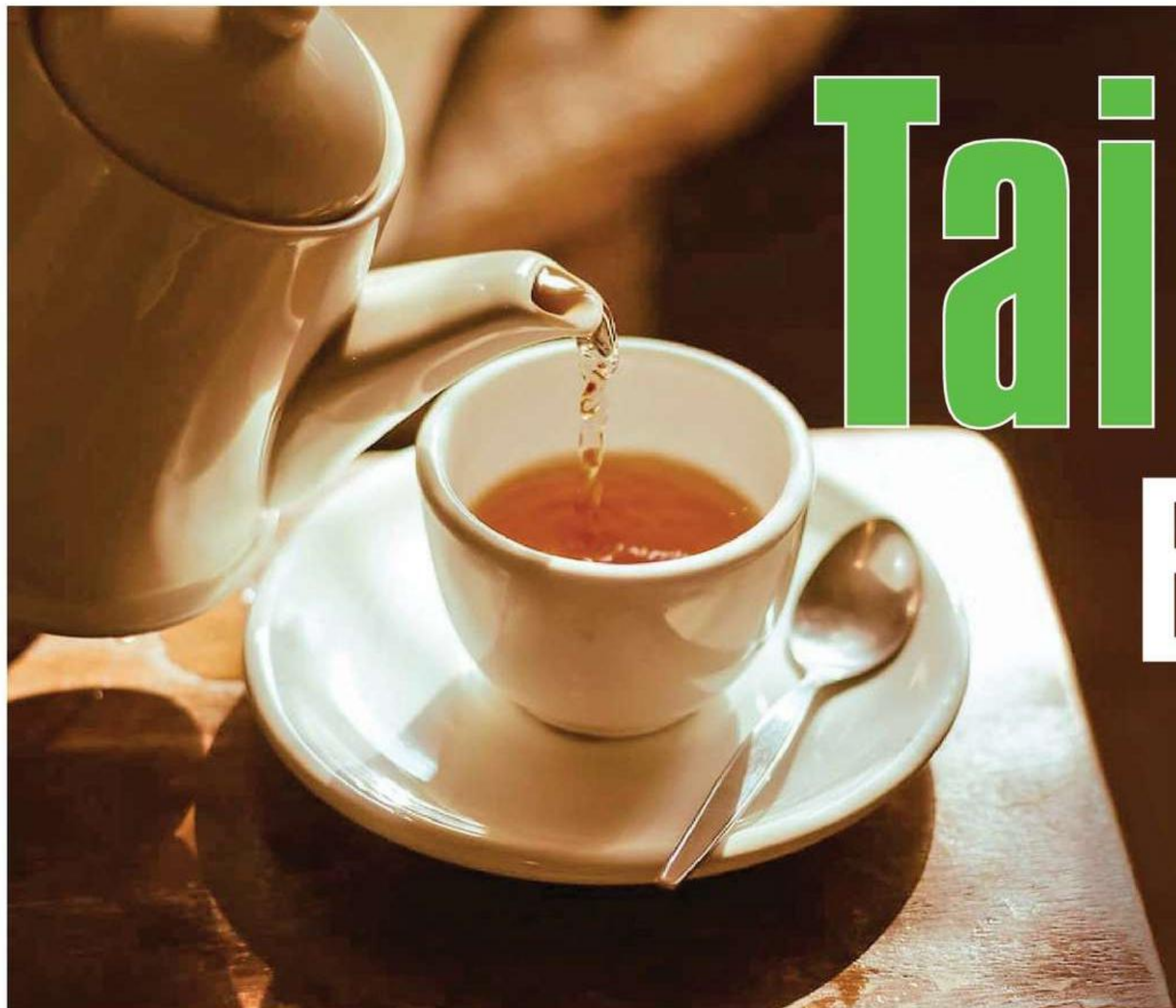


Tainted Tea: Ensure Welfare of Estate Workers



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An invigorating cup of Ceylon Tea is the trademark of trusted quality, refined to blissful perfection. We proudly acknowledge that Ceylon Tea is among the world's best brands. Behind this beauty we are forced to see some issues which are far from beautiful. What about the welfare and rights of thousands of hard-working resilient plantation workers who work in the mist-laden hills? These women (and men) also have needs, emotions and aspirations like all humans. They are also Sri Lankans.

In the novel *The Last English Plantation*, the writer Janice Shinebourne, states the reality: it is because of the "coolies" that some became rich and enjoyed a privileged life-style. This is true of Ceylon also. The first group of "coolies" was brought to Ceylon as early as 1817 to build the road from Colombo to Kandy. Later, many hundreds came to work on the coffee plantations (1830-1880) and, when coffee failed, they moved to work on tea estates. These workers were segregated in their "line homes", shrouded in their daily work, a grey existence. Not much had changed since 150 years ago on the lush mountains.

Citizenship issue

Attempts by Upcountry Tamils to register as citizens were deliberately frustrated by bureaucrats. After British rule and achieving Independence by united struggle in 1948, Sri Lanka sadly labeled the tea plantation workers as "temporary immigrants," denying them citizenship despite years of employment in vintage Ceylon. Their hard work built this nation's economy. Only in the 1980s, Sri Lanka granted citizenship rights to the 'descendants of Indian Tamil' indentured workers. This speaks volumes of our democracy then!

Everybody knows these robust women are the backbone of the nation's tea industry which brings in millions of revenue in addition to enhancing tourism. Every single tour group visits some tea estate. The estate labour force has worked with tremendous output for decades. Karl Marx once said, "Accumulation of wealth at one pole is at the same time accumulation of misery, toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole." Perhaps his words resonate with a deafening silence in these hills. The women workers on the tea estates are never appreciated for the very significant work they do. It is a physically demanding job to carry a heavy basket and work on slippery mountainsides, with the threat of leeches and snakes. There are many instances where these poor women have been fiercely stung by hornets, and where they had to wait in pain for a vehicle to be taken to the hospital.

Their lifestyle is mundane and manifests affliction. They begin their day waking up by 4 am. They do not have hot water taps or homes with carpets. They have to make their frugal breakfast which is very often some *rotti*. In addition, they

have to attend to their school going children, like any responsible mother. These children have to walk long distances to school- sunshine or rain. They have never seen any kind of fast food for a snack. In the past, we have seen all sorts of claims by plantation executives that other methods to collect and carry the tender green tea leaves or 'kolundu' will be introduced. This remains an illusion. The same method of 150 years continues, and remains a form of cruel servitude.

Voiceless women workers

The book *Two Leaves and a Bud* (author Raj Anand -1937) describes plantation life in India, a kind of prison where the female workers must abnegate their selves in order to endure humiliation. We realize that poverty was not the only factor compelling Indians to go abroad. Many were tricked into making the voyage to work on tea plantations, mainly in Ceylon. Why is it that these voiceless women have been treated like this for more than a century? For the record, there are a few tea companies that have initiated some good projects to enhance the welfare of these women workers which is commendable. This is not enough. As a nation what have we done to empower these plantation workers?

free in many spheres of life. To begin with, they never had a chance of a good education, especially to learn English. The ability to learn the English language is still elusive in the hill country though there are many new schools built, which is somewhat commendable. Education does not rise from a cement building but a dedicated force of teachers.

Having studied up to around Grade 8 or 9, many young girls drop out of school. This automatically stops them from learning any other trade skills. A few hundred have thankfully made it to the university. For those on the plantations, like their mothers, the 'tea basket' is put on their shoulders and the tradition continues. They often marry within their community. Apart from their hard work in the hills, these voiceless women have to endure verbal and physical abuse from their husbands, who are also frustrated and remain in servitude to the system. In the vintage era these Tamil women were molested and raped by the British Superintendents. Where was human rights and justice? These plantation workers have to live in uncomfortable houses in the cold mountains. I have spoken to many of these women. These women hardly come to Colombo City unless for an urgent medical need to the Colombo General Hospital. They have hardly gone on any leisure trip. What a sad state of discrimination and poverty. Those who genuinely advocate for women's rights must take note of these issues.



Does the higher echelon of the tea industry fear that if these women are duly empowered, especially with education, that they will lose this cheap and obedient labour force? Let's pause for a moment. The massive staff cadre employed in the garment industry work hard. They wear uniforms, enjoy healthy meals, team recreation, annual bonus and work amidst modern technology. By contrast the estate women have been left behind. During the 1970s, the tea plantations were taken over by the state, resulting in the forced eviction of the "estate workers" resulting in destitution on the roads of Nawalapitiya, Gampola and Hatton. It is said hundreds died. There was no one to talk about human rights in that era. There was no 'aragalaya' for their rights and welfare.

The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore said, "We gain freedom when we have paid the full price". For more than 150 years, the women tea pluckers have paid their share by their dedicated labour. They certainly are not

Thousands of plantation women work hard and retire with no savings. They only collect varicose veins on their legs from years of standing and spine-related pains by carrying the heavy basket of Ceylon Tea. They carry the burden of broken dreams. It is disdainful that these estate workers have to still campaign for a wage increase. Their rights and welfare as workers is as important as Sri Lankan tea exports. Ceylon's tea must not only reflect good taste but goodness to its plantation workers at every level. I conclude with a quote from Martin Luther King "All labour that uplifts humanity, has dignity and importance."

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