

# The Tea Plantation Workers' Museum & Archive – “A Milestone in the History of the Sri Lankan Tea Plantation Workers”



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**“ Where there is tea there is hope ” - Sir Arthur Pinero, British playwright, 1855-1934.**

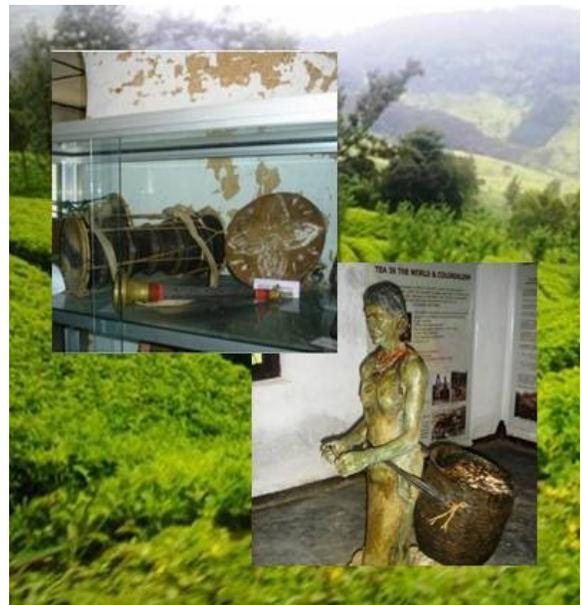
According to historians, tea was introduced in China in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century AC as a sacred beverage in temples. Later tea traveled to Japan and then to Central Asia and Russia in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century tea reached Western Europe and was popularized all over the world by Colonialism and trade. The British introduced a new political-economy based on plantations and mercantile activity in its colonies. During the colonial era coffee and then tea was introduced to Sri Lanka as a plantation cash crop.

The tea industry, which brings in a considerable proportion of Sri Lanka's national revenue, inherits centuries of historical importance through means of socio-economic, cultural and political significance. Sri Lanka has been supplying tea to the global market for the past hundred and forty years since the introduction of the crop to the country by the British colonialist in 1867.

The natives of Sri Lanka, principally the Sinhalese population, rejected to work in the plantations. It results in to import South Indian Tamil Speaking workers in 1824 as a cheap labour force to toil in the coffee plantations during the colonial period . “Just as the Africans was uprooted from tribal homelands in Africa to work on cotton and sugar plantations, Indian workers were exported to neighboring countries to work as laborers on estates”. Initially, the South Indian Tamils migrated to Sri Lanka during the coffee planting period and harvesting period. Once the harvest is over the migrant workers used to return to their homeland. But certain groups remained. As result of a widely spread disease in the coffee plants tea was introduced from 1860s onwards.

The tea cultivation required permanent and large workforce for its maintenance. This resulted in increase of large labour migration from South India. This major migration was taken place until 1922. The road on which these labourers traveled, both metaphorically and literally, were riddled with thorns.

Many of those who were brought on foot from India to Sri Lanka perished under the traumatic traveling conditions and have died when they crossed the Mannar gulf by Katumaram and boats. Those who survived walked over 200 miles through the jungles. Some were attacked by wild animals and some have died by Malaria.



On the other hand, the lives they were made to live in the plantations too were problem riddled and exploitative. The large migrant workers were permanently settled within the tea plantations. The barrack type houses were built for the workers and the workers occupied according to their caste and their parental villages.

Even though Sri Lanka is economically depended on the sweat and blood of these plantation workers, it is noted that these Tamil speaking Indian migrants are still alienated and kept aside from the developmental processes of the country. The plantation community have suffered a lot during the last 30 years' ethnic conflict although they are not part and partial of the struggle launched by the North and East Sri Lankan Tamils.

What should be noted is that the plantation population of Sri Lanka has a unique set of socio-economic, cultural, religious and political identity that has not been studied or looked into in detail.

In order to fulfill this task, Institute of Social Development (ISD) created the Tea Plantation Workers Museum to enlighten the wider community about the lives of the tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka. ISD as an organization working for the right issues of the tea plantation community intended to protect and preserve the artifacts, traditional dance, drama folklore, oral history and literature of the tea plantation workers. This project was initiated in 1997 by the founder and from that day onwards ISD has been able to collect valuable artifacts and information on traditional cultural practices of this community. After many years of hard work of the ISD staff, trade unionists and well-wishers had the grand opening of the tea plantation workers museum and archive on 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2007. This is the first museum and archive which was created for the tea plantation workers. Not only that, but this is the first time in history that a museum and archive has been created for the working community of the country. His Excellency, the Ambassador of the Royal Embassy of Norway Mr. Hans Braxtor graced the occasion as the chief guest.



*Traditional Line room setting*

The main goals of the museum are to preserve and protect the cultural heritage and history of the Indian origin plantation community. Promote ethnic and cultural harmony through highlighting the contribution of the plantation community for the economic development of the country and their life style.

One of the unique features of this is, the museum itself is situated in a 100 years old "line room" a dwelling built adjoining to the New Peacock estate in Nuwara Eliya for the migrant tea estate workers during the colonial period.

The Tea Plantation Workers' Museum & Archive consists of six sections:

- Worker's dwelling.

Model living room of a plantation worker which is normally 10 feet.

- Traditionally used utensils.

A number of traditional cookery and cutlery and other kitchen are displayed.

- Ritual artifacts.

Traditional dancing costumes, music instruments and household

- History.

The history of the Sri Lankan plantation community since they migrated as South Indian Tamils were been displayed.

- Photo gallery.

Origin of the coffee plantation and the tea plantation in Sri Lanka.

- Archive.

Collection of books and articles related to struggles, and the plight of the tea plantation community of Sri

Despite tea brings a large number of income for Sri Lanka, the life of the tea estate workers haven't undergone any qualitative change yet.

Tea Pluckers  
My bronze bodied men  
Noose the morning light;  
From dell to dale  
From uplands and inclines  
Echoes rise and fall  
To the rhythm of pickaxe  
Mammoty, fork and crowbar  
Forkers and pruners  
Ferners and sprayers  
Each skilled in the task;  
They enter the field.  
Distributed beehives their hearts  
Drip warm with the sweat,  
Eight hours in a day  
Seven times in a week;  
Thus their life blood flows  
To fashion this land  
A paradise for some.

- C. V. Velupillai -

To Lankan land they brought their own cultural traits. Only by a clear insight of their historical journey we would be able to appreciate its cultural value and work for the betterment of this population which keeps the heart of mother Lanka beating.