

The Salt

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS: TAKING ON WORLD PROBLEMS

PHOTOS: In Sri Lanka's Tea Paradise, A Social Enterprise Is Brewing

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VICTORIA MILKO



Amba Estate, a 26-acre tea plantation in Sri Lanka, shares 10 percent of its revenue with its workers.

Victoria Milko for NPR

In 1890, Sir Thomas Lipton arrived on the island of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, to purchase a plot of land that would become the first tea estate in his global tea empire.

These days, in the Ambadandegama Valley located just a few miles from Lipton's original estate, another experiment in tea production is unfolding.

Tucked into the side of a precipitous mountain, Amba Estate is a tea operation that shares 10 percent of its revenues with its workers. That's a novel approach here in Sri Lanka, a country that's one of the world's largest exporters of tea — an industry that employs more than 1 million of its 22 million residents.

"What makes us different is our 10 percent revenue share — not profit share. We decided to do revenue share because even when we're not making a profit, we felt it was only right that workers and management receives recognition," says Simon Bell.



Tamil and Sinhalese workers pick tea on Amba Estate in the early morning.

Victoria Milko for NPR

Bell purchased the 26-acre Amba Estate in 2006 with three partners — all of whom had previously worked in international development. Their goal, he says, was to create a for-profit social enterprise that could create long-term employment in the region. "It's thanks to the hard work and innovation [of the workers] that we've grown revenue 20 fold over the last few years."

The estate employs 30 full-time workers from the local village. One elderly Tamil couple resides on the property itself. They had lived in an old line house, a structure built to house tea workers during the days of British rule, since long before Bell and his partners purchased the land. "We didn't know if they had anywhere else to go," says Bell. "They asked to stay and we were happy to let them."



The old line homes are now primarily used for storage, break and work rooms. But one Tamil family has decided to continue living in one of these homes. "They asked to stay and we were happy to let them," says Bell.

Victoria Milko for NPR

Workers rise early in the morning, strolling or motor-biking down the winding road that links the village to the estate, and head into fields of tea bushes to fill bags of tea leaves plucked by hand.

After about two hours of careful plucking, the workers leave the thick fields and head to the measuring room, a former line house converted into sunny work rooms. The tea bags are weighed, and workers make note of which section of the estate each bag came from, so that they can monitor flavor profiles.



Workers have their tea weighed and recorded in a repurposed line home before continuing their work day.

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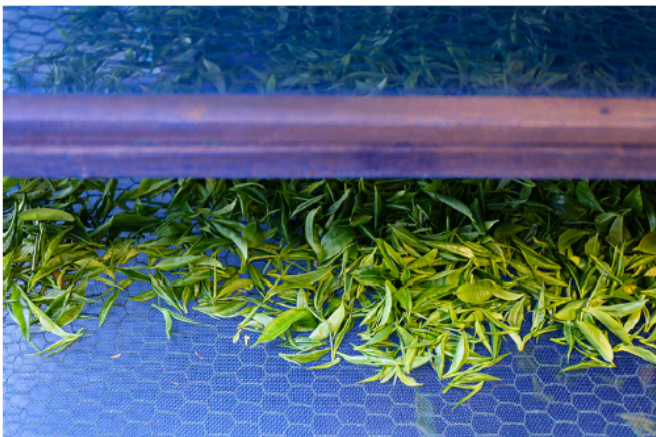
Then, they head back out to pluck again. The staff gets paid overtime if they work outside of their usual 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. day or during the weekend. Workers also receive bonuses from a portion of the sales made in the estate's gift shop.

The tea leaves are spread out on racks that get placed inside dryers like this one – basically, it's a metal contraption with a heating bulb and ventilation holes. The design is deliberately simple: Both the racks and the dryers are locally made.



A locally made and designed dryer uses simple technology — a heating bulb and ventilation holes — to dry tea. The machine was designed to be easily replicated by other local farmers.

Victoria Milko for NPR



Bell and his partners had custom drying racks designed and made locally. The estate sells its tea in a gift shop on site. The workers receive bonuses from a portion of the sales.

Victoria Milko for NPR

Bell and his partners worked with Sri Lanka-based engineers to design the technology – they wanted to make it easy for other local, small farmers to replicate. "From Day 1 we wanted to be a model to show co-ops and small farmers that you don't need to be a big factory. You can produce tea with local technology," says Bell. "Our hope is to create simple, affordable machinery for other farmers and to help a small industry in itself with these equipment firms."

It's that kind of attitude that has helped make Amba successful, says Rohan Pethiyagoda, the chairman of the Sri Lanka Tea Board. "They work with the village rather than agitate against them," says Pethiyagoda. "They don't complain about dogs barking at night or the radio in the village being a little louder that it perhaps should be. They haven't tried to socially engineer the village to their way of thinking."

In a country where ethnic tensions fueled a 25-year civil war that ended in 2009, Amba Estate boasts another rare distinction: The staff is nearly equally split between Sinhalese and Tamil workers.



Tamil and Sinhalese workers relax in a former line home that's been converted to a break room while waiting to receive their revenue bonus. After their break they will return to plucking tea.

Victoria Milko for NPR

"Most of the harmony has been because of the history of the place," Bells says. The estate was first purchased in 1890 by Thamba Arunasalam Pillai, a former Tamil plantation laborer who turned it into a successful tea enterprise. For years, the original Tamil owners and local Sinhalese and Tamil villagers have held joint celebrations for weddings and religious holidays. (Tamils are Hindus, Sinhalese are Buddhist.) "We can't take credit for the history of the region, but we certainly maintain and benefit from it," Bell says.

Indeed, the Pillai legacy lives on at Amba. Pilla's great-grandson, Karuna Mohan Raj, joined the team as estate manager in 2009. He also leads tours of the grounds.



Karuna Mohan Raj, the great-grandson of Thamba Arunasalam Pillai, the estate's original owner, is now the estate manager. He leads tours of the grounds and gives tea tastings to around 2,000 visitors a year.

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Tea tourism is big business in Sri Lanka — and a major source of revenue for Amba. The estate typically sees about 2,000 visitors a year, Bell says. Some stay the night in a 100 year-old farmhouse on the grounds, indulge in tea tastings and take tours of the property.

The partners are also working to renovate an old, abandoned tea factory on the property and turn it into an eco-friendly hotel.



An old, abandoned tea factory sits on the Amba property. The partners are renovating it to become an eco-friendly hotel, allowing them to expand their bustling tourism business.

Victoria Milko for NPR

Amba is one of just three tea plantations in the country to be certified organic. As part of the organic conversion process, the estate uses manure from a herd of cows it adopted several years ago. "It's a local Buddhist tradition to rescue cows destined for slaughter from the abattoir at New Year each year," says Bell, "So we ended up with our own herd of 'rescue cows' to provide organic manure."



Cows, which provide organic manure for the estate, wander the property freely and occasionally trample tea plants.

Victoria Milko for NPR

While it sounds idyllic, the process of converting Amba into a social enterprise hasn't come without challenges. The region has shallow, gravelly soil that produces rich tea flavors but can make growing difficult. Swarming bees occasionally force visitors to find quick shelter inside. Cows have fallen down wells or trampled tea plants. Brush fires have spread through the estate. Generations-old village relations sometimes boil over, leading to disputes.

"There is no day something unexpected doesn't happen due to weather, animals or the community," says Bell. "We take it as it comes."

Tea Tuesdays is an occasional series exploring the science, history, culture and economics of this ancient brewed beverage.