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An ex-planter reminisces on his early career as a Junior Assistant, way back in May 1951, for the record.....

### MANAGEMENT OF TEA PLANTATIONS

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Hunuwella Group, Opanaika at that time was a Company plantation with approx. 1250 acres of tea and an equal acreage of rubber. It was managed by Carson Cumberbatch & Co. Estate Agents and Secretaries to this Company. The Superintendent was Mr C.R. Waren with 2 Assistant Superintendents. The yield was a little over 1000 lb/acre each of tea and rubber. It was considered as a very profitable plantation obtaining a profit of around Rs. 1/- per pound on both crops.

The plantation is between Pelmadulla and Balangoda just getting on to the dryer section of Ratnapura and categorized in the low-country elevation. It had a full cover of seedling of high jat tea. The routine agricultural practices carried out were:

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## **Weeding**

The entire estate was clean weeded once a month both by contractors and daily labour. Each weeder had a "Kutti" sack strapped to her waist and the weeding scraper blade was not more than 2" deep. These were supplied by the estate. The weeds were collected by a member of the group, normally one collector to 10 weeders. These weeds were taken to the boundary heaped into a "Cube" and covered over with a layer of soil. The weeding round was rigorously enforced to ensure that before the end of the fourth week of the month the work was completed. Due to the good cover of the tea and the regularity of the round there were hardly any weeds. As far as I remember the cost was 2 labourers per acre.

## **Pruning programme**

A 24 month pruning cycle was in force. Each prune was done an inch above the previous cut. A rim of lungs was left which was removed in 21 days time. Weak bushes were left alone to fully recover. Very little cleaning out was done at these prunes. However, every 4th cycle or so a prune called "medium clean prune" was undertaken where much of the dead wood, knotted and moribund branches were removed. A mixture of lime and water (Limbox) was sprayed to induce better bud break.

## **Fertilizer programme**

In the early fifties the programme was to give applications of NPK at 40 lb N per acre within the pruning cycle, with N in the form of sulphate of ammonia. Furthermore, each

application had to be accompanied with burying of green manure. In Hunuwella, we had a fairly even stand of *Gliricidia* and *Albizia* each at 40' apart. A lopping gang goes a day or two ahead of the manuring gang and forks every alternate row. Every envelope opening is fed with a handful of the fertilizer mixture topped with two to three handfuls of leaves scraped from the *Gliricidia/Albizia* branches and closed. This was of course a tedious process and required much supervision but we Assistants with our KPs had to be on the spot whenever a field was fertilized. Forking and fertilizing a field used to end up around 2 pm in a day but that was how the job was done in those times. The estimate for forking, application of fertilizer and green manure was 7 labourers/acre.

### **Green manure**

This was another important item in Hunuwella. The whole estate had an even stand of *Gliricidia*. The old trees were pollarded just below the bole and allowed to grow with about 10 branches after which the regular lopping was done. The tree subsequently got a new head.

*Albizia* planting was another routine exercise where trees over 10 years were ring barked. A 10 year replanting programme coinciding with the pruning cycle was part of this exercise.

### **Infilling**

Nurseries, at that time consisted of seedlings and were laid down to cater for both monsoons. The entire estate was supplied

during the May/June as well as the October/November rains. Since the estate had a good cover, there was little to be done but every dead bush was replaced and followed up in the North - East monsoon resulting in a 100% stand.

### **Pests and Diseases**

There were hardly any pests and diseases in those days. The incidence of Blister Blight was seen in pockets in the late fifties but preventive spraying with copper cleared it up. Termite and shot-hole attacks were unheard of and even if it were there, we were not aware of it. Any diseased or weak plant was uprooted and a new plant supplied.

### **Cleaning of drains**

Another important item of work was the cleaning out of drains. After each fertilizer application, the drains were cleaned. All washed soil had to be removed and packed around exposed roots above the silt pits. The estimate was 3 labourers/acre.

### **Plucking**

In Hunuwella we had a level plucking table where the bush was trained to be flat as a table top. The rounds were maintained on the strict 7 day round with cash and sundry plucking done when necessary. A 4 day plucking round was resorted to during the months of drought. All "flush" above the level was taken at plucking while no inside "arimbus" were allowed to be touched. All stem ends (koli kal) were removed and plucking KP's were totally responsible for the

cleanliness of the plucking table. It was a belief that on a 2 year pruning cycle, too much leaf should not be left on the bush. Furthermore, a good standard of leaf was received at the factory with hardly any coarse or "banji" leaf.

### **Management**

On the 2500 acres with a Superintendent and 2 Assistants, it was a total "Grind" for us. We had to be on our feet, from 7 in the morning to 5 in the evening. Although as a Junior Assistant I was not allowed to the office, I remember the boss proudly informing us at the end of the year that we had made a profit of a rupee on a pound of both tea and rubber. This was of course a princely profit in those days when inflation was an unheard of phenomenon.

On the otherside of the coin, labour control was easy. We had no unions to deal with and village labour was available in plenty. In fact all new clearings were done by villagers and when the programme was completed as just stopped them. This meant 4-5 days a month for them but no repercussions. No politicians to answer.

### **General**

Perhaps, what I have written may be old "hat" to you, but 40 years after, these valuable assets of ours are a fast depleting lot. Six years back I visited Hunuwella with Mr Ranjan Wijeratne when he was the Chairman of the State Plantations Corporation. The highest yielding tea division in 1951 was being planted into rubber. The Superintendent

explained that the tea casualties were so heavy that the only answer was to diversify into rubber because the soil was not good for tea! As we go into the year 2000 we may see more of our tea lands finding their way into other crops. Perhaps this may be the answer.