



BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE TO CONTAIN THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN SRI LANKAN TEA SECTOR



Ceylon Tea is well known globally for its outstanding quality and unparalleled taste. In this field note, Tharaka Jayasinghe explains the role of EAS in creating behavioural change to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lankan tea sector.

CONTEXT

With more than 150 years of customer recognition, Ceylon Tea is well known globally for its outstanding quality and unparalleled taste. The advent of COVID-19 Pandemic increased the demand for the tea owing to its high quantity of theaflavins (antioxidant polyphenols that are formed from the condensation of flavan-3-ols in tea leaves during fermentation). Research evidence published in several medical journals have shown the positive impact of theaflavins on viral diseases. High levels of theaflavins in Ceylon Tea has thus resulted in a competitive advantage for it in the international market. It is also among Sri Lanka's main sources of foreign exchange.



EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES (EAS) IN THE TEA SECTOR

Safeguarding the reputation and competitive advantage of Ceylon Tea is a priority for the Tea Extension System in Sri Lanka. The government, plantation sector and private companies (e.g.: A Baur & Co.(Pvt.) Ltd.) are engaged in EAS in the tea sector and this is the right time for all the stakeholders to come together and convey a united message to the tea sector in Sri Lanka.

The main topics for the entire extension system of Ceylon Tea should be:

- a. Good Handling Practice (GHP),
- b. Good Hygienic Practice (GHP) and
- c. Good Agricultural Practice (GAP)

Good handling and hygienic practices ensure sanitation of the packing house, pest control and sanitation of containers while ensuring hygiene of the workforce. Also, ensuring safety of the work personnel is a part of good agricultural practice, especially in the time of COVID-19 spread. Therefore, for extensionists, this is the time to train our workforce engaged in plucking tea leaves and working in tea factories in all the above aspects.



We also need to change the traditional management system of tea plantations and smallholdings in the country. About 80% of green leaves are produced by the smallholding sector in Sri Lanka while the remaining comes from plantations. The labour engages in plucking work in plantations and on smallholdings, especially in the low country, depending on the demand. So, spreading of COVID-19 can increase in plantations. Because migration between plantations is common, intra-plantation migration should be stopped. The workforce in tea factories also fluctuates due to many reasons. These two labour categories have a higher risk of spreading COVID-19. So, we have to train the plucking and factory staff about hygiene, social distancing and washing hands throughout the manufacturing process of black tea.

This is a critical time for Sri Lanka. Therefore, traditional labour management practices should change now. The priority for extension officers of the plantation, factory and fertilizer companies in the present situation is to train the pluckers and factory staff as soon as possible.



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Field level: Labour Management

The traditional practice of labour management needs change. Normal management practice is to gather all the tea green leaf pluckers into one master meeting every morning and the manager speaks to them to assign daily duties to the pluckers. This practice should be avoided.

Also, gang plucking (as a team plucking in one area) should change and individuals should be allocated separate land area for plucking. This practice will help maintain distance between the workers and help reduce the risk of viral spread.

In the mornings, pluckers usually gather at one place for tea and for lunch post-noon. They are used to sharing food and tea during this time, which will have to be advised against.

After plucking the workers come to a common point to weigh the leaf plucked. We have to change this practice. It would be better to organize weighing twice a day to reduce risk.

Factory level: Selling green tea to the factory and operations within the factory

Sri Lankan small green leaf tea producers often like to give their product to two or three bought leaf factories in a day. This practice should stop and the entire day's production should be sold to one factory, and on another day it could be given to a different bought leaf factory. Also, we have two sets of green leaf collection bags, one set for each one day, which can be kept under direct sunlight after use.

We should also be concerned about the labour involved in factory operations and they should be educated about good hygiene practices within the manufacturing process.

E-auction

Though discussions to digitize tea auctions were ongoing in the past several years, it did not happen until COVID-19 emerged. Sri Lanka's 126-year old Colombo Tea Auction has now moved online. Over 16.5 million kg of tea were sold during Sri Lanka's first three e-auctions between April 4 and 19, allowing the country's tea export industry worth USD 1.5 billion to continue during a nationwide curfew imposed to contain the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

As a leading extension team in the private sector, we already have started extension programs via social media and zoom, and we are planning to organize more campaigns to create awareness about good handling and good hygiene practices for the labour in Sri Lanka's tea sector.

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