



Trade Winds News

February 2008

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Michael and Jill Finnane



A Dambadeniya woven basket



Preschool children at Idulgashinna Bio-Tea Estate

What difference does a cup of tea make?

*'Because Trade Winds support has been continuous we have been able to expand the project. Many others come with a few big orders and go. Even though the tea orders from Trade Winds have been small, **2500 people** have benefited from this slow and steady support. 'A drip in the ocean is nothing but still the ocean misses the drip.' If Trade Winds were not there it would have been missed. We gratefully acknowledge their willingness to stay with us and would expect them to help us further by buying more tea from us, which will definitely help us in our future programmes planned for our community.'* Gnanasekaran, Manager, Idulgashinna Bio-Tea Estate

Sri Lankans value the support and relationships formed over many years between their projects and Trade Winds. This is what long term Trade Winds members Jill and Michael Finnane found on a recent trip to Sri Lanka. Jill and Michael interviewed workers and staff at four of the most inspiring projects that Trade Winds has supported over the last 30 years. They wanted to know what difference Trade Winds support has made in Sri Lankan people's lives since it pioneered the fair trade message by selling tea produced and packed in Sri Lanka in the mid 1970s.

Both Jill and Michael have been involved in Trade Winds since the early days. They have visited Sri Lanka for over 25 years at their own expense, including three months as volunteers teaching English and permaculture courses to people involved in projects Trade Winds supports. In this newsletter we share some of the stories of the people they met in Sri Lanka.

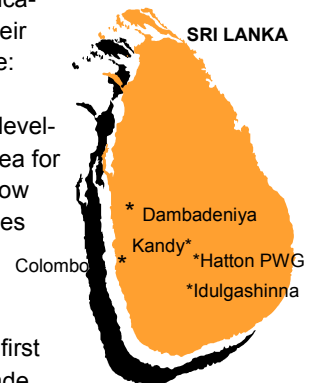
Trade Winds supports four main projects in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankans involved in these projects know that self reliance, health, ecological sustainability and education are all connected and Trade Winds supports them because of their holistic approach and connection with fair trade. The four projects are:

1. Dambadeniya Export Production Village – This is a community development project using women's traditional weaving skills to package tea for export. Trade Winds was the first customer for this project which is now over 25 years old. It has grown to be a huge foundation which provides employment and educational opportunities for upwards of 4500 people in the Dambadeniya region.

2. Idulgashinna Organic Bio Tea Estate – In 1987 this became the first certified organic tea garden in the world. It was the first source of Trade Winds organic fair trade tea. Trade Winds has supported the social development project since its beginnings in 1992 through buying the tea and contributing funds.

3. Satyodaya Centre in Kandy – This is an inter-ethnic, multi-faith community founded in 1972 that combines research and work on the ground to help some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Sri Lanka: the Tamil tea-estate workers and disadvantaged Sinhalese villagers. Trade Winds and individual Trade Winds members make contributions to support their research and social development work across 30 tea growing areas.

4. Penn Wimochana Gnanodayam (PWG) in Hatton – This energetic organisation does leadership development work with women plantation workers on 6 tea estates. Contributions from Trade Winds and its members in the past assisted the Hill Country Educational Foundation (HCEF), a scholarship program for needy students set up in 1986. The PWG also conducts community health awareness, runs 3 pre-schools, encourages organic farming for nutrition and income, teaches skills that encourage self reliance and provides interest free loans to its members and the plantation community.





Children outside dilapidated line huts on the Pattyagama tea estate, where Satyodaya has recently begun working. Satyodaya has run housing programs across many tea estates and for former tea workers now living off the estates, to give children like these a better chance in life.

“We now have two students at university and one doing teacher training. When Bio-tea children go to the government school the teachers see a big difference. The children also are now getting some good results in the scholarship exam. The vocational training centre gives a good opportunity for the children.”

S.P. Francis, Idulgashinna Bio-Tea Estate



Children in a computer class at Idulgashinna. Computer classes for children and adults are also an important focus in the Dembadeniya project.

Better living conditions

The social development program at Idulgashinna which Trade Winds supports involves workers in all aspects of the management of the estate. This is raising the standard of living and improving education and health care. It is a radical departure from conditions on most tea estates, where there is a big gap between the management and workers, and where workers live in very basic conditions with poor access to education and health care. Today Idulgashinna is a thriving tea estate.

When the social development program began at Idulgashinna in 1992, the manager, Gnanasekaren says the first thing the estate workers told him they wanted was toilets, especially the young teenage girls. He told Jill and Michael: ‘They felt as though they were treated like animals in having to just go up into the plantation and find a place to relieve themselves. The first project was therefore to provide each family with a toilet. The remarkable thing that happened then was that the Sinhalese villagers living down below the plantation came and thanked us. They had been getting a lot of bowel diseases. These decreased and the hospital reported fewer cases.’

The second project was to provide houses with light, ventilation, and clean drinking water, helping people to move out of the extremely basic conditions in the traditional tea estate line huts.



Foundations for new houses at Idulgashinna

It is a large comfortable house where he lives with his wife, 3 children and his wife’s mother. Later he did some training as a carpenter and mason and currently works as a building supervisor.

Zaki Alif, Director of Stassen, the company that runs the Idulgashinna project, told the Finnanes: ‘At Idulgashinna we are developing their minds not just giving them housing and toilets.’ BPB Ponraj, a worker on the estate, confirmed this saying: ‘The culture and attitude has changed. A major problem was alcohol. Now that has been brought down. Mental attitudes have changed and families are happier.’

Opportunities for the next generation

When asked about the changes they have seen at Idulgashinna, many people spoke to Jill and Michael about the educational opportunities that the project had opened up for their children. S.P. Francis told them: ‘We now have two students at university and one doing teacher training. When Bio-tea children go to the government school the teachers see a big difference. The children also are now getting some good results in the scholarship exam. The vocational training centre gives a good opportunity for the children.’ S Maran said: ‘We never expected the children would get to this level. We are very thankful to Mr Zaki Alif and his partnership with others.’

At Dambadeniya, what was once a depressed rural area is now a thriving network of villages where children achieve high results in national exams, and families are learning new skills in organic agriculture. Michael says, ‘I have visited Dambadeniya many times over the last 25 years and have seen it grow and grow. The IT training for children and adults is very impressive.’



Balasundaran made his own poster to demonstrate the difference between where they used to live and the house he helped build.

Empowering women

All of the projects focus on improving the lives of women. At Dambadeniya the women basket workers have shares in the foundation's company, elect their own executive and make the decisions about what the company should do. Michael says: 'The success of the place is that they are doing what the people themselves want. This was unheard of before it started. And the project continues to provide income to the women workers and has been financially very successful.'

One of the greatest changes that Jill saw was in a woman called Sivapackiam. Jill first met Sivapackiam when she taught a permaculture course in Sri Lanka over 10 years ago. The course was attended by a mixture of government officials and other well educated people.



Sivapackiam

Sivapackiam was then a tea estate worker earning only a couple of dollars a day and with little formal education She was sent to the course by PWG. Jill says: 'She said very little during the course and I wondered whether she had gained anything from it. But when I met up with her again on this trip I found her confidently teaching permaculture to other tea estate workers.' Annathaie Abayasekara of PWG told Jill and Michael that through the support of PWG over many years, and a great deal of personal energy and commitment, Sivapackiam has retired from working for the tea estate and is now a field worker for PWG. She teaches the women on 6 estates how to make compost, and shows them how to grow and sell your own food by doing it herself. Her work has been recognised by the leading organic training institute in Sri Lanka where she has attended many training courses over the years. She was also one of the first in PWG to buy a sewing machine and she started making her own clothes and those of others on order. She got a loan to buy a cow and furniture and became responsible for collecting loan payments on the no-interest loans provided by PWG.

We are human beings first

Building relationships across cultures is an important part of the work undertaken in all of these projects, a critical task in a country racked by civil war for several decades. Those working with Tamil tea estate workers are careful to also work with disadvantaged Sinhalese villagers to avoid creating any resentment that could be dangerous when inter-ethnic tensions flare up as a result of the civil war.

Many people connected with Trade Winds have stayed at Satyodaya and been inspired by this community where men and women who are Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Tamil, Sinhalese and Burgher (Sri Lankans of European descent) live and work together. The staff at Satyodaya have worked tirelessly to help break down cultural and legal barriers to Tamil tea workers mixing and working more broadly with the majority Sinhalese population. Fr Paul Caspersz told Jill and Michael: 'We have always held bilingual seminars for poor Sinhalese from the villages together with Tamils from the plantations. When we began to hold the seminars we found that the Sinhalese would walk comfortably around the place as though they had a right to be here. The Tamils would stay timidly in the one place. It took a long time for them to feel as though they too had a right to be here. Now they walk in as confidently as the Sinhalese.'

Building relationships across cultures is also a priority for the Idulgashinna project. Zaki Alif told Jill and Michael: 'Before the start of this project, the Sinhalese lived in the villages 3 km away and had no contact with the people on the plantation because neither group of people could speak each other's language. Where in the world have you ever gone where people 3 kms apart cannot speak each other's language? The tea workers were trapped, treated as outcasts, disempowered and unable to communicate. This is still the situation on many other plantations today.' At Idulgashinna they gained the support of a Buddhist monk in the local village, and now have extensive contacts with the Sinhalese village, including language classes in Tamil and Sinhalese. Some villagers even work on the estate.



Satyodaya and PWG regularly run compost making and organic food growing courses as part of encouraging greater self reliance among tea estate workers.

"The Tamils would stay timidly in the one place. It took a long time for them to feel as though they too had a right to be here. Now they walk in as confidently as the Sinhalese."

Fr Paul Caspersz,
Satyodaya.



The first female supervisor in the tea factory at Idulgashinna. The social development program has provided new opportunities for women and targeted domestic violence and alcohol abuse

"We are all seeking in our lives to make a small but effective difference to complex situations that are bigger than all of us. "

Find out more about these projects and organisations:

PWG: <http://www.malaiyagapenn.com/>

Satyodaya: <http://www.satyodaya.org/Our%20Mission.html>

Dembadeniya/Idulgashinna: <http://www.stassengroup.com/about/community.htm>

To order Trade Winds tea and coffee please contact:

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It's all about relationships...

Reflecting on their recent visit to Sri Lanka, Jill and Michael Finnane say: 'it is the long term trusting relationships with our partners in Sri Lanka that give us the energy and motivation to continue working for trade that is good for the producers and good for the environment. Over the years we've seen the children in the projects grow up and the pride of their parents at the opportunities the children have had because of the projects: things like education and health care that we take for granted in Australia. And it gives them a boost to know that there are people in Australia who care enough about their situation that they are trying to do something practical and want to know about their achievements'. Professor Brett Inder from Monash University recently told a Trade Winds gathering that 'fair trade needs to be about *establishing a relationship* between producer and consumer. *In the world of trade, it is only when we relate to others as fellow humans that change can really happen.*'

Of the people Trade Winds has had the most direct contact with over the years, Jill and Michael say: 'We've been on a journey together. Even though we are thousands of miles apart and we don't connect that often there is high mutual respect and regard that exists between us. We have seen them awaken as we've awakened to the importance of ecologically sustainable practices. We are all seeking in our lives to make a small but effective difference to complex situations that are bigger than all of us. And over time we've become good friends. Life is so much easier for us here. What our friends are doing in these remarkable projects is a real struggle and we are full of admiration for them.'

Our Sri Lankan partners



Zaki Alif

When Trade Winds started importing tea from Sri Lanka in the 1970s it was from a small Sri Lankan company called Stassen. Mr Zaki Alif was one of the founding directors of Stassen and has had contact with Trade Winds since that time. He is a man of great energy and imagination who uses his privilege and personal commitment to look for innovative ways to improve the opportunities of some of the poorest people in Sri Lanka. It was Zaki who first thought of drawing on women's weaving skills to package a traditional export product, namely tea. Zaki has since initiated projects around the country, in many cases through creative collaboration with Government.



Gnanasekaran

Gnanasekaran is the manager of the Idulgashinna Organic Bio-Tea Project, one of the many projects initiated by Zaki Alif. He and Stassen started the organic conversion of the estate in 1984. Gnana (as he is known) is the driving force behind Idulgashinna's dual goals of producing clean organic tea for consumers from a happy, cared-for environment, and ensuring that the people who produce it are also happy and comfortable. A quietly spoken and humble man he has inspired many in Trade Winds who have met him over the years as a man of great integrity and vision.



Annathaie Abayasekara

Annathaie Abayasekara came to Australia with her husband Jeffrey and children for 3 years in the 1980s, while Jeffrey studied Theology in Australia. While in Australia Annathaie and Jeffrey both did voluntary work with organisations closely linked with Trade Winds and through this made many local connections. They visit Australia when funds permit to see their children and grandchild. Annathaie started Penn Wimochana Gnanodayam in 1976 and continues to support the organisation, which is now ably run by Sri Devi and Nirmala.



Fr Paul Caspersz

Fr Paul Caspersz founded the multifaith, inter-ethnic Satyodaya centre in 1972 in response to brutal massacres and displacement of the poor and vulnerable Tamil tea estate workers in the Kandy area. Fr Paul is passionate in his commitment to giving a 'voice to the voiceless' in Sri Lanka (this is the name of the regular research report produced at Satyodaya about the situation on the plantations) through combining research with practical social development work. Those who know him also love him for his wonderful sense of humour.