



## **Gnanasekaran, Manager of the Idulgashinna Organic Bio-Tea Project talks about the origins and workings of the project**

*An interview conducted by long time Tradewinds supporters Jill and Michael Finnane in Sri Lanka in 2007.*

### **Tell us a bit about yourself...**

I am the manager of the Idulgashinna Organic Bio-Tea Project. My parents were born in India and I am a Tamil. I am a citizen of Sri Lanka.

### **How did the project begin?**

Between 1984 – 87 we commenced on the road to get organic certification. During these years, the land was in conversion. This became the first certified organic tea garden in the world. In 1992 we began a social development programme.

### **How did you go about setting up the social development programme?**

What we did was to get a number of owners of small tea gardens in the Haldamulla district together for the purpose of manufacturing organic tea. One of them also had a tea factory, which was used to manufacture the tea grown by the others. However, the tea factory owner, who was also a tea garden owner, did not agree with the idea of starting a social development programme for the tea workers. He wanted to keep the workers under fear as he believed that that was the best way to get work out of them. He also wanted a big gap between the manager and the workers, whereas our aim in the bio tea project was to make the workers and the management equal.

We tried several ways to explain our ideas to him. We pointed out that he took his dogs to the vet if they had something wrong with them but when a worker was sick, the worker had to walk a long way to hospital, without any help and this sometimes meant that people died on the way. He could not or would not understand.

Because of his objections, he refused to allow the others in the project to use his factory for the manufacture of tea, so Stassens bought an abandoned tea factory at Idulgashinna to enable tea to



Gnanasekaran (or Gnana as he is known) is the manager of the Idulgashinna Organic Bio-Tea Project, one of the many projects initiated by Zaki Alif of Stassens. He and Stassens started the organic conversion of the estate in 1984. Gnana 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 Tradewinds who have met him over the years as a man of great integrity and vision.

be manufactured. This factory, which has been very much improved and modernised is still used today.

The Stassens' management gave me full freedom to go ahead as I wished with the development of the workers. Godwin Samuel started as the social development officer in 1992. He was very experienced as a welfare officer on tea plantations. He changed the focus from welfare to social development.

In 1992 there was a big meeting for the first time of the workers. Until this time, the workers had never met or been part of any organisation apart from the union. When I first arrived to take up my position as manager, I found the workers would not talk to me, unless I summoned them and they would not look at me. This was something we had to break down.

We first gave workers an awareness of what our goals were:

- The production of clean organic tea to be supplied to consumers from a happy, cared-for environment;
- Ensuring that the people who produced it were also happy and comfortable.

We asked the people at the meeting what their problems and needs were and we noted them down. Then we asked them how they wanted the problems solved. Thus we got the questions and the answers from them.

First we gave dignity and then freedom and independence. **NONE OF THESE COST ANY MONEY.**

#### **How did you give them freedom?**

We told them 'no one will tell you what to do. If you want to see the manager or make suggestions you can.' We told them they could walk in the office any time to meet the manager. We also told them they could decide their own weekly pattern. 'If you want a rest day you can have one.' We explained that if you work so many days we will produce more and sell more. We said that if they wanted time off for a special occasion they could work extra hours to make up the time. At other places they are told when they can and can't work.

We took the fear out of the relationship. We said, "We have come to serve you.'



*"We asked the people at the meeting what their problems and needs were and we noted them down. Then we asked them how they wanted the problems solved. Thus we got the questions and the answers from them."*

**Pictures – top to bottom: Meeting of the Social Development Committee which represents all areas of the estate; Gnana talking to Balasundaram about his house.**

We are blest in that all the people that have come here love them. Mr Zaki Alif when he comes asks how happy they are and he asks me, 'How do you know they are happy? He doesn't ask me, 'How much money are you making?'

All the staff we have had, have been by nature caring. I believe the saying that 'bees go to the flowers and flies go to the dirt'. We made the flowers here and the bees come. We get good quality people who come and stay. There is good team spirit. We also have good partners eg Tradewinds who are all thinking along the same line.

**So how did you go about implementing what people had said they needed?**

After finding out what they wanted, we started our action plan with short term, medium term and long term goals. We polished it up, put it in order and started implementing it. We divided it into four sections: mental health, physical health, environment and economic.

The first thing that they wanted was toilets, especially the young teenage girls. 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 second thing the people wanted was good housing.

Thus the first project was 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. These diseases had come because of the washing down the hill of faecal matter deposited on the hills by the tea workers. When they had toilets, this no longer happened.

The second project was to provide houses with light, ventilation, and clean drinking water. We found a lot of malnutrition. Newborn babies were under weight and weak. There was no family planning with 5, 6, and 7 children to a family with anaemic mothers. We gave them health education, antenatal education. To get healthy children we set up polyclinics to give them vaccines, food and worm treatment. We brought in outside doctors and set up a separate file for each family which looked at their requirements on a physical level.



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We found there were a lot of family quarrels and cruelty to children; the males were controlling the women and the women were doing most of the work. Some wives were being ill-treated and this made the children frustrated and stressed. Parents often didn't treat their children well. There was a lot of illegal alcohol.

We trained volunteers among the workers as family counsellors and introduced cultural activities in cooperation with the Hindu Temples.

We counselled men as many of the problems came from the men. We did it by empathetic listening. We got them to see the true picture by getting it from them. We asked them to describe what their wife did and then asked them to compare it with what they did. Other organisations tend to go in and say, 'This is wrong. Don't do it.' We become friends with them and so they themselves say: 'it is wrong we should not do it.'

We also brought in professional people from outside such as doctors, dentists, veterinary surgeons, and skilled tradesmen to train the workers as skilled tradesmen.

We identified talented people from the community, gave them training and gave them better employment. Cultural activities, sport, a library all helped to divert their minds, as otherwise they would sit at home with nothing to do. Now the families usually have only 2 or 3 babies. We showed them how to love the children. We helped them to see that each baby is precious and important and needs their love and care and that it is difficult to give that precious child the care it needs if more children come along.

Drinking of alcohol to excess was a difficult problem. The British introduced alcohol. Illicit brewing meant that alcohol was freely available and almost 90% on our survey drank strong alcohol and regularly became out of control or drunk.

#### **What have been the outcomes of the project so far?**

Good health for the workers has meant better productivity. We also have a strong plan for education from birth to university level and now we are concentrating on education. We have given a good foundation to each child for tomorrow's world. If our plans are successful, many of the young people will want to leave the tea



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**Pictures – top to bottom: Health centre workers; Gnana talking to a nurse at the health centre; the first woman supervisor in the tea factory.**

estate and work at something else. More specifically some of the things we have achieved are:

**The factory:**

The factory provides a clean, healthy and safe environment for the workers. We encourage them to come up with useful ideas and when they do, we put them up in a prominent place with attribution to the worker who thought of the idea. We have tried to develop a sense of pride in them in what they do. This has led to our promoting a number of women to supervisory positions. Most of the workers in the factory are women.

When we took over the factory, we took over old and dilapidated machinery. We have fixed this up and replaced a lot of iron with stainless steel. We replaced a lot of the flooring and fixed the walls.

We produce fair trade and organic black and green tea, which is sold to Tradewinds and to other buyers.

One of our customers is the famous English department store, Harrods. They wanted us to develop for them some special types of tea. We consulted our workers and between us and them, came up with a number of special lines, made only from tea buds, which are hand made by the workers.

The Harrods Tea buyer has visited our factory and estate and has provided us with a letter commending us for our social justice programme, as well as for the quality of our tea. We only produce about 60 kilos a year of the special lines for Harrods. This tea is expensive and is sold by the gramme.

**The estate generally:**

We have provided housing programmes at a number of places in the estate and tried to foster the idea of the workers living in a village. So the clusters of houses in the more remote areas have post offices and shops to encourage this. We have infants' crèches and pre schools. We make it possible for workers to travel to hospital if that is necessary.

We encourage the children to go to school and to reach the higher grades at school.



**Around the factory  
Pictures – top to bottom:  
Drying the green leaves;  
packing the dry tea; worker  
hand rolling specialty tea;  
workers display specialty teas  
they developed for sale in  
Harrods; commendation from  
Harrods.**

We have extensive contacts with the local Sinhalese village. Some of them work on the various programmes on the Estate. We make it possible for them to join in our training programmes. We teach our children Sinhala and English and with the assistance of the Buddhist monk in the village, we teach Tamil to the Sinhalese villagers. We have done a lot to break down suspicion and hostility between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities. What we have done could be a model for the country.

After some years, we engaged in a rehousing project, building houses for those who wanted them and who were prepared to contribute with money and labour. The first house built was that of N. Balasundaram. This house was built in 1994 and has been extended since then. He was a field worker, but during the construction of his house, he helped with the work and received training as a mason and a carpenter. He used these trade skills to work on other houses and after further training, became a building supervisor. This is his present job and he supervises other building work.

The additions to his house were paid for by him. The house is now a quite large comfortable house, with a living room, a lounge room, a number of bedrooms, a kitchen with proper cupboards and benches and a bathroom with a shower and a toilet. He has gardens outside his house. He lives there with his wife, 3 children and his wife's mother.

**Medical Centre:**

Dr S Vamadevan, who retired from 35 years as a doctor in the Plantation Sector, is now the doctor and is assisted by a team of nurses and health workers. The health workers go out into the various villages on the plantation and seek out people with health problems. Dr Vamadevan is very happy with his job and he is also the social development officer. S.P. Francis helps him in this latter role.

Respiratory problems are very common, as well as alcohol related illnesses. There is an alcohol awareness programme and there are regular visits by a mobile dental clinic. The project pays for the accommodation and travel costs of the dental staff.



**Pictures – top to bottom:**  
**Poster made by Balasundaram to show the difference between his old house and his new house;**  
**Gnana talks to Balasundaram and his family outside the new house;**  
**Dr Vamadevan;**  
**Outside the mobile dental clinic.**

Dr Vamadevan counsels many people and gets them to accept treatment for such things as the removal of lumps, surgery to correct club feet and knock knees, epilepsy and diabetes. Women are encouraged to continue with breast feeding for 6 months after birth and family planning advice is provided. He has also arranged for veterinary surgeons to inoculate dogs on the estate against rabies.

**Other centres:**

There is an arts and craft centre to train people who train the children in arts and crafts. There is an IT centre run by Ajaitha and her husband. It is well resourced with computers. They run courses ranging from learners’ courses, a diploma course and a higher diploma course. So far, 26 students who have done these courses have got employment in the IT field in jobs away from the estate.

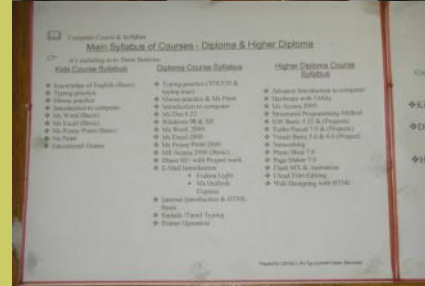
There are also crèches for very young children and pre-schools for children not old enough to go to school. Over the years, the health of the children and of the workers has improved markedly. The new houses all have chimneys, toilets, running water, glass windows, electricity and are well built.

There are places for recreation and reading, the community elects its own leaders and they take an active part in the project. Training is provided to workers and children AND to people from the Sinhalese village in such things as dressmaking, plumbing, carpentry and masonry. High achieving students are encouraged to pursue higher education.

We intend to continue to develop the Social Development Programme. It has not by any means achieved everything it could achieve.

**Who will work on the tea estate if the young people leave the estate when they grow up?**

We will divide areas of the estate into blocks and give ownership of these blocks to each working family. Each family will have one, two or three acres. They can then work their own tea as well as do other work. After school, children can help – it is theirs. This is a long term plan.



**Pictures – top to bottom:** Students in an IT class; IT teacher at the IT Program noticeboard; Overview of IT curriculum; younger students in an IT class; Gnana talking to students in an IT class.

### **As the manager what is your relationship with the workers?**

We operate as one family. We are not manager and workers.

### **What would people who visited the project see that is different from what happens in other estates?**

1. The management system is the major difference – we have closed the gap. The relationship between workers and management is closer than that in other tea gardens.
2. All workers are respected. In other gardens the managers only are respected.
3. The manager visits their homes etc to see their needs and assists them. In other places they have to go to the manager and fight for their needs.

### **What do you enjoy about your work?**

There is here a great opportunity for me to make history. This is the only tea garden I know of where the manager can move freely with the workers. Zaki Alif has given me a free hand. Some managers may like to do what I am doing but the top management will not allow it.

### **What has been the value to you of the partnership with Tradewinds?**

When you look back, the partnership with Tradewinds has continued over the years. Because Tradewinds support has been continuous we have been able to expand the project. Many others come with a few big orders and go. For example, if we have a drought, they might go elsewhere but Tradewinds always stays with us and is happy to wait. Even though the tea orders from Tradewinds 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. 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.

### **What is your view on fair trade and its impact on the project?**

We think fair trade is a very important concept because it means we get more for our tea than we would at auction and this difference in price enables us to continue our social development project.

There needs to be a link between the producer and the consumer. The consumer needs to know that there is a community



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**Pictures – top to bottom: Tea worker’s son; girls in an art class; Idulgashinna boys at a youth camp.**

development programme supported by the producer. Value adding is a great concept, for example the production of the baskets at Dembadeniya.

In our project, the workers produce a good product for which consumers are prepared to pay a fair price and the workers can take pride in producing such a product. I am happy with the involvement of GEPA and Tradewinds because they want to support us and want to pay a fair price for our tea.