

few. On my own, I may not be able to solve that problem. I have only the idea that I don't want more—but I don't know how.

THE HIGHLANDS, A TEA PLANTATION

The most noticeable feature of a car trip into the highlands of Sri Lanka is the lack of open spaces. Everywhere the eye looks, there are houses or people or animals: evidence of human settlement. The lush green rice paddies are veined with walkways going from one habitation to another. Another village is around every turn in the road. Its streets are filled with merchants, markets; people are everywhere, and they seem little bothered by the billows of black smoke that engulf them as buses, trucks, vehicles of all sorts, belch through the towns.

As we climbed higher, the vegetation changed suddenly. The rounded mountains of the tea plantations have been denuded of their trees and are covered with what at first appears to be soft green moss. Observed more closely the tea bushes are not gracious plants; they stand chest high and have strong, sharp branches. Among them move in colored saris the women "pluckers," with 80-pound baskets strapped around their foreheads and onto their backs. Impatiently they throw the tea leaves over their shoulders into the baskets to the tune of a foreman's constant chastisement: "Pluck here, pluck there, quickly, quickly!"

These women work from early morning to late afternoon for the sum of 4.70 rupees a day, roughly 45 U.S. cents. They do so whether it be hot, cold, or rainy. They work quickly and silently, covered when the rains come with a piece of plastic sheeting. Their bare feet grip the roots of the bushes to maintain balance on the steep mountainside. As we wound up the mountain to the first plantation, women enroute to the factory moved to one side as the car passed. They turned to look, and smiled—without the slightest hint of the shyness of which I had been warned.

The quarters of the plantation workers were down a steep hill and formed a series of long bungalows. Four families live in one. Each lodging consists of a kitchen, an entrance way, and one medium-sized room. There is no water inside, no electricity. The courtyard was well swept and, at this mid-afternoon

hour, filled with older people—too old to work in the fields. Some small children, raggedly dressed and barefoot, were doing their best to crawl away from the watchful eyes of the grandmothers. It was cold and damp. We became chilled quickly as we waited for the pluckers to return.

The woman with whom we talked was 45 years old, a Hindu. She had changed from her “work sari” into attire suitable for visitors: a sari of worn mauve cloth. Her teeth were reddened by betel leaves, chewed during the work day, and rotting; two were missing. She looked undernourished. Speaking in a soft, submissive tone, she told us she had carried nine children. The last, a girl, had died just over a year ago. The youngest is three, the eldest 20. She has always lived on this plantation and never attended school. She started plucking tea when only 10 years old.

– How old were you when you had your first child?

= I attained puberty when I was 12, so I was married at 12. My parents arranged the marriage. I did not know my husband before. I was 13 when my first baby came.

– Can you tell me how you think your life is different from your mother’s or your grandmother’s life?

= My mother had just three children. I have a younger sister and an elder brother. As a child I was all right, but now I find it extremely difficult to live because I have such a large family—eight children. That’s the main difference.

– What do you think is a good family size in today’s times? What is the best number of children per family?

= If people have more than three, they will find it extremely difficult to make out.

– And what are you telling your daughters about having smaller families?

= I won’t say anything to them. I am a poor example, myself. And then, having a child is so good.

– Do you know of any methods of limiting the number of children in the family?

= I know some women who were about three months pregnant. They went out somewhere and got some kind of medicine. They bought it, but it didn’t work. I don’t know what it was.

– Was it an herb or did they get it from a pharmacy?

= I don't know. Then there was another woman who was not married, but she became pregnant. She was a widow. She had a daughter and was living with her parents. It was during that time that she had come to know some man. She thought her pregnancy would be a shame and a slur on her family. She tried to abort by using some kind of medicine but it didn't work. Later she drank some insecticide to commit suicide.

– But you don't know of any modern methods which work?

= No, I don't.

– Can you tell me what you think the women here on this plantation need most? What would make their lives better?

= You know, we are a bit scared. For any improvement of our life on the estate, we have to ask the superintendent. Normally, we all have large families, and we have only these "line" rooms, with hardly any space on the small veranda. There are too many people. The one room is not enough. We have gone to the superintendent and asked him for another room. Perhaps the problem would be solved if we were a smaller family. We need more money. If only we could just go to the superintendent and ask for loans. And then there is hygiene. We have tap water for everyone but it is far, 300 yards away. We need a better water supply and more lavatories.

– And now a silly question. Did you ever think that it might have been better to have been born a boy?

= Oh yes, I have thought of it several times. If I had been born a male I wouldn't have to go through all this agony of bearing so many children and have all these difficult problems to face. I think if I were a man I wouldn't have as many problems.

Despite the late hour, another tea plucker was willing to talk with us. She sat before us, dressed in a faded yellow sari, nursing a year-and-a-half-old baby, well wrapped up for warmth. The child had on woolen socks and a cotton cap, below which its eyes were dull, almost dead-looking. The mother wore gold pins in each nostril and gold earrings on each ear. She

had a bright red caste spot in the center of her forehead. Slowly, she told us she had never attended school and did not know her husband before marriage.

– Tell me about your mother's life? How do you think yours is different?

= My mother had ten children. I have five brothers and four sisters. But although we were many, things were all right then. The situation is different now. Even though I have only three children, life is too costly.

My husband and I both work on the plantation 30 days a month. I am a very good plucker, but with all the deductions for rations, we might get something like 150 rupees (\$14 US) at the end of the month.

– Were your parents also tea pluckers?

= Yes, but in those days the wages sufficed. Now I am able to save about 25 rupees (\$3 US) a month. I have a bit saved and am trying to get some jewelry for the children.

– So the only difference you see from your mother's time is the cost of living?

= Yes, that is it.

– Do you want more children?

= No, I don't want any more, and I have already had a tubectomy. I had it done after this baby was born. This one is a boy and I have two girls.

– When you and your husband discussed the operation, why was tubectomy chosen rather than vasectomy?

= My husband was a bit afraid, for one thing. I didn't want to have any more babies to add more burdens to my life and his, and at the time I didn't know there was such a thing as vasectomy that males can do. I didn't know it.

– How did you manage to work and pluck tea all day when you were pregnant?

= There is no leave for pregnancy. I go to work around 7 o'clock and work until lunchtime at 12:30. Then at 1:30 we start picking again. It is too little time to go home, and we finish work at half-past four. Then we have to weigh in the baskets. No leave is given.

– Did you go to the hospital to have your babies?

= I had them in the lines (while picking tea) and then, this last one, I didn't go to work for thirteen days. After I went

to the hospital to undergo tubectomy I didn't work for three months.

– Did you feel you needed three months' rest?

= I felt a little weak and there was no one to care for the baby. Now there is a woman to look after the child when I go to the fields. I just come back to breastfeed the child, if I can, then I go to pick again.

– Do other women you know talk openly about family planning?

= Many women have asked me, since the operation, if there are any side effects or problems. We used to discuss it quite openly, as well as in secret. There is one woman on the estate who has had a child every year. She has seven children already. I told her she should do the same thing I did, and six months ago she listened to my advice and had a tubectomy.

– How did you first hear about family planning?

= My brother has three children, and his wife can't nurse her babies. They had to buy milk for them. My brother found it too expensive to bring up those babies so he took his wife to the hospital and made her undergo the operation. She has a son and two daughters, and they are fine; so I thought, "Why not me? This way we can live more happily."

– What do you want most for your children?

= I just wish that they wouldn't have to do this plucking. I hope they can at least get some sort of education, maybe a chance of getting some kind of decent employment.

– Among the women you know who work here on the plantation, what do you think they need most in order to improve their lives?

= The people here are totally ignorant of everything. I would like somebody to teach us child care and how to behave nicely with people. They are a nasty lot. I was the first woman to undergo tubectomy, and all those people have been scolding and teasing me saying, "Why did you ever do that?" That's the type of people you get in these estates. Somebody should come here and instruct them and advise them on the *benefits* of family planning and of limiting their families.

For me, I thought, since I have three children, that's

enough, so why have more and then get into a mess of troubles. I will try to give the children, at least, the best: food, clothing, good health . . .

MASKELIYA HOSPITAL

Perched on a mountainside at 4,500 feet altitude, Maskeliya Hospital dominates hills and valleys below. We had gone to the hospital one morning to listen to a lecture given by visiting workers from the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka. The hospital was large and airy, the corridors wide and empty. As we sat in the second floor lecture room, listening to the presentation, a dog kept walking up and down the corridor, snuffling about for a missing master.

The Family Planning team introduced me to a group of 20 men and women. The women sat on the benches facing us, the men stood to one side. Listening to the speaker, the women appeared to be far more at ease than their menfolk. The men had the look of well-disciplined workers: empty, tired, and frightened. The women had a more conspiratorial attitude. Soon we were talking about my visit and asking for volunteers for personal interviews.

Alone in a vast lecture room, we sat with a woman whose sari was covered with a terrycloth bathrobe cut off at the waist to serve as a coat here in the mountain clime. She wore the gold filigree earrings common here. Thirty-nine years old and a Buddhist, she said she had never worked; she is a housewife.

— What does your husband do?

= We don't have any land. He runs errands and does work for a hotel. We have eight mouths to feed on just one man's earnings. It's difficult. I have six children; the youngest is three. The eldest daughters got through the tenth grade, and I have a son who is in the ninth grade. He will take his exam in December.

— How old were you when you married?

= I was 19. My husband is not a relative of mine. I didn't know him before. It was an arranged marriage, arranged by my parents. Actually, I had seen him but I had not spoken to him. He was a neighbor. The boy's family approached

my parents first and, because he didn't have a very good job, my parents weren't very much for the marriage, but I stepped in and said it was hardly fair for them to reject the boy, and they agreed. I guess I had a soft spot for him after all.

— Can you tell me the differences you see between your mother's life and your own?

= My situation is much worse than my mother's, much worse. Although she is old and sick, she is better because my brothers take good care of her. They are in a position to do so, but in my case, we have to scrimp with the little my husband earns. We are eight in the family, and I have two daughters who should be married too. School fees and examination fees are expensive, and my son has to have shoes and bus fare. It is very difficult. If my first two had been sons, they might be helping now by earning wages, but the eldest are daughters. I can't send them off to do some sort of casual work, and they must be married soon.

— Did you ever go to school?

= I went for four years. If I had gone to school up to the tenth grade, I would have been a sewing instructor. I like embroidery and sewing, or I would like to have been a teacher like my younger sister. Then I would be earning something like my husband. I wouldn't have all these problems.

— What about your daughters?

= The eldest has gone up to the tenth grade but she can't find decent work. The other one is going to school right now. I think she will get through the tenth grade all right. I may be under a lot of difficulties, but I am determined to give my children the best education I can afford so that they won't be in the situation I am in.

— What do you think is the ideal family size given the economic difficulties of today?

= It depends on the income. If a couple gets a fairly big income, they can support a maximum number of children—but definitely not more than four because, even if you earn a thousand rupees a month, you will not be able to support the children or give them benefits. The ideal number is two or three. I would definitely advise my

daughters, considering the present situation, to have two or a maximum of three and then stop at that.

— How would you advise your daughters that they limit their families?

= Well, it's not like before. There are ways of controlling pregnancies now. If you go to the district medical officer you can find out, or certainly they can undergo a tubectomy. So there are ways and means now. There are the pills and the IUD, so they could use any of those things. I have an IUD right now.

— Do you have any side effects from the IUD?

= I used to be quite a heavy woman but after I got this IUD I lost a lot of weight. I became frail. When I have my period, I lose too much blood for about three days. My relatives are angry with me because they say I am ruining my health.

— If you had the opportunity, what would you like most to learn to help you in your life?

= If there was an opportunity like that here, I would go to school and learn sewing. If you know how to sew garments, you can sell them to the nearest shop and earn money.

— Would you have preferred to have been born a boy?

= I have thought of it a hundred times. I would have been much better off. You see, a woman here in Sri Lanka has so many responsibilities to shoulder. She really does. She has all the responsibility in maintaining the family. Even if a child falls sick, it is the mother who takes the child to the hospital; it is not the husband. If she were born a man, there would not be all these responsibilities.

If you are a man you can just go from place to place, you get a job, you get paid a monthly salary, and come back and give it to the wife and go off again. But she has to account for the children at home, especially if they are grown daughters. They are under her custody. If a child is going to school, something might happen to him, so until the child returns home, you are on pins and needles. This kind of uneasiness, no peace of mind, all these things would not have happened to me if I had been born a man.

But somehow I have to make us keep going. I keep biting my lips and trying to keep up courage. Somehow, I will see that the children at least come out well in this life.

KURUNEGALA

Under the land reform policy of Sri Lanka, large privately owned estates were nationalized and converted to cooperative management. Some are operated by those who worked them before nationalization; others were turned over to new cooperative groups. Many young people were attracted by the opportunity to live and work on these farms.

A train ride northeast to Kurunegala district enabled me to visit two of these estates. One, the Dambakanda settlement, is managed by young people. They elect their leaders, decide their rules, and operate the plantation. Thirty-nine people tend the coconut palms, banana trees, and sheep, on the farm's 25 acres. They receive five rupees a day and share the annual profits at year's end. Of the people who greeted us, most were in their twenties; some looked even younger.

A young pregnant woman volunteered to talk with us first. She was tall and heavy set. Her pregnancy was just beginning to reshape her body. Confident and smiling, she told us she was a Buddhist, 22 years old, and had been married just eight months before.

— How did you happen to come to this cooperative?

= When I finished school, I trained for two years at a poultry farm. I passed the exam and then joined a rural women's organization. We had had some labor problems on the job, and I knew employment was going to be ended. I heard about this coop and came to be interviewed.

— Did your parents approve of your joining?

= At the start they were reluctant to send me alone. They thought I could find more suitable work than on this farm. Later they found out it is a safe place. They have no objections now.

— How did you meet your husband?

= Here on the farm. After coming here, we got friendly, and the rules say that if you get friendly, it is best to marry. It was a love match.

— Do you think "love matches" are better than marrying the traditional way?

= If my daughter gets proposals from boys, I will ask her