

Tea; a view from South India, October 2002. Iris Macfarlane

The road winds up from the steamy plains of Kerala into the Western Ghats. As the air grows cooler, coconut palms thin out, allowing ferns and then pines to flourish. And then tea; the largest concentration of bushes in the world, climbing vertical hillsides almost to the top. The hill station of Munnar is like the bottom of a vast emerald bowl, a froth of clouds flowing down the sides like spilt milk. The tea bushes are planted in squares rather than rows, so that another simile suggests itself; it is like a great game played on green baize that stretches for hundreds of miles.

Here Tata Tea Company gardens sit side by side, at six thousand feet unshaded. Good roads climb up to them and I visit one of them, the Manager a Sikh, his wife Hindu, both from the Punjab. Their bungalow is a modest white stone affair, beautifully but not ostentatiously furnished. It has a quite modest garden too, because they only have one mali (gardener). The Manager's salary of £500 a month makes him comfortable in India, but by no means a fat cat. He gets no commission.

The labour force are housed in solid terraces with electricity and sanitation; most of them have televisions and many scooters. A pair of workers earn £28 a month, which seems ridiculously little, but they have a large area for growing vegetables; some of them sell these at the roadside, the largest, brightest carrots I have ever seen. In a lush pasture their herds of cattle graze free. I don't see inside either hospital or school, but they look neat and well built, scrupulously clean, the school provided with playgrounds and football fields. Tata are well known for their generous scholarships and grants.

The Manager says he is busy reorganising the staff; because they pay well and spend generously on welfare, Tata companies are finding it hard to compete in an expanding tea market. Indonesia and China are now competitors, India no longer has a monopoly in the East. Lesser companies on the coast are in real trouble, labour forces having to be rescued from near starvation by the government as concerns close down.

Amongst these green hills a well cared-for work force seems content, treated like human beings at last. In the Planter's Club Managers and assistants are required to dress formally. The evening I was there they emerged sober from the bar in blazers and ties and played a homely game of Bingo with their families. They seemed very different from the sloppy reeling variety who were the members of Assam clubs in my day.

Tea, South Indian Tata variety, is a different world; a pleasure, indeed a relief, to encounter.