Tea Plantation Labour: The Wage Story Behind the Cup

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea plantation labour, in summary:** Much of the world's tea is picked by some of the lowest-paid agricultural workers anywhere, mostly women, often on estates inherited from the colonial system. Fairtrade and other labels help at the margins but do not fix the underlying wage economics.

The most uncomfortable fact about tea is that the low price on the shelf is, to a significant degree, a wage story: a great deal of the world's tea is picked by some of the lowest-paid agricultural workers anywhere, often women, frequently on plantations whose structure descends directly from the colonial system. A guide that discusses flavour and skips this is not neutral; it is incomplete.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in January 2026.

Who actually picks the tea

Fine tea is hand-plucked, a bud and a leaf or two, repeatedly, all season, and that labour is overwhelmingly done by large workforces on estates and smallholdings in India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Bangladesh and beyond. Across the major producing countries the pattern is consistent: tea picking is women's work, around 70 to 80 percent of pickers on Indian and Sri Lankan estates, and a female majority almost everywhere. On many traditional plantations the workforce is resident, with estate housing (the "lines", often basic quarters with shared sanitation), rations covering staple foods, and on-estate schooling and medical care, a structure inherited largely intact from the colonial plantation model. Many Assam communities descend from indentured workers brought from Bihar and Odisha in the nineteenth century who never had the means to leave. That integration is double-edged: it provides housing and basic services, but a worker who leaves loses housing, rations and community ties at once, so mobility is structurally limited. Your tea's cheapness is inseparable from the economics of that workforce.

Why wages are so low

The mechanism, without melodrama, has three structural parts. First, the global tea price has not kept pace with inflation: the wholesale price of bulk Indian and Kenyan tea has been broadly flat in real terms since the 1990s, partly because supply rose sharply (Kenya massively expanded) and partly because supermarket buying power compresses margins, so producers have little room to raise pay. Second, country minimum

wages set low ceilings: India's Plantation Labour Act minimums are negotiated state by state at levels designed to keep producers globally competitive, which by definition means low, and often below non-plantation rural wages. Third, in tea-growing regions the supply of labour exceeds demand, since generational estate families have few alternative employers and therefore little bargaining power. None of this is a conspiracy; it is the predictable result of a cheap commodity, weak worker power and an inherited estate structure. Saying it openly is candour, not activism.

What fair trade and ethical labels can fix

The measured assessment. Certification schemes genuinely can and sometimes do improve things. Fairtrade is the best known: certified producers pay a premium, currently around 50p per kilo of finished tea, into a worker-controlled committee that decides how to spend it, usually on community projects such as housing, schools, water and healthcare, and independent audits check that wages meet the legal minimum, conditions meet basic standards and child labour is excluded. Over time this has built real infrastructure on certified estates. Other schemes have different focus: Rainforest Alliance and the former UTZ lean towards environmental practice (pesticides, biodiversity, water) with basic welfare audited, the Ethical Tea Partnership is a producer-led scheme that audits members without a consumer-facing logo, and organic certification addresses pesticide use but not labour at all. Our verdict: "better than nothing, and worth choosing, but not a solved problem".

What the labels cannot fix

The limits matter just as much. Fairtrade does not raise individual wages above the country minimum; it funds community projects, not pay packets. It does not break the integration of worker into estate housing and rations, does not create alternative employment, and does not address generational poverty in any structural sense. Critics note that premiums, while real, are often a small fraction of estate revenue and fund things that should arguably be the state's responsibility. And no label stops the supply-and-demand pressure that keeps tea cheap: as long as supermarket teabags retail at a few pounds for a pack of eighty, the entire upstream chain is squeezed. Treating a logo as absolution is exactly the comfort-over-truth move this wiki refuses; the deeper issues, commodity pricing, worker power and the inherited estate model, are structural and not fixable by a stamp alone.

Where the picture is changing

There are genuine positive trends from the last decade, worth stating so the page is not only bleak. Kenyan smallholder cooperatives, notably the KTDA, have shifted some power from plantation owners towards grower-shareholders. Darjeeling estates selling direct and bypassing the auction have raised producer margins. Sri Lankan small-grower programmes have improved both quality and pay for non-plantation producers. India and Sri Lanka have both modernised plantation laws in the last five to ten years. The common thread is that smallholder farming tends to be fairer than plantation labour, because the farmer is also the owner, so the routes that put more of the price in growers' hands are also, broadly, the routes towards fairer work.

What an aware drinker can actually do

Candour includes not pretending the consumer can fix this single-handed, and also not pretending the choices are meaningless. A few practical, non-preachy actions help. Drink less but better tea, since less commodity and more single-estate puts more revenue per pound at the producer end. Buy Fairtrade where it is available, recognising it as a floor rather than a full solution. Favour transparent sellers, direct-trade and specialist merchants who name gardens and discuss sourcing, over opaque chains. Ask retailers explicit questions: where is this from, and what wages are paid? And accept that paying a fair price for tea is normal rather than virtuous. Watch the language, too: "ethically sourced" with no scheme named is marketing; a vague country of origin tells you nothing about the estate; and if a producer cannot name the garden, the picking method, the wage policy or the certification, assume the chain is opaque. This is informed, proportionate choice, not guilt and not slogans.

Why this belongs in a tea wiki

Because it is not a side issue; it is the human base of the entire product. Every flavour, history and brewing page on this site sits on top of this labour, and a guide worth trusting says so as plainly as it gives a brewing temperature. The worker behind the cup is often a woman working a long day on her feet in tropical heat with a basket strapped to her back, for wages that across much of the industry hover near the local legal minimum. Knowing who picks the tea, and why it costs so little, is part of drinking it with open eyes, which is the whole point of this wiki.

Tea plantation labour at a glance

Question	Answer
Who picks tea?	Predominantly women on Indian, Sri Lankan and Kenyan estates, often working all day in tropical conditions with a basket strapped to the back.
How much do pickers earn?	Low: Indian Assam minimums have been around a few pounds a day, Kenyan smallholders similar effective rates, with Japanese pickers earning considerably more.
Are conditions safer than they were?	Yes, slowly. India's Plantation Labour Act 1951, Sri Lankan regulations and Fairtrade auditing have raised minimums, but wage levels stay low and disputes continue.
What does Fairtrade actually pay?	A premium of roughly 50p per kg of finished tea on top of the market price, paid into worker-controlled committees for community projects.
Does Fairtrade fix wages?	No. It provides community-level investment, not individual wage rises; wages stay governed by local minimum-wage law and employer policy.
What other certifications exist?	Rainforest Alliance, the former UTZ, the Ethical Tea Partnership, Organic and Direct Trade, each with a different focus and audit standard.
Can paying more for premium tea help?	Mostly. Direct-trade and named single-estate teas often pay producers better; generic supermarket teabags are the lowest-margin route to growers.

The teas where your money goes furthest towards decent conditions are generally loose leaf single-estate teas where the producer is named, Fairtrade-certified ranges where you are explicitly paying a premium into

worker funds, and direct-trade teas from small growers who own the land they farm. It is a small lever, but a real one, and you can explore those in the full tea shop, where UK delivery is free over £35.

Reference noted

- Fairtrade Foundation: Tea
- Ethical Tea Partnership

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The cup you finish is the right cup. Skip the variety until that one is sorted.

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