
A NOTE ON MECHANIZATION

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Ceylon tea uses more labour than any other large-scale crop in the world. The number of workers on a typical tea estate is about 25 times as great as on a farm of the same size growing crops with a high labour requirement in the United Kingdom. The opportunity for using mechanical appliances to raise production per worker is, therefore, very great.

On most estates there is immediate scope for using tractors, and readily available equipment, for all the work of lifting and carrying materials and for road-making. But in established tea, even on land with no steep slopes or rock, there is little possibility of using tractors or any other self-propelling equipment in actual field work.

The main obstacle is the existing arrangement of the bushes themselves, and the impossibility of manoeuvring between and around them. Because of this immediate mechanization is possible only at the level of the appliance, like the mechanical plucker or the mist blower, if carried together with the engine on the coolie's back. But as and when tea is replanted, or new tea is opened, there is no reason why a substantial degree of mechanization should not be introduced, provided that the necessary experimental work is put in hand right away. One side of the work would be concerned with finding out the best arrangement of bushes; and another with the development of suitable equipment for use on fairly steep hillsides.

Given a suitable rearrangement of the bushes, perhaps twenty per cent of the whole tea area might be worked with ordinary tractors; while with special, but not necessarily complicated equipment that should result from experimental work, up to sixty per cent of the total area might be tackled. In conjunction with mechanically operated winches for bush pulling, the same equipment would materially reduce the cost of replanting.