

A Doyen of Tea Speaks

Posted on

Manik Jayakumar's journey through the tea industry spans continents, decades, and a remarkable transformation—from a young assistant manager in the plantations of Ceylon to the founder of the largest organic tea importer in North America. His story is rooted in the misty hills of Sri Lanka and branches into the dynamic, health-conscious tea markets of the United States.

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Manik Jayakumar.

Roots in Ceylon's Tea Country

Jayakumar began his career in 1964 with Whittal Boustead, a leading plantation management company during the waning days of British dominance in Sri Lanka's plantations. Fresh out of Royal College, where he had been a Sergeant in the Senior Cadet Platoon, prefect, house captain and Rugby team captain, he was selected for plantation training—an elite opportunity at the time.

He began as a 'creeper,' or trainee, at Brunswick Estate in Maskeliya, working under British planter David Perkins. Perkins, unlike many of his contemporaries, mentored Jayakumar with kindness and patience. Their bond endures to this day. Jayakumar credits his early success to this humane approach, learning that leadership in the plantations required empathy, discipline, and a deep understanding of people—more than just knowledge of tea cultivation. Promoted early to acting superintendent at just 25, he was known for his ability to manage difficult laborevironmentswithcalmefficiency. Over the years, he served at prestigious estates like Kelliewatte and Dayagama, and later at Craig Estate, where he hosted President Ranasinghe Premadasa and built strong community ties. Despite political interference and challenges during the nationalization of tea estates in the 1970s, Jayakumar stood his ground, becoming a key figure in the Planters Society and earning the respect of industry leaders and workers alike.

Pioneering Organic Tea

Manik was the manager of Craig Estate in Bandarawela when a remarkable opportunity emerged to establish an organic estate. As the Sri Lanka Tea Board showed no interest in the project, Jayakumar partnered with Stassens to establish an organic tea project close to the Needwood Estate. It became the very first organic tea garden in the world. His company continues to proudly purchase teas from Idulgashena Estate, which had absorbed parts of the original Needwood estate.

Growing organic tea required experimentation and education, but it was a success. Today, the legacy of that early project continues through estates like Idulgashena estate situated in Haldumula, Haputale, and Jayakumar's experience with organic cultivation would later form the foundation of his entrepreneurial pursuits in the United States.

From Sri Lanka to the U.S.

After a distinguished career as a planter and military officer—serving during the JVP insurrections and overseeing estates in volatile regions— Jayakumar made the difficult

decision to leave Sri Lanka in 1989. The country's political instability had claimed the lives of many colleagues, and concern for his family's safety became paramount.

He briefly worked in Indonesia before settling in the United States in 1993. At 50, he started over—first in nursing care and then, with a loan from his employer, launching QTrade Teas and Botanicals.

Drawing on his plantation expertise, he began importing organic and specialty teas from Sri Lanka, India, and China— blending and marketing them in a country where organic tea was barely known. With persistence and credibility, QTrade grew rapidly. His company now stands as North America's largest organic tea importer and a global leader in specialty teas. In 2019, he received the World Tea Expo's John Harney Lifetime Achievement Award, a testament to his legacy.

Family Enterprise and the Next Generation

Through the ups and downs— including navigating COVID-19 disruptions and reducing a workforce of 130—Jayakumar has remained steadfast in his principles: deliver quality, honor commitments, and innovate thoughtfully. Post-pandemic, QTrade moved operations to Houston to reduce warehousing costs, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Today, his son—a Harvard and Georgetown graduate—leads the company as CEO, while Jayakumar steps back into a mentoring role. The family-run nature of the business adds a personal touch to its success story.

A Lasting Partnership: Harry Jayawardena

A key figure in Jayakumar's story is late Harry Jayawardena, the visionary behind the Stassen Group. Their relationship, which began during the organic tea project, blossomed into a close friendship and business collaboration. QTrade has long represented Stassen Teas in the international market, and Jayakumar remains deeply grateful for Jayawardena's support and strategic brilliance. Until Harry Jayawardena's passing, Jayakumar made it a point to meet him on every visit to Sri Lanka. Their shared vision for quality and innovation in tea helped lay the groundwork for Sri Lanka's place in the premium tea export market.



Reflections on Sri Lanka's Tea Industry

Jayakumar remains closely connected to Sri Lanka and is candid about the challenges facing the industry. "Our cost of production is too high," he explains. "While we excel in packaging and value addition, we're struggling when it comes to raw tea leaves. Competing with countries producing at half our cost is difficult."

One of the major issues is quality control, especially among smallholders, who now produce a majority of the tea. Inconsistent leaf standards and increased quotas have led to a rise in wastage—from three percent during his time to 15 percent today.

"The industry needs stricter enforcement of quality standards," he says. "Even refuse tea has value if handled correctly. We must rethink how we manage labor quotas and harvesting practices." He also sees opportunity in better land utilization—suggesting that underused estate land be cultivated with trees for factory fuel, lowering costs and enhancing sustainability.

Investing in People and the Future

Labor welfare remains close to Jayakumar's heart. He laments the poor conditions in many estate communities. He believes worker productivity suffers due to long-standing social issues—alcoholism, lack of sleep due to modern distractions, and absence of economic

opportunities beyond plucking tea.

He proposes integrated development: microloans for poultry or dairy farming, better tools and training, and collaboration with global tea producers to learn best practices. “In Argentina, one worker with a machine can harvest 25,000 kilos in a day. In Sri Lanka, we need 1,000 workers to match that. This has to change.” He emphasizes that profitability and compassion can coexist. “Companies must take care of their workers. That’s the only way we’ll build a tea industry that thrives in the future.”

Giving Back and Staying Motivated

Jayakumar remains involved in outreach programs in Haputale, working with communities linked to the Idulgashena Estate. He has stayed committed to supporting education, health, and economic upliftment in the region. He assists in running possibly the only elders home in the entire plantation sector. He also assists a telemedicine project, routine visits to hospitals for the elderly and differently abled, food packages for the needy and arranging for micro loans for dairy farming and raising poultry. “Plantation communities have been neglected for too long. It’s time we give back.”

His motivation stems from a desire to uplift people and ensure the future of the tea industry is inclusive and sustainable. “I’ve seen what this industry can be. We must do better—for the workers, for the land, and for Sri Lanka.”

Looking Ahead

Jayakumar is hopeful about Sri Lanka’s future. He praises current efforts to root out corruption and unify the country. “This is a moment of opportunity. We must invite back our diaspora—Sri Lankans who’ve found success abroad—and encourage them to invest and participate.”

He stresses the importance of inclusivity, particularly in the North and East. “We must create space for all Sri Lankans to contribute, regardless of ethnicity. That’s how we build a strong, united nation.”

Manik Jayakumar’s journey—from the rolling hills of Ceylon to the corporate boardrooms of North America—is a powerful reminder that integrity, hard work, and a commitment to people can turn a humble beginning into global success. His legacy, still in motion, is not just about tea—it’s about transformation.

