

# Producing a Culture of Consumption – The Tea Story

Gopa Sabharwal

LSR College, University of Delhi, India

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## PRODUCING A CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION – THE TEA STORY

Tea along with coffee, chocolate and then sugar rewrote the human history of consumption in Europe and other parts of the world during the colonial era. Tea has been described as the most consumed substance on earth apart from air and water<sup>1</sup>. I situate my work on tea as part of a larger project of reading 1947 through the press. Aside from concentrating on the historically momentous events of the year, I am also looking at what are called commodities of the Raj. My point of entry into tea is advertisements in the six English language papers in five Indian cities namely – Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, New Delhi and Lahore.

Advertisements of course are focused on the consumption of tea and that became my focus. In focusing exclusively in consumption I am aware that I am overlooking other very crucial aspects of the production and commercialisation of tea as a colonial enterprise. These include the clearing of large tracts of land, altering local ecologies forever, displacing countless people, the in-migration of labour especially into Assam, the appalling conditions under which this labour worked and the fact that tea industry was an almost totally white enterprise etc.<sup>2</sup>. I became intrigued by when exactly did Indians become mass tea drinkers and how did this story of tea consumption unfold.

The first fact that exposed the idea that tea was not an Indian beverage, was the origin of the word *chai*. Both *Cha* and *te* are Chinese words – *cha* being the word commonly used in Mandarin or Cantonese while the Fujian dialect used the word *te* to describe the same product. The Dutch traders carried the word *te* to Europe while the Portuguese traders picked up the word *cha* from Macao and Canton from where it spread to other areas. The second notable fact from the point of view of this discussion is that in 1947, tea was not yet the national beverage it is made out to be. The way India drinks tea, with milk and sugar was also a British invention which was marketed to India by the British.

Sensing these facts, I became intrigued to see when exactly did Indians become mass tea drinkers and how did this story unfold. India's conversion to tea drinking actually happened post independence with a subtle change in tea technology and some hard propaganda. In this paper I concentrate more on the tea story up to 1947.

Before we go straight into the marketing of tea, it is worthwhile to place the tea scenario and its engagement with British colonialism in historical context. Tea consumption, as is well known, was established in China well before the Common Era. From there it was introduced to the wandering tribes of Central Asia. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, tea was introduced into Japan and became a universal drink. The Portuguese were probably the first European consumers of tea. The British East India Company which was founded in 1600 competed with the Dutch and the Portuguese in the spice trade in the Far East. The Portuguese it may be noted had been trading in Macao since 1557.

Records show the first sale of tea in England was in 1657, the tea reaching England via Amsterdam. Press advertisements of 1660 show that tea was an expensive item, ten times more expensive than coffee and as much as 1440 bottles of Spanish sherry.<sup>3</sup> In 1662, the Portuguese Princess Catherine of Braganza married Charles II and her dowry included chests of tea. Henceforth tea was popularised in the Court and among the elite. This tea was probably all green tea and not black tea.<sup>4</sup> This was the first step in tea becoming the national drink of England – a foreign commodity becoming a national identity.

The growing popularity of tea resulted in the East India Company (EIC) deciding to import it. They commenced the import of tea in 1667 as a branch of their trade.<sup>5</sup> With China being the only source of production and the EIC the only supplier this was a monopoly trade for the Company. China accepted only silver as payment for the tea since it was not interested in any other British products such as wool. For the next 200 years, the tea trade was controlled by the EIC at exorbitant prices.

By the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English people were drinking 50 cups of tea per day (the size of cup was not specified).<sup>6</sup> Increased consumption led to a dramatic rise in imports from 90,718 kg per annum in 1711-1717 to 136,077 kg in 1757.<sup>7</sup> By 1794 the EIC was selling 867,586 kg of tea to Britain and Europe and it was from tea that the EIC drew 90% of its commercial profits<sup>8</sup>. The drain on silver holdings of the East India Company was becoming worrisome and the EIC hired Sir Joseph Banks to advise them regarding an alternative source of tea. He advised the EIC to introduce the plant into the colonies which would allow them to control the production of a global commodity. In 1813 the British Parliament curtailed EIC's powers in India<sup>9</sup> while allowing it to keep its China monopoly till 1833<sup>10</sup>. Because of the balance of payment situation with China, the British Government was eager to make Britain independent of foreign i.e. non-imperial supplies of tea. Thus, the British Government rendered all types of help to the setting up of a tea industry in India.

I'm going to skip over the details of the discovery of a native tea plant in Assam as early as 1815 which was passed over by the obsession with the Chinese plant by members of the Government committee charged with overseeing tea production in India. Finally, tea plantations were established in India using the variety *Assamica* discovered in the Himalayas in 1823<sup>11</sup>. Following Assam, tea gardens were established in the Himalayan foothills (1842), the Surma Valley (1856), Darjeeling (1858) and the western Dooars (1874)<sup>12</sup>. By 1850 the acreage under tea in India had reached 1,000 acres<sup>13</sup>.

The first shipment of manufactured Indian tea was ready for export to Britain in 1838. It comprised 80 chests of about 158 kg and was sold in January 1839 in the auctions at London at a price ranging from 21 shillings to 34 shillings a pound<sup>14</sup>. By 1841, 1,011 hectares were under cultivation and the production touched 13,154 kg of tea. The EIC was brought out of near bankruptcy with the Assam variety of tea the production of which increased steadily and dramatically by 1852. The Assam plant soon became a strain imported by all countries other than China and Japan<sup>15</sup>.

By 1866 the UK consumed 4,762,719 kg of tea of which only 4% was of Indian origin. By 1935, the United Kingdom was consuming 202,302,197 kg of tea with Indian tea accounting for 58% of that total<sup>16</sup>. With tea production thriving, it was soon realised that, a wider consumer base was needed for the industry to flourish. It was essential for India to begin to consume tea. In 1901, the Viceroy commissioned an experiment of introducing tea to Indians –the experiment has to be abandoned in 1904 with the conclusion that the market did not hold promise<sup>17</sup>.

In order to promote the drinking of tea, the Indian tea industry asked the Government to impose a tax on the export of tea, the proceeds of which could be used to promote tea sales. Thus, the Indian Tea Cess Act was passed by Viceroy Curzon in 1903, to promote the marketing of tea. The levy of one-eighth of a rupee (2 annas) per 45 kg was imposed on all tea exported. This rate was revised in April 1921 to half a rupee (8 annas) per 45 kg. The funds were used to stimulate the tea drinking habit, and to appoint agents in India and abroad to push the sales of Indian grown tea. The Government acted simply as the collection agent, handing over the money to a non-official committee to administer.

For illustration we can look at how this fund was used in different years. In 1917-18, the total amount collected was £38,130 of which £5000 was allotted for propaganda in the US army, and £ 23,000 for work in India<sup>18</sup>. In 1923-24 it was decided to allot £20,000 to France and Belgium. The chief methods were demonstrations on how to brew tea, to which attention was drawn by newspaper advertisements. Most of the money was expended in advertisements. The rate of cess was increased from time to time and in 1936 it was at three-fourths of a rupee (12 annas) per 45 kg of tea and the total amount collected in 1934-35 was Rs.16,10,632 or £120,797<sup>19</sup>.

By 1930 the industry faced a crisis due to over production of tea and a slump in consumption. This also led to the collapse of many enterprises and a fall in prices. Producers in India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and the

Netherlands East Indies negotiated a proposal for an international agreement restricting the amount of export from each country under the Regulation of Exports Scheme<sup>20</sup>. The negotiations resulted in the formation of the International Tea Committee (ITC) to administer the Regulation Scheme under the terms of the International Tea Agreement, concluded on 9th February 1933, with the approval and support of the Governments of each of the three participating countries<sup>21</sup>. All signatories agreed to a reduction of 15% of the maximum attained in any of the years from 1929 to 1933. The scheme stayed in place until 31st March 1955 and was not thereafter renewed, but an agreement was reached between the governments of the participating countries for the continuance of the ITC as a centre for the collection and publication of statistics and other information relating to tea<sup>22</sup>.

The regulation of exports alone would not be a cure for over production. The true remedy had to be expansion of markets and increased world consumption of tea. India, Ceylon and the Netherlands East Indies co-operated and pooled resources to carry out “propaganda” in the USA, United Kingdom, Canada, Europe, Egypt, Australia and South Africa, under the direction of the International Tea Market Expansion Board. The term propaganda was commonly used for all attempts to push tea consumption. Referring to the results of the propaganda carried out by the Tea Cess Committee, E.A. Watson, Chairman of the Indian Tea Association in London, reported in 1936 that over a period of twenty-five years, the propaganda of the Indian Tea Cess Committee had resulted in increasing Indian consumption from 9,071,847 kgs to 27,215,542 kg per annum.

In 1933 the Tea Cess Committee was morphed into the unambiguously named Indian Tea Marketing Expansion Board (ITMEB), a precursor to today's Tea Board. By 1934-35 Assam, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri (West Bengal) accounted for 77 % of Indian tea while South India i.e. Malabar coast including Travancore and Cochin state and districts of Malabar, Nilgiris and Coimbatore, accounted for 18%<sup>23</sup>. Of the 1,046 tea gardens in Assam, 336 were owned by Indians. Indians in addition, were also substantial shareholders in some of the other European Companies<sup>24</sup>. The total number of people employed in the tea industry in 1933 was 864,503. Area under tea was 337,886 hectares and the investment in tea production was £383 million.

By 1945, Indian consumption was 68,038,855 kg and was expected to go beyond that in 1947<sup>25</sup>. The combined production of undivided India in 1947 was 272,155,422 kg – with an estimate of 200 cups of tea per pound or half kilo of tea leaves<sup>26</sup>. The largest consumer of tea was the British housewife or the UK which in 1947 consumed 190,508,795 kg of tea, i.e. more than half of India's total production. This worked out to 4 kilos of tea per person per year. Any reduction in consumption by the British consumer could have spelt doom for the Indian tea industry. Add to this the fact that the consumption of tea in America was not seeing any great advance beyond 250 gm per head per year. This meant that new consumers had to be found in order for the British to continue to consume their favourite drink<sup>27</sup>.

The Anglo-Saxon passion for tea was the determining factor in consumption. UK, Australia and New Zealand had the highest consumption in the world, with western Ireland being the most discriminating purchaser of high-quality teas. Tea was also the national drink in Canada. In USA, Coca-Cola and coffee were giving strong competition to tea and the invention of tea bags in the US did not go down very well with the prescribed British method of brewing tea.<sup>28</sup> The tea industry was confident that tea being the cheapest drink after water, with wages going up faster than the cost of tea (due to inflation), thousands could afford to now buy tea for the first time. But, the industry was aware that consumption based on inflation is not a firm basis for prosperity<sup>29</sup>.

The tea habit in India was not nearly as pervasive as the tea producers would have liked. The Indian Army was become a consumer of tea with its soldiers having been exposed to tea drinking during the War while serving with the British Army. They were expected to continue the habit<sup>30</sup>. In addition there had been some growth of tea drinking amongst mill workers as evidenced by a remark of a former civil servant from India who said in 1936 that he had recently dealt with a mill workers strike where one of the demands was for money spent on tea<sup>31</sup>.

One reason for the low demand and slow growth of tea consumption was the vociferous opposition to tea within India - and especially against labour practices at tea plantations, that had been aired by nationalist leaders from as early as 1906. For many years, tea was viewed with suspicion and even fear. Stern proscriptions by nationalist leaders such as Gandhi were dampening domestic demand. He called tea "an intoxicant", in the same class of

avoidable substances as tobacco and cacao. Gandhi had said that tea contains tannic acid while in actuality what it contains is tannin. Gandhi can be forgiven for the mistake, though, as it's a misconception that started long ago and continues even today<sup>32</sup>.

Gandhi remarked that Viceroy Lord Curzon had "set the fashion for tea-drinking. And that pernicious drug now bids fair to overwhelm the nation. It has already undermined the digestive apparatus of hundreds of thousands of men and women and constitutes an additional tax upon their slender purses."<sup>33</sup> The opposition to tea also found its way into literature. In the early 1920s, Acharya Prafulla Ray, an eminent chemist and a passionate nationalist, published cartoons equating tea with poison.

The campaign for tea, however, held its ground and carried on with its propaganda despite the hostility from some quarters. The focus was on educating the public both as to the virtues of tea and also the correct way to brew tea. In earlier years a wider multi-pronged approach which included demonstrations and free distribution of tea especially at railway stations or fairs was used, but there is no mention of any such activity in the newspapers in 1947. The two biggest obstacles were implications of tea on health and then on morality especially of women.

In England, over almost three centuries, tea drinking had become a matter of public performance with display of status through porcelain dishes, silver cutlery and even set spaces such as tea rooms for the consumption of the beverage<sup>34</sup>. Tea had also percolated down the class ladder to become the main drink of the nation. In India the initial consumers of tea were mostly the Imperial masters and tea was a symbol of the Empire. Bhadra has reproduced an advertisement proclaiming tea to be the "Queen's Own Tea; The Sovereign's Drink"<sup>35</sup>. From its Imperial role models, the elite took to tea drinking but these were not large numbers.

The late 30s and early 40s were hectic times for ITMEB. Vice Chairman Mr Griffiths commissioned the Indian statistician P.C. Mahalanobis to conduct a sample survey on tea drinking habits in Calcutta in 1939<sup>36</sup>. A look at some of the findings of this survey may help explain the thrust of the advertising campaign that we encounter in 1947. Mahalanobis's report on the survey is of course designed to show the superiority on modern statistics in supplying superior information. In fact, two intelligence officers of the ITMEB were allowed to do their own parallel survey research alongside the main survey.<sup>37</sup> When summarizing the results, Mahalanobis concludes that the ITMEB researcher over-estimated the prevalence of tea drinking in almost every case and that his estimates are "entirely unreliable"<sup>38</sup>.

The survey looked at data from around a thousand respondents from Bengali Hindu and Bengali Muslim families and also non-Bengali Hindus which included Punjabi and Madras Hindu and Marwaris. There emerged a clear link between economic status and tea consumption with tea consumption rising along with income. The highest rate of consumption was among the Bengali Muslims and the lowest among the Marwaris. While 4 out of 5 Muslim families and 2 out of 3 Hindu families drank tea, it was only consumed by 1 out of 4 Marwari families. He found that once a Marwari family took to tea drinking then, a higher proportion of its members drank tea in comparison to other communities<sup>39</sup>. Of the tea drinkers, 77% drank tea twice a day while 17% drank tea only once a day. Only 5% took tea more than three times a day. There was also data on gender and age which showed for instance that among Bengali Hindus, roughly 15% of young children under five are given tea<sup>40</sup>.

The tea companies were innovating their sales methods and we learn from Brooke Bond that they had pioneered direct selling the number rising from 100 salesmen in 1930s to 1500 in 1946. The tea company advertisements were supported by advertising from ITMEB. These were generic advertisements which kept the message simple and repeated the same message each time. The main tag line "Any Time is Tea Time" featured at the bottom of one set of advertisements. Tea was positioned as a brew that brought rest, refreshment, renewed mental vigour, bred friendship, smoothened nerves and gave strength. This message was combined with the power of visual imagery designed to convey the sentiment. Middle class men and women and the power of tea to calm frazzled nerves were the main themes.

Another indication that tea was yet to become a common drink was the fact that ITMEB advertisements focused on how to brew tea with great emphasis on freshly boiled water. This Anglo-Saxon ideal code for the preparation and consumption of tea was sought to be imposed as the correct means of brewing tea. The text in each of



advertisements was identical and ended by saying “learn these rules by heart and see that they are always followed in your home”<sup>41</sup>.

Post independence, there has been a dramatic rise in tea consumption in the domestic Indian market. While at the time of Independence roughly 31% of total production of tea was retained for internal consumption, in 2006 as much as 81% of total production was domestic consumption<sup>42</sup>. India is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest tea producer and largest black tea producer in the world, with production at around 1,350 million kgs. India is also the highest consumer of tea in the world as per the Tea Board of India. A study by the Tea Board in 2023 revealed that overall around 64% of the total population in India is tea drinking population<sup>43</sup>. The per capita tea consumption in India is 840 gm annually. India continues to export tea with Iran, UAE, and Russia being the top tea export destinations<sup>44</sup>.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Macfarlane, 2003 p.1

<sup>2</sup> Sarma, Jayeeta. 2011. p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Pickersgill p.395-6

<sup>4</sup> Black tea did not become popular until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Watson, 1936, p.446

<sup>6</sup> Pickersgill, p.396.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 397

<sup>8</sup> Hanser, 2017 p.315.

<sup>9</sup> In 1813, the monopoly of East India Company being the sole trader with India came to an end but it continued to trade with China.

<sup>10</sup> Whittaker, p.679

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. P.678

<sup>13</sup> Watson, p.447

<sup>14</sup> Whittaker, p.679

<sup>15</sup> Whittaker, p.680

<sup>16</sup> Watson, p.447

<sup>17</sup> Lutgendorf, p.13

<sup>18</sup> Dharamsee, Doongersee, p.163

<sup>19</sup> Watson, p.468

<sup>20</sup> Watson, p. 447

<sup>21</sup> Website of International Tea Committee <https://inttea.com/itc-history/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Watson, p.448

<sup>24</sup> Watson, p.456

<sup>25</sup> Whittaker, p.682

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.681

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 682

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 683

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 683.

<sup>30</sup> Whittaker, p.683

<sup>31</sup> Watson p.463

<sup>32</sup> Tannin imparts the characteristic pungency to tea liquor and gives the final product its distinctive red and brown colour. Tannic acid on the other hand, is 25times stronger than the tannin in tea which is neutralized by the addition of milk. Watson p. xxx

<sup>33</sup> Gandhi, p.17

<sup>34</sup> Brickham, p.80.

<sup>35</sup> Bhadra p.6-7

<sup>36</sup> Mahalanobis, p.283

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 285

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 310.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.287

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 287

<sup>41</sup> From ITMEB Advertisement

<sup>42</sup> Report of Tea Board of India

<sup>43</sup> Executive Summary of Study on Domestic Consumption of Tea in India, Tea Board Website.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.