



# Chai as a Colonial Creation: The British Empire's Cultivation of Tea as a Popular Taste and Habit Among South Asians

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## Abstract

For Indians, chai, or spiced black tea, is a sign of hospitality, served within families, workplaces, and at train stations. While most Indians now perceive chai to be an essential and unquestionable part of daily life, this was not the case until the early twentieth century. While today, masala tea (or masala chai) is seen as a traditional South Asian custom, my findings suggest that the habit of drinking tea was actually thrust upon Indians through a colonial apparatus of the British Raj that utilized indentured labor, plantations, and exploitative trade practices. In this research, I deconstruct the misunderstanding that tea is native to India by gathering records of the first tea plantations and advertisements designed to popularize tea in India. I also present evidence of British establishment of tea and sugar plantations, which preceded the mass production and distribution of chai for export and internal use. Lastly, I analyze advertisements that were used in the British campaign to popularize chai in India. The tea trade exemplifies the short and long-term inequalities that resulted from British occupation in South Asia, as it was a key factor in motivating and funding colonial expansion and in solidifying colonial control. Beyond colonizing land and bodies through tea, the British succeeded in colonizing Indians' aesthetics and taste.

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## 1. Introduction

Tea—or chai, as it is known in India—is a daily staple for billions.<sup>1</sup> In 2021 alone, India produced 1.26 million metric tons and consumed 1.09 billion kilograms of tea. Indeed, most Indians drink chai several times a day. Chai is a sign of hospitality, shared with families, in workplaces, and at train stations. Most Indians today perceive chai to be an essential and unquestionable part of daily life.

The Indian style of drinking tea is known as masala chai, which refers to a mixture of black tea, milk, sugar, and spices that differ in composition and proportion from region to region in South

Asia. Although many consider masala chai to be a traditional Indian drink, often attributing the “exotic” flavors of the spices to its indigenous roots, this is a historical misconception. Colonialism and the British Empire had a direct role in the introduction of tea to India; the commodities of sugar and tea were mass-produced in Indian plantations due to British demand and colonial interference. Colonial business entities such as the East India Company, Lipton Company, and Tea Market Expansion Board sought to popularize tea among Indians to maximize profits by establishing a new market.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statista Research Department (2022). “India: Consumption Volume of Tea 2021” [Online]. Available: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/870829/india-consumption-volume-of-tea/> [2022 May].

<sup>2</sup> Billie Cohen, “The True Story behind England's Tea Obsession.”

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Due to its prominence in the daily cultural practices of modern Indians, the preparation and consumption of masala chai is commonly assumed to be a long-standing historical tradition of South Asia. However, this habit of tea— of production, consumption, and ritualization— was actually thrust upon Indians through a colonial apparatus of the British Raj—or British Empire—that utilized indentured labor, plantations, and exploitative trade practices.

## 2. Tea as a Commodity in Victorian England

To fully understand the popularity of chai in South Asia as a result of British influence, it is important to first analyze the sources of demand for tea in England. The industrial revolution and urbanization in England were key catalysts for tea demand, and therefore, for production in India. However, before tea became accessible and popular amongst England's working classes, it was an expensive and luxurious beverage, served and prepared only for the elite. Tea was first introduced to England in the 17th century. When the Portuguese princess, Catherine of Braganza, married England's King Charles II in 1662, she brought with her loose tea leaves as a part of her dowry. Catherine of Braganza had a habit of drinking tea regularly, which quickly became popular within the court and among aristocracy.<sup>3</sup> Edmund Waller, a renowned poet during this time, composed a poem entitled, "Poem on Tea," for Princess Catherine's birthday, which accredited her with the introduction and

popularization of tea within the English court: "The best of Queens, and best of herbs, we owe / To that bold nation, which the way did show / To the fair region where the sun doth rise, / Whose rich productions we so justly prize."<sup>4</sup>

By the end of the 17th century, tea was very popular amongst the English aristocracy.<sup>5</sup> Picking up on this increase in demand, the East India Company, founded in 1600, fueled the popularity of tea by supplying tea to England through purchases of tea from Singaporean and Hong Kongese vendors.<sup>6</sup> The ritualized English tea drinking habit consisting of porcelain cups and saucers, sugar spoons, and teapots that is well known today was adapted from Portuguese, Dutch, and Chinese tea customs.<sup>7</sup>

While tea was initially an "exotic luxury", by 1730, a reduction in taxes and increased trade with China made tea affordable for almost everyone.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, growth in accessibility and popularity made tea a part of everyday life for all British social classes.<sup>9</sup> No longer was tea only popular amongst aristocratic men in coffeehouses – it was redefined as a common drink associated with home life, domesticity, and family.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, tea became known as England's national beverage.<sup>11</sup>

As tea increasingly became a domestic commodity, Britons became suspicious of the foreign origins of tea, especially the fact that it was sourced from China. English citizens began to notice the contradictions of calling tea a "national drink" when it was cultivated in China, a place that was perceived as an inferior "other."<sup>12</sup> As Fromer

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Billie. (2017). "The True Story behind England's Tea Obsession - BBC Travel" [Online]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20170823-the-true-story-behind-englands-tea-obsession> [2022 May].

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Waller, (c. 1662). "Poem on Tea." Cited in Billie Cohen (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Billie Cohen, "The True Story behind England's Tea Obsession."

<sup>6</sup> Rosen, Diana, *Chai: The Spice Tea of India*. (Canada: Storey Books, 1999, 10).

<sup>7</sup> Billie Cohen, "The True Story behind England's Tea Obsession."

<sup>8</sup> Collingham, Elizabeth, *Curry: a tale of cooks and conquerors*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 191).

<sup>9</sup> Fromer, Julie E, "'Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant': Representations of English National Identity in Victorian Histories of Tea," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2008), 531.

<sup>10</sup> Fromer, Julie E, "Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant," 531.

<sup>11</sup> Fromer, Julie E, "'Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant,'" 531.

<sup>12</sup> Fromer, Julie E, "Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant," 537.

notes, “the desire for a safe, British-controlled source of a commodity that had become necessary to daily life helped spur the expansion of the Empire.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, tea was a direct impetus for colonial expansion.

In addition to social unease about China, Britain had begun losing money from importing expensive tea from China. Attempts to negotiate trade by selling British products to China failed. Thus, gaining dominance in economic relationships was a key motivator for Britain to produce tea within its own colonies.<sup>14</sup>

The rising demand for tea among the English working classes, an inability to finance continual imports tea from China, as well as governmental and social efforts to nationalize tea as a British drink set the stage for the introduction of tea cultivation in India. Britain’s colonial control over Western India and strong navy gave them the means and the power to instigate tea cultivation in India, and their doing so would permanently shift the tea trade.

### 3. Stolen from China, Grown in India

Britain’s thirst for tea led to insidious measures to obtain knowledge of Chinese tea cultivation, establish plantations in India, and maintain profit margins. Aware of British subjects’ demand for tea, Queen Victoria commanded that tea be grown within a British colony. Upon discovering tea leaves in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, Queen Victoria sent British expeditioners and botanists to cultivate tea in India. Charles Alexander (C.A.) Bruce, Major Robert Bruce, Lord William Charles Cavendish Bentinck, and English botanist Robert Fortune, all of the East India Company, were the first five pioneers of tea sent

to Assam to cultivate tea in India, and each would have a unique and profound impact on the development of the tea trade.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Bruce is accredited with the “discovery” of wild tea plants in the Beesa Hills of Assam. In reality, an Indian, Moneram Dewan, showed the tea plants to Bruce.<sup>16</sup> Because Assam borders China, some hypothesize that Buddhist monks introduced the tea bush from China to Assam during a journey between India and China, as the monks historically cultivated tea leaves as a part of prayer and meditation practices.<sup>17</sup> Robert Bruce’s brother, C.A. Bruce, was appointed as the first Superintendent of Tea Culture. Although C.A. Bruce was not educated in botany, he used his experience as an explorer to experiment with planting and cultivating tea leaves. After picking the leaves, Bruce would wither them in the sun and dry them using charcoal fires.

One of the first pioneers sent to Assam to cultivate tea in India, Robert Fortune is known as the “spy who stole China’s tea empire.” The East India Company recruited Robert Fortune to smuggle tea leaf seeds to India, effectively establishing tea production in India.<sup>18</sup> Fortune first traveled to China in 1842, and during his time in China, he became familiar with the Chinese tea preparation style. Between 1842 and 1851, Fortune sent back 12,000 tea seeds which were added to the existing Himalayan plantations in Darjeeling.<sup>19</sup> Due to this thievery, “India surpassed China as the world’s largest tea grower.”<sup>20</sup>

Beyond stealing, adapting, and implementing the Chinese methods of growing tea leaves in India, England and the East India Company looked to finance their tea-growing endeavors in India by destabilizing China in order to secure a monopoly over tea growth. To gain this control (and funds),

<sup>13</sup> Fromer, Julie E, “Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant,” 532.

<sup>14</sup> Rosen, Chai, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Rosen, Chai, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Rosen, Chai, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Rosen, Chai, 13-15.

<sup>18</sup> NPR Staff, (2015). “Tea Tuesdays: The Scottish Spy Who Stole China’s Tea Empire” [Online]. Available:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/03/10/392116370/tea-tuesdays-the-scottish-spy-who-stole-chinas-tea-empire> [2022 May].

<sup>19</sup> Rosen, Chai, 19.

<sup>20</sup> NPR Staff, (2015). “Tea Tuesdays: The Scottish Spy Who Stole China’s Tea Empire” [Online].

the British used opium. The East India Company took control of the Bengal opium market and greatly expanded production by forcing farmers to grow more poppies, and even providing them with new cultivation techniques.<sup>21</sup> British landlords coerced Indian farmers to grow opium under brutal conditions: “[l]ocal landowners forced their landless tenants to grow poppy; and peasants were also kidnapped, arrested and threatened with destruction of crops, criminal prosecution and jail if they refused to grow the crop.”<sup>22</sup> These harsh and immoral tactics allowed the British to reach unprecedented levels of opium production to fuel the highly profitable opium trade.

The funds that Britain gained from the Chinese addiction to opium also helped to support tea trade in India. Although the opium trade was illegal in China, the British sold opium to traders who smuggled it into China. When the Chinese government attempted to retaliate against illegal opium smuggling, Britain reciprocated, marking the beginning of the Opium Wars. With a strong navy and military, the British won the opium war, forced opium trade to become legal in China, and captured the island of Hong Kong.<sup>23</sup> This victory undermined Chinese leadership and set the precedent for a nationwide opium addiction crisis, destabilizing the Chinese government and strengthening Britain’s colonial power over Indian economy, and later, culture.

The lengths to which the East India Company and the British Empire went to secure tea as a “domestic” product highlight the economic greed and colonial power of the British Empire. The British sought to further capitalize upon this market by mass-producing tea in India through any means possible, which, more often than not, further fed the Indian and Chinese addictions to

tea and opium. These aggressive actions underscore that British interference in China and India was not only about tea; rather, it was also about securing political and social power through trade monopolies and political destabilization across major Asian countries. The East India Company and British Empire not only secured tea profits for themselves, but also instituted customs, treaties, and laws which enforced long-lasting power dynamics. Western power persists today while countries such as China and India struggle to recover from colonial practices (namely economic and infrastructural) which lead to destabilization and lack of development (namely economic and infrastructural).

#### 4. Cultivation of Tea in India

British success with tea cultivation in India flourished due to exploitative plantation practices and indentured labor with conditions scarcely better than slavery. The first tea estates were established in Assam in the 1830s using Chinese tea plants.<sup>24</sup> Britain annexed Assam in 1838 for the purpose of commercial tea cultivation.<sup>25</sup> Though tea plantations were first developed in Assam, the British East India Company also identified Darjeeling as a prime location for tea cultivation and established the Darjeeling tea industry after the 1850s. The East India Company already had control of West Bengal during the 18th and 19th centuries, and Darjeeling was conveniently located in the Himalayan foothills, at the northmost end of West Bengal. Darjeeling plantations were sometimes favored over those of Assam because their black teas had a higher quality aroma. Additionally, Darjeeling soil and climate was favorable to tea leaf growth, an

<sup>21</sup> Rowllatt, Justin (2016). “The Dark History behind India and the UK’s Favourite Drink” [Online]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-36781368> [2022 May].

<sup>22</sup> Biswas, Soutik (2019). “How Britain’s Opium Trade Impoverished Indians” [Online]. Available:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49404024> [2022 May].

<sup>23</sup> Rowllatt, Justin (2016). “The Dark History behind India and the UK’s Favourite Drink” [Online].

<sup>24</sup> Rowllatt, Justin (2016). “The Dark History behind India and the UK’s Favourite Drink” [Online].

<sup>25</sup> Rosen, Chai, 19.

economic advantage for the British plantation owners in terms of both marketing, and ease of production.<sup>26</sup>

Prominent British colonist, Robert Fortune, strongly supported the establishment of these plantations in Assam and Darjeeling. He argued that “tea crops would materially enhance the culture and comfort of Indian men and women.”<sup>27</sup> In his published travel journal, *Journey to the Tea Countries of China*, Fortune asserts that “to the natives of India themselves the production of [tea] would be of the greatest value... his dwelling house is a mere mud-hut... If part of these lands produced tea, he would then have a healthy beverage to drink...he would have the means of making himself and his family more comfortable and happy.”<sup>28</sup> Fortune’s tone is blatantly disdainful towards impoverished and ‘backwards’ Indians, and is a reflection of British colonial racism and justification of Indian labor for tea growth. A key player in bringing tea leaves to India, Fortune’s vocal support for the use of Indian labor on tea plantations may have catalyzed and justified the strategies used to recruit Indian laborers.

Slave labor had already been banned in the British Empire by the 1830s when these plantations were established. As a workaround to employing slaves, the East India Company and tea estate owners used indentured labor, which involved a contract that bound laborers to tea estates for certain periods of time.<sup>29</sup> The British use of unethical, exploitative, forced, and slave-like labor aligns with a broader pattern of colonial practices across the world, and their strategy of using indentured labor on tea plantations stimulated mass production and strengthened the commerce of tea as a commodity. Thus, the introduction of tea to the Indian Subcontinent was

forceful and unethical, contrary to the misconception that tea natively grows in India.

Tea cultivation, which includes plucking and processing, is extremely labor-intensive, and contracts were strictly binding in order to prevent laborers and families from leaving the plantations. Estate owners went out of their way to recruit cheap labor because of the long-term cost benefits. For instance, fewer than 25 families lived in Darjeeling in 1839, so the British imported laborers from other cities and villages.<sup>30</sup> The East India Company specifically recruited labor from Nepal, including Gurkhas, into Darjeeling. Darjeeling tea gardeners even developed the Sardari system, in which they sent Sardars to Sikkim and Nepal once per year to recruit laborers. Sardars were paid 10 rupees for their work, and they would often recruit entire families, which was highly encouraged. Because women and children were regarded as better pluckers, perhaps due to defter fingers, the British benefited from familial employment in which they paid less for more labor. Tea cutting was considered “women’s work,” a rhetoric which defended dismal working conditions for women on tea plantations, and subsequently their children who followed them around. In this way, the British tea plantation owners’ exploitation created a new gender precedent.

This strategy of incorporating Nepalese labor used by Darjeeling tea estate owners was seen as easier to manage than the Assamese labor system, in which estate owners indentured laborers from tribal areas such as Santhal Parganas and Chota Nagpur.<sup>31</sup> Darjeeling tea estate owners encouraged individual spare-time cultivation among indentured laborer families, even granting land for these activities. Estate owners instituted

<sup>26</sup> Akhtar, Sadia, and Song Wei, “British Colonization and Development of Black Tea Industry in India: A Case Study of Darjeeling,” *Advances in Historical Studies*, Vol X, No. 4 (December, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Fromer, Julie E, “‘Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant,’” 539.

<sup>28</sup> Fortune, Robert, “*Journey to the Tea Countries of China*,” cited in Julie E. Fromer, *Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant* (2008), 394-5.

<sup>29</sup> Rowlatt, Justin (2016). “The Dark History behind India and the UK’s Favourite Drink” [Online].

<sup>30</sup> Akhtar & Wei, “British Colonization,” (2021).

<sup>31</sup> Akhtar & Wei, “British Colonization,” (2021).

welfare programs such as providing housing and farmland to laborers and establishing an educational system for their children, all in an effort to encourage laborers to stay. Thus, they succeeded in establishing a plantation economy in Darjeeling.

However, these so-called social welfare actions did not mask the poor sanitation, limited water access, and lack of medical treatment that plagued plantations.<sup>32</sup> Many laborers contracted malaria, a disease leading to an enlargement of the spleen, so when their employers kicked and beat them, their spleens would rupture, causing death. There were very few medically qualified doctors on the plantations to treat diseases such as malaria or other ailments.<sup>33</sup>

Some estate managers offered bags of money in villages to retain and attract workers, but they were unable to do so when the villagers discovered the poor working conditions. To prevent families from leaving, Darjeeling plantations employed a paramilitary force called the North Bengal Mounted Rifles.<sup>34</sup> Estate owners also hired contractors called “coolie catchers” to find runaway laborers and recruit poor peasants for tea plantation labor.<sup>35</sup> The tea produced in Assam became known among plantation workers as “bitter tea” due to the suffering and labor that went into producing the tea leaves.<sup>36</sup>

The same abysmal living and working conditions instituted by the British Raj persist today on tea estates in Assam. Malnutrition, overflowing toilets, chemical exposures, and even child labor, can be found on the tea estates that supply leaves to Lipton, PG Tips, and Tetleys and Twinings.<sup>37</sup> The establishment of a plantation economy has impacted generations of plantation workers, and continues to impact them to this day.

Women and children faced the brunt of exploitative labor practices due to Western gendered expectations of labor quality payment, in which they were expected to produce more tea for less pay. British development used strategies of kidnapping, instigated gender-based inequities, institutionalized structural poverty, and furnished unethical labor conditions. British plantations have destabilized lives and communities to fuel profit and fulfill the promise of a “domestic” tea product.

As novelist Mulk Raj Anand noted in his 1937 novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*, the perfect phrase “to describe the contents of a cup of tea [is]: ‘The hunger, the sweat and the despair of a million Indians!’”<sup>38</sup> The establishment of plantations, and even development of infrastructure such as railways, would not have been possible without thousands of indentured laborers bound to the land under inhumane conditions.

## 5. Tea and “Development”

The first chest of Indian-produced tea from Assam was sold by the East India Company in 1839, but the quality was poor and failed to impress buyers. Eventually, the quality improved and tea plantations began to pay off for the British. The Indian tea industry became stable and profitable in the 1870s.<sup>39</sup>

British tea associations established a new railway line to expedite the process of tea leaf export in the 1880s. Since tea auctions were primarily held in Calcutta, where tea sellers exported their product to Europe and Tibet, the ‘Darjeeling Himalayan Railway’ line connected Calcutta and Darjeeling. Thus, the establishment of the railway line increased the efficiency of the

<sup>32</sup> Akhtar & Wei, “British Colonization,” (2021).

<sup>33</sup> Collingham, Curry, 193.

<sup>34</sup> Akhtar & Wei, “British Colonization,” (2021).

<sup>35</sup> Collingham, Curry, 193.

<sup>36</sup> Rosen, Chai, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Rowlatt, Justin, and Jane Deith. (2015). “The Bitter Story behind the UK’s National Drink.” [Online]. Available:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34173532>. (2022 May)

<sup>38</sup> Anand, Mulk Raj, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1937).

<sup>39</sup> Collingham, Curry, 193.



latter part of the tea trade process and strengthened British control over the tea industry. The railway also helped the British to market the tea to Tibetans, who mainly sourced their tea from China, by increasing ease of transportation access. Thanks to these progressions and other infrastructure developments such as road pavement and tea gardening machinery, British-controlled Indian tea trade commercially flourished.<sup>40</sup>

The push for development in India may have been a residual of the nearly concurrent Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, or perhaps it was an attempt to demonstrate British industrial “advancement” in colonies. However, there existed a disconnect between the success of tea estate owners and that of South Asian laborers. British profits grew, but wages and living conditions of plantation workers did not reflect this prosperity. British industrial developments sought to increase efficiency and profits, not the wellbeing of individuals or communities, yet they were framed as benevolent efforts to mask the poor treatment of Indians.<sup>41</sup> Not only did Indian laborers not materially benefit from the Empire-driven development and industrialization in India, they were actively disadvantaged through indentured labor, reinforcement of class hierarchies, and export of Indian money and goods. Ultimately, one must juxtapose the long-lasting structural inequalities as a British legacy with their oft-praised legacy of development.

## 6. Popularization of Tea Amongst Indians

Having perfected their exploitative tea cultivation strategy and developed the infrastructure to support its production, the British next looked to expand their market by selling tea to Indians themselves. The aggressive marketing techniques

of the British Raj are the primary reason that tea is popular amongst Indians today and were the catalyst for the creation of what is now known as masala chai. Indians did not widely consume tea until the early twentieth century; until the early 1900s, tea was regarded primarily as an herbal or medicinal blend.<sup>42</sup> This lack of recreational consumption is largely due to economic barriers: tea, and the included “paraphernalia” such as teapots, cups, saucers, sugar bowls, and milk jugs, was too expensive for most people.<sup>43</sup>

In 1901, well after the tea trade had become profitable for the British, the Indian Tea Association, a British Empire-sanctioned tea company, realized that Indians themselves could be consumers of tea and thus began their marketing campaign. They employed a superintendent and sent “smart European travelers” to persuade grocers to stock more tea. It took about 13 years to make progress in convincing Indians to purchase and drink tea. The Indian Tea Association finally had a breakthrough during World War I, when they began instituting tea stalls at factories, coal mines, and cotton mills. By 1919, “tea canteens” became an integral part of industrial settings in India. These WWI-era laborers received tea breaks, helping establish the habit of tea-drinking as a break-time activity. Campaigners also attempted to introduce tea directly into Indians’ homes, even employing lady demonstrators to appeal to religious families. Demonstrators’ habits of visiting houses at the same time everyday contributed to establishing a temporal inclination, a habit of drinking tea every day at the same time. The caffeine in chai did the rest of the work in creating a habit out of drinking tea at the same time.

Public demonstrations with cinema performances also attracted curious clientele.<sup>44</sup> The marketing campaign temporarily stopped during WWII, while the Tea Association supplied

<sup>40</sup> Akhtar & Wei, “British Colonization,” (2021).

<sup>41</sup> Akhtar & Wei, “British Colonization,” (2021).

<sup>42</sup> Collingham, Curry, 190.

<sup>43</sup> Collingham, Curry, 190.

<sup>44</sup> Collingham, Curry, 197-9.

chai to Indian troops fighting in Europe. They set up tea stalls for the Indian troops that included Indian songs and letter-writers, thus associating tea with home and nostalgia for India. Hot tea was also a comforting drink for soldiers and traumatized veterans. After the war, the habit of drinking tea remained amongst those involved in the war.

While the war increased habituation, a key turning point for tea distribution to Indians was the introduction of tea to railway stations. Guided by colonial authorities, the Tea Association gave local vendors kettles and tea, along with instructions for tea preparation, at railway stations, notably at Punjab and Bengal railway junctions. Railway station tea was affordable and sold by both Muslim and Hindu vendors, making it appealing to railway patrons of all socioeconomic classes and religions, thus eliminating boundaries which may have hindered profits. Oftentimes railway station vendors ignored the Tea Association's instructions for preparation and added milk and sugar to the tea leaves. Perhaps the milk and sugar appealed to north Indians because the drink then resembled lassi, which is a popular North Indian drink. Vendors also added their own spices to make tea more palatable to their customers. The Tea Association disliked "spiced tea" because it meant that vendors used fewer tea leaves and tried to discourage the addition of spices.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Indian customers preferred "spiced tea," or masala chai, so vendors continued to sell their adaptation, despite it being labeled by the British as an "unsavory and badly prepared decoction."<sup>46</sup>

## 7. Advertising Tea

Advertisements were an avenue through which tea companies and the Indian Tea Association heavily marketed their products to Indians from different

walks of life. Analyzing these examples yields an understanding of how tea became a prominent South Asian staple. As mentioned earlier, historian Collingham writes that "in India, [tea] remained firmly in the category of herbal remedy... and the tea loving British were forced to carry their own supplies of tea leaves when they traveled into the Indian countryside, as it was impossible to buy tea there."<sup>47</sup> Taking into account this background, it appears that the Figure 1 advertisement from the Hindustan Times, approximately 1940, appeals to the Indian perception of tea as a remedy or medicine. The use of the verb "relieves" with respect to tea portrays it as a concoction with the ability to alleviate some sort of illness or condition. In addition to appealing to existing Indian perceptions, the advertisement attempts to shape Indian lifestyle ideals. It identifies "lassitude"—fatigue—as a key problem, highlighting a British perspective towards so-called issues in need of a remedy. While lassitude is hardly a malady, the framing of it as such reveals colonial ideals and expectations of efficiency and labor from Indians. In the image, the consumption of chai is correlated with academic prowess, energy, and success. Overall, the advertisement depicts a scene of domestic, upper middle-class contentment for Indians to strive towards.



Figure 1. Source: Priya Paul Collection, c. 1940.

<sup>45</sup> Collingham, Curry, 195-8.

<sup>46</sup> Tea Association Records, cited in Elizabeth Collingham Curry: a tale of cooks and conquerors. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 197).

<sup>47</sup> Collingham, Curry, 193.



The Tea Board of India, a British colonial authority, and its tea corporations sought to capitalize on profits, thus they attempted to appeal to Indians from diverse walks of life. In Figure 2, by referring to Brooke Bond tea as *dilchampi ka kendra*, or the “centre of attraction,” the brand frames tea as a novelty. The illustration of individuals in folk settings enjoying tea is inviting and paints a fantasy of an ideal celebration to entice those not otherwise interested in tea; specifically, the ad targets Indians living in rural settings, who may not feel obligated to incorporate tea into their pre-existing routines.



Figure 2. Source: Priya Paul Collection, c. 1920-30.

The advertisement in Figure 3 appeals to nationalist sentiments and the independence movement in India. The charkha, or spinning wheel, in the advertisement was a prominent symbol of the independence movement (and often associated with Gandhi). The term “swadeshi” encapsulates the idea that domestic or local products should be supported and was associated with the Indian independence movement. In tandem with the woman sipping tea, the Indian Tea Market Expansion Board depicts tea as a grassroots Indian drink. The ad subtly implies that profits would go directly to those who cultivate and produce tea. This ad equates tea with being intrinsically Indian, a foundation for the misconception which persists today.



Figure 3. Source: Priya Paul Collection, n.d.

The Lipton’s Tea advertisements in Figures 4 & 5 depict happy tea plantation workers, notably women. The ads gloss over the arduous reality of cultivating and processing tea, as well as the history of oppression of Indian workers since the beginning of British colonization, making *chai* seem like a responsibly-sourced local beverage. Consumers would be less inclined to consume a product if it were associated with suffering and poor worker conditions, as tea production was. These ads soften the reality of tea production and make tea feel like a personal, hand-delivered drink. Ironically, Lipton’s Tea is one of the brands that has come under fire to this day for unethical working conditions in the tea industry.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 4. Source: Priya Paul Collection, c. 1940.

<sup>48</sup> Rowlett, Justin (2016). “The Dark History behind India and the UK’s Favourite Drink” [Online].



Figure 5. Source: Priya Paul Collection, 1937.

Many advertisements, such as those depicted in Figures 1, 3, and 6, featured images and symbols of domesticity, familial contentment, social life, and nationalism; these ads worked to reproduce Industrial Revolution-era English ideals amongst Great Britain's Indian colonial subjects, granting the British a greater degree of sociopolitical control over Indians. Many of these advertisements, such as those in Figures 3, 4, and 6 notably target women, who are regarded as moderators and authority figures in domestic and household affairs. In targeting women as homemakers, British commercial entities and the Indian Tea Market Expansion Board further attempted to instill the ideal that tea was an avenue to achieving aspirations of domestic and social happiness and established "tea as a 'drink of unity.'"<sup>49</sup> In this way, these commercial entities endorsed a need for a routine and instigated a culture surrounding tea.<sup>50</sup>



Figure 6. "Friends." Source: Priya Paul Collection, 1940s.

<sup>49</sup> Nijhawan, Shobna. "Nationalizing the Consumption of Tea for the Hindi Reader: The Indian Tea Market Expansion Board's

Some advertisements, such as the Brooke Bond Darjeeling tea ad in Figure 7, used famous film actors to popularize tea. The advertisement headline in Figure 7 translates to "the favorite of thousands," and references the 1976 movie *Filmi Duniya* to incorporate tea into the pop culture lexicon. Bollywood is a quintessential aspect of Indian culture and national identity, and incorporating tea into films and actors' lives made tea seem like a quintessential part of Indian life.



Figure 7. "Brooke Bond Supreme Darjeeling Tea." Source: Priya Paul Collection, n.d. Translation: Liked by millions. *Filmi World*. The filmy magazine with maximum number of copies sold all over India. Available at every book stall.

The Hindi-language advertisement from the newspaper *Sudha* in Figure 8 once again emphasizes family and domesticity, as well as appeals to nationalist sentiments. The use of Hindi language in the poster makes it more accessible to non-upper-class Indians who may not have understood English. The advertisement primarily targets women, cementing domestic values and expectations. The aspirational tone of the advertisement insinuates that tea as a product must continually be consumed to fulfill goals of civilization, culture, and modernity; it submits Indians to the impossibly high standards of the British framework of life and domesticity.

Advertisement Campaign." *Modern Asian Studies* 51, no. 5 (2017): 1229–52. doi:10.1017/S0026749X16000287.

<sup>50</sup> Shobna, "Nationalizing the Consumption of Tea," (2017).





Figure 8. Source: Sudha, May and July 1940, January and July 1941. Translation: Teatime: 'An indispensable routine. For familial gratification—tea. As soon as your husband returns from work and your children come home from school, you should prepare their tea. In this manner, you should also organize your private tea circle everyday in your home. This is the climax of happiness in domestic life. At this time, the pleasurable gathering in your home is also taking place in many more homes. Come, let us all drink Indian tea.'<sup>51</sup>

British Raj historian Collingham notes that “tea entered Indian life as an integral part of the modern industrial world that began to encroach on India in the 20th century.”<sup>52</sup> Today, everyone in India drinks tea, whether rich or poor. But the “very poor...use it as a way of staving off hunger... [Tea] is invariably milky and sweet. This makes it popular with the calorie-starved laborer.”<sup>53</sup> This quote introduces the role of tea in the lives of the starving labor class. The British Raj and its oppressive policies are directly responsible for creating distinct and disparate socioeconomic classes, such that there exists such extreme poverty that individuals and families must subsist on a milky and sugary drink to fill their stomachs. Tea is a “food” of poverty, replacing legitimate sources of nourishment with the hollow energy of caffeine. In today’s world, tea actually contributes to food deserts: labor or working classes rely on tea for a quick meal, as due to its easy accessibility and low cost compared to food. Chai is consumed to stem hunger. Tea plantations occupy valuable

<sup>51</sup> Shobna, “Nationalizing the Consumption of Tea,” (2017).

<sup>52</sup> Collingham, Curry, 195.

farming land which could produce nutritionally valuable food. Despite existing indigenous practices of consuming vegetables and grains, the consumption habits and rising prices of fresh produce inculcated by the British compel the poor to instead brew and rebrew the same tea leaves as a watery, insufficient meal. With little nutritional value, tea does more harm than good as a dietary staple – for the poor, tea is often more of a curse than a blessing.

By the end of the 20th century, Indians drank about 70 percent of the 715,000 tons of tea produced in India.<sup>54</sup> Thus, by marketing tea to Indian labor and working classes, the Indian Tea Association and Indian Tea Market Expansion Board helped transform “tea” into “masala chai,” a drink whose flavors feel familiar and intrinsically Indian to consumers even today.

## 8. “Byproducts” of Tea

The popularization of tea in Britain and India has both negative and positive byproducts. An increased demand for sugar, and labor to produce it, reinforced colonization and British imperialism. The British subtly weaponized tea by using it to reinforce cultural boundaries among different Indian communities, though many communities found common ground while sharing a cup of tea.

Tea was enjoyed with sugar in Industrial Revolution-era England, especially by the working classes, who drank tea with sugar as a cheap source of calories. Godoy writes for NPR, “The fad for tea came in just as sugar was under attack and had started to fall out of favor. By creating a new and lasting use for this sweetener, tea helped buoy demand for sugar from the West Indies.” This demand for sugar perpetuated slavery in the West Indies. The wealth that Britain gained from importing and distributing tea and sugar funded its navy, further cemented it as a colonial power,

<sup>53</sup> Collingham, Curry, 199-200.

<sup>54</sup> Collingham, Curry, 199-200.

and contributed to a positive feedback loop.<sup>55</sup>

Another byproduct of tea in India arose from the British Raj using tea to reinforce cultural divisions of religion and caste. The Tea Association was very careful and intentional to “accommodate” religious differences by equipping both Muslim and Hindu and high- and low-caste vendors with tea. However, this reinforced divisions between the different castes and religions by setting standards of specific vendors from which customers of different backgrounds could buy tea. This strategy played into the larger British colonial strategy of “divide and rule” and communalism in India.<sup>56</sup>

However, post-colonialism, tea often plays the opposite role than that which the British intended. Because tea has become such a cultural touchstone in India, tea can be a way to bridge cultural differences among communities. There are many different accounts of inter-caste/inter-religious spaces in which tea is consumed.<sup>57</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief, the widespread popularity of masala chai in India is a relatively recent phenomenon arising during the past 200 years as a direct result of British colonization. The flavors which are so distinct to Indian chai were only recently established and ritualized. The transformation of tea from an aristocratic drink to an accessible working-class beverage during the Victorian era in England, followed by a surge in popularity, demand, and nationalism during the industrial revolution, drove the effort to cultivate tea in India. Similarly, in India, tea became popular among the laboring class in industrial settings such as factories or along train stations, transforming it into a cultural commodity rather than a medicinal drink used in Ayurvedic/spiritual

practices. Aggressive advertising campaigns popularized tea amongst Indians; these cemented tea as a cultural staple and creating a new market for British exploitation. This campaign succeeded with Indian soldiers during WWI and among working class communities, notably in industrial settings and railway stations. Advertisements appealed to women and projected goals of domesticity and familial contentment, aiming to ingrain tea as a daily habit.

The dark history of tea exposes the unethical means by which the British pursued socioeconomic control in South Asia. British manipulation of China and the opium trade funded tea growth in India and highlighted the lengths the British were willing to go to maintain control of their power, products, and profits. Tea could not have been successfully cultivated without the exploitation of indentured laborers; it required meticulous, backbreaking work to grow, a task that few were willing to undertake. Entire families were bound to slave-like contracts, forcing them to work on tea estates. Women and children suffered from oppressive colonial gender norms. Sugar as a commodity was encouraged by tea-drinking habits in England, which led to the export of Indians as indentured labor to colonies outside of India to work on sugar plantations. To expedite tea production and selling, the British implemented development initiatives such as railway lines, creating new infrastructure in India that was explicitly under British control.

Today, India is the world’s second largest tea-exporter (following China), serving 25 countries across the globe. Still, the vast majority of Indian tea is grown in Assam and West Bengal (Darjeeling).<sup>58</sup> This research paper sparks several questions: if tea is a colonial creation, can it be decolonized? If so, how can it be decolonized? At the very least, Indians should be given credit for

<sup>55</sup> Godoy, Maria (2016). “Tea Tuesdays: How Tea + Sugar Reshaped The British Empire” [Online]. Available: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/04/07/396664685/tea-tuesdays-how-tea-sugar-reshaped-the-british-empire> [2022 May].

<sup>56</sup> Collingham, Curry, 195.

<sup>57</sup> Collingham, Curry, 205.

<sup>58</sup> “Tea Farming in India, Top Tea Manufacturers & Exporters in India - IBEF” [Online]. Available: <https://www.ibef.org/exports/indian-tea-industry> [2022 May].

creating the masalas of chai, which gives “chai tea lattes” their distinct flavor today. Certain activists even argue that corporations should pay reparations and proceeds to the Indian public, and especially plantation laborers and the poor who drink tea as a meal. Today, the repercussions of the actions the British took to popularize chai persist on tea estates, within roadside tea stalls, and across the world in popular cafe chains such as Starbucks.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that Indians adapted British tea by resisting the preferred corporate fashion of serving it without spices to make a version that suited traditional and cultural tastes. Indians were able to partially reclaim a beverage with a history so fraught with oppression.

British presence in India goes beyond economic and settler colonialism: the British introduction of tea altered society in terms of taste, labor, and hierarchy, and began a new cultural norm. Masala chai became so ingrained in Indian life that it is seen as an intrinsically Indian product today, despite the fact that it wouldn't exist without heavy colonial intervention. Beyond the colonization of land and bodies, through tea, the British succeeded in colonizing Indians' culture, aesthetics, and taste.

I would like to conclude by providing a modern-day personal family masala chai recipe, to show how relevant tea is to the contemporary lives of South Asians, even in diasporic communities. The spices, as well as milk and sugar, all have historical ties to Britain and colonization. The recipe is as follows: Boil water, add ground cardamom, cinnamon, and anise seeds. Add tea leaves to water, and brew for 5 minutes. Add boiling milk and sugar to taste.

Tea is not simply a drink or a product; it never has been. Tea is a political entity, intrinsically tied to colonization, with complex and wide-ranging repercussions in terms of labor, class, poverty, and colonization.

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