How Tea Assisted in the British Imperial Rule of India

And

How the Plant Shaped the Fate of a Nation

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For the majority of my childhood growing up in India, I was continuously exposed to various works of literature and facts in history textbooks that showcased the gradual changes in India from the Mughal Empire of the 16th century to the independent republic’s development in the mid-20th century. From the viewpoint of Indians, the subcontinent had evolved, or rather devolved, from being a *sonei ki chiddiya* (“bird of gold”- representing prosperity and freedom) to a region deprived of wealth by the imperial exploitation of its natural resources. Having this point of view indoctrinated in my mindset, I was very intrigued when I found out about the role that tea played in not only determining the extent to which the British colonialists took control of India but also in establishing the plantation industry that has shaped the modern economic zones. The cumulative effect of tea in shaping the political and economic dynamics of India can be explained by a chronological understanding of the events and of the nature of the powerful plant.

The tea plant, *camellia sinesis*, belongs to the Theaceae “tea” family and has grown over the centuries to become, along with coffee, the most important non-alcoholic beverage with over 3 million tons produced annually around the world (Plant Cultures: Tea 2013). This stimulant is a caffeinated plant with health benefits most profound in protecting against cancer and heart disease due to its richness in antioxidant flavonoids and tannins, natural phenols capable of acting as an antioxidant in biological processes (Cornell University CALS 2013). The Southeast-Asian variety of the plant that I want to focus on is *var. assamica*, deriving its name from the eastern India region of Assam. The variety, the second one to have been identified after the Chinese one, is native to the relatively hotter climates of Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and India. Botanically speaking, this variety produces hardier leaves that are larger with a leathery texture. The bright green and shiny leaves have become a delicacy when infused in hot water to produce tea (Plant Cultures: Tea 2013).
The culture of tea in Britain began with Dutch imports but the economic boost of trade that inevitably led to the shaping of the Indian colony under British rule came from King Charles’ marriage with a queen practicing temperance who was fascinated by the mental effects of tea. Adoption of the ritual among within the aristocracy led to the social acceptance of tea as a means of abstaining from common place alcoholic beverages. However, the drinking of tea plants in this fashion had been long since spread from Burma to the surrounding regions near southern China. And the English East India Company, a trading organization, exported small amounts of the tea produced near China to serve the needs of the nobility as tea’s potential had not yet been unleashed and it was not considered worth importing as a large scale commodity (The Nibble 2010). The gradual interest in propagating trade throughout Asia, Russia and Europe gave the Company a monopoly over the trade and allowed it to separate itself from its Dutch counterpart to a point that 100 tons of tea were exported per ship and Britons found themself consuming 9 million cups of tea by the early 1800’s as tea shops outnumbered cafés in London (Plant Culture- History 2013). However, the establishment of the British East India Company’s monopoly in China is not what interests me, rather it is the desire to sustain demand and supply of the plant that had become central to its functioning that grabs my attention. It helps explain why the development and total control of India was so important for the sustainability of the British Empire overseas. The dissolving of the Chinese trading chapter in 1834 brought an end to tea exports from China as the British Parliament abolished trading functions involved with the Company due to opposition by the English population spurred by overarching control in foreign territories (United Kingdom Tea Council 2013).

But in order to comprehend how tea, by the late 1800’s, just years following the 1834 closure, was being produced in over a million pounds per annum in the subcontinent of India, it
is imperative to understand how such dominance could be asserted and how the tea plant facilitated in total control of the local economy. The East India Company had modest starting efforts in the west coast town of Surat, Gujrat during the very early 17th century as a spice trading port. Though the Company definitely wanted greater control of the subcontinent, the earlier presence of the Portuguese and the Dutch East Indian Company hindered any expansion by the English. The British East India Company was restricted to other small coastal towns during this time period, namely Calcutta, Madras and Bombay (cities that have now become central economic hubs of modern India as a result of British tea exports!) (Plant Cultures- East India Company 2010). But the means by which British control increased is attributive to their desire of going inroads into Central India as trade cannot be facilitated solely by control of ports. In the early 18th century, well before tea was being traded by the Company in India, it gradually expanded its control which would later pave way for a tea monopoly in India and across the world. The Company had managed to gain exemptions in 1717 from paying Mughal revenues throughout Bengal, the largest and most opulent Mughal province that contained the port city of Calcutta (mentioned above). But in the pursuit of greater authority, the Company saw its first transformation from being a commercial enterprise to a governing enterprise by displacing the current ruling power, the Mughal Empire. It achieved this by establishing temporary allied relationships with smaller Princes who would allow the establishment of a widespread network of railways and telegraph-communication to expand. The shift came in 1757 with the company overthrowing the Nawab of Bengal with the assistance from the smaller rulers seeking limelight (Plant Cultures- Empires 2013). These smaller rulers would then be put up against each other in battle as the Company would rearrange alliances and thereby weaken the other parties involved economically for takeover by the Company. Gradually, the Company had expanded networks of
transportation established throughout the peninsula and had not only established trading centers in Central India but also discovered potential markets for selling products in the future (United Kingdom Tea Council 2013). However, even at this point, expanding trade and making full use of the resources that were now accessible would not come until several decades as efforts were still localized in China. Therefore, the two developments in China and India detailed above come together in a bigger picture to explain the evolution of the tea plant from being a small scale shrub to being the central commodity of the world during the imperial era. India’s true potential, from the colonial viewpoint, would be discovered in its ability to produce tea.

Cultivation of tea in India was the contributing factor behind British commercial interests in the 19th century. The evolution of the tea as a crop came during 1834 as the fall of the Company in China saw it become the administrative agent of the British government in India on behalf of the King. The desire of continuing tea production was evident as they brought seeds from China of the Chinese variety to be germinated and implanted in India. Earlier efforts had already been made as several explorers throughout east India had filed reports in 1815 of a type of tea (hot water infusion from roasted leaves) drunk but they could not determine whether it was from the tea plant. (Plant Cultures- Assam 2013). Again in 1823, Major Robert Bruce, in efforts of finding a local tea variety, sent samples of an Assam tea plant to the British East India Company’ Botanical Garden Unit in Calcutta but they were not convinced since it was a lot different from the Chinese variety (var. sinensis). A similar effort faced denial in 1831 with the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in Calcutta denying official recognition of the Assam variety. All these attempts date to a period (pre- 1834) when Chinese tea production was proliferative and profitable. The British institutions were reluctant to interfere with the trade by introducing a new variety (Plant Cultures- Assam 2013). This can, however, be understood by
realizing that the wild tea plants in Assam were not capable of producing a palatable brew and could not really be compared to the spectrum of tastes that var. sinensis offered (The Nibble 2010). However, the British officials in India could not risk ignoring such a variety in the light of the interrupted trade from China. In 1834 itself, Charles Alexander Bruce’s sample was approved as an official variety and termed var. assamica (Plant Cultures: Tea 2013).

The evolution of the tea plant during this second half of the 19th century has lasted the test of time as the modern tea industry has continued with a hybrid tea mixture that was a result of the Chinese seeds grown with the variety from Assam. Some seed gardens throughout the country deliberately planted both seeds in the same field when most stuck to individual ones. This combination of var. assamica with var. sinensis, discovered accidently, was found to be superior to China tea as it possessed greater variability and vigor. This would only have been possible had the Company usurped control of the markets around India (It had politically conquered nearly half of India) and established the railways for fastened transportation out to the ports. The cultivation by 1855 in Assam alone of Indian tea was over half a million pounds (United Kingdom Tea Council 2013). The economic expansion set the British monarch rule over India to cover the entire region. Harnessing the potential of the tea as a vital trade plant globally led to the plant being constantly in demand. More interestingly, though, it resulted in the small 17th century British controlled port cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay developing into the largest hubs of tea export and the center of Indian commerce during the next century (Now Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai) due to increased economic activity.

During the following decades, economic control over India’s tea production and trade was taken for granted and the imperial British Empire sought to include the economically profitably nation (Tea imports from India had grown from half million pounds to 86 million
pounds in just a mere 32, higher than the total cumulative amount imported to the West from China) into the Commonwealth by exercise of governmental authority and administrative control through excessive taxation and exploitation (United Kingdom Tea Council 2013). Eventually, the East India Company would not be able to sustain the state of rebellion and the British government took direct control of India until 1947. By then, tea had become not only a part of the Indian culture but also of the Independent nation’s economy with India producing ~30% of the world’s tea with a projected growth of >5% in the current year alone (Tea Board of India 2013).

The ability for one plant to not only shape the power dynamics in the world stage but to also determine the fate of an entire nation is truly attributive to its strong relationship with humans and human societies. Serving as a caffeine ally, the stimulating effects of the plant such as arousal, alertness and increased metabolic rates along with the antioxidant benefits help explain why control over the production of such a plant would impart not only a large amount of political and economic power but also responsibility because modern communities have been developing, ever since the mid-19th century and the Industrial Revolution to exponentially become more productive and efficient. All the effects have recently been identified with neurochemical pathways in the brain whereby the caffeine molecule can serve as an antagonist at the inhibitory neurotransmitter (adenosine) receptor and produces the stimulating effect that has essentially been responsible for controlling men rather than men controlling the plant.

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