



## Tea Plantation in the Indian sub-continent during 19<sup>th</sup> Century: An Exploration or Exploitation

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focusses on tea plantation efforts of British Government in different areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Assam, Darjeeling, Kumaoun, and Kangra Valley, since early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The tea plantation drive took decades for the British government to succeed. The purpose of the study is to investigate the underlying socio-economic interests of the British government behind tea plantation in different areas of Indian sub-continent. The primary data evidence is collected from the official records at Punjab archives and other relevant online sources which are coupled with the secondary data sources. The data findings reveal that the British government's ventures of tea plantation in different areas of Indian subcontinent had borne fruitful results for the government. But the tea plantation drive had caused an exploitation of the native people by making them serve the British government on their own lands and eventually losing their lands to the British government if they were unable to pay the tax levied upon them while using their own lands for the crop cultivation.*



### Introduction

From 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, tea plantation had gained recognition as being the most distinctive, profitable, and important crop. At the global level, by then, China had maintained their monopoly as the exclusive producer and exporter of tea. And the European nations, Indonesia, the Netherlands, American colonies, and many more were receiving Chinese tea exports. The British government were no exception in their dependance on the import of Chinese tea until they decided to initiate the tea plantation process in areas where they had imperial influence, including the Indian subcontinent.

Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, tea production and export had served as a great catalyst and deciding factors of economic supremacy in the geo-strategic global politics. Being known as a major global trade commodity at the inter and intra continental level, the growing tea consumption and the reliance for import of the world states on China had all called for fixing the trade imbalance by initiating tea cultivation in other pockets of the world. Tea cultivation and production in the British colonies provided a boost to the British economy at the national and international levels. Although, the British had already established their trade links in the Indian subcontinent since 1600 with the establishment of East India Company (EIC henceforth), the British government made a concerted effort to learn everything there was required to know about India's native population and its natural riches during its colonial reign. The British administration spent about 150 years gathering information on all facets of the Indian subcontinent, including social, cultural, political, economic, educational, communal, and administrative.

Following the war against Siraj ud Daula in 1757, the British had set themselves towards exercising colonial power in India. (Moxham, 2003) In addition to gaining power, the British government's annexation

program was motivated by the desire to exploit India's resources, as the Indian subcontinent was known for having an abundance of natural resources. With reference to the matter relating to tea trade, because the EIC had established a monopoly of tea trade with China, other tea ventures in India were being discouraged. The monopoly was discontinued by the Parliamentary Act of 1813, curbing the EIC's control in India. (Whittaker, 1949) It was no later than 1815, when the species of wild tea were discovered in the hills of Assam, which was followed by further expeditions in other areas of Indian subcontinent and incentives were announced for those growing and bringing up varieties of good quality tea species. Hence although starting off with a small company like EIC being established by the few French merchants had later on paved a way for the establishment of a powerful British imperial rule over the Indian sub-continent. (John, 2011) British were not confined to trade anymore, rather their influence had extended to the internal administrative, socio-political, and economic affairs of Mughal rule. Following their conquest of the subcontinent, the British began exploiting Indian resources for their own ends. In addition to lands, the British government's target of control had included agricultural resources, industrial sector, and administrative sector. (Walvin, 2017; Das, 2015) And tea plantation and trade was one of the most significant areas of exploration, control and exploitation for them.

### **Objectives**

This research aims to investigate the interests of British government behind the tea plantation in different areas of the Indian sub-continent and their consequent effects on the lives of local people.

### **Research Questions**

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

- Why did tea hold such pivotal significance for the British government's political and economic strategy?
- What motivated the British to select certain areas of the Indian subcontinent for their tea plantation drive during 19<sup>th</sup> century?
- What were the implications of tea plantation drive for the local Indians?

### **Significance of Tea Plantation in Indian sub-continent**

The abundant natural resources of the Indian subcontinent was a source of attraction and keen interest for the British invasion in the region. In the historiographical traditions the subcontinent has been consistently portrayed as a prize for conquerors, and the British, from their earliest trading ventures, actively sought to exploit these resources to serve their growing empire and strengthen their economy. (John, 2011) This historical context clearly explains their actions.

During 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the British government had controlled parts of India, they knew Indian soil and territories must yield numerous economic benefits for the British government. Most people on the Indian subcontinent lived in villages. They owned vast farms and were accustomed to harvesting crops. In addition, there were plenty of lands in India where farmers, peasants, and zamindars made up most of the population. (Handique, 2009). The government found great value in these factors, especially with reference to their ambitions for tea plantation. The most crucial factor in starting a tea plantation was land availability, and the Indian subcontinent was thought to be the best place for tea plantation from the perspective of the British authorities. And they had high hopes that the opportunities for tea plantations in the Indian subcontinent would soon be found. As the British government gained knowledge, it discovered that the Indian populace is straightforward and that a certain segment of the people is not highly educated. The British government recognized that these simple, village people might be trained to fit their needs. Among other factors, behind their decision to establish colonial rule over India was their desire to start and maintain tea plantations in the lands with conducive environments. (Das, 2015)

The British administration viewed tea plantations as a significant endeavour to preserve an imperial expression. Furthermore, the British government wanted the colonies to be reliant on the export of tea since they were dependent on it. Economic strength was the most significant component that demonstrated the significance of tea to the British government. Since tea was thought to be the most popular beverage in colder countries, exporting it to those with colder climates brought in enormous earnings for the government. (Linda, 2010) By selling it to nations of colder areas, the British government also hoped to boost its economy. The British government's involvement in many wars with other nations during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was the cause. In theory, economy was struggling because the British were spending money on wars. The British government was forced to focus on cultivating tea domestically due to its economic worth. The British government discovered that tea plantations were a crucial way to deal with the economic challenges. (Dey, 2018; Walvin, 2017)

The British government turned its focus to an area where it could establish its economy and maintain power. Since 1600, when the East India Company was founded, the Indian subcontinent had been a focal

point for British governance. The establishment of tea plantations on the Indian subcontinent was a pivotal move on the part of the British government. (Walvin, 2017) The British government started a tea plantation in the Indian subcontinent in order to achieve its objectives. Fortunately, the British government learned that tea bushes can be discovered in upper Assamese gardens in 1821 thanks to the official report of two Englishmen, Robert Bruce and Charles Alexander Bruce. For the British government, that was fantastic news. The British administration immediately began significant action to cultivate tea in Assam. For this reason, the government dispatched a team of botanists to investigate the area and validate the report that was received. (Sharma, 2011) In Assam, the first tea plantations were established in 1827. Despite making several faults in the tea plantation process, the British government did not halt it and made a concerted effort to improve it going forward. With the Upper Assam coming under British control in 1839, the British government's interest in tea production was given to Assam company in 1840. Despite all difficulties, the company had run into profits and had secured a repute among tea-producing countries, other than China and Japan, seeking strains of Assam tea. (Whittaker, 1949)

A team of official personnel was established by the British government to carry out routine surveys of the Indian subcontinent. The process of growing tea was gradually introduced in several areas, including the Kangra Valley, Darjeeling, Murree, Gurhwal, and Kumoun. Below is a discussion of the tea plantation's detailed account. (Bruce, 1827)

### **Initial exploration in the Indian Sub-continent with reference to the Tea Plantation**

Growing tea was more than just cultivating a typical crop. In essence, it served as an instrument for the expansion of British imperial rule over the Indian subcontinent's population and economy. In order to cultivate tea on the subcontinent, the British government did all necessary actions. The British government meticulously and ingeniously prepared a plan. The British government immediately started the first steps to plant tea, which are detailed below:

The British government's initial action was to assemble a group of botanists and scientists. In Assam, the first tea plantation project was initiated. (Sharma, 2011) Charles Alexander Bruce was appointed superintendent by the British government, who requested that he survey additional areas of Assam, including upper and lower Assam. He was in charge of a number of duties, including determining whether the Assamese environment was suitable for tea plantations, compiling a list of resources, assessing how the locals reacted to the introduction of a new crop, and—most importantly—reporting on the tea plantation project on a regular basis to the British government. (Bruce, 1827)

Charles Alexander Bruce oversaw the effective beginning of the tea cultivation process. A tea committee was established by the British government. George James Gordon was selected by the government as this committee's secretary general. Robert Bruce was appointed to oversee several tea-growing locations in addition to these two. In a similar vein, William Jameson was tasked with surveying the Indian subcontinent's northwest. These were the committee's well-known team members. In addition to the committee members listed above, a number of additional British officials were assigned to various districts where reports of tea plant discoveries had been received. They were all making a concerted effort to fulfill their roles effectively and make the tea planting operation profitable for the British government. (Jameson, 1840)

British government officers had surveyed various regions of the Indian subcontinent. Since Assam was the primary location, district officials initially conducted surveys of several Assamese locations. British officials were actively looking for additional suitable areas for tea plantations in addition to Chabuwa, the original location of Assam. Botanists and bureaucrats were surveying the Indian subcontinent's many regions together. The Indian subcontinent's northwest areas were the main emphasis. "Saadiya" is the name of the Assamese location chosen for the tea-growing procedure. The tea produced in this area was particularly prepared for exportation. Following the successful launch of the tea industry in Assam, the British administration made the decision to carry out surveys in the Kangra Valley, Kumaoun, Murree, and Darjeeling, among other areas of the Indian subcontinent. (Jameson, 1852)

Tea experiments were initiated in various parts of the Indian subcontinent following the successful completion of surveys and the operation of tea plantations in Assam. In 1840, a tea business was established in the Darjeeling region. West Bengal was home to Darjeeling. The British government used the same approach to establish tea plantations in Darjeeling as it did in Assam. Kumaoun was another area that was chosen for the tea plantation procedure and where the botanists discovered tea plants. (Jameson, 1855) In Kumaoun, the tea plantation process began in 1842. When botanists conducted surveys and observed the Kumaoun areas, they discovered that the plants there are of higher quality than the Assamese tea plants. The British government got more involved and aware of the Kumaoun tea cultivation process because of this report.

The British administration paid particular attention to Kumaoun tea plants in order to develop them efficiently. British botanists believed that Kumaoun tea plants were more similar to the Chinese tea plant model. Dr. William Jameson, a botanist, assessed the Kumaoun sites. The distinctiveness of the tea plants at Kumaoun piqued his interest. (Bruce, 1844)

The British government gradually became more enthusiastic and created extension strategies after realizing that this common crop was good for the economy. The British government instructed local officials to set up both large-scale and small-scale nurseries in order to expand the tea plantation operation. The manufacturing of tea could be accelerated in this way. In order to alleviate the financial strain of hiring Chinese labor, the British government was simultaneously building nurseries quickly and educating local workers. (Moxham, 2003) The British government was relieved that it would now be able to produce tea on its own after discovering the areas where tea plants were found and putting in place a robust tea plantation infrastructure. (Lake, 1863) Additionally, it was successful in preserving its imperial reputation on the other colonies. To create colonialism and capitalize on the region's natural resources, the British government made every effort to turn the huge and expansive Indian subcontinent into a colony. (Das, 2015)

### **The Seizing of Land and Enslavement of Indigenous Populations in the Tea Plantation Areas**

The British government's top priority after seizing control of Assam and learning about the exploration of tea plants in the region was to reduce the amount of land available for the cultivation of tea plants. The issue was that even though the British had taken over Assam, the locals still owned their land and belongings. They could not be forced to abandon their lands and property by the British government. To obtain land from people, the British government had to take some calculated actions. (Dey, 2018) The British administration used a very astute approach to sidestep the Indians' opposition. The British government targeted waste lands rather than native lands. The British government focused on woodlands in this regard. The deforestation strategy was established by the British government. Some Assamese forests were converted into tea gardens, although not all of them. (Sharma, 2011)

Natives opposed deforestation, but they were powerless to stop the powerful imperial force. In order to clear the wild shrubs and convert the forests into plain plains, the British government directed its authorities to engage laborers. Since tea plantations were just being started, the government did not dare to target large areas. Only a few acres of land were used for the production of tea. Following Assam, the British government's focus shifted to other parts of the Indian subcontinent. (Bruce, 1844) The British authority and Nepal were at odds in 1816. The British administration won the battle against Nepal because of its powerful military. The British administration and Nepal signed a deal known as the Sugauli deal. This treaty resulted in Kumaoun being formally occupied by the British administration. The British government took possession of Kumaoun before Assam, but the tea plantation process began later. The reason for this was that in 1816, the British government's attention was solely on importing tea from China and selling it in its colonies. (Jameson, 1840)

When the British administration discovered that Assam plantations were prosperous and successful, Kumaoun tea plantations reached their zenith. The same deforestation tactics were used in Kumaoun to complete the tea plantation operation. On waste sites, small-scale nurseries were set up. In Kumaoun, tea plantations were established on the non-public grounds. A tea plantation was established on almost 118 to 120 acres of Kumaoun waste land. (Marquis, 1858)

The Anglo-Gorkha War brought another kingdom, "Darjeeling," under British rule; as part of the Treaty of Sugauli, Nepal ceded a small portion of its territory to the British. After nearly 20 years of Assam tea plantations, Darjeeling lands were also employed for tea plantations. It may be argued that during those early years, the only way to obtain land was to target waste or forest properties. (Hazarika, 2011)

Nearly every year, the British government conquered different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The British administration simply sought to establish its dominance over every area of the Indian subcontinent, regardless of how big or tiny the region was. A tiny area of Punjab, known as Kangra Valley had also held significance due to its relevance for tea plantation. (Gordon, 1835) Following the conclusion of the Second Anglo-Sikh War, Punjab came under British control in 1849, and all districts of the province were put under direct British control afterwards. The British administration began establishing tea plantations the very next year after the Kangra Valley was annexed. The territory used for tea cultivation in the Kangra Valley included more than just wastelands and forests. The land acquisition process was altered, which regrettably did not benefit the indigenous people. The British government's initial methods of gaining territory were annexation attempts and conquests. (Jameson, 1852)

In addition to fighting battles and conquering people, the British administration implemented many programs that exploited lands and indigenous people. The British administration employed several strategies to purchase fewer lands, even though the tea plantation was a method to obtain control over the landed

property of the Indian subcontinent. Kangra was a little area made up of tiny villages. (William, 1855) The region's modest size made it easy for government representatives to carry out surveys. When it came to using their lands for tea plantations, the government benefited from the indigenous obliviousness to the value of the available land. Tribes and zamindars established themselves in the Kangra valley, who had great tracts of land, but they were unsure of how to exploit them properly. (Egerton, 1860)

Even though those people were simple and largely uneducated, the British administration was astute and understood the value of property. The British government now needed to come up with a plan to buy the available land. (Egerton, 1860) In order to achieve this, the British government established a few land regulations that allowed them to seize control of land. Following its occupation of the Kangra Valley, the British government imposed restrictions on the land ownership.

British government required to own a certain amount of land. The colonial government had introduced some reforms and set rules regarding land possession. (Jameson, 1853) If anyone disobeyed the directives, the government would take substantial action against the lawbreaker. If the indigenous disobeyed the orders, they would be punished. In response to any opposition, the locals were subjected to punishments such as the imposition of high taxes, land revenue, and land subjection. (Handique, 2009)

Additionally, the British government implemented scores of land revenue and taxation schemes. These taxes were motivated by the idea that the British government ordered would take over the land of any native who was unable to pay taxes. The taxes had eventually become unaffordable for the locals! (Linda, 2010) The government had anticipated that people would lose their lands because of their inability to pay taxes. Tenancy of tea plantations were another method of obtaining land from the locals. The British government automatically seized lands when the locals failed to pay the rents that were established on the specified acreage of land. In a similar vein, the government raised property taxes. The locals, who were poor and owned only a few acres of land, were forced to submit their holdings to the government because they were unable to pay property taxes. (Linda, 2010)

In addition, a new system called the Ryotwari system was developed by the British administration since early 19<sup>th</sup> century; whereby land ownership rights were given to the peasants or cultivators. The government created a law for the peasants who owned land. This system referred to the close relationship between the peasantry and the government. The requirement that people with excess land pay tenants was another intriguing method of obtaining land from landowners. People were forced to pay renters or risk losing their land during the tenancy period. To secure sufficient land for the production of tea and to preserve their imperial authority over the Indian subcontinent, the British adopted all necessary measures. (Sharma, 2011)

To attain more fruitful outcomes, the British administration introduced an agricultural transformation in the Indian subcontinent. Farmers, peasants, landlords, and landowners were instructed to try new ventures in the existing agricultural methods and were encouraged to cultivate new crops. Prior to the British government's presence, the local populace was more acquainted to using traditional crop-growing techniques. Rice, wheat, and sugar were among the few crops they used to cultivate. With British support, individuals were compelled to think more broadly about crop plantation. (Egerton, 1860) The British administration promoted the cultivation of tea, cotton, paper, and rubber. Tea plantation was the central focus of attention for the British government after they had introduced agricultural transformations for the sake of promoting a cash crop economy. (Money, 2007) The British government made a concerted effort to persuade the locals to embrace the new crop. The initial response of locals was not very supportive of the British emphasis on tea plantation. For instance, in the region Kumaoun, people did not want to cultivate a crop they did not even know had existed. They were unaware of the economic significance of the crop. (Marquis, 1858)

For a speedy and effective implementation of the tea plantation drive, the British administration had targeted the lower classes, including farmers, peasants, and illiterate population. Implementing the land possession strategy, the British Government used peasants' land for tea cultivation. Furthermore, the occupation scheme for jobless natives was also introduced to serve the purpose. The British government took the initiative to train locals to cultivate tea and employ them in tea gardens. Due to their lack of literacy, the people of the Indian subcontinent accepted the government's occupation policy. (Jameson, 1840) Perhaps, the locals could not see how cleverly they were being manipulated by the British authorities, especially when they were given pay lower than that of Chinese workers. Moreover, due to taxation policies, the landowner peasants were stripped of their lands with the passage of time, and eventually they had to work as government servants. On the one hand, the British government exploited the zamindar's lands and, on the other, used the lower classes as tea cultivators on lands. Similarly, zamindars and landholders were required to pay the British government a share of the profits from the tea production. The British policies were

exploitative to an extent that those natives who could not pay land taxes and land revenues to the British government for using their lands as employers, were unable to maintain their hold on their lands. Moreover, natives were forced to work on their lands for free because they had to pay their taxes. It indicates that the British government was exploiting the Indian subcontinent's tea plantation industry to its fullest extent possible. (Lake, 1863)

### Conclusion

During 19<sup>th</sup> century, tea plantation in the Indian subcontinent was more than just a routine crop farming. The process of exploration and utilization had brought home profits for the British government, but eventually these had adverse implications for the locals. Even though tea plantations were thought to be economically profitable, the profits were not meant for the local people engaged in the activity. This had proved rather exploitative for the latter. The British government's taxation and land ownership policies for tea plantation, cultivation and trade had left the local people sometimes exposed to forced labour and at other times deprived of their own lands.

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