



If Only Each Indian Would Drink One Cup of Tea a Day!

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Abstract: This paper studies a crisis moment in the tea industry when production was high, stocks were piling up and exports were dropping. The only way out in addition to finding new markets abroad was to find new consumers in India. 1931 became the year when the push for Indian consumers became the central focus of the tea trade. This paper looks at this and surrounding issues to try and catch that moment when Indians were being persuaded to give tea a try.

Key words: Tea, trade, India, Empire, consumption, Tea Cess Committee

This paper looks at the tea industry in India at a crucial time period in the years 1930-31 when, almost hundred years after India had not only successfully grown tea but had seen tea become one of its most traded commodities, the industry was in crisis. The Great Depression of 1930 coincided with a surge in tea production in India, thus causing a problem since exports were dwindling and huge unsold stocks could become a reality. 1930 and subsequent years became crucial for the Indian tea industry, in that they needed to find new consumers of tea in order to keep afloat. A micro history of this period makes interesting reading and provides insight into the functioning of tea as an industry and the conversion of Indians into tea drinkers.

At the 1931 annual meeting of the Indian Tea Association, the Chairman A. F. Stuart's opening remarks went straight to the topic of the need for increasing tea sales in India. This was against the backdrop of a crisis in the industry with dropping sales abroad, mainly the UK, as a result of which Indian Tea Estates had been advised to restrict production¹. An artificial restriction without an agreement not to plant further areas would be of no help in future years. The Indian Association was of the view that unless consumption of tea in India was not increased, "we shall face disaster in the near future"². The outcry from the industry was to use this down time to grow their market in India.

Earlier in the year, the Chairman of the Assam branch, W. G. Mc Kercher had put forth a scheme which referred to the success of the Tea Cess Committee propaganda for tea consumption in Assam as proof that similar success would be forthcoming in other parts of the country, if tea were available for sale to the rural population throughout India. The scheme entailed imposing a duty on all tea imported into India, but no

action had been taken at the London end on the request. Stressing the importance of the local market, he had written “we are neglecting the best market for increased consumption”³ The UK had abolished all custom duties on tea in 1929 which had allowed foreign teas mainly from Java and Sumatra to flood the market at a price below quality Indian tea which was sold in UK.

At the General Meeting in 1931, it was then decided that the previous scheme not having been accepted, a new scheme should be forwarded. The first condition of this new scheme was that the responsibility for running it should rest with the Indian Tea Association Calcutta and not the Tea Cess Committee which the Association charged with having failed to take advantage of the large population in India. The thrust of this scheme was to pack a standard blend of tea for the Indian market in a “tobacco packaging type of machine”⁴ at a Central Packing Factory. This tea would be sold in one ounce packets priced at two *pice* per ounce. The tea Estates could supply tea to the Association at eight *annas* per lb⁵. The Tea industry went further in borrowing from tobacco by recommending that they adopt the successful system introduced by the Imperial Tobacco Company for distributing their cheap packets of cigarettes, i.e. a traveling Assistant for a specified area”⁶. This person would interact with shopkeepers inspect their stores, check their cash books and also make new connections. It was also noted that the good travelling Assistants of the ITC were all public school boys⁷. This scheme did not immediately take off since, the Association did not go ahead with the plan to build the factory, until they had secured co-operation of the distributing trade. A sum of 1¼ lakhs had however been allocated for this packing factory⁸.

The period witnessed an all-out commitment to raise new consumers of tea both in India and abroad. The thrust of the campaign was to be two fold—expand the existing markets and capture new ones. All kinds of suggestions were forthcoming from various quarters. In India it was estimated that if domestic consumption went up to only one pound per person, very little tea would be left for export.⁹ This consumption figure was way short of the British consumption which worked out to 9 pounds per head¹⁰. The British view on tea sales even during the industrial depression was that consumption would remain steady and only grow as this was the cheapest beverage obtainable in any country barring water¹¹.

With so much emphasis on selling tea and expanding the market, it should not be surprising that the activities of the Tea Cess Committee came under scrutiny. This Committee had come into being in 1903 following the passing of the Indian Tea Cess Act. This has been a demand from the tea industry to Viceroy Curzon. The purpose of the Cess collected from all the tea that was exported, was to raise a fund to promote marketing of tea worldwide. The Cess was originally set at 2 *annas* per 100 pounds of tea exported. It was periodically revised and what was a testimony to the power of the tea Industry, the Government simply acted as a collection agent and handed over all of the money collected to a non-official committee of the Indian Tea Association.

The India Tea Cess Committees’s Accounts for the year ending March 31, 1931 revealed that out of a total expenditure of Rs. 7.37 lakhs for promoting the sale and increasing consumption of tea in India, as much as Rs. 6.15 lakhs was used in office expenses, salaries and travelling expenses of the travelers who maintained touch with distributors and dealers and gave demonstrations etc. This left Rs. 1.22 lakhs for other kinds of propaganda in the form of advertisements in the papers, journals etc. distribution of leaflets, advertising signs on Railway Stations, Bus routes and so on¹².

There was a fair amount of discussion on the propaganda on tea in America and whether it was yielding the results it should. Ceylon tea decided that they wanted to concentrate on America and asked the India Tea Cess Committee to partner them. The Indian Tea Cess Committee was very dissatisfied with the results of the American campaign to which a sum of £50,000 had been committed. At the mid year meeting it was decided that once this money was spent, propaganda work in the U.S. would be curtailed¹³. Almost on cue, the India Tea Bureau in New York put out the news that they would resume their nation-wide drive to take the India-tea message to housewives in cooking schools. For the year 1931 they estimated that some 1,500,000 housewives will be told about the superiority of Indian teas and learn how to prepare and serve tea. It was also estimated that some 8,000,000 housewives would be reached through the newspapers affiliated to cooking schools¹⁴.

Finally, the Tea Cess Committee unveiled a new campaign for India, in territories where no propaganda has hitherto been attempted. These were towns situated on the bus routes and the surrounding villages and local market areas in both North and South India were selected for intensive propaganda work. The main objects of the work were to (1) give the inhabitants an opportunity of tasting, free of charge, good sound tea properly prepared, and (2) in arranging channels for subsequent supplies at reasonable prices. Suitable shopkeepers were to be selected and given assistance and instruction in the purchase and care of their stocks. The desirability of tea drinking would be established before the public in the towns, villages and local market centres (*haats*) and tea packets would be sold on behalf of the shopkeepers at the same venues. The shopkeepers were to be encouraged to keep their stocks in good condition and also push the sale of tea¹⁵.

Figures in July 1931 reported that 297,767 demonstrations in how to prepare tea were conducted and 14,623 lectures conducted. Arrangements were made by the railways for supplying tea to lower-class passengers for a few years already and these were extended to include Bengal and North Western Railway. The distribution of tea on trains was now considered so successful that the Commissioner was of the view that more supervision was not required and some of the staff could now be used on bus routes¹⁶. Details of the active tea campaign emerged from various parts of the country and it was reported that tea was being taken in lorries to the districts where villagers are encouraged to taste it and shop keepers persuaded to stock it. Much of this is lower-priced teas, a section of the industry that needs help since more expensive and superior teas had a ready market in Britain and elsewhere¹⁷.

A timely report on Tea by the Imperial Economic Committee gave a good summary of the tea story in UK. It revealed that nearly five cups of tea a day were consumed per head of the population of the United Kingdom. The Report stated that the “British Empire has become the tea garden and the tea shop of the world”¹⁸. The annual consumption of tea in the UK exceeded 420 million pounds. The consumption pattern was usually an early morning cup of tea, a mid morning cup of tea among domestic servants, shoppers and business women, the early afternoon cup of tea in offices. An increase of tea-drinking among manual labourers was also part of the social changes in tea drinking habits over the previous years¹⁹. The UK was consuming 70 percent of the tea produced within the Empire. Other consumers were Australia, New Zealand, The Irish Free State, Newfoundland, Canada, Holland and Morocco in that order²⁰.

The Report noted that in “production, manufacture, transport and distribution, tea is to an exceptional degree an Empire industry”²¹. In an effort to boost tea sales, a tea advertising strategy was unleashed in England under the banner of Empire-Grown Tea under the Empire Marketing Board. The thrust was to unite under the banner of Empire produce –not Indian tea or Ceylon tea. They secured the co-operation of all of the main associations such as the Indian Tea Association (London), the South Indian Tea Association (London),

the Empire Marketing Board, The Trade Commissioner for India and the major tea distribution and blending firms²². India and Ceylon were in 1929 accounting for 73 percent of world exports. If their tea gardens were to work at full capacity new markets and new consumers were needed. Hence, the focus of this advertising campaign was to advertise tea as tea, irrespective of country of origin or collective advertising²³. A sum of £10.000 was set aside for this purpose²⁴.

The main onus of this campaign was protection of Empire tea from the dumping of Dutch East Indies tea which was feely admitted into Britain. The selling price of Indian tea at this time was at a price below the cost of production. The increasing importation of foreign teas mainly from the Netherlands East Indies resulted in the percentage of the market cornered by foreign teas rising from 7.9 per cent in 1921 to 19 percent in 1930²⁵. If this trend continued, tea plantation companies in the Empire would suffer increasing loss leading not only to loss of employment of European staff and native labour but also the revenue of the Governments of India, Ceylon and other countries. It would also affect many business enterprises in England. Mr. Harper the former Commissioner of the Tea Cess Committee India, was engaged from May 1931 to help evolve the campaign for Empire Teas.²⁶ All Empire grown teas were now so marked and it was hoped that the consumers would pick guaranteed Empire teas.

This led to an argument between the Dutch-grown tea manufacturer Brooke Bond and the Empire tea industry. The director of Brooke Bond wrote a letter to the newspaper with the plea that their teas should not be taxed in the UK as a great part of their tea was grown using British capital. Any taxes he said, would impact British investors. The response from various tea bodies in the UK was that it was a well known fact that much of the investment in the tea production in Java and Sumatra is foreign but the amount of British capital so involved in miniscule in comparison to that invested in India and Ceylon. The Empire tea industry's view was that since the Dutch imposed a tax on all imports of tea they should not mind receiving the same treatment when they exported to other countries. They could not possible demand the same treatment and consideration as producers of tea grown within the Empire "with the co-operation of British capital and the labour of British subjects"²⁷. All of the three main tea associations in London thus rubbished the argument of Brooke Bond and made the charge of the dumping of Dutch tea in the London market.

This charge was reiterated by Sir Charles McLeod at a speech in November to the Fellows of the Royal Empire Society where he said "no British Government worthy of the name will continue to allow Empire industry to be ruined by foreign dumping"²⁸. It was the first time a plea for the Empire tea industry was being put forward at a public gathering. He quoted extensively from the report of the Imperial Economic Committee. There were employment figures too to draw attention to the seriousness of the condition. With regard to the Europeans, it was estimated that there were more than 5,000 men involved in the cultivation and manufacture of tea and many of them had lost their life's work in tea to return to the UK to swell the ranks of the unemployed. The number of Indians employed in tea production was around 932,500 with an additional 592,000 involved in Ceylon. A slump in tea would threaten many of these jobs.

The Empire Marketing Board had been set up in 1926 to increase the sales of empire produce in the United Kingdom. By 1930, the range of produce that was being sold in the U.K. included Canadian apples, bananas from the British West Indies, lamb, cheese, butter from New Zealand oranges from South Africa, coffee from British East Africa, currants, eggs, pears from Australia and tobacco from India and so forth²⁹. Three Empire Shops were established one each at Glasgow, Birmingham and Blackpool.

In another move to publicize the India tag for tea, much like geo-tagging in current times, it was announced by the Royal Exchange Calcutta in August 1931 that the map of India 'Emblem' was to be stenciled on all packages before leaving the gardens.³⁰ This would help advertise Indian tea the world over. This practice had been introduced in 1928 in America by the Director of the Indian Tea Bureau, New York. The 'Emblem' had since then been used as a tea advertising medium in American journals and trade magazines. Its extension to all tea was a new development. It meant that the Map of India Emblem would be stenciled inside an octagonal frame on one side of all tea chests with the words 'Produce of British India' appearing below the Emblem.³¹ This decision was later revised by the Indian Tea Association in September, when responding to various suggestions sent in for their consideration, it was decided that the word 'British' should be omitted from the emblem and only the words 'produce of India' be put below the emblem. Hence the previous emblem was cancelled and a new one released with new wording³².

In order to further tea propaganda, it was also decided to advertise Empire teas on correspondence covers. The Indian Tea Association Royal Exchange Calcutta put out the following slogan for use on the covers of all correspondence where so ever directed³³.

**DRINK INDIAN TEA
WORLD'S BEST BEVERAGE**

Another innovative scheme was unveiled in Madras during Prohibition Week in September 1931. It was decided to showcase the model of a tea house as a counter-attraction to drinkers. Propaganda was also going to be carried on against the letting of trees for tapping toddy³⁴. The Indian tea story was seeming to draw inspiration from the temperance movement in Victorian England a hundred years ago which organized tea parties to lead people away from alcohol to sobriety³⁵. Tea and coffee were seen as antidotes to spirits. In addition, the Indian Tea Cess committee had taken to giving prizes at fairs and exhibitions in India for the best methods of advertising tea. Apart from the Prohibition Week mentioned above, these events included Mysore Dussehra Exhibition and Annual National Health and Baby Week in Calicut³⁶. The suggestions that were emerging included the idea that tea must be available in the small shops in the villages from where labour has gone to work on estates.

The problem before those heading the propaganda work was that they had no actual figure of tea consumption in India. The acting Commissioner of the Indian Tea Cess Committee said in a note in 1931 that the best way to estimate tea consumption in India was to subtract the exported tea from the figure of the tea produced and imported in any season³⁷. He estimated that the consumption was anything from 50 to 60 million lbs. per annum. The slump in the trade and reduction in sale price in India led the tea industry to look at the other side of the equation namely the sale price in Britain. It appeared that the British grocer had not reduced the sale price of tea despite a reduction in the wholesale price³⁸. The reasoning was that the grocer was making a huge loss in the sale of sugar, the price of which was very low, and so needed to recoup his loss through the sale of tea.

Many ideas were put forth to deal with this crisis in the slump of price of tea. Industry publications shared information on consumers in Britain including learnings from the campaigns of the other beverage namely coffee. In 1931, the Coffee Board of Great Britain set up two stands at the Cookery and Food Exhibition in London. 3,000 cups of coffee were given away daily to members of the general public and many thousands of packets and tins of coffee were sold and many large contracts booked³⁹. The effort was a huge success and received very favourable press comment. It showed that the strategy to get Indians to taste tea was on the right track.

The UK Budget in 1932 presented by Neville Chamberlain, saw the re-imposition of duty on tea, two pence on Empire tea and four pence on Foreign tea. It was hoped that this would prevent the dumping of foreign teas in the UK. It was seeming as things were looking up and we can end with the Tea Cess Commissioner's report for number of demonstrations held in the latter half of 1931.

Demonstrations of Tea Between July- December 1931

At Bazars	97,831
At Schools	66
At Railway Stations	88
At Mills, etc.	20
At <i>Haats</i>	19,611
At Bus Stands	1,633
At Cinema Shows	78
At Fairs	3,165
Lectures in Tea District <i>Haats</i> ...	4,804

Source: Planters' Chronicle 1931, p.280

In addition 501 additional liquid tea shops and 5,530 leaf tea shops were assisted with their business organization. The budget for the year was 600,000 which was less than the previous year by 150,000. This resulted in retrenchment of staff and also the work on the railways was all but closed by the end of the year due to fund shortage. Many railway stations had by now established liquid tea stalls for both Hindus and Muslims and the Acting Chairman of the Tea Cess said that each of these successfully running stalls were a lasting form of propaganda. Their train-side vending is a constant reminder that tea is waiting to be drunk⁴⁰.

And, as often happens with a successful venture, the tea Cess committee found itself dealing with adulteration of tea and the manufacture of imitation tea. The largest centre for this was Viirudhnagar from where consignments were sent to Bombay with labels describing the contents as "Black Gram Husk"⁴¹

Despite all the success, given the large size of India and its population, I will end with a story of challenges when giving demonstrations on how to prepare tea and handing out samples to taste. The town dweller even though he may not be a regular tea drinker can be encouraged to try some tea. He watched others drink it and is convinced it is safe to do so. Not the villager. It takes a great deal of persuasion for him to try it. In addition there is poverty and caste prejudice. It is difficult to get a village grocer to stock tea and it is unlikely that he will do anything to exert himself to make a sale. The Cess committee used picture cards, posters and cinema films to appeal in favour of tea drinking. The cinema draws crowds and it is then possible to persuade some of them to drink well made tea.

Each team of the Tea Cess comprised one European Inspector and six Indian demonstrators. In a few years, the International Tea Market Expansion Board (ITMEB) was set up in 1935 to handle campaigns abroad while the Indian Tea Cess Committee handled tea campaigns in India. What changed in Indian advertising was the centering of tea as an Indian product for Indian consumers.

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