

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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All the Tea in India

c/o American Consulate
Calcutta
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

My informal study of Hindustani has got me by now to the point where I can manage such useful sentences as "Dekho, is jagah bahut makhian hain" ("Look, there are too many flies here"), "Hamare saman ki khabardari karo" ("Look after our luggage"), and in retreat "Koi admi angrezi bol sakta hai?" ("Does anybody speak English?").

Actually there are only two expressions that the foreigner in India must know. The first is "Namaste," the Hindu greeting meaning "I bow to the divine in you," spoken with the palms pressed together before the face. The second is "Chae lao," meaning "Bring tea," and spoken in homes, offices, shops, railway stations and wherever else you get the chance.

In this hot land of bad drinking water, little wine or beer, morally "corrupting" (and internally corroding) toddy, and as yet little Coca Cola, tea is the national drink. There is tea everywhere (except in the Deep South, where they drink coffee) and all day long. On rising there is "morning tea" or the English' "bed tea." In city offices and shops the Indian equivalent of the American coffee-break is a day-long tea binge, for workers and customer-visitors alike. The usual source of supply is a tea-stall prosperously trespassing on the street curb, but big offices have servants whose only job is to answer the call, "Chae lao." The city working day ends with late-afternoon tea at home or in a restaurant: refreshment and fashion. In many a village, the tea shop of crude mud walls and benches is the only community center besides the temple or mosque, and for the men, lolling around the tea shop at day's end, smoking and sipping and gossiping, is the closest thing there is to getting away from it all.

Tea is beverage, habit, and hospitality, and also an industry. The country's 6500 tea gardens, located in the Northeast and South, produce 630 million pounds of tea a year, employ nearly a million workers, earn India about Rs 1100 million (\$231 million) a year in foreign exchange, and contribute Rs 190 million (\$40 million) to the Government in export duties. Two-thirds of India's annual crop goes into the world market, where it supplies one-half of the world demand. The remaining one-third is consumed at home. V.K. Krishna Menon, who is said to drink as many as 40 cups a day whether in New Delhi or New York, may be a world-market factor. Considering the investment in the gardens, the managerial agencies, the transportation middlemen, and the blending, packaging, wholesaling and retailing establishments, tea gets to be quite a business---even leaving out such tangential aspects as the income and inspiration provided string-manufacturers (for the tea bag), gypsy

fortune tellers (tea leaves in the cup), song-writers ("Tea for Two"), and writers (the Mad Tea Party in Alice in Wonderland).

India's position as the world's number one producer of export tea is due to the British, who discovered tea in India, developed the industry and still own 70% of it, and faithfully consume 75% of India's crop. In these post-Independence days they are still very much around, those tea-tasting, whisky-drinking Englishmen and Scotsmen, the latter-day heirs of the early race of retired (and cashiered) army officers, engineers, steamer captains and University Men who hacked away the jungle, planted their gardens, and, fighting off jungle rot, malaria, floods, wild animals and river pirates, sent the rich leaf down the rivers and back home. They are still here, with their mem-sahibs, dinner jackets, Planters' Clubs and sea-mail newspapers from home. But fewer young men are coming out now, and more of the Marwaris, the ubiquitous Indian traders from the desert of Rajasthan, are buying into the tea business, and the beginning of the end of the old days is at hand.

They are also still there, the thousands upon thousands of coolies. They are still moving between the bushes, plucking the leaf, returning at night to the huts and barracks, to darkness and scant food. They knew worse disease and hardship, but didn't tell. Things are better for them these days, with higher pay and medical care and schools; but the old toilsome days are still there too.

China is generally regarded as the home of tea, but tea has travelled extensively. The most widely used Chinese word for tea, "cha," went out, with slight modifications in pronunciation, to describe the same beverage in Japan, India, Persia, and Russia. In the Amoy dialect the word was pronounced with an initial "t," and the Dutch, picking up that version, carried it to Western Europe, where it took its place as "tea," "the," and "tee," in a variety of languages.

The English have been drinking tea, heavily, since Elizabethan times. In those days it was Chinese tea, carried in British ships. When New England shippers tried to cut in on the monopoly of the East India Company, the English answered with the Tea Act of 1773, and the Americans answered that with the Boston Tea Party. In 1823, Major Robert Bruce discovered "native Indian tea" in Upper Assam, and 11 years later the Governor-General of India, Lord William Charles Cavendish Bentinck officially established the Indian tea industry by appointing a tea committee.

Committee or no, China remained the home of tea, and that's where the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, the "A&P," got theirs, and that's what the Taeping, the winner of the Great Tea Race of 1866---Foochow to London, around the Cape, 16,000 miles in 99 days---carried in her holds. But gradually India, being within the Empire, took over the British market, and when the Japanese invaded China, India went ahead and become the world's leading producer of export tea. India leads today, followed by Ceylon, Indonesia, Formosa and East Africa. There is some long-range uneasiness among many Indian tea people about the East African "threat" of new and abundant gardens.

Four-fifths of India's tea is grown in the Northeast, in the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys of Assam and the slopes of upper

Bengal (and a bit in the Himalayan foothills in Uttar Pradesh). The rest is grown in the South, among the Western Ghats in Kerala and Mysore. The teas are known by their home district---"Assam," "Cachar," "Dooars," "Terai," "Darjeeling," "Travancore"---but an expert, a "taster," can also tell the subdistrict and in fact comes to depend on a certain garden to yield a certain-tasting tea during a certain month of the year.

In the hot, humid Assam valleys there grow the strong, pungent "heavy" teas which provide the base for a mixture, but have to be thinned out by blending. In those straight-row, shaded gardens the bushes produce an average of one ton of leaf per acre, each pound selling for Rs 1.50 to Rs 4 (one rupee = \$.21). From the gardens terraced into the sides of the Himalayan hills around Darjeeling come the full-bodied teas with a nutty flavor described in the tea business only as "Darjeeling quality." Here there are fewer, smaller gardens, and the yield goes down to 400 pounds per acre, but the price goes up to Rs 3.50 and higher, occasionally up to Rs 26 a pound. Besides being "self-drinking," Darjeeling teas are blended with heavier leaf to brighten the flavor. Most of the tea sold in the United States comes from South India and Ceylon.

At the edge of the upper Bengal plain there is an inlet in the green mass of foothills and a climb up the road coiling around the mountains, 50 or 60 miles, into the interior. Then Darjeeling town, sprawling along and spilling over the edge of a mile-high ridge, lies brightly in the sunshine, merely beautiful in the presence of the giant snow-mantled peaks, towering above, crowding the eyes even at such a distance. Darjeeling is a "hill station," an English-made resort, with a ridgeful of tourist hotels. But in the bazaar below stroll Nepalis, Sikkimese and Tibetans, and at night there comes the joyful sound of clanging cymbals from a Hindu temple.

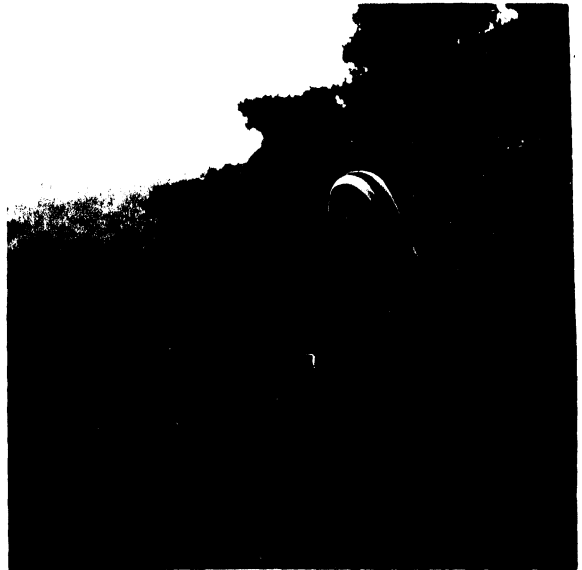
From Darjeeling the road runs rising five or six miles to Ghoom Post Office, past the Buddhist lamasery with its fluttering prayer flags, then down the side of the mountain to a dirt-road turn-off marked "Poobong T.E.," Poobong Tea Estate. Plunging down that twisting, banking road in a Land Rover, I noticed for the first time that the Nepali driver had a withered left arm. He also had a slight smile. The jeep pitched downward, the gears whining loudly, through a misty cloud belt, then down into the sunshine again where the terraced rows of tea bushes stepped greenly, grandly down the side of the mountains to the narrow valley stream below.

Half way down the mountain, on a lawn-landing, in front of a two-story stucco bungalow, John Taylor, the young Scotsman who is manager of the estate---he could be nobody else---stood waiting as host. He wore planter dress--- a bush shirt, and silk scarf, shorts, long woolen stockings and heavy shoes. He looked about 30, young to be a manager. We said hello and shook hands, and he asked right away, in a rich burr, if I'd care for "a walk o-o-o-over the gar-r-r-den."

Poobong, John began as we walked, is one of 78 gardens owned by Duncan Brothers of Calcutta, a British "managing agency" which also deals in jute, coal, paints and what-not. His garden, he said, is a small one, 350 acres.

We had climbed up a steep path, and now it leveled off as a sort of platform-belt around the slope of the mountain. The women pluckers, handsome Nepalis, moved silently among the bushes, above and below. The garden, John said, is spread out all over the mountainside between 1900 and 6100 feet high. He usually rides a pony when he goes up and walks when he comes down. The jeep is used for hauling chests of tea into town.

"The thing about Darjeeling," John said, "is the moisture and the mild sun, the loamy soil, and the drainage to handle the monsoon runoff---the best in the world." We walked on. "You know, tea is properly a tree that would grow to 20 or 30 feet tall, if it weren't for the pruning. We keep a bush three feet high and shape it for the maximum exposure to sun and moisture." These bushes, he said, counted out to 1400 an acre. They were 70 to 80 years old, "getting on in life," though the yield was still good.



Tea-plucker

Actually, John apologised, this was not the full bloom. The season begins in May with the shearing off of the topmost shoots, or "tipping," and the plucking begins with the first "flush," or re-sprouting of buds. The second flush, in June, gives the best leaf of the year. All during the monsoon months, June-July-August, there is good plucking and each bush gets shorn of its tenderest leaves every 11 or 12 or 14 days. Plucking continues in September, October and November, but with lesser results, and the off-season is spent in pruning bushes, repairing roads and drains, and in general tidying up the garden.

We hopped down a couple of terrace steps to watch a woman plucker. She wore a golden nose-ring, a striped silk blouse, and her long skirt was protected by a canvas apron. Both her hands felt over the top of the bush rapidly, twicked off a few leaves with fingers that worked like scissors. She tossed stuffed handfuls of leaves over either shoulder into the basket strapped to her back.

John watched too. "Some of them go through the bushes like a combine," he mused. "They say a good plucker will make 30,000 separate plucks in a day." During the height of the season the pluckers work from 7:30 to 12 and 1 to 4, and pick around 12 or 14 pounds a day, a little less than two basketfuls. Men pluckers are paid one rupee and six annas (\$.28) a day, women get one anna (\$.01+) less, and children another anna less.

"The rule for plucking," John said, "is 'two and a bud,' the bud and the two topmost leaves. If you go below that you go into 'coarse plucking,' and that's the tough leaf."

I plucked a few leaves. They snapped off nicely. I held them out to John. "All right, how much do I have coming?" He looked at

my handful. "Well now, you're sacked," he said gravely. "Look at that, it's like a cabbage leaf, too tough. If I sent it to Calcutta I'd be sacked too." We both laughed. The pluckers looked at us and smiled. John uncurled one tiny leaf and ran a finger along the furry underside. "That's the real stuff," he said, 'tip!'

Back on the path, a line of seven or eight women pluckers came along, on their way to dump their leaf at a weighing shelter. From there it would be bagged and sent sliding down a ropeway to the factory near the bottom of the valley. We stood aside to let them pass. John called out a greeting. They passed us in silence, then began to laugh and chatter.



Dumping leaf

There are about 525 workers on Poobong Estate, 500 or so out on the garden, the remaining few in the factory. All together there are about 2000 people living on the estate and dependent on it. They live in scattered mud houses---now freshly mud-plastered and garlanded with marigolds for the Diwali festival. All of the coolies are Nepalis. The men work, but they are usually hard to find; the women are the real workers. There are three elementary schools on the estate and a dispensary and a temple. Each coolie family has crude, free quarters and a half acre for raising vegetables and fruits and, even on that little land, flowers. The household water supply comes through lengths of bamboo poles plugged into hillside streams. The children gather firewood for cooking rice and grass for feeding the family cow, which is kept home for fear she would break a leg out grazing on the terraces.

As estate manager, John Taylor is commander-in-chief, president, administrator, foreman, supervisor, paymaster, inspector and occasionally judge, letter-writer and banker for all of his 2000 people. Although his staff includes two munshis, scribes, and one sirdar, labor chief, for every 50 coolies, all look to him, the sahib, the master, and, still, the white man, as ruler of the Poobong world. For them even Darjeeling is far away.

We stepped down the steep path toward the bungalow. "They say the estate manager is supposed to be the ma-bap, the parents, to the coolies," John said. "I don't know how, but everything seems all right on this garden. In Assam they're Communists and trouble-makers. Here, I've got no union, no unrest. I've got a works committee---the two munshis, several of the sirdars, and one or two coolies. They've no requests and they've no complaints."

Inside the bungalow, we plunked down on living-room chairs. A bearer came in and pulled off John's shoes. While John went upstairs to shave, I listened to some gramophone records by a lush English dance band. At lunch (soup, tongue, and salad) John recounted some of his adventures on last home leave. "...Oooh now, so you've got an auto, do you," she says. 'Why don't you come home and have a look-in at me Mum...'. The next thing you know you'd be marrying her and bringing her out here. They'd like that, aye, with the servants and everything, and a good salary. Not me, I'll tell you!"

After lunch we drove up the mountain and into Darjeeling for the horse races at the folksy little track. The stands were crowded with soldiers and planters, sherpas and tourists. The home-stretch was the road from town to the track, and late-comers were liable to be bowled over by a cavalry charge. The horses, I was told, were available other afternoons by the hour for riding around Darjeeling. John sat high in the pavilion as one of the stewards. They suspended one jockey in the second race for pulling his horse. I won Rs 72.

The following morning we went farther down the hill from the bungalow to the factory, a two-story oblong building, a hundred feet long, painted white, with a couple of black stove-pipe chimneys sprouting from the roof. There was an attached platform where the bags filled with freshly picked leaf came gliding down from the hill above on the ropeway.

John opened the door and we stepped inside into, surely, a tea factory, into a warm room filled with the sweet smell of fruit and nuts and wood.

"First I'll take you to the withering room," he said, and we climbed the wooden stairs to a long low hot hall. There were tight rows of eight-story racks holding burlap trays. "They take the fresh leaf from the bags and just flick it in onto the trays, very thin," John explained. "Hot air blows in from that air shaft downstairs, and withers the leaf to drive out the moisture. That makes it flaccid. Eighteen to twenty hours in here---fourteen hours in the hot months---and it's ready. One hundred pounds of fresh leaf will dry up to 55 or 65 pounds." He took a handful of leaf from the tray and squeezed it in his hand. He opened his hand and revealed an un-springy, pale green ball of tea leaves. "This one is about ready," he said.

"Manufacturing tea," John said as we went down the stairs, "is a one-day process. You can't let green leaf just sit around." We came to the "rolling room." There were two man-and-a-half tall machines clacking loudly. One the bottom half of each, withered tea lay on a slowly revolving circular metal tray. From above, a heavy circular brass jaw was pressing down lightly on the tea and revolving slowly in the opposite direction. The brass jaw was chewing---or gumming---the tea, like a cow chewing her cud, twisting the leaf, breaking the membranes, exposing the juice to the air, turning the leaf a slight brown.

"Two hundred and forty pounds in a batch," John said. "Forty minutes at first---that drops the smaller leaves out---then the remaining big leaves are re-rolled twice more, thirty minutes each. By the time it's finished here, it's pretty sticky."

He put his hand on another machine, one not working, which looked like some sort of shredder. "This is the C.T.C.," he explained, "the Crushing-Tearing-Curling machine. They're wild over this one in Calcutta, they are, because it produces more cups per



Coolie children

pound. It also takes unwithered leaf, and leaf is difficult to wither in the monsoon. I'm experimenting with it." He grunted. "It's a blooming tobacco-cutter! That's no way to make tea!"

The next room, the "fermentation room," was cool at 65 degrees and damp at 95% humidity. The now green-and-brown tea was spread on low tables and on the concrete floor in several large oblong inch-and-a-half thick mats. A little old man moved about silently, turning over handfuls of leaf, exposing the greener leaf underneath to the air. "Fermentation oxidizes the tannin in the leaf," John said. "After two hours here it turns a coppery color. It should 'look like a new penny and smell like an apple.' That's the rule."



John Taylor

After fermentation comes "firing," or to be precise, firing, or roasting, stops fermentation. When the fermented leaf goes into the oven---and we were now in the oven room, becoming sweaty and red-faced in front of the furnace---the remaining moisture (or all but 1 or 2% of it) is dried out. A very old, wise-faced man with bone-thin legs tended the furnace. "I suppose this man is my most valuable man," John said. "He can just open the oven and smell and tell when the leaf is ready, or do it by touching it with his hand. Two firings, twenty minutes each, at 205 degrees. You have to have a 'slow roast' or else you'll have 'case hardening,' brittle on the outside and not done inside." The black tea came on the end of the endless chain inside the oven and dumped out onto the floor. A boy was scooping it up by hand and putting it in basket-trays.

John picked up a huge handful of tea and held it downward. "Look at it cling together," he said. "That's a good twist. What does it smell like?" he asked. We both smelled it. I wasn't sure. "Biscuits," he answered, and put the tea in a basket, carefully, I thought, and with a smile.

"Then there's grading, or sifting," he said, leading me into another, cooler room. A multi-decker machine with several wire-net trays and take-off spouts was shaking itself violently. "After everything," John shouted above the noise, "---withering, rolling, fermentation, and firing---the leaf comes in here, goes up on top, and shakes out into nine grades of 'leaf' and two grades of 'dust.'"

He pointed out the various sizes of tea in each catch-basket. Some of the leaf had come out rather whole, and some had been battered in the process. "The large-leaf teas are 'Pekoes,' the smaller stuff is 'fannings,' and this grainy tea is 'dust.'" He poked a finger around in "Golden Flowery Pekoe," "Flowery Orange Pekoe No. 1," "Orange Fannings," "Pekoe Dust," and others. "'Dust' is a bad name," he said. "Some people think it's what we sweep off the floor of the factory. It's just the smallest leaf, good for quick brewing."

Two women sat on the floor, hand-picking-over the leaf from the machine, extracting bits of stem or stick or bark. John picked out a few bits of tea. "You remember that furry leaf we saw in the garden? This is the way it turns out. That golden thread there. That's 'tip,' 'tippy tea.' That's where the money is."

In his small factory office John had the figures on the output



Tea-sifter

of his garden. So far this year he has sent out 800 chests of tea, about 80,000 pounds, or 60% of the expected season's total. Most of the chests are jeeped down to the Bengal plain and flown to the Calcutta market---a speedy trip compared with the Assam teas that take a two-week, thousand-mile boat trip down the Ganges delta.

We moved to the packing room, where two women were hand-sprinkling black tea into plywood chests lined with tissue paper and aluminum foil. "This chest will weigh 92-94 pounds," John said. "It started out as green tea four times as heavy." The women sprinkled the tea as if making thin layers. "It's got to be packed lightly."

A boy came and announced meekly that the tea was ready. We followed him into a laboratory-like room with a sink, a hotplate and seven covered tea-cups on a table. "The infused leaf," John said. "Here we go." He sipped from each cup in turn, swishing the tea in his mouth noisily, then spitting it into a waist-high cuspidor. The boy poured off the rest of the tea and John sniffed the wet leaves. He came to the last and inhaled with his eyes closed. He held the leaves under my nose. "What does it smell like?" he asked. It smelled good. "A sort of sweet nut," I said. He shook his head. "Roses," he said, with a smile.

In Calcutta they know about tea too---at the docks, the railway stations, the airport, the warehouses. The tea district is around Netaji Subhas Road (bygone Clive Street), where the managing agencies, the brokerages, the Indian Tea Association (a tea chamber of commerce), and the Government's Tea Board have their offices. The chamber of chambers, however, is the air-conditioned room in a second-story in Mission Row, where each week on Mondays and Tuesdays the buyers meet to decide the fate of as many as 65,000 chests of tea placed there for auction.

The buyers waste no time at the auction, and tea is sold at a rate of four "breaks," or lots, per minute. The hurried reading of the auction catalogue, the raised fingers, the pointed fingers among the buyers (meaning "I'll split this break with you"), the movement of messengers sending out reports and bringing in late requests, all give an impression of a cross between bingo and charades. Although some tea goes straight to the London market or to overseas customers, most Indian tea, including that to be used in India, goes through the Calcutta market. For Southern teas the port of Cochin in Kerala is the market.

Getting ready for the weekly auction dominates the activity in the Calcutta agency houses. At the office of Duncan Brothers, who own Poobong garden, I was taken in to meet Mr. R.T. Gardner, a bespectacled Englishman, wearing a white laboratory coat. Mr. Gardner was busy looking over the catalogue for next week, and slightly re-

sembled a horse-player looking for a needed winner in the sixth race. He introduced himself as a taster, which really means buyer. He said he spends the better part of his week tasting the four-ounce samples sent by tea-producers, matching them up with the advance catalogue, and trying to figure out what teas he will have to buy to meet the requirements of his company's customers.

Our pot of tea came now, and Mr. Gardner poured out tea and information. I caught a couple of the Latin names of tea he mentioned (Camellia assamica and Thea sinensis), and a little bit about tea chemistry. In one cup of tea there is less than one grain of caffeine and about two grains of tannin. By adding milk the tannin is "fixed." The sugar adds the sweetener and takes away the astringency. The caffeine is a stimulant but not a strong one. Most of the stimulation comes from the warmth of the tea.

"There are fashions in tea," Mr. Gardner said sweetly. He suddenly turned astringent. "Nowadays the fashion is for dusts, and they are actually pounding"---he pounded his fist mildly on his desk---"good leaf into dust!"

Mr. Gardner let that sink in. He then leaned forward and asked, with just a touch of sting, "You actually drink a lot of iced tea in America?"

I said, "Sure."

"And paper tea bags, eh?"

I said, "Sure," and added, "but you know, the Indian Tea Board has just come up with---tea ice cream."

"My God!" he said softly, and took another sip of tea.

Walter Friedenbergl

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