

# Chinese Science, British Skill and the Making of the Tea Industry in Assam: A Historical Scrutiny over Its Relevance in the Context of the Act East Policy

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## ABSTRACT

One of the major findings of the research on the development and growth of the tea plantations in colonial Assam has been the consistency in implications of the British planters' scientific knowledge in converting the wild periphery of the distant part of the newly annexed territory into the edenic manifestation of a garden. But we delve deeper into the historical background of the production of tea as one of the major mercantile goods in terms of its capacity to occupy a very respectable position in the world of commerce for the interests of the British colonial empire then we could see that it was the Chinese methods of scientific production of tea that was deployed in generating the knowledge about the further growth of tea cultivation in Assam. It was not the British science that was assumed to be the catalyst of making Assam a safe haven for increasing rate of export of tea instead of the Chinese import of tea but it was the art of scientific knowledge of producing tea which was utilized through the mercantile skill of the British tea entrepreneurs. The paper would try to analyze how the British colonial state took help in the initial stage of production of tea from the Chinese experts in order to consolidate the hold over the methods of cultivation of tea in a more appropriate way. In today's perspective, the chai diplomacy has a great leverage in increasing strong diplomatic relation of the Indian republic with the South East Asian countries through coming out of the colonial hangovers.

**Key words:** Tea plantation, scientific, wild periphery, Chinese, mercantile, colonial state, chai diplomacy.

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution and progress of the tea cultivation in the colonial Assam since its scientific appropriation of the skills of cultivating tea more as the systematic production with the objectives of defeating the monopoly of the Chinese tea in the world market as well as defining the capacity of the British entrepreneurship to join more proficiently in the competitive edge of the industrial society which had been started to be formed with the drinking of tea as one of the best forms of social leverage over the feudal forms of labour. The search for the discovery of tea since the beginning of the colonial rule in Assam itself spoke more about the plan of producing tea in tropical location of south Asia where the neighbouring south east Asian region particularly of the Chinese scientific skills of producing tea had a great chance of providing sufficient background in enhancing the possibilities of cultivating tea in the newly acquired territory of Assam. There was a mad rush for acquiring the Chinese methods in developing the space for tea cultivation in Assam. It was an adventurous journey of making of an industrial product full of impacting the advanced economies of the west in subsequent centuries. The development in tea industry has become the basic point of initiating a diplomatic relation with the South East Asian nations through the chai diplomacy in order to position the advantages of doing trade with Assam in particular. The paper will primarily give its emphasis on discussing the early trends of development of the tea cultivation particularly with the Chinese contact and how it had been able to defeat the Chinese monopoly and later one of the basic tools of strengthening diplomatic relation with South East Asia.

One of the basic aims of colonial penetration into the economy of Assam had been in transforming the natural resources into profitable mercantile goods where the previous previous economy of the Ahom state had no such

objectives at all from the point of view of the world commerce but the Ahom state had commercial ties with the countries like China through the Tibetan range of commercial networks and particularly with the state of Myanmar . But the presence of the British colonial trade with its monopoly over tea trade had a singular importance in connecting the prospects of the search for tea cultivation in tropical environment in Assam. The rapid increase of the consumption of tea in the English society of the eighteenth century created a new socio-juncture where in order to substantiate the continuous supply of tea to the domestic market it was considered wise in keeping a good diplomatic relation with the China which was the only tea producing nation who had the capacity to mould the business of tea in the world commerce .The popularity of tea had been spreading among the masses not only as the product of consumption but it had captured ‘the imagination of the British public’ to such a degree that the British government was compelled to declare it as the ‘National Drink of England’ since 1784 (Behal, 2014,p.25).Before the growth and development of the industrial culture in England ,the colonial products like tea had occupied a prominent position in pushing forward the pace of urbanization in pre-industrial English cities like Liverpool in the 1750s (Hobsbawm ,1999,p.2). By the middle of the eighteenth century ,the stimulus for the growth of the market economy had set in a context where the aspects of undermining the ‘local and regional self –sufficiency’ already started to define or enmeshing ‘the village in a web of cash sales and purchases’ (Hobsbawm,1999,p.6). The major feature of the rural society had been developed since that period with the commercialization of the rural life through the ‘growing use of the imported commodities’ like tea and the rapid rise of the use of tea had created a situation when ‘about 0.6lb of tea was legally imported per head of the population , plus a considerable amount smuggled in’ besides the evidence that the drink had become popular among the labourers particularly among their wives and daughters that actually helped in assumption that the Britons consumed ‘three times as much tea as the rest of Europe put together ‘(Hobsbawm,1999,p.6).

**The Commerce of Tea and the East India Company:** The hold of the East India Company had already defeated the other European powers like the Dutch which was at the first of initiating the tea trade with China but after the 1784 when the Commutation Act was signed for ending the smuggling activities of the ‘rival European smugglers of China tea into the British market’ it was estimated that ‘one seventh of the tea that went to market in China was bought by the British East India Company in its high period after 1759’(Fairbank&Goldman,2006,p.194). The Canton trade developed since the 1750s was instrumental in lifting up the web of commerce with the West through a typical Chinese system of trade where ‘the government commissioned a group of Chinese merchant families to act as brokers superintending the foreign traders. The security merchants formed as a guild or Cohong and the imperial officials or the Manchus known to the foreigners as Hoppo virtually had the full authority in ‘taxing the foreigners’ imports and especially their exports of tea and silk’(Ibid,p195). The East India Company had tried to import of tea from China at the maximum level since 1711 -1791. From the following table it would be more clear about the increasing number of imports of tea between the period of 1711-1791(Behal,2014,p.25):

Table 1:

Year	Quantity of Import in lbs
1711	142,000
1741	890,000
1751	2,800,000
1781	4,9000,000
1791	15,000,000

It was not only in heavy consumption of tea which had triggered the huge bulk of tea importation by the British mercantilist companies like the EIC but in fact the heavy import duties on tea did not dishearten the demand for tea in the domestic market of England .The import duty on tea which was 13.93 % of the gross value had been increased up to 23.59 % in 1759 and in fact ‘during the years 1750-55 ,the rate of taxation on tea sales in England

was in excess of 100 per cent of the net cost to buyers ‘(Behal,2014,p.25).The Commutation Act substantially provided the monopoly rights to the EIC over their business of tea and that powerful position of the Company could be glanced from its capacity in handling the affairs of monopoly rights over the specific commodities like tea which had become more important with the growth of the industrial infrastructure based on expansion of capital in diverse sectors of development .During the years of 1800 and 1808 ,it had purchased 23.3 million lbs to 26 million lbs of tea from China and it ‘accounted for about 10 per cent of the total revenue from import duties and the entire profits of the EIC’(Behal,2014,p.26). Jayeeta Sharma in one of her important research works has attributed the successful journey of tea in Assam to the Chinese skills engaged through the scientific quality of knowledge acquired by the Colonial authority (Sharma,2006,pp.429-455)



Photo of British Sahib inspecting garden workers . source- internet

The public interests of the English society in the formative stages of the industrial revolution as well as during the matured stage of developing a big structure of production relation over the habit of tea drinking had not been lessened and it could be glanced from the instances where the ‘Britons ,who had consumed 1.5lb of tea per head in the 1840s and 3.26lb in the 1860s ,were consuming 5.7lb in the 1890s –but this represented an average annual import of 224 million lb compared with less than 98 millions in the 1860s and about 40 millions in the 1840s’ (Hobsbawm ,1992,p.64). In the West,there was no idea of drinking tea until 1550 and the Dutch merchants had begun to bring small quantity of black tea from China since 1640 but it soon made its entry into the English market for which since 1684 ,the EIC began to purchase tea five to six chests from the Canton for only presents in England (Hsu,2000,p.148). The flourishing trade which developed between England ,India and Canton was a great catalyst in giving wide shape to the growing stage of the mercantile interests of the English traders which provided a great boost in future course of their action in the world market of the colonial goods .Major tea producing regions in China were ‘Fukien (black tea) , Anhwei (green tea), and Kiangsi(both)and ‘in February of each year , a thousand or more tea merchants came to Canton to make arrangements with the hong merchants for delivery ‘(Ibid,p.149). But the situation had been more alarming due to the strained ‘Sino-British relation’ for various reasons and that kind of diplomatic tussle was responsible for seeking out a separate space for producing tea for the Britons as well as capturing the hold over the distribution of tea in the world market .There were several traditional restrictions put upon the conduct of the foreign company officials by the Chinese imperial authority and another important aspect developed around the ‘rapid growth of the private and country trade and the phenomenal rise of opium –smuggling from India to China (Ibid,p.166). Where the increasing rate of private trade developed by securing ‘consulships of other European countries, and managed to stay in Canton and expand their business. They served as agency houses for firms in London and India and engaged in the lucrative illicit traffic of opium-smuggling at “outside” anchorages ,such as Lintin and Hong Kong, ,making transactions with “outside” (i.e.non-hong) merchants for quick profit. So powerful had the private

traders become that they began to agitate for the abolition of the Company's monopoly .By 1820 the complexion of the Canton trade had changed : private trade had surpassed the company trade ,and opium had superseded regular articles as the chief item of import '(Ibid). The Chinese authority later regarded the Canton trade system as well as the trade of opium as the great disaster to the economy and society of the great country .The enmity between the two countries had been culminated in the wars of 1839-42 which 'secured Qing agreement to the Treaty of Nanjing in August 1842'(Fairbank&Goldman, 2006,p.200).But it was not that the EIC had put it into an end the whole relation of importing tea from China and in fact ,the Chinese tea dominated the global market (almost 96 per cent) in the 1850s where the share of the tea from India was only 4 per cent (Nath,2016.p.52).

**Place of the of Tea as Prime Agro-Industrial Product:** Another very significant feature of the development of the tea cultivation in India was that until the 1850s the position of tea among the exportable was almost negligible and the export of tea had began to dominate the market only since the 1880s in spite of the fact that tea as an export commodity continued to rise after 1859 though in export value it was very low indeed where the rise of the export occurred slowly in nineteenth years , from 60,000 pound sterling between the years of 1858-59 to over two and half million in 1876-7 (Dutt,1995,p.263). The growth of tea as an agro-industrial commodity had been rising continuously and by the last decades of the nineteenth century the export of tea had been increased up to 150 million lbs on an average which was accounted in value terms with 6 to 10 per cent (Chaudhuri,2010,p.855). By the year 1886 , only 59 per cent of tea from China was imported into the domestic market of the United Kingdom where as total amount of tea supplied from India was 38 per cent and by the year 1903 'the imports of China had fallen to 10 per cent , compared with 59 percent of Indian and 31 per cent of Ceylon tea'(Gait, 2010,p.489). There were several reasons behind the spectacular growth of the tea industry since the second half of the nineteenth century and one of the basic features of its growth was its transfer of technique of production from the original land of modern production of tea to the colonial hinterland of Assam. In the post-discovery stage of the wild tea which had been tried to be homogenized with the production of the Chinese tea that had a blaze of attraction over the world . The discovery of the tea in Assam entailed a beginning of a new mercantile phase in the frontier state of India where the use of tea as specific drink of certain benefits to health had not been developed at all .There are controversies still rampant that the actual discoverer of tea in Assam was due to the superb intelligence of the indigenous entrepreneur Maniram Dewan who informed about the availability of the wild plant in the Khamti region to Robert Bruce and after his death in 1824 , the task was carried forward by his brother C.A.Bruce (Baruah,2011,p.25).Another viewpoint regarding the contribution of Robert Bruce in discovering the tea plant growing wild in the Brahmaputra valley had been made popular by the great historian Edward Gait with the assumption that during his visit to the old Ahom capital Garhgaon he had been acquainted with the Singhpho chief 'who promised to obtain some specimens for him'(Gait,2010,p.484). When the specimen of wild variety of tea was presented to C.A.Bruce in 1824 ,he submitted the plants for further examination to David Scott when it was confirmed by the Botanical Gardens ,Calcutta that they were of the same stock of of family 'but not the same species , as the plant from which the Chinese manufacture their tea'(Gait,2010,p.485). It was the C.A.Bruce who informed about the existence of the wild tea plant to Captain Jenkins when the later was deputed to report on the resources of the newly annexed territory of Assam in 1832.In February ,1834 ,with the direction from the Governor General ,Lord William Bentinck a Tea Committee was formed with the membership of prominent persons like N.Wallich , Radhakamal Deb, J.S.Pattle , J.W.Grant, J.R.Trevelyan, C.K.Robinson ,Rob Wilkinson ,R.D.Colquhoun ,Ram Comul Sen and G.J.Gordon and the last one who had great experience in opium trade was made the secretary of the committee .The majority of the members had their vast experiences in respective fields like in opium trade ,some of those were civil servants ,British scientists working in colonies like in India (Behal,2014,p28). Gordon was sent to China for the exclusive purpose of collecting plants, seeds and persons skilled in manufacturing tea and it was through the Chinese skills and the science of plantation which made it possible in starting of the lucrative industrial entrepreneurship of tea in Assam. Lieutenant Andrew Charlton received sufficient information about the identification of the tea plant and his observation was that the Singphos and the Khamtis had already their traditional practices of using the tea leaves through the specific preparations of drying in the sun for drinking and one of his success was that he received official notice for his discovery (Sharma, 2012,p.30). Fresh enquiries initiated by Captain Jenkins and Lieutenant Charlton helped in clearly convincing the Government of British India ,the botanists and the Tea Committee about the real identity of th e Assam plant with that of China.



Photo of enjoying tea, a refreshing drink . source- internet

**Tea as Blended Mode of Production:** The tea plants grown in Assam in its first experiment were of Chinese origin and with the efforts of Gordon from his visit to China for that exclusive of purpose of collecting the Chinese variety of tea sent the seeds for its cultivation those were distributed over the region of Assam , South India and sub-Himalayan areas in North India (Baruah,2011,p.30) . C.A.Bruce under Lieutenant Charlton was provided with the responsibilities of tea nurseries and the nursery with the Chinese variant of tea was first established at Sadiya (‘near the confluence of Koondil and Brahmaputra’ ) in 1833 .The first experiment of planting the tea seeds did not able to show any sign of progress due to the selection of wrong place where ‘a shifting sand bank having only few inches of alluvial deposit on the top and sandy layer below’ brought into its end the plants of the nursery which was abandoned completely in 1836 (Ibid).The next experiment was made in 1837 with the same Chinese seeds which was planted in Chabua that proved to be a successful one .Another experiment was made in respect of cross –pollination of the indigenous variant of tea with the seeds from China which later gave birth to the hybrid quality of tea (Ibid)that helped in shaping the foundation of tea plantation since the later decades of the nineteenth century . Although the hybridization of the tea seed was made with the prospects of commercial edge over the Chinese tea ,the indigenous variant ‘largely preponderates’(Gait,2010,p.487).It was not only the Chinese tea which had been implanted in the soil of Assam but it was the expert Chinese manufacturers which helped in providing the sufficient expertise to the early phase of development of the tea industry where the Colonial British tea enthusiasts played the key role in augmenting the most significant resource of the frontier region of the colonial Indian state .

There was almost a wild imagination of the successful entrepreneurial endeavour of tea plantation in Assam only through the importation of the Chinese seeds and plants into the soil of Assam and in fact after the discovery of the indigenous variant the colonial authority was not convinced of its capacity to stand as one of the important mercantile goods perfectly controlled by the British finance and innovations . The Colonial scientific argument as reflected in the botanist William Griffith who observed that the importation of lower breed of tea plant from the mainland China would be far better than the ‘jungly stock’ or the wild variant of the indigenous tea in the context of starting of the tea plantations in Assam(Sharma,2012,p.31). The colonial agenda of differentiating the parts of the occupied territories or the consideration of a specific territory from its experiences of continuous kind of developing the mercantile interests just like China had been oriented to depict the regions like Assam ‘far below China or more settled parts of the Indian subcontinent ‘(Ibid). That kind of consideration about the uncertainty of continuing production in a ‘jungly tract’ with its savage elements could be modified only through the call for Chinese characteristics of culture particularly in the filed of cultivating tea through the great

knowledge system of the Chinese civilization. Thereafter, the task of convincing the British public about the efficacy of the new product from Assam where the certain steps were taken through the London newspaper *The Times* that there had been great similarity between the product of Chinese tea with Assam (Ibid) where of course the British customers were more familiar with the China. In first example of tea production, Charles Bruce decided to send in 1837 some specimen of tea boxes (46 in number) for the London market but due to defect in packing those materials much of those boxes had been damaged in Calcutta before arriving in the final destination but when the small part of the product reached at the market of England there was a very hopeful situation developed by declaring that 'Assam tea would be quite capable to competing with the Chinese product 'when more care shall be taken in the selection of leaves from plants better pruned, and when greater experience shall have perfected the mode of preparation' (Gait, 2010, p.487).

The bitter diplomatic relations with the Qing government later convinced the East India Officials about the urgency of searching for alternative resource in their occupied territories but their dependence on the expertise of the Chinese tea planters had not been lessened and their firm belief on their skills of producing tea by the conquest of the wilderness of the tea bushes. The Chinese peasant families had an age old tradition of cultivating tea in a very small scale but there had the availability of processing tea leaves for further use as healthy drink. The excellent processing skills of the Chinese was great demand for the newly established tea cultivation in Assam which was considered to be a continuity of the ecological landscape starting from the Yunnan province of China fit for the growth of the tea plantations. The consideration of the only the Chinese variant as the 'marketable beverage' defined the journey of making huge endeavours in establishing and giving the organized base of production to the tea cultivation with the edenic label of a garden.

**Emphasis on Genuine Tea Experts from China:** Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General of India was highly interested about the capacities and experiences of the Chinese manufacturers and in fact to know more deeply the "character" of the Chinese he visited the English settlement in Malacca and Singapore with the obvious consideration of the superiority of the Chinese in terms of their 'energy, industry, spirit of speculation, and ability to calculate that of any European nation' (Sharma, 2012, pp.35-36). His suggestion was that the Chinese labour would make possible in fulfilling the plan of tea cultivation in distant Assam. In fact he gave emphasis on sending an 'intelligent agent' to Penang and Singapore for procuring the genuine plant as well as proper cultivators by providing a good remuneration to those experts where his basic thrust was always on transporting 'Chinese growers, artisans and labourers' in order to give a perfect blending of the novice tea plantation in Assam (Sharma, 2012, p.36). With due importance given to the suggestions of the Governor General Bentinck, the Assam Company decided to send the 'London bio-prospector Robert Fortune, the Calcutta opium trader George Gordon and a China missionary, the Rev. Gutzlaff to obtain these workers' (Ibid). The Chinese tea experts were termed as "tea planters" which was a great contrast in relation to the consideration of the Indian tea experts or the workers as a whole in a pejorative term of the "coolies" applied to the vast bulk of the recruited indentured tea workers as well as the immigrant Chinese workers to the other labour market. The Chinese physician Dr. Lumqua was appointed as an emissary with a payment of Rs.400 and the Chinese men had started to arrive in Assam since 1840. Dr. Lumqua's high salary was denied by the EIC who offered an alternative way of contact with the Chinese tea growers and where a carpenter with the ability of interpretation in a salary of Rs.40 proved to be more efficient but that assumption of the superior capacity to deal with the Chinese tea experts proved to be unsuccessful venture for which the newly established Assam Company retained the service of the physician Lumqua as 'overseer' only (Sharma, 2012, p.36). Another emissary from Upper Assam named E-Kan was sent to Singapore and Penang for recruiting expert workers and all efforts were made to recruit maximum number of workers with the offer of liberal sum of rupees as payment to work in the early phase of development of the industry. The Chinese workers those were recruited mostly came from Malaya and Singapore and the importance given by the colonial officials and scientists only in recruiting genuine workers from the mainland China had been somewhat faltered for which the botanists like William Griffith had a serious opinion regarding absence of the pure race of the Chinese among the workers recruited out of the China proper. Due to the easier means of recruitment of the workers from the Malaya and Singapore, the agents of the Assam Company did not go further into the proper channel of recruiting workers from China. The problems of getting more Chinese workers had become truly more problematic after the death of the physician cum overseer of the recruitment process of the Chinamen Dr. Lumqua in 1840 and his death signaled the loss of control over the sources of labour recruitment. The earlier obsession of working through the Chinese tea experts where the EIC

officials as well as the tea committee constituted for the purpose of unraveling the prospects of tea cultivation in Assam and the first tea company of the world the Assam Company gave preferences in hiring the expertise of the Chinese workers in developing the tea as mercantile good had been largely evaporated after the bad experience of dealing with the Chinese workers in the actual field of work 'J.W.Masters , the Assam Company superintendent , grumbled when they objected to doing anything else but making tea '(Sharma,2012,p.38). Since the 1840s , the Chinese workers had deserted their work place and almost a strike wave occurred due to the insufficient wage structure and both the indigenous and the Chinese workers refused to sign 'a covenant'(Sharma,2012,p.39).The managers were compelled to increase by Rs.1 over the present salary . In 1839 , the Assam Company was established with a net capital of 500,000 pound sterling which was divided into 10,000 shares with the share holding of 50 pound sterling (Behal,2014,p.34).Later , the Bengal Tea Association was merged with the Assam Company on the condition of remaining independent of the London and 'the Calcutta branch of the Company was allotted 2,000 shares , which including 100 each by Dwarakanath Tagore and Motilal Seal' (Behal,2012,p.34).



Photo showing tea labour plucking tree leave, source- internet

Meanwhile , the enthusiastic support provided to the Assam Company by the agent to the Governor General in North East Frontier Francis Jenkins made it possible to expand the acres of tea plantation through nominal revenue charges as well as making of a separate act which was known as the Waste Land Grant Rules of 1838 through which it was stipulated that 'one fourth of a grant was to be held revenue-free for an initial period of five to twenty years ,varying according to the nature of the wasteland concerned :i.e.for five years if the land was under grass , ten years if under reed and high grass , and twenty years if under forest'(Behal,2014,p.35).When the 1838 Rules failed to attract the capitalists from the European countries , the rules were revised granting the liberal lease of holding waste land fit for tea plantation for 99 years with minimum area of 500 acres (Guha, 1988,p.14).The lure for wasteland had tempted the planters to open more tea gardens in the wasteland to be made commercially more viable in the international market of tea .Through the fee simple grants in 1861 , the land grabbing was made more lucrative when the rate of sale had started from Rs.2-8 to Rs.5 per acre without any clearance condition (Guha,1988,p.14).

**International Competitive Market of Tea:**The production of tea in Assam since the 1830s till the moment of independence had largely been occupied with the colonial interests of merchandise and the huge scale of private investment was made particularly in draining out the resources to the enrichment of the owners of the tea estates as well as for the benefits of the big joint stock companies based in Calcutta and London. The importation of the workers from the districts of Bengal, (particularly of Chotanagur, Birbhum, Maldah, and Gorakhpur of the United Provinces and the Central Indian provinces under harsh conditions of work created a delicate situation of legal enticement of the workers . The situation of the tea industry has been witnessed a vast change in terms of its location in the world market as significant product of great medicinal worth and other is the conditions of facing double edged feature of competition from the countries like Sri Lanka , Kenya ,China when the quality

of tea has been much improvised in those countries and at the same time, the environmental deterioration has a huge negative impact upon the growth of the industry. But still, the lure and interests for the Assam tea has not been diminished for which there has been the relevance of the multiple impacts of the tea as product of cultural ingenuity that has transformed the identity of the modern Assam. Now a days, the tea plantation sector has faced stiff competition from the international competitors like China and Kenya where the China has become the largest exporting nation with an annual production of 3 million metric tonnes and it contributes about the 40% to the world production of tea and Indian republic has remained in the second position in term of production of tea which was 1.34 million tonnes in 2018. The global export of tea was in 2018 about 1.86 million metric tonnes with an estimate of US\$7.76 billion and 'in value terms China (\$1.78), Sri Lanka (\$1.68) and Kenya (\$1.48) together accounting for 56% of global exports' (Govt. of Assam Report, 2020, pp.1-2). In this context, it would be worthwhile to mention that the small tea growers contribution has been rising since an estimate of 2014-15 from the 34 per cent to 47 per cent in 2017-18.

**Chai Diplomacy and the Possibilities of External Trade System:** The Indian Government has continuously highlighting on the context of establishing a strong relationship with the East Asian nations through significant cultural and economic tool that helps in advancing the informal tie up with the friendly nations. In showcasing the success in tea production, India tries to strengthen its commercial ties particularly with the South East Asian countries with right directions in developing the practical politics of the tea which is aligned with the commerce, connectivity, culture and capacity building known as the four C's. How these four features could prove itself as guiding principles in heralding a new dawn in the field of diplomacy depends upon giving specific in commercial exchanges with the countries like Thailand where the increasing demand for premium teas from India has provided a good environment in establishing strong friendly relations through commerce only. The Act East Policy could act as the effective leverage in giving priority to the movement of goods like tea from Assam and in this context we could mention the buildup of a great road communication link between Thailand, India and Myanmar known as the Trilateral Highway which could act the medium in transporting teas and other goods from India's northeast. Through the official or unofficial promotions of cultural exchange of tea through the various promotional events as well as the practices of the culinary diplomacy which has the great potentiality in strengthening of India with the South East Asian nations. In active sharing of the ties in terms of collaboration with knowledge sharing and skill development, the possibilities of partnership on agricultural methods of production, technique and processing, the marketing of tea has one of the biggest opportunities of enhancing ties between India and South East Asian nations in particular.

The basic thrust of the Act East Policy in developing a dynamic relationship where the corridor of the north eastern states has the greater chance of acting as the meeting point with the South East in terms of deep historical ties as well as opening up the routes of commerce. The emphasis of the Government has been particularly in resolving the issues of non-tariff barrier which has impacted upon in growth of a stable commercial linkage based on the export of tea to those countries where there is the huge chance of capturing the dynamics of the tea market but it could also develop a strong bilateral relation with the Indian democratic republic and the developing economies like Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Taiwan and other nations of the South East. In 2014, the Prime Minister of our country Narendra Modi gifted a select product of Assam and Darjeeling tea to the American industrial magnets to symbolize India's best taste and the art of production. Another notable showcasing of the pride of Assam tea has been initiated by the Government of India at a special event organized in the United Nations with due regard to the International Tea Day in May, 2025, the Indian *chai* was served to the top international leaders as one of the iconic product from the India as well as one of the basic forms of cultural diplomacy. In fact, in July, 2025 in a great event of signing the Free Trade Agreement with the Great Britain, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the British Prime Minister Keir Starmer tasted the tea masala chai from Assam to symbolize the tie of friendship. No doubt, the Indian government has to keep a strict vigil on the growing strength of the Chinese counterpart in terms of its hegemony over multiple brands of tea as well as the competition offered by the Korean entertainment where the Indian tea has to look out new avenues of diplomatic relations through the utilizing the methods applied by the countries like Taiwan, Thailand and Hongkong by formation of an alliance called as Milk Tea Alliance to give a strong rallying point against the domination of the Chinese domination in South East Asian political economy. The diplomatic relations through the exchange of tea in a strong way with the countries like Taiwan could play a key role in strengthening the Indian presence in the South East Asian economies and interestingly in 2019 an international trade event

promoted the ‘Chai Diplomacy’ to define the Indo-Taiwanese relation in a solid form of functioning diplomatic corporations .In the International Tea Convention to promote the brand of Indian tea initiatives like #TeaReady and #TeaDesh has been taken up to attract the modern consumers of tea (Internet source).

The Act East Policy in the context of Assam has a beneficent result in terms of making a strong arrangement of improving the infrastructure of the road , railways and ports through the transportation of the goods like tea could be made more efficiently to the foreign market . Through the joint collaboration and investment by the Japanese government in improving the highways and hydroelectric power , the development in the tea sector has been tried to be provide a strong logistical support .The logistics for the tea industry could mean a great improvement in initiation of other avenues of commerce and industry through furthering the investment from the nations of the South East Asia In particular. No doubt , the exports of tea from India since the independence has played a great role and where the region like Assam has been playing the pivotal role in supplying the bulk of tea from its tea estates and from the following table we could assume the exact quantity of export of tea since the 1950s till 2002 :

Export of Tea from India (1951-2002):(Quantity in thousand kg. value in thousand Rs.)

Year	Total tea (excluding instant tea)		Instant Tea		Total tea (including instant tea)	
	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value
1951	-	-	-	-	205,983	960,130
1955	-	-	-	-	156,708	1136,132
1960	-	-	-	-	193,063	1199.883
1965	-	-	-	-	199,365	1149,747
1970	-	-	-	-	202,016	1487,533
1975	-	-	-	-	218,128	2446,592
1980	2224,046	4,290,277	754	35,184	224,780	4325,461
1985	214,021	6,952,996	916	82,908	214,937	7035,904
1990	209,085	11,041,507	939	92,003	210,024	1133,510
1995	167,143	11,908,077	853	172,079	167,996	12,080,156
1998	207,639	22,383,087	2,699	711,273	210,338	23,094,360
1999	189,092	19,024,369	2,627	634,314	191,719	19,568,684
2000	204,353	18,270,324	2,463	715,795	206,816	18,986, 119
2001	179, 857	16,022,060	2,731	799,055	182, 588	16,821,115
2002	198,087	16,697,757	2,915	836,141	201,002	17,533,898

Source: Tea Statistics ,Tea Board (Cited in Pradip Baruah ,2011,p.51)

The Indian export of tea was stagnant for the period of 1970s and 1980s where it was only 200-225 m kg and there was a gradual decline occurred in share of tea in world market .Besides , the smaller amount of tea in value terms which has been marginally increased from 1990 again comes down since 1999 with an export of 38.35

m.kg of value addition Rs.541.88 crores in 2002 (Baruah,2011,p.52).The shares of tea production in contrast has been occupied by the Chinese market and in 1961 its share in world market was just 10 per cent but since that period ,the tea production has been increased to such a degree that it's now 32.75 per cent in 2008 and whereas India's share has been dwindled to 21 per cent in 2008 (in 1961 it was 36.02 per cent) (Mishra,et.al,2019,pp.26-27). Other South East Asian like Japan , Indonesia , Vietnam has also have their share in world market of tea . The CTC production has the greater edge in contrast to the orthodox tea and the finest flavor of Assam tea should be promoted more intensely among the tea lovers of the world .Another significant point of tea production in Assam has been increasing contribution made by the small tea growers or the STGs those have become more prominent since 1970s and it now stands in 2024 with 47.25 % to the total production of tea in Assam .



Photo of Assam tea garden, source-internet

The Look East Policy is the germination of long historical ties of Assam in particular with the South East Asian nations and the countries like Thailand, Myanmar and China which has a strong relation with Assam through the migration of the Tibeto-Burman family as well as early cultivation of rice made a huge impact in terms of cultural exchanges since the ancient period of history and the powerful ties of friendship with those countries like Japan ,Vietnam and Indonesia which have been maintaining a strong diplomatic relation with the India has a greater chance of exchanging the product of tea from Assam in order to define the powerhouse of tea production in the age of globalization . In the earlier stages of the growth of tea in Assam,the Chinese tea experts had played a significant role but in later stages of its expansion ,the indigenous laboueres like the Kachari workers dominated the scene of work and the work of production had been fully transferred to the migrant poor workers from other parts of India which made it possible in making of the Assam tea as world class product through strong management of the British colonial plantation authority . The policy of establishing stronger economic relation with the South East Asia has been heavily dependent upon transportation of the Assam tea not as the industrial product only but it means more than that in terms of cultural exchanges to know more about their strong points of cultural regeneration amidst continuous growth of the modern industrial society.

Tea as medicinal beverage is great demand in the world market because of its role in 'reducing weight , lowering plasma cholesterol , enriching blood, increasing appetite and promoting digestion , preventing coronary heart diseases , resisting cancer ,reducing hypertension etc' (Dutta,2012,p.165).The point is how to make efficient market mechanism to push forward the popularity of the Queen Camellia among the tea loving nations of the world in the competition from other tea producing nations like Kenya, Sri Lanka and particularly of China and for which the research and development at the sufficient level is quite necessary to improvise the methods of production in a qualitative way . For defining its role in world commerce ,the tea producing state of Assam with its great heritage of producing quality tea , the initiative at the level of external affairs with different nations of

the South Asian nations (Vietnam ,Taiwan , Malaysia , Indonesia , Thailand, Laos, Myanmar , Japan ,Philippines) has the great possibility of inaugurating a new phase of development for the economy of Assam in particular through advanced methods of robust marketing techniques . It would be possible only through the Act East Policy with its continuous emphasis on working out dynamic –pragmatic trade relations with those countries as mentioned when the doorway of the Assam can eventually lead to the dominant position of the Assamese variant of tea beyond the traditional buyers of the Assam tea .

## CONCLUSION

The East India Company's efforts in exploiting the natural resources of Assam in the interests of the colonial capitalist juncture eventually had initiated the birth of the expatriate capital investment in the tea plantation sector which was becoming famous for occupying the prime position by defeating the Chinese market of tea and infamous in turn because of the sordid tale of labor recruitment from the distant part of India through conscious negligence of basic provisions for minimum standard of living for those poor recruited workers. The Chinese skills in field of production and cultivation of tea had been harnessed to a degree when there was the dearth of knowledge and skills on the part of the Company but eventually acquiring the proper skill with sufficient scientific knowledge about the superiority of the indigenous variant of tea culminated in rapid expansion of tea through deployment of labourers from the administrative mapping of the recruitment zone as surplus populated space. So, the tale of tea leaves and its gradual retelling the stories of edenic contemplation of the ever growing totality of producing tea as the essence of the Assam blend of consumption has the great South-East Asian contact through the Chinese skills and the colonial scientific knowledge system but that was blended in such a way that the indigenous quality of the Assam tea had been established with the unique variant of tea to be delivered as the finished export product . The new diplomacy under the Look East Policy has been given the great platform of evaluation through the exchange of tea not only as the good of the trade but in a huge mechanism of developing the international friendship among those nations of the South East Asia which has a deep cultural contact with the India's society and economy in general and Assam in particular from the historical antiquity to the present.

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