A Tale of Tea: Empire, Science and the Assam 'Garden'

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Introduction

Those supplies, which the progress of civilization has converted from a luxury to a necessary of life, from the palace to the cottage…[1]

In 1800, the East India Company was selling about twenty million pounds' worth of Chinese-grown tea in England, an amount over and above the equivalent amount that the government estimated to be smuggled into the country.[2] For long a consumption good signifying taste and refinement in East Asia, tea, conjoined with cheap and abundant sugar supplies, was rapidly becoming the British Empire's 'drug food' of choice.[3] This was mainly possible through the introduction of commercial tea cultivation into Assam, a region annexed to British India in the early nineteenth century. The paper traces the interface of science, ideology and economy, which placed Assam at the service of Empire through its new character as Britain's very own Tea Garden.

Science, Empire and Tea

The northern powers will not permit that the rich and as yet comparatively undeveloped countries of the tropics should be entirely wasted by being devoted merely to the supply of food and clothing wants of their own people, when they can also supply the wants of the colder zones in so many indispensable products.[4]

In recent years, the botanic garden has come under intense scrutiny as a scientific institution that played a critical role in the expansion of empire. It was the Society of Arts, during the Seven Years War, which originally encouraged the creation of colonial botanic gardens to facilitate plant exchange. In 1786, deriving inspiration from the scientist Joseph Banks' vision of empire and botany flourishing in tandem, the Bengal military officer Robert Kyd floated a scheme for a 'Garden of Acclimatisation' at Calcutta, to act as a hub for the wider scientific study of the Indian continent. Henceforth, the establishment of such gardens would become an integral part of the consolidation of conquests, particularly in the Crown Colonies. In Britain, Kew Garden was begun in 1772 as a royal hobby, but by 1841 it won the status of a state institution 'aiding the Mother Country in everything that is useful in the vegetable kingdom' and coordinating the efforts of 'the many gardens in the British colonies and dependencies whose utility is wasted for want of unity and central direction'.[5] The Royal Botanic Gardens eventually comprised a long chain of thirty-three government stations radiating out of Kew, stretching all the way from Calcutta to Singapore to Jamaica to Fiji to Kisanto and Eala. As Kyd declared, the introduction

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[1] James Leonard (Member Of Royal College Of Surgeons, London etc), *A Letter On The Discovery And Character Of The Indigenous Tea Plant In Assam To Alexander Rogers, Esq.* (London, 1839), p.1.
[2] Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985), p.73.
[3] Ibid, p.99. Mintz uses the term 'drug food' to refer to sugar, tea, coffee and chocolate, all of which contain stimulants and whose consumption rose sharply in Europe from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries.
[4] John Christopher Willis, *Agriculture in the Tropics: An Elementary Treatise* (Cambridge, 1909), pp.38-9. Willis was the director of the Peradeniya Botanic Gardens in Ceylon. Quoted by Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940* (Oxford, 1988), p.210.
[5] William T. Thiselton-Dyer, "The Botanical Enterprise of the Empire," in *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 11, 1879-80, pp.276-8. Thiselton-Dyer became Director of Kew in 1885, succeeding his father-in-law Sir Joseph Hooker.

and dissemination of plant wealth should enable the British to 'outstrip our rivals in every valuable production which nature has confined to this part of the globe'.[6]

Lucille Brockway's pioneering work has shown how these imperial botanic gardens undertook transfers and scientific plant development that allowed new crops to be introduced into tropical colonies, usually on a large-scale plantation basis.[7] Such activities were supported by a considerable information and exploration network, with colonial doctors, missionaries, military and civil personnel providing specimens, drawings and observations.[8] Richard Drayton has significantly extended our understanding of the metropole's political connections with science by showing how the botanic garden acted as 'a complicated theatre of virtue' through which 'the Crown, the East India Company, and perhaps the British nation, sought equally to offer living testimony of their 'improving' administration'.[9]

The collection of plants and herbal lore was not only a much desired addition to 'useful knowledge', but was important for the general salvaging of institutional reputations before Public and Parliament, as institutions attempted to distance themselves from 'Old Corruption'. This was particularly important for the East India Company. On the one hand, it required to be seen as cooperative by Pitt and George III who had rescued it from Whig attacks, mirroring the long standing disquiet about the India trade and its 'nabobs'. On the other, the Company also wished to be viewed as efficient and virtuous by a British public which, as the Warren Hastings trial showed, was not convinced it deserved its privileges. In Drayton's opinion, it was this set of needs that caused the East India Company to emerge as a greater patron of the sciences than the government (or indeed any other body) in the Mother Country. By the early nineteenth century, the Company had established observatories at Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and St Helena, initiated an Ordnance Survey, founded new botanic gardens in Calcutta and Madras while resuscitating older Mughal collections, as at Saharanpore.[10]

Gardens and their attendant scientific networks provided an invaluable economic and ideological asset as they visibly furthered the dissemination of Science into far-flung reaches, through grand projects to 'improve' and manage Nature, and to connect up its myriad treasures for the larger good of empire. Drayton argues that while there is as yet much to learn about how books, religious and scientific controversy, taste and fashion moved between the centres and peripheries of the British Empire, it is possible to view agriculture as an associational impulse that often preceded other kinds of cultural initiative. The improvement of agriculture (and Nature) was one of the most important stimuli for Empire's gentlemen when they came together to constitute learned societies.[11] After Kyd's Calcutta Garden was established with East India Company support in 1787, various city luminaries, including the English Baptist

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[6] Kalipada Biswas, *The Original Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks Relating to the Foundation of the Royal Botanic Gardens* (Calcutta, 1950), pp.185-236.
[7] Lucille H. Brockway, "Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens," *American Ethnologist*, Vol.6, No.3 (August, 1979), pp.449-465.
[8] David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India: The New Cambridge History of India*: III.5 (Cambridge, 2000), p.20.
[9] Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World*, (Yale, 2000), pp.121-4.
[10] Ibid, pp.115-9.
[11] Ibid, *Nature's Government*, p.63.

missionary William Carey, met to organise a Horticultural Society in 1816, and an Agricultural Society in 1820. The horticulturists' inaugural statement, published in the *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, emphasised that 'indigenous fruits and vegetables might be most essentially improved by scientific cultivation, and the rich soil and invariable summer of these regions must be favourable to exotic introductions, under judicious management and sedulous attention'.[12] In a similar vein, the Agricultural Society announced in 1829 that one of its chief aims was to introduce into India plants from 'other tropical countries, especially America and the West Indies'.[13]

One area of 'exotic introduction' was tea, the 'cup that cheers' upon which the desires of Science and Empire were gradually converging. Given the importance of this drug food for a rapidly changing British economy and society, tea ranked high as a desirable botanic possession for Empire. As in the case of other varieties of botanic wealth, Banks had been the first to moot the notion that the Oriental tea plant could and should be domesticated within British-ruled territory. While freeing Britain from dependence on the Chinese supply, this scheme could also advance his larger plan to introduce plants of 'considerable national importance', and to facilitate Kew's role as 'a great exchange house of the empire, where possibilities of acclimatising plants might be tested'.[14] Kew's Science would build upon the contributions from colonial correspondents in distant sites such as Calcutta where Kyd, and his succeeding Directors, Nathaniel Wallich and J. Forbes Royle, were experimenting with the cultivation and improvement of cotton, tobacco, tea, cinchona and other plants.

As regards tea, Banks had even sent a memorial, as early as 1788, to the Chairman of the East India Company on the possibility of cultivating it in the new Indian territories. He felt that since the plant grew best between 26th and 30th degree latitudes, Eastern India might be a suitable tea habitat, with the Calcutta Garden well placed to be a nursery.[15] Inspired by this scheme, the collectors attached to the Macartney China Mission had dispatched some tea plants to Calcutta, but Kyd's efforts to grow them failed.[16] Over the next few years, sporadic transfers of the China plant were attempted in various Asian territories, from Penang to Java to Ceylon, but with a notable lack of success.[17]

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[12] Anonymous, "Institution of a Horticultural Society," *The Calcutta Monthly Journal*, 24 June, 1816, reprinted in Benoy Ghose (ed.), *Selections from English Periodicals of 19th Century Bengal*, Vol.1 (Calcutta, 1978), p.3.

[13] *Gleanings*, 1 (1829), p.208; quoted by Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine*, p.52.

[14] Joseph Banks, quoted in Geoffrey B. Masefield, *A History of the Colonial Agricultural Service*, (Oxford, 1972), pp.20-21.

[15] Memorial dated 27 December 1788, by Sir Joseph Banks, sent to the Chairman of the East India Company on the Possibility of Introducing Tea Cultivation into India, 27 December 1788, OIOC, Mss. Eur. D 993.

[16] William Griffith, *Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam* (Calcutta, 1840). Presented to Parliament as part of the 1839 *Papers Relating to Measures for Introducing Cultivation of Tea Plant in British Possessions in India*, Vol. XXXIX, Paper 63.

[17] Even where a crop was harvested, as in Penang, where the new Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, Nathaniel Wallich, collected some tea in 1822 and 1829, the quality was most unsatisfactory. From *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63: "Observations on Cultivation of Tea Plant, for Commercial Purposes in the Mountainous Parts of Hindostan; drawn up at the desire of Rt. Hon. C. Grant," by N. Wallich.

Nonetheless, it will be misleading if these aspirations and plans are unilaterally read as an indicator of the importance of Science in the actual formulation of colonial policy. Tea provides a striking example of the ambivalences and dissonances that beset science in empire. For a long while, the biggest setback for the imperial tea quest remained the patent lack of interest evinced by its most plausible patron-to-be, the East India Company. Since they enjoyed a profitable tea monopoly with China, John Company's traders had little time for the notion that tea should be grown in India to supplement and perhaps replace the Chinese supply. Institutional support was sorely lacking until the abolition of the Company's tea monopoly in 1833, and the British-Chinese scuffles over opium smuggling, trading rights and treaty ports. Drayton's contention that the Company, from the 1780s, was lending eager patronage for economic botany and other scientific projects in India has to be qualified by an examination of how, as in the case of tea, changing economic and political imperatives always shaped the East India Company's zeal for the pursuit of 'useful knowledge'. As David Arnold points out, it may have been the case that 'self-interest and scholarship often coincided, but whereas the former was frequently in evidence, the latter received only erratic support'.[18]

The tea situation changed dramatically with the new tensions in Anglo-Chinese relations, from about 1830. The escalating coolness between the Celestial Empire and the 'white devils' dragged the British tea quest to the centre-stage of metropolitan concern. With Chinese threats to terminate the treaty-port system ringing in their ears, British public opinion urged the powers-that-be to consider that 'if but a portion of the capital, which is now jeopardized in China, be carried to the British provinces in Assam, the transfer will give an impulse to agriculture in those provinces, which will develope (sic) many of its other resources, and at the same time, do more to teach the Chinese sounder notions of political economy than even the cannon of a British man-of-war'.[19] Therefore, it needed the intervention of imperial political economy to promote tea from disinterested (and oftentimes, seemingly impractical) Science to a discovery essential for the world of Commerce.

Previously, Robert Kyd's grand plans for 'propagation' had come to nothing, given his employers' perennial reluctance to loosen their purse strings. While the Company did announce to him that 'so sensible are we of the vast importance of the objects in view that it is by no means our intention to restrict you, in point of expense',[20] it does not do to overestimate its actual devotion towards the advancement of Science and Knowledge. When these causes did not appear likely to provide immediate returns, the East India Company's functionaries made no bones about withdrawing any patronage they might have extended. Arnold has discussed how science did occasionally impinge upon the Company's active attention, when its economic and political interests were directly aroused and the case for some scientific endeavour was convincingly made, but mostly, it retained its secondary importance compared with the more pressing concerns of revenue, diplomacy, law and order.[21] But by 1837, in a striking volte face, we see the Company's Directors objecting to members of its medical corps conducting any 'agricultural or horticultural experiments' or enquiring

[18] Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine*, p.21.
[19] Anonymous, "The Tea of Assam" (reprinted from *Asiatic Journal*), *Information on the Discovery and Character of The Tea Plant in Assam* (London, 1839), p.1.
[20] Biswas, *The Original Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks*, pp.185-236.
[21] Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine*, p.25.

into any 'matters connected with natural history' that would not aid the cause of 'the peculiar question of the practicability of cultivating the tea-plant with a view to its manufacture as an article of commerce'.[22]

For tea, the commercial agenda was all the stronger for the new possibilities that the crop offered for the Company's finances. From the mid-eighteenth century, the East India Company had been steadily augmenting its political and economic power over Bengal. However, even as its control increased, the Company's fiscal complications became more and more troublesome. Economic crisis loomed large, especially with the dilemma about the form best taken by Company remittances from India. In an age where mercantilist ideas were still in vogue, the outflow of English bullion to transmit Bengal's Company revenues was a more than venal sin. The solutions to this predicament were few, either a resort to more ruthless taxation, or a growth in the tax base, or perhaps, the cultivation of commodities to redress the trade balance. It was this last alluring prospect that the new Company patronage of Science aimed to reach. Since it was obliged to purchase approximately nine million pounds' worth of China tea every year, the Company hoped that tea cultivation in India would solve its recurrent economic problems. Thus, the newly established Tea Committee deliberated, in 1834. 'If we should succeed…Bengal would be possessed of an additional staple for export nearly equal in value to that of the aggregate mass of indigenous articles now shipped to England'.[23]

Some idea of the pressures bearing upon the Company can be gathered from the several memorials it received from Britain. Most of these petitioned the Directors to move urgently on the matter of Tea, so that 'some better guarantee should be provided for the continued supply of this article, than that at present furnished by the mere toleration of the Chinese government'.[24] The memorialists adumbrated the progress of British Science, seeking to dispel fears that the British would not be able to supply the precise blend of soil and climate required.[25] In an undated memo, John Walker assured Bentinck that it was a complete delusion 'that China was the only country where the tea plant would grow…The Burmese, the Japanese and Brazilians...have cultivated tea with success and we may confidently state that if in future we are not rendered independent of the Chinese, by producing tea from our own territories and colonies, it would be our own fault'.[26] Walker quoted from Abel, the botanist who had accompanied Lord Amherst to China, to witness that 'from every account given of the tea plant, it succeeds best on the sides of mountains'.[27] Other travellers were adduced in support, among them the first-hand observation made in Burma by the Company's

[22] CD to B, 23 Aug 1837, IOR E/4/752. Quoted by Deepak Kumar, "The Evolution of Colonial Science in India", in John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester, 1990), pp.51-66.
[23] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 12 May 1834; Tea Committee to Revenue Department, 15 March 1834; Minute by Secretary at Meeting of 13 February 1834.
[24] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 1 February 1834; "Proposition to the Hon. Directors of the East India Company to Cultivate Tea upon the Nepaul Hills, and Such Other Parts of the Territories of the East India Company as may be Suitable to its Growth," by John Walker.
[25] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Minute by Governor General, 24 January 1834.
[26] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; "Proposition", Walker.
[27] *Ibid*.

own botanist surveyor Francis Buchanan that the 'chief plant of renown is the tea plant...cultivated on the Sheen hills'.[28]

The constant allusion to 'hills' and 'mountains' is fairly significant, allowing us to pinpoint certain strategies through which otherwise dominant stereotypes about climate and natural endowments were addressed. David Arnold's seminal work considers how medicine and botany were the two channels through which the concept of a tropical India was establishing itself in colonial discourse.[29] It was the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's travel-inspired rhapsodies about the 'organic richness' and 'abundant fertility' of Central and South America, which had played a decisive role in the 'invention' of the tropics as a field of scientific enquiry and an aesthetic domain.[30] At the same time, negative representations of the tropics were gradually becoming prominent, with stark contrasts being drawn, between tropical and temperate places, and even races.[31] The very lushness of nature's aspect in the tropics was felt to be detrimental, producing 'morbid miasmas' in places like Bengal, unlike anything in Europe. But the far-reaching impact of Humboldt's Romantic sensibilities still allowed British scientists like Forbes Royle to find analogies between the effects of elevation and aspect on the climate and botany of the Andes and those of the Himalayas.[32] Therefore, while the discourse around tropicality was to remain a powerful imperial trope, the notion that India did possess, apart from its dominant tropical climate, some exceptional temperate and alpine zones, was gaining scientific ground. This was particularly important, given that the lacklustre record on previous tea plant transfers, botanists were now paying particular attention to Banks' dictum that a particular altitude and climate was essential if the plant were to flourish outside its natural China habitat.

The practical significance of this modified 'tropicality' was considerable, at least for the tea quest. By the 1830s, the scientific establishment was quietly confident that it could transfer tea to India, provided that there it was guided towards suitably elevated altitudes and a climate close to the temperate. Banks' prescience again seemed remarkable, with his observation that the 'country between Bengal and Bhutan' was one where 'in a few days you get from the tropical heats and consequently tropical productions to a climate similar to that of Europe'.[33] In order to enter such a country, the East India Company's active support was indispensable. Hence, Walker reminded the Directors that the Burma and the Nepal wars had brought extensive tracts of such Himalayan foothills into Company hands, and how those territories could conceivably serve as suitable environs for the China plant. If successful, the particular advantage of Britain's own production of tea would be added to the general one of providing a use for otherwise unproductive hilly regions.[34]

Given these imperatives, the East India Company deemed it politic to harness the long-neglected useful knowledge painstakingly gathered by scientists towards its

[28] *Ibid*.
[29] Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine,* p.52.
[30] David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature. Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (Oxford, 1996), p.146.
[31] Ibid, pp.151-2.
[32] Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine*, p.52.
[33] Harold B. Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks, 1743-1820* (London, 1988), p.272.
[34] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 1 February 1834.

newly urgent objective of the tea quest. In 1834, with the backing of the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, himself a self-professed 'practical agriculturist',[35] a twelve-member Tea Committee was constituted. The Tea Committee's first step was to dispatch a Circular addressed to all Commissioners in India, and particularly those who governed hill districts, asking for information that might fit the scientific criteria for tea lands. At the same time, it also sent the opium-trader G.J. Gordon to China to collect tea plants and seed for transplantation to suitable Indian locales. Whether the resources to be acquired would be disseminated downwards to small-cultivators on the model of the Chinese tea-grower, or upwards to the Bengal indigo-planter, was not yet in issue. In this first phase, the mode for imperial tea cultivation, whether it was to be grown by planters or peasants, on estates or fields, remained unclear. Banksian wisdom once again seemed relevant, this time on the labour question, where the great man had advocated the offer of 'liberal terms' to attract Chinese tea growers with their shrubs from Canton and Hunan.[36] But while the expertise of the Oriental cultivator was thus far acknowledged, Banks' successors took care to spell out how easily and inevitably the Western botanist would supersede him. 'We can scarcely doubt that when the skill and science of the Europeans, aided by thermometers etc. should once be applied to the cultivation and preparation of tea in favourable situations, the Chinese tea will soon be excelled in quality and favour.'[37]

Science and Local Knowledge: the Tea Plant in Assam

Take every opportunity of sending to the Company's Botanic Garden useful or rare or curious plants and seeds, with such observations as may be necessary for their culture.[38]

David Gilmartin makes an interesting distinction between 'imperial science', the 'science of empire', and the relationship between them. Imperial science is defined as the application of science to control nature worldwide. This application, he argues, is modified by the 'science of empire', which linked together in praxis, a distinctively colonial political system, the colonial state and indigenous political elites, through the scientific appropriation of 'local knowledge'.[39] Gilmartin's intervention is useful when it comes to examining the actual manner in which the Company's tea quest came to fruition, and the interface of its local actors with the 'moving metropolis' of imperial science.[40] It needs to be considered why an entire decade went by before a local 'discovery' could be assimilated into the official tea quest, and how the mandarins of the imperial science establishment dominated subsequent tea knowledge. While those scientists long retained their idée fixe about the China plant as the one and only authentic native, this rested alongside their staunch belief in the unique capacity of the West to use science to modify and master Nature.

In the 1820s, the first British travellers to Upper Assam overturned the prevailing scientific wisdom that tea was a plant peculiar to China when they found the plant

[35] *Parliamentary Papers, 1839, Paper 63,* Minute by Governor General, 24 January 1834.
[36] Memorial dated 27 December 1788, Banks, OIOC, Mss. Eur. D 993.
[37] *Parliamentary Papers,* 1839, Paper 63; "Proposition," Walker.
[38] "Instructions to Plant Collectors from Joseph Banks." Cited by Drayton, *Nature's Government*, p.121.
[39] David Gilmartin, "Scientific Empire and Imperial Science: Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in the Indus Basin," in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.53, No.4 (November, 1994), pp.1127-49.
[40] Roy McLeod, "On Visiting the 'Moving Metropolis': Reflections on the Architecture of Imperial Science," in *Historical Records of Australian Science*, Vol.5, 3 (1982), pp.1-16.

growing abundantly in the region's forests. Unlike the Chinese tea consumption with its refined court and cultural associations, Assam's tea leaves were used as a beverage only by the Singphos and the Khamtis, 'rude tribes' living on the Assam-Burma frontier. Assam itself was known to the British in Bengal as little more than a name for a 'vast, fever-infested, jungle area',[41] presently occupied by the Burmese, who had placed a puppet ruler on the throne, a member of the Ahom dynasty that had previously ruled over most of the country.

The pioneer in Assam's tea 'discovery' was a certain Robert Bruce who entered Assam in 1823, with an assortment of trading goods. Formerly a Major in the Bengal Artillery, he was the first British merchant to penetrate so far beyond the eastern frontier of British India.[42] Robert Bruce was said to have formed an acquaintance with a local Singpho chief, the Beesa Gaum, with whom he made a written engagement to be furnished with some tea plants, observed by him to be growing 'in a state of nature'. Charles Bruce, a naval officer, who had earlier seen service in the Isle of France and Java, followed his brother Robert into Assam. At the outbreak of the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, Charles offered his services to David Scott, the Governor General's Agent on the Northeast Frontier. After his appointment to command a division of gunboats, Charles Bruce was ordered up to Sadiya, in Upper Assam. After the Burmese interlopers had surrendered, local chieftains, including the Beesa Gaum came down to pay their respects. When the younger Bruce asked him about the tea-plant, the chief produced his brother's agreement, and supplied him with leaf samples.[43]

However, it took a decade for this 'discovery' to be assimilated by the 'metropolis', represented, in this instance, by the Calcutta botanic establishment. It was only in 1827 that Assam was officially taken over by the East India Company's administration, and it was still later that Bruce's 'native plant' received due consideration. Only by 1834, when the British desire for tea had taken a new, urgent dimension could the Indian Tea Committee proclaim a 'discovery...by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire'.[44] Just a few months after its inception, the Committee was enabled to savour the triumph that 'the tea shrub is beyond all doubt indigenous to Upper Assam'[45] and thus, to the British Empire. It is noteworthy that while the Calcutta scientists had been canvassing for tea knowledge among District Commissioners and their usual network of informants, the all-important tea identification had arrived from a local source in Assam, an unknown military officer named Lieutenant Andrew Charlton.

A striking insight into the tensions between 'imperial science' and the 'science of empire' is afforded from the scepticism evinced by the Calcutta establishment towards much local information on scientific matters. In Mathew Edney's analysis, the pursuit of science in British-ruled India helped to differentiate the European elite

[41] H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company, 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), p.2.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Anonymous, *Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions, with the Discovery of the Tea-plant, and of the Countries adjoining Assam* [With Maps], (London, 1839), pp.20-21.
[44] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; From Tea Committee to Revenue Dept, 24 December 1834.
[45] Ibid.

from Indian and British soldiers, merchants and planters.[46] While individuals from the latter groups often attempted to enter the world of scientific knowledge, they met with varying degrees of success. If science was promoting and preserving a sense of cultural commonality among educated Europeans in India, it was also susceptible to the hierarchies among different categories of 'colonial hands'. Thus, the acknowledged men of science were wont to regard the Company's field personnel, the 'men on the spot' as unreliable mavericks lacking proper knowledge for their claims.

The lengthy process of authenticating the Assam forest plant as true tea is explainable only through this kind of myopia. This is even more suggestive when juxtaposed against Nathaniel Wallich's assertion to Parliament that 'no scheme was ever entered upon with such a progressive accumulation of favourable and confirmatory circumstances as our Tea scheme'.[47] This pronouncement by the Director of the Botanic Garden ignored the fact that the first attempts by 'men on the spot' to convince experts about an Assam tea plant had been repeatedly stonewalled. For instance, in 1824, the Bruce brothers had sent their samples to the Northeast Frontier officer-in-charge, David Scott, who subsequently dispatched them to Calcutta. The long wait to have the plants certified fizzled out three years later when the scientists dismissed them as a type of wild camellia, a distant undesirable relative of the China plant. Yet later, Lt. Andrew Charlton of the Assam Light Infantry made another attempt on behalf of the Upper Assam plant. From his base at Sadiya, Charlton sent some specimens on the long perilous journey to be vetted by Dr John Tytler of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society. These plants too, were rebuffed.[48] Tea, it seemed, could not possibly be found in such a remote territory, nor could the opinions of its bucolic soldiers and administrators be trusted.

It was only in the propitious circumstances of the Tea Committee's workings after 1834 that Charlton's identification found a receptive cast of mind among Calcutta opinion-makers.[49] By now, Charlton was able to describe how 'the Singphos and Kamptees are in the habit of drinking an infusion of the leaves, which I have lately understood they prepare by pulling them into small pieces, taking out the stalks and fibres, boiling and then squeezing them into a ball, which they dry in the sun and retain for use'. He further bolstered his case by comparing those local leaves with what he had observed in previous postings of 'the tea plant in different parts of the world, and lately in New Holland, propagated by seeds brought direct from China'. A few months later, Charlton sent to Calcutta both seeds and leaves of the plant, which he had prepared into 'something like tea'. He informed the Committee that 'the tree I now find is indigenous to this place…and grows wild everywhere and there all the way from this, about a month's journey to the Chinese province Yunnan, where I am told it is extensively cultivated'.[50] With this emphasis on Assam's propinquity to China, tea could be welcomed as a valuable addition to the British Empire's natural riches. However, it remained to be seen how best it could be harvested. We will see that the Company's establishment would launch a long campaign to order this 'wild' plant of Assam in line with ostensibly scientific principles of authenticity and utility.

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[46] Mathew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago, 1997), p.33.
[47] Anonymous, *Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions*, p.27.
[48] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Letter from Lt Charlton to Captain Jenkins, 17 May 1834.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

The Wild and the Authentic

An indigenous plant, neglected, it is true, by man, but in the full enjoyment from Nature of all those peculiar conditions on which its properties will be found, under proper management, to depend.[51]

The East India Company's involvement with Assam was inaugurated at a pivotal point in its career, just as the shift from military fiscal adventurism to bureaucratic system was afoot. What Satpal Sangwan terms 'plant colonialism' was a significant part of these endeavours, evident in systematic surveys of the Company's territories, where the collection of plant and herbal knowledge took a prominent role.[52] Such activities were dictated as much by a new 'improving' agenda as by an avowed scientific and material purpose.[53] Nature's bounty was to be discovered, and thereafter improved upon, by its dissemination through Empire. In the case of tea, the discovery of Charlton's wild plant in the new Assam territory set in motion an array of actions on the part of the scientific establishment, for what an anonymous London pamphleteer called its 'proper management'.

While Charlton's plant samples allowed for Assam tea's certification as the proper camellia, it still remained for its home, and environs, to be validated. This was the task of the scientific delegation sent to Assam in 1835, headed by the director of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, Nathaniel Wallich. The presence of another botanist, William Griffith gave the group added scholarly cachet, if not harmony, given a rather public animosity between him and Wallich. Griffith's researches would extend beyond tea, as after Upper Assam, he would join another expedition, led by Captain Hannay, to the nearby country of Ava (Burma). For the Assam delegation, its main remit was to confirm the existence of the tea jungles upon the lands held by two sets of local hill chieftains, the Gams ruling the Singphos and the Bar Senapati ruling the Mataks. It was hoped, too, that those same forests might provide other varieties of natural wealth. Hence the instructions to the delegates to collect 'the greatest variety procurable of botanical, geological and other details...before ulterior measures may be successfully taken with regard to the cultivation of the tea shrub in that country'.[54] The delegation's knowledge-gathering possibilities were further enhanced by including the geologist, John M'Clelland, who was soon to officiate as the Secretary to the Committee for investigating the Coal and Mineral Resources of India.[55] Given that he was a major and influential critic of the Calcutta Garden for what he deemed its overly theoretical agenda, his inclusion might have been another brake on any grand speculations mooted by Wallich and the other botanists.[56]

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[51] Anonymous, *Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions*, p.19. Quoting John M'Clelland, a member of the scientific delegation sent to Assam in 1835 by the Tea Committee. See Footnote 56.
[52] B.B. Misra, *The Unification and Division of India* (Delhi, 1990), pp.53-5, for brief details of surveys by Mackenzie, Buchanan, Colebrooke, Hodgson, Herbert, Webb, Monier-Williams etc.
[53] See MacKenzie ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World*.
[54] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; Tea Committee to Revenue Dept, 24 December 1834.
[55] The Committee for investigating the Coal and Mineral Resources of India was established in 1836 and its findings were published as a Report in 1838.
[56] A good example of the many Scotsmen with wide-ranging scientific interests in the Bengal and the Indian Medical Services, the geological expert John M'Clelland also published the first account of Assam's zoology in *The Quarterly Journal* of July, 1837. William Griffith's *Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam*, submitted as part of the report to Parliament and then published from Calcutta in 1840

Apart from reporting on the jungles where the tea grew, these experts were already seeking means to 'improve' the plant. In their view, the bounty that nature had bestowed upon these otherwise unproductive domains could only be of full use once it was subjected to the civilising influence of China, the original home of tea. Griffith proclaimed that the indigenous plant in Assam, like its populace, was unacceptably savage. As he saw it, the most important measure for the new tea enterprise was

> the importation of Chinese seeds of unexceptionable quality, and of small numbers of the finest sorts of tea plant. I imagine that the importation of even the inferior kinds would be more likely to lead to the produce of a marketable article than the cultivation of a wild, or (to use our Indian notions) a more expressive term, jungly stock…it is obvious that the pollen of the Chinese plants must be applied to the stigmata of those of Assam. By repeating the experiments indefinitely it may be expected that the indigenous plants of Assam will lose most or all of those bad qualities that may with reason be supposed to exist in it.[57]

Griffith's dismissive views of the local plant held sway for many years. Later, a retired tea-planter, David Crole (late of the Jokai Tea Company etc) spoke for most of the Assam tea industry when he bitterly wrote, 'thus did these scientists unwittingly bring about the introduction into the province of a curse that at one time seemed as if it would prove as disastrous to Assam as ever the *Phylloxera vastatrix* has been in France or the *Hemileia vastatrix* in Ceylon'.[58] As another 'practical agriculturist', Crole attributed this blunder to the lack of hands-on experience on the part of the men who had made the first important policies for the tea industry in India. 'I should say that no more powerful object lesson than this is wanted to illustrate the folly of making up a jury for such a matter composed entirely of men of science, without a leaven of practical men, whose sole qualifications should be the possession of mere sound common sense and being versed in business undertakings.'[59]

However, this is a fairly superficial reading of theory vs practice, by a not entirely disinterested party. Until the China and Assam researches of the 1840s, British botanists, would-be planters, administrators, Mincing Lane sellers all had the sketchiest notions about tea in its natural state, not even realising that green tea and black tea were processed from the same plant. Thereafter, the aim of the great tea quest was not just to find the plant that would fill a current demand, but also to improve it through species selection, hybridisation, and new methods of cultivation, to

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became remain one of the most influential works on tea. The posthumous papers he bequeathed to the East India Company on his death in 1845 were published as *Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Afghanistan and the Neighbouring Countries by the late William Griffith, arranged by John M'Clelland* (Calcutta, 1847-48). It is curious that Wallich himself did not find a prominent place in the theoretical deliberations over tea, apart from the various memoranda he submitted in the course of the official duties.

[57] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; "Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam," by Mr. Assistant-surgeon William Griffith, Madras Establishment, late Member of Assam Deputation.

[58] David Crole, *Tea: A Textbook of Tea Planting and Manufacture comprising Chapters on the History and Development of the Industry, the Cultivation of the Plant, the Preparation of the Leaf for the Market, the Botany and Chemistry of Tea Etc. With Some Account of the Laws affecting Labour in Tea Gardens in Assam and Elsewhere* (London, 1897), p.25.

[59] Ibid.

identify new environs for its propagation, and to suggest means of processing it for the world market.

After the defeat of China in the Opium War (1839-42), British botanists seized the opportunity for a series of plant transfers from that country. As soon as word reached England that the War was over, Robert Fortune, who had previously assisted at the Edinburgh Botanic Garden, obtained an appointment as Botanical Collector to the Horticultural Society of London. He was sent on his journey with little pay, but an interesting list of requests. He was to find blue flowered peonies and tea plants, and to investigate the peaches growing in the Emperor's private garden![60] During this first China trip in 1843-45, Fortune sent back several shipments of seeds and live plants in Wardian cases, but not tea. By the time he returned to England, some of his specimens had already been propagated and transferred to various European botanic gardens.[61] About the same time, the Calcutta Botanic Garden entrusted the opium trader G.J. Gordon, also the member-secretary of the Tea Committee, with smuggling tea seed out of China.[62] In 1848, Fortune, too, was instructed from London to 'proceed to China for the purpose of obtaining the finest varieties of Tea-plant, as well as native manufacturers and implements'.[63] By 1851, he managed to bring 2000 tea plants and 17,000 tea seeds, and also Chinese experts in tea cultivation, out of the country. Most of these resources were transferred to another hilly region of India where the Company hoped to propagate tea, the Kangra sub-Himalayan district. Incidentally, Wallich's distribution of over 400,000 China tea seedlings via the Calcutta Botanic Garden was just then allowing his charge to stake a major claim for its practical role in Empire, in the face of critics like M'Clelland. These, then, were the China tea seedlings which Charles Bruce would plant in the experimental gardens ('baris') established by the East India Company, in the 'jungles' of Upper Assam.

In the entire discourse around tea, whether in the commercial arguments given by William Bentinck or the scientific ones by William Griffith and Nathaniel Wallich, it is notable how tea acquired enormous clout in the pursuit for ever-advancing science, commerce and civilisation. As contemporary tracts on tea show, the proletarian in the mother country and the native in the colony were being imagined as an immense pool of demand for a beverage whose potential for moral and economic improvement could not even be overestimated. (As it transpired, the Indian consumer would be slow to emerge.) In the metropole, tea, obtained from the awe-inspiring Celestial Empire not yet unmasked as a 'paper tiger', had from the seventeenth century signified refinement and luxury in the flourishing bourgeois world of consumption. The 'savage' native product of Assam certainly did not seem to suit the 'refined' London palate, which, for the present, the East India Company saw as its best customer. The first task for the scientist and, following his lead, the planter, appeared to be to ameliorate the indigenous breed of Assam by the application of Chinese genes. A few decades would elapse before this wisdom was to be questioned, and this time by voices from the locality.

[60] http://www.plantexplorers.com/Explorers/Biographies/Fortune/
[61] Robert Fortune, *Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China* (New York, 1979). This is a reprint of the 1847 edition published by John Murray of London.
[62] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Tea Committee, 15 March 1834.
[63] Robert Fortune, *A Journey to the Countries of China* (London, 1852).

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, Gordon's smuggling of Chinese seed was dictated by the need to cross a superior breed of tea seed to the 'wild' or 'jungly' variety or 'jat' discovered in Assam. The tea discourse's use of 'jat' is noteworthy, especially given its proximity to another indigenous term, 'jati', denoting caste or race. Charles Bruce's copious insertion of the Assamese word jat provided a criterion for classification, a location where the Native of the locality, whether human or vegetable, could be judged as to its suitability for the imperial agenda. Virtually all these imperial transfers and explorations had as their sub-text a concerted campaign to rise above the unsatisfactory local jat of tea in Assam. Bruce's China hybrid was the plant of choice for the plantations established by the Assam Company and other entrepreneurs, once the East India Company's scientific researches had shown the way. Only in the 1880s was this plant finally abandoned in favour of the indigenous variety, which the British planters (and their Indian employees) were already discovering to be hardier and more productive than its scientifically nurtured predecessor.

Therefore, by the turn of the century, an interesting reversal of values had occurred, which, while managing to actually bolster the importance of jat, served to deny its earlier affinity with a transplanted variety, the product of man-made miscegenation rather than natural destiny. It is tempting to see the growing discomfort with 'mixed races' in British imperial discourses, or the opposition to 'white colonisation' in the tropics, as mirrored in the distaste evinced by the English planter for the tea hybrid. In a fascinating turnaround, the Assam plant was winning praise for its 'robustness' and 'vigour', so well suited for the cruder palate of the British working classes, while the hybrid was condemned for its effeminacy and artificiality. The pioneering scientists of empire, Banks, Wallich and Griffith received kudos from the metropole for the Assam tea experiments, but from the perspective of Empire's planter, their obsession with authenticity and hierarchy derailed the practicalities of this project to a considerable extent.[64] Not only had the parameters of the authentic shifted considerably, for both plant and people, but most 'scientific' intervention would, for some time, focus its gaze upon the technical and the mechanical, rather than the botanical.[65]

Of course, the logic of improvement was not confined to the plant alone. Once the Assam plant had been ameliorated by its Chinese neighbour, that improved jat would in turn require a civilised jat of worker to do it justice, under the supervision of European science and capital. As Captain Jenkins bemoaned, 'We have...an unlimited range of wastes, wastes enough for three or four millions of people, which implies, of course, that our population is very scanty, and what is worse, they are very rude; fine, able, strong men, but without the introduction of a more civilised race they are not convertible to immediate use'.[66] Once again, imperial science seemed to provide the solution. Banks had advised that a tea labour force, like the seed, should come from its original home, China. This opinion was buttressed by the fact that contemporary

[64] Michael Worboys mentions that some detailed studies have shown that the role of colonial scientists was at best marginal and may, in fact, have inhibited economic change, in the case of crops such as cocoa on the Gold Coast. See Worboys, 'Science and the Colonial Empire,' in Deepak Kumar (ed.), *Science and Empire. Essays in Indian Context* (Delhi, 1991), p.18.

[65] Antrobus, *A History*, pp. 292-301. Machinery for various processing operations was introduced into the tea factories from the 1870s.

[66] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 7 January 1835; From Jenkins to Tea Committee, 6 January 1835.

racial typologies were discovering the Chinese to be the most hard-working race Asia could provide, the most satisfactory mediator between the polarities of Occident and Orient.[67] The Chinese presence would reassure the London market as to the quality of the Assam harvest, as well as bypass 'the indolence and apathy of the local people' with their disinclination to work as long as they had 'enough rice and opium'.[68]

However, misgivings about Chinese labour soon crept in. The botanist William Griffith had agreed on the importance of securing 'a sufficient number of first-rate Chinese cultivators and manufacturers, both of black and green teas.'[69] But he found it necessary to enter a caveat, 'this can only be done by the usual route; for I found that among all the so-called Chinese, who are to be met with at Mogaung, Bamo and Ava, as well as those among those who form the large annual caravans that trade with Burma there is not a single genuine Chinaman'.[70] Since most of the Chinese labourers brought in by the Assam Company's agents hailed by way of the migrant communities in Singapore and Penang, by this logic, their authentic status as tea labour was open to question.[71] More to the point, these Chinese workers rapidly displayed such 'obstreperousness as well as unsuitability for the local climate', that coupled with the higher wages they had to be paid, four or five times the local wage rate, all this soon outweighed fears that less civilised races might not be adequate substitutes to harness the bounty of nature.[72]

At another level, while the information on tea-growing provided to Bruce by Chinese informants had been prominently showcased even in the London *Times*, the ministrations of British botanists seemed to be rendering this Oriental resource also redundant. By the 1860s, just as the Chinese seed was beginning to be seen as less satisfactory than its once despised jungly cousin, the 'civilised' Chinese labourer had lost all appeal for the Assam plantation.[73] In previous years, Bruce and his colleagues had not yet realised that while the Chinese grower's expertise was necessary at the outset, his cultivation system was not. Under the supervision of the colonial planter, the prime requirement was a vast pool of cheap, docile labour for a large-scale agro-industrial operation with backbreaking manual labour required to sustain it - not the skilled Chinese tea grower they had previously sought.[74] Rather than perpetuating the tea forest of the Khamti or the household cultivation of the Chinese, at the end of the day, British colonial capital would prefer to produce tea on an industrial scale.

To harken back to the role of science, McLeod points out how in its more general political usage, science became a convenient metaphor of empire itself, or more

[67] See Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London, 1995).
[68] Antrobus, *A History*, p.375. Quoting Charles Bruce.
[69] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations 20 June 1836; "Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam," Griffith.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Letters issued to Government; Vol. 24, 1861, Assam State Archives (Guwahati, Assam).
[72] Antrobus, *A History*, p.383 and p.388.
[73] Ann Laura Stoler and others have provided illuminating instances of how the Chinese labour on the Sumatran tobacco plantation, was considered unsatisfactory for his obstreperous behaviour and higher wages, compared to the impoverished Javanese coolie brought in to replace him. See *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (Yale, 1985).
[74] Studies show that in comparison with coffee, tea required nearly nine months of diligent attention and a more stable work force, as well as larger investment in terms of factory facilities. See Paul Erik Baak, *Plantations, Production and Political Power* (Delhi, 1997), p.72. This was one reason for the shift, by the end of the nineteenth century, from smaller enterprises to a few managing agency houses.

exactly, what the Empire might become.[75] Therefore, as we have seen, the first discussions of tea centred around plant and land, and how science could intervene there. As the industry moved on to focus on the next necessary factor of production, labour, science took over again. This time round, the 'science of empire' was reorienting a fresh set of assumptions, those of colonial labour ethnography, in order to privilege the 'industrious primitive' over the 'civilised native' for work in the tea plantations of Assam.

'Garden' and 'Forest': The Colonisation of Assam

Articles more precious than silver and gold grow wild upon its mountains, uncultivated and till lately uncared for.[76]

In 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo had marked the end of the first Anglo-Burmese War and also delivered Assam, which had been briefly under Burmese control, into British hands. To begin with, the East India Company chose to take direct responsibility only for Lower Assam, given its geographical and commercial proximity to existing British territories in Bengal. The comparatively unexplored forested territories of Upper Assam were left in the hands of tribute-paying 'native' chiefs. However, after the authentication of the tea discovery, the Ahom prince Purandar Singha and the Matak chief were ousted in favour of direct British rule. While the Company Bahadur acquired the political reins, it was another commercial enterprise that emerged as the de facto suzerain of Upper Assam, the London and Calcutta based Assam Company, through its inheritance of Charles Bruce's experimental tea plantations with a renewed charter for the 'conversion of uninhabited jungles to a smiling cultivation'.[77]

The new imperial perspective on Assam, viewed as a wild cornucopia of arable potential, can be usefully explored through another semantic shift, this time, from 'tea forests' to 'tea gardens'. In 1840, Bruce had pioneered the use of the term 'garden' alongside with its vernacular equivalent 'bari', in his reports to the Assam Company. In pre-colonial Assam, the term bari had a very particular connotation, referring to the raised or high lands suitable for homestead and garden sites, over which the peasants possessed hereditary proprietary rights. This was distinguished from the low-lying fertile lands, used for wet rice cultivation, over which the peasant held only usufruct rights. The tea baris that the Assam Company and other planters were operating could thus be understood as their private property - an important claim to be upheld considering the vast expanses of previously common land which came under their sway, with large portions usually remaining uncultivated.[78] Planters were not backward in admitting that vacant lands were best occupied to keep away competing European latecomers, or encroaching Indian planters, and also, to attract tenants who would be readily available for the plantation as a labour reserve force in the peak season. Even a hundred years later, in 1947, when the pressure upon arable land was becoming an important issue in Assam politics, Amalendu Guha estimates that only

[75] McLeod, "On Visiting the 'Moving Metropolis'".
[76] Anonymous, *Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions*, p. 14. Quoting John M'Cosh.
[77] Justice A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Calcutta, 1854), (Reprint Guwahati, 1982), Appendix E, "Petition to the Governor-General of India from the Directors of the Assam Company," p.80.
[78] Amalendu Guha, "A Big Push Without a Take-off: A Case-Study of Assam: 1871-1901": Reply to Comment,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 4 (December, 1974).

about 30% of the 1.5 million acres of land held or controlled by tea planters was actually under cultivation.

Again, within this narrative of discovery, the term 'garden' was located in opposition to 'forest', and indeed, served to replace it, for the most part. As has been mentioned, the original discovery of tea was in the Upper Assam lands ruled by the Singpho chiefs and the Bar Senapati. This impelled the scientific experts on the Tea Committee to spell out, in no uncertain terms, the absolute necessity for the Company to annex this resource, since it was far too valuable to be left in the control of the local people.

> In my humble opinion, the gamers or chiefs who own the Singfo tea tracts will not object to our leasing or purchasing them...procuring the forest lands on a long lease might, probably, insure all our purposes. Considering, however, the destructive manner in which the tracts in question have been hitherto treated by the natives and the injuries which most of them are at this time almost daily undergoing, I beg most earnestly to urge the necessity of immediate and effective measures being taken to secure the forests from further spoilation.[79]

Therefore, for Nature's protection, the indigenous forests needed most urgently to be changed into the tea gardens which imperial science and commerce required. This was redemption, from one point of view, but disaster from another. In a way, the Singpho uprising at Sadiya in 1843, which led to a number of casualties among the Company's garrison, was a predictable outcome of how the expansionist policies resulting from such advice would rebound upon the inhabitants of such territories, when their lands acquired novel status as Nature's prizes for empire. Some time before the uprising, the Singphos had lamented to the British authorities, 'now it is said that where the tea grows, that is yours, but when we make sacrifice[s] we require tea for our funerals; we therefore perceive that you have taken all the country, and we, the old and respectable, cannot get tea to drink'.[80]

At yet another level, this terminology of 'garden' served as a way of distinguishing between the 'jungly' variety of tea that Griffith had scornfully dismissed, and the superior strain that European expertise would produce. In the eyes of John M'Cosh, a Company surgeon who wrote a glowing account of the region's potential for a London readership, the previously unproductive Assam forests would be transmuted by European capital and science, with some little assistance from Chinese talent, into a cultivated expanse blooming with tea. This would be the harbinger, hopefully, of a more general transformation of this wild, unhealthy and jungle-laden region into an 'Assam [which]…might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, of tea, coffee and sugar'.[81] Hence, the Assam vision of unordered Nature blooming into ordered gardens would fit very well into that general doctrine of empire where, in Drayton's words, 'the rational use of Nature replaced piety as the foundation of imperial Providence, government became the Demiurge, and universal progress, measured by material abundance, its promised land'.[82]

The seductive power of this Edenic ideology, and the way it brought together ideas of civilisation and progress is strikingly close to views held by the Assamese gentry, at

[79] PP 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 4 April 1836; Wallich to Jenkins, 15 March 1836.
[80] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 96, 12 August, 1843; Letter from Beesa Gaum to the Agent to the Governor General, National Archives of India (New Delhi).
[81] John M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam* (London, 1837), p.33.
[82] Drayton, *Nature's Government*, p.80.

least over the first few decades of colonial rule. In 1847, the Calcutta-educated magistrate, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan piously penned the following vision. 'O Gracious Lord of the World, do give these inhabitants of Assam the desire to render their land civilised, wise and pious…do bring that day when Assam will cease to be a forest and become a garden of flowers'.[83] Phukan's essay, a paean to England as the civilised model to which Assam could aspire, appeared in the *Orunodoi*, the Assamese-language periodical established by the American Baptist missionaries who, armed with the printing press and Bible, had followed the tea enterprise into Assam. One of them, Nathan Brown, observed in his journal, '(Tea)…will produce a great change in the country, will fill it with a dense population, and convert these almost impenetrable jungles into the happy abodes of industry. If the means of grace are employed, may we not also hope that it will become a garden of the lord?'[84] British official, American missionary and Assamese elite opinion appeared to nurture the same optimism about the 'economics of Eden'. A few years later, another Assamese publicist, Gunabhiram Barua, monitored the 'progress' of tea gardens, in his gazetteer-cum-history, written in the Assamese language and widely used as a school textbook. 'Almost fifty years ago, the news was received that the tea plant was growing in Assam. Its cultivation has now made substantial progress. Huge expanses of forest have been transformed into blooming and productive land'.[85]

But it is pertinent to recall here that most of these voices belong to an upper-caste intelligentsia anxious, in this period of Aryanist race theories, to emphasise boundaries between the 'sabhya' and the 'a-sabhya' (the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised') peoples living on this new South Asian frontier, i.e., between themselves, the settled, cultured dwellers of the plains and the wild 'tribal' peoples of the hills and forests. Their distance from the latter's concerns is evident from the poignant remark offered by the Beesa Gaum, chief of the Singphos, when the new British officialdom asked for documentary evidence in support of his land claims. 'Now wherever you find land you make a tea garden; if it be so, there will be no room for the seventeen Gaums to remain'.[86] Again, such accolades from a modernising intelligentsia active in a colonial public sphere read very differently from the views expressed by some of the displaced notables who had close connections with the pre-colonial order. One of the last manuscripts produced under the patronage of an Ahom prince, written by the scribe Dutiram Hazarika, claimed that the king's rule had been overthrown by the white man's desire to turn the country into a vast tea garden.[87]

It would be rather facile, nonetheless, to attribute such contrasting sentiments to a simple dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' elites. Indeed, it was a prominent member figure of the old Ahom aristocracy, Maniram Barbhandar Barua, who assisted the Assam Company through its early tea career. Maniram was the son of Ramdutta, a minister under the last independent Assam king and started his career working for the British during the 1824-5 expeditions against the Singphos and the Khamtis (when Charles Bruce, too, had commanded a gunboat).[88] When the East

[83] Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, "An Account of England," in *Orunodoi* (April, 1847), Sibsagar Mission Press.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji* (Calcutta, 1875), (Reprint Guwahati, 1972), p.169.
[86] Foreign Political Consultations, No. 97, 12 August, 1843; Letter from Beesa Gaum.
[87] Dutiram Hazarika's verse Mss in the Assamese language, dated to the 1830s, was recovered and published with another text of the same period by the historian S. K. Bhuyan with the title of *Assamar Padya Buranji* (Guwahati, 1932), (Reprint 1984), p.209.
[88] Antrobus, *A History*, p.9.

India Company installed Purandar Singha as the tributary ruler of Upper Assam in 1833, Maniram became his minister. Possibly, it was his influence that prompted Purandar, in 1836, to envisage collaboration with the new tea enterprise. 'Raja Poorunder Sing makes no hesitation in placing the Gubroo hill at the disposal of Government; but he is anxious to retain one-half of the hill, that he may carry on the cultivation of the tea plants, on that half…and that the superintendents and overseers of the Government should instruct his people in the management of the plant and manufacture of tea.'[89] However, with the British resumption of his lands on the exue of his 'misgovernment', Purandar lost his throne and Maniram his job. Incidentally, the larger implications of this dethronement were quite clear to onlookers. Some forty years later, the king of Manipur pleaded with the British Political Officer to abandon his plans to introduce tea into the region, for were they to succeed, he would lose his kingdom to the planters.[90]

In 1836, with his ministerial post rendered redundant, Maniram joined the Assam Company as its 'Dewan' or land agent. The Company's annual reports, for some years, provide glowing testimony to his services. A visitor from the Calcutta office William Prinsep, in 1841, was loud in his praise. 'I find the Native Department of the office in the most beneficial state under the excellent direction of Muneeram, whose intelligence and activity is of the greatest value to our Establishment.'[91] Doubtless, in these early years, Maniram was a very useful mediator between the Company and indigenous power structures. Tea cultivation was only one of the areas where he tendered his services, and one that was as new to him as to the British, but he was able to use his local knowledge to promote it. However, in the inevitable systematisation of colonial rule that was coming up, services such as his would find much less demand, and we soon find Maniram parting ways with the Assam Company.

The ostensible reason for Maniram's dismissal lay in his establishment of two private tea plantations, with his suspension on charges of diverting the Company's seed and labour there. The proceedings are silent as to the results of the enquiry into these peculations, but their findings can be gauged from the fact that Maniram formally left the Company in 1845. Here, it should be considered that Assam Company employees had been liberally pilfering their employer's resources for years, and that almost all the new private plantations in Assam were established on that basis.[92] The main point at issue is not whether Maniram was guilty of the accusations, but the fact that not a single white entrepreneur faced similar retribution. His subsequent participation in a conspiracy to overthrow British rule, in 1857, brought Maniram's life to an untimely end. His tea estates were confiscated, and acquired at a throwaway price by Captain Williamson, the founder of the managing agency house of Williamson and Magor. In this regard, it is interesting to consider that a vernacular tradition still lives in Assam, enshrining Maniram's memory in ballads and stories not just as a patriotic martyr, but also as the indigenous pioneer who introduced tea cultivation to the British. A counter narrative of the 'discovery' of tea was thereby created by local nationalist lore, seeking to displace the European pioneer, whether Bruce or Charlton, and place his 'native informant', Maniram at centre-stage. But this nationalist Assamese

[89] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1839, Paper 63; Extract India Revenue Consultations, 11 July 1836, From Jenkins to Wallich.
[90] Alan and Iris Macfarlane, *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea* (London, 2003), p.8.
[91] *Assam Company Report of Local Directors to Shareholders at a General Meeting* (Calcutta, 1841), li.
[92] Antrobus, *A History*, p.343-4.

mythology totally erases the unassuming figure of the Khamti and Singpho, the 'tribal' inhabiting and using the original tea jungles.

The Maniram episode needs to be viewed in the larger perspective of how, by the mid-nineteenth century, Indian participation in mercantile capitalist networks around Calcutta was subjected to a series of obstacles, driving it virtually to extinction. The Indians on the Assam Company's Calcutta board, including the famous 'Merchant Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore, soon disappear from the records. While the Governor-General, Lord Auckland had, in the early 1840s, hailed the growth of tea in Assam, 'a country of vast promise,' and looked forward to its development by the application of European and Indian capital, the latter would only find itself circumscribed and controlled by the former.[93] As the nineteenth century wore on, the growing 'racialisation' of the colonial economy that Amiya Bagchi describes meant that autonomous possibilities for indigenous enterprise were fast shrinking in scope.[94] The rosy prospects that the Assamese magistrate Anandaram Dhekial Phukan could still envisage, in the 1840s, for an indigenous improving class actively participating in the region's economic modernisation would soon be impossible to realise in the face of government indifference, at best, and active obstruction, at worst.

This is not to say that natives did not venture into the new Mecca of tea enterprise. Many did so, with indifferent success, and some abandoned it when the going was hard. In the 1860s, a government official observed that 'a large number of respectable natives burnt their fingers in tea speculation and have been shy of retiring into any other since'.[95] Their situation is clear from the career of the premier Assamese planter family, the Khongiya Baruahs, whose founder Bisturam and his son Siva Prasad both flourished through their close ties with the managing agency firm of Williamson, Magor and Co,[96] founded in 1869 by a Brahmaputra river steamer captain and a Calcutta hotel manager.[97] Like other indigenous planters, Bisturam began by supplying seeds to the big European concerns, using his powers as a government appointed rent collector to bring local peasants to work the small tea garden he set up on his family land. Such small concerns did not have the resources to set up their own factories, they functioned as subsidiary concerns of the European gardens to whom they had to send their tea leaves for processing. Bisturam's fortunes began to take a better turn than most of his compatriots when James Williamson helped him set up his own factory with the British firm's outdated equipment sold to him at a throwaway price.[98]

Conclusion

By mid-nineteenth century, the steady advance of the British Empire, with its clarion-call of science, religion and commerce, had introduced into the metropolis' larder,

[93] Auckland Papers Addl. Mss. 37689-37718, British Library; Cited by Blair B. Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley, 1976), p.70.
[94] See Amiya K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India, 1900-39* (Cambridge, 1974).
[95] Agriculture and Revenue Records, Letter No. 267, 15 December 1870; to the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, as part of answers to questions for the Bengal Gazetteers, District Record Office (Jorhat, Assam).
[96] Arup Kumar Dutta, *The Khongiya Baruahs of Thengal* (Guwahati, 1990), pp.27-8.
[97] http://www.bluemoontea.com/WM-Teas.htm.
[98] Dutta, *The Khongiya Baruahs*, pp.27-8. It is noteworthy that the Khongiya Baruah family broke loose from their patron-client relationship with this British managing agency as late as the 1970s.

unknown names such as Demerara, Assam, Darjeeling and many more, from obscure corners of the globe. Ironically, while these places were in the process of becoming household names, this process was simultaneously emptying them of any signification other than of that of the globally traded commodities that they denoted. In Assam, the imperatives of capitalist tea production had reordered the region's natural environment and social demographics, with commons, forest and swidden lands being subjected to the industrial discipline of the plantation, and a racialised 'coolie' labour force instituted for it. In contrast to the early years of tea 'progress', by the early twentieth century, burgeoning anti-colonial sentiments in India meant that Assam's 'Planter Raj' was at the receiving end of a tremendous amount of nationalist opposition. But while the immediate mastery of the white man came to be contested by a temporary alliance between 'coolie' and local, the ultimate logic of the plantation system was not.

Tea enterprise would remain the great white hope for economic progress, and for the Indian planter who inherited the Assam gardens and their workforce from his British predecessor. Today, Celestial Seasonings, like so many other firms, advertises English Breakfast Tea as one of its main products, made from 'robust full-bodied brews' grown in Assam and Kenya.[99] Another firm uses Assam and Ceylon to manufacture its 'full-bodied and hearty' English Breakfast Tea.[100] Nonetheless, the inexorably falling prices of ever-cheapening primary commodities, which is the reality of the globalised marketplace, in tandem with the over-centralised nature of the Indian state's economic policies has meant that the extractive economy of Assam (and of other commodity-based regions) based on tea, timber and oil continues into the twenty-first century, in a not very different form from its colonial antecedents.

[99] http://www.celestialseasonings.com/products/black/deb.php
[100] http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B0000E223K/102-6538733-4933701?v=glance&n=3580501&s=gourmet-food