



The contribution of the early European Tea Planters in the growth & development of Darjeeling and Duars

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Abstract

After the discovery of the tea plant in Assam in 1823 by Robert Bruce, the East India Company took interest in tea plantation in India. Before that they had monopoly in China tea trade. With the monopoly removed, the Company took interest in tea cultivation in Assam, Darjeeling hills, Terai, Duars and other favourable parts of India. The European planters, particularly the British had played a definite role in the foundation of tea estates in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts and commercial tea plantation was introduced by them. Though they were helped by the ruling government, they had to face tremendous challenges due to the absence of modern conveniences in these areas. But they overcome all these difficulties and succeeded in their venture by their enthusiasm and optimism. Development of modern Darjeeling and Duars is partially attributed to these early European tea planters.

Key Words- Tea estates, European planters, Darjeeling, Duars, Contribution, Influence

Introduction: In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight the life and profile of the early European tea planters in Darjeeling & Duars and their influence in the growth and development of these areas. It was the British East India Company who introduced tea plantation in India. So long British East India Company enjoyed monopoly over China tea they had no design or desire to cultivate tea in India. But when they lost their monopoly over China tea in 1833 they started giving importance in planting tea in India.¹ Governor General Lord Bentinck had appointed a committee in 1838, to investigate the possibilities of cultivating tea in India.² But the honour of discovery of tea in India by Westerners is usually attributed to Robert Bruce who in 1823 had discovered tea plant with the help of Maniram Dewan in some hills near Rangpur, the then capital of Assam. But unfortunately he died in 1824 before he could collect the tea plants. It was C. A. Bruce,³ brother of Robert Bruce who planted tea seeds at Sadiya, eastern side of Brahmaputra valley. Gradually numerous tea tracts were discovered in Assam and in 1838 the first consignment of indigenous Assam tea, eight chests weighing 488 lbs, was sent to London.⁴

The period from 1860 to 1866 was a period of stupendous expansion of the tea industry. In the year 1885, in India, 114900 hectare was under tea cultivation when 32444 tons could be produced and 30,897 tons directly exported.⁵ By that time tea had started growing in Darjeeling hills and gradually in Terai, Duars & other favourable parts of India. Observing the growing demand of tea in European market, it was the British entrepreneurs who ventured in these climatically suited areas to grow tea. Thus they laid the foundation of tea plantation in India including Darjeeling & Jalpaiguri districts.

Darjeeling: The North Bengal district of Darjeeling situated in the Himalayas is famous for three T's - Tea, Timber & Tourism. Before British occupation, the district of Darjeeling was one vast primeval virgin forest, with few paths leading from Sikkim to the plains of India. During the 18th century, the Nepalese had conquered Sikkim, but in consequence of their defeat at the hands of General Ochterlony in 1815-1816, Sikkim was ceded to the British. The following year (1817) Sikkim was restored to the Sikkim puttee Rajah by the British and in 1828, Mr. J.W. Grant, the then Resident at Malda and Capt. Lloyd was sent to settle the boundary between Nepal and Sikkim. In consequence of their report and recommendations, the East India Company directed the Governor General Lord William Bentinck, to request permission to establish a sanatorium at Darjeeling for the benefit of Government officials and their families. In 1835, the district was ceded to the East India Company for an annual rental of Rs. 3000/-. The Terai was ceded in 1850 and the Kalimpong sub-division after the Bhutan war in 1865.⁶

In 1839, Dr. Campbell became the first superintendent of Darjeeling. He first started experimental tea plantation in Darjeeling at a height of 7000 ft. but frost and snow of that height injured the plants as did the hailstorms in spring.⁷ After that Major Crommelin began plantation in a lower valley called Lebung⁸ and according to the report of Dr. Hooker, 'the tea plants succeeds here admirably'.⁹ By 1856 development had advanced from the experimental to a more extensive and commercial stage.¹⁰ Tea had been raised from China seeds at Takvar by Captain Masson, at Kurseong by Mr. Smith, at Hope Town by another European, on the Kurseong flats by Mr. Martin and between Kurseong and Pankhabari by Captain Samler, agent of the Darjeeling tea company.¹¹ The same year saw the emergence of two more plantations in Darjeeling hills namely Aloorbari Tea Garden and one on the Lebung spur.¹² In 1859 the Dhutaria garden was started by Dr. Brougham and between 1860 and 1864 gardens at Ging, Ambutia, Takdah and Phubsering were established by the Darjeeling Tea Company.¹³ Tea planting in Darjeeling was soon followed by experimental plantations in the Terai and first garden was opened in Champta, near Khaprail by Mr. James White, in 1862.¹⁴

Due to the favourable climate and suitability of soil there was a rapid development in tea plantations. British planters were able to do so as the then East India Company encouraged exploration and establishment of tea companies. Land was made available on very nominal terms to companies on leasehold basis for a long period of about 90 years.¹⁵ In 1870 there were 56 gardens in the district with 11,000 acres under cultivation, employing 8000 labourers and giving a crop of nearly 1,708,000 lbs.¹⁶

Among the early European pioneers in Darjeeling we can mention the name of Rev. W. Start who opened his mission in 1840 and made the first attempt to reach the hill people through education.¹⁷ He was followed by a band of German missionaries who included the Warnickes, the Niebels and the Stolkes. Mr. Niebel devoted himself to school work. Mr. Stolke started planting out first commercial tea garden at Steinthal, later extending his tea planting to Rishihat. Wernicke family were the pioneers to introduce tea in the district on a commercial basis. Among them there were Andrew Wernicke, his brother Fred Warnicke who was an assistant on Captain Massons' estates at Takvar, Ernest Andrew Wernicke, eldest son of Andrew Wernicke who was the managing proprietor of Bannockburn Tea Estate. Later Warnicke family established their tea estates at Lingia & Tumsong. The Warnickes had discovered that Darjeeling tea possessed something, which was very rare. This was the intrinsic flavour of teas grown at high altitudes and they recognized the

differing flavours by such terms as lemon, strawberry, muscatel etc. Another early pioneer was George Watt Christisan, a Scottish who became the General Manager of Lebong Tea Company in 1864 and served the company for over 55 years.¹⁸

The early pioneers were themselves ignorant of scientific tea cultivation. Many of them indeed were soldiers, sailors, clerks, who had not the foggiest idea of how to grow tea. Their funds too were extremely limited, labour was scarce and unskilled, seed was precious and tea was a perennial crop. Tea would only be in bearing after years of labour and expenditure. Besides, the pioneers were, or most of them were, essentially practical men and they were not prepared to try out any pet theories or fancies on their own.¹⁹

“Tea planting in those days was a particularly an arduous job, entailing long hours in the field beginning at dawn and ending with dusk. The early planters had to be ‘jack of all trades.’ They had to manage all their problems themselves without the help of technical experts and scientific officers. They had to acquire a rough elementary knowledge of machinery and building, the making of tools and equipment. He had to be a bit of surveyor, as most roads were inclined to follow goat tracks and wood cutter’s paths. He had to study the transports of his crop and be an accountant to keep his own books. Besides, he should be a little bit of lawyer and even a judge to settle the dispute that would arise.”²⁰

Pioneer planters’ with limited capital and investment but unlimited enthusiasm and inexhaustible energy and optimism that made the tea gardens develop into commercial enterprises. With each new garden and every expansion of the existing one the imported labour population grew and the demography gradually changed. Larger population meant larger requirements of edibles, clothes, medicines and other necessities of daily requirements. Tea thus influenced the growth of markets in different sectors and on a broader view it influenced the growth and prosperity of the towns and villages in the vicinity of the plantations. Even the railways, which gave a huge spurt to tourism and trade in Darjeeling was inspired by the tea industry. A souvenir of 1921 says “The cultivation of tea had by this time developed remarkable and the industry had become firmly established. But the needs of this industry and the inconveniences suffered by the general public in tedious ascent by tongas soon led to dissatisfaction with this means of transit, and to the inception of laying of a steam tramway along the road from Siliguri to Darjeeling.”²¹

In those early days of Darjeeling planting racial hatreds and national bigotry were non-existent. The simple hill people were quick to realize and appreciate the organizing ability, the integrity and justice of the white man.²²

Duars: This district is also famous for three T’s - Tea, Timber & Tobacco, though the areas where the last product was grown has been transferred to East Pakistan (Today’s Bangladesh) by the Redcliff Award.

In order to trace the pioneering role of European planters in the district we have to know the history of the formation of the district. The Duars or the strip of country running along the base of the hills, was under the possession of Bhutan for a long period. East India Company first came into contact with Bhutan in 1772 when Bhutanese invaded Cooch Behar and Raja sought help from the Company which drove away the invaders. Gradually bitterness grew among them and second Anglo - Bhutan war broke out in 1864. Ultimately peace treaty was signed in 1865 by which Bhutan surrendered all the land covering eighteen Duars to the East India Company and the latter offered an annual grant of Rs. 25,000 to be hereafter increased up to the sum of Rs. 50,000.²³

Jalpaiguri district which includes the western Duars was formed in the year 1869. After the annexation of Duars, British government paid attention to develop tea plantation because they found that the soil and climate of the western Duars was suitable to the growth of tea, the Govt. offered land to investors on favourable terms and industry developed rapidly.

The first garden in the district was opened out at Gazilduba by Mr. Richard Haughton, the pioneer of tea industry in Jalpaiguri district and the garden was owned by Dr. Brougham.²⁴ Fulbari was the next place to be planted and was opened out by Mr. Pillans who gave his name to the market called Pillans Hat and was owned by Colonel Money.²⁵ Within a short period of 2-3 years tea plantation in the district increased rapidly. Before August 1877, when cultivation in the district was first started by an Indian planter Munshi Rahim Baksh, there were 13 estates, all of whom were owned by British entrepreneurs. Such as

<u>Name of the proprietor</u>	<u>Name of grant</u>	<u>Area (Acre)</u>	<u>Date of lease</u> ²⁶
1. W. F. West Field	Dalinkote	509.00	3.4.76
2. B. W. Money	Gandhabhul	795.00	26.5.76
3. I.F. Fasting	Rangatee	504.00	1.10.76
4. Kerr Tarrach & Co.	Bagrakote	320.00	5.10.76
5. H. Fisscher	-----	493.00	21.10.76
6. Mrs. Mackenzie	Bagrakote	59.00	8.1.77
7. R. Macdonald	Baintbaree Grant	676.00	Jan. 1877
8. Col. Edward Money	-----	500.00	20.1.77
9. Do	-----	500.00	20.1.76
10. W. S. Creswell	Bamandanga	645.00	30.1.77
11. J. Windram	Ellenbaree	253.00	July, 1877

The European planters formed their Association, the Dooars Planters Association in 1878, a body composed of European Managers, Assistant Managers, Supervisors etc.²⁷

Behind the rapid growth and prosperity of the European tea enterprise the colonial state had played a very important role. The British Indian government or its provincial and district level officials provided direct as well as indirect help and protection to the European planters. Administration of law and order, allotment of land, labour recruitment and control methods, promotion of transport and communication, forest policy, policy with regard to setting up of huts or weekly tea garden and village markets, taxation measures or administration of institutions like District Board - all were explicitly designed to help the European owned and European controlled tea plantation enterprise.²⁸

Land settlement policy of the govt. was also helpful for the early British planters. The govt. leased out lands - categorized as waste lands to the intending planters on specially favourable terms. Under the waste land rules introduced in 1896, a preliminary lease was made for a term of five years, the land being rent free for the first year and after that on a rental of 3 annas an acre for the second year and an additional 3 annas (approx. 19 paise) for each successive year upto 12 annas (approx. 75 paise) an acre. The govt. reserved the right to fix rents subjects to certain lower and upper limits.²⁹ Perhaps due to such a land policy the planters usually grabbed more lands and contributed to the prosperity of the tea industry.

Thus in the initial years the tea plantation enterprise in Jalpaiguri was under firm British control. While quite a large number of rupee companies were registered in India, the majority were sterling companies. But all of their capital was not brought from Britain, the bulk of capital was raised in India out of earnings of firms owned and managed by British citizens or of British individuals who

had made money out of various activities.³⁰ For example, Ellenbarrie and Manabarrie, two early Duars gardens were opened by a Calcutta bank manager, a Darjeeling planter and a sub-manager of the Land Mortgage Bank and later came to be managed by Duncan Brothers. Hope T. E. was started by the manager of a Darjeeling garden. Further, all the European companies had their management entrusted to one or other of the British owned managing agency house of Calcutta, which had interlocking interests in diverse activities. Thus Duncan Brothers which was very important in the Duars plantations had also substantial interests in jute manufacturing, insurance and several other activities.³¹

“Though the jotedar - adhiar system constituted one of the distinctive features of Jalpaiguri’s economy and society, the most significant one was the growth of a ‘capitalist’ enterprise in the form of tea plantation system. The introduction and growth of the tea plantation enterprise in the district were not the products of operation of indigenous economic forces but of exogenous development and requirements of the imperial order. Earnings from tea export along with those from other major Indian exports played a critical role in Britain’s international trade and capital flow relations in the maintenance of the British imperial system. Capital, enterprise and management were imported into the district, Even the unskilled labour needed by the industry was brought from a considerable distance and the involvement of the local people of the district was only marginal.”³²

Conclusion: The contribution and role of the European planters particularly the British planters of the initial tea plantation age is very much important. Let us imagine those earlier days when the pioneer British planters opened up different forest areas for growing tea with a spirit of adventure. There were no roads, no electricity, no telephones or other means to lead a sophisticated life. There is no denial of the fact that the early days were really tough. There were no signs of modern conveniences, yet the planters lived their life to the fullest. Life was not easy, but they enjoyed the planter life. It was they who had guaranteed to do what they could in the given conditions. The credit for the development of Duars mostly goes to those early planters. Although the Duars was a mostly unhealthy area, where malaria and black water fever were rife, climatically there was much to recommend it as a tea growing area and British planters realized this. If tea plantation had not been introduced, the history of the area would have been different. Although small townships did not immediately develop around the plantation areas like Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and other towns owe a lot of their prosperity to the tea industry. These towns became the supply areas for tea plantations and the workers daily needs and even today much of the people in the Duars depend on the industry for employment, education, health and business. The tea garden today is the largest organized sector of employment in West Bengal. In Darjeeling also due to the contribution of the pioneers of Planters Raj era the famous brew had obtained a legendary reputation. Social, economic and political life of Duars and Darjeeling systematized when pioneer planters laid the foundation of tea.

Tea plantation industry in India was started by the Europeans, flourished under their patronization and participation. But the domination by the European planters gradually declined in the second half of the 20th century and in the de-colonization phase the number of the European planters became insignificant. But there is no denying that the early European planters shaped today’s Duars, Darjeeling hills & Terai. Though they sacrificed much for tea there is hardly any biography, autobiography or written history on them. The role of early Europeans in the history of tea industry has remained unexplored, unknown and unwritten even today.

However, it is an acknowledged fact that if today's planters seriously want the promotion of the tea industry, they must follow the management discipline of the European planters. Discipline with humanitarian approach can only enhance the promotion and expansion of the to-day's tea industry. The Early European Planters' perseverance patience and patriotism must be restored by the professionalized and the commercialized planters of the present era so that the plantation owners, the management, the workers and the public at large are benefitted socially and economically.

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