Tea in India: A Colonial Industry That Became Its Own

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea in India, in summary:** India's huge tea industry is not ancient: the British built it in the nineteenth century to break China's monopoly, on India's native Assam plant and on coercive plantation labour. It later became a genuine, indigenous culture, chai and all. A truthful history holds both.

India is one of the largest tea producers and consumers on earth, and the single most useful fact is that this enormous industry is not ancient: it was deliberately created by the British in the nineteenth century to break China's monopoly, built on India's own native Assam tea plant and on colonial plantation labour. The pride of Indian tea today is real, and so is the uncomfortable way it began, and a complete history holds both.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

Tea in India was a colonial project

Unlike China, where tea drinking is millennia old, large-scale tea growing in India was a deliberate British creation, an imperial import-substitution scheme to escape dependence on Chinese tea and the silver-and-opium problem behind it. The Scottish explorer Robert Bruce documented wild tea growing in Assam in 1823; a Tea Committee was formed in Calcutta by 1834; the first Indian-grown tea reached the London auction by 1838; and by the 1850s plantations had spread across Assam, Darjeeling and the Nilgiris. The gamble worked: by 1900 India supplied most of Britain's tea, and the East India Company's experiment had become a vast colonial industry.

Assam, Darjeeling and Nilgiri

Assam, in the north-east, produces about half of India's tea, mostly CTC (crush-tear-curl) black tea built for milky breakfast cups, from the indigenous assamica variety: malty, full-bodied and robust, the backbone of most British breakfast blends. Darjeeling, in the Himalayan foothills of West Bengal, uses mostly the Chinese sinensis variety in cooler mountain air to give a much lighter, floral, aromatic tea, and holds a protected geographical-indication status like Champagne, though counterfeiting remains widespread. Nilgiri, in the Blue Mountains of Tamil Nadu, gives bright, brisk high-grown teas, less famous but increasingly seen in single-origin ranges. Kangra, Sikkim, Munnar and the Dooars add character at smaller tonnage.

The chai story: marketed into existence

People often assume Indians have drunk chai for millennia, but the mass adoption of spiced milky tea as a national daily drink was largely the deliberate work of the colonial-era Indian Tea Association from the 1910s to the 1930s, which ran chai-walla training, subsidised tea stalls at railway stations, and pushed sweetened milky tea as cheap, energising and modern. By the 1950s chai was woven into Indian life; by the 1990s the West had "rediscovered" it as exotic. Both stories are true and both are recent. To make it properly, simmer black loose leaf (Assam works) with crushed cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, fresh ginger and black pepper in water, then add milk and sugar to taste; the supermarket teabag version is a pale shadow.

Labour, then and now

The non-negotiable part of the story is labour. The plantations ran on indentured workers, predominantly recruited from Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Chota Nagpur and transported to Assam under contracts historians describe as functional debt bondage, with high death rates and the 1859 Workmen's Breach of Contract Act making it a criminal offence to leave the plantation. Independence in 1947 did not resolve the structural issues: the Plantation Labour Act 1951 set minimum wages, housing and welfare standards, but enforcement has been patchy and estate wages remain among the lowest in the formal Indian economy. Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and Ethical Tea Partnership certifications now cover many estates, and consumer pressure has driven some improvement, so the picture today is a mix of progress, ongoing struggle and worker activism.

How tea became Indian

The other half is that, although the industry was imposed, tea genuinely became India's own. Across the twentieth century, through independence and after, India built an immense domestic tea culture, became a major independent producer (around 1.3 million tonnes a year, second only to China, with roughly 80% consumed at home) and the largest consumer of its own tea. So "Indian tea" is simultaneously a colonial invention and a genuine, now-indigenous culture, and a truthful account neither erases the exploitative origin nor denies the authentic living tradition that grew from it.

What "Darjeeling first flush" means

Darjeeling is harvested in distinct seasons. First flush (mid-March to mid-April) gives the lightest, most floral cup, often pale gold with muscatel notes; second flush (May to June) is fuller and more amber with classic muscatel; the monsoon flush (July to September) is lower-grade blending tea; and the autumnal flush (October to November) is mellower. First flush is the most expensive and the most counterfeited, since by some industry estimates more "Darjeeling" is sold each year than the region actually produces, so for the real thing, buy from a specialist who can name the estate.

Why this history matters in the cup

It matters because much of the world's everyday black tea, and a good deal of what is in a standard teabag, is Indian, and its abundance and cheapness are inseparable from how the industry was built. Knowing that lets you enjoy a genuinely great tea nation's output, Assam's malt, Darjeeling's muscatel, Nilgiri's brightness, while understanding where the industry came from and why ethical sourcing is part of the conversation. Watch equally for the romantic colonial narrative (the labour was not dignified) and for blanket condemnation

that erases modern Indian agency (India has run its own respected industry for nearly 80 years).

Tea in India at a glance

Question	Answer
When did tea growing start?	1830s in Assam, scaled by the East India Company from the 1840s
Was tea native to India?	Yes, assamica grew wild in Assam, but tea-drinking culture is mostly post-colonial
Why did the British plant it?	To break China's monopoly and reduce the silver outflow
Labour conditions?	Indentured workers from Bihar, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, close to debt bondage
Production today	Around 1.3 million tonnes a year, second after China, about 80% drunk at home
Main regions	Assam (CTC black), Darjeeling (delicate black), Nilgiri (high-grown), plus Kangra, Sikkim, Munnar, Dooars

You can drink Indian tea without guilt, but it is worth drinking with awareness. The companion history of the tea trade and Opium Wars pages set the wider context, and you can explore the output, from robust Assam to delicate Darjeeling, in the full tea shop.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Per-cup price is the only price that matters. Loose leaf usually wins; supermarket bags sometimes do too.

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