

From British to Indians: A Study on Ownership Changes in the Tea Industry of North Bengal

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Abstract: *The control and ownership of tea estates in North Bengal were overwhelmingly under the Europeans. Immediately after World War II and the Indian independence, the European tea estates changed hands with the Indians. It was a process that began in the 1940s when the tea plantation enclaves were being threatened in various ways. The serious slump in 1919 – 1920 gave a serious blow to the foreign tea companies in India. They fell from 66 to 55 percent of the total and the number owned privately from 19 to 11 percent. The transfer of ownership from foreign companies to Indian companies started during 1939 – 1945. The decline of the London Auction Market and the coming up of the Calcutta Auction Market in 1947 alarmed the British tea planters. The Tebhaga movement, in which many tea garden workers participated with their kin among the ex-tea workers who were sharecroppers, also contributed to the sense of fundamental changes among the British planters. As a result, the European tea companies began to shift their business to South Africa, Uganda, and Rhodesia after selling their gardens to the native Indians. These Indians began to form limited liability companies under the management of mainly Indian agency houses and boards of directors. Thus the post – 1947 environment was ripe for the transfer of ownership in the tea plantation industry of North Bengal.*

Keywords: Ownership, Economic Depression, World War II, Tebhaga, Partition of India, Marwari traders

The beginning of the tea plantation industry in Bengal was originally initiated and developed by British enterprises. The British developed Darjeeling, first as a sanatorium for the European and secondly, as a place where tea could be cultivated. J.D. Herbert in his survey report has recommended Darjeeling as a station of health for European troopers mainly for its cold climate, so pleasant and different from the plains.¹

Archibald Campbell introduced tea in Darjeeling. He first served at the Residence in Nepal for eight years. Later he was posted to Darjeeling in 1839 in place of Captain Lloyd. For the next 22 years, Campbell served as the Superintendent of Darjeeling. He encouraged the Nepali immigration in

Darjeeling who later largely contributed to developing the basic administrative infrastructure and roadways of the hill town.² His first endeavour to produce tea started with the seeds of Kumaon which he collected from Nathaniel Wallich, the Director of the Botanical Garden at Calcutta in November 1841. After five years, he further procured seeds from Assam with the same purpose. In his very attempt, he could not succeed. The Journal of the Agri – Horticultural Society of India reported that similar results have been obtained in Mussoorie. The tea plant would thrive up to the altitude of 6500 feet. Being overwhelmingly impressed with his report, Campbell distributed seeds in Darjeeling hill and many of them succeeded in growing tea. After tea, later he started to establish Cinchona plantations through private enterprise. He also tried to grow cotton.³

In Jalpaiguri, there were 18 Sterling tea companies and 33 British Rupee Public Limited tea companies.⁴ These companies employed agents or secretaries in Calcutta to implement the policies and programmes formulated by the Board of Directors in London. The management of the estates of various Sterling and British Rupee Public Limited tea companies were vested in the British Managing Agency Houses of Calcutta.⁵ They played an important role in converting either a personal lease or proprietary estate into a public limited company.⁶ Ellenbarrie and Manabarrie Tea Estate in Jalpaiguri *Duars* were established by a Calcutta Bank manager, a Darjeeling planter and sub-manager of the Land Mortgage Bank and later came to be managed by Duncan Brothers.⁷ The Hansqua Tea Estate was established by Mr. Arthur Currie in 1865. Mr. Currie sold this property to Messrs R.D. Hamilton and C. F. A. Deney in 1913. Mr. D. F. Clive was the manager of this garden from 1913 to 1917. Following some misunderstanding, Mr. Deney sold his interest to Mr. Hamilton in 1916 and left for his own country England the very next year. Mr. Hamilton also established another Tea Estate namely Gaya Ganga Tea Estate in year 1916 and appointed his nephew Mr. A. Robertson as the manager of the garden. Since then Mr. Hamilton along with his nephew continued to reside at Gaya Ganga Tea Estate. The factory of both garden was established in the year 1926. Duncan brothers formed the Hansqua Tea Co. Ltd. and purchased the Hansqua Tea Estate from Mr. A. Robertson in 1934 along with the Gaya Ganga Tea Estate.⁸

Besides the white tea planters, the Indian tea planters played a pivotal role in introducing the tea plantation industry in North Bengal. Among them, the Bengali lawyers ranked first. There were also another group of entrepreneurs of Jalpaiguri⁹ and Siliguri¹⁰ like Zamindars, Jotedars, timber merchants, ex-tea garden employees, Bankers, money lenders, Government professionals, labour suppliers of numerous tea estates.¹¹ All of them migrated here from various parts of undivided Bengal for the sake of administrative and economic interest.¹² The formation of the Jalpaiguri district in the year 1869 opened up some new opportunities on a hitherto unprecedented scale.¹³ The residents of the Jalpaiguri district could not respond effectively to the new opportunities. Hence all the positions were filled up by the immigrant

population from the rest of Bengal as well as from outside. A nebular social stratification began to take shape there during that period which indeed made the platform for the rise of the Bengali entrepreneurs of Jalpaiguri town.¹⁴ The Jalpaiguri Gazetteer is clear about this fact and it reads that "After the formation of Jalpaiguri district with its headquartering at Jalpaiguri town and sub-divisional headquarter at Alipurduar, the district began to attract educated Hindu gentry from various parts of East Bengal. The administration needed clerks and lawyers. Once the clerks and lawyers came and settled down there, their needs attracted doctors and teachers. Thus a process of urbanization set in."¹⁵

Nevertheless, as a newly formed district obviously, Jalpaiguri had a special attraction for the lawyers. To affix the land – revenue in the newly formed Jalpaiguri district as well as civil suits on land and attestations of land – titles shot up the demand for pleaders. They were sought out by the Jotedars zealous to defend their claims. Moreover, fresh demands also come from various European Tea Companies of having a law agent to deal with legal matters mainly in connection with the land. It resulted in the migration of several qualified pleaders in Jalpaiguri from various districts of East Bengal. It is true that in this process those who come to Jalpaiguri were earlier retained by the Bhutan Government for the Bengal – Bhutan boundary demarcation. It helped them a lot to establish themselves as successful lawyer towards the *Jotedars* as well as for the European Tea Companies. That an environment such as this should favour legal practitioners was no wonder. Almost all of the first groups of Bengali pleaders were the law agents of the European Tea Companies. This experience helped them to establish a tea estate of their own in future.¹⁶ They started with very small capitals which they could gather. Practically it was an association of poor men determined to do a big thing.¹⁷

Thus we may say that except for the Bengalees, we could not find any other Indian community that put their step in this economic venture majorly before independence. The Marwaris during that period entered the tea business, not indeed as producers but as purchasers of tea from small village growers for sale to local tribal people.¹⁸ Though the ownership of European tea estates in Darjeeling hill changed hands to the non-Bengalis (among them the Marwaris, Gujratis ranked first) during the World economic depression of the 1930's no serious changes took place in the field of ownership until 1947. Immediately after World War II and the Indian independence, the European tea estates changed hands with the Indians. It was a process that began in the 1940s when the tea plantation enclaves were being threatened in various ways. The special status of Darjeeling as a European sanatorium diminished with the exodus of both the British planters and civil and military officials. At this time, the British planters comprised mostly the European population of the region.¹⁹

The serious slump in 1919 – 19120 gave a serious blow to the foreign tea companies in India. They fell from 66 to 55 per cent of the total and the

number owned privately from 19 to 11 per cent. The transfer of ownership from foreign companies to Indian companies started during 1939 – 1945. The decline of the London Auction Market and the coming up of the Calcutta Auction Market in 1947 alarmed the British tea planters. Thus the post – 1947 environment was ripe for the transfer of ownership.²⁰

By creating formidable barriers to the entry of 'natives', colonial firms maintained an oligopolistic position in eastern India up to 1947. These barriers were created and efficiently maintained because of a milieu that allowed Anglo – Saxon businessmen to reap the benefits of their bonds of racial affinity with the rulers of the land. With the snapping of such bonds in 1947, the colonial firms fell from grace and made a hasty retreat from India. Unfortunately, this argument has factual problems. Although some British managing agencies packed up after 1947, many others remained. Even in 1960, Calcutta had Andrew Yule, Gillanders and others that were still under British control and the expatriate community continued to enjoy the privilege of sunbathing in exclusive whites-only swimming clubs, even preventing Indian entry into the hallowed premises of the Bengal club right up to the late 1960s.

The structure of the development of tea estates particularly its ownership and management pattern took place when the Capital Issue Control Act was implemented in 1947. This provided that all joint-stock companies operating in the country whether registered in India or abroad will have to obtain official permission for bonus issue of all types of securities (shares and debentures) and in certain cases, the authorities had the right to refuse the permission for the capital issue. The joint-stock tea companies faced difficulties in declaring bonuses and getting permission for the capital issue. Under this situation, some of the tea estates owned by foreign companies transferred their ownership to Indian hands who were either Indian rupee companies or agency houses whether Indian or non – Indians. The changes in the structural development of the tea industry received further momentum when the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, of 1947 and Export Import Control Act, of 1947 were also implemented. The foreign tea companies were restricted to earn foreign exchange and were compelled to take official permission to import any commodity. They were supposed to be guided by the rules and regulations of the act which specified the conditions of payments (like cash, instalments or long-term credit) under which goods could be imported and also decided the countries from where the commodities could be purchased by specifying the foreign exchange. The Acts, thus, established the ways of restricting competition among foreign companies, securing the domestic market for local producers and utilizing foreign exchange most rationally. Given the above, some of the foreign companies faced difficulties in expanding tea cultivation and thereby production and desired to sell their tea estates to Indian nationals. The Indians subsequently converted them into different types of ownership viz. public limited, private limited and property concerns. Henceforth, they came under the management of mainly Indian agency

houses, board of directors, managing partners and individuals.²¹

The European tea companies were also affected by the Minimum Wages Act of 1947 and the Factory Act of 1948. The Minimum Wages Act provided that wages in the tea plantation industry were to be fixed and notified by the respective Governments from time to time. The Factory Act contained various provisions limiting the permissible hours to work of factory labour. The foreign companies which mainly dominated the tea plantation industry thus feared the possibility of low production of tea under the implementation of these acts and found it unprofitable to run business in India after meeting all the expenditures.²² Moreover, incessant interceptions like protests, gheraos organized by the trade unions and of course the slogan "*Bilati Malik London Bhago*" (white tea planters Go Back London) raised during the *Tebhaga* movement compelled the European planters to think about whether they would retain their business in India or not?²³ The *Tebhaga* movement, in which many tea garden workers participated with their kin among the ex-tea workers who were sharecroppers, also contributed to the sense of fundamental changes among the British planters.²⁴ As a result the European tea companies began to shift their business to South Africa, Uganda, and Rhodesia after selling their gardens to the native Indians.²⁵ These Indians began to form limited liability companies under the management of mainly Indian agency houses and boards of directors.

The foreign tea companies thus realized that their gardens might not be profitable and changed their ownership and thereby management. Foreign companies were badly hit due to the Industrial Development and Regulation Act of 1951. They were required to register with the corresponding government agencies and obtain licenses permitting them to operate. Official licenses were made compulsory if a new industrial project was launched. In certain cases, the authorities were given the power to refuse registration or declare the license invalid. Moreover, the authorities assumed the right to inspect the activities of all private enterprises. In the case of unsatisfactory management (chronic financial loss, instability, violation of national interest or threat of national unemployment), the authorities had the right to take them over for a few years. The foreign-owned tea estates which mainly dominated the tea industry, apprehended nationalization and decided to change their ownership to Indian hands.²⁶ The Tea Act of 1953 restricted the cultivation of tea in India and the export of tea from India. The foreign tea companies thus felt further handicapped on account of this act.

The companies that survived the 1930s and 1940s and fought off Indian intrusion remained after 1947 and were reasonably prosperous until the mid-1960s when they were finally sold to Marwaris, Gujratis. The ones that packed up did not do so because the Raj had come to an end. They were inefficient, cash-strapped managing agencies that had lost the battle in the 1930s and early 1940s in the economic, not the political arena. Deeply in debt, these companies were bought up by their old Banias. For example, we can mention that Duncan's Group was bought up by Mr. Keshav Prasad Goenka;

MacLeod Russel by Mr. Radha Kissen Kanoria.²⁷

To clarify the scenario some examples are given below-

Longview Tea Estate

This tea estate was incorporated on 16 January 1879 by James Warren and Company Ltd. (formerly known as Planter's Stores and Agency Co. Ltd.) who had been looking after the management of the company as secretary and treasurer, registered on 31 January 1950.²⁸ In 1970 the ownership of this tea estate was transferred to Dagapur Tea Co. Ltd., Jalpaiguri, a private company incorporated in the year 1933 under Indian Companies Act 1913. The Daga family has also promoted other industrial enterprises including Deepak spinners Ltd, Deepak Industries Ltd and continental profiles Ltd.²⁹

Bagdogra Tea Estate

This tea estate was incorporated by E.F. Southern and Others. It was sold to Late Maithan Das Agarwala in 1956. He along with his son Sri Ajit Prasad Agarwala formed Terai Tea Co. Ltd This company now possesses 8 tea estates under its management. However, all these estates were sold both from the British and Bengali tea companies.³⁰

Lohagarh Tea Estate

This tea estate was incorporated by Octavious Steel Company Ltd. Later its ownership was transferred to National Indian Traders Pvt. Ltd in the 1960s. Their head office was at 49, Stephen House B.B.D. Bag, Kol-1. On 15 April 1976, the ownership of this tea estate was further transferred to Maithan Das Agarwala.³¹

Atal and Singhton Tea Estate

These two estates were incorporated by Andrew Yule and Co. Ltd. It was primarily a managing agency that made its money in trade or as a labour contractor in tea estates. Andrew Yule started in the trade and entered the fields of coal and steamships before they took up the jute industry. Later they started their venture in the tea industry.³² Their first venture in the tea industry in the Terai region was the Atal Tea Estate and Singhton Tea Estate in Darjeeling hill. Later these two estates were purchased by Sri N.C. Goenka, a trader from Kurseong in 1947.³³

Chunijhora T.E., Jayanti T.E., Phanskhowa T.E., Bhatpara T.E.

These four tea estates lying in the border area of Bhutan were incorporated by McLeod Russel India Ltd, a group of William Magor and Company with its head office in London. Two Englishmen namely Captain J.H. Williamson and Richard Boycott Magor based in Calcutta formed a partnership firm Williamson Magor and Company to service the requirements of tea estates in North-East India under the flagship of McLeod Russel and Company. The office was originally at 7 new China Bazar Street, Calcutta before they moved to Four Mango Lane in 1894 where the company is still located today. It was renamed as Williamson Magor and Company Limited.³⁴ When it changed its status to a limited company in 1954 Brijmohan Khaitan, an East Indian merchant who used the tea estates of this company with fertilizers and tea chests, was asked to join the board of the company in 1963 and he became the

Managing Director of the Company in 1964. In 1967 the Guthrie family in the U.K. sold their all shares in the McLeod Russel group which included the Makum and Namdung Tea Companies to the Khaitan family, making the Macneill and Magor group. In 1992 Macneill and Magor group was renamed Williamson Magor and Company Ltd. It was originally incorporated as Ever Ready Company India Pvt. Ltd on 5 May 1998. The company's tea is marketed under the registered Elephant trade mark. The present Managing Director of the company including the tea estates is Aditya Khaitan.³⁵

Table-1
Change of Ownership from 1949 - 1970

| Categories | Ownership in 1947 | | Ownership in 1970 | |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------|
| | Indian | Non – Indian | Indian | Non- Indian |
| Proprietary | 31 | 08 | 32 | – |
| Private | 01 | – | 12 | – |
| Public Limited | 11 | 10 | 41 | – |
| Sterling | – | 40 | – | 16 |
| | 43 | 58 | 85 | 16 |
| | Total 101 | | Total 101 | |

Source: Rohit Sharma, Trade Union Movement in the Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills, PhD Thesis, University of North Bengal, 2003, p. 187

It was also found that several foreign tea companies, after going back to their own country again came back to India, though were few. A few were merged with Big Houses to economies the expenditure, reduce the cost of production and improve the quality of tea. According to the Tea Board of India, fifty companies were merged with other tea companies or formed under new names during the period 1955-1975. The Goodricke Tea Company, having its headquarter in London, was further incorporated in India on 14 June 1977 and the certificate of commencement of business was obtained on 27 June 1977. It was formed to take over the Indian business and assets of eight sterling tea companies comprising 17 Tea Estates. in terms of the scheme of amalgamation sanctioned by the Calcutta High Court the company acquired the Indian undertakings of the sterling companies as a going concern with all their assets and liabilities as at the close of business of 31 December. Now it has eight tea companies The *Assam – Dooars* Tea Company Limited, *Hope* Tea Company Limited, *Lebong Chulsa* Tea Company Limited, The Darjeeling Tea Company Limited, *Chulsa* Tea Company Limited, *Leesh River* Tea Company Limited, *Denguajhar* Tea Company Limited, *Meenglass* Tea Company Limited. These are amalgamated with the Goodricke tea Company since 31 December 1977. However, some examples are given below to help the readers to know how many tea estates which were worked earlier under Indian management are now being owned and controlled by this foreign tea Company.³⁶

Table-2

| Name of the Tea Estate | Previous Lease | Present Lease | Date of Transfer |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. Gendrapara | Assam – Duars Tea Company Limited | Goodricke Group | 09/08/1980 |
| 2. Laxmipara | Assam – Duars Tea Company Limited | Goodricke Group | 09/08/1980 |
| 3. Dalimkote | Meenglas Tea Company Limited | Goodricke Group | 09/08/1980 |
| 4. Patibari | Lesh River Tea Company Limited | Goodricke Group | 09/08/1980 |
| 5. Hope | Hope Tea Company Limited | Goodricke Group | 09/08/1980 |
| 6. Aibheel | Chalsa Tea Company Limited | Goodricke Group | 09/08/1980 |

(Source: Touji Department, District Magistrate Office, Jalpaiguri)

The question may arise that why most of the European tea estates were sold only to the non – Bengalis, not to the Bengalis. Though a large number of Bengali tea planters were there. Several reasons were responsible for this situation -

Firstly, the Bengali tea planters always fought against the British Government either to set up their gardens or even to set up their own economic identity by establishing various tea associations like “Indian Tea Planter’s Association” (ITPA) in Jalpaiguri town and “Terai Indian Planter’s Association” (TIPA) in Matigara, Siliguri. What is more interesting is the recognition of the Indian Planters’ Associations like *ITPA*, *TIPA* by even the ruling British planters against whom the founder has waged a persistent *Jehad* right from the moment of its birth against the mechanization of British influence. They could not deny the popularity of these Associations despite their bitter feeling towards them.³⁷

Secondly, the Bengali tea planters like Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Sashi Bhushan Neyogi, and Tarini Prasad Roy had a major role in India’s Freedom Struggle by affording all sorts of assistance to the freedom fighters or even participating in the *Swadeshi* movement.³⁸ So we could see that from the very beginning a monstrous tussle was there between the European and Bengali tea planters.

Thirdly, though a large number of Bengali tea planters were there they were not in a position to buy another tea estate on account of their weak financial condition and feudal lifestyle. The drastic fall in tea prices in the 1970s and 1980s hit their tea estates badly. They had no reserve fund at all to survive their tea estates during this financial depress condition. So, under the circumstances, they couldn’t buy another tea estate owned by the Europeans rather than surviving their tea estates.

This opportunity was engulfed by the Marwari, and Gujrati traders as a whole during the economic depression in the 1930s and most importantly after independence. Their relationship with the European firms as managing agents or as a broker brought to them the opportunity of buying the tea estates from the European companies. The European tea companies often appointed a guaranteed broker, colloquially "Banian", usually remunerated with a one percent commission on sales, who had to guarantee the trustworthiness of other Indian businessmen who dealt with the firm. Sometimes the relationship between the guaranteed broker and the European firm was far closer than the simple relationship. For example, the Goenka group were closely related to the Duncans; Tarachand Ghanshyamdas itself became Banian to Wallace Tea Company; Radha Kissen Kanoria was closely related with the McLeod and Co. from 1887.³⁹ Timberg observes that where opportunities were less or competition potent, they moved less rapidly. Their migration was rapid to those fields which formed, in the words of Timberg, a "commercial vacuum" where the indigenous population were neither well organized nor provided with the other requisites to exploit the new trading opportunities opened up by the British.⁴⁰ This type of privilege was available in the tea industry of North Bengal since independence but the Bengalis, the pioneer tea planters among the Indians after the British could not grab the opportunity due to their financial weakness.⁴¹ In addition to that the long – absence of any Indian merchant in the tea industry of North Bengal helped the Marwaris to buy the tea estates from foreign tea companies.⁴² The frequent changes in ownership brought about a new class of people as owners of tea gardens. The Biharis who previously acted as ration suppliers and country-made liquors became the owners of different tea gardens in Darjeeling hill.

Lastly, the most notable feature about this community is that they always present themselves as a closed-knit community anywhere in this vast country. They used to take good care of each other and provided food and shelter to those who would come later to try their luck. Sometimes they would even collectively contribute a small amount of money so that one newly arrived could start a business of one's own. Due to this attitude, this community now stands as the major owner of tea estates not even in North Bengal but all over India.⁴³

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