

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# **Sipping the Cup on Wheels: Contextualizing Tea and Indian Railway in Select Tea Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

Tea culture in India has a rich history closely linked with the Indian Railways. Both were introduced by the British colonizers who planned and executed the setup in India. The railways and tea have had a significant impact on the life and culture of the country. In the post-colonial era, the railways and tea have become complementary, further strengthening their relationship. Throughout this article, a thorough analysis has been conducted to carefully select particular tea narratives that provide detailed descriptions and insightful analysis regarding the various contexts in which tea is consumed while traveling on Indian railways. The paper also highlights the efforts made by Indian authors to create an environment that seamlessly blends foreign concepts with Indian values. Despite initial hurdles and challenges, these ideas have been transformed into Indian versions and widely accepted by the Indian population. The article delves into the cultural significance of tea consumption during train journeys and its impact on Indian society over time.

**Keywords:** Tea, Indian Railways, British, Colonizers.

Tea drinking and travel have a long-standing relationship in the Indian context, with tea being an integral part of Indian life and culture. Although it took time for tea to become a part of Indian culture and identity, through a gradual process of assimilation and association with daily life, it eventually became a staple in the Indian beverage repertoire. Overcoming early inhibitions, people from different strata of society came to accept tea as a refreshing medium in social and cultural settings.

The article of Lisa See titled “In Search of the Source of Tea” deals a lot about the early myths and the origins of tea. Tea, according to Lisa, “is the second most” widely consumed beverage in the world after “water”. According to mythology, Emperor Shen Nung, also known as the “Divine Husbandman,” discovered tea accidentally in 2737 B.C. when some tea leaves fell into his boiling water. With a history spanning over 4,700 years, tea has been grown in many countries such as India, Nepal, Japan, Kenya, and other nations located within the mountainous regions between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn (See).

This deep connection with tea is also reflected in the Indian Railways, where tea has a special place. The railways have played a significant role in spreading the love of tea throughout India, as train journeys have become synonymous with the enjoyment of this refreshing beverage. Whether sipping tea in the comfort of a train compartment or enjoying a cup at a bustling railway station, tea and travel have become inextricably linked to the Indian experience.

It is a fascinating historical fact that both tea and the Indian Railways were introduced to India by the British. However, the railways proved more significant than tea for the British, as they faced the challenge of covering the vast and expansive Indian subcontinent, which was difficult to navigate and explore in a single day. Therefore, establishing the Indian Railways in 1853 was a remarkable initiative by the British to quickly overcome the distance and reach remote areas. Initially, the Indian Railways were operational only between Bombay and Thane,

but as time passed, the network expanded, proving highly beneficial for British administrators, army personnel, and other officials. However, for Indian travellers, access to better amenities was not available for a considerable period.

In her thought-provoking article, Mohona Kanjilal explores how the British government utilized Indian Railways to expand their business by providing free cups of tea and targeting women. Kanjilal's article "How the British Used India, Free Cups, and Targeted Women to Make Indian Tea Drinkers," sheds light on the historical context of tea drinking in India. Kanjilal puts in the following ways:

The first and most important place where these experiments were conducted was the Indian Railways. Not only were free cups of prepared tea distributed to the public at the Howrah railway station in Calcutta, but paper packets of tea (of such quality that would not find favour at auctions) were sold to them for one pice (a monetary unit of very low denomination in British India). (Kanjilal)

Furthermore, Indians were only allowed to travel in lower-class compartments initially, and class discrimination towards them was prevalent not only in social and cultural life but also in the travelling compartments. This discrimination is the central theme of Khuswant Singh's "Karma," a short story that portrays the struggle of Indians to gain equal rights and privileges as British citizens. In the story, the protagonist, a well-educated Indian man who recently returned from England, purchases a first-class ticket for the train compartment. However, when some British soldiers find an Indian man sitting in the first-class compartment, they perceive it to be against the social hierarchy and the kind of snobbery they maintain. Consequently, they throw the protagonist, along with his luggage, off the train at the platform. At the same time, his wife, travelling in a separate compartment for women, remains unaware of the incident.

This story highlights the status conferred on Indians by the British, which was discriminatory and unequal, with Indians being relegated to lower-class compartments even in

their own country. It also demonstrates the struggle for equality and the desire for access to better amenities and privileges, which only became available to Indians after the departure of the British from India. Overall, the Indian Railways played a vital role in connecting the vast Indian subcontinent and played a significant role in the country's history, both before and after independence.

The relationship between tea and the Indian Railway is remarkable and distinctive. It symbolizes the development and progress of the nation and reflects the process of establishing a unique identity and sense of richness through diverse mechanisms and dynamic forces. Tea and railways were complementary - tea being the fuel and energy that propelled the railways to new heights of achievement and success. Both tea and railways were products of the 19th century. It is worth noting that tea was readily available to all Indian citizens in early India. However, due to restrictions imposed by the British during their rule, Indians were confined within their own country and could not move around as they pleased. These restrictions were prevalent in nearly every aspect of life and were evident in something as simple as drinking tea while traveling on trains. Since tea was considered a luxury item, the average Indian could not enjoy it regardless of class, creed, or social status.

Nevertheless, the journey of tea from being a luxury item to a drink of the common people is fascinating. During the British period, an impenetrable circle around the British planters prevented the indigenous people from entering. There were several clubhouses where Indians were not allowed to participate, with signs reading "Dogs and Indians are not allowed" (Baghel). The issue of "restriction" and the deliberate "space" between the British planters and the Indian common folk is particularly noteworthy. However, the planters understood that to do business in India, they needed to minimize this space. They realized that if tea were converted into a common drink for all, they would benefit from a huge market in India. Therefore, they started lowering the price of tea to be accessible to everyone.

It is widely acknowledged that Indian Railways played a crucial role in popularising tea amongst the masses in India. The railway tracks facilitated tea distribution to remote areas of the country, and tea stalls on railway platforms became a common feature nationwide. However, it is worth noting that British agencies primarily drove the early tea promotion in India through various forms of advertising, including colourful posters and sketches. These promotional materials were abundant and widespread, contributing significantly to the drink's popularity in the country. While the role of the railways and British agencies in promoting tea in India is well documented, there needs to be more information available on the role of All India Radio in this regard. However, it is known that many literary figures and prominent individuals were requested to share their views on promoting tea to the masses. Rabindranath Tagore, a celebrated pre-Independence era personality, was among those who contributed to promoting tea in India.

Interestingly, how tea was promoted in India took a different turn in later years. While literary figures and accomplished individuals played a crucial role in the early days, film actors and actresses later became instrumental in promoting tea. It is fascinating how tea promotion in India evolved, with different strategies to capture the public's attention.

The offer of free tea in India was a highly attractive proposition that many individuals could not resist. The people who initially tried the free tea became addicted to its taste and aroma, and they soon became regular customers, purchasing tea in the Indian market. Interestingly, tea consumption in India was once considered a luxury only enjoyed by the elite. However, it eventually became a drink for the commoners and the masses. This transformation of tea-drinking practices significantly impacted the social dynamics and interactions among the commoners. The process of diluting class status and promoting social assimilation remained a unique phenomenon during British rule in India, and it became even more pronounced after the declaration of Indian independence. India is a country that has a long-standing history of

class division, and the concept of inclusivity is deeply ingrained in its cultural fabric. However, inclusivity and brotherhood can often become artificial and superficial regarding business matters, promotion, material benefits, and other monetary gains. The desire for financial gain often overshadows any genuine sense of camaraderie or closeness, and once the monetary gain is achieved, such shallow relationships tend to evaporate quickly. It is imperative to acknowledge that India's journey towards becoming a more inclusive and egalitarian society is ongoing, and it requires constant effort and attention to ensure that all individuals are treated with fairness and respect.

The British planters were astute in their understanding of the psychology of the Indian natives. They recognized that if they could instill a sense of familiarity and cultural significance, tea as a drink would not be viewed as foreign. Rather, it would be embraced as an integral part of Indian culture. The planters employed a subtle and gradual approach to promoting this sense of rootedness among the native Indians. They tactfully induced and provoked them to incorporate tea into their daily social and cultural lives. While initial success may have been limited, the British planters persisted. Over time, they successfully imbued Indian drinkers with a sense of connection to tea as daily refreshment, firmly establishing it as an essential part of their daily routines.

It is important to note here that for many Indians, anything brought from a foreign land was seen as psychologically unacceptable. This sentiment was especially prevalent among staunch Bengali families, particularly those of Brahmin background, and was also found in many other parts of India. Many Indians believed that anything directly associated with foreign lands would lower their social status and lead to their excommunication from the rest of the community in their area. Crossing the sea and reaching a foreign land was considered taboo in India's social and cultural history. Even crossing the sea was known colloquially as crossing the "Kalapani," and was seen as a social stigma for an individual. However, over time, such

social conventions were gradually eliminated, and a modified form of humane interaction developed, removing and declining social inhibitions. When it comes to the culture of tea drinking in India and the early restrictions among Indians, planters attempted to promote the practice of tea drinking in a more Indianized manner. They aimed to create a new market and culture of tea drinking in India. They took the initiative to introduce tea more and more to the local population, refining the concept of tea drinking with Indian cultural practices. Slowly, the belief developed that tea drinking was no longer a foreign practice but a part of Indian culture. In order to reinforce this idea, the planters attempted to rename the drink to something more meaningful and familiar to Indian drinkers. There is no definitive proof that tea was renamed “Chai” by the British planters and introduced to Indians in a new form. It is possible that the name of the tea, “Chai,” was exclusively chosen by the Indians. Regardless of its name, tea became very Indianized, taking on a new shape and flavour among Indian drinkers. Social and psychological inhibitions and previously existing restrictions began to disappear gradually. This process of acceptance, or the medium of acceptability among Indians, was truly magical - Indians embraced tea drinking without maintaining social or cultural gaps or distances. The transformation of tea drinking in India from a foreign practice to a beloved cultural tradition is a fascinating example of how cultural exchange can lead to creating of something new and beautiful.

It is quite intriguing to observe that while both “Chai” and “Tea” are derived from the same *Camelia Sinensis* leaves; they differ vastly in taste, colour, and flavour. Furthermore, these two drinks are emblematic of the diverse social and cultural differences between various communities. They represent a stark contrast between culture, custom, creed, taste, choices, and beliefs. Interestingly, “Chai” is essentially the Indianised version of “Tea,” while “Tea” itself originated in India and is a beverage that still retains its foreign flavour and fragrance. The British were known for their fondness of fine, delicate, and refined palatable sensory

experiences, which were predominantly enjoyed by foreign drinkers in India and those belonging to the higher strata of society and class. As a result, many higher-class Indians attempted to imitate the British way of life, resulting in a sense of 'mimicry' amongst those who wished to ascend in society or be closer to British officials. These Indians envisioned themselves as equal to their British counterparts, and assimilation into the British way of life was seen as a way to gain favour from British officials. This phenomenon ultimately gave rise to cultural hybridity still prevalent in India today.

The emergence of “Chai” in India brought about a significant transformation in the world of tea. Unlike the British version of the beverage, “Chai” was prepared by mixing tea with milk and sugar, which resulted in a unique and unprecedented taste that had never existed before. This new way of preparation changed the way tea was consumed in India and gave rise to a new nomenclature for the drink. Over time, Indian tea sellers began experimenting with the recipe, adding more cream to the surface of the tea to create “malai tea” and further enhancing the taste. However, this was only the beginning of the innovative Indian tea journey. As a land of spices, India provided a perfect opportunity for tea merchants to explore new avenues. British merchants, in particular, recognized the potential of India and its spices and began experimenting with different spice blends to create a new tea variant. This new blend, “masala chai,” was a hit with Indian tea drinkers, resonating well with their tastes and preferences. Adding different spices and ingredients to the tea created a unique and flavorful taste and added health benefits to the beverage. Indian tea merchants continued to perfect the “masala chai” recipe by experimenting with different spice blends, and it soon became a popular drink across India.

This discourse can be forwarded further emphasising the idea that the emergence of “Chai” in India sparked a revolution in tea. The unique blend of milk, sugar, and tea created an unparalleled new taste, and adding different spices and ingredients to the beverage only



enhanced its flavour and health benefits. Today, “masala chai” remains a popular drink in India and has gained popularity worldwide, showcasing India's rich and diverse tea culture.

It is worth noting that the evolution of tea in India was not restricted to just the preparation process but also extended to its presentation and serving methods. The British influence on tea culture in India resulted in a certain level of sophistication and luxury when serving tea, using a cup and saucer and an aristocratic presentation. This presentation style was largely unfamiliar to the Indian community, and the sense of beauty and aesthetics that came with it created a sense of distance between those who drank tea and those who did not. On the other hand, the Indian concept of “Chai” was deeply rooted in the local culture and gradually became a common practice among the masses. Unlike the spiritual and meditative aspects of tea culture in China and Japan or the special “tea time” culture in Britain, Chai remained grounded in Indian traditions. It was a drink consumed regularly and without hesitation, without any special celebration or presentation. Chai was typically served in ordinary, reusable glass or in earthen tea cups that were not reusable. These earthen cups were commonly discarded after use, and the concept of an earthen teapot deeply connected to Indian roots and soil offered a unique flavour to the tea that was previously unknown to many. In essence, the evolution of tea in India presented a stark contrast between the luxurious, aristocratic presentation of British tea and the grounded, indigenous Chai culture that became a part of everyday life for the common people.

Before delving deeper into the topic of tea drinking concerning the Indian railway system and other travelling conditions, it is crucial to acknowledge that it was an exclusive affair in its ideal form. In this perfect scenario, all the participants of the tea-drinking session would come together in a specific location, such as a drawing room. The most important aspect of such a gathering is the creation of a certain ambience, which requires specific accessories, such as teacups and saucers, as well as some snacks. Additionally, a tea table is a mandatory

piece of equipment to keep the tea cups on, thus making the entire setup ideal. If tea drinking is viewed as a social activity, the British citizen imagined it as a gregarious ambience and a performance. They deliberately passed down this idea to the colonies, which interestingly became a vogue. However, the Chai environment was entirely different from this. Chai became the drink of the commoners, with no specific formalities. Unlike tea drinking, it did not require a mandatory tea table to create the ideal ambience. Instead, the informality found in drinking Chai is its essence. While taking Chai, the classical ambience of taking tea no longer exists, and it gets evaporated. The Indian version of tea should be considered a street food or drink that can be enjoyed anywhere on the street and in any conditions, irrespective of the time and location. The roadside tea stall is a panacea for every passerby or office goer. This informality and the presence of every walk of life transform tea into a drink of the commoners, and Indians can immediately associate themselves with the Indian tempo and culture. It reflects the Indian way of life, which is inclusive and welcoming. Thus, Chai-drinking has become an integral part of Indian culture and way of life.

The arrival of early tea stalls in Indian Railways marked a significant cultural shift that caught many by surprise. The innovation was traced back to the colonial era and the British colonizers who aimed to boost the confidence of Indian people in this new drink. Their clever strategy was to encourage the locals to set up tea stalls across different railway stations in India, thereby realizing a double profit from the investment in railways and the burgeoning tea market. This successful venture propelled the popularity of tea to new heights as it was introduced to more places throughout India. The tea stalls established in the early period of the Indian Railways played a significant role in shaping the country's culinary, social, and cultural landscape, of which native Indians were previously unaware. The practice of tea drinking also catered uniquely to the needs of railway travellers. The tea stalls on the platform and the mobile tea sellers during the journey on the train served manifold purposes for the passengers.

Gradually, tea drinking became an integral part of the railway experience, providing passengers with refreshments and a sense of tranquility during their journeys. The tea stalls helped promote the tea culture and provided employment opportunities to the locals.

The history of tea stalls in the Indian railway system can be traced back to the 19th century when the British colonial rulers introduced the railway system in India. These tea stalls were more than places to grab a quick bite; they became locations for social interaction and cultural assimilation. The Indian Railways made converging in one place easier for people from various backgrounds and walks of life. This time, the early sign of a cultural boom and social mixing up was seen. As travellers waited for their trains, they would converse, share stories, and exchange information, bringing people together in a new way. These tea stalls played a strong role in fostering friendship and comradeship among individuals. It was a new platform hitherto unknown to the natives of India. The tea stalls also became a space to meet strangers and transcend feelings, allowing everyone to move forward and cross the petty boundaries of language, culture, and social class. In essence, the tea stalls served as a melting pot of cultures and ideas, a place where people could unite and share their views uniquely and meaningfully.

Over time, the tea stalls in Indian railway stations have gradually transformed to keep up with changing tastes and preferences. These stalls have evolved to cater to the demands of tea drinkers, considering their feedback and suggestions. As a result, a wider variety of snacks and beverages, including local delicacies and choices, have been introduced to complement the tea-drinking experience. The condition of presenting tea to the Indian drinkers made them feel a sense of familiarity and pride in their national drink rather than being viewed as an import. The “Swadeshi” undertone has undoubtedly contributed to the growth and development of tea drinkers in India, with some stalls gaining popularity for their unique signature dishes that cater to diverse tastes and preferences. Whether you are a regular commuter or a tourist, these tea stalls offer an authentic and satisfying experience that is quintessentially Indian.

One crucial aspect that requires attention is the interplay between the tea industry and the economy in India. The beneficiaries of this industry were the British planters and the proceeds from selling tea in India were funneled back to England. Meanwhile, Indian merchants were selling tea to other Indians, which meant that the Indians were buying from their people. Despite the majority of the population being involved in the tea trade, most of the profits accrued to British planters and shareholders. The interconnected process was a shrewdly crafted and meticulously designed system implemented by British policymakers. The process was so effectively executed that it was almost foolproof. On the other hand, the British strategists and policymakers led Indian tea merchants to believe that selling tea in tea stalls or on trains would be a lucrative venture that could sustain their livelihoods. Consequently, the Indian traders, spurred and encouraged by the British planters, saw this as an opportunity for local money flow, leading to the selling tea in various nooks and crannies nationwide.

In various texts concerning Indian railway platforms, the cultural significance of tea stalls has been frequently referenced. Fiction and non-fiction pieces and essays have meticulously described the ambiance of tea drinking as a facet of Indian custom and culture. These works provide ample examples and narratives that highlight the importance of tea in Indian society and reveal the unique customs and traditions associated with tea drinking in the country.

R.K Narayan's *The Guide* is a novel that explores the intricate details of tea-drinking culture in India during British rule. It delves into the social and cultural factors prevalent in the Indian context and how they intertwined with the new system and customs gradually emerging. The novel portrays the protagonist, Raju, who used to assist his father in their tea stall at the Malgudi Railway Station, observing and recording the conditions and life in general during British rule in India. It highlights the installation and introduction of the early railway system in India and how it impacted the tea-drinking culture on a railway platform.

The descriptions of tea-drinking habits in the novel reflect the changing pattern of society and its new locations in India. The emergence of traveling and tourism as a habit is also depicted in the text, making it a crucial piece of literature that conceptualizes time's social and cultural factors. *The Guide* offers a vivid and detailed account of the tea-drinking atmosphere in India, shedding light on the customs, traditions, and rituals that were associated with it. The novel also hints at several other cultural and social factors prevalent in the Indian scenario, making it a valuable and insightful read for anyone interested in the history and culture of India during British rule.

In the works of R K Narayan, tea is a recurring element mentioned in various texts, including his most celebrated work, *Malgudi Days*. These narratives are known for their simplicity, magical charm, and beauty that captivate readers with their perfect blend of emotions and everyday life experiences. The characters in the stories are portrayed with such inimitable artistry that they impact the reader's psyche. Amidst the tapestry of the Malgudi atmosphere, the reference to tea-drinking sessions is a recurring theme woven seamlessly into the narrative. The simple and cozy atmosphere of Malgudi brings together the homeliness and colorful journey of life, giving the readers a glimpse of how life is refreshed and enlivened with the sipping of tea in daily interactions. Although the reference to tea drinking may seem mundane, it carries symbolic significance that reflects the hospitality and camaraderie amongst fellow villagers, the social interactions that bind them together, and the journey of the passage of time marked by the simple act of sipping tea. The detailed portrayal of tea as a cultural phenomenon in Narayan's works is a testament to its significance in Indian society and culture.

The story "Tea from Assam" by Arup Kumar Dutta tells the experience of two friends, Pranjol and Rajvir, studying in Delhi. Pranjol's father works as a manager in a tea garden in Upper Assam, and Pranjol invites Rajvir to visit his hometown during their summer break. During their journey, Pranjol explains the mechanics of tea production in the tea garden to

Rajvir. The story continues on a train as they travel from Delhi to Assam. The story's unique setting is captivating, and the narrative flows seamlessly.

Ruskin Bond's *The Great Train Journey* is another brilliant text that deals with various and multiple experiences of moving on a train. As is always found, Bond has an inimitable sense of humor, and he enjoys all life experiences with the same sense of humor. The characters in this great train journey take and drink tea while traveling through their journey.

The confluence of tea and Indian Railways in the 21st century has resulted in an inseparable association between the two. It is impossible to imagine one without the other. This journey together has transformed India's social and cultural dimensions and brought about a significant change in the country's gastronomical landscape. The ubiquitous presence of tea in Indian Railways has not only made it an integral part of the railway journey but has also given rise to a distinct tea culture that is unique to the Indian Railways. From the aroma of freshly brewed tea to the taste of traditional snacks that complement it, tea has become an essential element of the Indian Railways experience. The relationship between tea and Indian Railways has evolved over time into a mutually beneficial partnership that is here to stay. Tea and Indian Railways have witnessed changes in cultural parameters and gastronomical geometry.

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## **About the Author**

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