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## Tea Tales – India's ever evolving chai culture

Village Square < <https://www.villagesquare.in/author/admin/> > | May 23, 2022

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As we observed International Tea Day on May 21, to peek into the vibrant history of chai and chai tapris in India, Village Square spoke to Arup K Chatterjee, professor of English at OP Jindal Global University. He is the author of widely acclaimed books including, *The Purveyors of Destiny: A Cultural Biography of the Indian Railways* and *The Great Indian Railways*.

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### Village Square: How did tea become so popular?

Arup K Chatterjee: Allow me to begin with a personal anecdote. About two-and-a-half years ago, after I finished the preface to my last book *Indians in London: From the Birth of the East India Company to Independent India* – where tea plays the role of a protagonist – I stood before a chai tapri in Lalgola a suburban town in West Bengal. Rotating the earthen cup of tea in my hand, I came up with an idea for a fiction.

It was about a distressed creative genius of Lalgola, who decides to make money for his sister's dowry, by growing tea saplings he steals from a distant village. The tea business thrives and the family becomes so rich that many prospective matches for his sister appear, without demanding dowry. One of the reasons I could not pen down that will-o-the-wisp was that this was what psychologists call cryptomnesia. I call it gastromythology. That is, it was not wholly fictional, but an unconscious reconfiguration of history. is the story behind the tea we drink today.

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Tea was somewhat known to the Western world – particularly Europe and Britain – since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. But it became popular when the dowry of Catherine of Braganza of Portugal – the wife of King Charles II – in 1662, is said to have comprised the 'island of Bombay and a chest of tea'. In my book, I call it a 'zeugmatic dowry'.

### Village Square: Can you walk us through the history of tea in India?

**Arup K Chatterjee:** English tea culture was largely based on Chinese and Japanese models. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Britain's tea imports from China steadily increased.

Then, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tea's global commercial importance was cemented, given Britain's imperial relations with China and India. In 1823, tea plants were discovered in the Assam valley. This fostered a break in England's trade with China.

In 1843, Robert Fortune, a Scottish horticulturalist, travelled to China, funded by the Royal Horticultural Society. Enthused by his discoveries, Dr John Forbes Royle, the British botanist, recruited Fortune on behalf of the East India Company, to scout for Chinese tea samples.



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A modern day tea stall, named Chai Tapri, near the OP Jindal University, is a favourite haunt of tea lovers (Photo by Sriraksha Murali)

In 1848, Fortune visited China again, disguised as a mandarin. He smuggled plants and seeds, including tea samples out of China. It enabled British planters to establish the Indian tea industry. The development of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and the Nilgiri Railway in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century further helped the trade.

The [Indian Tea Association < https://www.indiatea.org/ >](https://www.indiatea.org/), a trade body of tea producers, was founded in 1881. In 1901, India was designated as a large market for tea. Two years later, the Tea Cess Bill was passed, to levy a cess on tea exports. This cess was meant to be used for promoting tea in India and abroad.

After the First World War, small Indian contractors were provided with tea packets and kettles to serve at the chief railway junctions of Bengal, Punjab and North West provinces. By the 1930s, the tea campaign reached its heights. Display hoardings and posters for recipes of tea could be found in Indian languages, on urban and suburban railway platforms. Back then, Indians did not necessarily welcome the relatively bland or aromatic flavours that the English preferred.

### Village Square: That's interesting. So, when did Indians take to drinking 'chai'?

**Arup K Chatterjee:** Indians were practically aliens to the taste of tea, even in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But over the next hundred years, India would become a consumer of over 70% of its own produce of the herb.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have seen many new experiments and a turn towards authenticity in tea brewing. However, the kind of brew that seems to have become most popular during the first 80 years of India's tea consumption history is what the West refers to as the 'lassi' variety, or what we call 'kadak chai,' made of significantly large quantities of milk and, oftentimes, flavouring condiments.

Today, nearly three-fourths of our consumption is concentrated in the urban pockets. However, tea consumption in rural and suburban India today hovers around 40%, which is a major leap forward.

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## Village Square: And what can be said about its significance for the average Indian today?

**Arup K Chatterjee:** Today, Indian tea is cultivated largely in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Smaller cultivations and experimental varieties can also be found in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Sikkim and Uttarakhand.

More than 10 lakh people are directly employed by the industry. Like its older sibling industry, the Indian Railways, tea cultivations, packaging, processing and retailing provide employment to over a crore of Indians.

In parts where tea cultivation is concentrated, such as the northeast, women comprise over 50% of the workforce. The annual turnover of the tea industry is about Rs 100,000 million. In the last 70 years, the tea industry has grown two-and-a-half times, even though the cultivation area has only grown by less than half.

To derive a singular answer to what a cup of tea means to the average Indian is perhaps impossible. However, what cannot be denied is that tea has become much more than a beverage of nutrition or even leisure, in India. Inevitably, for every tea drinker, the herb conjures a gastronomy – a mythology of the rhythms in food and gastronomy that refer to, or remind the consumer, of other walks of their life.

Inevitably, then, tea has become entangled with stories of love, loss and longing, stories of journeys with or without destinations, tales of nomads without identities, nostalgic anecdotes of family patriarchs, the average resistance of the average homemaker, and the new woman battling against misogyny.

## Village Square: When and where did chai tapri culture take root?

**Arup K Chatterjee:** We are discussing this at a time when the Indian spirit is undergoing an undoubtable turn towards soul-searching, introspection and an inward-turning gaze towards small towns and villages. Rural India seems more important than ever for policy makers, governments, industrialists, medical practitioners, film makers and cultural thinkers, among others.

To answer your question, first philosophically, and then historically: 'chai tapri' culture is a historian's enigma, because it does not necessarily have a beginning, a middle and an end. As the economic history of tea clearly suggests, until about the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian villages consumed not more than one-third of the nation's tea produce. (ALSO CHECK OUT THE PHOTO STORY: [Celebrating India's favorite beverage – chai](https://www.villagesquare.in/celebrating-indias-favorite-beverage-chai/) < <https://www.villagesquare.in/celebrating-indias-favorite-beverage-chai/> > )



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From being aliens to the taste of tea, most Indians of the present day have adapted tea as their national beverage (Photo by Rahul Raman)

One can find many deeply nostalgic examples of village tea-stalls in the wistful tales of R.K. Narayan, Ruskin Bond, Vaikom Mohammad Basheer and Omprakash Valmiki, or the poetry of Arun Kolatkar, Namdeo Dhasal and Gulzar – spanning the north and south, as it were. However, the significance of the 'chai tapri' culture exceeds geographical, economic and urban-rural divisions.

Let us consider a commonsensical historiography of vocabulary and etymology. The word 'tapri' is a well-known Hindi word, meaning 'kiosk' or sales 'booth.' Adding the suffix 'chai' to it and having a composite phrase 'chai tapri' is not unusual, either. But that it is now a function of our common parlance is an outcome of a living heritage.

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## Village Square: What does the chai tapri culture represent today, whether in villages or in metropolitan areas?

Arup K Chatterjee: Technology today enables us to examine histories of urban myths and evolving cultures, like 'chai tapri.' Evidence from economic, statistical and cultural history suggests that 'chai tapri' culture is a typically 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon. That is, however, not to undermine the heritage value of the culture.

On the contrary, what this implies is that many histories (if also mythologies, puranas and daastaans) of Indian heritage can gradually fuse with this culture, so that, in about a decade, it would be nearly challenging to have a hierarchy between the gastromythology of Indian chai tapri culture and the British imperial mythology of tea brewing and the happy Victorian home, for example.

Turn to recent films representing small town India, for a sample. Is it possible to have a *Masaan*, or a *Bareilly ki Barfi*, or *Panchayat*, without the classical motif of the chai tapri – not necessarily a proper tea-stall but an untarnished shade to pick up the remains of the day with your cup of chai?

Chai tapri culture, then, is about the restless metropolis coming to terms with its inner soul, about rural India involuntarily extending its hospitality to a weather worn truck and its wan truck driver, about the raindrops splashing onto the teacup of a lover while bidding one last adieu to a departing beloved, about the detached constable who has seized a well-earned respite from election duty just to have a glance over the day's newspaper against the silhouette of steam rising from a greasy kettle, and so much more.

Of course, chai tapri culture is about love stories, nostalgia, industry, democratic, federal and heritage ties between rural and urban India; but I see it as a hitherto untapped potential for our collective industrial, economic, cultural and spiritual resources.

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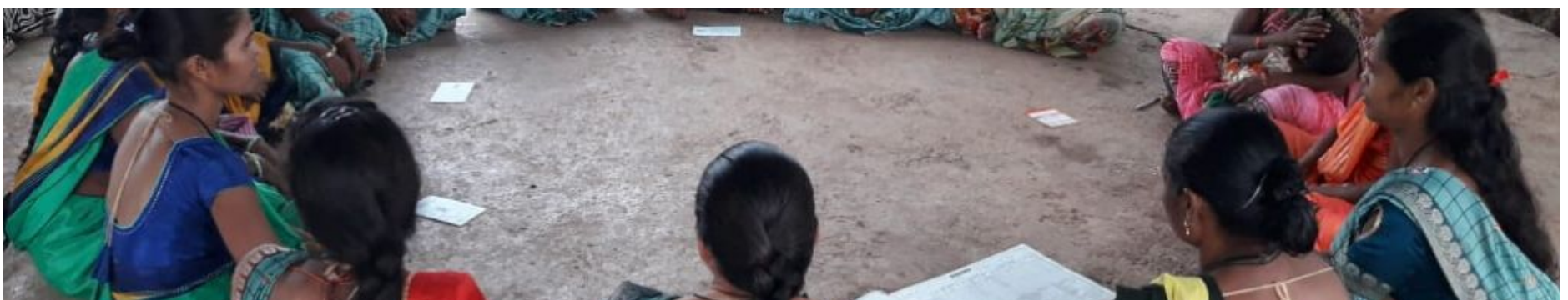
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