The discovery of the Tea plant on Indian soil, its introduction, cultivation and its present position in the economy of our country make a glorious chapter in the history of India.

ATTEMPTS AT TEA INTRODUCTION IN INDIA

The Tea plant has been cultivated in China for many centuries; Europe came to know tea in 1610 when the Dutch brought it from Java, and the East India Company brought it to Britain in 1650. But for many years after its introduction tea remained a mystery; details about the original plant, its cultivation, structure, etc. remained practically unknown. In the 18th century it first became known to Science that tea came from the leaves of a large shrub or small tree; no information, however, was forthcoming about the origin of the green and black teas of commerce. Most points dealing with the natural history of the tea plant, methods of preparation of the commercial product etc. became known after the publication of his experiences in China by Robert Fortune in the middle of the 19th century.

As regards India, seeds of the tea plant were available in Calcutta from Chinese sources from at least 1780; in 1788 Sir Joseph Banks prepared a memorandum recommending the introduction of China tea in India; this communication was sent to Col. R. Kyd, who heartily agreed with Banks on the desirability of introducing tea in India. In 1793 Lord Macartney sent some plants from China to Bengal, “in some parts of which his Excellency had been informed were districts adapted for their cultivation.” (W. Griffith in Trans. Agric. Hortic. Soc. India 5: 160, 1838). Col. Kyd had some tea plants growing in his private garden already at the beginning of 1780; and when the garden was made over to the Calcutta authorities and formed, as it were, the nucleus of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, Kyd could write to Banks that “the tea plants received from Canton have thriven well, although in most unsuitable soil and climate...” (S. Baildon in The Tea Cyclop. p. 9, 1881). Some plants remained in the Calcutta Garden at least until the time of Wallich as Superintendent, for he reported that the plants were not doing well in Calcutta.

TEA IS DISCOVERED IN ASSAM

For the following paragraphs I have drawn freely from the report published by William Griffith in 1838, and another report prepared by one Mr. Campbell and published in “Papers regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal” (Calcutta, 1873).

The discovery of the tea plant in its wild or indigenous state is usually credited to two brothers, C. A. and R. Bruce; the former was in command of a division of gun-boats in Upper Assam during the war with Burma, and in 1826 brought down certain plants that were identified as being the tea plant of commerce; such plants had been brought to his notice by his brother R. Bruce and through the intervention of David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General in the N. E. Frontier at Gauhati the specimens reached Calcutta. Little or no notice was taken of this discovery at the time; eventually it did rouse public opinion in Britain and India, and thus led to the establishment of the Tea Committee by Lord William Bentinck in January, 1834.

The Tea Committee consisted of some twelve European and two Indian gentlemen of the merchant community, with one Mr. Gordon as the Secretary. The Committee was expected to suggest ways and means for the introduction and cultivation of the tea plant in suitable areas in India and other British possessions. Early in 1834 the Secretary of the Committee, Gordon, was sent to China to procure seeds and plants for the stocking of the nurseries. Gordon succeeded in sending to Calcutta a great number of seeds, of which one half germinated; it seems that he also succeeded in bringing to India a number of Chinese artisans expert in the preparation of the tea leaf.

While Mr. Gordon was engaged in China collecting seeds and plants, the fact of the existence of the Tea in Upper Assam, and that to a great extent, was brought to the notice of the Tea Committee, who gave information of the fact to Government, in a letter dated 24th December, 1834. As a result of this discovery Gordon was recalled back to India, the reasons for the recall being given by Wallich in a letter to Gordon of February 1835: “the Assam plant exists in sufficient abundance to
produce seeds for all the purposes of the Committee, with this great advantage, that they can be procured in a state of perfect freshness; finally, taking into consideration the great expenses necessarily incurred in obtaining supplies of seeds from China, which are now ascertained to be no longer required."

(W. Griffith, loc. cit. p. 96-97).

"In consequence of the discovery, at the latter end of the year 1834, that the genuine Tea plant was indigenous to Upper Assam, and of the representations of Capt. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General on the North East Frontier, the Supreme Government came to the determination of having the tracts of country producing the plant in question, properly examined. The officers selected for the purpose, viz. that of enquiring into the physical condition of the Tea plant, were Dr. Wallich and myself, as botanists, and Mr. McClelland, as geologist. The deputation left Calcutta on the 29th August, 1835, and arrived at Sadiya, the frontier station of Upper Assam, early in January, 1836, having traversed en route the Khasia range of mountains, on which considerable collections were made in botany, and most extensive ones, great portions of which were entirely new, in geology. The deputation left Sadiya for the Singpho Tea tracts, on the 11th January, and arrived at Kuloo on the 15th; on the following day, the Tea was first seen in its native state. On the 19th it arrived at the Tea tract on the Manmoo, and by the 20th it had reached Sadiya, visiting on its return Choonpoora, 12 miles above Sadiya. On the 6th February it left Sadiya for the Tea tracts in Mutack country; it visited Clykwa for the purpose of selecting a fit spot for the nursery for the Chinese plants that had been despatched from Calcutta; and it arrived at Nadowar on the 17th, and at Tingien on the 23rd, and returned to Dibroo Mookh on the 28th. Leaving this place finally on the 1st March, it reached Jorhauth, on the 4th, and Cubroo Purbut on the 8th on which day the tea was examined for the fifth and last time. On the 9th Mr. Wallich left, carrying with him Mr. Bruce who had accompanied as guide, the deputation for the purpose of being present at a general meeting of the authorities in Assam, which had been convened (partly) for the purpose of settling every question regarding the Tea. Mr. McClelland and myself whose presence was not deemed necessary on this important occasion, availed ourselves of the opportunity of visiting the Naga Hills. On these we remained, having ascended to an elevation of about 1100 feet, until the 12th, then we returned to Cubroo; we arrived at Bishenath on the 19th, too late, however, for the consultation, as the meeting had broken up the day after, I believe, the arrival of Dr. Wallich. About the 21st the members of the deputation dispersed." (W. Griffith, loc. cit. p. 96-97).

TEA CULTIVATION IN ASSAM

After the return of the Tea Delegation to Calcutta, tea cultivation was taken up at once, both Chinese and indigenous seeds being used for the purpose. Campbell in the report mentioned above writes on the beginning of tea growing in Assam:

"The operations of the Tea Committee appear to have proceeded very slowly owing to the great difficulties of communication between Assam and Calcutta which existed at the period, as also to the total ignorance which then prevailed on all points connected with the proper cultivation of the plant and the manufacture of tea. A sample of tea which had been forwarded to the Court of Directors in 1836 arrived in so mouldy a state that it could not be tested; this specimen would seem, however, from the description given of it by the Court in their despatch of August 1837, to have been merely a collection of leaves gathered from the wild shrub, without having undergone any course of manipulation or other process necessary for the conversion into the tea of ordinary use."

"Tea makers and artisans from China were introduced in 1837, and some consignments of manufactured Assam tea were forwarded to the Court of Directors in the years 1838-39, which were found on arrival to be of such excellent quality and to command such very high prices at open sale, that the undertaking attracted the attention of the English mercantile world, and a company, which was afterwards styled the Assam Company, was formed for the cultivation of the tea plant and manufacture of tea in Upper Assam."

Another report published in The Tea Cyclopaedia, 1881, mentions that Assam tea was first sold in London in 1839, the prices paid varying between 11s and 34s per pound.

As a result of the visit of the Tea Delegation, an experimental tea garden was set up at Lakhimpore in 1835: it failed, and the plants were removed to Jaipore, where a garden was made, and sold to the Assam Company in 1840. C. A. Bruce, who first called attention to the existence of tea in Assam, and had accompanied the Tea Delegation in their exploration tour, was put in charge of experimental cultivation of tea in Assam. Bruce’s report of 10th June, 1839, gives the following data: "... The number of tracts (where wild tea grew in Assam) now
known amounting to 120, some of them very extensive, both on the hills and in the plains... A sufficiency of seeds and seedlings might be collected from these tracts in the course of a few years to plant the whole of Assam... The China Black-Tea plants which were brought into Muttuck in 1837, mounted-in all to 1609—healthy and sickly. A few of the latter died, but the remainder are healthy, and flourish as well, as if they had been reared in China... I collected about twenty-four pounds of the China seeds, and sowed some on the little hill of Tifum in my tea garden, and some in the nursery-ground at Jaipore; above three thousand of which have come up, are looking beautiful, and doing very well. There may be about 6,000 young seedlings at Chubwa; at Deenjoy about 2,000; at Tingri a few; and some at Paundooh. In June and July, 1837, 17,000 young plants were brought from Muttuck, and planted at a place called Poongroong Patar among the thick tree jungles of Sadiya... In 1838, 52,000 young tea plants were brought from Nemsong Naga hill tracts, about ten miles from Jaipore; a great portion of these have been lately sent to Calcutta to be forwarded to Madras...”

“By 1850 many gardens had been made in different districts and in 1853 a Mr. Mills visiting Assam found three private gardens in Sibsagar, and six in Lakhimpore. In 1854, the first gardens in Kamroop and Durrong were started. In 1855 indigenous tea was found in Cachar, and the first garden in that district was commenced in the cold season of the same year. In 1856, Tea was discovered in Sylhet, but no gardens were started until some time after.” (S. Baildon in rep. Assam Adminstr. 1875-76, cited in The Tea Cyclopedia, 1881, p. 9). Kumaon started tea planting about 1850; Darjeeling in 1860; Nilgiris about 1862; Chittagong 1864; Chota Nagpur and Ceylon 1872.

THE BOTANY OF THE TEA PLANT

Linnaeus in Species Plantarum 515, 1753, described the Tea plant under the name Thea sinensis, and mentioned the names Thee of Kaempfer and Chaa of Bauhin, with indication that the plant grew in China and Japan. In Genera Plantarum under No. 593, p. 232, 1754, Linnaeus listed Thea and under No. 759, p. 311, listed Camellia; as originally conceived these two genera clearly differed from one another; but as more and more species were added to both, it became difficult to keep them separate. Camellia and Thea have so many intergrading characters that modern botanists have fused them under one name, Camellia; thus the name of the common Chinese tea plant is now listed as Camellia sinensis (L.) Kuntze. Among the species of Thea or Camellia that have been described from the time of Linne, the following are the more important ones: Th. sinensis Linn., Common Tea; Th. assamicus J. W. Mast., Assam Tea; Th. bohea Linn., Buxea Tea; Th. cantoniensis Lour., Canton Tea; Th. viridis Linn., Green Tea; etc. All these species are now treated under Camellia and most of these names are considered synonyms for one or two species.

These various species seem to hybridize among themselves quite readily, so that at present it is rather difficult to find a plant that may be said to be a pure species.

Among the names that have been in vogue longest may be mentioned Thea or Camellia viridis and Thea or Camellia bohea; for a long time these two species were supposed to be the sources respectively of green and black teas of commerce; it was in 1843 that Robert Fortune showed that both green and black teas could be obtained from one and the same plant depending on the method employed in their manufacture.

In normal practice the Tea plant is kept trimmed or pruned to about 1 m in height; this is the type of plant one sees in Darjeeling or Assam or in South India; but when the tea plant is left to itself, it does grow into a large shrub or fair-sized tree; in 1839 C. A. Bruce reported noting indigenous or wild trees in Assam that were “two cubits in circumference, and fully forty cubits in height.” Some such trees can be seen at present in the Tocklai Experimental Station at Jorhat in Assam.

MODERN TEA INDUSTRY IN INDIA

From various, official and unofficial, reports, I have gathered information on the magnitude and importance of the Tea industry in India for different periods.

Gow, Wilson & Stanton, Tea Brokers of London, reported the following for 1895: Acres under Tea in India: 450,000 ; Labour employed: 600,000; Crop produced in lbs. 135,500,000 (= 73,170,000 kg.).

The Commonwealth Economic Committee reported for 1948 for India: Annual production in lbs. 549,000,000 (= 227,000,000 kg.); Annual export in lbs. 361,000,000 (= 149,000,000 kg.).

The latest annual figures for Tea production in India are given by Agricultural Situation in India.
The discovery of wild tea plants in Assam in 1835 showed that India could grow the China tea; both imported and indigenous seed was used for the establishment of our own tea plantations in Assam and other areas of northern India and in the Nilgiris in the south. In 1839 a small quantity of good tea was exported to London; from such small beginnings the tea industry has developed into one of the major sources of export for independent India. China had cultivated and used tea for centuries before India took up cultivation and drinking of tea.

CONCLUSION

North East India may, indeed, be called the original home of the Tea plant; but it would be more correct to say that the original home is that area of the world that covers N.E. India, S.W. China, N. Burma southwards into Thailand. From China tea was taken to Japan in the 6th century A.D.; from Japan it was taken to Java in 1884, though it was only at the beginning of the 19th century that tea plantations were established in Java from China stocks. Tea was taken to Ceylon early in the 19th century, but it was only when tea replaced coffee in the seventies of last century that it became an important article of commerce for Ceylon. Russia took up tea cultivation in the Black Sea area about the middle of the 19th century, and at present produces enough tea to satisfy nearly all the needs of the country. Several British colonies in Africa took up tea cultivation with some success towards the beginning of this century.

As a matter of history a word may be said on the part that tea has played in the political history of the world; tea was a monopoly of the East India Company from the first appearance of tea in Britain until 1858, when the monopoly was abolished. In 1773 the enactment of the Tea Act by the British Parliament led to the now celebrated Boston Tea Party, which "helped precipitate the American Revolution." The author of the article on Camellia in Encyc. Brit. from which I have extracted some of the data in this paper, remarks in connection with the Boston Tea Party: "Here it is interesting to note that, just as England had started out to be a nation of coffee drinkers before John Company begun its propaganda for tea, America started as a nation of tea drinkers; it was the Boston Tea Party that cast the die for coffee. By mid-20th century the tea and coffee habits of the two countries were reversed; on a per capita, pound basis, England drank about 5 times as much tea as coffee, the U.S. drank about 25 times as much coffee as tea.

TAKING THE AVERAGE WHOLESALE PRICE FOR TEA IN CALCUTTA PREVALENT IN JANUARY 1966, THE ANNUAL CROP OF 1965 WAS WORTH RS. 206.90 CRORES TO THE COUNTRY.

THE ORIGINAL COUNTRY OF TEA

The early history of the tea plant and of the beverage derived from it is shrouded in mystery. There are many legends in China, but such legends do not and cannot form the basis for any certain conclusion. One of the legends often repeated is that of an Indian prince, turned ascetic, by name Dharma; according to the story he left India and travelled to China as a pilgrim, preaching Buddhism on the way. His penance was to do without sleep, and this he kept up for years; one day, however, he fell asleep in his devotions. Awakening suddenly he was so struck by the enormity of his failure that full of remorse he cut off his eyelids and threw them on the ground. Passing that way some time later he noticed that the eyelids had grown into a shrub which he had never seen before; he nibbled the leaves, and found them possessed of an eye-opening tendency; he told the story to his friends, who took up the plants and grew into a shrub which he had never seen before; he nibbled the leaves, and found them possessed of an eye-opening tendency; he told the story to his friends, who took up the plants and this is the beginning of cultivation of tea. From China he is said to have crossed to Japan and introduced tea in that country. The date of Dharma's visit to China is recorded in Chinese chronicles of the reign of Vu Yu, as A.D. 543.

The interpretation that some modern authors have given to this story is that Dharma did indeed know the tea plant, which he had carried with him from India; but that in order to make the plant more attractive to his Chinese pupils, he made up the story of the miraculous 'creation' of the same from his eyelids.

However, the earliest reliable mention of the Tea plant in China dates from A.D. 350, when tea was described in an ancient Chinese dictionary. It seems an established fact that cultivation of the plant and drinking of tea was greatly helped by Buddhist missionaries, who found in tea a means of combating intemperance.
at present tea in one form or another may be said to be the most universal beverage in this country, second only to water. All honour, then, to the pioneers who discovered wild tea on Indian soil, to the tea planters and their workers that have brought the industry to such high levels of development, to the scientists that have helped and are helping to develop new races of better and more resistant tea plants: all of them well deserve the grateful of India.

LITERATURE CITED

BAILDON, S. The origin and future prospects of Tea in India. (The Tea Cyclopaedia, p. 9 seq., 1881).


