

The Rise and fall of Tea Industry in Colonial Kangra

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ABSTRACT

Kangra's agriculture was traditional and subsistence-based prior to the establishment of the British rule in C.E. 1846 and depended on rainfall and traditional farming methods. The crops cultivated were Wheat, Rice, Barley, Maize and Ragi. Cash crops were almost non-existent, and farming was primarily done for local consumption. Agricultural techniques were shaped by local customs and seasonal changes rather than commercial demands. The introduction of new crops, the most notable of which was tea, had a profound effect on agrarian relations when British authority was established in Kangra. This essay aims to investigate the establishment, growth, and downfall of Kangra's tea business in colonial era. It examines how the British pushed tea as a business, the circumstances that first supported its expansion, and the elements that ultimately contributed to its downfall.

Keywords: *Tea plantation, Colonial Kangra*

With the establishment of British control in C.E. 1846, Kangra's agriculture system saw substantial changes. By bringing in new commercial crops like tea, China grass, cinchona, and potatoes, the British changed the agricultural landscape of the area. The climate of Kangra-its altitude, rainfall, and soil-was seen to be very conducive to tea cultivation, making it the most significant and transforming crop among them. In order to integrate Kangra into the worldwide tea market, the British created tea plantations, supported European planters, and turned vast areas of land for tea production. This change affected traditional land-use patterns and encouraged commercialized agriculture. The genesis of the Tea industry in India can be traced back to C.E. 1833, when Governor-General Lord William Bentinck had formed a 'Tea Committee' in order to ascertain the feasibility of tea plantation in other parts of India, with tea cultivation being a success in Assam at that time. Earlier tea was mainly imported from China via Lhasa and Yarkand routes. The Chinese seed had reached Calcutta by C.E. 1835 and favorable response was obtained in Kumaon and Dehra Doon, where green and black tea was prepared. By C.E. 1845, 118 (One hundred and eighteen) acres of land were cultivated for the same in Kangra. All this made William Jameson, who in C.E. 1843 was made in charge of

Government Tea Plantations in the hill districts of the north-west provinces to visit district Kangra in C.E. 1849 in order to ascertain the possibility of cultivating tea in Kangra. The subsequent report prepared by him stated that the climate of Kangra is suitable for tea cultivation. Tea planting experiments were also done by the British in Shimla too, with plants being brought from Almora and Dehra Doon. At the end, Kangra was agreed upon due to many factors, the foremost being the availability of transportation during those times. The nearest railway during the colonial period was at Jalandhar, from where tea could be exported to the European market or to the subcontinent. The rainfall of 2,300-2,500 mm per annum was also apt for tea Plantation. The available soil at Kangra was also an advantage as rich loamy soil, free from stones and rock was to be found over there. The altitude ranging from 2,500 feet to 5,000 feet at Kangra also served the cause well. The availability of cheap labor was also another aspect which went in Kangra's favor. Early British records suggest the prevailing caste prejudice of the upper castes to plough fields, which was considered as derogatory. The British then shifted them to tea cultivation, with around 4,000 (Four thousand) persons being employed by C.E. 1904. Young men and women and colliers were employed for services at the rate of Rs. 2 (Two) and Rs. 3

(Three) per mensem and Rs. 4 (Four) and Rs. 4 (Four) and 4-8 per mensem respectively.

The plants from Almora and Dehra Doon were subsequently planted at the government gardens of Kangra, at an elevation of 2,500 feet, at Nagrota at 2,900 feet and the third one at Bhawarna at 3,200 feet. The imported plantations from Kumaun, which had suffered a great deal during the transit were sowed at Nagrota and Bhawarna gave good results., with the seedlings reaching up to 5 (Five) feet. In spite of all the favorable inputs received, the British were quite apprehensive about the native prowess to process the delicate raw leaves, that is why they had relied upon the Europeans, who were mostly retired military and civil officers. The British were also planning to establish a joint stock company but later on opted for private enterprise and capital in C.E. 1860. They had also mentioned their intention of benefitting the settlers (British Nationals in India) via establishing the plantations of tea.

A visit by the then reigning Governor-General Lord Dalhousie in C.E. 1852 gave fillip to the tea industry in Kangra. At the time of his visit there were only two nurseries at Nagrota and Bhawarna. The waste plains of Holta, with an area of about 1,000 (One thousand) acres, was selected due to the proximity of Awa and Nigal streams, to be used for irrigation purposes whenever needed and also due to its climate being in the range of 3,500 to 4000 feet, considered as an ideal for tea Plantation plus snowfall in the months of December and January. The soil here was of black vegetable mould which could withstand the plantations. The estate was placed under the Supervision of W. Rogers, who had prior experience at the Kumaon plantations. 300 (Three) acres were planted in C.E. 1853 and C.E. 1854, with the plantations reaching to 600 (Six hundred) acres by the end of C.E. 1854. 29,312 lbs. were produced in C.E. 1860 and sold at public auction at Rs. 1 (One) per lb. and Rs. 1-11-0 per lb. via public Sale.

In Spite of all the progress made, the Kangra tea plantation started to follow the trajectory of its Assam counterparts in cultivating large areas of land for tea and thereby incurring losses in the way. The Kangra planters started to bring large areas under cultivation, thereby incurring losses before a course correction was done. The other issue pertained to the difficulty in obtaining land for tea, which hampered the progress of this industry. Efforts were made as early as in C.E. 1856 to put 6,000 (Six thousand) acres of *zamindari* waste land for public auction on 1st of July and to use the same for tea. Early British records state the initial reluctance on the part of the *zamindars* for a possible tea cultivation on their land. The *zamindars* were made to sell tea leaves to the factories at Rs. 8 (Eight) per *maund* in C.E. 1859. The issue was repeatedly discussed by the government and on 1st January 1860, Edward Paske was appointed to negotiate with the *zamindars* to transfer their waste lands to

the intending purchasers. For the six months that he was employed, he had managed to transfer 2,596 (Two thousand five hundred ninety six) acres, which was sold by public auction on 1st July 1860. Negotiations were again started in C.E.1862, under Philip Henry Egerton, the then Deputy Commissioner. The *zamindars* were compensated by the government by giving them three quarters of the sum that their lands may fetch by auction sale and an equal extract of forest land on which they would have full control. He was able to secure about 2,547 (Two thousand five hundred forty seven) acres of land, which was sold via auction in C.E. 1863 and due compensation was paid to the *zamindars*. Enterprising British individuals and firms too had purchased waste or cultivated land for tea. Private British individuals like Duff had brought waste land at Sidhbari near Dharamshala from the landlords in C.E. 1869 for tea cultivation. Waste land was too purchased at Bhatto, Bagotla and Paplora in C.E. 1873. Different British companies like “Nassan Tea Company” had purchased land for Rs.800 (Eight hundred) in C.E. 1861 via public auction. Many tea factories were also formed during this time by the natives as well as by the Britishers like Wah tea estate (formed in C.E. 1857), the Manjhee valley tea estates were established in 1860s, the Dharamshala tea company (established in C.E. 1882, and Green Buds tea Company (formed in C.E. 1927 by late Jai Lal Butail).

Edward Paske, in his report published in C.E. 1872 had compiled a list of 19 (Nineteen) estates owned by retired British military and civil servants, local rulers, private entrepreneurs (both native and English) and also by the “Kangra Tea Valley Company”. The outturn of tea in C.E. 1860 was 29,312 lbs. The price realized by public auction was Re. 1 (One) per lb. and Rs. 1-11-0 per lb. via private sale. The ‘Pashke Report’ mentions that these 19 (Nineteen) estates had comprised an area of 8,708 (Eight thousand seven hundred eight) acres, with the area under tea cultivation being 2,635 (Two thousand six hundred thirty-five) acres. The price per acre was Rs. 1-1-3 per lb. and produce per acre came out to be 91.6 lbs. of tea. The gross aggregate produce for C.E. 1868 was 2, 41,332 lbs. There also comprised plantations owned by nobles and small landholders, referred to as “Small Plantations”, which covered an area from 2 (Two) to 30 (Thirty) acres, with an aggregate area of 351 (Three hundred fifty one) acres and the area under tea cultivation being 148 (One hundred eight) acres. The close of C.E. 1872 saw 3,292 (Three thousand two hundred ninety two) acres of land coming under tea cultivation and total yield increasing from 2,41,332 lbs. in C.E. 1868 to 4,28,655 lbs. in C.E. 1872. The tea industry continued to prosper with the output reaching up to 8,99,157 lbs. in C.E. 1885. 9,000 (Nine thousand) acres of area was under tea cultivation by C.E. 1892.

It saw a downward trend from C.E. 1892, which continued till C.E. 1902. The causes for this fall were many like

extension of cultivated land (total area under tea had increased to 9,692 acres) without any considerable increase in profits and turning over of land to companies at excessive rates. But the downward turn did have an advantage of turning out the Chinese tea from the United Kingdom's market. The year C.E. 1902 saw an upward turn in tea industry, (which continued till the earthquake of C.E. 1905). The reasons for this upswing were the abandonment of inferior lands, a more astute system of plucking and manufacturing of green tea with the aid of machinery. There were a total of 37 (Thirty-seven) estates at this time, with an area of 6,185 (Six thousand one hundred eight five) acres and giving an output of 1,01,2000 pounds of tea.

The earthquake of C.E. 1905 and World War I had an adverse impact on tea cultivation in Kangra. The earthquake made the European planters leave the valley and sell their estates to native traders and their workers. The steady fall in prices and restrictions on freight during the war limited its growth. The exports of Kangra tea was 5,00,000 pounds in C.E. 1892, which had decreased to 2,50,000 pounds by C.E. 1902. Baijnath tea estate was auctioned in C.E. 1921 on 26 and 27 November by the government.

In order to boost the export potential of Kangra tea, various efforts were made by the government. As has been mentioned in previous pages, the Kangra tea had captured the United Kingdom market by the beginning of the Twentieth century. Efforts were made in as early as C.E. 1868, when 'Palampur fair' was established to promote tea trade and trade with central Asian countries. Russian influence was increasing over the Central Asian regions at this time and the fair was also thought to be a great way to counter the increasing Russian sway. However, the expectations were belied as the demand for tea was not forthcoming from these areas. The fair was subsequently set aside in C.E. 1879. In spite of this setback, the tea trade with Central Asia continued, with Amritsar serving as a great mart to export Kangra tea to Central Asia. The Kangra tea was brought up by the traders from Amritsar to be further exported to the Central Asian regions. Markets for Kangra tea were also available at London. The tea was sent to Calcutta and then exported to London, where it was sold via public auction. The most profitable sale had occurred in C.E. 1892, when 152 (One hundred fifty-two) packages having 4,253 lbs. of tea were sold at an average price of 1s 4 ¼ d on the London market, with an average profit of 2 ½ d per pound net. The local Europeans in India and local native markets too absorbed the Kangra tea. The Europeans in India who used this tea were mostly from the military department while the native Indian markets too saw an increase in the consumption.

The government used to tax tea planters at Rs. 1 (One) per acre and a request for its reduction in C.E. 1890 was disregarded as it was stated that the Europeans were using

the new machinery and they were also manufacturing green tea, which fetched higher profits. In order to streamline the tea industry, an "Indian Tea Cess Committee" was established in C.E. 1938. An export tax of ¼ pie per lb. was imposed on all the tea exported, with the money thus made going to the 'Indian Tea Cess Committee'. The Committee, in order to increase the production of green tea, paid an amount of 6 pies per lb. on all the green tea exported abroad from India.

KULLU- The cultivation of tea was started in Kullu in C.E. 1856 by William Hay, the Assistant Commissioner of Kullu at that time, who had started its production at Kunghur with tea plants brought from China. The tea plantations over there grew from 4 (Four) to 5 (Five) feet. Some more plantations were established at Bajaura and Nuggar. Minkin served as Assistant Manager of this estate, with George Knox, the Deputy Commissioner in Punjab being his partner. It was George Knox who had founded the "Kullu Tea Company", with the company planting tea at Bajaura, Shumshee, Raisen, Gourdur and Nuggar. The company functioned from C.E. 1862 to C.E. 1870, when due to losses, it was sold to Colonel Reminck and H.J Minniken in 1883-1884.. Another company, which was started in 1866-67 had mainly functioned at Bajaura and dwara, too had sold its estates worth 5 (Five) acres and 2 (Two) acres, respectively to the Kullu Tea Company". Waste land was also purchased for tea cultivation by 'The Billiards Company' in C.E. 1864. Another estate was established by Duff, the owner of the Bundla estate at Palampur, at Dhobhi. Manniken too had established a plantation at Aramgarh Raisen in C.E. 1875. The total area under tea plantation at this time in Kullu was 200 (Two hundred) acres. The Kullu tea initially had a good start, with it winning the first prize as the best black tea at an exhibition in Lahore in C.E. 1863. It also got a 'Certificate of Merit' in C.E. 1909 at the industrial and agricultural exhibition. As it exuded high fragrance, it fetched a high price of Rs. 1 (One) to Rs. 2 (Two) per pound, and was mostly consumed within India, with a small quantity being exported, mainly to Tibet and England. Government help was also forthcoming as it reduced the land revenue demanded on the areas planted to Rs. 1 (One) per acre.

But tea industry in Kullu could not reach the success as seen by its Kangra counterpart. The cold climate and irregular rainfall played its part. Also, most of the land at Kullu was unsuitable for cultivation. The tea planted at Kullu also took a long 7 (Seven) year for gestation. The fall in prices of Kullu tea was also due to extensive cultivation at Ceylon and Assam. The process involved at Kullu was also tiresome and delicate, with tea ought to be hoed three times a year and irrigated continuously in the months of April, May and June.

The British are to be credited for introducing the cultivation of tea in Kangra. The British invested their excess capital in order to maximize their profit. In the end, it was beneficial to

India. Additionally, tea was becoming well-known in Europe around the time the British began cultivating it in India. In India, tea cultivation was introduced during the period of crop commercialization. The British are credited with identifying the temperature, soil, and habitat for the same, even if they had begun its cultivation for their personal gain. Although tea was transported and planted under British-made conditions, many native business owners benefited from it as a source of investment and employment, which accelerated the economy. Bringing underused waste land under cultivation was another advantage of growing tea. World War I and the earthquake that occurred in Kangra in C.E. 1905 were both natural causes of the decline, and the British could not be held responsible for either. The British are to be credited with creating the tea gardens in Palampur and Dharmshala, for which they should be appreciated.

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