

## Tea Environments and Plantation Culture

Arnab Dey examines the intersecting role of law, ecology, and agronomy in shaping the history of tea and its plantations in British East India. He suggests that looking afresh at the legal, environmental, and agroeconomic aspects of tea production illuminates covert, expedient, and often illegal administrative and commercial dealings that had an immediate and long-term human and environmental impact on the region. Critiquing this imperial commodity's advertised mandate of agrarian modernization in colonial India, Dey points to numerous tea pests, disease ecologies, felled forests, harsh working conditions, wage manipulation, and political resistance as examples of tea's unseemly legacy in the subcontinent. Dey draws together the plant and the plantation in highlighting the ironies of the tea economy and its consequences for the agrarian history of eastern India.

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# Tea Environments and Plantation Culture

*Imperial Disarray in Eastern India*

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Arnab Dey

*State University of New York at Binghamton*



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For my parents, and in memory of my late sister

What can be a more melancholy sight in a savage country than to see our own countrymen greater savages than those, whom we call Cannibals and gross idolators. Of these poor ignorant islanders we may say Lord have mercy on them for they know not what they do – But what prayer must we offer for those who should know better and are every day doing worse

What then have we civilized done for the Savages? Will you say they were overwhelmed in vice before our arrival?

True they had vices – such as Nature’s growth  
 But only the Barbarian’s – We have both:  
 The garden of civilization mixed  
 With all the savage which man’s fall had fixed  
 ...  
 The prayers of Abel linked to the deeds of Cain?  
 Who such would see may from his lattice view  
 The Old more degraded than the New

Journal of Thomas Machell, planter, India, 1824–62,  
 Mss. Eur. B 369/1, British Library, London

India is full of contrasts and, although Mahatma Gandhi, the anopheles mosquito and the planters’ club may appear to have had little in common, they were, in fact, closely related.

John Rowntree, *A Chota Sahib: Memoirs of a Forest Officer*, 1981

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## Note on Orthography

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The common practice of indicating “s” in the Assamese language with a velar fricative “x” in English has not been adhered to. Thus, I have retained “Assamese” (meaning both the language and the people of Assam) and not “Axomiya,” as is usually noted with the fricative. Diacritics have not been used for vernacular terms and transliterations into English.

Place names and proper nouns (except as they appear in primary documents and place of first use) have been modernized.