

Unkempt Edens: Tea and the Culture of Commerce in Eastern India, 1840–1940

Introduced around 1839 as an alternative to the Chinese market during the First Opium War (1839–42), the tea enterprise in Assam in eastern India remained a valuable economic mainstay for imperial Britain for the next century and beyond. Apart from land, however, all other factors of production including planters, expertise, and labor for the industry were “foreign” imports from metropolitan England, Calcutta, and mainland India. Moreover, unlike other cash crops—coffee, rubber or cotton for instance—the commercial success of tea depended on flavor, an attribute of its own qualities as leaf, and not on the finished product of its seed or fruit. The fact that this depended as much on local ecology and climate as on aspects of labor regulation and disease control convinced me that an interdisciplinary approach to tea’s history was in order. In other words, this would have to be a study that looked at the plant and plantation together.

This project argues that managing these estates in fin-de-siècle eastern India was as much an ecological challenge as an economic and cultural one. It complicates our understanding of commodity histories by drawing on evidence from multiple worlds—human and nonhuman—that impacted the working of this enclave economy. It addresses two interrelated sets of questions. First, it takes a closer look at the relationship between this plantation economy and its built environment. Given that tea was a monoculture crop, had taken up more than one million acres of land for production by 1899, involved the labor of more than two million men, women and children by the end of 1905, and had an overall mortality rate of 33.6 percent in 1896, this project provides an explanation of the ecological, structural, and social logics that connect these seemingly disparate features of the industry. Second, it rethinks whether these intersecting histories led to the emergence of a unique plantation culture in eastern India. It contends that tea ecology and agrarian systems, pest bionomics, epidemiological concerns, and forest management in colonial Assam contributed to—and complicated—the making of labor laws, administrative policy, planter attitudes, and the everyday lives of workers that have largely been overlooked.

This project finally demonstrates that the history of this commodity remains incomplete and inadequate if we separate the human dimension from its nonhuman setting. Neither the labor theory of value, nor the triumphalism of British agrarian “improvement” or an overemphasis on the spatial logic of political economy and capital alone captures tea’s distinctive local history and global appeal.