**Tea Advertising in the Early Years of Indian Independence**

**Natasha Nongbri**




Fig 1. ITMEB Poster, 1947. Priya Paul Collection.

This 1947 poster brought out by the Indian Tea Market Expansion Board (ITMEB) features an Indian lady in a white saree with a red and blue border, sitting cross-legged in front of a *charkha* (spinning wheel), and sipping a cup of tea. In the backdrop are more cups, saucers and *charkhas*, while the text declares the beverage a "100% swadeshi drink" (Fig. 1). Yet, even with the appropriation of the most potent nationalist symbol of economic self-reliance by the advertisers, to demonstrate how 'Indian' the beverage had become, tea was still far from being a 'swadeshi' or a 'mass' drink. In the late colonial period, various promotional campaigns and print advertisements had succeeded in creating awareness for the commodity, but inducing Indian consumers to drink more tea and make a habit of it was an undertaking that continued well into the post-independence era. This essay explores the shifts in tea advertising in the print medium

across these pre- and postcolonial periods, and the changing meanings of tea for consumers, who transitioned from ruled subjects into citizens of a new nation state.

The Indian tea industry had its beginnings in the late 1830s in the north-eastern frontier, and by the close of the 19th century, it had spread to other parts of the subcontinent and emerged as a leading plantation enterprise. India also wrested from China the position of chief supplier of tea to the British market. By the turn of the century, technological and scientific advances in the industry led to overproduction of tea and a desperate pursuit for new markets. Concerted efforts were then made to create and promote a domestic consumer base for tea. The ITMEB was established in 1936 and launched vigorous campaigns to popularize the beverage widely and promote it as a 'swadeshi' national drink among various strata of Indian society. Print advertising in English and vernacular dailies and magazines became one of the most effective media for reaching out to the Indian consumer and transforming tea from an imperial to an 'indigenous' beverage. [1]

The decade leading to independence was a windfall for the ITMEB. The Second World War provided opportunities to sell tea by exploiting wartime exigencies and war induced industrial production, notwithstanding inflation and government emphasis on austerity and economic stringency. This created a range of new consumers—from battered soldiers on the war front, poor peasants in the countryside, and workers toiling in factories, to the efficient office-goer, and the judicious but upwardly mobile members of a middle-class family. [2] Commissioned by ITEMB, print advertisements of this period show a plethora of visuals, punctuated with catchy taglines and texts extolling the refreshing, invigorating qualities of tea. This helped propel tea to the status of a regular everyday commodity, although it was yet to become a national or a mass beverage.

The 1950s saw the new nation state search for its moorings. It was a period of economic hardships and food shortages, which also witnessed the aftermath of the partition. But it was also a time of great hope, with both leaders and citizens actively participating in the nation-building project, and tea playing an important role in energizing this enterprise. The ITMEB was replaced by the Central Tea Board in 1949, and later the Tea Board of India in 1954. However, in the long

run, neither of these latter bodies were able to carry out the kind of rigorous propaganda initiated by their colonial predecessor, and the mantle of promoting tea was largely taken up by leading private companies like Brooke Bond and Lipton.

Across these shifts in the early years of Indian independence, three major themes came to dominate print advertisements. The first centred around the productivity of the worker. If tea advertisements in the pre-independence decade had focused on productivity for the empire and war induced production, the post-1947 ones married their message to the emerging needs of the new nation. Workers were no longer mere labourers, but also citizens performing yeoman's services and contributing to the prosperity of the new nation through the industries they served.



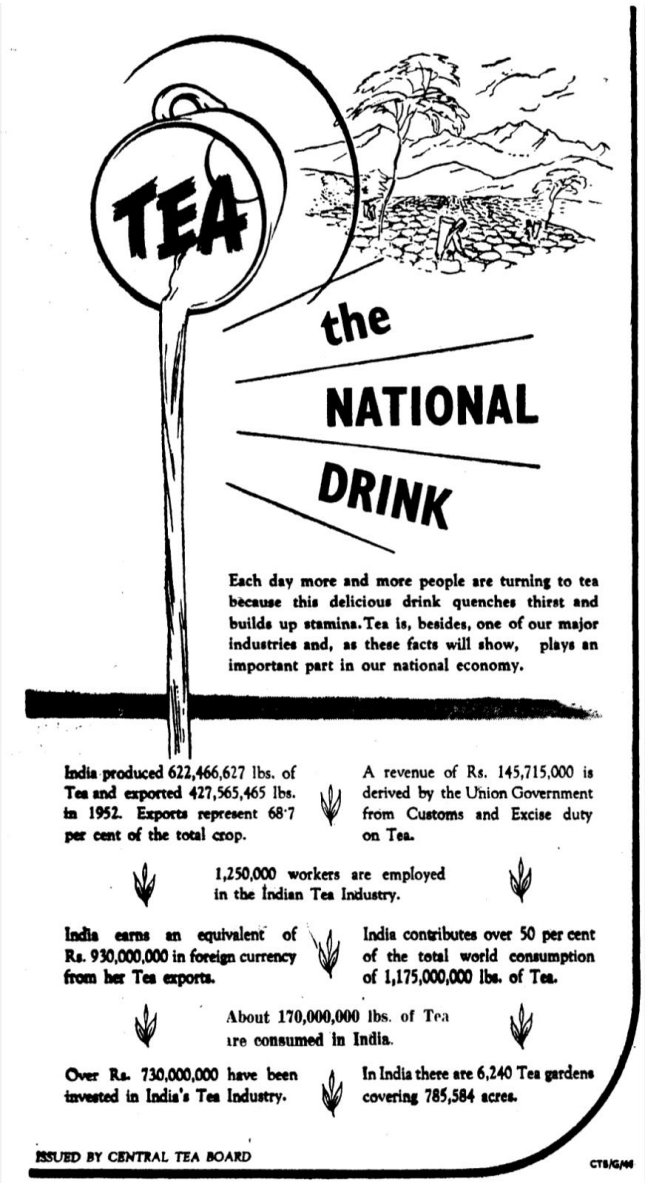



Figs. 2 and 3. Advertisements from the "Tea. Ask the Worker" series, *The Times of India*, April 23 and August 24, 1951.

Figs. 2 and 3, part of the "Tea? Ask the Worker" advertisements brought out by the Central Tea Board, focus on the two leading Indian industries coal mining and textiles. While the virtues of tea to fight fatigue and boost output remain prominent, what is even more striking in these advertisements is the context of industrialization. The post-independence years witnessed major industrial growth through both government and private participation, with tea being seen as the succour to these labour-intensive systems. "A timely cup of tea" was "as good" or even "better" than "long rest", claimed the Board. The closing line in each advertisement of this series—"The worker will tell you"—also appeared to accord a non-alienating, humanized dimension to Indian labour.

The growing importance of tea as an export item was another recurrent theme in advertisements by the Board. At a time when the nation had few products to export, tea brought in a substantial proportion of earnings, as evident in the following images.

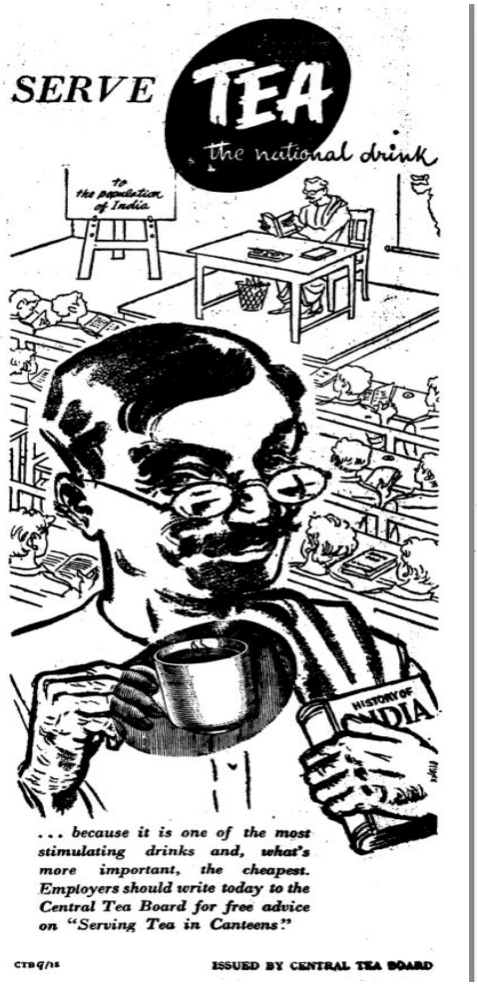


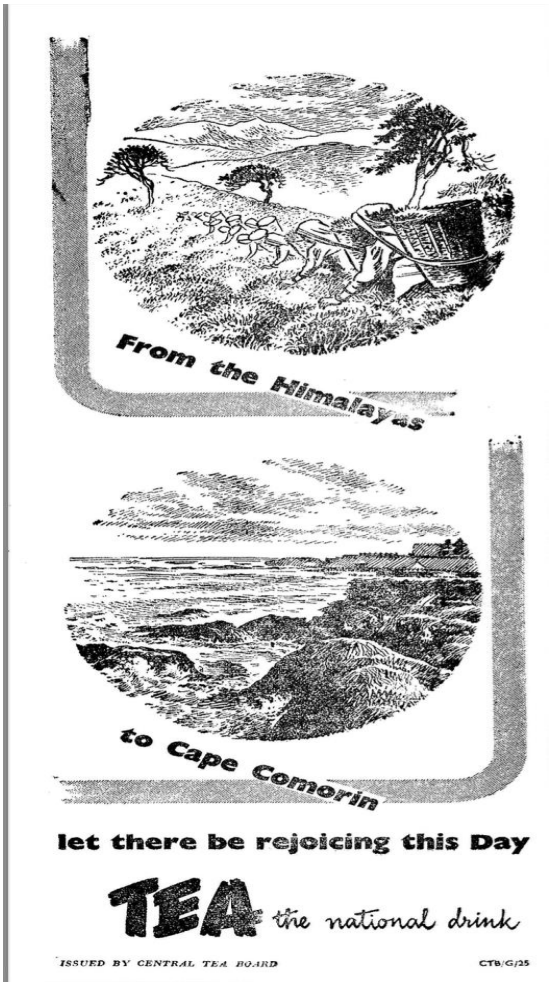



Figs. 4 and 5. Tea advertisements from *The Times of India*, January 28, 1950, and August 15, 1953.

A 1950 advertisement touted tea as "our most famous international crop" and "our second biggest export" (Fig. 4). It further declared that tea's foreign exchange earnings paid for crucial food imports worth nearly 60 crores annually, and that the product was a "time honoured beverage" providing "warmth and comfort" to millions of homes. In all respects, tea had become a "great Indian industry" contributing to the nation's economic development. A similar advertisement in 1953 (Fig. 5) presented the tea industry's feats in more quantifiable terms,

justifying for itself “an important part in our national economy”. From exporting 68.7 per cent of tea and earning Rs 93 crores in foreign exchange, to contributing through customs and excise duty to the national exchequer and employing large numbers of workers, the advertisement lauded tea’s position as one of the nation’s major industries. The advertisement also merged the growing importance of tea as a “national” industry and an export earner with the advocacy of tea as a national drink. The publication of this advertisement in an Independence Day issue of a national daily further drove home the tea industry’s significant role in the life of the nation. The presentation of quantifiable facts by the Board, and later advertisers of private companies, became a way of creating public awareness about the commodity, its associated industry, and its contribution to industrialization and national prosperity.






Figs. 6 and 7 (top left and right). Tea advertisements from *The Times of India*, May 13, 1952, and August 15, 1953. Fig 8 (bottom centre). Tea advertisement from the *Hindustan Times*, July 21, 1953.

A third theme that celebrated tea as a national drink also frequently featured in print advertisements of the early 1950s, but within the context of the newly independent nation. Captions like "Serve tea, the national drink" were attempts to widen the appeal of the beverage across the country. Concurrently, tea's universal charm and its utilitarian value were constantly reiterated through taglines like "Tea, the universal refresher", "Tea for zest and efficiency", "Tea builds up stamina", "Any time is tea time" and "The ideal companion" for all festive occasions. An advertisement of 1952, depicting a teacher with a book and a cup of tea in hand against the backdrop of a classroom in progress, declared the beverage as one of the cheapest and most stimulating drinks to be served to the Indian population (Fig. 6). Another advertisement which was again featured on Independence Day celebrated the growing popularity of tea as a national drink "from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin" (Fig. 7). Tea was even endorsed by the celebrated duo of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay who scaled Mount Everest: they endorsed it as the beverage that constantly cheered them and gave them vigour during their arduous ascent up

(Fig. 8). These print visuals explored the potential of tea as much for the vitality and leisure that it offered, as well as for the ease with which it could be served in a variety of contexts that celebrated the nation, its citizens, achievements and progress.

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**Notes**

[1] The role of print advertisements in shaping a culture of tea consumption in India has been explored by various scholars. See Gautam Bhadra, *From an Imperial Product to a National Drink: The Culture of Tea Consumption in Modern India* (Kolkata: CSSSC in association with the Tea Board of India, 2005); Philip Lutgendorf, "Chai Why?: The Triumph of Tea in India as Documented in the Priya Paul Collection," http://tasveergharindia.net/cmsdesk/essay/89/index; Shobna Nijhawan, "Nationalizing the Consumption of Tea for the Hindi Reader: The Indian Tea Market Expansion Board's Advertisement Campaign," *Modern Asian Studies* 51, no. 5 (2017): 1229-1252; Shubhneet Kaushik, "Viewing Advertisements Doing History: Advertisements in *Aj*, 1935-1938," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 74th session, 2014, 587-593.

[2] Nijhawan, "Nationalizing the Consumption of Tea," 1229-1252; Natasha Nongbri, "Representing Tea, Creating Consumers: Tea Advertising in Late Colonial India," in *Materiality and Visuality in North East India: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by T. Nongbri and R. Bhargava (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 129-150.