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**A DROP O' TEA: EXPLORING TEA NARRATIVES IN SELECT WRITINGS OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

Sabuj Sarkar

*Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Gour Banga,
Malda, WB, India*

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Abstract:

Tea as a drink played a significant role in Indian culture and culinary context since its arrival in India by the British planters. As a drink, tea maintained an essence of distance and experimentation for a considerable period. Passages of discussion are being construed considering the role of tea in various sections of society on multifaceted occasions. As an intellectual giant, Rabindranath Tagore felt the pulse of his time perfectly and could hardly dissociate himself from this popular drink. The magic and charm of tea also touched upon his mind theoretically as well as practically. 19th century Bengal was certainly a turbulent phase of the time. In a period of political consciousness and cultural upheavals, 19th-century Bengal witnessed several social parameters to judge it from different angles. Furthermore, in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, the social and cultural sketches of the time narrate a concrete picture which is rarely available with such accuracy and emotional authenticity comparing the writings of his contemporaries. This paper tries to highlight tea's impact on Indian life and culture, particularly in 19th-century Bengal, as reflected in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. His writings show that tea as a drink gradually found space in almost all households. It was primarily a drink consumed and enjoyed by the affluent class of society only, however, gradually; it became a drink of the commoners and was enjoyed by all on every occasion.

Keywords: *Tea, Planters, Space, 19th Century Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, etc.*

The connection between tea and Rabindranath Tagore was never unfamiliar. Rather, the aroma of tea came to the Tagore family far ahead of Rabindranath Tagore's birth. It is surprising but true that Rabindranath Tagore was very reticent about his grandfather Prince Dwarakanath Tagore. However, Prince Dwarakanath was a man of his own missions. An entrepreneur of a rare species, Dwarakanath, single-handedly proved his mettle as a pioneer businessman during the British time. He saw eye to eye with the British, talked to them, competed with them and made the British envious of his rapid success and achievements. Prince Dwarakanath was a man of many businesses. He could feel well the ambience of the time and did accordingly. A true friend of Raja Rammohan Roy, Prince Dwarakanath also advocated for English education in India. Raja Rammohan Roy also thought that to be successful in India, one must be educated and successful globally. Financial stability is what one needs to possess. The name of Prince Dwarakanath is found to be connected with the coal mining business, banking system, Railway Company, tea business and various other businesses during the British period (Kling, 27). He was a shareholder of the Assam tea company and one of the pioneering figures of the early tea business in India with the British. It is a matter of great doubt and duality that after his



demise, the Tagore family had almost nothing to say about him and his contribution to the family and society.

While in the case of Prince Dwarakanath Tagore, his connection with Indian tea was more of a practical kind and business-oriented relationship, in the case of Rabindranath Tagore; it was more of aesthetics, culture, sensibilities, emotions, society and the other finer aspects of human knowledge and wisdom. As a thinker, writer, practitioner and as a preacher, Rabindranath Tagore was global and, at the same time, a local personality. Throughout his long, voluminous, eventful, creative and meaningful existence, Rabindranath Tagore was inquisitive in nature and experimental in spirit. He had a curious and ever-thirsty soul to know the unknown and investigate for the new.

So there is hardly any doubt that tea as a beverage was already in practice when Rabindranath Tagore was writing in a full-fledged manner. A new kind of beverage is in the market. Everyone, particularly the Indians, is very curious about this new drink in the society, available on the street corners in different places and locations of Calcutta. Calcutta was the capital of India and also headquarters of the then British imperial administration. We can easily guess the vibrant presence in the arena of the time, and Tagore, with his entire curious mind, was very much sensitive about the new things in the market. Of course, there are no direct descriptions or documentation regarding Rabindranath Tagore's responses to the new kind of beverage in Calcutta at the time. However, through conversations, anecdotes, and textual references, we can at least get ample examples through which we come to know that tea as a drink was already in family life and also getting injected in class, society and different aspects of human interactions.

We have to remember that it was when anti-British slogans were in the market, and everyone was being found to protest against British clothes, products and British commodities. So from that same angle, too, there was a flow of ideas in which this new kind of beverage was to be discarded and rejected by the Indians. Several protesters were there, including Indian leaders and thinkers who spoke against tea and regarding the inclusion of tea in Indian life and culture. Two eminent names are to be mentioned in this state and out of which one is the famous scientist and teacher Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, and the other was the father of the nation, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. It has to be mentioned that Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy was all against tea drinking in the Indian context. As a chemist, it was his viewpoint that in a country like India where temperature is extreme, tea as a drink is not suitable for the Indians and particularly for their health. It will rather put long-term effects on the health of the Indian citizen and will malfunction in nourishment creating side effects and other ailments. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's argument against tea was almost similar. He, too, emphasized that tea drinking might be the cause of serious problems for Indian drinkers.

The reality of the situation was almost the opposite. The British could feel the pulse well. Moreover, they could already feel the marketing strategy and the greater possibility in the Indian market. Several strategic changes were adopted, and the British and the different tea companies started implementing new ideas so that the native Indian prospective tea drinkers get accustomed to the new flavour and taste of tea. British tea companies started experimenting with packages keeping in mind the weather of India and also started to consider the promotion of tea in different locations of India: They primarily thought of big cities like Calcutta and other important locations of India. They not only thought of distributing tea free of cost so that people get accustomed to tea-drinking sessions but also, along with business, they also injected the notion of nationalism. Such advertisements were never very far in which it was sketched and depicted that "tea is 100% Swadeshi". Naturally, the British tea planters had to think and plan meticulously to win the heart of the Indian tea drinkers.

Rabindranath Tagore's curiosity regarding tea is collected from various anecdotes and incidents. His enthusiasm was best reflected when he visited Japan. The details of his Japan visit are found in a separate text called *Japan Jatri*. In this perfect travelogue Tagore has recorded his



experiences of visiting a Japanese family during his stay in Japan. It has to be mentioned that Tagore was exposed to the traditional tea ceremonies held and practised in ancient Japan during this time. The Nobel laureate was well-received by Japanese literature enthusiasts and was invited several times. This visit was symbolically meaningful in many ways. For Rabindranath Tagore, it was an eye-opening experience. He came to know in details the pros and cons of tea ceremonies in vogue in Japan. Tagore writes in the following mellifluous way:

Then the host of the family came and declared that he had given the responsibility of preparing tea on his daughter. Her daughter came, bowed her head and got ready in preparing tea. Since her entry in the room to every part of preparing the tea was like a rhythm (Tagore, 88) [*My Translation*].

It is said that while he was offered tea in a cup and saucer, Rabindranath poured it on the saucer instead of taking it directly from the cup. Observing such a novel way of drinking tea made his Japanese counterparts curious about him. Rabindranath Tagore replied that it was an Indian way of drinking tea. Since a Nobel laureate is following this way, many Japanese followers there started doing the same after Rabindranath. Tea became an emblem of cultural exchange and of national and international medium of communication and human spirit.

Rabindranath Tagore's second political novel, *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters), should be read as a text of many layers. The novel was written when Bengal's political and social condition was in turmoil. Revolutionaries were working together, fighting for the causes of the country. Tagore has presented the essence of the time judiciously to ponder over the condition of the time. What is most important here in the opening page of the first chapter, Tagore describes the scene of a roadside tea stall.

Interestingly, this description is never arbitrary. Rather it is meaningful in the true sense of the term. Tea appears as a marker of when the Indian revolutionaries are meeting and planning to move further for their upcoming agenda to fight against the British atrocities. Tea stalls become the hubs of perfect meeting places. Tea stalls became a space for intellectual discussions amongst the revolutionaries of the time, a place for discussion for the intellectuals and general roadside enthusiasts. Naturally, the importance of tea and roadside tea stalls was growing rapidly.

On the other hand, the irony is that the police department under the British power's authority was also, similarly, taking tea and planning for new strategies to arrest the revolutionaries. So it was the kind of a storm in a teacup in which both the ends were getting inspired and invigorated, taking a sip. A tiny translated portion from Tagore's *Char Adhyay* can make the readers feel the tempo and temperament of the time that Tagore described perfectly in this passage.

The scene: a tea shop. Adjoining it is a small room where some school and college textbooks, many of them second-hand, are displayed for sale. Some of them are English translations of modern European stories and plays... The shop faces the main road and is flanked by an alley on the left. For those who wish to enjoy their tea in seclusion, part of the room has been screened off with tattered sacking. Today, in that partitioned area, signs of some special arrangements can be seen. To compensate for the shortage of stools and chairs, some packing cases bearing the stamp of a Darjeeling tea company have been placed there. Even the pieces of crockery have clashing designs. Some cups are made of blue enamel, others are of white china (*Four Chapters*) Tr. Radha Chakravarty.



The shop's description indicates and bears some of the symbolic presentations of this particular beverage available at that time. Rabindranath Tagore has perfectly managed to touch the ambience and the period's sentiment, emotion, and financial condition. Tea as a beverage can be enjoyed in company or isolation. This description in the passage narrates the cultural aspect of the time and the various other issues of the time, enabling the reader to get into the social and cultural upheavals. The reference to the China tea cup immediately reminds us of tea's early connection with tea. That tea never came to the Indian context; rather, the arrival of tea records a long history of bygone days. Such minimalistic sketches of the description perfectly remind us of the various changes taking place in society.

Gurung Roshan's article "Formation and Expansion of Tea Culture in India: With a special reference to Bengal" highlights several important aspects of early tea promotion in India, particularly in Bengal. One of the new aspects raised by the essayist is the point of religion and tea promotion in Bengal. He has raised some of the questions which are certainly significant and relevant. Roshan has pointed out that Muslims are broad-minded to accept new ideas from the British and foreigners. In the article of GurungRoshan, it is evident from a report of C.T. Buckland that the Hindu gentlemen seldom took any refreshments.

In contrast, in the case of the Mohammedans, they were more liberal and were ready to accept anything new. So, it was easy for them to accept this new beverage in India, particularly in Bengal, during the British Raj. Roshan has also rightly pointed out that the Mohammedans usually do not drink wine for religion's sake. Naturally, taking tea for them was a new kind of opportunity. It gave them a new opportunity and freedom in cultural behaviour to drink tea more openly without getting biased by the prevalent customs of the time (Roshan, 457).

Tagore's experiences with tea were numerous. Gurung Roshan's article shows that in 1926 Rabindranath went to Dhaka University and was amazed to find that so many tea parties were being organised to invite him (Roshan, 460). So, in India and Bangladesh, tea parties were gradually in vogue, and people found it a space for discussion or higher intellectual interactions. Furthermore, Tagore witnessed the same European life in India and the neighbouring countries, too (Bangladesh was a part of India during the British time). Terms like "tea breaks" during working hours in various offices and daily hard labour have gradually become colloquial.

Enthusiastic Rabindranath Tagore showed his exuberance regarding tea when he arranged a tea circle in Shantiniketan, and he named this tea circle "SushimChaaChakro". He wrote a Bengali poem titled "SushimChaaChakro", and the text was later published in his poetry book: *Prahasini*. This poem was written commemorating such an unusual and uncommon assembly in Shantiniketan. With all his enthusiasm and virility, the speaker in the poem was not only excited about having this new drink called "tea" but also discovered life and energy everywhere surrounding him. He finds energy in nature, also. Tagore actually went to China in 1924 and returned to Shantiniketan with an experience that in China it was not only a session of casual drinking, rather it was an art. Keeping that experience in mind and later enkindled by a Chinese friend, Su-Sumo, who visited Shantiniketan at that time stayed there as a guest for a while, played the role of a catalyst behind the formation of this circle. The poem goes like this:

Woe is me, woe is me,
Days are gone, gone forever,
Restless mind for a cup of tea
Like a flight of skylarks...
(My translation)



What Rabindranath Tagore and many other Indian writers, who wrote in English, actually did was a kind of negotiation. It was a negotiation of cultural heritage and identity. It was also an attempt to reach the global world. In Tagore's all writings and his continuous attempt to adopt and adapt to new dimensions in everyday experiences, he has attempted to do this venture very honestly. Moreover, we can assume a balance between his grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore and himself. What Dwarkanath did with a materialistic world, money, and wealth to reach the global platform, Rabindranath Tagore did the very same with his writings and ideas. The following words are apposite in this context in which May Ellis Gibson puts the opinion in the "Introduction" to *Indian Angles* in the following manner: "I argue here that all poets writing in English in India worked necessarily in a web of affiliation and rupture, identifications and disidentifications. They inhabited polyglot locations" (Gibson, 2).

In Tagore, we find a spirit that is not only global but rather all-encompassing. He attempted to break the narrow boundaries of human desire and the ways of personal fulfillment. Rather, he wanted to reach a platform that is far more general and utilitarian in concept. His love for tea was not only a personal choice and narrow personal preferences but also a message to welcome the unknown. Tagore always wanted to accept what was new and benevolent for society. In *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* Kalyan Sen Gupta has pointed out that

Politicians, he [Tagore] thought, move blindly and mechanically and lack real human sensitivity to the actual needs of life and the country. They worship 'the idols of the machine', seeking order and conformity in organization. What is more urgent, however, is to develop our creative urge as expressed in working in harness with others for the common good (Sen Gupta, 38).

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