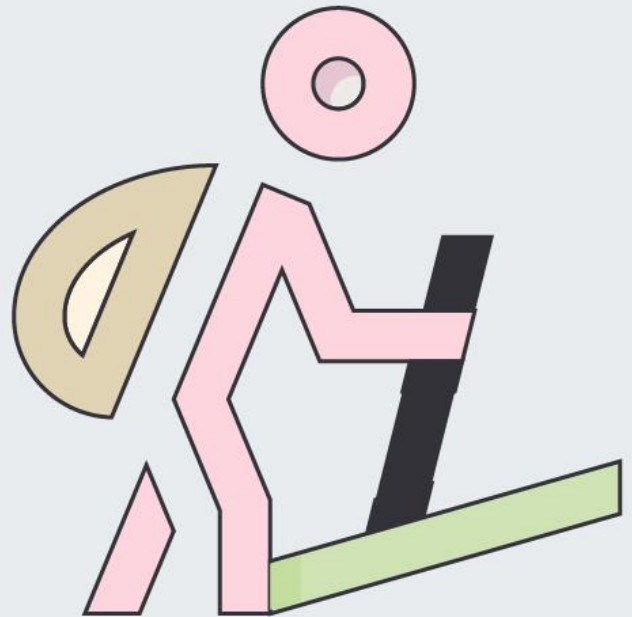


# THE FLAVOR TRAIL

with Sabita Banerji

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## LEAKS IN OUR TEAPOT

While we don't know if the writer and novelist Philip K. Dick was a tea lover, his phrase "We have a lot of leaks in our reality" could perfectly adapt to the tea industry if he said, "We have a lot of leaks in our teapot." Despite tea being a catalyst for many positive things, the actions of our ancestors have left a dark legacy that we continue to pay for today.

This new section, titled "The Flavor Trail," aims to reveal the reality behind a cup of tea, coffee, or any other food or drink that, when classified as "commodities," the needs and injustices faced in their production have been ignored. For the launch of "The Flavor Trail," we have the participation of Sabita Banerji, founder of **THIRST**, a platform of knowledge and action for civil society agents and stakeholders seeking to transform the tea industry into one that is prosperous but, more importantly: Fair.

It can be said that Sabita Banerji deeply understands the issues of the tea industry, as she was born into it: her father was a manager in a tea estate in southern India. Later, when she settled in United Kingdom, she developed her career at OXFAM, a global movement of people working together to fight inequality and end poverty and injustice.

However, she decided to go further and focus on fair trade because, as she says, "while charity is important, achieving fair trade allows people to have more agency over their quality of life." This path allowed Sabita Banerji to form what is now THIRST.

## THE COLONIES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Although the era of the **British East India Company** was long ago, its colonies left an impact that caused a colonial trauma. Despite having progressed as a human species, the mark they left are considerable. LeBaron (2018) points out: "because female tea workers often combine paid work within the tea industry with unpaid care work for their families, and risk losing the entire family's housing if they were to leave her job, women are further tied to the plantations." (p. 24)

THIRST (2023) states:

Many of the historical structures and systems established at the outset of the global tea trade, are still, in essence, in place today, and may be a key factor in holding back the development of a fairer tea industry; "...tea cultivation...especially thrived in colonial conditions... because colonial states fertilized this industry with cheap land, labor, and other requirements." (Erika Rappaport). (p. 16)

The picture becomes even grimmer when you learn that child labor exists in the industry.

According to the Tea Board of India, approximately 80,000 children or more work on tea estates. In Kenya, in 2002, more than 30% of the tea pickers were reported to be under the age of 15. In China, the Ministry of Education's "work and study" programmes have included primary schoolchildren being sent to pick tea. In Sri Lanka, 73% of children started to help out on the farm before they reached their 12th birthday<sup>153</sup>. The low financial state of Sri Lankan tea labourers hampers

children's access to better education and healthcare, and their poor living conditions – with little to no privacy – poses a risk to child protection. Twinings reports that “In Yunnan [China], child mortality is double that of urban areas due to lack of access to healthcare.” Children, particularly girls, on tea estates are vulnerable to trafficking due to the poverty and poor living conditions of their families. For example, there have been media reports of girls from impoverished families on Assam tea estates being trafficked into domestic slavery after being promised good jobs in distant cities. (Shivji, 2022, p. 90)

Far from being dignified, the tea industry is often a disgrace. And it hurts more when you consider that while some meditate with a cup of tea, seeking a state of no-mind, others long to escape the constant suffering and uncertainty of "What will happen tomorrow? Will I reach the goal?" Or something as essential as "Will I have enough to eat?"

Harassment and sexual abuse, as well as gender inequality, are also present.

In Kenya the #MeToo movement is gaining ground although like many other countries, openly talking about sexual assault and rape is very difficult for women, especially if they are accusing those in positions of power and their very survival depends on keeping quiet. A number of women in the Panorama programme told the reporter that because work is so scarce, they were left with no choice but to give in to the sexual demands of their bosses or face having no income. (THIRST et al., 2023, p. 21)

## **THIS IS NOT THE END, BUT THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE**

Despite the challenges in the tea industry, we must not give up. Inspired by conversations with Sabita Banerji, I have concluded that it is possible to be catalysts for change if we include these three key areas in our sustainability approach: environmental sustainability, human sustainability, and industrial sustainability. Although these areas are distinct, they can be interpreted as an interconnected sequence.

1. **Environmental Sustainability:** Seeking to restore the flora removed to plant tea, remembering that each environment has an ecosystem affected by human actions. Beyond reforestation, it is being aware of the chemicals used and trying to avoid them.
2. **Human Sustainability:** It's not just about providing a job with a salary but a dignified job whose benefits allow people to think beyond the paycheck, that is, about their future.
3. **Industrial Sustainability:** More than 60 countries produce tea, but we must fix the leaks in our teapot (the industry). Otherwise, by trying to introduce too much tea, we might end up with nothing. Take, for example, the case of Darjeeling. Despite being a highly recognized tea, almost a luxury, its production, the way it is marketed, how its workers are treated, and the price paid for the tea, all needs improvement. Darjeeling is just one of the many such cases that exist.

### **Fewer Words, More Action!**

While people often look to assign blame for the problems in the tea industry, it is crucial to recognize that we all share some responsibility. Instead of focusing on fault, we should aim to create change. Drawing on Sabita Banerji's insights, I believe that whether we are a large or small company, or simply tea enthusiasts, we can take actions to be catalysts for positive change.

1. **Hear, See, and Act:** Before pointing out and judging a situation, let's understand its origin and how we can counterbalance in favor of common welfare.

2. Let's Learn and Teach: It is impossible to know everything, so it is crucial to be humble to learn and teach. An excellent antidote to inequity is knowledge. We must ensure to obtain and provide reliable content. Let's demand it!
3. Paying a Little More Is Worth It!: As long as the increase is to provide better conditions for all involved, especially the producers, who are the ones who risk the most but, in most cases, earn the least.
4. Directly from the Source: Although it is more complicated to find, try to buy tea directly from the producer. The fewer intermediaries there are, the more significant the profit for the producer.

As I mentioned in "[Compañías, Reinos & Guerras Pt. 6](#)," the Flavor Trail section would reveal how years of British exploitation have shaped a country to this day. And something that took years to mold can hardly be changed in a day, but as Karl Marx said: "Talking and doing are different things, more like opposites." It is our duty to know history and strive not to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. Let us be catalysts of positive change by taking the example and advice of Sabita Banerji with THIRST and, if possible, [supporting this cause](#).

What better way to close this first blog post of this section than with the Tea Wisdom of Sabita Banerji? — "Listen carefully and understand what others tell you." — Regardless of whether it is the opposite of what we think, we can only understand the whole picture by listening carefully. No wonder they say we have two ears and one mouth, so we speak less and listen more.

Until next time!

Satoricha ~

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