

Cultural Impressions

On our first full day in Colaba, Mumbai, we took part in a cultural briefing as part of our first academic session. This introduction to India helped us to get acquainted with the culture which at the time we'd had so little experience with. After the briefing, we took a break with the hotel staff for some tea—a break we would come to look forward to every day in the future as we suffered through jet lag, sun exposure and a general lack of understanding our surroundings. This tea time allowed us to reflect on what we had seen or learned with our classmates and re-energize for the rest of the session, which especially at our first stop in Colaba was so necessary to maintain attention through the aforementioned deterring factors. Oddly enough, this tea time continued on into the other stops of the trip, and I haven't gone a day without tea since our arrival in Mumbai weeks ago. This very important facet of our trip wasn't once mentioned in our cultural briefing, which makes tea an even more fascinating aspect of India.

Tea production was commercialized in India by the British, which allowed for the mass-production of this versatile drink to begin in south Asia. India remains the largest tea consumer in the world, and backs their habit up by being one of the largest producers as well, right behind China. The tea consumption is easily seen at every meal in India, where tea is assumed as a staple. Even while in Dharavi, India's tea consumption was seen as many of the potters sold clay tea vessels. These pots are biodegradable containers to consume a drink that is global in India and provide an easy system for consumption which is not harmful to the earth—a solution that can be well-appreciated on this trip surrounding climate change.

Our largest interaction with tea on this trip was, of course, at the Windermere Tea Estate in Munnar, India. The estate looks over one of the many Tata tea plantations. We were able to get the production process from tea tree to finished tea leaf explained to us in detail. In picking the tea leaf, the fate of the tea is decided. If the bud and first three to five tea leaves are picked,

the tea will be black. The bud and the first tea leaf gives green tea, and only the bud gives white tea. Only black is fermented in production, which, since in this process the tea loses many of its antioxidants and gains caffeine, makes sense. India manufactures around 1,000,000 tons of tea per year, so it seems to be down to an art form. We took a visit to a tea museum, where we were able to see the whole process in detail, learn about all of the folkloric and scientific health uses for green tea, and purchase our own tea, a lot of which was grown in Munnar itself.

What was most interesting to me in learning about Indian tea is the different ways Indians re-use the parts of the tea leaves which can't go into tea, namely the stems and veins of the leaves. We've discussed often the concept of "jugaad," or reverse innovation, and the use of the tea leaves is one of the simplest examples. The stems and veins, which would otherwise be waste from production, are used in three ways. In the first of these, the caffeine content from the tea stems and veins is extracted and is sold for use in energy drinks. The second, in a more traditional fashion, is to use these parts of the tea tree to make a natural dye. Finally, the stems and veins can be recycled back to the tea trees, being laid down near the roots to be used as fertilizer for the current tea plants.

As a tea lover myself, I've absolutely loved getting to see and drink so much tea in our trip. Tea is a natural custom in India, and being so easily attainable, one can see why the delicious and refreshing drink would be so popular among such a unique culture.