

focus

Tea or coffee



A chai wallah at work in Delhi represents the traditional culture of tea that is now under threat from coffee, as the international franchises move into the country. Simon De Trey-White for The National

Battle of the beverages

In one corner is coffee, the trendy and expensive newcomer. In the other is tea, drunk in India since the 12th century and ingrained into its culture. Both industries are intent on winning the country's hearts and rupees. **Charukesi Ramadurai writes**

It is early evening, still a couple of hours before the sun sets. At a roadside stall, a blackened pans sits on a single stove, with a brown sludgy mixture of milk, tea and sugar brewing in it since morning.

In front of the stall, a dozen men of all ages exchange the day's news and gossip as steam rises from the tall glasses of chai in their hands. It is a scene taken from any place, any time in India.

India has been a tea-drinking nation for centuries, and has a strong cultural connection to the beverage. The shifty peon at a government office will ask you not for a bribe directly, but for something for his chai-paani (tea and water).

In many Indian advertisements a cup of tea denotes the housewife's "me time" - that time of the day when she finishes her chores and puts up her feet for a few moments.

And why not? In India, tea is the cheapest drink after water and is affordable to everyone.

It can be "spiced" the way Indians like their food and drink, with a range of condiments such as ginger, cardamom and pepper, and consumed as masala chai.

A 2008 study on beverage consumption patterns in India by Operations Research Group showed that 83 per cent of all households consume tea.

But is that set to change? Starbucks, the enormous US coffee conglomerate, opened its first store in India this month, in Mumbai.

The brand, with outlets all over the world, has been eyeing the Indian market for years and finally joined hands with Tata Global Beverages this year.

The company promises to use only locally sourced and ground espresso beans, and believes India has a huge potential because its coffee consumption is low: 100 grams a person a year, compared with 4.5 kilograms a person in the US.

Although Starbucks does sell a

version of Indian tea called the chai latte, the focus is bound to be on coffee. The company has plans to open more stores in Mumbai this year and in New Delhi next year.

Another storm in a tannoy came this year with an announcement by the planning commission that in April next year, tea was to be declared India's national drink.

This was to mark the birth anniversary of India's first tea planter from the north-eastern state of Assam, Maniram Dewan, who was hanged for his role in the 1857 revolt against the British.

When it was announced by the deputy chairman, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, protests erupted everywhere, with different communities clamouring for the spotlight on their own drink.

Cooperatives such as Amul from Gujarat in western India wanted milk to be the drink, while Punjab in the north voted for lassi, which is thick buttermilk, either salted or sweetened.

The satire of the situation has not gone unnoticed - a country that cannot reach a consensus on a national language was trying to force a national drink down the throats of its people.

At present, the government has gone silent - some media reports say "biding its time" - on the whole national drink business.

But the battle is still on, with the Tea Board clamouring for exalted status and others crying out for their own choice of beverage, including coconut water and sugarcane juice.

Coffee is expensive and drunk mainly in the southern states, closer to the plantations. It stayed this way until India's first western-style coffee shop, Cafe Coffee Day, opened in 1996 as an exciting novelty.

Suddenly coffee was the hip, preferred drink of young Indians. In its various versions, served hot or cold, and with additions such as

chocolate sauce, cinnamon powder and even ice cream, coffee has become all the rage despite its higher prices (starting from 80 rupees or Dh5.50 a cup).

The Barista chain followed soon, with its outlets, stocking newspapers, magazines, guitars and board games.

And it was not just the coffee that lured the young people, the high spenders in this sector, in droves. These cafes satisfied a gap, a place where people could linger all day over just a cup of coffee, book or laptop in hand.

Coffee shops became the cool place to hang out with friends, conduct business meetings and even acted as venues for the traditional meeting of boys and girls for an arranged match.

Today, Cafe Coffee Day (or CCD

as it is called) has more than 1,200 outlets all over the country and is opening a new branch almost every week.

Tea, on the other hand, is mostly seen as the beverage made and drunk every morning at home, or found in small roadside shops where people stop for a quick break.

It is left to battle the young, peppy image coffee has created for itself.

But tea industry experts remain optimistic.

Sandeep Subramani, the founder of Tranquillitea plantation and resort in the Nilgiris district to the south, says: "We see a lot of people, particularly in the age group of 15 to 35, moving over to coffee, not just for the beverage but also the overall experience."

"However, it does seem that a lot

of them return to tea in their mid-30s. Perhaps this is when people get more health conscious and are also looking to improve their well-being and quality of life.

"So the pattern of tea drinking in the country, in the long term, would remain steady and may even grow in the future."

"A major driving force for this is definitely the undeniable fact that tea is good for health."

Amid all the brouhaha over coffee, tea has been slowly making its way back into the consciousness of the young and affluent, this time in a new role - that of a cheap, stimulant beverage.

There is now willingness to experiment with flavours and strength. The British tea company Twinings has recently moved into India, launching with workshops to ex-

plain the nuances of teas, and pairing each with different food flavours, much like wine.

Tea cafes and lounges have mushroomed in the larger cities. They provide food along with a range of teas and attract a slightly older, professional customer base.

And tea estates are offering plantation holidays in places such as Darjeeling in the east and Ooty in the south.

There are varying accounts of when and where tea was first cultivated in India, but most sources agree it has been growing in the wild in the north-eastern areas since the 12th century. It has also been used for medicinal purposes by locals.

But it was only in 1833 that the Scotsman Charles Bruce discovered the tea from India was of high quality, worthy enough to be exported back to the UK.

And so began tea cultivation in India, managed entirely by the British. In the early 1890s, tea slowly became popular among locals, too, and when the railways came, consumption increased accordingly, thanks to stalls at every station, large or small.

When the British left, the Indians took over the industry with ease and, since 1947, tea production in India has increased by 250 per cent.

The country is the second largest producer of tea after China, cultivating almost 990 million kilograms last year.

Of this, about 20 per cent is exported and the rest drunk in India. The industry employs more than two million people in the plantations and factories, most of them in Assam and Darjeeling in the east and north-east, and in the Nilgiris in the south.

But whether the national beverage will be able to beat back the perky newcomer in India is yet to be seen.

The battle of the beverages continues.



Employees of the new Indian outlet of Starbucks work double-time in Mumbai. Rajanish Kakade / AP Photo