

***A Lot Can Happen Over Coffee: Coffee Bars and the Fetishized  
Subject in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Kolkata***

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“....Wires are cut very often, fuses go off  
But the lights are always on:  
This is Kolkata, Kolkata!  
Whatever happens, it is always alive!” (Gulzar 83)

There has always been something ‘romantic’ about the city formerly known as Calcutta: once the capital of the British Raj. It has always been fertile to an artist’s imagination fuelling it constantly to define and re-define the ways of grasping this hustling and bustling city-space. If Kipling spoke about it as having “Palace, byre, hovel—poverty and pride—/side by side” (Gupta 4), then Dominique Lapierre’s novel made the moniker ‘city of joy’ famous. It is a space where the past and the present mingle seamlessly; the ghosts of an ever alive colonial history and Naxalite movement sit side by side with the burgeoning I.T sector and share a cup of tea. This paper would try and look at this phenomenon and the changing dynamics of it, namely the ways in which the old haunts and joints, the remnants of the old world charm, where stories, ideas of revolution brewed with incessant cups of coffee and tea is slowly giving way to the swanky, urbanized coffee parlours or ‘chai’ bars. The question is whether this would signal the loss of an old world order, or are we merely consumerized subjects in a rapidly commodified world and victims of neo- colonialism all over again.

The influx of foreign brands and coffee chains seems to threaten the mythic quality of the city. As Ipshita Chanda puts it succinctly, “: Going to the College Street Coffee House where political and aesthetic revolutions are rumoured to have begun, is an attempt to live a myth, to synecdochally participate in the living history of Calcutta as it happens...” (Gupta 241). This mythic quality has its roots ‘in a typically Bengali cultural phenomenon, that of the ‘adda.’

Historically born out of the gathering of unemployed youths over a cup of tea at the temporary, dingy tea stalls in one's neighbourhood, this coming together has been a fertile space for intellectual/ artistic/ political debates and arguments as the years have rolled on. Not only has it provided intellectual stimulus to, borrowing a term from Amartya Sen, the 'argumentative' Bengali, it has also become a cultural signifier. The Bengali's penchant for this gathering and voicing of opinions has come in for searing criticism too. One remembers the reservations that Macaulay had against Bengali men about their being indolent, fish loving and rice eating, incapable of any serious physical exertion ( one must go through Mrinalini Sinha's brilliantly insightful work titled *Colonial Masculinity* to get a deeper insight into this). One is also reminded of how later with the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy branded tea drinking as one of the ways in which the British were slowly getting the Bengalis addicted to a kind of pastime and luxury thereby robbing their capacity for hard work and active participation in the political unrest and euphoria that was a sign of the times. He looked at it as a colonial enterprise, a kind of a mask of conquest and is a wonderful backdrop to start looking at another phenomenon, that of the Gen- Y thronging the various coffee outlets that have opened in Kolkata, making us wonder whether this is colonialism all over again, a kind of a 'velvet domination, to use a typically Marxist term, whereby we have become passive consumers and victims to a typically western consumer culture.

One of the reasons why these retail brands have managed a foray in a somewhat conservative Bengali culture has its roots in the changing economic dynamics of the earning youth. Madhumita Roy, in her essay *Cha- er Thek: Teastalls* argues that "With the declining number of educated unemployed youth who were addicted to a pastime called idling, these addas are a vanishing culture in Calcutta. The young of Calcutta today seem to prefer the growing Café Coffee Days, baristas, Adda Bites and Indthalias to the street culture of yore." (Gupta 170). And yet, it seems that there is a sharp division in this trend. North Kolkata has emerged as a difficult fortress for the tentacles of a globalised market to creep in; this part of the city has held on to its pastness with greater fondness and force than her rapidly urbanizing southern counterpart. With the crumbling and dilapidating colonial buildings and narrow by- lanes recently, it provides a sharp contrast to South Kolkata, a hub of the city's emerging mall culture and home to some of the most upscale eateries in the town. In a way, there are two cities in one, one structurally/ architecturally belonging to colonized India and the other, the face of a country rapidly

developing, working hard and partying even harder. Chanda points out that “Isidor of Seville distinguished between the *urb*, the architecturally conceived or mapped concept of the city and the *civitas*, the space defined as a community, a living assembly. In living the myth of a particular city, and simultaneously living it in reality, we seem to fluctuate between these concepts—the city as an architecturally—mapped space that is the repository of myth becomes at once, through the practices of everyday a mapped space.” (Gupta 235)

Bearing these things in mind, this essay would look at the rapid rise in the commodification of an activity that has been the staple for the Bengalis since decades. The new, ‘modern’ cafes, catering to a particular economic class raises uncomfortable questions about the manner of consumption and the way in which we negotiate with the globalised market making its presence felt. Do these cafes, armed with Wi-fi, a delectable seating arena, with music and jukebox contribute to a sense of a false ego- massage, a kind of ‘commodity fetishism’, to apply Marx’s term that we indulge in? These are some of the issues that this article aims to look into.

Social domination and hierarchy is rarely a simple matter to be analyzed in terms of having control over economic capital. The famed architectural metaphor of Marx simplifies the relation between wielding control over the ‘superstructures’ of the society when one is in control of the means of production. But the relation is further problematized when one realizes that even though “Social class is defined by relations to the means of production, it does not tell us how classes are constituted as classes, nor how the complex status hierarchies of capitalist societies are articulated and internalized by individuals or how other systems of status subordination are integrated within a class system of domination.” ( Blunden 1).

As Marx would argue, every object or commodity carries within it something greater than its economic or market value. These become a marker of a social statement, a signifier of social belonging, a way of distinguishing oneself from the rest of the population, by assuming that certain choices underline an intellectual/ aesthetic and social refinement. This fetish for well packaged and advertised commodities is what seems to be behind the emergence of the coffee chains like Barista, Café Coffee Day and the ilk which end up in making a customer believe that one is a person of culture, having access to a particular circle, internalizing a sense of difference and alienation from the tea-stalls and coffee shops that are part of the city’s history and culture. This is colonization all over again, not political but not any less threatening, a kind of

internalizing and naturalizing of the western cultural hegemony which leads to an erasure of native/ local traditions with the blind imitation and acceptance of things/ customs perpetuated and popularized by/ in the west. Blunden sums up, “Appreciation of culture is thus reduced, with little or no residue, to pretension—people acquire and express a taste which expresses their pretension to be recognized in a given class fraction, refusing the vulgar or the common, the difficult or the fancy, according to the need for distinction.” (Blunden 3). It is a process by which the subjectivity acquires form, instead of the subject being reduced to a form.

What it does is to give the fetishized subject an aura of exclusiveness, a desire of setting oneself apart by inhabiting a space which “looks” expensive, open to only those who can afford it. In the midst of myriad dimensions of consumer practices, notions, culture and identity are not monolithic wholes. Nothing remains pristine and in the milieu of socio- economic constructions of realities novel subjectivities are construed. The desire to set oneself apart from a particular habitus is also paradoxically a desire to belong to another, with the West as the marker of standards and acceptance. One realizes that “People make their consumption choices based not only on a product’s utility value, but from the personal symbolic meanings they invest in objects.” (Zepf). Almost in contrast to the Lacanian “self”, the Freudian “ego” must be formed and developed through looking for meaning in the everyday objects, routines and choices. The way the self is construed, it becomes a way of fashioning, keeping in mind of what is “trending” and what will ultimately highlight the “cool” quotient and appeal to the youth of the times. Sitting in dingy tea shops, without the fancy brand names is something that today’s commodity driven subjects cannot identify with, for it in no way lives up to the images of the cafes and baristas popularized in American sit-coms like *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother*. It is that image that has been played over and over again and which serves as a marker of social belonging and acceptance. This is a project of identity formation and calls to mind the phenomenon that saw the emergence of the “babu” culture in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal: a particular class that was taken to task by for aping the British in terms of trying to acquire their language, taste and culture. Fetishism “constitutes a useful link to justify a Marxist economic discourse about the world. it is said to reflect the fact that capitalist structures tend to reduce people to interact “rationally” and “ instrumentally” according to this logic. Fetishism, as the internalization of the logic of capital, becomes a convenient way to equate subjects with objects and enables us to move further in the study of the inherent laws of capital.” ( Knafo 148)

Coffee bars today capture the spirit of the age, not only because of the customer profile, but also in terms of the entrepreneurial flair that is demonstrably on show. For the youth in Kolkata, shunning the traditional “cabins” that have been enmeshed ‘in the political and cultural history of the state and accepting the coffee pubs above named is more of a status symbol or a lifestyle thing. If history suggests that coffee houses were fertile spaces for the germinating of political and intellectual ideas, the new age coffee pubs are sometimes tools for the fashioning of a particular identity for the “self”. Frequenting these social spaces becomes at times an act of necessity, to belong to a particular “niche”, make the social statement of one’s ability to afford to frequent these spaces. Consciousness is shaped by the social relations through which it emerges and “since social relations structure forms of power, necessity appears as a constraint imposed by society.” (Knafo 157).

The old world of Kolkata is a rapidly disintegrating one. In the face of globalization and the opening of the Indian market, there are remnants which are still holding on and celebrating their “pastness”: a sort of celebration of nostalgia by which these tea/ coffee joints try to preserve a slice of what had been. And yet, one cannot be too hopeful. The words of Marx echoes in our ears when he says, “value does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.” (Knafo 160)

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