



# Architecture of intellectual sociality: Tea and coffeehouses in post-colonial Delhi



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## ABSTRACT

The essay presents a historical narrative about the way tea and coffeehouses in post-partition, post-colonial Delhi were inhabited, embraced, used, celebrated and fought for by a couple of generations of migrant Hindi intellectuals in the middle decades of the last century.

Adda-like, but more public and open, the space helped them connect with the city, otherwise an alien and distant entity mired in power and busy with the agenda of nation-building. It is here that they set up networks with their like-minded others to find a virtual home away from home. It is long past its glory, but its affective appeal as a socially convivial, creatively stimulating, and politically vibrant, albeit gendered, public place is nostalgically testified in the abundant testimonials offered by its more articulate regular visitors. The space, what happens there, and to it, thus emerges as a metaphor for changing times the city has witnessed through the decades.

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## 1. Introduction

The recent global efflorescence of urban studies makes it abundantly clear that no history of modernity - including Asian and even what Partha Chatterjee called 'our modernity' for India - can be meaningfully written without its cities and no cultural history of any city would be complete without the *addas* or habitual social and intellectual congregations they hosted. And any *adda* worth its name will have to take into account the cultures emerging around beverages served to the 'virtuosi' that met and conversed, debated and discussed, bonded and networked during or after their offices (Chatterjee, 1997; Cowan, 2005; Pang, 2006). Their workplaces would generally be concerned either with the publication of the printed word in its myriad forms or with the production and broadcasting of the audio-visual messages depending on the media form or period we carve out to write such histories. In any case, not everyone who came to the tea/coffee house wrote as much or as affectionately about it as the journalists, writers, poets and cartoonists who chose to make it their second home. Writing about coffee (or tea) houses, in other words, is writing about a key public space that made literary and journalistic imaginary of a modern city possible.

As a historically changing space of consumption and transaction of ideas and intellectual goods, the study of coffee house culture in Europe has yielded comprehensive monographs (Ellis, 2004; Cowan, 2005). As far as South Asia is concerned, thanks to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, the *bhadralok* ('respectable people') *adda* of colonial Calcutta has become a philosophically powerful metaphor for 'provincialising' Europe, even though the *addawallas* self-consciously followed the footprints of their illustrious seniors or contemporaries in Berlin or Paris, London or Prague. Chakrabarty argues that the Calcuttans in the early 20th Century suitably 'Bengalified' the salon or coffeehouse imaginaries they received from the West by adding a profusion of local customs and colours to the conversations even if these were sometimes about Europe itself! (Chakrabarty, 2000). Moving down south, a culturally layered historical account of the middle class/upper caste consumption of tea, coffee and tobacco has been offered by the Tamil intellectual historian R. Venkatchalapathy, for whom the other sites of reflection in the same book are, unsurprisingly, the making of literary canons, cartoons and dictionaries (Venkatchalapathy, 2006).

Moving westwards, we find ourselves in the mid-century cosmopolitan Bombay whose films have acquired the reputation of being an urban archive in South Asia (Mazumdar, 2007; Vasudevan, 2011). A little-known film *Coffee House* is unavailable, but thankfully, another Hindi film from the same year, *Dekh Kabeera Roya* (1957), uses 'Janata ['People's] Coffee House' as a crucial joint

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for young artists – painters, writers, musicians of which we are given a friendly heterosexual pair each – served by a single waiter, who is at first confused, even disconcerted, by the unpredictable mood swings and empty pockets of his clients, but gradually becomes their confidante and guide, as he gets a better grip on their professional and amorous anxieties. The film forefronts a suffocating lack of creative space in the city as problematic, and resolves it by a simple exchange of living and working spaces among the three men. The bargain, however, leads to 'wrong' pairing in professional and romantic terms resulting in some hilarious encounters, before a typically happy resolution. The film opens with the lead men, heroes entering the coffeehouse as frustrated, lonely and depressed as their careers are going nowhere. Their predicament is comparable to the one drawn up by a columnist in contemporary Delhi who described its coffeehouses as expensive and unpalatable. Writing immediately after Independence/Partition, he sardonically observed a cosmopolitan, if anti-patriotic, enthusiasm for Russian, French and Chinese cuisines on the menus of the newly renovated 'colourful cafes', where,

Prices are prohibitive and you can have a good dish only if you are prepared to starve for the next two days. And what is most aggravating, you can't get a good tea for love or money. The intellectuals of Delhi, for whom tea is the elixir of life and an infailing friend, can only wait in despair:

Paintings, paintings, everywhere

And arts on walls we see;

We try our best but cannot get

A nice good cup of tea (Chandra, 1948: 22).

Named after its famous cartoonist founder, *Shankar's Weekly*, where this piece appeared, was primarily a satirical magazine of political graphics, but it also regularly reviewed cultural and media events, thus becoming an important political and cultural magazine in the Delhi of 1950s and 60s. In a typological caricature of the visitors to a Delhi coffee-house, a cartoon described them as follows: "the sponge: with empty pockets, of course", "the story teller: keeps you amused", "the intellectual: alone with an empty cup", "entertainer: keeps waiter bemused", "the hug and crush bye: daily routine" and "the 'civilized': pity nobody accepts his invitation" (-*Shankar's Weekly*, 15 May 1955). The typology is certainly not exhaustive, but it does convey a sense of the place as a convivial, boisterous, social space where men bonded more with other men than women, by telling stories, sharing jokes and ending up spending substantial time with very little or no money.

Delhi's population had swelled as a result of the Partition-related influx of the refugees trying to rebuild lives after grueling months in the makeshift camps (Kidwai, 1974; Pandey, 2001). The trauma of the event left an indelible mark on the physical and cultural landscape of Delhi as much as it remained inscribed in the mindscape of those forcibly uprooted, violated and marooned (Sobti, 1995). From these migrants emerged several Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi writers who wrote of their dreams of a new India as they did about their loved worlds forever lost to the Partition. To them, the coffeehouse was an essential emotional anchor where they found fellow-sufferers with similar stories or at least empathetic ears, as well as different stories so essential for forgetting their own. Certain other big events in a rather quick succession – the first Independence Day celebrations and Gandhi's murder and funeral – brought unprecedented numbers of people to the city. This was bound to have a lasting impact on both the residents and visitors.

Equally, the enchanting visions of a new India offered by the

capital city must have won a lot of the refugees over. The sheer momentum of a furiously busy city trying to write a new constitution, and to build enormous local and national infrastructures provided opportunities for architects, engineers and word-smiths. The language departments of the state required a range of personnel skilled in Hindi, or bilingual translators (Sundaram, 2010; Neelabh, 2004). Sensing the opportunity in a job-market in Delhi, several publishers, writers and poets soon shifted base. Poets such as Bachchan (UP) and Dinkar (Bihar) and Gupt (MP) were some of the more illustrious names in a long line of migrant *littérateurs* who made Delhi their new destination and finally, as the mid-century moved towards the last quarter, a foremost centre for Hindi language, journalism and literature (Jain, 2009).

However, the city of job opportunities and literary attractions was not necessarily an easy place to live in, as it also placed the writer-professionals in close proximity to power. Especially for the literary figures who doubled up as popular intellectuals in the Hindi public sphere, with a relentless anti-colonial record of speaking to and for the nation and its downtrodden peasants. So when the Nehruvian vision of modernity acquired a rapid materiality in the form of a sanitized urban and officious order, their nationalist enthusiasm wilted and they became uneasy and guilty about both their participation in the project of nation-building as well as their habitation in a cruel city. One recurring motif in Dinkar's Delhi Quartet of poems, for example, is the binary of country versus city: 'If you wish to bring light to the villages, you will have to exanguinate the unbearable luminosity of Delhi. She should be more like the mother of all of India, not a lifeless, decked-up fairy, cast in marbles.' Another poem, 'This Silken City of India', lampoons the poet himself as an upstart in the city of comforts in the capacity of a parliamentarian of the ruling Congress. Both Delhi and its leaders are then ridiculed for the distance they have managed to create between themselves and the rural poor (Dinkar, 1954). A large number of literary public intellectuals of this and the next generation retained this sense of schizoid unease and critical-ironical distance from both the capital city and its ruthless power, even if some of them continued to participate in the nation-state's projects for a living (Kumar, 2005). A collection of literary memoirs about Delhi – *Abhi Dilli Door Hai* (Delhi is still far away), is a straight Hindi recall of the medieval Persian saying *Hameen Dilli Durast* – and a rebuttal to an optimistic Raj Kapoor film – *Ab Dilli Door Nahin* (Delhi is not far now, 1957). If we ask the obvious, literal question – like the writer Krishna Sobti did – from where? – the answer would be a village or a small town. In the melodramatic film, the young boy has lost his mother and his father is wrongly framed for a murder. So he comes to meet the elusive Uncle Nehru to seek justice. Going by the overwhelming fictional evidence, Hindi writers in the post-independence Delhi appeared not very different from the inconsolable boy, and many of them stuck to their memories of a romanticized, remembered village, resenting their urban living conditions marked by a sense of rootlessness and claustrophobia (Kumar, 1995).

### 1.1. A virtual home away from home?

The self-consciousness of a lost village and an unbearable city notwithstanding, what started off as a trickle in the early 1950s very soon became a veritable torrent of migration of writers to this city. And the flood has not really stopped, as Delhi continues to expand geographically and institutionally in a desperate effort to accommodate aspirations and desires – private and public, personal and national, bourgeois and proletarian, male and female alike. A glance through a couple of encyclopedic accounts of Delhiite writers' contribution to Hindi language and literature is likely to yield a who's who of Hindi writers as a whole (Gaur, 2001;

Nagendra, 1995). Thus, by the last years of the past century, Delhi became the most important intellectual hub in the country for knowledge production in two very important languages in post-colonial India – English and Hindi (Sadana, 2012). As already indicated, the writers required a place to socialize, which they found in the welcoming premises of the tea/coffeehouses located in the heart of the city, Connaught Place, later renamed Rajeev Chowk.

### 1.2. Delhi tea house

So it is the career of Delhi's tea/coffee houses I turn to, to understand its historical significance as a hub of public life in the city. When Vishnu Prabhakar, the doyen of Hindi writers, radio broadcaster, and a coffeehouse regular, described it as 'my university', he was simply invoking Maxim Gorky's eponymous autobiographical work dealing with the non-academic spaces/sources of his learning (Prabhakar, 2008), or perhaps reiterating the old English notion of coffeehouses as 'penny universities'. Similarly, Hardayal, a student of English Literature, was familiar with the role of coffeehouses had played in modern English literary history, so whenever he visited Delhi, he would go to the tea/coffeehouses as a fan to chat up with some of the contemporary literary stars. Such visits became a weekly ritual once he shifted to Delhi (*Dilli Tea House*: 508). Between a famous Prabhakar and a not-so-known Hardayal lies an entire spectrum of writers who became habitual visitors to tea or coffeehouses. Here is a nostalgic snapshot of a typical day at the Teahouse:

There was a Teahouse once, but not anymore. Sad but it once was an inalienable part of our lives. Just imagine a big restaurant where you see Hindi writers hailing from different generations and literary movements assembled together to have tea or coffee, or simply talk. For example, on table one you see Prabhakar and Satyarthi of the oldest surviving generation, and on the next table can be found the next generation represented by Rakesh and Kamalleshwar; on a third table is seated the new generation of story-writers such as Kaliya and Ganga Prasad Vimal, while the fourth is occupied by the just-arrived generation of Ibbar Rabbi and Ramesh Upadhyay. Or, Raghuvveer Sahay and Shrikant Verma of the 'New Poetry' are on one table, while the 'New Story' writers like Bhishma Sahni and Ramesh Bakshi are sitting next to them. On the third table are seated Jagdeesh Chaturvedi and Mona Gulati of the 'Non-Poetry' movement, while the fourth one is taken by 'Non-story' types like Mahendra Bhalla and Atul Bharadwaj. No. Six hosts Maheep Singh and Manhar Chauhan, who lead the "Conscious Story" movement, as No. 7 is home today for socialists Deepak and Seksariya, while the progressives are sitting on table No. 8. (*Dilli Tea House (DTH)*: 309)

This thick, evocative description is from a unique anthology of essays commissioned, compiled, and edited by Baldev Vanshi, a Hindi poet and teacher at Delhi University. In the introduction, Vanshi remarks that a history of Delhi Teahouse is synonymous with a history of century of literary activities in the city. He does not fail to recognize the global provenance of the idea:

With the metropolises came tea and coffee-houses or homes that soon became a meeting place for *littérateurs*. In the West – France, Germany, England, etc. – such places emerged with the first flush of modernity. These spaces have played a key role in shaping serious debates and literary movements. In post-independence India, the coffee and teahouse cultures developed in cities such as Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Allahabad, Lucknow, Jaipur, etc." (Vanshi, *DTH*: viii)

Of course, we know that tea and coffee-houses in India, or anywhere else, did not come into existence by a happy coincidence. Tea and coffee were not homegrown – a taste of these imported beverages was assiduously cultivated by efforts of the colonial government, and the World War II period witnessed a more organised campaign to encourage Indians to drink coffee, as the demands from foreign markets drastically dwindled. The generic coffeehouses dotting the post-independence urban landscape that Vanshi assumes to be a natural corollary to the urban condition was in fact unleashed by Indian Coffee Boards and co-operatives set up in the 1940s and 50s (Dhorapkar, 2011).

For the writers of Kamleshwar's generation, though, 'Care/Of: Teahouse' was their sole, universally known, permanent address: "Anybody who came from outside the city came here to meet us. The future generations may not know that the tea house was not just that but a veritable research centre, where the first generation of *littérateurs* of Independent India laughed off their inequality and poverty to fashion those neologisms that could withstand the occasional storms generated by the forces of reaction, escapism, blind nationalism and riotous religious fanaticism. It is these words created by the first generation that has kept this democracy alive and kicking for the ones that followed." Kamleshwar further says that he and his friends spent a great deal of time at the teahouse and reproduces a funny interview conducted with his New Story movement comrade, and famous playwright Mohan Rakesh:

*Journalist*: What is your routine like?

*Rakesh*: I get up between 11 and 12. Breakfast, or you may call it brunch, is taken latest by 2(pm). Soon it is time to leave for tea house, so I leave by 4(pm).

*Journalist*: What do you do there?

*Rakesh*: We chat with friends, what else!

*Journalist*: Then?

*Rakesh*: We go back home by midnight after our daily dose of hopping and loitering.

*Journalist*: Then?

*Rakesh*: I go off to a good night's sleep.

*Journalist*: When do you write, after all?

*Rakesh*: The very next day! (*DTH*: 75-9)

Rakesh's uproarious laughter at the coffeehouse was legendary. Kaliya called it his 'second home', while Maheep Singh, a writer of Hindi and Punjabi, called it the 'nerve-centre' of writers. Tyagi likened it to a *chaupal* (corner assembly in rural north India) of *littérateurs*, several others called it an *adda*, yet others, *akhada* (a wrestling ring, a school). There is no denying that tea/coffeehouses in post-independence Delhi were no less than a social institution with a deeply affective presence in the vernacular intellectuals' life. It became a place to ceremonially 'receive' or 'see off' visiting writers from Pakistan such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Intezar Husain (whose novel *Basti* maps a whole history of Pakistan through the perspective of its migrant protagonist, and several discursive episodes in the novel are set in Lahore coffeehouse), and dignitaries from European countries (Husain, 2001).

Being a committed public intellectual burdened with the worries of the world placed the responsibility of finding creative solutions to a wide variety of problems, and devise literary experiments. So the coffeehouse too became a serious site for transaction

not only of ideas but intellectual and literary commodities. Of course, the virtuosi met and exchanged pleasantries and discussed their everyday life, but the topics of public discussion could range from global to Asian to local politics. They presented new numbers of magazines to each other, read out stories or poems, or simply brainstormed over the plot of a novel. Sometimes a single word could keep them animated for hours. If a particular discussion got interesting and prolonged, people from other tables dragged their chairs to the hot table. It was such a convenient place to throw up seminar ideas, rope in speakers and mobilise audiences and signatures for a public cause. They same held true for soliciting prospective writers for the special issue of a magazine and seeking its readers. If a particular writer received an award, the coffeehouse would turn into a party place, with snacks added to an otherwise Spartan menu. The party could very well spill out into somebody's house if the place shut down. And if the government agencies did not confer a prestigious award to the unofficial nominee from the coffeehouse, the house would organise a parallel award ceremony with much fanfare and press releases. An event like this happened during the Emergency, when Vishnu Prabhakar was denied the Sahitya Akademi award for his novelised biography of the famous Bengali novelist, Sharat Chandra. So writers of diverse political persuasions got together and conferred a Pablo Neruda Honour on him. Even the communists, who had bagged most of the awards on offer that particular year joined (*DTH*: 416).

### 1.3. Conflict, noise, laughter

But such a consensual moment was a rarity in the everyday life of the coffeehouse. The literary space was never non-political. It was a permanent battle zone with shifting characters, modes and methods; 'isms', generations, groups, factions and individuals were always making desperate efforts to establish their hegemony. (Bhandari, 281-2). Arguments flew around thick and fast, and on rare occasions, missiles of cups and glasses, too. Debates from the print domain invariably spilled onto the coffee tables, generating a fresh cycle of polemics at university seminars, 'Saturday Society' meetings or personal *addas* at itinerant homes in close by areas, or publishers' offices at Daryaganj. Ruthless demolition jobs were met with equally energetic defenses and creative repartees. Often enough, the discussions could degenerate into verbal duels but people by and large did not take criticisms 'otherwise', to use an Indianism. If so many intellectuals – somebody estimated the daily footfall in the Teahouse at a little less than 200 – talked, read, performed, clapped, laughed and shouted with gusto and passion, the noise levels would naturally become unbearable and the manager would try his best to calm them down, through a written sign, or a discrete waiter. But the patrons would turn that too into a joke on censorship.

### 1.4. Socialisation, mentoring, politeness

The Coffeehouse was also the space where young enthusiastic writers were schooled in the fine art of cultural etiquette and rigours of responsible criticism, to weigh their words before making them public. Hierarchically instituted, this gentle, yet firm mode of socialization is amply demonstrated by a confession recorded by a self-professedly 'immature' writer, Yogesh Gupta, of his encounters with the veteran Gandhian Jainendra Kumar, one of the finest fiction writers after Premchand, and a key figure against whom the 'New Story' movement pitted itself:

I once told Janinendra ji, "Dr. Nagendra is not a nice person, in fact a very bad person", to which his response was, "If you keep my company, please use a proper language, otherwise people would say I encourage you to speak like this." I remember one

more episode. When I told him, "Aurbindo Ghosh is a liar." I was immature then. As soon as he heard the word liar, Jainendra admonished me, "Do you have any idea who Aurbindo is? His scholarship is of such high order that people have compiled an independent dictionary from his oeuvre, of words that you may not be able to comprehend. What Aurbindo has said should be read in its context; else, you will jump to such hasty conclusions. You better pick up pace in your readings, if you want to understand these things. Aurbindo is not the kind of person who would lie, his contribution is seminal and lasting, at least his epic on Savitri, is without a parallel. (*DTH*: 314-14)

Quite clearly, Jainendra was conscious of his own responsibility and concerned about his image, for the coffeehouse was also a stage where ideological and factional loyalties were showcased, icons created and demolished. Such thoughtful grooming of, and encouragement to, the younger writers by the established ones is also corroborated by Mridula Garg and her sister Manjul Bhagat, who started writing and publishing almost at the same time. When their debut collections of short stories came out, they decided to throw a tea party and called Agyeya, a leading writer, poet, editor and critic to invite him over. He asked for the book, they asked for the bus route to his house to which he said, he would come and pick it up at the party itself, before hanging up the phone. While the writer siblings quibbled with each other on what the other should not have said on the phone, they had lost all hope of the man with gravitas turning up. But he did, in fact, before time, and stayed long enough to have finished an entire story right there. Before leaving, he quipped, "How could I resist the temptation of seeing two sisters celebrating the publication of their own books?" (Garg, 2008, 316-7).

### 1.5. Gendered space

It is significant that this tea party took place at Sapru House and not at the Tea or Coffeehouse, which represented a sharp contrast to cafes in early 20th century Shanghai, as discussed by Laikwan Pang, where women waiters constituted additional attraction for male patrons. For all its romanticised democratic pretensions, the coffeehouse in Delhi could hardly be described as a women-friendly place, even if we have evidence of some notable women writers, journalists and politicians like Snehmayee Choudhary, Subhadra Joshi, Manika Mohini, Achla Sharma, Sumati Aiyer and Tarkeshwari Sinha dropping by occasionally, as did the odd women dignitaries from diplomatic corps. To be sure, there was a lot of gossip about relationships between various writerly, journalistic and teacherly couples, but mostly it was men talking about women. Women came here mostly with known male companions or quite simply to wait for them. Their poor attendance is also reflected in the disproportionate number of reminiscences collected by Vanshi – 45 men: seven women in a 600-page book, and even these seven were no frequent visitors. Sobti, for example, preferred far more exclusive hang outs like Wengers or United Coffee House. Mannu Bhandari was initially a regular, but soon stopped going as she felt she was being branded a camp follower of the New Story troika of which her husband, Rajendra Yadav, was a prominent torch bearer (Bhandari, 2007, pp. 275-8). She drew creative sustenance more from the gatherings at her own house or in the neighbourhood. Mamta Kaliya too was far less a frequent visitor than her husband Ravindra Kaliya, and the case with the lovelorn pair of Anita and Mohan Rakesh was not very different (Kaliya, 2010). On the whole, there seems to be a marked gendered division of labour and leisure at work here – women worked, wrote and then worked more to finish domestic chores while men folk worked, wrote, travelled

more often, gossiped and debated at the coffeehouse. Sometimes he could also bring home unannounced guests with unknown departure schedules, the burden of cooking and caring for whom fell squarely on the wife.

Male writers were patronising, protective and possessive of their female partners – which could also explain the women's skewed presence. An anecdote repeated in several memoirs excerpted here from Narendra Mohan's diary is instructive:

The other day, I had a sharp altercation with Jagdeesh Chaturvedi. It so happened that Mona Gulati came straight to our table and sat right across me, and we chatted freely over coffee. After we were done and I got up to leave, Jagdeesh Chaturvedi called me aside, and blurted out:

"Why did you sit with Mona Gulati?" He looked tense.

"It was not me; *she* came to sit opposite me." I supplied the correct information.

"So what! Never do this in future." He spoke the language of command. "Why don't you tell her not to sit with me ... ?" I was trying my best to control my anger.

"I am forbidding you ..."

"Who are you to tell me what to do ... It is my personal choice."

"I am warning you!"

I did not like his tone and took him by the scruff of his neck. Friends immediately intervened and separated us. Then I felt I should not have held his collar. But if somebody behaves with such blatant arrogance, I tend to lose balance.

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The same incident was repeated today in a different form. The Punjabi poet Harnam gestured me to come outside the Tea House. Kumar Vikal was with him. Harnam picked up cudgels on Chaturvedi's behalf. Kumar Vikal came in between and told Harnam:

"Oye Harnam, he is our friend, our fellow Punjabi friend ... What are you saying! Think before you speak." And Harnam looked at me, laughed and said, "Alright, *daak saheb*, it is ok ..." (*DTH*: 173-4)

That such muscle-flexing and fisticuffs over women would be resolved by appeals to common linguistic ethnicity could hardly be reassuring to women visitors. Only Raghuvver Sahay is remembered as having come to the place with his wife and the two daughters. Although there was a section reserved for women in the old Teahouse, and love also blossomed and lovers got married courting here, the remark made by Delhi University teacher Chhattar Singh's wife, is telling, "I did not like the place as I used to lose him to others", the 'others' meaning Singh's male friends. So Singh remained a loyal, but his wife stopped coming along. Sometimes stray European and American tourists or 'hippies' visited the Teahouse and struck deep friendships, and relationships that continued well beyond the Teahouse, the city or the nation (Verma and Roy: 180). Not to paint a rosy picture, Vishnu Prabhakar mentioned an incident of rape of a foreigner right inside the Teahouse (*DTH*: 412).

Women writers have also dwelt on the professional discrimination they faced for being women. The critics tried to fix and compartmentalize them as niche writers, fit to write about women or better still, about themselves, that is, in autobiographical modes. Their creative output on mainstream issues would often go

unnoticed, until it became a flood and the male bastion that Hindi literary establishment was had to give them space and respectability. One can see a similar process of struggle against refusal to accept Dalit literature as literary on aesthetic grounds in contemporary Delhi. Ironically, part of the credit for creating chinks in the conventional fort of mainstream criticism and insertion of women and Dalits inside its haloed portals goes to the late Rajendra Yadav, who relentlessly pushed the envelope through his influential literary magazine, *Hans* (swan), launched in 1985 (Yadav & Verma, 2012).

### 1.6. The coffeehouse *adda*: patronage to protest

To understand the affective charge and the political power of a place like coffeehouse, we must revisit the actual event of its displacement, and a consequent social upsurge, when a minor refusal to pay an inflated price of coffee snowballed into a whole movement against price rise in Delhi and its suburbs, now known as National Capital Region. In the summers of 1964, the year Nehru died, the central government was in the midst of a serious grain crisis and inflation. Although the opposition – the communist parties, socialists and Jan Sangh – had declared a war on the government but it was not gathering momentum. In retrospect, it seems the event of the morning of September 18 was the spark the city was waiting for. Over to Soumya Verma and Sumit Roy who have helpfully reconstructed the event in a wonderfully researched essay:

Rajinder Kapoor, a journalist, was one of the regular patrons of the Janpath Coffee House. He was about to leave after his two morning cups but the bill placed before him put sudden brakes on his feet. When asked to explain, the waiter informed that the coffee would henceforth cost 53, not 48 paise. Within seconds the Coffeehouse was filled with cries of "*Et Tu Coffeehouse!*" The manager tried to patiently explain the general state of inflation and his compulsions. On the far end, Rajinder Kapoor declared that he was not going to pay. Everyone assembled there supported him and made their way out. *The Statesman* of the next day, recorded the ambiance with a sense of regret: "For the first time in its history of more than two decades of the Coffeehouse, otherwise crowded and filled with the noise made by the city's rich, traders, leaders, journalists, salesmen, and the chatterati, the board with 'Please Keep Silent' was faithfully obeyed." This eerie silence spread over the furniture of the coffeehouse was the harbinger of a den of reverberations taking the shape of a widespread urban movement against price rise (Verma and Roy, 2005, 172).

The boycott took innovative forms. The self-professed 'coffee-addicts' signed the boycott notice pasted on the gate and continued picketing. The evening shift of visitors came and ordered only hot water and did not forget to leave the customary tip for the waiters. The next evening, the demonstrators mobilised an entrepreneur to set up a makeshift coffeehouse in the cycle shed next door. The price of coffee was fixed at the low rate of 25 paise, and the tips were collected in a cigarette can. The waiters too were unhappy with the price rise, as it had not translated into any pay-rise for them. The establishment struck back by prohibiting tips-taking and water-serving, and disallowing Kapoor's entry.

But the public had already started speaking up for the protesters. So they gave their localised movement a more general and formal name – Price Rise Resistance Movement or PRRM. On the very first day, a hundred people subscribed to it by paying a rupee

each. The figure crossed 1,800 within 10 days, which included political leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia, Subhadra Joshi and BM Joshi and the President of North India Life Insurance Salaried Field-workers Association, M. M. Sadana, and the Planning Commission Chairman, Ashok Mehta. A person travelled all the way from Lucknow to take a membership, while another sent his subscription from a far away Vellore in Tamilnadu. The Prime Minister Shastri called the PRRM for a dialogue and ordered a committee for standardization of restaurant rates in the capital. The JCH went back to the old rates till further suggestions. This was the first victory for the PRRM but it had by now become a big movement, finding diverse articulations around particular everyday commodities such as milk and vegetables in particular areas. A ruling party member of parliament (MP) from Karol Bagh opened a fair price shop on the sidewalks and termed it his *satyagrah* against rising prices, while the people of the area started a boycott of four-seater vehicles. Buyers became fair price sellers on a large scale. In the words of Verma and Roy, '[i]t acquired the shape of an unprecedented consumer movement'. This leaderless, open, democratic movement continued for one and a half months and then fizzled out. But the coffee activists had at least achieved their fundamental goal and the 'Tent' was started with the collective efforts of PRRM and Indian Coffee Workers' Co-operative until the land was acquired and redesigned as the underground Palika Bazar. PRRM regrouped to set up the Indian Coffee House near Rivoli, where it still stands. But the Teahouse had degenerated as both architecture and a social space had no such luck. It did not re-open as Teahouse but was 'closed for renovation' only to be partitioned into the first discotheque of the city, 'Cellar', and a restaurant. It had long become a joint for lumpens who gathered at the gate only in the hope of ogling at foreign women coming out of Rivoli. Those who swore by the Teahouse had to face a permanent displacement.

Very soon, with the onset of liberalisation and the emergence of global and swanky, expensive chains such as Barista and Cafe Coffee Day on the city's map, the old style tea and coffeehouses lost their place in the life of Delhi's virtuosi. As indicated earlier, its origins, sustenance, popularity and ultimate obscurity were contingent on a whole host of factors. And although I have treated tea-and-coffeehouses based in Connaught Place as one generic entity, historically, there have existed one Tea House and several coffee houses, including the Tent Coffee House, or simply, the Tent, at the very place where Palika Bazaar came into existence after the post-Emergency demolitions and the urban renewal in the wake of the Asian Games in 1982. The process is somewhat similar in almost all the cities of India and it has been lamented in most of the literary memoirs, or elegiac poems like this one – 'There lived a Coffee House Here' - written by Rajkumar Kumbhaj, of which I present just an excerpt:

There lived a Coffee House here  
 Now left behind like a call once made  
 It has been reduced to rubble  
 Beneath which lie ideas galore  
 Ideas buried under the rubble  
 Do not vanish into thin air  
 They turn into foundations of a culture.  
 When I came back from Allahabad  
 It was not there in Delhi-Kolkata  
 ....  
 In the coffee-house that is no more

There lived countless disagreements  
 And in those countless disagreements  
 Remained one basic agreement  
 That there must be disagreement.  
 Those who have fought wars understand belligerence  
 Those who loved know that special ache  
 And only those who have lost a coffeehouse

Can comprehend what displacement might be (Kumbhaj, 2005, p. 164)

Displacement is a running theme in the life of modern cities and every few years the poor, the disenfranchised, non-citizens have had to relocate themselves to give space to the city elite's ambitions to become better in the context of a global competition. Every city wants to become some other city and is striving to create those impersonal 'non-spaces', where globe-trotting human populations find themselves comfortable. One such displacement was recently witnessed in Delhi when several clusters of working class localities were removed to make way for building infrastructure for the Commonwealth Games of 2010. The event, largely unreported in the media, did generate some literary responses in Hindi. More importantly, the process of displacement was recorded on a weblog and later reproduced as a book. Clearly the city has outgrown its yesteryear's self, and the various invisible parts have acquired the tools and capacity to make themselves visible and audible by writing their own narratives. Kumbhaj's poem above coalesces displacements of all kinds into the pain suffered by one displacement – that of the coffeehouse. But a post-coffeehouse fragmented imaginary of the city will have to explore other spaces of conviviality and conversation – virtual as well as real, literary and non-literary, bourgeois as well as proletarian, secular as well as sacred. These spaces could very well be on the one hand, blogs, facebook and the Barista; and on the other, the corner tea-shops, the temples and taps where working class women chat away while waiting for their turn to fill water (Banerjee, 2008, pp. 221–227; Trickster City, 2010).

That however is another story for another occasion. This essay, based largely on literary writings and memoirs, was an attempt to reconstruct a brief history of the intellectual life lived at and around the tea and coffeehouse in Delhi in the middling decades of the last century. The Indian Coffee House still exists but it is no more a happening joint for the groups of literati who once patronized it. It is more of a memorabilia of a past gone by, a great life once lived. But while it lasted, it was a lively *adda* with a difference in the sense that it was a public place not belonging to, or serviced/hosted by any one person. Although driven by the same global/local impulses and needs for an intellectual hang out, the content generated in local languages at and through this *adda* catered more to the local hunger for debate, discussion and dissent. In the period under study it remained a bastion of male conviviality. But as a physical network of networks, the middle class intellectuals were capable of reaching out to and connecting with a wider national, South Asian and global world – in ways real and imaginary. The source of this creative energy was self-consciously aesthetic and political on the one hand and individualistic and collective on the other. Going there was not just pastime: as an *adda* it was a serious practice and site of intellectual exchange and critical pedagogy in the fields of journalism and literature. This is where inhabitants of a 'wounded city' nursed their wounds, this is where political solidarity amongst the alienated and the elevated was forged, and literary factions created and fashions demolished. This is where transformative imaginaries were proposed, contested and discarded. This is where

history once lived, they would say. They, who actually lived there, then ....

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