

Today's Paper » NATIONAL » KARNATAKA**The brew with a socialist flavour**

BAGESHREE S.

Bhaswati Bhattacharya is in the country on a coffee trail

AN OLD HANGOUT: Bhaswati Bhattacharya: The Indian Coffee House is a comfort zone for people of different age groups and classes. — PHOTO: V. SREENIVASA MURTHY

A lot does indeed happen and has happened over coffee. While an entire colonial history hangs by the brew, it has also inspired great literature and some of the most heated debates on culture and politics.

Bhaswati Bhattacharya, a senior researcher at Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany, was a little perplexed as she studied the history of cash crops in India to find that coffee consumption here had escaped serious scholarly attention.

She decided to take up a project focussing on public consumption of coffee in India in the 20th Century, with the phenomenon of the Indian Coffee House forming an important component of it.

Co-op movement

Her project looks at how the coffee houses started in several cities around India as a workers' cooperative, inspired by the legendary Communist leader A.K. Gopalan in 1958, and shaped public consumption of coffee.

It also looks at how the humble Coffee House cuppa that comes at Rs. 8 in Kolkata and at Rs. 12 in Bangalore is faring in times dominated by cappuccino and latte designed for people with deep pockets.

Not much info

Documentation nearly absent, there are several areas of darkness in the history of coffee houses, says Ms. Bhattacharya. It is unclear why the colonial government started coffee houses through the Coffee Board in the late 1930s and the historical and economic forces that led to them being disbanded in 1958.

Once they became cooperatives, the Indian Coffee House outlets came to have different boards in different States, which makes documentation post-1958 very scattered. So, Ms. Bhattacharya is probing these questions through memoirs, newspaper archives and oral histories as narrated by patrons and workers.

Ms. Bhattacharya, who has already been to Kolkata to study its celebrated Coffee House, is now in Bangalore to study the famed hangout which some years ago shifted from M.G. Road to Church Street.

Speaking to older patrons has invariably meant a nostalgia trip. "They miss the times when beans were roasted and ground in the coffee house and one smelled the coffee 50 yards away," says Ms. Bhattacharya. The older workers go into raptures over the then inviolable code on coffee making: 1.25 kg of coffee powder infused with five litres of water for 20 minutes.

However, Ms. Bhattacharya believes that the young are indeed attached to the Coffee House. "It is a comfort zone for people of different age groups and classes," she says. A young man in Bangalore donated Rs. 30,000 to help the

workers rent new premises in Bangalore after they had to shift from M.G. Road.

Prime address

In Kolkata, the Coffee House continues to be the address for the most heated political debates just as it was in the 1960s. In fact, when real estate prices threatened to push Coffee House out of its prime location in Kolkata, its patrons — which included the who's who of the city — ensured that the Government came to its rescue.

Code of hospitality

The odds may be against good old Indian Coffee House, with the affordability factor often in conflict with escalating costs, but there is something to be said for the culture it stands for.

“A socialist ideology guides the notion of offering a good cup of coffee at a reasonable price. It came with a certain code of hospitality as well. You get a glass of water free in Coffee House, but you have to buy your water at a private chain,” says Ms. Bhattacharya.

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