

Public Drinking in Colonial Calcutta: Voices from Taverns and Coffee Houses

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Abstract: Coffee houses and taverns were perhaps the most attractive aspects of colonial urban Calcutta. Colonial Calcutta witnessed the emergence of taverns and coffee houses as the space of public drinking and recreation. The Citizens of Calcutta and upper class British people used those taverns and coffee houses for amusement. Eating and drinking wine were available in those taverns and coffee houses. Those were built up at Dalhousie, *Lalbazar*, *Baubazar*, *Kasitala* areas of Calcutta. The European sailors, soldiers and aristocrats met with each other in those taverns and Coffeehouses. 'Harmonic Tavern' was the best party association of elite and rich classes in colonial Calcutta. The 'Calcutta Exchange Coffee House' was started in the year 1798. But the most aristocratic coffee house was 'John Spence Coffee House'. During the winter season, the aristocratic Europeans, gentlemen and business men gathered there to enjoy ball dance and supper. Not only the Europeans but also richest people of Calcutta used to go in Spence's coffee house. Neo-elite class of Bengal was too much influenced by the taverns and coffee houses. After the decline of the taverns and coffee houses, Calcutta witnessed the advent of multiple clubs in various parts of the city. Consumption of coffee in public places paved the way for a new social space where an individual could indulge in an open and easy conversation with the Company and the Government. Owing to the discussion of various social and political issues, a new social group 'Bourgeois' was emerged in city of Calcutta. Consumption of coffee was marked as a symbol and an emblem of modernity. These coffee houses gave birth to 'adda' i.e. gossip, later this gossip became an inseparable and important part of Bengali culture and tradition.

Key Words: Coffee Houses, Taverns, Sailors, Soldiers, Public Drinking, Recreation, Colonial Calcutta, Ball Dance, Supper, *Adda*, Gossip.



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