

Adda at the Coffee House

with turbans and cummerbands on spotless white uniforms, they seem to be the last relic of the Raj. Along with the slowly whirring fans.

You try placing an order too quickly, you can see them look at you with disdain this is not a yuppie fast food chain, their eyes tell you. It is said that they don't mind even if you sit all day with just a cup of infusion drinking in the atmosphere more than anything else.

A sense of purpose is all pervasive as you scan the tables.

History and legends are part of the Coffee House atmosphere, which has had numerous references in the literature of Bengal. At various times writers, poets, painters, filmmakers, revolutionaries and political leaders have no doubt spent hours discussing passionately about their ideas and planning their next move. It's the favourite haunt of so many Calcutta celebrities- Aparna Sen, Manna Dey, Amarta Sen, Mrinal Sen, Goutam Ghosh and the late Satyajit Ray. I would be lying if I said I wasn't dwarfed by the Coffee House the cavernous main hall, the luminaries who probably sat at the same table that I was sitting on and the 'infusion' (dark, strong coffee) - all contributed to it.

Much older, and better known to the outside world than Modhu's canteen, the comparative thought did come to my mind. But the clincher came at the very end of my interaction with Arun da when I asked what he thought when people called his canteen the Coffee House of Dhaka.

He shook his head, and said decisively, "At the Coffee House, the discussion is intellectual and theoretical. At Modhu's, it is live politics." And that is not a small difference!

(The author gratefully thanks Rajeeb Bhattacharjee for his help in interviewing Mr Arun Dey)

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