

# Coffee hotel

Excerpted from A.R. Venkatchalapathy's  
In Those Days There Was No Coffee:  
Writings in Cultural History.

With the widespread use of coffee in Tamil society, a new institution, popularly referred to as 'coffee hotel' or 'coffee shop', which served coffee and hot drinks, with what was called 'bitter' emerged in the towns and cities of Tamil Nadu. This phenomenon was noticed and commented upon from the 1920s well until the 1960s.

These coffee hotels were so popular and such money-spinning enterprises that the ardent Leftists' Communist, the ideologue of the Dravidian movement, branded them "the printing-press every worker's common press".

A.K. Chatterji, a keen observer of contemporary culture, wrote in a lighter vein. Some find it difficult to explain their visit to certain hotels or houses, which people may look upon as coffee hotels. The coffee hotel is not just an eating joint. In villages it is a place of congregation. In towns it is the place where tradesmen, clerks, clerks, wage workers, school-going students and school-leavers, who don't have a cup of tea here — all depend on the coffee hotel. There are people who, sick of home-made food, go to eat in these hotels with their family members. Moreover, what can one do when visitors turn up without notice?

What is striking in this account, however, is the fact that the coffee hotel was generally run by Brahmins and, in the popular imagi-

was associated with Brahmins...

Not only coffee, but also the coffee hotel was closely identified with Brahmins, even if they happened to be fallen ones. It would suggest that the air of respect of the fall was only a way of articulating the ambivalence about the Brahmin's association with modernity. The complaint that coffee hotels were unclean was repeated as criticism by more contemporary middle-class observers who got roused without proper viewing the milk was adulterated, the wretches and quacks were dirty, the Indian government aided the spread of contagious diseases.

Such complaints only go to show their cultural anxiety of an institution, which was negotiating its existence in the dramatic mode by modern living in an urban context.

While such critics viewed their cultural anxiety about loss of caste in the dubious language of health and sanitation, nationalists like G.K. Gokhale were taking pride over "how quickly our affectionately called hotels have levelled up to European hotels. Good education or legislation have done that work with equal rapidity".

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My Ram, 70, wakes up at 5:00 a.m. and heads roughly for the kitchen. He picks water to boil, and begins a ritual common to millions of homes. He sets up a metal coffee-medium, with its own variable cups, spoons in coffee grounds. He taps it just so and pours the froth (not brewed) very gently in a circular motion to fill the filter. He places the lid, leaving a small slit. He waits for the drip.

Mr. Ram cannot tell whether he wakes up for the coffee to give it to himself or he wakes. The distinction is perhaps irrelevant for people like him who were initiated to the habit early. What he does remember is learning what "bitter" coffee meant as a kid. And once getting to anything less a degree less in his hyper-eroticized Marathi home of five members, the standard of this use was never compromised.

Except for one detail, his mother brought two beans, added them to a split for an even brown roast and stored them in a glass bottle. Powder was ground every day, fresh for the day's brew. The kids took turns to feed and crank the grinder, taking the rich foam in anticipation of the afternoon nap.

To Mr. Ram, these ritual, friends, childhood memories are entwined in this "bitter" memory. His mom, however, gave up the routine when roasted beans began to be sold, and eventually coffee

came home as powder in paper packets. The instant craze invaded the stores, but she would let this abandonment die. Her stomach thanked.

"Beats alcohol to drink coffee in the morning is a cutting-edge vice," said Anandaraman, who promotes Dravidian culture. He remembers walking, reluctantly, to a protected half a km away for that glass of life-giving liquid during his hotel days.

## Lineage

Arabica, Robusta, Peaberry — various and often by coffee's ancestors, which may have suggested these names. Which is a proper coffee grower in China, leaves the road lineage. Coffee in Ethiopia and Central Africa are believed to be the home of Arabica and Robusta respectively. Arabica is believed to have been introduced in India some time in 1600 AD by Baba Budan, a pilgrim from Yemen — or Baba Budan Hills near Chikmagalur in Karnataka. Robusta came from the Indo-China at the close of 19th century. Mashed Mocha brought coffee seeds to Coorg around the 1820s. The British commercialised the plantation in the 19th century. Coffee is grown in south India with a few parts of north-east under its aegis.

Credit for popularizing Indian filter coffee must go to India Coffee House, which began as a tea promotion in 1911.

1900s. A "coffee house culture" was launched in which grand feast of celebrities. Coffee became the reason for gatherings and brain-fuel for conversation. Strong bitter coffee was the star of "measles" and hotels. Coffee House regulars grew up, left to make their mark and money in the world, but some back for that shared sense of communion.

The Archive of India's coffee has been compiled by the India Coffee Board, an autonomous body, functioning under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Set up under an act in 1944, the Board focuses on research, development, extension, quality upgradation, marketing, promotion, and production of Indian coffee. According to its website, the Board relinquished marketing in 1995, but runs 14 India Coffee Houses in the country. The India Coffee House Board of quality powder was the preferred brand for many years.

In the 1990s the Board discontinued the Coffee House due to a policy change. Under A.K. Gopalan, the secretary took over the houses, and renamed the network Indian Coffee House. The Indian Coffee Makers Co-Operative Society was registered in Bangalore on August 29, 1987. The first SCM outlet opened in Delhi in October that year. Gradually, the Indian Coffee House chain expanded across the country.

On February 14, 1988, the Society

COFFEE TO CAPPUCCINO: The coffee habit is always welcome. PHOTOS: A. RAY CHOWDHARY AND S.V. SRINIVASAN

started an Indian Coffee House in the Manipalodyyam building, Coimbatore. The ICH claims to be the biggest restaurant chain in Kerala, with over 100 outlets and associated catering operations all over Kerala from Thiruvananthapuram to Thiruvananthapuram, and in government establishments like the Secretariat, Legislative Assembly, MLA-Hostel, medical colleges and universities. The Society also sells pretty coffee powder at reasonable prices.

## Pelvic coffee

These coffee competitors. In the last decade, coffee houses have yielded their place to trendy "coffee joints" run on post-industrialist business practices. Ujjwal Grover writes a morning farewell to one in Jaipur. "At this very moment, there used to be an old India Coffee House, converted to make way for an ultra-cool restaurant for youngsters like myself. It would be a lie to say that I don't miss that coffee house — a dirty place with ceiling like a chimney the cheap wooden tables coloured to give an impression of polychrome, wooden in the middle, the almost vacant group of old-fashioned black-wooden metal pots or two wicker or wicker-like to give a sense of space, the glasses and the occasional plates of egg potatoes. I thought the coffee served the place, but I realize they were there because that was the only place that had not grown younger as they

grew older. The India Coffee House had grown old with them... Now a new stand in its place, I hang out there, but it reminds me of the coffee house and its surprisingly affordable beverages. Not that this change isn't good, but I want to know what happened to that group of kids, their waiters, that manager and those tables."

Today, the cash-rich young drive to the sophisticated (more than 500 and counting) coffee bars not really because of the coffee that comes in many flavours and temperatures, but because they get for more than just coffee. It is to "swear up" rather than "swear for coffee". "The hip, laid-back ambience in the drink," said Unnambal Thiruvananthapuram, award-winning organic coffee grower. "It's a healthy trend to hang out socially to make friends, exchange views. I hear they are planning similar outlets for the elderly."

At Cafe Coffee Day, Starbucks and Cafe Mocha go on to open joints in petrol stations and in smaller towns, coffee will not be the sole ingredient of their campaign. Yes, there will be imported brands, but with merchandise like filters, mugs and T-shirts just for fun. Menus already include teas, smoothies and non-local "health" foods.

One outlet in south Chennai has a shop-in-shop coffee in a small space for book-lovers. This club and birth-

day parties.

Srinivas is surprised. "Why make coffee an excuse for this ostentatious?" he asks. "You come to be seen here, thinking that it's like pretentious apology for coffee?" He is grateful that Chennai hasn't become too urban to lose its old coffee houses. "We meet once a month in place like Woodlands for coffee, either hot or iced. What is a coffeehouse where you can't do it in Tamil, pack in screaming old-world pong and sip bitter coffee? The hell for about now. Movies is never more than No. 200?"

## Divided house

The coffee culture in Bangalore too also sees similar changes, like a city divided, there is the café culture and the hangout culture. The latter means that there is a minimum level of caffeine and chatter in Bangalore's arteries. From the language "by-the-way" stretched out in its intricate steel members — the strange Bangalore's idea of a "high ceiling" that is its people's multi-flavored. In the countryside, the fundamental purpose of coffee joints has hardly changed. While old-timers recall debates and conversations over their kept numbers, young 20-somethings explain the concept of "drilling out" in their "happening

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