

Creative cauldron

Kolkata's Coffee House was the ultimate pilgrimage spot for aspiring writers, artists or radicals.

ANTARA DAS

The coffee house at Kolkata's College Street was the place for intense intoxication, but achieved without the aid of liquor, remembers eminent Bengali writer Nabaneeta Dev Sen.

A visitor during the 1960s, though not a regular, to that now almost mythical cradle of intellectual discourse, Ms. Sen recalls how the "intoxication of creativity, intellectual excitement and free exchange of ideas" energised the place.

A cauldron of creative energy, the Coffee House was the ultimate pilgrimage for the aspiring writer, the budding poet, the young painters, playwrights and filmmakers or the radical in politics. "It was a kind of lounge where new ideas would be generated and exchanged, where young, creative, thinking people would congregate," Sen said.

Amid the twirling haze of cigarette smoke, editors of little mag-

azines would prod wannabe writers to submit their articles, while intricate cinematic aesthetics would be laid bare in discussions where Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen would hold forth.

Friendly air

Notwithstanding the heated political debates during the turbulent Naxalite movement, the general air was one of friendly camaraderie.

Dipak Majumdar might break out into a full-throated rendition of a Rabindra Sangeet, while writers scribbled furiously on their sheets or enthusiastic painters sketched. Interestingly, there were not too many women who frequented the place in the mid-1960s, Sen recalls.

Today's trendy coffee parlours may have robbed the now derelict, but still popular, Coffee House of its sheen, but they have not been able to don the mantle of



INTELLECTUAL AURA: Popular meeting place.

PHOTO: SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH

its intellectual aura. "That is never likely to be replicated," says Sen, a feeling echoed by writer Amit Chaudhuri, who points out the futility of trying to revive old activities and discussions in changed times.

"The coffee house, or other locations in north Kolkata, can be used for various events, maybe even rock or jazz gigs, to give them

that sense of purpose," he adds.

"But people who want to kill time, still occupy tables for hours on end. Nobody seems to mind..." writes journalist Soumitra Das in his book **A Jaywalker's Guide to Calcutta**.

For those wishing to savour the feel of those times, if not the spirit, there will always be room and coffee enough.