Adda: A History of Sociality

And it is a good sign that I still enjoy adda,
for adda and youth are inseparable.
(Manoshi Das Gupta, 1957)

Now that it is clear at the end of this millennium that there is no escaping the rule of capital anywhere in the world, a question that Marshall Berman asked a while ago becomes even more insistent in the lives of many. In his celebrated book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Berman was interested in exploring how “modern men and women may become subjects as well as objects of modernization,” how they might “get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it.”1 I am not confident that this can be achieved by or for all in a programmatic manner, for the control that different groups can exercise on capitalism is at best uneven and subject to global distribution of institutional power. But the struggle to make a capitalist modernity comfortable for oneself, to find a sense of community in it, to be—as Berman puts it—at home in modernity, is an ongoing, ceaseless process for all. We do not have a choice in the matter, even when the problem does not admit of any permanent resolutions. Whatever our philosophical critiques of metaphysics today, the process of producing metaphysical identities for oneself—both collectively and individually—marks this struggle. Yet the struggle is by no means simple. As the philosopher J. L. Mehta reminds us: “the appropriation of what is our very own occurs only as a homecoming, as a return from a journey into the alien and the other; this is the law of being at home as a making oneself at home.”2 The return, one assumes, is ever incomplete.

The history I present here of a social practice, adda, from the city of Calcutta in the first half of the twentieth century, is a specific historical study of that struggle to be at home in modernity. The word *adda* (pronounced “uddah”) is translated by the Bengali linguist Sunitkumar Chattopadhyay as “a place” for “careless talk with boon companions” or “the chats of intimate friends” (I will have more to say later on this inter-changeability of talk and place).3 Roughly speaking, it is the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations.

This history of *adda* should be more properly described as a history of the desire for—or against—*adda*. By many standards of judgments in modernity, *adda* is a flawed social practice: it is predominantly male in its modern form in public life; it is oblivious of the materiality of labor in capitalism; and middle-class *addas* are usually forgetful of the working classes. Some Bengalis even see it as a practice that promotes sheer laziness in the population. Yet its perceived gradual disappearance from the urban life of Calcutta over the last three or four decades—related no doubt to changes in the political economy of the city—has now produced an impressive amount of mourning and nostalgia. It is as if that with the slow death of *adda* will die the identity of being a Bengali.

Because *adda* is now perceived to be a dying practice, Calcutta has seen a series of self-conscious efforts in recent times to collect and preserve memories and descriptions of Bengali *addas* of the last hundred years or so. The internet carries several chat networks for Bengalis of both West Bengal and Bangladesh which are designated *addas*. A book of essays, *Kolkata adda* (*The Addas of Calcutta*), published for Calcutta’s tricentenary, is a response to this market. It begins by pointing to the “horrendous possibility” that Bengalis might soon forget to enjoy *adda*, that a busy and all-consuming ethic of work might overtake their lives.4 Saiyed Mujtaba Ali, a distinguished Bengali writer of humor, touched a note of mourning over the alleged disappearance of *adda* as early as the 1970s. “It is incontrovertible,” he wrote, “that genuinely distinguished *addas* are now as good as dead even if they seem alive. How many of the five-story, ten-story buildings going up in Calcutta today have [room] for *adda*?”

Even a catalogue of Bengali books in print brought out by the Publishers’ Guild in Calcutta on the occasion of the Calcutta Book Fair in 1997 began by mourning the loss of the spirit of *adda* from the trade itself. The introductory essay, surveying the history of the last fifty years of publishing in Calcutta, ended on a nostalgic and melancholy note: “The cover designs of [Bengali] books have changed, as has changed the artistry of publication. There is a larger variety of topics now. Along with new writers will come new publishers. . . . But will we ever get back that which has now disappeared forever from the world of Bengali literature—literary *addas*? Perhaps some will be struck by pain at this. But what other path is there to follow except to press forward even as our hearts ache?”
I am not interested in reading this nostalgia as an error of some kind. As a first-generation migrant with my homing instincts permanently damaged, I have no easy way of determining in what proportions the archives of the nostalgia for adda that this essay documents are mixed with my own desire—as an immigrant in Australia or the United States—to be at home in a Calcutta of a once-upon-a-time. Such nostalgia can only be oriented toward a future. It helps me to be at home somewhere else. I therefore have no easy critique of nostalgia. The apparent nostalgia in Calcutta today for adda must occupy the place of another—and unarticulated—anxiety: How does one sing to the ever-changing tunes of capitalist modernization and retain at the same time a comfortable sense of being at home in it? Many Indian cities now display the symptoms of what Arjun Appadurai has evocatively called “urban exhaustion.” The individual ambivalence of modernism that the metropolitan cities of India built up in the first half of the twentieth century are now faced with serious challenges in the context of demographic changes and—compared to the past—greater globalization of the media and the economy. A history of adda that is also a desire for adda may indeed be a requiem for a practice of urban modernism now overtaken by other pleasures and dangers of the city. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bengali intellectuals should have produced a lot of unintended metaphysics in their discussions of adda over the last few decades. Adda is often seen as something quintessentially Bengali, as an indispensable part of the Bengali character, or as an integral part of such metaphysical notions as “life” and “vitality” for the Bengalis. Benoy Sarkar, a sociologist of the 1940s, many of whose writings were published in dialogue form as though they were fragments of conversations from an adda, spoke in 1942 of the “vitality” of adda that had helped Bengalis “sustain and enrich” their natural instincts as a people. “What we need is adda,” he declaimed in one of his conversations. In his preface to the book Kolkata adda, the historian Nisithranjan Ray describes Bengalis as “an adda-loving people.” The Bengali writer Nipendrakrishna Chattopadhyay wrote in the 1970s in praise of the institution: “Bengalis enjoy a tremendous reputation in the world as the people best at practicing adda. No other race has been able to build up such an institution as adda that stands above all ideas of need or utility. To enjoy adda is a primordial and perennial principle of life—no other people have succeeded in acknowledging this in life as Bengalis have.” And a page later he adds: “so deep is the spiritual connection between adda and the water and atmosphere of Bengal that adda... has now spread to the

[Calcutta] Corporation, offices, state-meetings, rawk [verandah, the raised terrace of a building], tea-shops, sports pavilions, the district organizations of political parties, and to schools and colleges—everywhere. Everywhere, in the pores of all activity, it is adda that exists in many different guises.” In the reckoning of Saiyid Mujtaba Ali, the men of Calcutta come second only to the men of Cairo in being devoted to adda. The men of Cairo, in Ali’s adoring description, are to be found at home only for a reluctant six hours every day (midnight to six in the morning), and prefer instead to spend the rest of their time at work and cafeterias, enjoying conversations with their male friends. It is not my aim to defend the Bengali metaphysical claim that the practice of adda is peculiarly Bengali. The tradition of men and women gathering in social spaces to enjoy company and conviviality is surely no monopoly of any particular people. Nor is the word only a Bengali word; it exists in Hindi and Urdu, and means a “place of gathering” (bus terminals in north India are called bus-addas). What is peculiar, if anything, in twentieth-century Bengali discussions of the practice of adda is the claim that the practice is peculiarly Bengali and that it marks a primary national characteristic of the Bengali people to such a degree that the “Bengali character,” it is said, could not be thought of without it. It is this claim and its history that I study here in terms of Berman’s question: How does one manage to feel at home in the context of capitalist cities?

My concern with the history of the practice of adda is restricted here to the world and culture of twentieth-century Bengali literary modernism. It was within that world, as we shall see, that the practice was given a self-consciously nationalist home. This is one reason why I focus on developments in the city of Calcutta. Calcutta was once the leading center of Bengali literary production.

THE BENGALI DEBATE ON ADDA

The widespread acceptance of the status of adda as a marker of Bengali character did not mean that Bengali intellectuals were all of the same opinion as to the value of this practice. Let me begin, therefore, by giving the reader some sense of the kind of debate in which the practice was and is still embroiled. A good starting point is provided by the contradictory opinions of two well-known cultural commentators in modern Bengali history, the critic Nirad C. Chaudhuri and the writer Buddhadeb Bose, who also founded the discipline of comparative literature in India.
Chaudhuri's famous book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, sees *adda* as symptomatic of a deep and continuing malaise in the Bengali character. He uses the word "gregariousness" both to describe the institution of *adda* and to explain what, in his view, is wrong with Calcutta's men. He begins by noting how old and ubiquitous the Bengali cultural practice of *adda* is. Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay's *Kalikata kamalalaya*—a text published in 1823 that contains vignettes of Bengali social life in the early history of the colonial city of Calcutta—provides him with convincing evidence that the common Bengali practices of "the morning gossip, the midday spell of business or siesta, the afternoon relaxation, and the evening court, had all come down unmodified" from the 1820s to the Calcutta of the 1930s. Chaudhuri's description of this Bengali penchant for company is evocative, through its tone betrays the moral disapproval with which he regarded this cultivation of gregariousness:

What the native of the city lacked in sociability he made up in gregariousness. No better connoisseur of company was to be found anywhere in the world, and no one else was more dependent on the contiguity of his fellows with the same incomprehension of his obligation towards them. The man of Calcutta found the company he needed so badly and continuously readily assembled, without any effort on his part, in his office, or in his bar-library, or in his college, which were no less places for endless gossip than for work.

... Perhaps gregariousness was the only disinterested thing in Calcutta society. Outside working hours the true native would always be raving in search of company, and his very striving for it often defeated its purpose. Every able-bodied person after his return from office and a hurried wash and tea rushed out of his house with the intention of meeting his friends, and these friends being on the same errand it occasionally happened that everybody missed everybody else. The most usual practice, however, was to avoid these misadventures by having fixed rendezvous or, as they were called in Bengali, *addas.* Each *adda* had its fixed adherents. These gathering places were most often in the outer parlour of one of the wealthier members of the group, but at times also an office after office hours, and more rarely, a tea-shop. As a general rule, these meeting places were located in the quarter in which the greater majority of the frequenter lived. But it was not at all unusual to find a man travelling five or six miles by tram in order to join his company. A man was far less ready to join a new *adda* than he was to shift to a new house in a new quarter.

The colonial-Victorian prejudices lurking behind Chaudhuri's disapproval of *adda* are not hard to discern. In Chaudhuri's description, *adda* is, first of all, idleness itself; it denotes a lethargy of spirit. "In sharp contrast to the demonic energy shown in rushing to the rendezvous," he writes, "the languor of the actual proceedings was startling." Second, the practice of *adda* revealed to him a lack of individuality, the presence of a "herd instinct." He writes: "I did not understand this behaviour until in 1922 I read for the first time McDougall's *Social Psychology*, in which I found the distinction between the social and the gregarious instinct clearly drawn and properly emphasised. Reinforcing my critical armoury from the book, I began to call the gregarious natives of Calcutta Galton's oxen, that is to say, the oxen of Damaraland in Africa. Individually these animals hardly appear even to be conscious of one another, but if separated from the herd they display extreme signs of distress."

Third, *adda* signified for Chaudhuri the absence of a controlled sociality which, according to him, only individuals with a developed sense of individuality were capable of achieving. The people of Calcutta had *adda* because "there was very little" of what Chaudhuri understood by "social life": "No afternoon or evening parties, no dinners, no at-homes, and, of course, no dances, enlivened their existence." And finally, for Chaudhuri, *adda* was inimical to bourgeois domesticity. As he puts it: "The strong herd instinct of the natives of Calcutta has virtually killed family life. There is no custom among them of a man sitting with his wife and children in the evening. It is hardly possible even to find them at home at any hour of the day suitable for calls, because their days are divided into three major outings—the morning wandering in search of casual gossip, the midday stay in office, and the systematised cultivation of company in the evenings." Clearly, what Chaudhuri's critique both values and finds missing from the lives of his contemporaries in Calcutta is the familiar trichotomous bourgeois grid of home-work-leisure by which many textbooks in the discipline of sociology attempt to explain modernity. Chaudhuri's writings remind us that the grid was clearly there at least as an object of desire, if not as a practice, in the lives of modern Bengalis. Chaudhuri's was not an exogenous critique.

Yet at the same time as Chaudhuri published his denunciation of *adda*, Buddhadev Bose wrote an essay in the 1950s on the subject of *adda*, the mood of which could not be more opposed to that of Chaudhuri's reflections. The opening two paragraphs of Bose are worth quoting at length if only to document the elaborate nature of the affection that many Bengali intellectuals have felt for the institution of *adda*:
I am not a pundit [writes Bose], I do not know the etymology of the word. It sounds non-Sanskritic [and] Muslim. If we Hinduize it and call it sabha, it loses everything. If we Angloize it and call it “party,” we kill its spirit. The [appropriate] dress for meetings is khaki or khadi [coarse hand-spun cotton], while the clothes one wears at a party are light but firmly pressed, and the sabha is white, decorous, [and yet] uncomfortable. I don’t know if the French salon still exists, but their descriptions suggest a degree of elaborateness which may not be good. Does adda have an exact synonym in any other language of the world? Even without being a linguist, I can say, no. Because in no other country would there be the spirit of adda or the right environment. People of other countries make speeches, crack jokes, offer arguments, have fun all night, but they do not do [the Bengali verb is “give”] adda.... What would they do with the club, those who have the adda?

Bose was quite clear that the “they” of his description could only be the Bengalis. Not only that—much like Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay, whom I have already quoted, he literally naturalized this practice, seeing in adda a reflection of the soft, alluvial soil of Bengal:

Adda is an all-India thing, but it is only in the moist, tender soil of Bengal that it can achieve its fullest expression. Just as our seasons give rise to poetry, in the same way do they help make addas intense. Our Chaitra [mid-March to mid-April, the last month of the Bengali year] evenings, the rain-patter-filled afternoons of Sravana [the rainy fourth month of the Bengali calendar], the moon-washed nights of autumn, the sweet and the bright mornings of winter—they all go ringing the silent bell of adda; some hear it and some don’t. It is inevitable that [the spirit of] adda will wither in countries of extreme heat and cold.... My heart trembles if I have to go to a sabha, I run away at the mention of a party, but adda? I cannot live without it. ... That is why I cannot be satisfied simply being its worshiper, I also have to be its [high] priest and preach its glory.16

Formed at the opposite pole of Chaudhuri’s sensibility, such self-consciously lyrical panegyric to the spirit of adda is relatively rare. There are, after all, Bengali words like gultani, gyasano, and so on, that generally refer to “useless talk.” They suggest the existence of a critical attitude to adda that may not be indebted to the modern capitalist-colonial theme of “the lazy native.” It is possible that the middle-class emphasis on discipline prevalent since the colonial times built not only on Victorian conceptions of laziness but also on preexisting understandings of what consti-

The reader will not notice that something of Nirad Chaudhuri’s sensibility survives in this extract in the moralistic description of adda as “idle talk”; the aspiration to “modernity,” on the other hand, survives in the comparison suggested to the English “club”; the Sanskritized word addadbhar and the Persianized expression addabaf [2] point to the ways of being, a certain temperament or character, that the word connotes, while the word also carries the older sense of “dwelling,” a “gathering place,” a settlement, suggesting perhaps a dialectic of settlement and nomadology whose full sense is now beyond our grasp.

The very different meanings of the word obviously bear witness to the heterogeneous pasts that are invoked by the practice of adda, a simultaneously celebrated and condemned—but in any case ubiquitous—institu-
tion of Calcutta’s urban life. It would be simplistic to see *adda* simply as a hangover of an older feudal lifestyle, as a vestige of a rural, preurban past surviving as an obstacle to Bengali modernity. Similarly, we would be mistaken to read Bose’s praise of *adda* as defending a precapitalist sense of time and sociality. And it would be equally wrong to hear the ghosts of Luther and Weber speak through the prose of Chaudhuri. The institution of *adda* resists being seen within such a stark story of transition from feudalism to capitalism. After all, the votaries of the practice were often people who helped form a modern Bengali literary public in Calcutta and who contributed to a distinctly modern sense of nationality.

**ADDA AND THE BIRTH OF DEMOCRATIC SPEECH: A GENEALOGY**

In contemporary Bengali language, *adda, majlish* (from the Arabic *majlis*, meaning a gathering, meeting, or a party), *baithak* (an assembly; *baithak-khana: drawing room*) and other similar words are used as practical synonyms. One could now use both *majlish* and *addabat* to refer to a person who truly enjoys being part of an *adda* or *majlish*. This equivalence—at least in Bengali usage of these words—is of recent origin, however. In nineteenth-century writings, the word *adda* does not appear to replace the word *majlish* as frequently as it does now. In fact, I have not come across any use of the word *adda* in the nineteenth century that confers respectability on the practice. What made the word *adda* respectable in the twentieth century was its association with the spaces for the production of a modern Bengali reading public.

The custom of men gathering together—and women, too, gathering in separate social spaces—to talk informally about all kinds of things affecting their lives is an old tradition in rural Bengal. The word *chandimandap*—a permanent place for the worship of the goddess Chandi but used by village elders at other times as a meeting place—attests to that, and it is interesting that self-conscious discussions of the institution of *adda* often remind Bengali authors of this older feature of Bengali village life. One of the spaces in Calcutta most associated with *adda* was that of the *rawk* or *rawak*, the elevated verandas attached to older Calcutta houses, where young men of the neighbourhood often assembled to have their noisy *addas*. This was much to the annoyance of middle-class householders, who saw these raucous *addas* of the *rawk* as a threat to their respectability, especially if there were young women resident in the house. The exter-

nal veranda or *rawk*, an architectural feature of Bengali houses until rising land prices made it obsolete, may indeed have been a structural remnant of the *dhoa* (veranda) that went around a traditional mud hut in the villages of Bengal. Similarly, the practice of men collecting in such a space may have had something to do with earlier practices. But the *addas* of the *rawk* in the city mainly involved young men, and were not usually associated with modern literary production. In the nineteenth century, some of these *addas* were dominated by men who were the social leaders in a neighbourhood. The Bengali writer Premankur Atarhiti has left us pen-pictures of *addas* of young men gathering on the *rawks* of Calcutta neighborhoods around the middle of the twentieth century:

One house in the neighborhood had a wide *rawak*. The boys would have their *adda* there on every Sunday and on other holidays... Conversations ran across all different kinds of topics: patriotism, wrestling, sports, England, Germany, Switzerland... Often arguments that began in a friendly way in these *addas* would turn so acrimonious and abusive that the people living inside the house would get worried, fearing an outbreak of physical violence. But people those days were so devoted to *adda* that they would dutifully turn up at their *addas* in spite of all their fights. 

In Lal Behari Dey’s *Recollections of My School-Days*—written in the 1870s but reminiscing about the 1830s—the word *adda* is used to mean a resting place and occurs in the following way in his discussion of his first trip to Calcutta from his native village of Talpur (Sonapalashi): “We travelled only eight miles. We put up in an *adda*, or inn, bathed, cooked our food, ate and drank (Adam’s ale only), lounged about, again cooked and ate at night, washed our feet in hot water, and laid ourselves on the ground—a thin piece of date-matting being interposed between our flesh and the mud floor.”

In the well-known satirical social sketches of Hutom pyanjchar nakshe (hereafter: *Hutom*) written by Kaliprasanna Sinha and first published 1861/2 with the English title “Sketches by Hootom [Nightowl] Illustrative of Every Day Life and Every Day,” the word *adda* is clearly distinguished from the word *majlish*. *Adda* in *Hutom* refers a place of gathering, but its use is at least as irreverent as when he uses it to make fun of the congregational form of worship, modeled on Christian practices and introduced into Calcutta by the Hindu reformist sect of the Brahma Samaj: “It is almost impossible to understand the ways of Brahma dharma [religion] these days... Is the Almighty an upcountry immigrant or a
Maharashtrian brahman that He wouldn’t be able to hear unless addressed [in the collective voice of] an adda;25 The other uses of adda in Hutom associate the word with lowly lives, “dubs” where opium or ganja were consumed: charasper adda, ganjar adda. Pyarimohan Mukhopadhyay’s memories of Calcutta in the early part of the twentieth century confirm this usage. He places to squares near the “burning ghats” (where the Hindu dead were cremated, the word ghat literally referring to steps on the banks of river leading to the water) and underneath the Howrah Bridge on northern side of the city as harboring addas for those addicted to opium and marijuana.26 This use is in consonance with the way older Bengali dictionaries suggest a connection between adda and marginalized existence: a gathering place of “bad” people or people of bad occupations (kulok, durbritta).27

Majlish, on the other hand—whether in Hutom or elsewhere—suggests forms of social gathering that invariably involve wealth and patronage, and often conjure up the picture of men gathered in a rich man’s parlor (baithak or baithakhana). In Hutom, for instance, majlish goes with wine, dancing girls, chandeliers, expensive apparel, and drunken brawls that involve the newly rich of early-nineteenth-century Calcutta and their “spoiled” descendants.28 Many of these associations weaken in the twentieth century but, structurally, majlish as a place retains the ideas of a patron, the wealthier person without whose parlor or baithakhana the gathering cannot take place. And, usually, the word is also associated with a place where some kind of performance takes place—singing, dancing, recitation of poetry, and so on. Conversation here, even when it was not directly sycophantic, could never be totally democratic, for the very presence of a patron would influence the speech pattern of such a group in all kinds of ways. It is not surprising that Subal Mitra’s dictionary, first published in 1906, explains majlish as kartabhaja daler sabha or literally “a meeting of those who worship their master” (the kartabhaja, incidentally, were also a religious sect in Bengal).29

In contrast, whatever the later overlapping between the semantic fields of the two words adda and majlish, the adda that Buddhadev Bose celebrates in the 1950s has an unmistakably middle-class, democratic, ring to it. “Everybody must enjoy equal status in an adda,” Bose writes, and adds:

It is inevitable that there will be distinctions made between human beings in that part of life which is concerned with the earning of one’s livelihood. But those who cannot shed that sense of division just as one sheds

one’s office clothes will never know the taste of adda. If there happens to be somebody around whose status is so exalted that we can never forget his glory, then we will sit at his feet as devotees, but he will have no invitation to [share in] our pleasure, for the very spring of adda will freeze to ice the moment his eyes fall on it. But similarly, if there are people whose mental level [waster star] is much below that of others, they need to be kept out too, and that is comfortable for them, as well.30

Of course, no adda was ever just this, a pure practice of democracy. Many addas were dominated by important people who often acted as patrons by providing the venue for the gathering—their living rooms. Adda in the twentieth century remained a hybrid form that combined elements of the majlish with that of coffee-house conversation. Yet the emergence of a democratic sensibility is what separates the speech pattern of an adda in someone’s baithakkhana from that of an adda in a public place.

Parashuram [Rajeshwar Bosu]’s humorous and witty short stories “Lambakarna” and “Dakshinray”—the first published around 1915/16 and the second around 1928/29, both written during the period of the anti-British nationalist movement—give us interesting examples of conversations in a fictional adda that meets regularly in somebody’s baithakkhana. The patron in these two stories is a well-to-do Bengali landlord introduced in the story as “Roy Bangshalochan Banerjee Bahadur, Zamindar and Honorary Magistrate, Beleghata Bench.” The first story, “Lambakarna,” introduces the cast of characters of the adda that regularly meets at Bangshalochan’s place.

The evening adda that gathers at the baithakkhana of Bangshalochan-babu bears many tall claims every night. The governor, Suren [dramath] Banrujee [a leading nationalist politician], Mohunbagan [a soccer club], spiritual truths, the funeral ceremony of the old man Adhar in the neighbourhood, the new crocodile at the Alipore [zoo]—no subject is left undiscovered. Recently, for the last seven days, the subject of discussion has been the tiger. Nagen, Bangshalochan’s brother-in-law, and Uday, a distantly related “nephew” of his, almost came to blows last night over this topic. With great difficulty, the other members persuaded them to desist.31

This description captures the spirit of a Bengali adda. “A pure adda,” writes Radhaprasad Gupta, who was a member of an well-known adda in the 1940s, “has no . . . hard and fast agenda [the italicized English words are in English in the original]. . . . There is no certainty as to what
topic an *adda* will start with one day, what will cause argumentation and fights, and where it will all end. Suppose this moment the conversation is about a [*supernova* beyond the solar system, the next moment the discussion could be about *Plekhanov’s* “The Role of the Individual in History.”]

By the very catholicity of their interests—ranging from the nationalist movement to the Royal Bengal tiger—the members of Bangshalochanbabu’s parlor establish the fact that the nature of their gathering is indeed that of an *adda*. Yet the second story, set in the same living room with the same characters but now placed somewhere in the 1920s, illustrates how the patron of a *majlis* could intervene at critical points to direct the conversation, making it fall significantly short of the democratic speech Budhadev Bose idealized in his praise of the modern *adda*. Here is the beginning of the second story, “Dakshinray”; the subject is once again that of the tiger. Notice how Bangshalochan’s participation is minimal but critical:

Mr. Chatterjee said, “Talking about tigers, those at Rudraprayag [a pilgrimage spot] are [the best]. Huge, gigantic things. . . But such is the *power/glorious of the place that they do not attack anybody. After all, [the people there] are all pilgrims. They only catch and eat *sabiks* [Europeans, white people].” . . . Binod, the lawyer, said, “What wonderful tigers! Couldn’t a few be imported here? *Swaraj* [self-rule, independence, a word associated with Gandhi] would come quickly. *Swadeshi* [economic nationalism], bombs, the spinning wheel, splitting the legislative councils [referring to particular nationalist tactics]—none of these would be needed.”

The conversation was being conducted one evening in the *baithakkhana* of Bangshalochanbabu. He was engrossed in reading an English book, *How to Be Happy though Married*. His brother-in-law, Nagen, and his nephew, Uday, were also present.

Chatterjee took a drag on the hookah for one full minute and said, “Why do you presume that that method has not been tried?”

“Really? But the Rowlatt Report [on sedition] doesn’t mention it.”

“So what if you have read the report? Look, does the government know everything? There are more things—or however the saying goes.”

“Why don’t you tell us about it?”

Chatterjee remained silent for a while and then said, “Hm.”

Nagen pleaded, “Why don’t you, Mr. Chatterjee?”

Chatterjee got up and looked out through the door and the window and, resuming his seat, repeated, “Hm.”

Binod: “What were you looking for?”

Chatterjee: “Just making sure that Haren Ghosal didn’t turn up all of a sudden. He is a spy of the police, it is better to be careful from the beginning.”

Bangshalochan put the book aside and said, “You’d better not discuss these matters here. It is better that these stories not be told in a magistrate’s house.”

Eventually, Chatterjee proceeds to narrate the story, only after agreeing to Bangshalochan’s condition that he would leave out the “overly seditious” elements. There are two things I want to highlight here. First, the editorial/censorial role of the patron, which becomes clear only at the end of the sequence, when the patron of the gathering, Bangshalochan, speaks minimally and yet effectively decides the rules of speaking at this *adda*. This marks the space of this gathering as more of a *majlis* than a democratic, modern *adda*. My second point relates to the subtle way—through the title of an English book that Bangshalochan is reading—the author of the story draws our attention to the gendered nature of this space, a theme I will return to in a later part of the essay.

If the patron’s hospitality gave him the subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) power to edit the conversations of a *majlis*, at the other extreme was the coffeehouse or tea-shop *adda* where the absence of a patron was signaled by the acceptance of the ritual of “going Dutch” (with Bengali apologies to the Dutch!). There is, however, an interesting twist to this Bengali adaptation of democracy and individualism to the culture of *adda*. The Bengali expression for “going Dutch” is actually a string of English words that do not make any sense in English: “his his, whose whose.” It is a literal and (reversed) translation of *jar jar tar tar* (whose whose, his his). The expression was already in use in the 1960s. I do not know when it originated, but Sagarmay Ghosh, the editor of the well-known Bengali literary magazine *Desh*, mentions this expression in his reminiscences of an *adda* that seems to have met in the 1950s and 1960s. Why was “going Dutch” given a funny, English-sounding name? A deep analysis of this phenomenon would no doubt have to engage with the question of the use of language and the production of linguistically based humor by Bengalis. But I also think that the humorous use of English words here is meant to cover up a sense of embarrassment felt pre-
cisely over the absence of hospitality that “going Dutch” signifies. The Bengali expression *jar jar tar tar* is a disapproving description of what is, in effect, seen as an attitude of selfishness. The deep association between food and munificence in Bengali culture meant a certain unease in middle-class consciousness over acknowledging the individualism entailed when everybody paid separately for his or her own food. The deliberately absurd grammar of the expression “his his whose whose” probably helped a tea-shop *adda* to overcome its sense of embarrassment when faced precisely with the moment that spoke of the death of the patron. It was as though the democratic *adda* carried within its structure a nostalgia for the *majlish*. No wonder, then, that the aesthetics of the twentieth-century *adda* should always relate to a hybrid form that would never be able to tear itself away completely from the form of the *majlish*.

**ADDA AND THE PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE**

Between the *majlish* and the *adda*, then, there is the history of modernity, the process of emergence of a Bengali middle class whose public life was marked by its literary and political endeavors. The word *adda*, as I have said, attained respectability by its associations with the literary and political groups that flourished in the city in the 1920s, 1930s, and later. But this in turn was mediated by the development of certain institutions and spaces characteristic of modernity anywhere.

The first of these was the (high) school and the space it made for literary intimacy among young men, a space surely homosocial and sometimes bordering perhaps on the homoerotic as well. An instant of such friendship may be seen in the letters the young Michael Madhusudan Dutt, eighteen in 1842, wrote to his school friend Gourdas By sack (Basak), both students at Hindu College in that year. They were written in English and the emphases are Dutt’s own; the influence of English Romantic literature is clear:

My heart beats when the thought that you are my friend, comes into my mind! You say you will honour my place . . . with your “Royal presence.” Your presence, Gour Dass, is something more than Royal. Oh! it is angelic! oh! no! it is something *more exquisite* still!

Wednesday last I did go to the Mechanics—not to learn Drawing, “Oh! no! ’twas for something *more exquisite* still!” that is to see you . . . Shall I see you at the Mechanics tomorrow? Oh! come for my sake!

Later in the century, Bipinchandra Pal would form a similarly intense friendship with Sundarimohan Das, and Dinesh Chandra Sen with somebody called Ramdayal. For the twentieth century, a similar friendship is recorded between Achintyakumar Sengupta and Premendran Mitra in their youth, a sense of attachment in which one experienced feelings not altogether dissimilar from those of romantic love. Similar friendships blossomed between young women, too, with the establishment of girls’ schools, but their histories, for understandable reasons, are harder to recover. My point is that the history of the modern Bengali *adda* has some roots in the way literature came into the space of friendship and fashioned new sentiments of intimacy.

The Tagores were pioneers and patrons of many forms of literary gathering that combined more formal setups—and were usually given Sanskritized names like *ashar or sammilani*—with some of the more spontaneous elements of *adda*. In this family, the pleasures of kinship were garnished with those of literature. Sarala Devi, a niece of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, later wrote about the period 1887–1888 when, on a holiday with the family at Darjeeling, the poet would read out English literature to his family at a gathering (*ashar*) that met every evening. Sarala Devi writes: “My literary tastes were formed by Rabimama [mama = maternal uncle]. He was the person who opened my heart to the aesthetic treasure in Matthew Arnold, Browning, Keats, Shelley, and others. I remember how when we were at the Castleton House in Darjeeling for a month or so . . . every evening [he] would read aloud from and explain [to us] Browning’s ‘Blot in the Scutcheon.’ That was my first introduction to Browning.”

Anecdotes from the life of the nationalist writer Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay also provide evidence of this process of percolation of literature into the space of intimacy and sociality. The Bengali essayist Akshoychandra Sarkar mentions once spending a few hours in a waiting room at a railway station in the company of Bankimchandra discussing the literary genre of “mysteries”: “Out of that sharing of aesthetic pleasure (*rasa*) [in 1870],” he writes, “was born a feeling of mutual appreciation between us. Over time that grew into . . . a special friendship. He was my superior in age, caste, education, and accomplishment, but this never interfered with our friendship.” Bankimchandra’s nephew and biographer Sachishchandra Chattopadhyay relates the story of a stormy argument one day between Bankimchandra and a literary friend of his that continued uninterrupted from nine in the evening to after midnight, and comments: “The mention of Hugo, Balzac, Goethe, Dante, Chaucer, and
others still reminds me of that night.” Sachishchandra also mentions how Bankimchandra’s baithakkhana was sometimes transformed into a space for literary adda (he in fact uses both of these words writing in 1911/12) where writers met.41

Two other institutions helped move the discussion of a baithak toward cosmopolitan concerns. One of these was the newspaper. Hutom mentions how the “Anglicized” people of the 1860s were always excited about the “best news of the day,” but in those years the newspaper was something that distinguished the Anglicized.42 A sketch (Figure 1, c. 1920s) by the Bengali artist Charu Roy, which depict a typical scene of a baithak, suggests the newspaper and books as permanent, defining, everyday features of the new, twentieth-century baithakkhana.43 Compare this, however, with the drawing (Figure 2) of Suniti Chattopadhyay that illustrates an adda in a students’ hostel in Calcutta in 1913, along with Chattopadhyay’s description of the usual proceedings of a typical adda: the process of democratization and indigenization of literary tastes in the lives of the young of the middle classes will become clear.44 Unlike in the sedate and aristocratic baithak, the atmosphere here is animated, and the furnishing more sparse and much less comfortable than in the picture of the baithak. The scene gathers most of its energy from the extended arms, pointed fingers, and focused eyes in the foreground, suggesting intense argumentation. As Chattopadhyay explains, the arguments themselves showed an emerging new association between literature and and the production of Bengali selves:

The evening is one of the liveliest hours of the day in the hostel. . . . There is no end to talk and discussion on all manners of topics, and joking and singing. . . . Some of the favourite literary topics are Mr Rabindra Nath Tagore and the late Mr D. L. Roy as poets, the places of Hem Chandra Banerji and Michael Madhusudan Datta in Bengali poetry, the dramatic genius of the late Girish Chandra Ghosh. . . . The first subject is by far the most popular one: and there are “Rabi-ites” and “Dijoo-ites” in every hostel, as hostile to each other’s opinions as were the Whigs and Tories of the past.45

It is important to note that the literary references in the quotation above are all Bengali, marking a further step in the popularization of literature into Bengali lives, a development that was soon to be aided by the fact that Bengali literature was introduced as a formal subject study by Calcutta University in 1919.46 Debates in addas among young men were critical to this propagation of literature into middle-class lives. And this in turn brought respectability to adda as a form of social activity. As Suniti Chattopadhyay wrote of his student days: “The student has a large stock of hybrid words [mixing Bengali with English], which he can invent whenever he likes. Addify and addification have got nothing to do with mathematical addition; they simply mean to enjoy a chat ... and come from the Bengali word adda.”47

One begins to see in the early part of the twentieth century the tendency on the part of literate Bengali men to form something like clubs where arts and literature (and later politics) could be discussed. One such club that has recently had a certain amount of writing devoted to it was the Monday Club, so called from the day it met, which involved such future luminaries as the famous writer Sukumar Ray (the father of film director Satyajit Ray), the statistician Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, the linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, and others. In Hirankumar Sanyal’s descric-
tion, “this was a regular club” with formal membership and a four-anna rate of subscription every month.” The activities included discussing “everything beginning from Plato-Nietzsche to Bankim-Vivekananda-Vaishnav poetry, Rabindranath’s poetry” as well as music, feasts, and picnicking.

Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel prize for literature in 1913. One can only imagine how this would have helped to embed literature in “ordinary” Bengali lives. Whereas the nineteenth-century cultivation of the literary self was mainly the province of the relatively well-to-do, the young nationalist, radical, or socialist writers of the 1920s and 1930s were not any longer the rich. They were, sociologically speaking, small people who often lived in financial difficulty, yet whose love for their own literature and that in other parts of the world had an unmistakable idealism about it. Tagore was a great believer in the Goethean idea of “world literature,” and his winning of the Nobel prize seems to have democratized the ideal of literature as a vocation. To be a literary person now—even if one were unemployed—was to be someone respectable, as literary activity was now by definition of cosmopolitan and global relevance. Or so, at least, the argument went for some.

Adda could thus become a space for the practice of literary cosmopolitanism by members of the middle and lower-middle classes. In 1921, two young men, Dineshchandra Das and Gokulchandra Nag, started a new organization called the Four Arts Club with the express intention of involving women. The “four arts” referred to literature, music, crafts, and painting. Neither Das nor Nag came from an aristocratic background. Das worked initially for a sports goods shop in the Chowringhee part of the city and later for a pharmacist’s shop; Nag worked in a florist’s shop in the New Market. The democratization, as well as a certain social radicalism, of this particular form of adda may be seen in the fact that there was nobody’s parlor available to them. As Jibendra Singha Ray, who has studied the history of this club, writes: “The chief problem after the establishment of the club was the venue. Many were reluctant to rent a room for the purpose of meetings that would involve both men and women. Faced with this situation, Dineshchandra’s sister and her husband Sukumar Dasgupta . . . let out their lounge room for a small rent.”

Also remarkable was the idealism of the founders of this club, colored as it was with a heavy dose of a post-Tagore Bengali faith in the redemptive role of arts and literature in middle-class lives. Dineshchandra was later to describe the origin of the club in terms that bespoke an idealism seeking to take within its embrace nothing short of the whole world. He may have been an unknown Bengali writer but what he did, he assumed, was for the benefit of humanity at large. He saw himself as a citizen of the global literary cosmopolis. Das’s description is a testimony to the way literature, male friendships, and a certain humanism came together to make literary addas of Calcutta of the 1920s spaces where a democratic and cosmopolitan vision of the world could be nurtured and sustained.

The ideal and an imaginary shape of this club had been unfolding in my mind for many years. Witnessing the sign of a silent pain on the faces of many men and women of [this] idealistic country would make my heart wish that I could bring to light [my own] imagination from the dark caverns of my mind. . . . My pathos must have cast a shadow over my face. Gokul asked me one day, “What’s going on in your mind? I feel as though I am also thinking the same thought as you are but cannot quite tell what the thought is.” I said, “I imagine a [kind of] resting-house [an inn]—where people tired by the burden of their lives can come and rest, where nationality, sex, and position will not be any barriers, [where] men will make their own work joyful and by freely mixing with others and will find themselves fulfilled in the easy working out of their own desires. Gokul put his hand over mine, clapped, and cried out in joy, “That is the dream of my life, too, but I could not figure out its exact shape until now!”

The growing book trade in the city—the market in global literature, that is—was itself organized around the culture and institution of adda. Conversation and orality remained important factors in the creation and dissemination of literary taste in a city where the production and consumption of books were based on relations that remained fundamentally personal. Every bookshop, every little office of a literary magazine hosted an adda at which writers, critics, editors, and readers gathered. Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay gives us a lively sketch of this small but significant subculture.

Right behind College Square was a big bookshop called The Book Company. A few new bookshops like this were established toward the beginning of this century around College Square. These shops played a very helpful role in spreading the culture [English word in the original] of the period. They began to import freshly produced books from Europe and America on various literary, poetic, and scientific subjects; it was through their efforts that the young and the writers of those times got an opportunity to get to know the trends in world literature and thinking.
Chattopadhyay reconstructs what might typically happen at this bookshop. His story, whether apocryphal or not, underlines the close connection that existed between *adda* and literary cosmopolitanism in Calcutta of the mid-twentieth century. In Chattopadhyay's somewhat dramatic narrative, the owner of this new shop, Girinabau, suddenly calls out to a familiar customer he spots on the pavement outside. The customer happens to be none other than the reputed Bengali sociologist, professor at the University of Lucknow, and well-known correspondent of Tagore, Dhurjatiprasad Mukherjee. Girinabau invites Mukherjee to go into the warehouse at the back of the shop, where an *adda* of a select group of book-crazy readers of Calcutta gathers regularly: "Go inside, Nadu was looking for you." Nadu, an employee of the shop, is in charge of opening the newly arrived shipping crates that contain the fresh imports of literature from overseas. He knows the readers by their personal reading tastes. Here is the scene, in Chattopadhyay's reconstruction, that Mukherjee witnesses on stepping inside the warehouse:

Nadubabu is engaged in opening a crate that has just arrived. Around him are two *adda-stars* [the central characters of an *adda*: see below] staring at the wooden box, their eyes thirsty like those of an alcohol lover eyeing a bottle of champagne. The younger of the two is very young. The older person is middle-aged. An aristocrat from top to bottom, the latter is dressed in perfect Bengali attire, white as the feathers of a crane, holding—through sheer habit it seems—an empty, golden cigarette holder between two of his fingers. A closer look would reveal his fingers to be trembling a little—[this is] Pramatha Chaudhuri [a famous writer and critic of the 1920s and the editor of the avant-garde magazine, *Satyajpatra*]. Addressing the young man, he says, "You see, this new poetry now being written in England and France contains a very big tragedy behind all that seeming disorder of meter and rhyme. The Great War [1914] came and destroyed all the old-world beliefs in the minds of their young, their restless minds are seeking a new refuge. I will show you an example if the book has arrived by this mail... oh, here you are, Dhurjati, welcome!"

Thus the market and taste in the consumption of literature are all mediated, as in this anecdote, by the conversation of the *adda*.

The practice of *adda* seems to have been critical in the creation and dissemination of taste in the areas of films and arts, as well. In remember-

ing an *adda* that used to gather at “3-B, Kalighat South Park” in the 1950s and that revolved around the personality of Bimal Ghosh, “Kanuda” to his younger friends, the historian Arun Das Gupta says: “For as long as he lived among us, Kanuda was our expert, advisor, and guide in matters relating to films.”

The Communist artist Debrabata Mukhopadhyay reminds us in his memoirs of the College Street Coffee House that the it was from an *adda* at the Central Avenue Coffee House (of which Satyajit Ray and the future film critic Chidananda Das Gupta were regular members) that “the renewal of Bengali filmmaking began.” And speaking of the education of his own taste, Mukhopadhyay is even more forthright in his insistence on the modernity of *adda*: “I have no academic training,” he says. “My education, whether in art or culture generally, is largely a contribution of *adda*.”

These changes would have acted in tandem with other transformations in the nature of public space in the city. Two in particular deserve our attention. First, we need a history of parks in the city. The nineteenth-century material mostly does not mention “parks,” at least not under that designation. *Hutom*, which is very good and detailed on streets, verandas, *baithekhanas*, and opium-*addas*, has nothing on parks. Yet the park that Calcuttans usually call Hedo or Hedua (on Cornwallis Street) figures prominently in quite a few literary reminiscences of the twentieth century. Bipinbehari Gupta’s *Puranan prasanga*, for example—an indispensable sourcebook on nineteenth-century history—is really a series of conversations between him and Krishnakamal Bhattacharya (a contemporary and an acquaintance of Bankim and the Tagores) that takes place at this park (Beacon Gardens/Hedua) around 1910/11. When he was an undergraduate student, that is, in the 1910s, the physicist Sathyendranath Bose was part of a literary *adda* that used to meet on the rooftop—yet another unresearched urban site in Calcutta—of the house of Girijapati Bhattacharyas, both Bose and Bhattacharya later became prominent members of another famous literary *adda* that formed around the magazine *Parichoy*. Sometimes, we are told, this *adda* would shift to the park at Hedua. Discussing Tagore’s stories, reciting his poems, and singing songs written by him were the staple of this *adda*. The journal *Prabashi*, in its later incarnation under the editorship of Ashok Chattopadhyay, was conceived at an *adda* at this same park in 1924. We need to find out more about rooftops and parks and the roles they played in the cultural life of the city in the twentieth century.
The other important question is: When do tea shops, coffeehouses, and restaurants proliferate in Calcutta, and when do they begin to act as major sites for literary addas? There have been, of course, places like "Puntiram's shop" near College Street in north Calcutta, which has now run for more than a hundred years, though specific history needs research. The Communist author and leader Muzaffar Ahmad mentions in his reminiscences of the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam tea shops where he and others could drop in to sit down for a chat in the early 1920s. But the reader will recall that Nirad Chaudhuri's comments suggested that addas in tea shops were relatively rare in the 1920s, compared to those in someone's parlor. In his introduction to Hirankumar Sanyal's reminiscences of the literary magazine Parichoy (started around 1932), the historian Susobhobhan Sarkar writes: "In our college life, the streets and lanes of central Calcutta provided the chief meeting places. Eating out at restaurants was not yet a popular practice."

These statements receive support from a remark of Radhakprasad Gupta. Gupta remembers how, in the late 1930s, many tea shops "from Shyambazar to Kalighat" (that is, from the north to the south of the city) used to advertise on red banners their desperately cheap rates: "Only two annas for a cup of tea, two pieces of toast, and an omelette made of two eggs." Although it seems that there were indeed shops—Gupta mentions "Gyanababu's tea shop," Favourite Cabin on Mirzapur Street, Basanta Cabin opposite the Calcutta University premises, and the College Street YMCA restaurant—that fostered a culture of adda among university students in the mid- to late 1930s, the chain of coffeehouses and Sangu Valley Restaurants that were to dominate the city's adda scene soon after independence did not appear until the late 1930s or during the war. The big coffeehouses were started by the Indian Coffee Expansion Board as a way of marketing coffee to a city that belonged—and still does—predominantly to tea drinkers. However, the practice of drinking coffee, says Gupta, was introduced into the Bengali culture of Calcutta in the 1930s by the immigrant southerners (the Bengali word dakshini refers to people from the south—Tamilnad, Kerala, Andhra, and so on) in the city who set up small eating places around Ballygunge about this time. The drama of his first introduction to a "coffeehouse" is best captured in Gupta's own words:

One evening in 1941-1942, I went to . . . Waterloo Street to see my childhood friend the dentist Gopal Banerjee. The young man Gopal, though bred in . . . Konnagar, would in those days turn himself out sometimes as a full-fledged sabib and sometimes as a pure Calcutta-bred Bengali dandy. That day, when I showed up, he was ready [in English in the original] to go out, . . . dressed in a fine dhoti and kurta. On seeing me, he said, "Come, let me take you to a new place." When I asked him about this new place, he said, "Oh no, on that matter I should remain speaki not [a jocular Bengali expression which makes use of English to say "I am not speaking"]. It's close, why don't you just come along? You will soon see for yourself." So saying, he took me past . . . Bentinck Street to the just-opened India Coffee House at the crossing of Meredith Street and Central Avenue. Young people these days, even the children, do seem to be taken by surprise by anything. But my jaw dropped even in my "older" years at the sight of this coffee house, with its huge size, livered bearers ["boys"] wearing badges, its clean appearance, polished tables and chairs, and nicely dressed customers at every table. . . . The College Street Coffee House started soon after this.

Indeed, evidence from fiction would suggest that although adda may have been a general and plebeian practice among the residents of Calcutta, its more respectable form—self-consciously imitating a European coffeehouse form—made only tentative beginnings in the 1930s. Parashuram's celebrated story "Ratarati" (Overnight), written around 1931, creates a funny situation at a fictitious restaurant called The Anglo-Mughal Cafe located somewhere in Dharomatola, the central business district of the city—its location itself signifying a degree of cultural distance from the everyday lives of the middle classes. The joke of the situation turns on many things. On the one hand, The Anglo-Mughal Cafe is about the aspiration to Europeanize the adda form, to turn it into something like the conversation at a European cafe. At the same time, the Bengali lack of familiarity with European forms is suggested through the manager's ignorance as it reveals itself during an altercation with a customer, Bantlo, who prides himself on his superior knowledge of these things:

The Manager: Do you realize that this is Anglo-Moghul kef?
Bantlo cannot tolerate wrong pronunciation. He said, "It's not kef—kaafe."

The Manager: It is all the same. Do you realize that this is not an ordinary place, that this is a respectable res-tau-rant [says it phonetically]?
Bantlo: Restora [tries the French version].
Manager: It is all the same. Do you realize that this is a ren-des-vos for the educated people?

Bantlo: [using French] Rendezvous.43

ORALITY AND COMMUNITY IN ADDA

That there should be tension between the ideals of the adda and those of the modern civil society is understandable. They are mutually antithetical organizations of time and place. Civil society, in its ideal construction, builds into the very idea of human activity the telos of a result, a product and a purpose, and structures its use of time and place on that developmentalist and utilitarian logic (even when that logic is not simply linear). Conversations in an adda, on the other hand, are by definition opposed to the idea of achieving any definite outcome. Enjoying an adda is to enjoy a sense of time and space that is not subject to the gravitational pull of any explicit purpose. The introduction of a purpose that could make the conversation “instrumental” to the achievement of some object other than the social life of an adda itself, kills, it is claimed, the very spirit and the principle of adda. Buddhadev Bose says as much in his essay on adda: “Suppose we decide that we will convene a literary meeting once a week or twice a month, so that knowledgeable and talented people can come and discuss good things. . . . Good idea no doubt, and it is possible that the first few sessions will be so successful that we will ourselves be surprised. But we will observe after a while that the whole thing has fallen from the heaven of adda and has turned into the barren land of ‘duty.’”44

The center of gravity of the adda lay in a direction away from the telos of productivity or development (in this case that of purposeful discussion). Hirankumar Sanyal recalls how food (and, I might add, a gendered division of labor) were once used in a meeting of the Monday Club to defeat Prasantachandra Mahalanobis’s plans to inject into the proceedings a sense of purpose. Sanyal writes:

Every . . . [meeting] included a feast. But one day, Prasantachandra turned obstinate [and said], “Eating makes discussion impossible. Why do you waste so much time just eating? I will serve you only tea and cheap biscuits.” The meeting was at his place that day. There were some tiny little biscuits available those days called “gem” biscuits—usually offered to pet cats and dogs. Everybody raised a hue and cry. Tatada [Sukumar Ray] realized protesting would not achieve anything, for Prasanta would not listen. He whispered to me, “Go inside [the house] and tell Prasanta’s sister that Prasanta has invited a group of people for tea but has not arranged for any food. Just say this and come back.” After about fifteen or twenty minutes a variety of food appeared . . . Prasanta said, “What is this? Who got all this?” Tatada replied, “How does that concern you? The food is here, and we will eat it.”45

Even without the aid of food, conversation in an adda could itself ensure that arguments never reached a terminal point. Take this entry for 24 January 1936 from Shyamal Ghosh’s published diary in which he used to keep records of the conversations at the highbrow adda of people associated with the magazine Parichoy. The discussion here broaches large questions, but not with a view to solving them:

Ayub asked: Putting aside the matter of physical reactions, are there any qualitative differences between emotions such as anger, fear, love, and so on?

Mallikda asked a counter-question: Can you isolate emotions if you leave the body out [of consideration]?

It was not possible to reach a conclusion even after about an hour’s argumentation.

I heard Ayub say once, “Let us assume that no feeling is possible without the mediation of the body, still I want to know why, if all emotions are of the same type, someone will be beside themselves when called a ‘pig’ at one time, and just brush it off at another . . . why does this happen?

Ghosh closes his entry with a matter-of-fact remark that suggests how used he was to such discussions: “There cannot be conclusions to such debates.”45

Focused on the oral, Bengali addas represented a certain capacity on the part of their members to take pleasure in the pure art of conversation.45 By its very nature, the pleasure was communal. The writer Hemendranakumar Ray’s memoirs distinguish between the speaking style of a meeting and that of a baithakkhara. Pramatha Chaudhuri, the editor of Sabujpatra, was famous for his baithaki style of speech: “it was in small rooms that his baithaki style of conversation would become so captivating.”46 The life of the adda was always a person with some speciality to their speech, someone who could tell a good story, coin a new word, turn a phrase interestingly, or produce smart quips that made an impression on others. They were the people who could, as the Bengali expression goes, make
an *adda* "congeal" or "chicken" (in the same way that a plot does). Hirankumar Sanyal says of Sukumar Ray in the context of the Monday Club: “[He] . . . had a remarkable capacity to help the *ashar* [mailish, convivial gathering] come into its own. On days on which the Monday Club had no specific subject to discuss, he kept us enthralled by telling us all kinds of stories.” The *adda*, in this way, must have drawn on older styles of speech such as those of *kathakata* (traditional practices of telling devotional stories). The pleasure of conversation is also suggested by another story about Sukumar Ray told by Sanyal. The austere Brahmo teacher Herambachandra Maitra once asked Sukumar Ray, "Sukumar, can you tell me what life’s ideal is [should be]?” Sukumar is said to have replied [in English]: “serious interest in life.” Maitra was so pleased at this answer that he immediately ordered *sandesh* [a popular variety of Bengali sweet made out of ricotta cheese] for everybody present. The communal nature of the pleasure exchanged by this verbal transaction is signified by the fact that everybody present celebrated the answer by making it an occasion for eating sweets — yet another exercise in public practices of orality.

The connection between orality and a certain kind of aesthetic/communal pleasure was thus already given in the form of the *adda*. The coming of English literature (or literature available in English) into the lives of the lower middle classes made possible certain distinct variations to this orality in the *adda* of the educated. *Adda* became an arena where one could develop techniques of presenting oneself as a character — from Wilde or Shaw or Joyce or Faulkner — through the development of certain mannerisms (meant for the enjoyment of others), habits of speech, and gestures. In the reminiscences of *addas*, people are typically remembered not in a way that "history" or "biography" as genres would represent them (in the round, as it were), but rather as relatively one-dimensional characters who are remembered for how they presented themselves to the *adda*. A case in point would be Radhaprasad Gupta’s memories of a member of their *adda* called Amitabha Sen:

His command over mathematics, science, literature, and arts used to leave us dazzled. All the developments in the different fields of knowledge — I have translated the Bengali expression literally — were at his fingertips, thanks to good books and foreign journals. It was through him that we first saw the ubiquitous ball-point pen of today. That perhaps was the first ball-point pen in the world, called Reynolds. We were rendered speechless by it. Everyone took his turn at writing with it. You could write any way you wanted. Amitabhababu’s face wore his familiar gentle smile. Watching us, he only made one remark [in English]: “Man-kind at last has been freed from the tyranny of the pen-angle.”

WOMEN, ADDA, AND PUBLIC CULTURE

Was the space of the modern *adda*, the one that was opened up by the coming of universities, student dormitories, modern literary production, restaurants, tea shops, coffeehouses, and parks — was this a male space? The Bengali cultural and literary critic Manashi Das Gupta has made the point to me that the very public acts of orality — speaking and eating — through which an *adda* created its sense of community tended to form "traditional" barriers to women’s participation in a male *adda*. Women, if they were to adhere to nineteenth-century middle-class ideas about respectability in public (that is, avoid exposure to the gaze of men from beyond the confines of kinship), were barred from these practices of orality. Yet this does not mean that women did not enjoy or practice *adda*. First, one has to remember that the separation of spheres for men and women both before and after British rule in India meant that women could have their own *addas*, and that in part is still the practice. The sites of such *addas* would have been different, being spaces where women could meet. The topics discussed may also reflected the separation of social domains. The 1990 collection *Kolkata adda* has female contributors on the subject as well as an essay on "women’s *adda*." Women working in Calcutta and commuting to the city by train every day in their specially designated "women’s compartments" develop their own sense of *adda*.

But male *addas* of the mid-twentieth century were predicated, practically, on a separation of male and female spaces. As Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay bluntly asserted: "the biggest natural enemy of *adda* are women!" The statement is not as misogynist as it may seem. He actually also refers to the gender problem as a "defect" and takes a sympathetic view of the position to which women are relegated by the structure of *adda*: "A big natural defect of *adda* is that it is an intimate world for men. And yet this weakness is the amulet that also protects it. An *adda* breaks up if a woman comes within ten cubits of it. . . . Every married woman looks on *adda* with poisoned eyes. It is, after all, for the *addadharie* husband of hers that she has to sit up and wait into the silence of the night. Every husband who returns home from an *adda* comes back prepared
to be asked this single [sarcastic] question: ‘so the adda finally ended, did it?’”

This [imagined] widely hostility to adda drew on a culturally conceived opposition between the world and the word, between “worldly responsibilities”—the world of chores, dominated by needs—and the noninstrumental pleasure of company and conversation that an adda was. In speaking of role of the addadhari—literally, one who holds an adda together—Nripendrakrishna pictured him as a man who artfully and devotedly evaded everything to do with domestic and social duties. In words that in Bengali brim over with both humor and irony, Nripendrakrishna thus described the ideal addadhari:

Every adda has a central personality, someone who could be called an addadhari. . . . He is the sun of the solar system of an adda, it is around him that the adda revolves. The addadhari is like a stable center in a world that is otherwise restless. He has no office to go to, no wedding invitations to attend, no speeches to deliver at any meeting, no obsessions about going to the movies, no obligations to do with the marriage of his sister-in-law, no first-ripe ceremonies of a son of his wife’s brother, he has no Darjeeling, no Puri, his only job is to sit there like the immobile image of a deity lighting up the adda. The streets of Calcutta may be under water, the asphalt on them may have been melted by the sun, the Japanese may have dropped a few bombs, but every addabij [adda-addicted person] has the assurance of knowing that there will be at least one person present at the adda. And that person is the addadhari.”

This could not, however, be the whole story. Women’s education and their entry into public life—a historical process that started in the 1850s—made a difference. The tension between the old separation of male and female domains of life and the new ideals of companionate marriage is the subject of the Parashuram (Rajeshkhar Busu)’s humorous story “Dvandik kobita” (Dialectical poetry) written in 1957. “Dialectical poetry”—the name itself mocking some of the chaukik aspects of Bengali Marxism—is a tale told in an adda, and concerns a character called Dhurjati and his wife Shankari. Dhurjati lectures in mathematics but has devoted his life to writing love poems addressed, in the fashion of Bengali romanticism started by Tagore, to unknown, unseen, and completely imaginary women from imaginary foreign lands. Needless to say, this practice of addressing male romantic sentiments to fictional women consciously described as “unknown” (ajana, achena) itself reflected the distance between these sentiments and everyday, routine rounds of domesticity. After his marriage, the protagonist of Bose’s story, Dhurjati, tried to make a dent in this tradition. For a while he deliberately made his wife the addressee of his expression of romantic and poetic love, but gave up the effort in frustration when he found that Shankari was more interested in the baby they had had soon after their marriage than in his poetic exuberance: “Dhurjati gradually realized that the ‘ladylove’ of his marriage had nothing in common with the beloved of his [poetic] fancy. Shankari does not understand the pleasure of poetry, there is no romance in her heart. She had received a lot of cheap presents . . . at the time of the wedding, she treated the poems that Dhurjati had written addressing her as though they were the same as these ordinary presents. She is just absorbed in domestic chores and in [their] newborn son.” Dhurjati goes back to addressing his poems to his imaginary sweetheart, while Shankari devotes herself to domesticity.

If Bose’s story had ended here, it would have depicted a nineteenth-century resolution of the tension between domesticity and the modern, expressivist male self: a man reserves his literary cosmopolitanism for his male friends and sustains a practical, mundane companionship with his wife. But Bose wrote in a period when literature was part of women’s lives, as well. So, Bisakha, a friend of Shankari from her university days, steps in and plants doubt into Shankari’s mind. She says one day:

“Your husband is, after all, a famous poet. . . . Can you tell me for whom his poems of love are written? Surely not for you, for he wouldn’t have written things like ‘my unknown sweetheart [whom] I have met in dreams’ in that case.”

Shankari said, “He writes for nobody. Poets are fanciful people, they erect somebody in their imagination and address her.”

—. . . Don’t you feel angry?
— I don’t much care for it.
— . . . You will have to regret later . . . take some steps now.
— What do you suggest?
— [That] you also start writing poems addressed to some imaginary man.

Shankari has never written poetry, so Bisakha offers to write for her. Soon poems appear in literary magazines in Shankari’s name. They are addressed to such characters as the “belligerent young man of Red China” (“I want to take shelter in your hairless chest”) or to “the young man of Pakhtunistan”: 
Take me into your jungle-haired chest
Hold me tight with those crank-shaft-like arms of yours
Let the bones of my rib cage break and crumble
Crush me, crush me.

And a male friend of Dhurjati says to him one day: “I say Dhurjati, isn’t this Shankari Devi your wife? What extraordinary poetry she is writing, regular bot stuff. . . . Professor Bhar, the psychologist, said [the other day], this is libido gone wild.” The subsequent conversation between Dhurjati and Shankari could not have taken place in the nineteenth century. Dhurjati said:

“What is this rubbish you are writing? People are talking.”
Shankari said, “Let them talk. It is selling very well, I have given another book to the press.”

Dhurjati shook his head and said, “I am telling you this cannot go on.”

“That’s funny. There’s no harm if you write [this] but it’s bad if I do!— . . . why do you write such rubbish?”

“You compare yourself to me? It’s all right if a man writes about imaginary women [lovers], but it’s very bad for women to do so.”

“All right, you stop writing poetry and burn all your books, and I will do the same.”

Unable to resolve the conflict on his own terms, Dhurjati gives up writing poetry and takes to writing books on algebra, while Shankari decides to write only recipes for magazine sections of Sunday newspapers.3

Bose’s resolution to this problem is not one that completely destroys the division between male and female spaces even in modern public life. It is, however, one that would have made an ada interesting and that laughter would have been a resource with which Bengalis could deal with the changes and tensions created by women’s entry into public life. But although the laughter would have been such a resource, it was no answer to the question of why an implicit principle of gender segregation would continue to exist in public life.

The issue of friendship in public life between men and women is part of a complicated history of modern heterosexual practices in Bengal. In his magisterial survey of the history of the Bengali novel, the literary critic Srikumar Bandopadhyay made the perceptive suggestion that it was within male—rather than male-female—friendship that European roman-

and cosmopolitan sentiments made their initial home in our history and thus expanded and intensified the space of that friendship. Surveying the novels written at the turn of the century, Bandopadhyay remarked:

Given the closed-door nature of our social arrangements, friendship [between men, as opposed to romantic, heterosexual love] is the only opening through which external revolutions can enter the Bengali family. Only the claim of friendship or being a classmate of somebody allows us to overcome the barriers of . . . [women’s space] of a different family and become intimate with them. The narrower the opportunities for free mixing between men and women, the greater the expanse of and the possibilities for male friendship. That is why Bengali novels see an excess of friendship [between men]—in the majority of cases complexity arises from the force and counterforce of the affection, sense of comfort, and yet at the same time the intense spirit of competition that such friendship generates.31

This is true not only of the nineteenth century. As recently as the 1960s, the sight of a woman engaged in ada with her male peers at the College Street Coffee House was rare enough to elicit this comment and sketch from the Communist artist Debabrata Mukhopadhyay: “Girls had just begun to come to the midday ada [at the Coffee House]. But they were extremely few in numbers. It was about this time a certain group of boys set up a regular ada around a particular girl. We, who had always been adhadharis without the company of women, felt a little jealous. We named the girl ‘the queen-bee.’ One day, I captured her in a sketch” (see Figure 3).32

Bengali modernity, for complicated reasons, never quite transcended the structure of opposition between domestic space and that of ada. If I could take out of context an expression of Henry Lefebvre and give it a stronger sense of irony than Lefebvre intended, I might say that literary modernity and its attendant spaces of the school, university, coffeehouse, bookshops, magazines, and so on did indeed help to expand, deepen, and modernize the homosocial space of ada, and even allowed for women’s participation in it. But its male character was never erased, and it often left the heterosexual men involved in literary endeavor with a sense of— that this is where I register my debt to Lefebvre’s coinage—a “phallic solitude.”33 The “human” on whose behalf Gokul Nag and Dinesh Das dreamed their cosmopolitan dreams barely included Bengali women.
It is possible that the world mourned today was never real. The cultural location of *adda* perhaps has more to do with a history in which the institution came to symbolize—in problematic and contested ways—a particular way of dwelling in modernity, almost a zone of comfort in capitalism. For all the claims made by the celebrants of *adda*, we know that it did not work equally well for everybody, that there were aspects of exclusion and domination in the very structure of *adda*. In spite of these problems, however, the institution played enough of a role in Bengali modernity for it to be tagged “Bengali.” And Bengalis seemingly continue to invest *adda* with certain metaphysical talk: about life, vitality, essence, and youth. It could not be insignificant, after all, that the epigram to this chapter was penned by a woman, Manashi Das Gupta. Herself a trained academic and an active participant in many literary and political *addas* from the late 1940s to the present, Dr. Das Gupta is no stranger to the ways male *addas* tended to dominate if not exclude women. One would not expect her to “romanticize” *adda*. Yet the lines I quote from her:

> And it is a good sign that I still enjoy *adda*,
> for *adda* and youth are inseparable

were part of a poem she wrote home in 1957, describing her life at Cornell University, where she earned her Ph.D. Why is it that even a cultural and feminist critic who is otherwise acutely aware of the male nature of the space of *adda* still associates that space with something as vital and metaphysical as youth, the sign of life? Why does the mention of *adda* generate such affection in most Bengali writing about the distinctiveness of their modernity?

The history sketched above attempts to answer this question. What remains buried in the current Bengali nostalgia for *adda*, I suggest, is an unresolved question of their present: how to be at home in a globalized capitalism now. An idealized image of *adda* points to the insistent pressures of that anxious question.