



The Social Science Review

A Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 2584-0789

(Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International e-Journal)

www.tssreview.in

LOOKING THROUGH THE THIRD PLACE: TALE OF ROADSIDE TEA STALLS

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Abstract

In a moving competitive world, people are looking for relief amid their busy work-life routine. A space that can nurture them, create a passion in them and allow them to be unrestrained from the shackles of daily chores is called the 'third place' which is situated beyond the periphery of home and workplace. Roadside tea stalls are examples of such places where people from diverse backgrounds come to taste tea, get involved in conversation with familiar and unfamiliar persons, share their opinions and enjoy some quality time. These stalls bring life to the street side activities and create a vibrant urban space.

This paper will try to explore the role of tea stalls in bringing social cohesion, their exclusive character that has made them popular among people, the problems and prospects associated with these tea stalls and the policies and programmes relating to these stalls. The entire study has been done with the help of relevant secondary resources and conducting a case study in some of the tea stalls of Kolkata. The observation method has been applied also to get a perfect understanding of the situation. Respondents (both customers and traders) are the prime focus of the study that have helped to find out answers to the relevant questions and made the endeavour a successful one.

Keywords: *Third place, Roadside tea stalls, Communication, Diversity, Social life*

Background of the Study

The concept of 'third place' is gaining immense admiration among scholars and common people in a fast-growing world of competition. The term was coined by Ray Oldenburg in the early 1990's. The third place signifies a conversant public spot where a person can connect with others both familiar and unfamiliar and can share interests and activities. As per the opinion of Ray Oldenburg people use third space to get relief from the routine of home and work. Routine work at home and workplace makes life dull and questions a person's identity. A balance is highly required, as Bertrand Russell has rightly opined that if one part of life seems typical and routine bound then the other part needs to be open and unclassified. The third places where people gather to gossip and hang out are places of pleasure and retreat. A feeling of oneness, and unity in diversity fills the soul. It helps people to connect, cooperate and coordinate with their fellow citizens.

Exchange of opinions on different issues, jokes, laughter and spending casual time are the main activities people seek in these types of spaces. Along with ensuring personal benefit for individuals, these places help people to build a nexus with fellow individuals and ensure social well-being. It constructs the identity of a human being in the social canvas. Examples of third place are numerous ranging from cafes, gyms, and libraries, to community centres and many more. Roadside tea stalls also fall in the bracket of

Published by:

Pather Dabi Educational Trust, (Regn No: IV-1402-00064/2023), Under Govt. of West Bengal, India.

third place and are a unique example of social space. Regularly a huge number of people gather in the roadside tea stalls voluntarily, happily and informally beyond their home and work life schedule and therefore tea stalls fulfil almost all the criteria of Oldenburg's third place.

Roadside tea stalls are found almost in every city in India including the rural segment. Tea stalls can convert a general space into a vibrant one. The structure of the Tea stalls varies usually from small to medium-sized, shabby structures that are found throughout India. Especially Kolkata city shares a sweet relationship with roadside tea stalls for years. While the popular catchline "a lot can happen over coffee" limits the scope amongst urban elites, the appeal of 'Parar Cha er dokan', or "office parar bhanrer cha" (tea stall of neighbourhood or tea in an earthen pot in a workplace area) is widespread and stimulates mass culture. The tea stall and its adda (gossip) are a treasure to nurture.

With the rapid growth of urbanization, a space crunch is occurring in cities. The growth of high-rises is changing the urban fabric now and then. Amid the hustle and bustle of city life, people need a place to relax, to breathe, and to realize their entity and above all they need the company of fellow citizens. In the virtual world, social media is providing temporary pleasure but taking away the joy of face-to-face interaction and communication. Especially in this regard the role of roadside tea stalls/ shops is becoming essential. Irrespective of class, caste, gender, or religion people from diverse backgrounds are coming throughout the day to these tea stalls for a cup of tea primarily and to mingle with others specifically. These tea stalls are celebrating diversity, and human bonds and confirming the right to the city to all its stakeholders. Unlike the weather-controlled, glassy coffee shops, the open-air tea stalls with a plastic canopy, faded coloured wooden benches and a minimal furniture look are attracting a thousand to relish the aura of the place. The otherwise unheard voices of the cities, the marginalized too are getting a scope to share their views on multiple topics starting from national politics to the very next door incident. Tea stalls are a great place of debate and the participants are varied in terms of their background. Unmatched age groups and different professions never create a barrier while discussing the political fate of the nation, the unstable condition of the economy and its impact on the employment segment, the privatization of education and medical services and many more.

Very simply, the tea stall embraces the command to convert a gloomy, vacant space into a sparkling social place. They are familiar with different names in different places. They emerge at every other street corner. These places are always busy with people and their gossip over a cup of tea. The structures of tea stalls can be temporary or permanent depending on the situation and profit in business. Sometimes there is no sitting arrangement in a tea shop owned by a poor person, while the comparatively affluent one can make a challah ghar (temporary settlement) with plastic or asbestos sheets with a sitting arrangement on wooden or iron benches. Very few can afford the luxury of providing a table fan or pedestal fan to the customers. In short, the untidiness and simplicity are the key features of these roadside tea stalls. People here look for spontaneity instead of perfection. The free flow of communication and interaction holds the string of attraction.

Tea stalls can be found in every nook and corner of the city, in residential and non-residential areas, especially in the Office Para (Neighborhood of Office). Street corners, outside of parks, gardens, footpaths, nearby places of bus stand, and railway stations are some of the most common places for tea stalls as one can find innumerable tea shops in Dalhousie office area, Gariahaat more, Central Avenue, Sealdah and Howrah Station, and in the lanes and by lanes of South and North Kolkata. Being one of its kinds as a public space, accessibility is the prime feature of these tea stalls. The customer base is wide and open to all, delimiting any boundary.

Objective of the Study: The objective of this paper is to trace the role of roadside tea stalls as a place of social interaction. How in the rapidly changing world these informal entities are bringing a sigh of relief in the minds of people, and how people are using it as a place of spontaneous interaction are the core areas to explore. What makes these tea stalls a successful social place will be analysed thoroughly to find out the answer.

Methodology: Several secondary literatures have been used while constructing the arguments of the study. Secondary literature, especially literature on the third place has been beneficial in identifying the tea stalls as a social hub, a place of information exchange, and above all a successful third place. Case studies have been conducted in some of the Tea Stalls (old and new) in Kolkata to get first-hand data. Approximately 50-60 respondents including traders and customers have been informally interviewed with unstructured questionnaires and their response is the core of the findings of this study. Apart from these, the observation method has also been followed to catch the pulse of the customers. Sometimes silent participation in an ongoing conversation has become beneficial in tracing the tune of the talks and in internalizing the feelings of the participants.

The Findings

Uncountable numbers of tea stalls are scattered throughout the streets of Kolkata. To comprehend how far these places are performing the role of a third place, some of the criteria like sociability, accessibility, use and activity, space-user, tolerance, diversity, significance have been included at the time of informal interviews. Respondents were asked several questions like why they come to the tea stalls, what made them choose the roadside stalls over the formal café, and what they think are the key factors of these tea stalls. How far these places are relevant? What are the positive and negative sides of these tea stalls? What do they like about the tea stalls etc.? Respondents were chosen on a random basis to avoid any kind of biases in the answer.

To begin with, any public space grants a chance of social mixing. It is a platform where people can come and exchange their views and opinions. Different types of people (office goers, homemakers, businessmen, students, tourists) can mingle in this place. The unrestricted integration strengthens their bond and develops a sense of community feeling. Roadside tea stalls in this context fulfil the above-mentioned criteria as people of diverse backgrounds gather here over a cup of tea and freely communicate with each other.

Secondly, tea stalls are accessible to all the community members of a particular area. People can come and use the stalls at their convenience. No restriction is imposed on people for the use of these places. They are free to share their opinion, and arguments and can move on. This celebrates the essence of the third place which is providing people the opportunity to make the maximum use of the space beyond their scheduled work-life routine.

Thirdly as space tea stalls are unique in nature, any public space becomes meaningful when the users can use the space at their convenience and ascribe a meaning to the space. As a third space tea stalls are visited by many types of people who use the space in their way. Some people come only to enjoy tea, while others spend their leisure time in a habit in the stalls, It is unique for each person in its very own way.

Fourthly, people from different backgrounds irrespective of gender, class, caste, or religion come into these tea shops, enjoy their beverages, get engaged in chit chats and therefore move on. Some people visit the place regularly and others occasionally or incidentally but that never creates a barrier to assimilation. Multiple shades of identities get mingled in one place without controversy- that undeniably highlights the notion of tolerance prevailing in people's minds for each other and promotes the success of a third place.

Finally, in terms of social contribution, these tea stalls are the means of livelihood for many who could not have otherwise been able to earn a livelihood due to lack of employment opportunity or formal education. Thus, in economic terms, these settlements are benefitting a large section of the population economically. Customers on the other hand are getting their daily refreshments at a cheaper rate. On political and social grounds, tea stalls can be called hub of adda (gossip). From serious discussion to casual conversation, it allows open tides of communication. This signifies the political and social consciousness of the people. Many times, discourses are formed in these informal addas.

Culturally, these tea stalls are sometimes indistinguishable from the identity of a place. In many residential areas people often refer to a particular tea stall as a landmark of their address. Tea stalls are witness to many moments of delights, heartbreaks and struggles. In busy office areas some local tea stalls become famous because of the nature of the footfalls only. Above all belonging to the third place inculcates a sense of right to the city in the minds of many. Traders have many times faced the threat of eviction from civic authorities which challenges their livelihood. In those times their unity for survival has been strengthened by the notion of their right to occupation, their right to use the city space and ultimately has taken a bigger shape of resistance.

These characteristics have undoubtedly made the roadside tea stalls distinctive as a third place. Its popularity is beyond boundaries which became evident from the reply of the respondents through informal interviews. The respondents were a mixed group of people in terms of age, occupation, gender, religion and income bracket. The people aged between 40-50 replied that coming to tea stalls has become their habit. It refreshes their mind and allows them to share views on multiple issues. The fresher, mostly college students think that tea stall adda gives them a feeling of oneness, to search for an alternative identity for themselves. The retired persons aged above 60 mostly found in residential area-specific tea stalls replied that they come for a simple time pass and to meet old friends.

Cost-effectiveness is the primary cause of visits to the tea stalls instead of visiting structured shops or weather-controlled cafes as more than 86% of the customers replied. Nonetheless, it is notable that the third place is a no-barrier zone which the formal outlets are not. The air-conditioned shops with superfluous etiquettes unconsciously create a gated community where not all are welcome. On the contrary, the openness, and the galore of warmth in these informal entities touch the hearts of many.

An unrepressed flow of conversation is the key factor that attracts consumers to the tea shops as evident from the replies of the consumers. People can talk their minds, they can escape the decorum of the workplace or the routinized home life also. Traders also admit that without chatting with the consumers their shops feel hollow. Freedom of speech and expression gets a true channel here in these small shops.

Around 62.34% of consumers think that informality and cordiality of the tea shops are their asset. At the same time, many have expressed concern over hygiene and sanitation in these tea stalls. It has been found that traders often use the same pots severally without properly cleaning that, which elevates the chance of gastronomical infection. Many shops do not use dust bins, consequently customers throw plastic/ paper cups/ earthen pots on the roads or in the drains causing water logging in rainy seasons and turning roads dirty.

Sometimes the casual arguments turn into a heated conversation resulting in a quarrelsome situation. Many customers do not follow the rules of respecting others' opinions and try to impose his/her judgments on others which creates an unpleasant situation. The majority of the consumers have opined in favour of free and fair conversation but at the same time said that personal attacking or judgemental attitude must be avoided to keep any conversation healthy and effective for the broader benefit of society. Traders have expressed their grievances against the civic authorities as they often face the threat of eviction especially if there is any big event to happen in the city. They get alerts about maintaining hygiene and sanitation but often are deprived of access to clean drinking water supply in their shops. The local mafias who enjoy political patronage often collect money from the traders regularly, and any complaint goes in vain due to the unavailability of the redressal. These practices need to be banned immediately as the traders unanimously said.

'The Guardian' has confirmed in the year 2017 that Kolkata has the best street tea in the entire nation. Such a huge kind of recognition needs to be handled with much care and responsibility. Tea stalls around heritage spots need to be highlighted and promoted in a much better way. If planned properly, these roadside tea stalls can be used as a cultural hub. Through different kinds of innovative efforts, these places can be made more attractive as found from the suggestions of the young respondents. If initiatives can be taken to organize debate competitions on socially relevant issues among tea stall users in a locality that can spread awareness on the said matter. Simultaneously it also needs to be kept in concern that any

undesirable situation can destroy the spirit of the place. Thus a little concern and mindfulness are required while exchanging views and information. Recent news has attracted the attention of people where a tea stall owner in the Burdhawan area has put a caution notice before his tea stall stating to avoid any kind of heated political conversation. According to him differences of political opinion may ultimately lead to violence that may in turn destroy his property i.e. the stall which is his sole source of earning. This kind of incident is no wonder alarming and at the same time detrimental to the true character of the third place.

Tea stalls are exclusive in their character as they can convert the city into a sparkling tapestry of variation and delight. By encouraging street-level activities they bring life into the street. The joy of interaction with the known and unknown brings a feeling of sheer thrill. William Whyte has talked about the process of triangulation in the stalls which is relatable to the above feeling. In this process, people are connected by noting a common third person or an activity. Observing other people on the street, and watching the games on a tea stall TV are some of the processes of triangulations. The 'other' is very important in the third place which makes sense for the 'self'. Therefore, the tea stalls are nurturing the 'other' along with the 'self' to play the orchestra of mutual understanding, patience and tolerance flawlessly. This pure bliss needs to be protected and promoted by all to celebrate the glory of togetherness.

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