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**Identi-Tea: Reading *ChayaKadas* in Bangalore**

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***Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com*****ABSTRACT**

The large number of *chayakadas* – tea shops - that have sprung up across certain neighbourhoods of Bangalore city prove to be an interesting cultural phenomenon. Though not a chain, these shops are almost uniform in appearance, and seem to be a tangible part of the migrant Malayali demographic located in these neighbourhoods.

Do these tea shops provide a sense of familiarity and rootedness in the unfamiliarity of the City? Against the backdrop of a city that has a multicultural and layered history and has become a hub for migrants and diasporic communities, does this space narrate the sense of loss that is part of the migrant experience, and how does one understand that loss? Are these just spaces of refreshment or do they inform a sense of home and an imagined past? What constitutes the link between the diasporic experience of the lived present and the imagined past?

This paper will attempt to understand how the humble *chayakada* of Kerala becomes a space to negotiate memory, nostalgia and belongingness in the bustling metropolitan city of Bangalore. The researchers will study the *chayakadas* located in the SG Palya - Thaverkere area, on which, nine such tea shops exist. A reading of these spaces as a cultural artefact manufactured through the diasporic experience and the markers that constitute them will be attempted.

**Key Words: Tea, Diaspora, Bangalore, Malayali, migrant, city.****Introduction**

The Malayali fondness for tea is well known and documented in the cultural production of and about the state. The popular joke of Neil Armstrong finding a *chayakada* on the moon when he first landed there is testament to this. Food has always been a significant external marker of migrant populations (Mannur, 11). Parts of the city with significant Malayali migrant populations are often synonymous with messes – inexpensive, functional, often family-run dining space, which offer regional cuisine – such as the Jose Mess in SG Palya which was, at one time, famous across the city for quality Malayali food. However, today, there seems to be a sudden proliferation of tea shops with a distinct sense of style and cuisine. Heavily inspired by the traditional *chayakada* or tea shop in Kerala, these seem to be significant to the understanding of the Malayali diasporic experience in Bangalore city.

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The shops, though small in size, foreground two major artefacts—a large copper urn or samovar used to brew the tea decoction, and the meat safe, a wooden display cabinet with large glass windows that houses eatables. Apart from tea, nothing is prepared in the cafe—hence the meat safe plays an important role. The walls are flanked by low, backless wooden benches and tables, with rings of tea stains, caused by the characteristic *chaya* glasses, on them and regional language newspapers thrown in for good measure. These walls are covered with colourful murals, often depict rural life in Kerala, typography-based design (including lines from popular films, nostalgia or tea related quotes) or imitations of un-plastered clay or laterite brick walls. Some cafes, like The NadanChayaKada, have photographs of tea estates (possibly Munnar) and the process of making tea instead of wall murals.

Language operates as important signifier at multiple levels— the primary language of commerce within the shop is Malayalam, as is the language of the newspaper and the typographic art work on the walls. The presence of regional artefacts that are functional in their original context but are primarily decorative here, such as lanterns, bunches of bananas, strategically placed/coiled jute rope, are noticed here. The menu is primarily limited to regional delicacies, snacks and beverages like *chukkukapi* (a herbal spiced coffee mix that is a popular remedy for the common cold and cough), and the most recognizable of these, such as *pazhampozhi* (batter coated banana fritters) and *parripuvada* (deep fried lentil fritters), are prominently displayed. The names of these *chayakadas* identify them with Kerala, specifically the northern regions— Malabar Cafe, KI- 13 (a reference to license plates issued in the Kannur district of Kerala), the NadanChayaKada, Mangala, Thalassery Cafe, etc.

These tea shops seem to be focused in their need to reconstruct an 'authentic' *chayakada* and tend to highlight the traditional over the modern. The *chayakada* of Kerala, reproduced in Bangalore city, uses nostalgia to become a curated aesthetic and a social space for migrant Malayalis to negotiate memory of the past, and could possibly act as a catalyst to create a sense of belongingness to the City. This paper will attempt to understand this space and how it mediates diasporic experiences of the present through an analysis of the *chayakada* space and how it is constructed. Though spread across the city, this paper will limit its scope to the *chayakadas* located on the SG Palya – Thaverkere area, on which, nine such tea shops exist. This study is limited by its qualitative nature. It may be extended through interviews and other quantitative tools.

It is evident in the description of the *chayakada* mentioned earlier that the space and the artefacts in it are infused with an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. This element of nostalgia, which is created as a selling point for these businesses, is manufactured through material culture, and provides a sense of familiarity, thereby grounding it in the cultural past of the diaspora. “It is nostalgia, that sense of romance and loss which makes the individual in diaspora want to recreate a small part of home 'out of place' through culinary practice” (Parveen, 52) For instance, KI-13 uses whole spices as decor pieces under the glass tops of tables, jute rope wrapped around the bases, and wall paper with un-plastered clay brick walls to transport this shop located off SG Palya main road to a site within the perceived sea of signifiers called “Kerala”. The NadanChayaKada does the same through un-plastered clay brick wall paper, and the name – overtly stressing on a direct, almost familial/lineage-like, and exclusive relationship to the archetype “ChayaKada” through the use of the singular, specific article, “The” in its name. Malabar Cafe employs a hanging lantern and a *vazha kola* or a bunch of bananas to hark back to the agrarian ethos of the state. The string of nostalgia is further pulled by the image of a child on a swing and the line “and the nostalgia begins...” located just behind the counter. All three *chayakadas* have the ubiquitous copper samovar, while Malabar Cafe takes it a step further and incorporates it into the branding in the typography on the cafe signboard. The NadanChayaKada takes it a step further with potted palm trees marking its entrance. Material culture and artefacts like utensils, furniture and spices become, as Dan Ojwang (2011) suggests, a part of “an exile's survival kit” (73), and become part of the “assertive ways in which the diaspora occupies urban space”, and “turn home into a portable

artefact” (81).

Interestingly, just as the decor facilitates nostalgia, food too evokes notions of the homeland. In such a space, food serves multiple purposes: it is not only the product that necessitates and creates the space (of the shop), but is also part of the process of creating the space (of the *chayakada*). The display of food is both the product as well as part of the ambience. The selection of foods located in a particular tradition and region further validates and accentuates the authenticity of both the *chayakada* and the experience of 'visiting' home by breaking spatial and temporal boundaries.

An important part of the ambience of these *chayakada*s is the wall art. Primarily digital murals printed on wall paper, the walls of these cafes depict facets of non-urban life in Kerala- a child on a swing (Malabar Café), a boy flying a kite (Thalassery Cafe), a sketch of a traditional *chayakada* (Malabar Cafe and Thalassery Cafe), a man sitting on a mat, drinking tea with an aluminium kettle and a radio playing in the background (Falooda Cafe), scenes from village life and overcrowded buses (Thalassery Cafe). These images act as an “imagined metonym”(Hage,422) – they represent an imagined, agrarian/non-modernized, coherent and time trapped image of home that has never really existed for the diaspora, a sort of “unchanging and enduring cultural essence” that is “fragmentary, partial, and irretrievably lost” (Mannur,14). The wall art also include images of Malayalam film stars (Malabar Cafe) and popular lines from Malayalam films that the average 20-30 year old today would have seen in their childhood (Malabar Cafe, Thalassery Cafe and Falooda Cafe). Thus, nostalgia is not just created through the imagined collective past, but also through the individual lived past, through popular culture markers and lived experiences. These images and lines from films anchor the individual and his/her experience of the past to the collective history/past of the state. “In contrast with viewing nostalgia as a re-experiencing of emotional pasts it may also be seen as a longing for times and places that one has never experienced.”(Holtzman, 367)

Memory, for most diasporic communities, is a highly problematized category. Through the material practice of nostalgia, the diaspora is thrown into a debate between their memory of lived experience and the collective, idealized memory constructed through these spaces. For a large part of the Bangalore Malayali diaspora, memory of home will also include aspects of modernization and non-pastoral, urban living, which are often deleted or ignored in these spaces. Thus, it comes as no surprise in a discussion with Millennial Malayali migrants, it was also observed that a majority of them have never been to a *chayakada* in Kerala despite some of them growing up there. As Dan Ojwang (2011) suggests, experiences “that would otherwise be discarded for their peasant or working-class associations are recuperated precisely because the scenes of peasant and working-class life have been left behind—and because any such recuperation serves to provide foundational myths that hold the immigrants together in their present (dis)location.” (74) Since this memory is constructed and reconstructed, there is substantial possibility of homogenization and flattening of experiences – the *chayakada* in Bangalore, though a symbol of Kerala and Malayali-ness, fails to represent the diversity that is Kerala. The use of the copper samovar in the tea making process (which is unique to that region), and the names of the cafes largely refer to the northern Malabar region of Kerala- Malabar Cafe, Thalassery Cafe, K1-13. Although one must acknowledge that most of these cafes are owned and run by individuals from the Malabar, possibly creates a singular memory of home.

Similarly, the memory of the *chayakada* itself is problematic. There exists no singular or quintessential archetype of a *chayakada* that these cafes in Bangalore refer back to. Taking various shapes, sizes and locations, the *chayakada* in Kerala is a functional space wherein tea is made and served together with accompanying snacks unlike the performance that is the *chayakada* in Bangalore with its overwhelming images and the accompanying samovar. The cost effective and functional space i.e. the *chayakada* in its various forms across the state of Kerala has been looked at a space for debate, discussion and dissent in the popular imagination of the state. This image is monetised when the *chayakada*s re-imagined in a cosmopolitan city like Bangalore.

With such a large physical recreation of an imagined homeland, one wonders how this production and consumption of nostalgia through the *chayakada* affects the migrant's process of associating and belonging to the City. Arguing theoretically, using Ghassan Hage's *Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building* (2010), the *chayakada* in Bangalore becomes a sort of anchor in creating a sense of belongingness to the City. "...intimations of lost homelands, ...should be seen as affective building blocks used by migrants to make themselves feel at home where they actually are. They are part of the migrant's settlement strategies rather than an attempt to escape the realities of the host country. For migrants, that is, memory belongs to the construction of the future." (419) The *chayakada*, apart from satisfying the fundamental requirements of forming a sense of home, such as basic needs (like food) and the "absence of harmful threatening otherness" (418) of the new City, it also operates with familiar 'laws' and codes- images of familiar food, the wall art harking back to an imagined past, the familiar language of commerce, etc. Since it has already fulfilled the requirement of a safe space, "home" or the *chayakada* goes on to provide a greenroom, a transition space for the individual to launch into the opportunities and hope that the unfamiliar City may provide (419). "One takes refuge in the memories of the past from the potentially traumatizing encounter with the present" (417) Thus, the *chayakada* acts as a catalyst to create a sense of belongingness to the City.

A close reading of the "symbolic spatial structure" (Ghosh, 75) and its infinite reproducibility can, to a certain degree, help understand how the *chayakada* of Kerala, reproduced in Bangalore city, uses nostalgia to become a curated aesthetic and a social space for migrant Malayalis to negotiate memory of the past, and could possibly act as a catalyst to create a sense of belongingness to the City. A fairly new phenomenon in the geographic area studied, it must be acknowledged that the majority of the demographic that these cafes cater to is a floating student population. It leaves the longevity of the phenomenon and its future open to speculation. A quantitative analysis, through questionnaires and interviews, and a study of other such areas with high densities of *chayakadas*, like Maruthi Nagar, Koramangala, KR Puram-Marathalli and Whitefield would further help validate the relationship between the *chayakada* as a constructed reality in Bangalore and the nostalgic, remembered imaginary homeland.

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