

Of Latte Love and Kaapi Nirvana

SNEHA ANNAVARAPU    MADHUMITA GOPALAN
VIVEK MUTHURAMALINGAM

While chai is the more popular beverage in India, coffee drinking has its own genealogy, especially in the southern region of the country referred to as ‘South India’. In the South, small shops that roast and make coffee (adding chicory to the mix upon request) sourced from local estates are common. Generally consumed with steamed milk and sugar, filter coffee is a staple beverage in most households. Growing up, the smell of freshly brewed filter coffee wafting through the house at 5:30 a.m. was magnificently routine, even though I was not allowed to drink the magical concoction until I was 14. Coffee was for ‘adults only’ my mother reminded me whenever I begged her for a drop in my milk. That tiny spot of viscous, full-bodied brown was enough to make me feel grown up, mature, and responsible. Even though consumption of coffee has traditionally been the preserve of the upper class due to its cost, it was hardly a beverage that conjured up any notion of *stylish* leisure; it was more a necessary rite of passage without which one would be emotionally, and physically, constipated.

Today, as I sit at Starbucks in Hyderabad and write this essay amid a sea of strangers, I indulge an image that I grew up aspiring to inhabit: of sitting alone at a café while sipping a latte and writing my heart out, watching people walk by on the street. It was something aspirational I had conjured in my head based on my consumption of Western popular culture. While I perform this banal act of writing at cafés almost every single day in the US, this would have been nearly impossible in India even just a decade ago. As it is, the mobility and movement of women in India is subject to scrutiny and surveillance by their families and a pervasive paternalist culture. That, coupled with culturally rooted negative attitudes towards eating out, strangers, public places, and the threat of symbolic pollution and actual adulteration, would have practically made it impossible for me to be here, or to be writing about coffee-shop culture based on personal experience. And yet, here I am today.

For a long time now, I have wondered how one could characterise the public life of coffee in a country that has such a jagged social terrain. Coffee drinking was an activity I associated with sociality, sure, but one that was confined to home and family visits—a fairly private experience. Plus, the personal reflections and reminiscences that began this essay reek of a class privilege I cannot deny. The social life of coffee in India is so

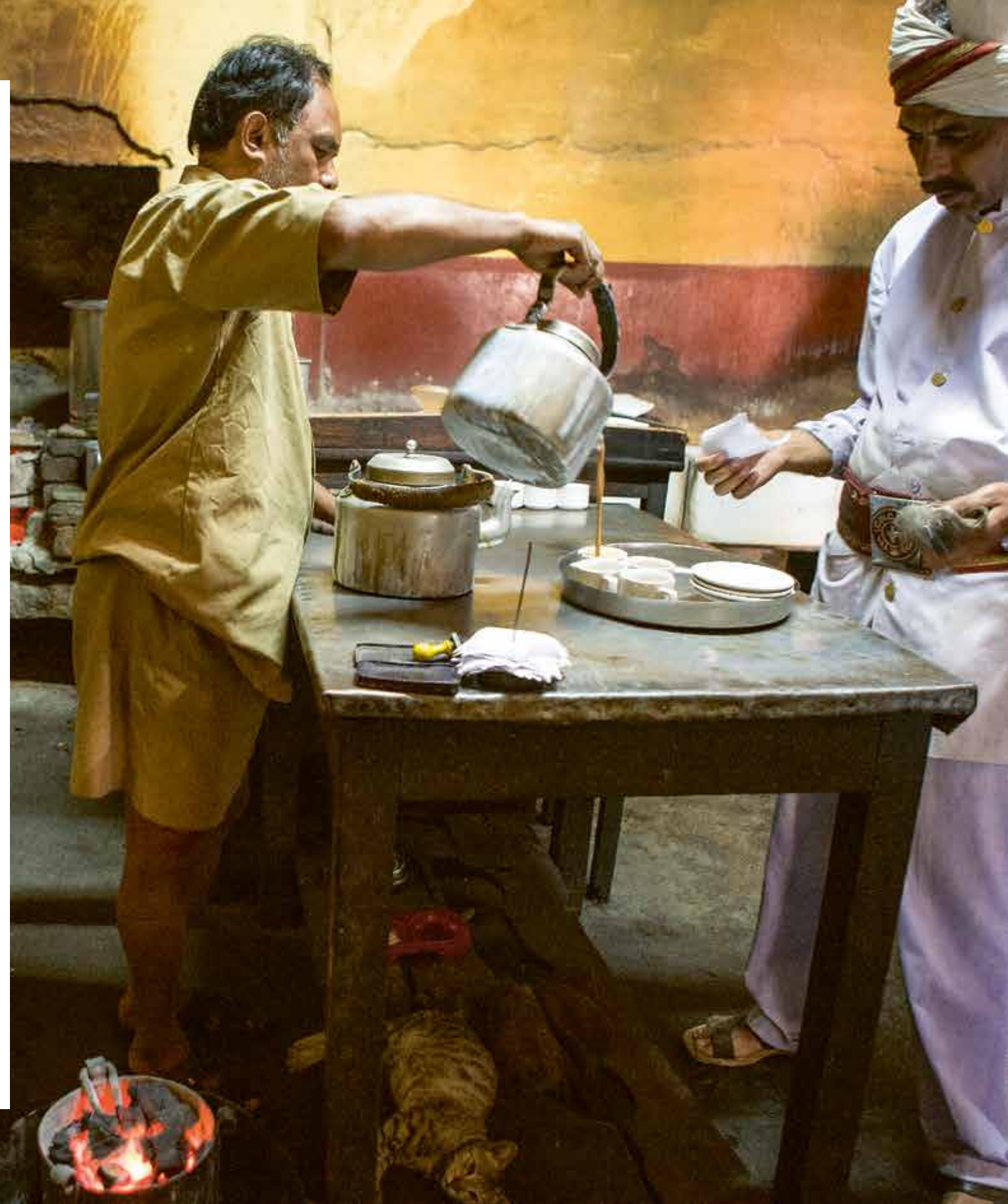


variegated: it is sipped at leisurely, or in a tearing hurry, at makeshift carts on street corners frequented mostly by groups of men; it is consumed but as an accompaniment to staple breakfasts at small hole-in-the-wall restaurants; it is enjoyed with a cigarette or two at the several dingy cafés that dot both cities and towns; or, more recently, it 'hangs out' as an artefact of aspirational modernity among young men and women at swanky coffee shops. Gender, caste, class, religion, and the rural-urban divide make it impossible to tell a single story of absolutely any commodity in India, and coffee is no exception to this rule.

Historically, the role of cafés in fostering discussions and debates amongst bourgeois men especially in the early 1900s was an important one. These traditional cafés were generally located in central areas of the city and offered hot chai, coffee, baked goods like biscuits, scones, cakes and other pastries, and local snacks like *samosas* and *pakodas* and had regular patrons, generally men, who would engage in debates and discussions over matters of civic and political value over several cups of chai. India Coffee House in Kolkata is one such historic café. The development of a culture of sociability at cafés, albeit gendered, was enabled by ideals of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, and is especially associated with political foment during the struggle for independence in the 1930s and 1940s. The image of seemingly educated men, especially distinct from illiterate men, whiling away time in urban colonial cities like Kolkata and Delhi has been circulating in the public memory for a long while now. Even today, such street corner cafés buzzing with men and serving traditional filter coffee or instant coffee with milk or sugar are common.

However, in the wake of economic liberalisation in 1991, several changes in the culture of consumption in India and the heightened political visibility of an avidly consumptive middle class have spurred a newer and chicer narrative of coffee consumption. Since the 1990s has been the rise of coffee shops that are trying to import and localise a 'Starbucks' culture. The focus on consuming an idea of global belonging rather than just the beverage itself is clear. South Indian coffee has been replaced by 'cappuccino' to an extent that the former has become an exotic and a retro offering with nostalgia-inducing functions; cappuccinos—good, bad, and ugly—are sold with immense confidence at corner shops and bakeries which until a few years ago did not even know of its existence. Up until the 1990s, the legitimacy and visibility of coffee shops that were identifiably legitimate in their offerings of cappuccinos and lattes was fairly restricted to social elites in cities like Mumbai and Delhi. What was more readily available in Southern cities was filter coffee at 'tiffin' centres which were more amenable to male and/or filial sociality.

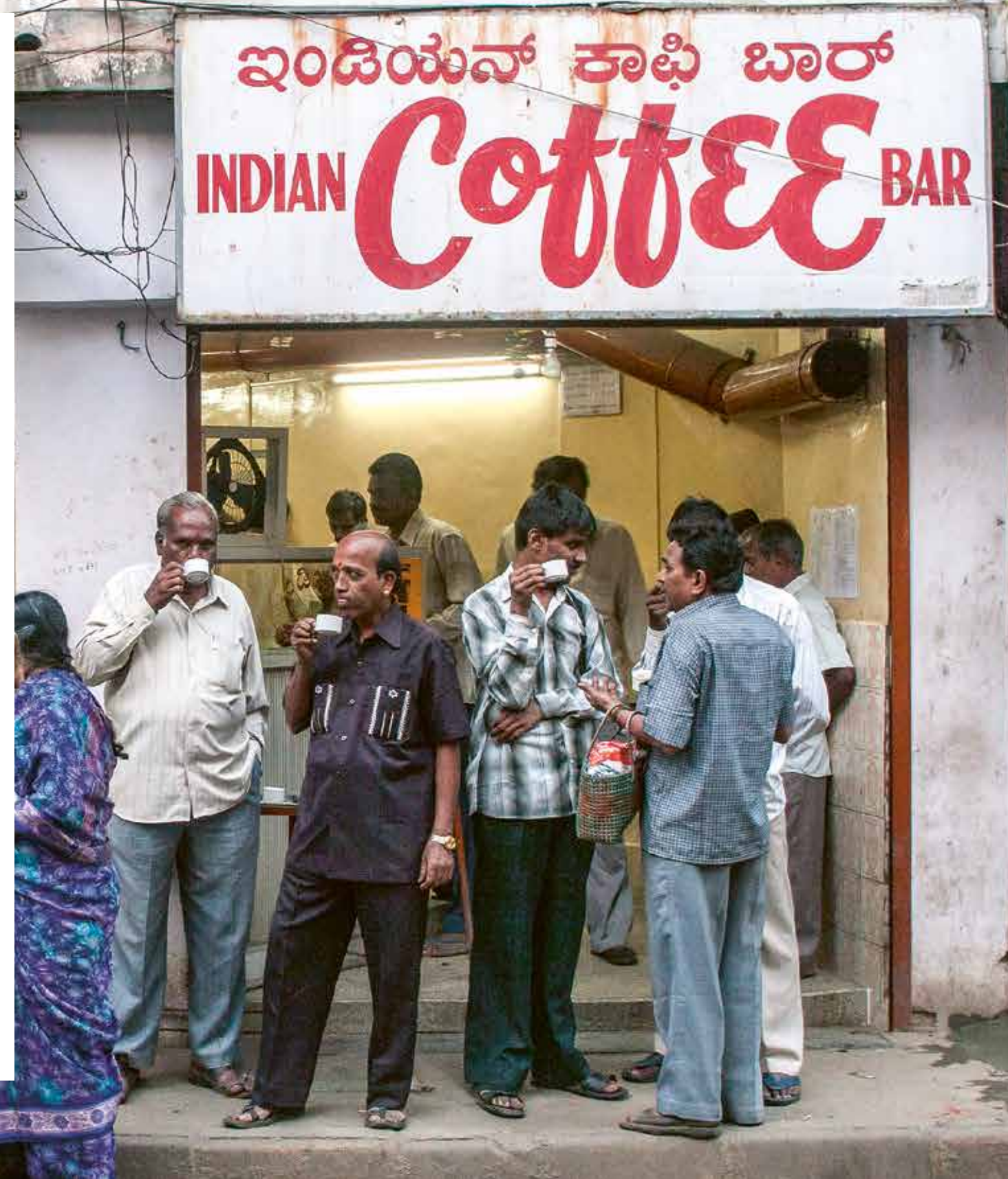
It was with the founding, and the subsequent stunning popularity, of Café Coffee Day—India's largest coffee-shop chain with more than 1500 outlets all over the country—in 1996 that the association of stylish leisure and consumptive pleasure with coffee shops for men and women of the middle class became possible. Inaugurating a new oeuvre in coffee culture in India, the several CCDs all over the country began to sell not just frothy cappuccinos, creamy milkshakes, and decadent desserts, but also



locally tailored food and locally sourced coffee. One of CCD's awarded beverages was called 'kaapi nirvana' made with cold milk, coffee, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream. The use of the local pronunciation 'kaapi' for coffee and the cool nod to its oriental roots with the word "nirvana" is exemplary of the way CCD fashioned itself—it is cool to be local, but not *too* local. Social scientists have noted that the rise of a 'new' middle class in India with more consumption-orientated lifestyles and an aspiration to be 'Modern but Indian' is crucial in explaining the traction of this relatively new coffee shop culture in India.

Characterised by modernist glass and chrome architecture, neat and minimalist decor, and armed with a provocative tagline, 'a lot can happen over coffee', CCDs and the several other domestic and foreign brands that followed have become extremely popular hangout sites among the middle-class youth. In a fundamental way, CCD promises the seduction comfortable leisure and safety in spaces that resonate with a sense of globalism. Cafés such as CCD provide a sugar rush to the consumer that is both real and symbolic. Young couples, who generally bear the brunt of moral policing in a culture disapproving of public expressions of intimacy, seem to have finally found a space where they might carry out the much-romanticised ritual of dating in a reasonably affordable manner. Most of these cafés, as such, are very explicitly social spaces unlike cafés in the US, where one tends to find many of the customers working on their laptops. While the trend of laptop love is definitely catching on in cafés in India, it is restricted to elite spaces and to certain areas of the city such as university campuses. More generally, and especially in semi-urban areas, these cafés are sites of romance, gossip, laughter, and conversation. The heightened sociality at cafés can, perhaps, be understood better when one considers the fact that socialising over alcoholic drinks or hanging out at bars and pubs—a pattern that is ubiquitous in America—is not as culturally acceptable, especially when it comes to women.

Having said that, perhaps the one coffee shop chain in India that is best associated with 'gizmo sociality' is—no points for guessing—Starbucks. The anticipation, elation, and eagerness with which India welcomed its first Starbucks in 2012 was a key point in defining a national coffee culture. I remember news items covering the queues people were forming outside the Starbucks in Mumbai and Delhi just to get a glimpse of this much-awaited international celebrity. Growing up in a globalising India, I avidly consumed popular culture spewed by America and became familiarised with the urban ritual of getting a Starbucks coffee 'to go'. Almost every foreign trip I undertook between 2007 and 2012 involved getting a Starbucks coffee to go (even though I did not leave the café for an hour after) with the aplomb and confidence of a regular patron. Little did the barista know that my heart was exploding with joy at the prospect of being included in the global Starbucks community. In India, Starbucks is elevated to the status of envious luxury *precisely* because it is a rare offering and it stands in for something more than just coffee. In America, its fame seems to be tied to its pervasive, nagging presence and its palatable and affordable coffee. Starbucks in India are generally populated by youngsters but, unlike in the US, the to go concept and the 'solitary laptop lover' trope



are wanting in visibility. Starbucks in India is too expensive an experience to be rushed; the point is to revel in the glory of being at a Starbucks. As one of my college professors, a big fan of economic liberalisation, put it, 'India is coming of age. Look, now even we have so many Starbucks! I don't care for that coffee now when I go abroad.'

It might seem as if coffee shops in India are about everything *but* coffee. In a way, that is not far from the truth. One of my friends, someone not familiar with South Indian coffee but very familiar with authentic cappuccinos, scoffed when I mentioned that I was writing this article: 'There *is* no coffee culture in India because coffee here sucks.' Such extreme sentiment notwithstanding, the importance afforded to the quality and taste of coffee wanes in the face of the overall experience of a coffee shop in India. It is hardly about finding a favourite barista and watching the art of coffee making emerge. Few people care about what they are drinking as long as they are drinking it in an air-conditioned coffee shop with company. (Of course, imagine my shock upon going to the US and learning that Starbucks was pretty much America's CCD.) For good and tasty traditional filter coffee, one would have to travel to select towns and villages in South India, or pester a coffee-drinking, generally South Indian, family member or friend. In fact, it is to rectify both the callous attitude towards coffee *and* the paucity of coffee-related knowledge and skill that entrepreneurial initiatives like Blue Tokai in New Delhi and Mumbai or The Brew Room in Chennai have slowly but steadily become a hit among those with some 'coffee cred'. These initiatives aim to resuscitate the centrality of good coffee in India by fusing the fabulous flavour of locally grown coffee with the global art of making espresso-based drinks and other coffee beverages. These coffee shops make it a point to symbolically and materially distance themselves from the image of the 'average' café in India—be it a traditional hole-in-the-wall venture, a CCD, or a Starbucks. In attempting to forge an authenticity that is faithful to local flavour (and production) but also to a more global sensibility of coffee consumption, these coffee shops aim to foster a culture of 'glocality': the ultimate compromise between global and local identification.

Let me end this parade of reflections with one of the images I started with. I am sitting alone at a Starbucks in the bustling city of Hyderabad, writing on a MacBook. I see some of the servers look at me with curiosity. They have seen me here, quite often, and have wondered why I order just one flat white and sit here for almost five hours doing nothing but looking around, scribbling on my red notepad and typing rapidly, intermittently. Apart from the sad fact that I can barely afford a flat white a day, the food here does not interest me. Even the coffee is a tad vague, and I would much rather drink good old traditional filter coffee that my mother makes for me every single morning with great love and passion. Yet, this place offers a familiar strangeness: it is familiar since it reminds me of my life in Chicago in all of its unfortunate replicability; and it is strange, utterly strange, to look out of the glass window and just watch the throbbing traffic, the chaotic honking, the tiny heaps of litter, and the colourful disorder of the typical Indian street. As I look around and feel a strangely sanitised sociality close in on me, I leave my almost-full flat white to its fate and head home for some quiet and a cup of filter coffee. ☺



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