



“Adda”, identity, and digital culture: Negotiating Bengali informal public life through social media

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the Bengali cultural practice of ‘adda’ in the context of social media and digital transformation. Traditionally, adda has been an essential feature of Bengali socio-cultural life, functioning as an informal space for intellectual exchange, debate, humour, literature, politics, and interpersonal bonding. Rooted deeply in the cultural history of Kolkata and Bengal, adda historically flourished in physical settings such as royaks, drawing rooms, tea stalls, and neighbourhood spaces, often reflecting the social and literary character of Bengali society. The article traces the historical development of adda and its representation in Bengali literature and public life, while also examining its gradual transformation due to urbanization, political shifts, globalization, and technological advancement. With the emergence of social networking platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram, traditional face-to-face adda has increasingly shifted to digital spaces. The study highlights how online communities and social media groups have recreated the spirit of Bengali informal public life by enabling virtual discussions on culture, politics, nostalgia, literature, and identity. Using statistical data on internet and social media usage in India, particularly in Kolkata and West Bengal, the article demonstrates the growing dependence on digital communication. It concludes that while the form of adda has changed from physical to hybrid and digital modes, its cultural essence continues to shape Bengali identity and collective social interaction in contemporary society.

Keywords: Bengali cultural, Historical development, Internet, Social media, Digital communication

Introduction

The Bengalese is very much fond of “Adda”. The origin of the word might be from the Arabic word ‘Adda’ (أدى) which means ‘led’. Many expressions can be there to express the word ‘adda’ like ‘Sabha’ in Bengali, or informal chatting, but in a single word it’s difficult to express the exact flavour of the term. ‘Adda’ can be sensed as to join in an assembly of idle talkers; to indulge in informal and friendly talk with others. ‘Adda’ can be defined as informal gathering and chatting into never-ending subjects like scandals, sexuality, scams, culture, education, economy, to politics within people with more or less matching level of mental wavelengths. Sometimes an ‘adda’ is funny, sometimes it is eager to talk, sometimes it is sweetened by love, Friendship and intuition, the practice of heart and mind, stimulation and rest all together. The first rule of ‘adda’ is not to set any rule and most of the time it is irregular, untimely, and unplanned. It has always vibration of life. But if the level of the mind, which is much lower than others, is not kept out, there will be no justice for the whole ‘adda’. So ‘adda’ gets successful and enjoyable of course with its component participants. The ‘adda’ has a normal population limit of three to thirteen. The beauty of this kind of chat or ‘adda’ lies in the thoughts and fantasies, doubts and questions that are constantly rising in the minds and many of which may be accidental but not meaningless, are like the words of a liberated deception.

There is no hesitation, no sense of subject, no sense of responsibility, no sense of courtesy. There is no obligation to speak well. The chat is always pure and free; it is complete in itself. It is thought that if it can't be pleasurable for itself, then its existence has no meaning. The component of an ‘adda’ widely varies from layman, logical comedians to wise persons committed to public interest. Bengal witnessed different flavour of adda like- ‘Boithak-khanar adda’ (chat at drawing room), ‘at-chalar adda’ (special kind of sheds with eight roofs), ‘Bottalar adda’, ‘chandi-mandap-er adda’, ‘sharodiya adda’, ‘rock- adda’, etc. (*What’s the Good Word? It’s Adda, of Course!*)

A look into Kolkata

Here in Bengal ‘adda’ has a well-built history as well as it played an important role in socio- cultural and literary skeleton of our State. Kolkata as the capital of Bengal has also a heritage signature in the perspectives of ‘adda’. Mainly ‘Royak adda’ was predominant in Kolkata. Many places as well as the stories of ‘adda’ are well preserved with its context of ‘adda’ with famous personalities. I could be easily assuming that in the mid-sixties, in Kolkata the morning ‘adda’ used to begin with the famous signature tune of ‘Akashvani’ composed by Walter Kaufman, a refugee-composer who fled the country due to Nazi persecution, which used to float on the radio through the open

windows of the neighbour. In 'adda' there was a profound practice of 'literature and culture' in Kolkata. The conversation on 'Rabibabur Gaan', songs of Lalchand Baral, Gyan Gonsai or 'Kana Kesht' (Manna Dey's uncle, Krishnachandra Dey) were integral part of that times 'Babu adda' of Kolkata. (*Biswas Adrish*). With decades, Pankaj Mallick, KL Saigal, Hemant Mukherjee, Shyamal Mitra, Salil Chowdhury, Pintu Bhattacharya, Haimanti Shukla, Aarti Mukherjee, to Anup Ghoshal. Not only songs but also the 'addas' were enriched with literature, politics, pun and fun. From strange combination of different ages, dresses, tastes, and doctrines *in* Royak's chat it could be said to be a free-way of the argumentative Calcutta. From the literature of late Binoy Ghosh ('Kalpencha') it could be drawn when and how the 'Rowak' culture originated in North Calcutta, but the main architectural differences between the North and South Kolkata with the naked eye were the alleys, the balcony and the Royak. At the entrance to the big house, 'Rowak' was probably made for friends who came to the men of the house in the beginning — those who had difficulty getting inside the house. But later the 'rowaks' became the 'social' / 'common' or 'everyone's' right to sit and hang out in the neighbourhood. The Royak culture extended from Bagbazar, Darjipara, Farapukur in the north to Baubazar-Taltala in the south. The chat started at five or six in the afternoon and lasted till eight or nine. Many times the chat was divided according to age, the topics were also different. Face-to-face, worldliness and pure rosary were all essential qualities of this 'adda'. (Banerjee, Tania) (*TV9 Bangaliana: আড্ডা সৃষ্টিশীল নাকি কর্মনাশা? কী বলছেন বিশিষ্টরা*)(Sen, Debarati).

“Adda” in literature

In literature we witnessed many times different interesting examples of 'adda' that created meaning to the story. Narayan Gangopadhyay took the matter to the level of art in his 'Tenida' series, as well as immortalized 'Chatujjeder Royak' of 'Pataldanga'. In his story Bishwapetuk and Maha-Gulbaj Tenida sat in 'Chatujjeder Royak' with his three friends-cum-followers Kabla, Palaram, and Habul. Many new adventure plans are being hatched centering the 'Rowak adda'. In fact Bengalese could not forget the famous moment of “Ke tumi nandini” or “Jibone ki pabona” songs performed at a 'rowak adda' by some 'adda-baj' or 'rock-baj' from the movie “Tin Bhubaner Pare” inspired by Samaresh Basu's novel released in 1969. ['adda-baj'-persons fond of indulging in idle talk with others or of haunting clubs where such talk is indulged in]. (Suraiya, Jug)

The chatter of North Kolkata and Roak changed a lot since the formation of the first United Front government in 1967. The name 'Naxalbari' reached to the ears of common people. CRP vehicles continue to increase on the roads. Overnight, 'Rowak-baj' or 'adda-baj' youth fell into a 'revolution'. The bodies of the youths lying in the streets gradually became 'recognizable'. At this random time, the old rhythm of the 'adda' at different alleys, 'rowaks' and streets in Kolkata almost came to an end. (*Adda: A Brief History of the Bengali Fine Art of Discussion*).

Evolutionary changes in the form 'adda'

With the advent of computer technology, mobile technology, and social networking a groundbreaking changes happened in over decade in the form, format, pattern and composition of 'adda'. Social networking sites played immense on the generation of new avtar of 'adda'. In the earlier form of 'adda' the composition was always homogeneous in respect of gender. Though earlier the 'adda' was mainly Men's cup of tea yet with the decrease in intensity of male-dominance in the society of Kolkata as well as Bengal, women started participating in 'adda' in their own way in their own group. There is a lot of work done by women and men in isolation in the world but with time we percipience that rhythm is the union of the two. As globalisation touched both the 'henshel' (kitchen) and 'rowak' (Rock) of the house in late 80's the new form of 'adda' emerged with the easy space for heterogeneous union of both men and women. Social networking gave birth to new form of chatting or hangouts with one to one, one to many, and many to many communication channels.

In the year 1985 The Well and GENie was introduced as General Electric Network for Information Exchange. This was a critical moment in the history of social media both in business and in general. GENie was still used well into the late 1990s. It had 3,50,000 users at its peak and made redundant by the development of World Wide Web. Gradually in 1986 came Listserv; in 1988 appeared IRCs (Internet Relay Chats); in 1994 introduced a graphical chat room 'the palace'; In 1997 came first recognizable social media site SixDegrees.com; in 1998 opened Moveon.org; in 2002 Friendster was emerged but got defunct after 2015; in 2003 photosharing, mmo's and online storage became popular through Flickr. These were not get at all popular in Kolkata or West Bengal. But in 2004 the first game changing monster came into existence that shook the concept of chatting and hangouts even in Kolkata as well as in West Bengal. In 2004 Orkut, Proto-facebook or Harvard dorm-based version of Facebook, Hyves, Care2, Piczo, Multiply, Ning, Mixi were launched. At this phase Orkut became very popular in the adult generation of Kolkata.

In 2006 launched Facebook and it began to monopolize the market. After the advent of Facebook, it remains one of the most popular social media platforms. People started making friends with both known and unknown faces. It added a sense of excitement and thrill to the member when chatting. Facebook group chat, group posts also got popular along with one to one chat. In 2006 Twitter was introduced and it has attained an almost cult-like status since inception. In Bengal there was an immense craze for getting touch of the stars of silver screen or celebrities. Its ability to allow users to interact directly with celebrities was almost unheard of previously. In 2007, Tumblr and FriendFeed were launched and grown popularity in teens, and those prey on them with its micro-blogging and social networking features. In 2009 mushrooming of social networking sites started as market got crowded with lucrative web business. Groupon, Ping, Spotify, Kontain appeared in 2008. In 2010 the Instagram, Pinterest, Google Buzzl were introduced and these have grown in popularity and

become gigantic. WeChat first appeared on 2011 and in 2011 Google+ was launched as a full-fledged social networking tool. Users were able to form group contacts in 'circles' and chat via video 'hangouts'. It has recently been discontinued. In 2009 Whatsapp was launched and got enormous welcome by the people of Kolkata and West Bengal as well. It became popular not only among teens and adults but also it broke the bar of ages. In 2010 emerged Minds.com, is a free open-source social media platform that self-described as a "Crypt Social Network". Minds.com's privacy, decentralization, optional anonymity, steadfast commitment to transparency and protecting freedom of speech is appealing to many of its regular users. In India Telegram was launched in 2013. In 2016 another incredibly popular social media platform, TikTok was launched. A variety of social media platforms, social media apps changed the whole world in just last two decades and many creative ideas like 'adda' among Bengalese' culture got extinct.

Besides these in a very softer way the teenage and adult populations were channelized to dating instead of chatting and hangouts only. Gradually Kolkata experienced a bunch of dating sites like TrulyMadly, sangam.com, quackquack.in/dating/in/Kolkata, Meetville.com, mingle2.com, Tinder, Plenty Of Fish, OK Cupid, Badoo, Bumble, Woo, Coffee Meets Bagel, Happen, Hinge, Zoosk.

Present usage statistics and market in new mode of 'adda'

In India, each year the usage of internet grows but the corona pandemic of 2020 sent everyone home and forced us to rely on digital technology more than we ever had it before. Social media, video platforms, e-commerce showed increased usage in due time. According to IRS (Indian Readership Survey), Global Stat and IAMAI (Internet and Mobile Association of India) report the Indian internet population has clearly leapfrogged desktop generation. Internet usage through a mobile device is striking compared to other devices in both urban and rural population. Affordability of mobile devices and availability of cheaper data plans made it first choice. According to IRS Jan'19-March'19 report internet consumption at home was prevalent across Kolkata. The report shows almost 88% users used internet at home. According to IAMAI report 67% of male internet-user- population using internet and 33% users are female, whereas in Kolkata there are 58% male internet-user- population and 42% female internet-user- population. In Kolkata major internet-using population belongs to between 20 to 30 years of age group. The Global Stat report Aug2020 to Aug2021 shows that majority of internet-user-population use facebook. The statistics of social media statistics (active members) shows Facebook -59.37%, Youtube-18.39%, Instagram-10.93%, Pinterest- 5.43%, Twitter- 3.96% and Tumblr- 1.13% active users. WhatsApp is actually owned by Facebook. About two billion people access the app on a monthly basis. It is available in 180 countries and 60 different languages with 390.1 million users, India is WhatsApp's biggest market. In India Today reported in Dec, 2020 that India has 459 million active WhatsApp users

followed by YouTube with 452 million users. In 25th February 2021 Union minister Mr. Ravi Shankar Prasad informed that WhatsApp has 53 crore or 530 million users in India. In 13th January 2021 The Hindu news paper reported that Telegram had 1.5 million active users in India. From the weight of the user and use we can easily assume the market. (*India Internet 2019. IAMAI report*).

Use of social networking in India has a direct market effect on Browser market share in India, Search engine market share, operating system market share, and mobile vendor market share. According to StatCounter Global Stat report Aug, 2021 the highest earning browser market share marketing in India is Chrome that is 64.92% and rests are as follows: Opera-2.17%, Firefox-3.54%, Edge-3.56%, Safari-18.77%, Samsung internet browser-3.06%.

According to StatCounter Global Stat report Aug, 2021 the Search Engine market share Aug, 2021 in India reports Google predominates with 98.83%. Bing, DuckDuckGo, Ecosia, yandex, yahoo have very minimal Search Engine market share. Another important market share is of Operating System marketing in India which is predominated by Android with 73.75% share. As most of the social networking apps and sites run on Android operating system the use of social media directly effects on the market share of OS. Windows has 19.65%, iOS- 2.39%, OSX- 0.95%, Linux- 0.84% market share. Android OS starts its monopoly over the market. According to Stat Counter Global Stat report Aug, 2021 mobile vendor market share are as follows: Xiaomi-27.28%, Realme-9.59%, Samsung-19.01, Vivo-14.03, Oppo-11.17%, and Apple-3% market share. Interestingly the statistics of market share of mobile vendors do not show the monopoly characteristics and if we see just five years back in 2016 & 2017 Samsung mobile had maximum share with over 27% share, and in 2017 xiaomi showed around 5% share. There were many mobile vendor like Lenovo, HTC, Micromax, Sony, Nokia, BBK those are washed out from the market after the predominance of Android OS and popularity in participation in social networking.

Besides the chats, group chats, video chats and hangouts many of teenagers and adults of Kolkata as well as West Bengal have become addicted to dating sites to make friends having freedom of mind and without having a sense of responsibility. So the dating app and dating sites have also a very big and prospective market in Kolkata and West Bengal. The Hindu reported on 10th February, 2021 that Tinder was the top ranking dating app in India. Dating apps made three billion dollar in 2020. In 18th January, 2021 Indian Express reported that 31 million users are Indian in dating apps. India is the second largest revenue market for dating apps after the US, with 323 million dollar in revenue in 2020 according to statista.com. In TrulyMadly over 7.8 million active users are reported from India. Economic Times reported on 22nd May, 2021 that in the April-May the user growth increased in 28% and daily active users increased to 25%. When the lockdown hit in 2020 the surge in the number of installs due to boredom viewed. (IAMAI report 2020, 2021) 'adda' in West Bengal using social media platform:

Bengalees believe in their cultural root. With the wave of globalization though the traditional form of 'adda' is not enjoyed today, yet Bengalees are keen to participate in digital, online, virtual, in both synchronised or a-synchronised platform with almost the same flavour. In facebook we can see different groups like "Boitaroni-Boipokader adda", "Elebele boithok", "isolated adda", "Rajniti", "Crushes and Confession adda", "Political adda", "Shree Ramakrishna Bhakta Onuragi brinda", "80's and 90's memory (the nostalgic golden era), etc. Enormous numbers of groups are there to carry on 'adda'. The groups are with variety of subjects to discuss on. A report was gathered by IAMAI between March 23 to March 31st, 2021 with a survey using Campaign India and Facebook India. The survey involved an analysis of social media posts and comments and a poll among some Facebook users on their social media usage. The report showed the high impact constituencies in West Bengal. (*Kolkata Beckons: Adda - An Identity of Kolkata (Calcutta)*) (Chatterjee, Anindita).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of 'adda' in Kolkata and West Bengal has undergone significant transformations with the advancement of technology, particularly the emergence of social networking platforms. From its traditional roots as a predominantly male-centric gathering, 'adda' has evolved into a more inclusive and diverse form, welcoming participation from both genders across various age groups. In a nutshell we can say it that "adda" took its shape from homogeneous to heterogeneous that means male-dominated, "adda" has embraced inclusivity, welcoming women and diverse groups through online platforms. The proliferation of social media platforms such as Orkut, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others has revolutionized the concept of 'adda,' providing avenues for one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many interactions. These platforms have not only facilitated communication but also introduced new dynamics, such as group chats, video calls, and community-based discussions. Furthermore, the rise of dating apps and sites has redirected the focus of some individuals towards online socializing and relationship-building, diversifying the landscape of interpersonal connections in Kolkata and West Bengal. Amidst the digital age, Bengalis have upheld their cultural heritage by embracing online 'adda' through various social media groups and forums. These platforms serve as virtual spaces where individuals can engage in discussions ranging from literature and politics to nostalgia and personal interests. As evidenced by recent statistics on internet usage, social media engagement, and market trends, the influence of digital technology on social interactions in Kolkata and West Bengal is profound. Social media usage significantly influences browser, search engine, and mobile vendor markets. Dating apps also see a flourishing market in Kolkata. The widespread adoption of mobile devices and the internet have reshaped not only how people communicate but also their preferences and behaviours in social settings. In essence, while the traditional form of 'adda' may have evolved, its essence remains intact as Bengalis continue to engage in meaningful conversations and exchanges, albeit in a digital landscape shaped by the ever-

changing currents of technology and culture. The future of "adda" likely lies in a hybrid model, blending traditional gatherings with online interactions. Concerns regarding privacy, addiction, and the decline of face-to-face interaction require careful consideration. Continuous adaptation to emerging technologies will be crucial for sustaining the unique cultural essence of "adda" in the digital age.

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