

## Bengalis, but not Men?

### *Bhadralok* Masculinities in *Adda*

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SubVersions | Vol.1, Issue.1, (2013), 146- 170.

Url: <http://subversions.tiss.edu/?p=127>

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on interviews with 16 men and women in two age groups – fifties and twenties – and participant observation in *adda* sessions in an undergraduate college in contemporary Kolkata, this paper attempts to demonstrate the interactional dynamics through which ideas of *bhadralok* masculinity are produced in a particular form of sociality in the city. It seeks to underline the crucial role of humour and gesture in the performance of heterosexual masculinity in *adda*, their use in forging friendly solidarities between men and between genders, and in managing male anxieties about the homoerotic. The paper also tries to indicate, rather tentatively, how ideas about cultural difference are mobilized in everyday talk between men to produce a regionally-specific version of normative masculinity.

**Keywords:** masculinity; *adda*, Kolkata, Bengali, *bhadralok*, friendship, heterosexuality, talk.

The Babu at the Central Works seemed always mild and mellow.

How could we tell he'd prove to be a most aggressive fellow?

[...]

...with thund'ring voice and features grim and swollen,

The Babu rose, 'Confound you all! My whiskers have been stolen!'

[...]

'They think they own their facial hair —

O road to all disasters!

Its whiskers, now, that makes the man,

And they're our lords and masters.'<sup>1</sup>

— Sukumar Ray

It would be a fairly safe wager if one said that every child born to the Bengali *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* in post 1920s Calcutta would have read this iconic poem by Sukumar Ray, the immensely popular Bengali writer of literary nonsense. Like the best of children's literature, this poem too evoked a wholly different set of meanings for me when I revisited it recently. The proverbially effete Bengali *bhadralok*, it seemed to me now, may be submissive to the point of being timid, but he is hardly immune to the cultural discourses which demand expressions of masculinity from men. The Babu's great disquiet about his stolen moustache thus has to do with him having lost an emblem of masculine authority that is at once both social and sexual. The male body divested of hair is feminised precisely because it has removed material markers of male sexual maturity. The maintenance of facial hair, then, is

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\* I am grateful to Dr Shilpa Phadke and Dr Shoba Ghosh for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Sukumar Ray's 'Gonph Churi', translated by Sukanata Chaudhuri as 'The Purloined Moustache', 1989.

one of the ways in which men are able to exhibit their masculine potency, both to other men and women.

*Adda* is the practice of friends gathering together, on a recurrent basis, for extended, informal conversations. Some of the traditional spaces of *adda* would be parlours of middle-class houses, narrow ledges along residential houses called ‘*rowak*’, tea-shops, sports-pavilions, the canteens of schools and colleges. Significantly, although the word ‘*adda*’ exists in other Indian languages, it is often seen as an essential part of the Bengali character, an indispensable contributor to such metaphysical concepts as the ‘life’ and ‘vitality’ of what it means to be a Bengali. In his seminal essay on *adda*, the writer Buddhadev Bose (2008) claims that although *adda* is pan-Indian, “it reveals itself in its fullest glory only in the moist breeze of Bengal. Our seasons quicken *adda* in the same way that they awaken poetry.” Such understandings of *adda*, both as an infallible marker of Bengali identity, and as a form of sociality, however, have had its share of critics. Colloquial words such as *ganjano* and *gultani* for instance, were often used pejoratively in relation to practices of *adda* to emphasize its propinquity to idleness (Chakravarty, 1999). We may note that the *bhadralok*’s has traditionally had a distinctly male character. Dipesh Chakravarty writes for instance, that as recent as 1960, it was uncommon to see a woman participating in an *adda* with men (Ibid). While Chakravarty has shown that traditional middle-class perceptions of respectability would deny women from participating in *adda* with men whom they were not related to, he has also pointed out that the increasing association between literary modernity and the spaces of *adda* allowed women’s entry into *adda*. As I re-read Sukumar Ray’s poem, I found myself thinking that if the middle-class *adda* is a male form of sociality, how do men go about ‘proving’ their masculinity in these *addas*. What practices and modes of exchange get exalted as ‘ideals’ of masculinity through the conversations and activities that transpire in *adda*? What are the terms on which men engage with these signifiers of maleness? This paper is an

attempt to understand how *bhadralok* masculine identities are produced and circulated in the practice and spaces of *adda*.

It is worth pointing out that the opinion that the Bengali *bhadralok*, who may have once been a repository of cultural values, even a forerunner of scientific innovation and industry, but is today “stuck in stagnant provincialism and sterile despair”, seems to have gained great currency. A recent feature article in *Outlook* (Biswas, 2000; source of the aforementioned quotes), tellingly titled ‘Death of the *Bhadralok*’, certifies that “Bengal today is a volatile wasteland dotted with closed factories... *peopled by a smug and parochial bhadralokdom...*” The writer’s diagnosis of the cause for this condition is that “the fabled slothful *bhadralok* is hoist on his own petard, *out of sync with modern-day realities*” (italics mine). This causal connection<sup>2</sup> between a perceived decline of a community, its cultures, and the supposed un-modern orientation of its gentile class is significant, particularly because the writer locates his critique in the CPI(M) government’s apathy towards industry led modernization. With the opening up of the Indian economy in 1991 and the more recent neo-liberal turn in the economic policies of the CPI(M) government in Kolkata it would be fair to say that the political economy of the city, has been in a state of flux in the previous twenty years. My study of *bhadralok* masculinities in *adda* is located in this context. Globalization, despite its claim to promote free societies and respect the sovereignty of nation states establishes certain civilizational virtues, and thereby, at least ideologically recreates the universalism of European modernity which was used to sanction the colonial enterprise. Significantly the magazine article quoted above, issues the same colonial certificate of ‘sloth’ to the *bhadralok* and alleges that the ideals of *bhadralok* society are opposed to the vector of development. How are these discourses shaping the making of *bhadralok* masculinities today? For this paper, between October and November 2009, I interviewed 16 men and women in two age

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<sup>2</sup> The blurb for this article reads, “Bengal’s decline can be located in the insular legacy of its gentility”.

groups – fifties and twenties – and conducted participant observation in *adda* sessions in an undergraduate college in the city of Kolkata.

My approach to understanding the production of masculinities in *adda* has been to first examine the social history of the *bhadralok* and then search for ways in which masculinities may be examined in the specific context of the college *adda*. An overview of this history may be an enabling entry point to this exploratory discussion since it may help ascertain the relevance of colonial constructions of Bengali masculinity in the contemporary context and how they are modified by other cultural discourses.

### **A Social History of the *Bhadralok***

Historically, the *bhadralok* class was a group of tax-collectors and clerics who occupied some of the highest positions in the colonial hierarchy (Chowdhury, 1998). The *bhadralok* class thus comprised of social elites created by land reforms and trade policies of the East India Company, particularly the Permanent Settlement of 1793. To ensure the highest revenue collections from land, the Company gave “ownership” rights to zamindars who would be responsible for extracting levies from the peasantry. The *bhadralok* class benefited from these colonial privileges but was ultimately powerless under colonial rule. Heterogeneous in its caste membership, it comprised of new and old elites in equal measure (Mani, 1998). Nirad Chaudhuri writes that the *bhadralok* class comprises people of a wide range of economic means, from those in acute poverty to those with access to a great quantum of wealth (Chaudhuri, 2008).

The consolidation and growth of the *bhadralok* class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was closely connected to the Bengal renaissance. It was with the Bengal Renaissance and the introduction of Western education (available for the most part to urban middle-class Hindu males only) that the *bhadralok* – a new class of secularised intelligentsia, clerks and bureaucrats – emerged at

the confluence of colonial trade and educational institutions like the Hindu College in Calcutta (Chaudhuri, 2000). Sumanta Banerjee (1993) has pointed out that the babus of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seemed to be of two types – first, decadent scions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century *banians*, who squandered away their inherited wealth on entertainment, and a second retinue class comprising of barristers, doctors, teachers etc.

It is noteworthy that the colonial discourse in Bengal imposed the stereotypes of the ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’, as a justification of colonial rule in the region.<sup>3</sup> The colonial construct was that the Bengali babu was sharp of intellect but frail of limbs, a configuration that was internalised to a great degree by the *bhadralok* himself (Chowdhury, 1998). The famous Kalighat *patuas* of Kolkata, for instance, which depict scandalous episodes from babu life, portray the *bhadralok* as effete, and subservient to the tyranny of his dominating wife or mistress. In the colonial imagination, the ineffectual Bengali needed the Christian straightforwardness and honesty, and the manliness of British men (Alexander Duff, cited in Basu and Banerjee, 2006) to raise himself from his innate torpor. In addition to the ‘martial race’ theory which categorised Indians into ‘martial’ and ‘non-martial’ races, what also contributed to the image of the ‘weak’ Bengali, towards the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were Risley’s anthropometric tests which categorised Indians into seven physical types (Chowdhury, 1998). The *bhadralok* was slotted into the fifth category which claimed their suitability for clerical tasks and a commensurate lack of physical courage.

A significant element in the Bengali response to the colonial assault on its masculinity was the fashioning of a male body that would simultaneously accommodate aspects of colonial masculinity and indigenous conceptions of maleness (Ibid). Swami Vivekananda’s creation of

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<sup>3</sup> Here it bears recall that while colonial subjugation was justified in Bengal by highlighting a supposed lack of physical valor and hence effeminacy of the Bengali people, the people from other parts of the country did not escape the colonial charge of the ‘feminine’ native, as well. The martial resources of the Sikhs and the Marathas were acknowledged, but where they supposedly fell short were the other ‘masculine’ requirements of rationality (Sikhs) and honesty (Marathas). A great portion of the justification of colonial rule thus rested on the construction of an overall effeminacy of the Indian people in terms of Christian notions of manliness. See Basu, Subho and Banerjee, Sikata. 2006.

an idealised masculinity, for instance, sought to coalesce militant physicality and the brahminical principle of asceticism. While on the one hand men needed to exercise their bodies and build muscle, on the other, it was imperative that they master their souls (Ibid.). In the post independence period, political power has continued to be elusive to the *bhadralok* who thrives on the precarious terrains of educational success and social propriety (Chaudhuri, 2000).

As noted previously, several of the ideals of hegemonic *bhadralok* masculinity<sup>4</sup> are perceived to be incompatible with the vector of development in a liberalised economy. It is in this context, that I try and understand the transactions that are at play between these ideals of Bengali manhood and different notions of masculinity produced by other discourses such as globalization, the gay rights movement and feminism. The construction of masculinity, as pointed out by R.W. Connell (1995), is not the creation of an isolated individual but the collective work of a peer group. The idea then is to try and study how the peer group and the individual in *adda* produce and feel their masculinities through the various performances of gender that *adda* makes available.

### ***Bhadralok Masculinities in Adda***

Sujaan<sup>5</sup> (22)<sup>6</sup> is a self-professed *adda* addict. After graduating in physics in year 2008, he has spent the last couple of years trying to make a career in photography. I asked him if he thought some men were more popular than others in *adda*.

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<sup>4</sup> In her essay 'Masculinity, Femininity and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late 20th Century' Raka Ray notes the dominant characteristics of hegemonic *bhadralok* masculinity – high value on men of letters, high culture, education and the intellect, independence of means and maintaining a genteel and cultured life. Ray says that in *bhadralok* society of contemporary Bengal, masculinity has little to do with virility and physical strength. While keeping these notions in mind, I have tried, following R.W. Connell's suggestion that hegemonic masculine behavior is constructed in particular contexts, to ascertain masculine ideals which emerge from the specific context of the *adda*.

<sup>5</sup> Names of respondents have been changed to protect their identities.

<sup>6</sup> The number denotes the respondent's age.

There are guys who are popular – those who speak well, can tell a joke hilariously, and are entertaining, can sing, automatically stand out with the women. But it's not a special tag that one comes with but something that is evolved through *adda*. But no single person ever steals the show.

In these words a parameter is thus identified which measures male ways of being social in *adda*, particularly those which find favour with women. Indicators such as 'articulate', 'witty', 'sing well' which are identified as contributing to the masculine appeal of a participant, far from being value neutral are in fact loaded with cultural attributes which are held in high esteem in *bhadralok* society. It is significant that the respondent says that these attributes are not pre-given but evolved in *adda*. As members of the same *bhadralok* class, most of the *adda*-givers would have had access to similar cultural resources that inculcate these cultural values, which in turn ensures that no single person steals the show. However, this certainly does not mean that all forms of masculine behaviour occupy same social positions; certain forms of masculine behaviour – such as the ones identified by this respondent – emerge as honoured in the context of the *adda*, and thereby become ideals for men to measure up to. The social practice of *adda*, in its pervasive popularity, thus emerges as a crucial site where these cultural ideals of male social behaviour are both actualised through performance and reinstated as desirable forms of masculine behaviour. Consider this comment by Srilata (23), a postgraduate student of English Literature:

A man with a good voice and a guitar takes things to a different level.

The observation shows how certain styles of self presentation, in this case the act of singing with the accompaniment of a guitar, emerge as practices signifying desirable masculinity in the space of the *adda*. The pursuit of this signifier of masculinity by performing the act thus becomes a process of being and becoming masculine in a way that is consistent with the terms

set by the dominant cultural discourse. The self is constructed in a social setting that recognises a particular trope of behaviour as ‘masculine’, and is thereby imprinted with the stamp of masculinity, in this case by members of the opposite sex. Narratives such as these underscore *adda*’s role in perpetuating culturally specific expectations of masculinity from men.

One of the ways in which intimacy is achieved, both between men and between genders, is by collectively transgressing accepted norms of public behaviour (Kiesling, 2005). Srilata’s recollection is relevant in this connection:

There isn’t any manly space there. We can talk with the guys about anything – sex, underwear, menstruation, night fall. We’re all very close.

Here, talk about sex, menstruation, underwear, considered taboo in public spaces, more so in a space of heterosocial interaction, serves to forge bonds of intimacy both between men and between genders. In a similar way, intimacies are forged in the *adda* of the older generation. Subhas (57), a professor of Botany in a city college, and Raina (56), an artist, had this to say:

In *adda* a casual informality is not only possible but imperative. For instance, there if we use slang in front of women, no one really minds.

(Subhas)

I was immediately struck by how much this guy would abuse. I thought it odd in the beginning but gradually a lot of it became funny!

(Raina)

The use of taboo words in *adda* (in this case slang), becomes a way of temporarily escaping the ideal of sobriety that is intrinsic to the construction of hegemonic *bhadralok* masculinity. Raina's remark that she gradually found these slang words "funny" draws attention to how certain illocutionary acts open up a space for the formation of joking relationships between acquaintances. Through such collective transgression cast in the form of humour, not only do men become socially intimate with each other but are also able to create a space of informal interaction with women in public life, from where romantic intimacies may emerge.<sup>7</sup> However, there are limits to what can be transgressed, and these limits also have a significant bearing on how masculinities get constructed in the context of *adda*.

At first I was very uncomfortable with guys talking to girls about breasts. I've become used to it now and it doesn't bother me anymore. But I feel irritated if guys leech at women openly. But it's generally very subtle since these are people whom you know intimately. That's fine with me.

(Srilata)

Men's talk about women's breasts is gradually brought within the ambit of acceptable behaviour once a certain degree of intimacy has been established among *adda*-givers. However, other discourses serve to filter the norms which still need to be upheld; an undisguised sexualized gaze is often unacceptable. When I asked her if she would speak out against such behaviour, she said that when it crossed her limits of tolerance, she certainly did protest and made sure that the men were mindful of it. My participation observation diary also showed up another instance of *adda*-givers' negotiation with taboo:

Mahesh: Oy, where is Priyasmita? Haven't seen her in many days.

Sanjukta: Priyasmita has gone missing!

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<sup>7</sup> Subhas and Raina met each other in their college *addas* and later got married.

Deepak: O fuck!

Mahesh: What?!

Deepak: I heard Priyasmita has gone milking!

In Bengali, the pun is on the similar sounding words ‘*dubh diyechey*’ (literally ‘has given the bunk’) and ‘*dudh diyechey*’ (literally ‘given milk’ but a euphemistic way of saying ‘she is pregnant’). The men in the group laughed very tentatively at this play of words whereas the women chose to not react at all. Seeing this response, Deepak moved quickly to an entirely different topic. Dominant reactions to such exchanges demonstrate to those present which norms of social behaviour can be flouted and which need to be observed.

My fieldwork revealed a generational difference in understandings of what comprises taboo in *adda* conversation. Quoting two respondents in the age group of 50s will help me to explain some of these differences here, and their implication for an understanding of the making of *bhadralok* masculinities.

Seldom if ever, would sex be explicitly discussed in *adda*. Earlier our body was thought of as a temple that had to be worshipped, kept away from polluting elements. Now the body is all about pleasure. This is reflected in the *adda* of young people today.

(Bikram)

Just a few days back I was at a restaurant and overheard a group of youngsters teasing each other about whether they were using adequate protection! All this was never discussed in *adda*, certainly not in front of women!

(Subhas)

This likening of the body to a temple recalls Hindu nationalist conceptions of male embodiment which constructed the male body as the body of the ascetic, divested of pleasure and concerned with the preservation of semen as a means to creating a nation of heroes empowered to confront colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> The expressed need to maintain the ‘purity’ of the body by abstinence from sex, betrays the continuance of the cultural anxiety about semen loss in the *adda* of the 1970s. It is instructive to note that almost all the men and women in the age group of fifties, whom I interviewed, reported that conversations in *adda* stayed clear of explicit sexual mention. The *adda* of young people today, which is mentioned in the second quote, indicates the transition to a very different conception of the body. This seems to reflect the regiments of the body in consumer culture with its pedagogy of a careful cultivation of the body’s surface, and prescription of the pursuit of bodily pleasures as facilitating the full expression of the self (Featherstone, 1999). In this sense, talk about proper use of protection becomes a way of indicating sexual activity in a milieu which rewards those who are able to demonstrate an active sex life.

It is important to note that in the *adda* of today that is reported, both the act of an overt sexualised gaze on a woman in a social setting such as the *adda* (“I feel irritated if guys leach at women openly”) and talk about contraceptive use, are ways of performing masculine heterosexuality, both to women and to other men. The rejection of the first ploy and the acceptance of the second, by those present, serve to show men which performances of masculine heterosexual behaviour are desirable and which are not. In the face of such rejection, what other strategies do men employ to exhibit their heterosexuality to others? As

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<sup>8</sup> Celibacy has historically been an exalted ideal of masculinity, particularly among those whom the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers constituted as Hindus. Vivekananda’s construction of ideal manhood, referred to earlier, added regimes of body building to the prescription of transforming sexual energy to cosmic energy by preserving semen. Janaki Nair and Mary E. John (2000) have shown how the rise of Gandhi and his pledge to becoming a ‘eunuch for the nation’ furthered the link between semen preservation and nation-building. Uma Chakravarti (1998), in her analysis of the late 1980s television serial ‘Chanakya’ has demonstrated how this historical character was hijacked by the Hindu Right as a champion of celibate values, pitted against a debauched and hence emasculate King Nanda.

the young woman tells us, she doesn't mind if men are subtle about their sexual interest in women. My participation at one *adda* session of college-goers revealed some more answers.

Sanjukta: What films are being screened at the film fest?

Rongon: *Jana Aranya, Little Terrorist, Brokeback Mountain...*

Anik: Some people are very excited about *Brokeback*. (Laughs and slightly nudges the girl sitting next to him)

Deepak: I'm so not going to sit next to Arnab when that film's on. (Laughter)

Ostensibly, the conversation is about an upcoming college film festival. However, the innuendos about *Brokeback Mountain*, a film whose protagonists are gay, call attention to the narrative of heteronormativity that is being articulated in this *adda*. Anik's suggestion that 'some people are excited' about the film, and his nudging the girl seated beside him, indirectly identifies those who are likely to be especially interested in a film exploring queer issues – straight women and gay men. It also serves to simultaneously mark his own distance from the sexuality of 'some people' that he mentions. In a similar vein, Deepak's reluctance to occupy a seat next to a certain Arnab, identifies in the man a sexuality that is suspect, and instates himself as clearly heterosexual. These gestures and linguistic strategies adopted by men in *adda* reflect the maintenance of heteronormative ideals in this form of urban sociality. Through the adoption of these modes of exchange which identify sexual 'others', a self is constructed in a social space which can attest it as 'heterosexual', 'masculine' thereby consolidating its ontological security.

This creation of a normative self by indirectly identifying a sexual other, I also found in the narratives of a lot of men from the younger generation that I spoke to. This is what Arindam (27), a management professional had to say:

There was one guy amongst us who was gay. Sometimes we would tease him about his sexuality. We would try to identify which men he liked and then list which body parts were his favourites! (Laughs) But we immediately stopped if we saw that it was upsetting him.

Within the garb of banter (which reportedly takes note of the discomfort of the person to which it is directed) a normative masculine self is created by accentuating the difference between one's sexual object choice and that of a gay man. The increasing visibility of the gay rights movement has both, made it impossible to ignore homoeroticism, and more overt homophobic references socially inappropriate. Significantly, this recollection also demonstrates the social tutelage that is circulated in *adda* about what kind of interest in another man's body is legitimate. Thus, the collective preparation of a list of sexually attractive parts of the male body, by humouring the sexual preference of a gay person, serves to indirectly demonstrate that 'normal' men talk about the male anatomy in a social but not sexual way (Kiesling, 2005). Even while this episode was being recounted to me, the respondent felt the need to laugh, and through it emphasise the nonsexual tone of his narration. In this way social relations between men get deemed 'masculine' and same-sex relations cast away as 'non-masculine'.

In the context of this masculine anxiety to disown desires which may be seen as homoerotic and hence 'feminine', it is relevant to ask how men navigate their desire for male solidarity in ways which comply with the heterosexual negation of intimacy between men. Certain responses by respondents laid open some of these nuances. Susmita (51) who works for her own NGO recounted:

I remember the Geology department had only boys. So they were extremely eager that girls join their *adda*. Some of them would try fancy antics to impress the girls – poetry,

hasty attempts at wit, basically try and hog the limelight – it was very obvious! (laughs)

They were all in it together.

Sulogna (54) teaches Mathematics at an undergraduate college; she shared her experience in these words:

Those who have a strong personality are always more attractive. I remember two guys who were academic but also very entertaining. They were often at the centre because they could speak knowledgeably and tell a joke right. These guys were great friends themselves since they had common academic interests.

These women's recollections of male participants in *adda* show how solidarity between men is built in concurrence with their pursuit of exalted status in *adda*. Thus the two men with academic inclinations, through a display of the depth of their understanding of a certain field of study, are able to attain status in a cultural context which places high value on men of letters. Furthermore, this display of erudition becomes especially 'desirable' in the space of a college, which is a seat of learning. Like the men in the Geology department, who "together" "try fancy antics to impress the girls", they are able to build homosocial ties (we are told they were "great friends") even as they compete for honour in *adda*. Here the problem of homophobia which is the "classic barrier to friendships among heterosexual men" (Connell, 1995) is solved by their shared normative sexual object choice made explicit. Susmita's understanding that "they were all in this together", evidences this collective aspect of practices of masculinity.

Indeed, a lot of the men whom I interviewed seemed to feel the need to negotiate the double bind of masculinity, which simultaneously demands male solidarity and heterosexuality. As Brinda Bose (2007) has argued, heteronormativity has traditionally defined camaraderie as the

only socially legitimate form of interaction between men. In camaraderie the accent is always on the social values of loyalty and fellow-feeling rather than emotional intimacy. Since emotional intimacy is closely tied up with sexuality, the dominant discourse of heterosexuality demands that men reject intimacy in all-male spaces, or mark such intimacy as clearly nonsexual. The narratives that I collected revealed how *adda* bears witness to these male social dynamics.

Bikram (59), who has taken voluntary retirement from government service and now works independently as a tax consultant, remembers his participation in *adda* in these words:

When I really got into *adda*, I was an adolescent, 12-13 years of age. All boys. That is the time when boys start feeling attraction for girls. Yet, we were never open about it. At the most we would tease each other about who likes who. The silence, I think, is what created romanticism about love. Now things are far more open. It made possible a kind of intimacy between us (the boys) which I don't see now.

Bikram thus identifies *adda* as the site for early homosocial bonding among adolescents. Although their burgeoning sexuality was never discussed, it is through *adda* that Bikram seems to have acquired his first notions of romantic love. What I want to underscore here is that in spite of Bikram's admission that the travails of their adolescent years were never discussed in *adda*, he emphatically describes his interactions with his peer group as being 'intimate', that too of a kind which he finds fast disappearing. Bikram's evocative recalling shows how in male social relationships, camaraderie, with its celebration of fellow-feeling and loyalty, passes for intimacy. The nostalgia for that interaction and a denunciation of things that "are far more open" today, at least in part, betrays an anxiety about self-disclosure to other men, which hitherto had been a reserve of heterosexual relations. In other words, in Bikram's assessment of the situation, now there seems to be a social need for men to share

their fears and desires if they are to be intimate not only with women but also other men. The anxiety that I am reading into his response is an apprehension about a crossover from the homosocial to the homoerotic, and the additional burden of having to negotiate this perceived danger in the contexts of male-male interactions.

There are others, however, who seemed to be able to transact these processes with greater ease. A case in point is Sayantan (30) who owns a popular book shop in the city. The *addas* which he recalls with the greatest fondness are the ones in which only men participated.

We would discuss so many of our personal problems. Seldom, if ever, would we hide anything from each other. If someone was facing some trouble, all of us would come together to try and solve it. *Adda* makes people close to such an extent that even their families become intimate. Some of my friends now live away from the city. When there are functions in their families, I attend them even though they may not be around.

In stark contrast with Bikram's taciturnity, here the intimacy that is being spoken of rests largely on disclosures of one's innermost thoughts and predicaments. Sayantan's preference for *adda* with his male friends over those where women are also present, emerges from his experience of this form of homosociality as more lasting than non-romantic relationships with women. He says,

After they get married, girls are difficult to remain in touch with. Our social structure is such that things somehow change.

Here it is important to point out that while in a Western context such invitations of male-male intimacy may seem homoerotic, in the specific cultural contexts of South Asia, such intimacies are forged often because similar levels of interaction are impossible with members

of the opposite sex outside marriage (Ibid). As the literary critic Sreekumar Bandyopadhyay has suggested, “Given the closed-door nature of our social arrangement... Only the claim of friendship or being a classmate of somebody allows us to overcome the barriers... of a different family and become intimate with them” (quoted in Chakravarty, 1999). Sayantan’s narrative clearly exhibits such an understanding of social life in Kolkata. The anxious need to mark such homosocial intimacies as nonsexual, however, is not entirely absent in these narratives, also among the younger generation of men. The following comment calls attention to this need:

We have one friend whose mother was burnt alive. She was doing puja and her saree caught fire. After that he couldn’t stay alone in his house. So I ended up staying with him for three months. Such is the loyalty of our friendship.

Sujaan (22)

The vocabulary of this expression illuminates the indirect disclaimers that men frequently employ to demonstrate the nonsexual nature of their feelings for each other. The final explanation for such a deeply compassionate act as the one recalled by Sujaan is not ‘care’ or ‘concern’ but ‘loyalty’. By this linguistic substitution of a sexually suspect ‘care/concern’, to a clearly nonsexual and masculine ‘loyalty’, the speaker is able to accommodate the desire for homosocial closeness with the dominant cultural discourse of heterosexuality intrinsic to *bhadralok* masculinity, which proscribes emotional intimacy between men.

### **The Question of ‘Difference’**

It is noteworthy that among the signifiers of masculinity that respondents identified, there is a complete silence on physicality as an important dimension of masculinity. I asked all

respondents if they remembered fights breaking out in *adda*. The following reply may be taken as the representative response to this query:

Physical fights would never break out. I remember this one time when two guys fought so much over some political issue that one guy had to go around looking for a needle and thread to sew his torn shirt. But I think I remember it so distinctly because such things hardly ever happened.

(Debabrata [56])

This absence of overtly physical demonstration of manhood seems to endorse Raka Ray's contention that in *bhadralok* society, masculinity has little to do with virility and physical strength. In some ways *bhadralok* masculinity seems to consolidate itself by opposing a perceived hypermasculinity of North Indian notions of manhood. Two respondents had this to say:

I was brought up in Delhi and had a very Punjabi mentality before I came to Kolkata.

(*What do you mean when you say 'Punjabi mentality'?*)

You know, the rough "mard ban" (be a man) attitude that so many Punjabis have. The *bhadralok* is not crass. It was only after I came to Kolkata and particularly through the kind of topics that were discussed in *adda* that I acquired a taste for theatre and art.

(Subhas [57])

Career would be spoken of but only in passing. There was hardly any high ambition in the *bhadralok* back then. Most of us would love studying but that wasn't to make a career out of it. It was because we wanted to immerse ourselves in culture. Today's modern *bhadralok*, if at all you can call them so, are too busy pursuing careers.

Indranil (54)

Intrinsic to both these constructions of exemplary *bhadralok* masculinity are certain ideas of ‘culture’ which have to do with art, learning, oratory and social propriety. The first observation also carries the additional negation of a perceived ‘roughness’ of the Punjabi male. The colonial tutelage of ‘martial’ and ‘non-martial’ races and the supposed cultural pre-eminence of Bengalis find resonance in this understanding of what makes the Bengali *bhadralok*. In the second observation, another rejection is discernible – the *bhadralok*’s apathy for commercial enterprise. This perceived ‘acquisitiveness’ gets associated with Westernised modernity and is deemed incompatible with *bhadralok* culture. How then do Bengali men today negotiate the demand to remain ‘cultured’ even while they pursue careers made fabulous by the opening up of the economy?

The dhuti-clad *bhadralok* is of-course no longer there. And not much is got out of holding on to dead tradition anyway. Today the *bhadralok* can be in converse, provided he is cultured, knows how to deal maturely with a woman, speaks well, and most importantly, reads.

(Srilata [23])

## **Conclusion**

A major thrust of critical research on men’s lives has been to lay bare how masculinities, far from being natural, are *made* in particular socio-cultural contexts. This paper has drawn on this literature in the field of masculinity studies to highlight the interactional dynamics through which ideas of *bhadralok* masculinity are produced in a particular form of sociality in contemporary Kolkata. It has sought to demonstrate the crucial role of humour and gesture in the performance of heterosexual masculinity in *adda*, their use in forging friendly solidarities between men and between genders, and in managing male anxieties about the homoerotic. The paper has also tried to indicate, rather tentatively, how ideas about cultural difference are

mobilized in everyday talk between men to produce a regionally-specific version of normative masculinity.

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