

Social club life in colonial India as ladder to modernity

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It was not just booze, often termed as 'cementing' the British Raj in India, playing cricket, golf, socialising and at times rollicking with chatty stuff as part of a phenomenology of carrying the 'White Man's burden' to Asiatic societies.

'Club Life' in colonial India was, despite its initial phases of exclusiveness and colour prejudices, for over a century and more since the "earliest and largest social clubs" - the Bengal Club (1827) in Calcutta, the Madras Club (1832) in then Madras Presidency and the Byculla Club (1833) in then Bombay - came into being were little known but structurally key crucibles of change in modernizing and secularizing the Indian tra-

dition. the Indian subcontinent, though there are references to clubs in places that are now in Pakistan and Bangladesh and a large number of sporting clubs that dotted South Asia. The club was not just the creation of a new public space as part of "Englishmen preparing for a political life" in various colonies of Pax Britannica. They were as much an unwitting catalyst for the emergence of a new civil society, made possible by historical changes worldwide, responding to democratic aspirations, including the tumultuous World War years.

As aptly captured by the author at the outset in the words of Sir Bartle Frere, then Governor of Bombay, addressing members of the Byculla Club there on St. Valentine's Day in 1867, "we

dition.

It has been a complex, multi-dimensional development with major social and political ramifications that has been patiently and succinctly put together by Prof. Benjamin B. Cohen, Associate Professor in the department of History at the University of Utah, USA, in his work, "In the Club, Associational Life in Colonial South Asia". He engages different disciplines simultaneously - like directing various instruments in a musical ensemble - history, politics, sociology, ethnography and countless notes and anecdotes from memoirs and biographies, besides going into piles of clubs' internal papers.

As a historian, Prof. Benjamin has done an extremely admirable job,

are trained in our clubs to habitual respect for the verdict of the majority.....-.....But above all, we are trained in our clubs to have a habitual and liberal regard for the wishes and feelings of the minority." While the Indian National Congress (INC) itself, in the vanguard of our freedom movement, started off as the broadest possible liberal club at that time, the author points out how at the height of the Indian nationalist movement, the public utility value of social clubs grew manifold. It was best exemplified in the feminist and nationalist, K. Radhabai Subbarayan, hailing from Tamil Nadu, who was a founder-member of the 'Nilgiris Ladies Club (1930),' and a member of the Women's India Association (WIA). She saw in the club

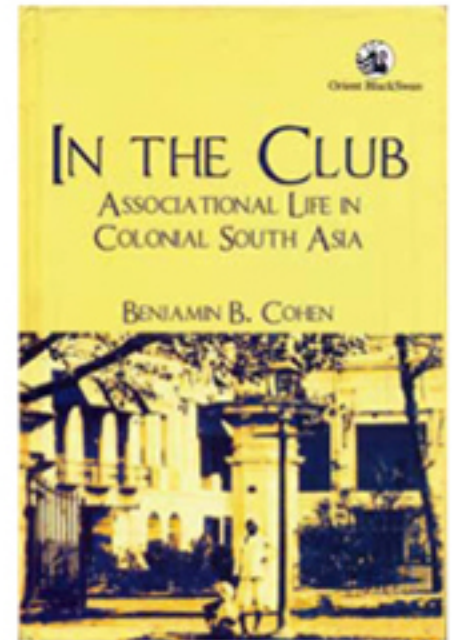
not hesitating to draw attention to the contradictions that charted this progress without sounding sensational or just falling for the juicy stories that club lawns may have occasioned. Despite some overlapping in details in covering various facets of club life - from their individual origins, rules and bye-laws, the financial ups and downs that marked the growth and fall of clubs, the kind of patronage, the role of women in shaping clubs, the servants and staff employed and the nitty-gritty of class and racial issues when the ruling Britishers began to comingle with the 'Natives', and the challenges clubs faced after India became free in August 1947, Prof. Benjamin must be lauded for upholding the narrative's historical austerity, even while probing

activities, "the training and experience necessary for performing public duties."

Another important facet of this club phenomenon is that it was only after the 1857 'Sepoy Mutiny', that more number of social clubs were formed across the country, even in small towns like Jhansi as the British masters saw the need for not only "bridging the gap" between the ruler and the ruled, but also as contact/network points in the "associational life" of a society in transition. If not for such clubs, the alienation of the British rulers from the people they ruled would have been total and perhaps more disastrous.

There were then newer clubs like the 'Union Club of Calcutta (1859)', the 'Hyderabad Boat Club' established in 1877, the

BOOK REVIEW



with multi-disciplinary candles.

Some historically incisive themes form the bedrock of Prof. Cohen's narrative, which largely looks, in great detail, at the social clubs in

'Calcutta Club' formed in 1907 two years after the infamous partition of Bengal, the 'Cosmopolitan Club' that came up in Mysore in 1896, and among others, two other famous clubs that Mokshagundam Vivesvaraya promoted - the 'Deccan Club' in Pune (1891), and the 'Century Club' in Bangalore (1917). Indians themselves formed several clubs including those blessed by the princely states scions.

The book also has lots of interesting nuggets on activities of various clubs - At times, games like billiards were a rage. The Coimbatore Club in 1878, for example, even went to the extent of putting forth a motion "to mortgage the entire club to raise funds" to buy a billiards table! Above all, this book is an illuminating read for the lay reader and experts alike.