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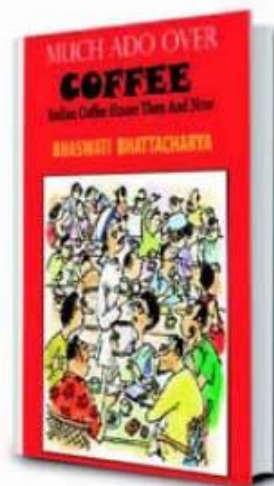
# Not measured in spoons

Tracing the history of a cafe chain-led conversation culture

SUDIPTA DATTA

*'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons'* - T.S. Eliot

This January, during Presidency College's bicentenary celebrations in Kolkata, Prof. Amartya Sen, a 1953-batch alumnus, extolled the virtues of the institution and its culture of conversation. "In that culture," he said, "there was a kind of easy transition from what was happening in the classes to what was happening across the street in Coffee House." Long before the explosion of chic coffee parlours, a cafe chain was created in urban India in the late 1930s—India Coffee House or Indian Coffee House after 1958 – to promote coffee, and what it brought in its wake: conversation. In *Much Ado Over Coffee, Indian Coffee House Then and Now*, Bhaswati Bhattacharya goes looking for answers to questions that puzzled her: How did the Coffee Cess Committee (1935) that had no experience of marketing decide to set up coffee houses? What



■ **Much Ado Over Coffee: Indian Coffee House Then and Now**

Bhaswati Bhattacharya

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guided the choice of place? Why did they decide to set up 40 plus outlets before they realised that the concept was not profitable? How much coffee did go into the making of a cup? To find the answers, Bhattacharya "decided to explore a living archive – patrons of the space since it was launched." Once she began talking to coffee drinkers past and present it became clear that there was more than coffee

that attracted them to ICH - "the practice of drinking coffee in this new urban space became synonymous with sociability" - and *adda* (a place where friends meet and converse informally.) Bhattacharya traces the history of ICH from its birth - and the creation of a new space in the city. In this, all aspects are covered, from management (the Coffee Board) and its workers and their cooperative, the struggle for survival, and coffee in the imagination, and its link to literature. She studied the coffee houses in Kolkata, Delhi and Allahabad, and includes reference to her research on ICH in Bangalore, Trivandrum and Trichur. Just to give one instance, Bhattacharya brings College Street of Kolkata alive, where the ICH is located, surrounded by bookshops of every hue. There's a minor quibble though: Bhattacharya has included priceless photographs to record the *addas* in ICHs of all three cities, but the display should have been better.