

Adda

Buddhadeva Bose
Translated by Rosinka Chaudhuri

BUDDHADEVA BOSE (1908–74) was born in Comilla, in present-day Bangladesh. After completing graduate studies in English from the University of Dhaka, he taught at Ripon College, Calcutta (1934–45), and worked as a journalist at the *Statesman* (1944–51). From 1956 to 1963, he was attached to the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, which, indeed, he helped create. Something between a Bengali nationalist, a European cosmopolitan, a cultural polemicist, and an old-style ‘man of letters’, he was, more than anything, a passionate advocate of the written word: as a novelist, poet, and playwright, as well as a critic, translator and editor—in other words, as a uniquely influential type of reader and enthusiast. More than anyone else, too, Bose brought to Calcutta’s literary life a generational self-awareness and belatedness that was at once implicitly tragic and, in its modernist argumentation, liberating in its time; a self-awareness related to the problem of succeeding Tagore, to being conjoined to our history and present moment with a sort of inevitability, and to be among the first to feel the full creative and cultural brunt of what it meant to inhabit this wearying, self-renovating metropolis.



I’m not a scholar; I’m unsure about the word’s origins. It has an Islamic, non-Sanskritic sound. If I Hinduize it and call it ‘sabha’, very little of it remains. If I anglicize it and call it ‘party’, it dies as well. ‘Meetings’ are clothed in khadi or khaki; ‘parties’ attired in clothes that are fashionably up-to-date but too sharply ironed; ‘sabha’ is pure, beautiful, comfortless. I’m not sure if the French ‘salon’ is still in use, but descriptions I’ve read of it make it seem altogether

Originally published in Buddhadeva Bose, *Probondho-Sankalan*, Calcutta: Dey’s Publishing, 1988.

too elaborate. Does an appropriate word for 'adda' exist in any other language in the world? Even without being a linguist I can certify none does; because the mood that engenders adda doesn't exist anywhere else; or if the mood exists, a properly regulated ambience doesn't. People in other countries make speeches, joke, argue, spend the night having fun, but they don't 'do adda'. It is extremely amusing to me when a well-meaning Englishman takes pity on us to say, 'You poor things, you don't know what a club is!' For those who have adda, what use is a club? Our efforts to establish clubs are like the movements made by a mechanical doll, there's a perfection to its physical stirrings, but life's heartbeat is missing. They belong to an adda-partaking race, and yet they must rent rooms, print letterheads, put the servants in uniforms and found clubs—what could be more laughable or more tragic?

The thing called 'adda' is pan-Indian, but 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. Our Chaitra evenings in the summer, our monsoon evenings, moonlit autumn nights, our sweet, bright, winter mornings—they all silently sound the bell of adda: some can hear it, some can't. Countries in which both winters and summers are extreme, or where winter reigns for six months in a year, aren't really conducive to adda. The enthusiasm for adda is as natural to Bengal as the existence of dense foliage is to its pleasing climate. I've been immersed in a love for adda since my childhood. I become nervous at the thought of 'sabhas' or formal meetings, I run away at the sound of a party, but adda! I can't live without it. You might say I was raised to adulthood by its nurture. I have learnt more from adda than from reading books. I had plucked the desirable fruit of higher learning rather too easily from the tree of university education—that too was a gift of adda. I greet adda as having been the main support in my literary efforts too. When I was young my elders were anxious because they thought adda would destroy me; now I see I gained the world from it. That is why I am not content to remain merely a devotee, I have sat myself down as a priest to preach its virtues.

Adda has exactly the texture of the sort of clothing I love. Clean, but not too white, quite loose, providing some amount of unnecessary slack beyond one's exact needs, soft to the touch, pliable. It doesn't

feel stiff on the skin, doesn't impede your desire to stretch your limbs, even allows you to lie down if you will. Yet it is not faded, not stained with fish-curry or betel juice; the loose gathering of immodest bare-chested men at the door has not crumpled it. It has the air of leisure, but not of neglect; it is not discordant, it has a natural rhythm.

You may think then that you can have an adda whenever you wish. But it has a fragile soul, a whimsical temper, it abandons its bodily materiality at the slightest of reasons, melting away without a trace, and it is a long time before anybody is even aware of its absence. When we sit down for an adda, it sometimes turns into a felicitation of other people's learning—I mean book learning—or we might build an altar to gossip. I may decide to hold a literary soirée once a week or twice a month—the learned and the talented will attend, and we shall have various conversations. Certainly it cannot be doubted that the idea is a good one; the first few occasions take off in such a way that we are amazed, but after a few days, we see our gathering being expelled from the heaven of adda to lie fallen in the bonded land of mere duty. When you have to reach a fixed destination at a fixed time, like office-going, then whatever else you might call it, you cannot call it an adda. Because the first rule of adda is that there are no rules; but you must not be self-conscious either about its unpredictability, its uncertainty, its unannounced nature. It is not a place of recreation, it is a home; we return to it after work, and if we want to escape work and come to it anyhow, that too will remain unquestioned.

Yet it is not as if an adda is built in a haphazard way. My own experience has shown that it needs the guiding narrative of someone's hidden but firm intention behind it. Once quite a few conditions are met, a gathering of a few individuals turns into an authentic adda—not a club, not a party, not a meeting or a function. Let me present these conditions one by one.

In an adda, the status of everybody present must be equal. Differences between men will exist in everyday life, but those who do not know how to shed those divisions along with their office clothes can never savour the true taste of an adda. If there is anybody amongst us so great that the aura of his greatness can never be put aside, then we shall sit at his feet like devotees, but he is not invited to share in

our joy, because his very glance will freeze the fountains of our adda into ice. On the other hand, unless you keep out those whose mental levels are considerably lower than the others' neither side will be justly served. There is a natural limit to the number of people who make up an adda; the upper limit is ten or twelve, the lower, three. More than ten or twelve turns it into the Albert Hall, or even into a wedding reception; and if there are exactly two, then they will meet with the inauspicious—in poetry, and in life. There should exist, among those present, a variety of behaviour at least in the upper storey of their nature; but if there is no harmony in the lower floors, then the rhythm, step by step, will be lost. Adda is for those whom ties of love and kinship spontaneously draw near, and it should stay that way; if you try to forcefully add to the numbers in an adda, its soul-bird will fly away before anyone even realizes it.

Yet it isn't even as if every time these few attuned people come together, an adda will get going. The place too has to be conducive—renting a room for an adda is like renting professional mourners to express grief. The main location of an adda shall be in that house which has the most favourable atmosphere among all the houses available. At the same time, it is advisable to have a few alternative pilgrimage spots at hand, sometimes a change of place works like a sharpener of one's mental faculties; and the complete satisfaction one gains from moving, according to the various seasons or the making and breaking of the moon, from room to veranda, veranda to terrace, terrace to open field, is created for us by Nature's own hand. But whatever the reason, however much the temptation, one must never go to the wrong place. In the wrong place, the people too seem all wrong, and the right note is never struck.

The place for an adda should be very relaxed, and without ostentation. The furniture should be low, soft, and with its shine taken off; if it is also light enough to be dragged away from its usual position whenever you feel like it, what more could you want? It is also advisable to have a sort of rug near the chairs and tables—if it gets too late at night, or if someone feels tired, then one does not need to take permission before stretching out. To drink, there should be cold water in glass tumblers and fragrant, golden tea in fine white tea cups; and if there is any food, it should be tasty, dry, and in small

quantities, so that you can pick some up from time to time, and don't need to get up to wash afterwards. The dishes should be neat, not ornate, and if the servant is given a holiday and the mistress of the house herself distributes the food and drink, then the honour of the adda remains intact.

The conversation should be natural, rhythmic, it should flow along, there should be no thought or effort expended on it; it should be constituted of the sort of thoughts and fancies, anxieties and queries that rise and fall in the mind at all times—the sort that remain buried under the discipline of a working day, the better part of which appears suddenly, but not necessarily meaninglessly, like the beating of newly free waves. Here there should be no hesitation, no material calculation, no responsibility. There should be no need to feel obliged to broach suitable subjects. If suitable subjects do not arise, any subject will do; if occasionally we lose the thread, why should we be afraid to sit in silence? Those who think that to sit silently for even a moment signals an intellectual defeat or a lack of civility do not understand the thing that is an adda. Argumentative types and professional comedians are the two classes of people forbidden in an adda. Those who are learned, as well as those who are compulsive philanthropists, also have to be respectfully kept out. Because the insidious serpent that repeatedly expels us from the Eden of our adda is called Purpose. However well intentioned or however insubstantial, never allow a sense of purpose into an adda even by mistake. Any attempt to self-consciously garner knowledge through an adda is almost as injurious to its health as gambling with dice or cards. You must take it for granted that an adda is purposeless, that nothing may be achieved through it, it can do no good to either you or anybody else. Adda is pure and above desire, complete in itself. If it cannot be enjoyable for its own sake then its existence becomes meaningless.

An adda does not work with only men or only women. If it is only men who come together, the conversation, in the end, will always veer towards work; or again, if it veers completely off course, it may even go off the rails and somersault its way past the limits of good taste. If only women gather, nobody shall be able to keep talk of housekeeping, children, clothing or jewellery at bay. The adda flowers when men and women mix. When women are nearby then men's and

when men are nearby then women's speech becomes more polished, voices remain lowered, gestures do not become ugly. Women contribute their affection and grace, the finest of bindings for the lowliest of occasions; men bring the far-seeing imaginings of their undomesticated minds. Kept apart, men and women have achieved many things on their own; but when the two meet, harmony is created.

Adda is not static, it flows like a stream. Its character changes with the passing of time. It may give you whatever your mind desires: sometimes the flavours of mischief, sometimes animated discussion, sometimes tender goodwill. Friendship and introspection, facilitating the use of your mind and the propensities of your heart, inspiration and rest: only adda can give us all of these together, if it really is worthy of its name. We have been banished to an obscure corner in the meeting hall of nations; those who belong to a busy and great race, whose glances of kindness pierce our hearts at every moment, do not know as yet of our immeasurable gift to world civilization. Perhaps one day we shall open the doors of the new age and come forth, not with arms, not with a measuring rod, not even with religious texts, we shall come forward with a mantra for clean living, a vow for aimless pleasure; we shall conquer the world with adda, conquer, but not capture it—because we know that what you want to hold, you lose, that if you let it go, it is yours. The politics of the world says: grab; the politics of our adda says, let go.