Eat, drink, hookah in Calcutta

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In stately colonial homes, hearty meals were invariably followed by the hookah and brandy-pawnee. Warren Hastings’ Calcutta was the uncrowned foundation of elite social life in India, for at least 200 years to come. The city’s dramatic transformation into a concentrated urban centre from a cluster of villages was amplified by its social gatherings.

Of the rituals that Robert Clive’s progeny adopted after the Battle of Plassey, hookah-smoking was a dominant one. Lord Macaulay had wanted to turn Indians ‘English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect,’ but the British had gone native half a century earlier.

William Hickey, memoirist, who lived in India in the late 1770s and early 80s, wrote that in British Calcutta, going out of favour with the hookah implied going out of fashion. The hookah was an emblem of British integration into Indian culture as well as of their supremacy: with the employment of the hookahburdar (hookah bearer), smoking became a ritual of native subjugation and administrative status. British diplomat Philip Dormer Stanhope wrote in his Memoirs that even writers whose salaries did not exceed £200 a year employed hookahbureadors.

An advertisement from 1792 for the sale of a hookah by a European firm in Calcutta, reads: ‘Elegant Hookah bottoms — urn shaped, richly cut, with plates and mouthpieces’. Charles Bendysh’s inventory of 1675 mentions ‘Chamolet Hoake (sic) with a green baise’. Retired British army official Thomas Williamson’s accounts in The European in India (1813) report many European parvenus as being slaves to their hookahs. Williamson’s accounts were illustrated with engravings by Sir Charles D’Oyly, a British painter and official. His Tom Roe series features several scenes of hookah-smoking in private or public milieus, besides his paintings of the hookahs in his own drawing room in Patna. Paintings by the Italian painter Francesco Renaldi feature Bengali women of fashion smoking the hookah.

Past midnight

The hookah was most widely adopted by the Europeans in the 18th century, with increasing contact with Indian society. The Dutch traveller, John Splinter Stavorinus, wrote about a dinner at the residence of the governor of Calcutta in 1769 that was followed by a hookah session which went well past midnight.

In Regency London, the ‘nabobs’ — a pejorative for rich, indolent or corrupt colonial retirees — frequented clubs like Norris Street Café or Sake Dean Mahomed’s Hindoostane Coffee House, situated in the Marylebone area, also known as Little Bengal. Those who had fought in the minor battles of Hindostan, as one satirist observed, would “eat Mulligatawny...
soup, smoke the Hookah, talk about Tippoo Saib, Seringapatam, and tiger hunting.” Sake Dean Mahomed, known for establishing the first Indian takeaway curry-restaurant in Britain, was also the pioneer of the hookah. Thanks to his innovative herbal inhalants and flavoured nicotine range, smoking was no longer a private activity but a social one.

Back in India, the unforced fecundity of the Colony cast its colonials into imperial boredom. The hookah was both aggravator and therapy — an apology for ruling by pleasure and lassitude. In European history, the hookah appears as a sinful creature in the manors of India, accompanied by a sweet fragrance wafted by the punkah of toddy leaves. In 18th century Bengal, breakfasts of cold ham, fish, rice and fruits were followed by the hookah chaperoned by brandy-pawnee while the sahibs emitted smoke in “odoriferous spicy gales; crowds of Bengallee servants in ... attendance.”

According to Hickey, the sahib would have rather foregone his dinner than be deprived of his hookah. William Makepeace Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1847-48), described as a “panoply of Victorian smokers”, also featured the hookah as an accessory of Jos Sedley, a civil servant returned from Uttar Pradesh with a hookahburdar.

No reservations

There are also several accounts of Indian, and sometimes Western and Christian, women whiling away time with hookahs. Percival Spear notes in The Nabobs (1832) that prior to the intervention of Victorian morals, 18th century European women “had no objection to the hookah, and occasionally smoked it themselves; they freely attended and enjoyed nautches.” An issue of The Calcutta Review from 1860 says: “The rage of smoking extends even to the ladies; and the highest compliment they can pay a man is to give him preference by smoking his hookah. In this case it is a point of politeness to take off a mouthpiece he is using and substitute a fresh one, which he presents to the lady with his hookah, who soon returns it.”

Johan Zoffany’s painting, The Auriol and Dashwood Families (1783-87), gives a wonderful glimpse into colonial life and interracial interactions in 1780s’ Bengal. It depicts a tea party under a jackfruit tree, with the two families, attendants and the hookahburdar. It shows how the two grand commodities of empire — tea and tobacco — bound the imperials and Indians in a relation of consuming and serving.

Hookah was invented in India by Hakim Abul Fateh Geelani, a physician in the reign of Akbar, although some sources credit the Safavid dynasty of Persia with the invention. The Europeans adopted hookah-smoking from the Mughal Amirs. Akbar appeared twice a year before the public, and on each occasion he would be seen smoking a hookah that rested on the head of his elephant. When the British took over, it was this imperial utopia they intended to reinvent. Nabobery meant imitating the Mughals.

Well into the 19th century, hookahs were considered ‘delicious, and very different from the horrid, vulgar smell of common tobacco.’ By the end of the century, however, there were concerns over the expenses the hookah demanded, especially that of employing a
hookahburda. Then, as the administration changed, from Company to Crown, and cultural divide between imperials and subjects widened, hookahs slowly went out of fashion.

In London, however, it continued, in the questionable parts of the city, as in Thaddeus Sholto’s house in Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Sign of the Four (1890). Today, many parts of Central London reclaim the habit. From George Street — where the Hindoostane Coffee House was situated — to Marble Arch, the road is lined with popular and crowded hookah bars, their fashionable clientele happily ignorant of who started the fire.

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