

Excursion of Tea-Stalls in Anarkali, Lahore

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Abstract

This study presents a cultural and socioeconomic exploration of traditional tea-stalls in Anarkali, one of Lahore’s oldest and most iconic bazaars. Through ethnographic fieldwork, including mapping, surveys, and interviews with owners and patrons, the research documents the spatial distribution, operational patterns, and social dynamics of seven tea-stalls in the area. The findings reveal that all tea-stall owners originate from the Swat region, with many connected through familial or village ties, suggesting a migration pattern driven by economic opportunity in Lahore’s informal food sector. The tea-stalls operate within similar hours (approximately 8:00 AM to 9:00 PM) and primarily serve black tea to a predominantly male clientele consisting of local wage laborers, market workers, and occasional students. Female patrons are rare. Despite their proximity, stalls do not significantly compete with one another, each maintaining a steady daily sale of 100–300 cups. Seating arrangements vary, with some offering benches while others operate as grab-and-go services. The owners display pride in their craft, though some acknowledge occasional customer complaints regarding quality. The paper situates these tea-stalls within the historical context of Anarkali as a social and commercial hub, reflecting broader themes of urban informality, migration, and culinary culture in Lahore. The study concludes that these stalls are more than mere vendors—they are vital social spaces that facilitate daily interaction, rest, and community bonding in the bustling historic market. Their persistence underscores the enduring role of small-scale food enterprises in shaping the cultural landscape of the city.

Keywords: Urban Anthropology, Tea culture, Cultural Heritage, Ethnographic Survey

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“OLD LAHORE”
-----from the destined walls
Of Cambala, seat of Cathian Can,
And Samarchand by Oxus, Temir’s throne
To Paquin of Simean Kings; and thence
To Agra and Lahore of Great Mogal.
Paradise Lost, Bk. XI, I (386-392).¹

Lahore Past and Present was written by M Hanif Raza and published in 1987. In a separate chapter, Raza gives us the views of travelers and writers on Lahore. He begins with Milton, the celebrated poet. “Milton placed Lahore among the cities which met the eyes of a repentant Adam from the hill of Paradise”

ANARKALI, LAHORE

Lahore’s Anarkali. The queen of shopping centers in the Punjab, held temptations few people could resist. A shopper’s paradise, the famous bazar had an atmosphere of fun, gaiety and laughter which attracted local residents as well as tourists and businessman. Stretching from outside Lahori Gate and reaching right to Nila Gumband, a distance of nearly one mile. Anarkali dominate large part of the cityscape². Compared to its broad expanse, other bazars in the walled city, looked like narrow, winding alleys. The social life of old Lahore centered round the now deserted Lower Mall. Beauty of this place is people gather there for shopping, gossiping and tea-breaks while shopping. There still are few remains of architecture there, as indications of departed glories.

HISTORY OF FOOD AND TEA

Cities are the index of civilization admired for their palaces, temples, art and aqueducts but as a rule for granaries. Sumer and Egypt rested on those granaries and men who work to fill them. With the arrival of Aryans, after the collapse of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, livestock and cattle in particular assumed great importance. Aryans food was mutton, milk, curd and cooking medium was ghee. When they arrived in India, they also brought animals, and various recipes. Variety in rice cooking, meat, poultry, drinks, syrups, tea, grape-wine, were the few items which can be luxury ingredient of royal cooking³.

With the growth of town, market places, sale of merchandise, need for ware-houses, movement of people for sale and purchase at the given points caused the need for cooked food and thus came into being the cook-shops and tea stalls.

TEA STALLS LOCALITY AND MAPPING

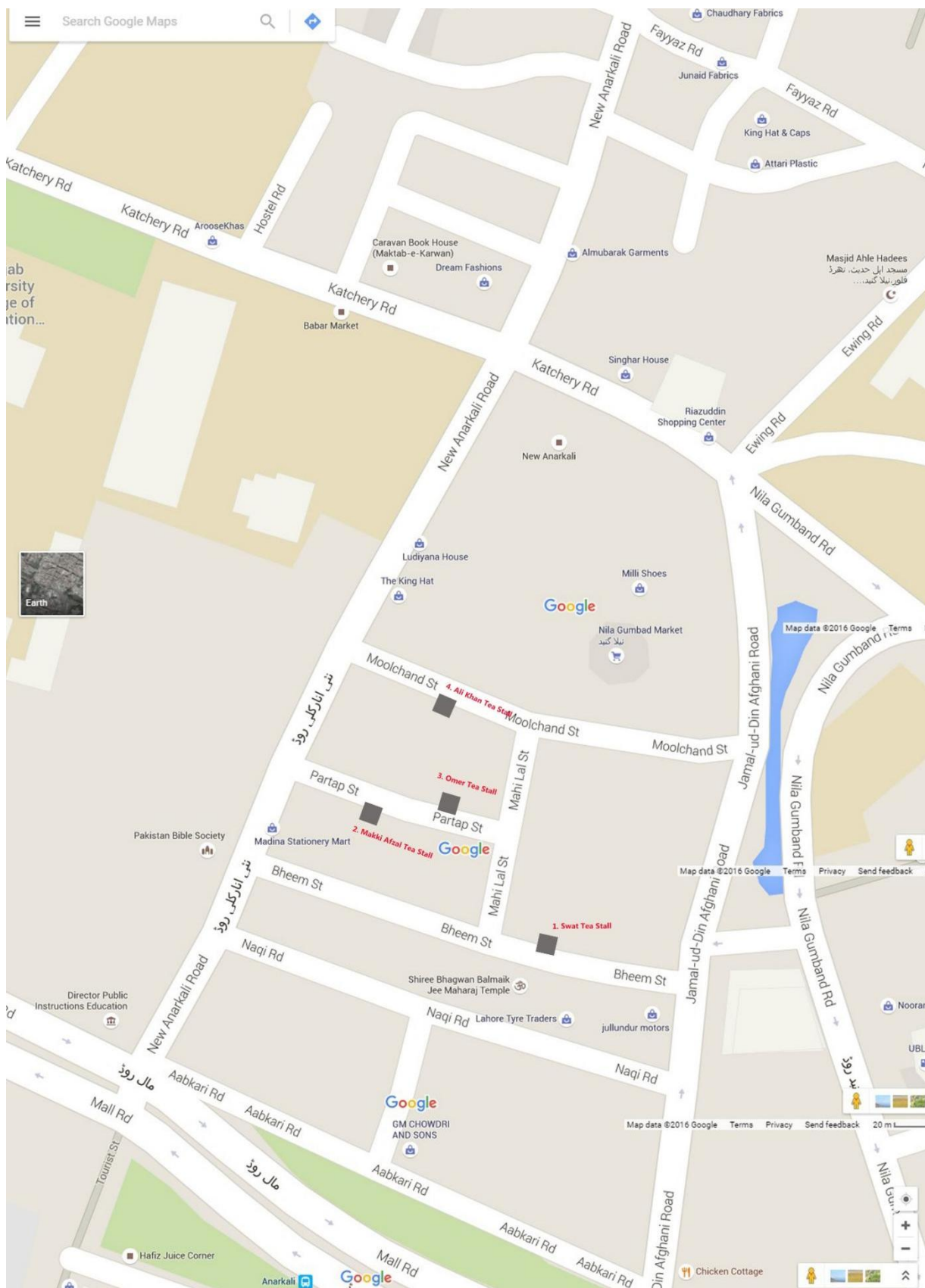
By following the google maps, and moving in every lane of the Anarkali, few tea-stalls are located. They are first located and mapped. After regular visits to these tea-stalls, the data is gathered and surveys are completed. After surveying and interviewing with the owners, shopkeepers, locals, customers of the tea-stalls, the data is documented. It may contain the biased opinion of the people, but to my knowledge it is thorough. Map 1 indicates the four tea-stalls in the anarkali, till katchery road. And Map 2 locate three tea-stalls up to Aibak Road.

¹ Raza, M. Hanif. *Lahore past and Present*. Colorpix, 1980.

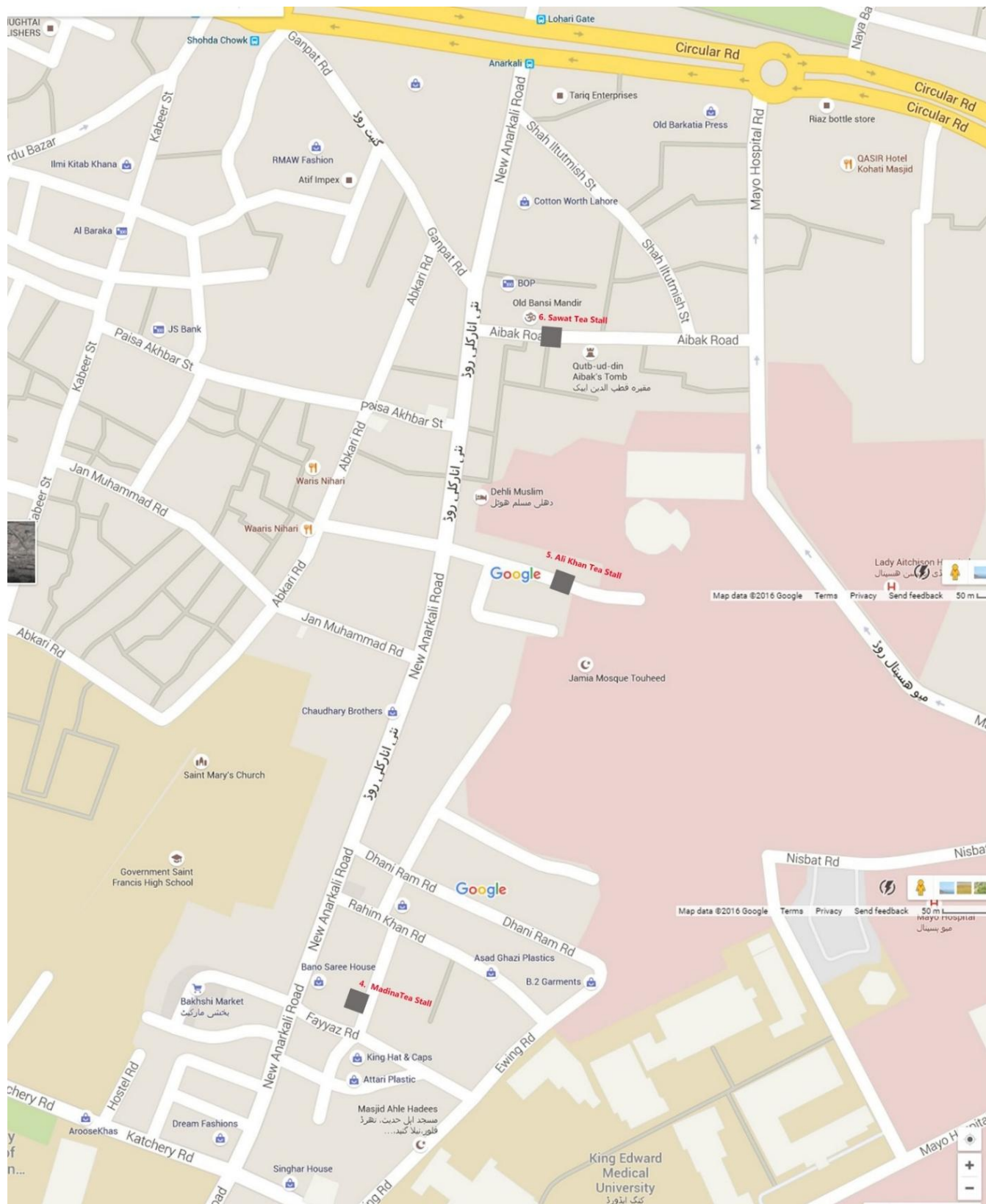
² Neville, Pran. *Lahore: A Sentimental Journey*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1993.

³ Ānand, Som. *Lahore, Portrait of a Lost City*. Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1998.

Map 1



Map 2



1. Nameless Tea Stall

There is no name mentioned, and the owner also declares they are working without any name to serve. But later on in last round, when I visit it for photographs, the relative of the owner said that the name is "Swat Tea Stall". However, someone has mentioned with marker, on the board as "Best Tea Stall". They have started this business some 28 years ago and serve only tea and work from 8:00 in the morning till 8:00 in the evening. Their daily customer range varies from 200 to 300.

2. Makki Tea Stall

According to the owner, Afzal Taj, they started it in late 1960's. They are from Swat. The current owner has served the first owner for years, and after his death he owned it. Then to this day his sons and grand-sons are serving. In the start, they use to serve 24 hours, but now due to security issues, change in their quality and taste, customers has decreased and the shop opens 9:00 in the morning and serves till 8:00 p.m. Malai is served with the tea, on demand, for alluring the Lahori taste. Females also rarely visit this tea-stall. A few benches are there to accommodate customers.

3. Omer Tea Stall

Haji Shareef, has established this tea-stall, 13 years ago. They are the relative of the owner of the Makki tea-stall. After serving conjointly for few years, they later decide to start it on their own. Family issues might be the reason, as they were reluctant to declare anything. The timings are from 9:00 a.m. till 9:00 p.m. Two benches are on the road for the customers.

4. Ali Khan Tea Stall

Hamid Khan is serving there for 14 years is from Buner. Average sale is from 150 to 180 cups. Mostly college student visit this tea-stall. Seven to eight benches are there to accommodate the visitors.

5. Madina Tea Stall

The owner Sheikh Rehman is from Swat. He has started this tea serving business some 7 years ago. Almost 100 - 150 cups are sold per day. The people around praised him for their taste and service. Rarely females visit this tea-stall. Mostly they serve the shopkeepers around the tea-stall.

6. Ali Khan Tea Stall

Ali, from Buner, started this business almost 23 years ago, and is satisfied with the sale. They never told their average daily sale and were reluctant to cooperate. Two to three benches were on the road for sitting. According to them there sale is proportional to the shop around. If the customers visit the shops around the tea-stall, the sale is more than the other days. Women were never seen there.

7. Swat Tea Stall

Ahmed Ali from Swat, started this business some 30 years ago. They serve almost 150 - 200 customers per day. They have sitting area with 8 to 10 benches. And on the racks around the cups and other crockery is well-arranged.

The questionnaires and photographs from each tea-stall is here for further details:

Name of Owner: Sajjad Khan **Since:** 28 years **From:** Swat

Name of Tea Stall: Swat Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?

Almost 300

2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Only men came to this tea stall, and age vary from 20 – 35 years
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly wagers and market workers from around.
4. Do you offer seating?
They have to sit outside the shop. Only 2 benches are available.
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Visitors prefer to sit for the cup of tea, in some case they just prefer to grab it.
6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?
We all tea-stall owners are from same village. And few are even relatives.
7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?
Only a few customers invite their friends for tea, and our customers are satisfied with the available tea.





Name of Owner: Afzal Taj **Since:** 1970 **From:** Swat

Name of Tea Stall: Makki Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?
Almost 200
2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Both male and females came to this tea stall, and age vary from 25 – 50 years
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly market workers from around, with a few job holders.
4. Do you offer seating?
They have to sit outside the shop. 3, 4 benches are available.
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Visitors prefer to sit there, as benches are there. They deliver to shops nearby.
6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?
Our cousins and friends are also in same occupation, in same lane, and a few cross streets.
7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?
There are sometimes few complaints regarding the quality, and we try to meet their demands.

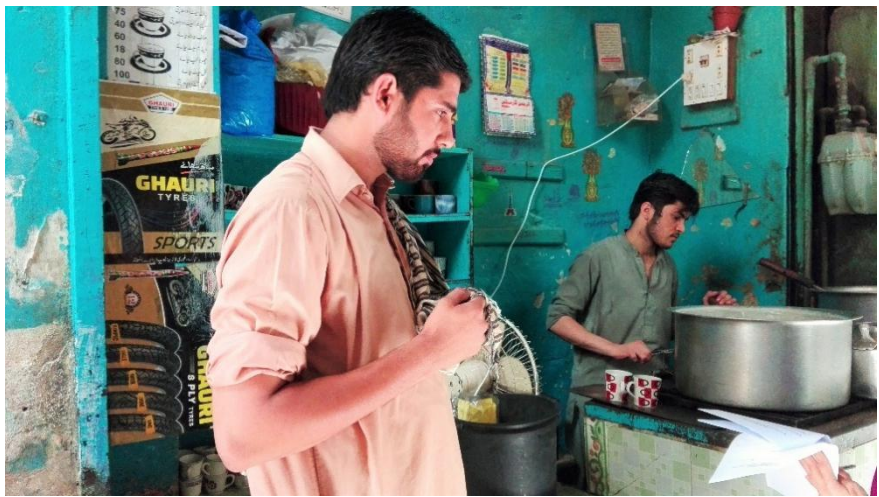


Name of Owner: Haji Sahrif Khan **Since:** 13 years **From:** Swat

Name of Tea Stall: Omer Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?
Almost 250 - 300
2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Only men came to this tea stall, and age vary from 20 - 30 years
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly market workers from around.
4. Do you offer seating?
They have to sit outside the shop. Only 2 benches are available.
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Visitors mostly grab the tea due to space issue, only a few prefer to sit.

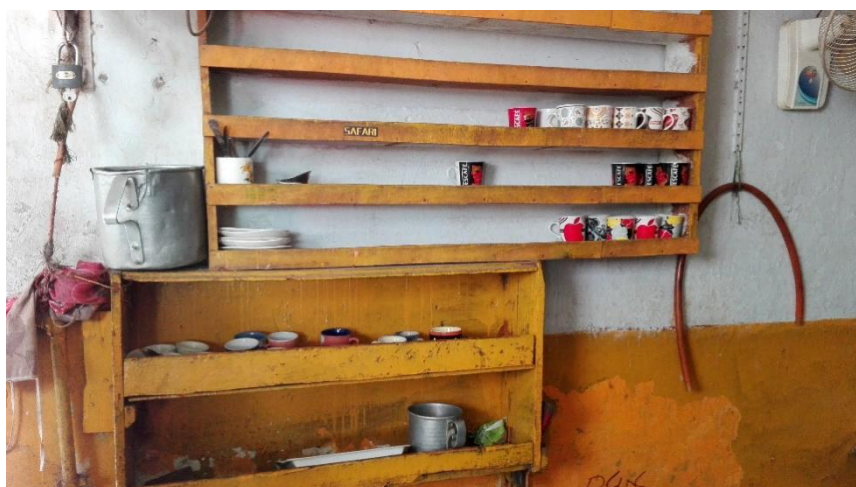
6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?
A distant relative from Baner was already in this business, so they also came along.
7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?
Our customers mostly prefer to drink our tea, as they are satisfied with the taste and quality.



Name of Owner: Hamid Khan Since: 14 years From: Baner
Name of Tea Stall: Ali Khan Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?
Almost 150-180
2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Mostly college students visit the tea stall
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly wagers along with the market workers from around.

4. Do you offer seating?
They offer sitting place inside the shop. 6, 7 benches are there to accommodate.
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Visitors prefer to sit there instead of just grabbing the tea.
6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?
We all are from same area, so we know each other.
7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?
Customers are mostly satisfied, while some customers complain about the quality.



Name of Owner: Sher Khan **Since:** 7 years **From:** Swat
Name of Tea Stall: Al-Madina Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?
Almost 100-150

2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Females rarely visit the place. Mostly men from youngsters to age-old come here.
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly wager.
4. Do you offer seating?
They offer sitting place inside the shop with few benches
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Visitors prefer grab the tea. As mostly are wagers.
6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?
We are not relatives; we are only from same area.
7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?
Customers are very satisfied with the tea.





Name of Owner: Ali Khan **Since:** 23 years **From:** Baner

Name of Tea Stall: Ali Khan Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?
It depends on the number of customers who came to visit the shops around.
2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Only men visit this place.
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly market workers from around the shops and rarely the wagers.
4. Do you offer seating?
There are 2, 3 benches outside the shop.
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Mostly prefer the deliver them at their shops around, for their customers.
6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?
Like Lahore, we are from Swat, a widespread area. We aren't relatives
7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?
Customers seems satisfied.



Name of Owner: Ahmed Ali

Since: 30 years

From: Swat

Name of Tea Stall: Swat Tea Stall

1. How many cups of tea are served per day?
Almost 150 cups.
2. What age, gender of people visits it?
Both male and female use to come here for tea.
3. Visitors are job holders or wagers or market workers?
Visitors are mostly wagers and market workers from around.
4. Do you offer seating?
There is sitting arrangement inside.
5. Visitors sit there, just grab the tea or do they deliver?
Mostly prefer the sit there, while few prefer to just grab in their own cups.

6. Why you have come from Swat, any relative in same occupation?

We are from same area, so we know each other.

7. Are customers are satisfied with your tea, and do they invite other people as well?

People appreciate our tea.



“Tea ... is a religion of the art of life.” Okakura Kakuzō

The owners of the tea-stalls were reluctant to deliver information about their customers, sale and background. The timings of all the tea stalls is almost the same, i.e. from 8:00 in the morning till 9:00 p.m. An interesting fact is that they all were from Swat, maybe this is the reason that the names of the tea-stalls were in repetition. Some confessed that they are relatives, while few denied this fact and stated that they are from same village. And the only reason they came there because they heard that tea business here can be good occupation for meeting both ends meal. They are spread through-out the area, and except in one lane, they are all in different lanes at intervals, without bothering the sale and customers of other tea-stall. It is interesting that all the teal-stalls only serve black tea. And some of them, where sitting arrangement is available, have attractively arranged the cups and other crockery. Only few were visited by the females. But all are enthusiastic to serve well to the customers.

“There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.” Henry James