

# On the Street Where I Loved

The romance of Calcutta's Park Street has disappeared into thin air, laments Gitanjali Prasad, nostalgically recalling the magical days of yore.



Cooper, who now inhabits a shop front on Park Street



Queen's Mansions on Park Street retains its old-world charm

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and its very special joys. "In those days," says singer Usha Uthup, "there was Pam Crain singing at Blue Fox, there was Dee singing at Tricera, all the best musicians that people could think of were in Calcutta before they migrated to Bombay."

In his book, *Rickshaw Ragtime*, writer Jug Surrya, describes how for him Park Street "was cakes and humered toast at Flury's, dog-eared Enid Blyton's borrowed from the Oxford Library, comics (and later contraband *Pinky*) taken on lending charges from the pavement book shops, living to Calcutta's first juke box in Magnolia's Soda Fountain, getting into a punch up after a trainee jam session at Tricera... Park Street was, for Surrya and so many others, "a vivid strand in the umbriled design of growing up."

I remember, in the early 80s when I was a young bride in Calcutta, Saturday evenings were inevitably reserved for a meal at a Park Street restaurant. When we were plush, Akok and I would dine in style at Skyroom, which was considered the finest continental restaurant at that time. But even when we were broke, it was possible to have a fairly respectable Chinese meal in the inappropriately named Bar-B-Q for the princely sum of Rs 27.

Accepting an invitation to the revamped coffee shop at the Park Hotel, Calcutta, I confided to Mini Roy, then the PBC there, that it was to be the Park's coffee shop that Akok had taken me (exactly 16 years ago to the day) and write this piece) when we first met. Mini was not surprised. "You won't believe how many of the clients I contact, are telling me this," she said. "They say, 'Oh, of course, we will come, that's where I met my husband/wife for the first time.'" Ah yes, Cappuccino and Peter Cat, Mozambo, Tandooz, all these restaur-

ants are tied up with memories and milestones for so many of us.

So how is it that a street that was so inextricably woven into the lives of so many people, is today no longer a favourite haunt, or even an subsequent habit? "I've not been to Park Street for some time, and I haven't been to a Park Street restaurant for years now," says self-confessed Park Street aficionado, Usha Uthup, and families all over Calcutta



An old building on Park Street

would agree, that not indeed have they. "I think it's because earlier Park Street was really dotted with a string of excellent restaurants. Now a lot of offices and shops have come up, and they, of course, are shut in the evenings when people normally go out," says Anita Varma, vice

principal, Spontics Society of Eastern India. Agrees husband Virendra, managing director of Balmer Lawrie, "You see, in the '60s and '70s, the five-star hotel restaurants had not come up, and so the Park Street restaurants attracted the cream. Today, those restaurants are faced with competition they are finding it hard to meet." Indeed, many families feel that through prices in Park Street restaurants have risen sharply over the years, the ambience and quality of service have deteriorated. This makes Calcutta's clubs and five-star hotels more attractive for eating out.

There are other reasons. Rajesh Bhalla, owner of Bhulla Capers, a shop which has been on Park Street for 43 years, feels that the decline started around '75 or '77, when union activity led to an increasing number of strikes. "In many cases, the demands of the labour started increasing day by day, and if you didn't meet the demands, there was chaos. Then the increased traffic due to the office blocks that have come up, has led to such an increase in pollution that it's not pleasant to walk down the street any more," laments Bhalla.

Also, many families, who prefer to remain anonymous, state that today, conditions in Park Street are so bad, that about 15 to 20 pimps operate in the small area between the Chowringhee-Park Street crossing to Xavier's College. Even those who have their families in law are accosted by pimps these days, they complain.

Not everyone agrees. Says an enthusiastic Roxana Ahmed, who is a new recruit at Park Street's Louis Philippe shop, "I still say that Park Street is one of the best locations in the city for a shop like ours." As Usha Uthup rationalises, "By decline, if we mean morals, then morals are declining everywhere. I think problems like unemployment and poverty are dogging the roots of today all over the



A book payment shop lives up the name



The Park Street cemetery: R.I.P. to Calcutta's history



The new face: A park shop and cigarette bar



Modern days captures some of the old glamour of Park Street

Park Street was never just a street. For a whole generation of Indians, the very name itself glamour, excitement, romance and, inevitably perhaps, sometimes heart-break too. When Calcutta was still India's cultural capital, it was Park Street which beckoned the rich, the famous, the classy, and the crass with its irresistible magic. Film-stars and business magnates, company executives and society ladies, everyone flocked to Park Street to partake of its myriad offerings

the world, and they don't have any proper channels to give vent to their energies. You must see the decline of Park Street in a much wider perspective." It is perhaps inarguable that, apart from a drop in good, old-fashioned morality, congestion and pollution are on the rise everywhere.

And yet, Park Street, the old Park Street, with its unique amalgam of fun and festivity, is sorely missed. "It's sad, really," says Anita Varma. "I do miss the old Park Street, especially Skyroom." If Anita Varma misses the Skyroom, her husband reminisces fondly about Tricera. And others miss the special ambience that Peter Cat, Mozambo, Blue Fox and Waddell had in the old days.

Park Street, named after Chief Justice Sir Elijah Impey's deer park which once bordered it, has had a chequered history. Much of Calcutta's history lies buried in the famous Park Street cemetery and legends are dying out every day. Few of today's youngsters know that the Queen's Mansions were built by the "grand old man of the turf", the American tycoon J.C. Gaultier, who lost his fortune on the rice-trick.

The jewel in the crown of contemporary Park Street was Skyroom, which pulled down its shutters in the very recent past due to labour trouble. The glory and the grandeur of this little restaurant are the stuff that today's legends are made of. Calcuttians will tell you that Skyroom's prawn cocktail used to be flown to India's Gandhi in Delhi because she liked it so much. And that Arvind Mahalanobis would never visit Calcutta

on a Tuesday because that was the day Skyroom was closed. In its heyday, Skyroom was host to celebrities like Raj Kapoor, Jyoti Basu, Imran Khan, Shashi Modhi and Durbhan Seth.

Today, a cherubic Prakash Nath Malhotra, the owner of Skyroom, continues to live a quiet, retired life. "I started Skyroom in 1957," he says, "and we got such excellent patronage that things just kept getting better and better. Perhaps we were the only restaurant

in the city."

Does Malhotra not mourn the demise of his labour of love, whose destiny was perhaps tied up with Park Street itself? "Not at all," he answers, philosophically, "everything has to die. Why should Park Street be different?"

That's one way of looking at it. In fact, Malhotra confesses that "towards the end, I was so upset by the deterioration in the class of people coming to Park Street and to my restaurant, that I would tell them that the restaurant was full even when it was not. A restaurant is not just walls and tables and food, it is people. At one time, Park Street had a cosmopolitan crowd. Now it gets the new-rich. You can't have a classy restaurant with such a clientele."

To Usha Uthup, on the other hand, the fact that things are not the same, that served food on sterling silver cutlery and cutlery. At one stage, the head steward wore a gold bangle with a gemstone. The jewel in the crown of contemporary Park Street was Skyroom, which pulled down its shutters in the very recent past due to labour trouble. The glory and the grandeur of this little restaurant are the stuff that today's legends are made of. Calcuttians will tell you that Skyroom's prawn cocktail used to be flown to India's Gandhi in Delhi because she liked it so much. And that Arvind Mahalanobis would never visit Calcutta

make the enchanted '60s and '70s just that much more magical. "When I hear everyone say that it's not the same, all I can say is that I am very happy it's not the same. I am very glad that I was part of something good, and that I am not a part of the decline. If you say that there was a magic and I was associated with that magic, then it is very nice."

Have my own theory about why the decline of Park Street was inevitable. Perfection can rarely be sustained. Perhaps, as Malhotra says, "It was all too good to be true." ■



The Skyroom is now no more