

Memories of Delhi in the 1950s



Jatinder Sethi

Jatinder was born in Lyallpur, now Faisalabad, in pre-Independence India. He finished his M.A. (English) from Delhi University in 1956, and went off to London to study Advertising in 1958. He passed his Membership Exam of The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (M.I.P.A) in 1965, and joined Rallis India in Bombay. Later, for over 20 years, he worked for the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather. Now retired, he helps his son in his ad agency in Delhi.

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Recently, I bumped into some very old college friends while roaming in the inner circle of Connaught Place (CP), New Delhi. More than 50 years ago, we used to stroll around CP after spending hours in the India Coffee House discussing everything under the sun. I had left Delhi in 1958, and had recently relocated myself in nearby Gurgaon after about 50 years. We decided to have dinner together in Delhi 'O' Delhi restaurant in the Habitat Centre.

This restaurant was my first glimpse of people, many familiar faces from those days. There was a sugary crooner, singing melodies requested by the seemingly regular diners. One of the requests, a ghazal, transported me back to the Delhi of 1950s. I think quite a few of the diners were also taken back to old times. It was one of the most popular [ghazals](#) of the 1950s, written by the Pakistani poet, Qateel Shifai, and sung by the famous Pakistani singer Iqbal Bano.

ulfat kii na_ii ma.nzil ko chala, tuu baa.Nhe.n Daal ke baa.Nho.n me.n

dil to.Dane vaale dekh ke chal, ham bhii to pa.De hai.n raaho.n me.n

United Milk Bar and the Jukebox

In those days, the only place that had a Juke-Box in Delhi was a milk bar (which is now a liquor bar and restaurant) called United Milk Bar, located right under the then Hindustan Times Office/Press opposite Scindia House. It was in this milk bar that I expressed my love and proposed to a contemporary of mine who was studying for her Masters in Philosophy, while I was studying for Masters in English. Our relationship was known to most of our friends at the Coffee House on Janpath.

To play the jukebox, you had to insert a four anna (there were 16 annas in a rupee) coin, which was also the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola, or a cup of coffee at that time. Iqbal Bano's ghazal was the most popular out of the 75 song options. We spent a lot of four annas there every day, out of our limited student budget.

This milk bar, a nice decent place, was used to either meet one's girl friend or listen to the music. However, the main haunt was India Coffee House. Everyone had a great sense of belonging to the India Coffee House in the 1950s. And for us students, the coffee house at Delhi University was also the meeting place after classes.

The India Coffee House on Janpath

Let me introduce some of the people who were the regulars at the India Coffee House on Janpath, and occupied their customary chairs on the appointed hour punctually at 10.30 in the morning - summer and winter. There were others, working in government offices, who came earlier and left by 9.30, after having their paan and cigarette.

Now imagine you are with me back in the 1950s, and we are going to the coffee house. We go past the two old *paanwalla* punditjis, sitting on their *chowkis* on either side of the entrance, with shining copper *thaals* full of paans and all the colourful ingredients, already serving their regular customers. There is another cluster of people outside, buying cigarettes at the shop under the staircase, on the right side of the door, and discussing politics while going to pick up their bicycles and away to work. (Bicycles were a common mode of travel for office workers and students at that time in Delhi.)

As you push open the double door and enter, you see the place is already full, and sounds quite noisy. There is a cacophony of chatter, as everyone is talking at the same time. The inside hall is large and long, and goes right up to the kitchen entrance, from where a spiral staircase takes you to the balcony, which is rarely used by the regulars.

The centre of the hall has a long row of tables with chairs around it, depending upon the number of people in each group occupying the table. The left side of the hall is lined up with small cabins, for the families, with curtains drawn. And, along the right side of the wall, there is a row of sofas with low long tables for large groups. The sofa seat in the centre of this row is of horseshoe shape, meant for a larger group.

“Girilal Jain group”

In practice, this horseshoe shape sofa was unofficially always left for a regular group, already sitting there. The head of the group, sitting in the centre, is nobody else but Girilal Jain, then the chief reporter of Times of India. He has about ten youngsters listening to his discourse in rapt silent, over cups of hot coffee. Later on, one saw a new member, a young lady who came into this group: Kamala Mankekar, wife of the then editor of Times of India, Delhi, who had also joined the staff of Times of India.

Later on, Girilal Jain became Times of India’s London correspondent, and then Editor. In the early 1960s, I also happened to be in London at the same times as Girilal. I used to go to the Times of India’s office, as my place of work was quite close by, at lunch break to read the Indian paper, and sometime chat with him and have tea together. I left London in December 1964 for Bombay.

Coincidentally, in 1971, almost after 16 years, Kamala Mankekar joined as the Public Relations (PRO) head in the same organisation in Bombay where I worked, and we became good friends

“I.K. Gujral group”

The very first table in the centre row, as you entered the coffee house, was always occupied by a group, which included Inder Kumar Gujral, popularly called Inder; Surinder Nihal Singh of Statesman, more an Englishman than an Indian, with as tall a foreign wife; Inder Malhotra of Times of India, expert on Pakistan affairs; Rakshat Puri; Ajit Bhattacharjee (Rakshat and Ajit were two of the most serious people in this group), and Uma Vasudeva (known among us DU students as “303”!)

They were always in serious political discussions, Inder Malhotra being the most animated and loudest. I never found out who paid for the coffee, perhaps they were always going Dutch. Both Nihal Singh and Inder Gujral (I don’t remember if he had a goatee at that time, which he grew after the visit of Russian leader Bulganin) would move into the individual family cabins once their wives arrived. Later on, Inder Gujral joined the kitchen cabinet of Indira Gandhi (India’s Prime Minister), and went on to become the Prime Minister of India! He stopped coming to the coffee house once he joined Indira’s cabinet.

Nihal Singh, Ajit Bhattacharjee and Inder Malhotra, I believe, are still there and contributing to various newspapers. I am not sure about Rakshat Puri, whose younger brother, Rajinder Puri, writes a “Bulls Eye” column in the Outlook India. Rajinder Puri was occasionally part of our table of students and was trying to become a cartoonist at that time.

“Satinder Singh group”

Satinder Singh (God rest his soul, he died at a young age), an expert on Akali and Communist politics, was a very well read man. He had a small blond beard, more like a stubble, quite tall with the loudest laugh in the coffee house, a high pitch voice, and a great argumentative Indian. Beside a few young journalists from the Indian Express and Hindustan Times, there were a few others from the vernacular press, and Krishan Malik, who was the Airport correspondent of Times of India. Krishan later became the London correspondent and never came back to India.

As students, we never got invited to the lavish parties thrown by the American and Russian embassies in those days, but we always tagged along with Krishan Malik, who was a bachelor at that time and not attached with anybody then. He knew quite a few diplomats, and we gate crashed with him for free vodkas and whiskies. Malik was a happy-go-lucky jovial friendly chap. He is often on BBC television programmes these days, where he is invited as an expert on Indian affairs. He had a nice pad on the top floor of the coffee house building those days, which he shared with a diplomat from a South American embassy.

Satinder Singh, a bachelor at that time, used to live in West Nizamuddin, while I was living in East Nizamuddin, staying with my family. I often went to his place for a drink. The deal was that I would bring the sodas, and he would provide the whisky.

Satinder later on got hooked to a young charming girl, who used to visit coffee house with her family and eventually got married after a long romance. Our evening meetings stopped after he got married, and I moved onto Bombay.

I believe Khushwant Singh knew Satinder quite well, even though he never visited the coffee house. There were three other fans of Satinder Singh in the coffee house. One was “Professor” Joginder Singh, who used to teach in private colleges, which were quite popular at that time with the refugee students. He always used to carry orange peels in his pockets and use them as face fresheners during summer. His younger brother, Hardev Singh, who was an economist, used to work for a political weekly published in Delhi. And the third gentleman was known as “Judge Singh”, a popular character, tall and handsome who would also show up sometime in the University coffee house also. Nobody knew what exactly he did.

Cabin users

Before I take you to other tablemates, let me give you a peep to these well-known regulars, who preferred to sit inside the family cabins. There was Kapila Vatsyayan, now of Centre for Science and Environment, India, with her husband. Other cabin users were Richard Bartholomew, critic of modern Indian art, and his wife Rati, both working in Modern School at that time, and often joined by Balwant Gargi, the Punjabi playwright. Pablo Bartholomew, a well-known photographer, comes from the same clan. Satish Gujral, (a top selling artist) with other family members, always sat in a cabin, even though his brother Inder Gujral would be outside with his journalist friends.

Our mixed group

Our table, almost at the end of the row, near the kitchen door, always had about eight to ten friends, mostly students of M.A. from different colleges – Delhi, Kirorimal and Hindu. (Some of our friends at our table were not students but had jobs; these generous earning members were normally made to pay for coffee, as they always had money.) One of them was Roshan Taneja, from Commerce College, Darya Ganj who later on went off to New York to learn Acting. He worked on Broadway in *West Side Story* with Marlon Brando. After coming back to India, he joined the Film Institute at Pune as the head of the Acting Department and had the distinction of training Amitabh Bachchan, Jaya Bhaduri, Shatrugun Sinha, Asrani, and many more film stars. Eventually he started his own “Roshan Taneja School of Acting” in Mumbai.

O.P. Kohli, a short, plump and jovial chap, was involved with theatre production in Delhi while working in some government office. He would always force you to have coffee with him before he left for office. People considered him a buffoon but he was a very friendly soul.

Ved Prakash was a Hindi teacher in the Modern School at the same time as Richard Bartholomew, and a lover of Hindi poetry. And we had Shoon Saxena and Shyam Saxena. Shyam copied Dev Anand's hairstyle and shirt-collar style.

The topics of discussion on this table used to be poets and poetry – both Urdu and English. For us, "Madhubala" and Harivansh Rai Bachchan's "Madhushala" (both books of Hindi poetry) used to be like a commercial break in between famous Urdu poets such as Jigar and Josh.

I must mention two of my seniors from Kirorimal College. They both were MA English Final students, while I was one year junior. All of us, very close friends, were liked by our Principal, Dr. Swarup Singh. Harish Malik was a brilliant student while Sudarshan Bhutani was an average student who passed his Master's degree by just one mark! Harish got through with a Distinction and he joined the college as a lecturer. He was bent upon joining the IAS, like everyone else, but, even after three tries, he could not get in. On the other hand, Bhutani got through the exam in his very first try, and became an Indian Foreign Service officer. Harish eventually joined Air India and became a Board Director, but had to quit, I believe, because he could not get along with Rajiv Gandhi.

Other tables

There were number of other tables occupied quite a few notable people from various walks of life like travel agencies, hotels, All-India Radio artists, Urdu writers and Hindi poets. But we had no interaction with them.

India Coffee House at the University

The Janpath coffee house had a sibling establishment, under the same name and management, and as popular, at the campus at Delhi University, where we students discussed Keats, Byron, Milton along with Waris Shah and Ghalib, after our classes. Most of us, from different colleges, were studying literature, philosophy, law, economics and personnel management under renowned professors like VKRV Rao (popularly known as ABC RAO), Dr Swarup Singh, who went on to become Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University and later a State Governor, Prof. Bhalla of St. Stephen's College Another popular professor used to be Frank Thakur Das.

In our literature class, there were three girls. One of them was Madhur Mathur, who became Madhur Jaffrey, and is now the famous Indian cookery queen of New York.

The three students who never entered the University coffee house, were the Singh brothers - sons of Sardar Baldev Singh, India's first Defence Minister. They were law students. They always stood outside the Law Faculty – mid way between Miranda House (a college for women) and the Coffee House – leaning against their open limousines, chatting with friends.

For most of us students, the best mode of travel used to be the University special – a low, long trailer bus, which used to move through whole of Delhi, picking up and dropping regular students, some of them never paid the fare!

This coffee house was a quaint little place, with lot of open spaces to sit outside. Both the coffee houses, besides serving excellent Indian coffee, were known for their very friendly and courteous nature. The waiters knew the regulars by their names, and the regulars called the waiters by their first names- never as "waiter". The University coffee house produced quite a few IAS & IFS officers, while the Janpath coffee house produced well-known journalist and politicians. Of course, there were third-raters (like my friends and me, also, but all doing well in life (hopefully)).

Famous Cultural Activities of Delhi in the 1950s

I don't know about today's Delhiwallas, but all of us, the whole crowd of people of coffee houses – Janpath and the University – used to be pretty high on Indian culture (Nehru's influence?). There was something in the wind that made each member of these coffeehouses to look forward to three of the most famous cultural programmes in Delhi.

Mushaira at Chelmsford Club

An annual *mushaira* function used to be held in the memory of Sir Shanker Lal at the Chelmsford Club. It always was a three-night function. The *mehfil* used to start at about 9 pm and go on till the early hours of the morning. The function, every year, was presided over by Kunwar Mohinder Singh Bedi, who I believe was a government functionary, and a poet of repute. Some of the great poets who used to participate were Josh Malliabadhi, Jigar Muradabadi, Firaque Gorakhpuri, Sagar Nizami, Jagan Nath Azad, Ali Sardar Jaffery, and others. Sometime Pakistani poets like Ahmed Nadeem Kasami and Qateel Shifai also used to participate. Josh Sahib was Nehru's personal friend, but that didn't stop Josh going away to Pakistan. I believe he regretted the decision later on, but he didn't return to India although Pandit Nehru offered him his job as an Editor of *Aajkal* magazine published by All-India Radio.

Not only the whole of coffee house people but other Delhiwallahas were always there – all the three nights. Nobody would leave the *mehfil* till the early morning. The open-air place used to be packed, with quite a few drunks around, beside the poets, especially Jigar and Firaque, both in *sherwanis*.

Classical music nights at Constitution Club

A second great annual event used to be classical music function at the old Constitution Club. This was also a three-night event, and always had packed house every night. Here again, the *mehfil* never finished before the dawn of the next day. One had the life-time opportunity to listen to India's great masters, Omkarnath Thakur, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Gangubai Hangal, Girja Devi, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shanker, Ahmed Jan Trikhwa, Ustad Bundu Khan, the Sarangi player, and others. There were Pakistani singers like Mallika Pukraj, singing Hafeez Jalandhari's famous [*Abhi to main Jawan Hun*](#) *ghazal*.

The programme always started with the *shahnai* of Bharat Ratna Ustad Bismillah Khan. The topic of discussion the next day at coffee house was of course the previous night's show.

Phool walon ki sair

A third annual event was the famous "*phool walon ki sair*" at the Mehrauli village, to celebrate the birth of a local *peer*. At that time, Mehrauli was really a village, far away from Delhi. The event used to have Nehru's blessings in those days, and attracted Qawaali singers from all over India. Although, nowadays I pass Mehrauli every day, I haven't attended this event in recent years.

Incidentally, Qutab and Hauz Khas, in those days were the places for picnics and young friends to meet. One had to go there either by Tongas or by cycles, passing through all the villages. The tomb and the huge green lawn at Hauz Khas, (a Mughal monument) in those days, were like peaceful havens for young couples. These places seemed miles and miles away from Delhi. What a change in 50 years! Now they have been gobbled by the concrete townships.

Epilogue

I left Delhi, my hometown after Partition, in 1958 for Bombay then to London. Now retired and settled here in Gurgaon, I miss institutions like the old India Coffee House, where one could get lost in the cacophony of chatter of cultured intellectual people and friends.

In Bangalore, the India Coffee House has pulled down shutters recently. I can understand the loss of the people of Bangalore, which we went through long time ago.

May be that is why India is unable to produce politicians of great stature!
However, I still love Delhi! ❖

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