

A KOLKATAN'S NOTALGIA: THE SWEET AROMA OF FILTER COFFEE

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The moment I read in the papers that the South India Club on Hindustan Park was closing down its famous canteen, I rushed for a last breakfast. But alas, when I reached I found it had already shut down.

To make up, I went to the old trustworthy Ramakrishna Lunch Home on Lake Road, so close to where I was born and brought up. I gorged on steaming idlis, crisp vadas dipped in sambhar and a wonderful masala dosa. To me, it was not food — but nostalgia. I grew up on Lake Road that was known as Little Madras.

From the 1920s, Tamil Brahmans had been settling in south Kolkata. The sign board of South India Club mentions 1926. When anti-Brahman Dravidian parties (DMK, later AIDMK) became powerful in the 1950s, most educated Tamil Brahmans left and many made Kolkata their home. In almost every house or flat in our locality we had name boards like Subramaniam, Aiyar, Seshadri, Iyengar, Venkatraman, Krishnan, etc. Their older generation spoke no Bangla, Hindi or English and would start in fluent Tamil when they met us on the streets. I learnt elementary Tamil like “Ennaku Tamil Theriayudu, Pooriyadu” (I don't understand Tamil) and “Bangla Therimaa” (Do you understand Bangla) — only to survive.

Many wore their white dhoti folded up to the knees, like skirts — we got used to it. But what we could not adjust was that the senior Tamil gentlemen started their loud Vedic chanting and their prayers, before dawn — which woke us up. My naughty brother would shout at them saying “Uncle, God has not yet got up! It's only 4 am. Please go off to sleep and let us sleep”.

We always had Tamil families living on the floor above us and their ladies would start grinding rice, dal, chillies, in their huge stone grinders — at 6 am or even before.

We were forced to get up then, because of the thunderous sound of grinding stones. And their girls and ammas started practising Carnatic music, very early in the morning. The Tamils felt equally disturbed by Bengali families who chatted loudly till 11 or 12 pm as we all had late dinners. Their dinner time was 7 pm.

.We learnt to coexist and enjoyed their Pongal and Diwali. They were a quiet, decent people who had no excess show off and lived simple lives. They paid us well when, as kids, we went to ask for chanda for our para pujas.

But the best part was their food. The Lake Market area had so many cafes where we could get hot and authentic food for a few annas. Prema Vilas, Murugan Lodge, Udupi Home, Laxmi Vilas, Ramakrishna were just a few. We used to go to South India Club cafe a lot of times — mainly for a change of taste.

Their filter coffee was and is outstanding. No one can make it like them. The waiters would pour hot steaming coffee from the steel glass to steel katori from a distance of two to three feet, without spilling a drop. That aroma haunts me all the time.

We also had some Malayalis, Telugus and Kannadigas staying in the locality. They always protested when they were called Madrasis. Even before I was 10, I was told quite sternly that this term was for Tamils and that other South Indians were different. I understood this — but not everyone else.

When I finally returned to settle down in South Kolkata after 11 years in Delhi and a total of over 30 years in Government Quarters, I found quite a few old Madrasi cafes were closed. Sad — I really missed the warmth and the aroma.

Now this iconic restaurant on Hindustan Park has also shut down — and along with it, a part of Kolkata's history has also died.