

A chapter from the past

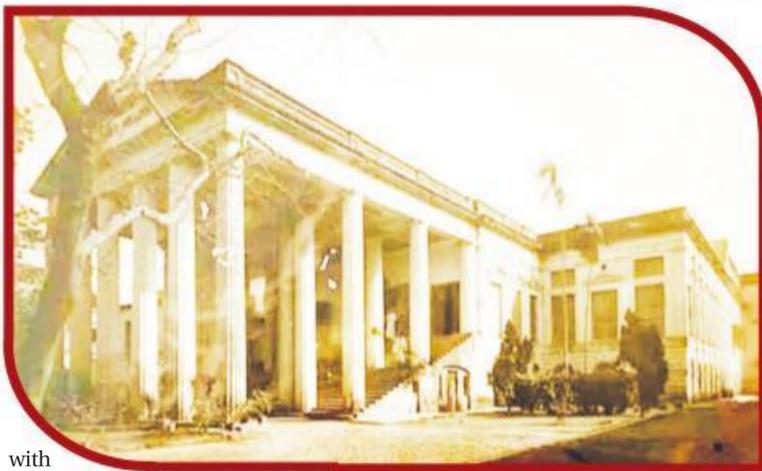


The Sans Souci theatre is a fading memory, but it was once the heart of the city's entertainment scene.

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As soon as the British rule in India was cemented in June of 1757, the investment of British capital through the East India Company and individual traders flooded the country. It pushed Calcutta to emerge as one of the prime cities of Asia, marked by its cosmopolitan culture.

From 1760 onwards, Calcutta started experiencing unimaginable growth as a city where a new European wave was washing away almost everything that was traditional and orthodox. With a new medium of education and new system of land revenue like permanent settlement, Bengal was gradually becoming a potboiler of the new Anglo-Indian culture and side by side it was also becoming a European colony



with clubs, secret societies, public library, debating society, literary clubs and the rise of theatre in pure European form.

Records show that the first European theatre in Calcutta was established in 1756 and named New Play House. The theatre was destroyed during Siraj-Ud-Daulah's Calcutta attack. In 1775, a modern theatre named The Calcutta theatre was established. Such was its grandeur that it was described an equal to "the most splendid European exhibition." It was shut down in 1808.

In 1795, a Russian named Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev founded Bengali Theatre. The first plays were staged on

27 November 1795. The names of the plays were "The Disguise" and "Love is The Best Doctor".

The next 50 years saw a revolution in European theatre. One after another, theatre buildings started coming up and they saw some of the finest performers playing on their stages with best possible sets, outfits, light and sound. As Calcutta was already the richest post of Britain in Asia by then, it had attracted a huge number of European residents. Theatre became their best entertainment. For Europeans of that time, no Indian city offered the lifestyle Calcutta did and theatre was one of the



main reasons.

The best theatre of Calcutta was then Chowringhee Theatre which was situated at the crossing of Chowringhee road and Theatre road.

Founded in 1813, this log-made building was gutted in 1839 causing much dismay to Calcutta's theatre-going crowd. The land was soon purchased by Prince Dwarakanath Tagore at a price of Rs 30,100. It was because of this that the road adjacent to it came to be known as Theatre Road.

This fire made Calcutta's top actress Esther Leach known as the "Queen of Indian stage" jobless. After making her debut here on 27 July 1826 at the age of seventeen, she was then at the pinnacle of her career.

A jobless Ms Leach initiated plans to build a new theatre and she managed to convince very influential persons of that era. One was Lord Auckland and other two were Prince Dwarakanath Tagore and mostly importantly Mr Stocqueler, then the editor of The Englishman, the most popular newspaper among the Anglo-American population of Calcutta.

It was decided that donations would be invited to build a new European-styled theatre with all modern facilities. Lord Auckland donated Rs 1,000 while a sum of Rs 16,000 was col-

lected from the public. Dwarakanath Tagore also made a large donation.

On 21 August 1839, Ms Leach finally managed to open a new theatre named Sans Souci in Waterloo street. It could seat 400 people.

Meanwhile a plot at Park Street was purchased to build a completely new modern theatre named Sans Souci. The plot was at 10 Park Street. The theatre building was completed in 1840 but the first play performed there was on 8 March 1841.

The new Sans Souci theatre was an amazing structure designed by J.W Collins. A flight of stairs from the base used to meet at the landing. The building was 200 ft long and 50 ft wide with a high portico. The stage was 28 ft by 50 ft, and its lighting was contemporary. The hall was airy and had proper ventilation. It was made with the best of material and was the biggest venue of entertainment for the city's European community.

With Bengal Club nearby, the presence of this theatre ensured that the Park Street became the social hub of the street, as it has remained. From here Ms Leach became a legend in Calcutta's entertainment world and she became the biggest rival of a talented actress from Australia named Maria Madeline Tylor.

Sans Souci had its golden time from

1841 to the end of 1843 when a tragic accident on the stage ended the life of Ms Leach. As on every evening, the theatre was packed to capacity on 2 November 1843. That day, a famous actor and director James Vining who was travelling to India came to Sans Souci for a performance with Ms. Leach.

Ms. Leach, who was also in the play, came close to the lamps wrongly placed on its stage in 1848, when for the first time an Indian named Baishnav Charan Adya played the title role in a production of Shakespeare's Othello. This amateur actor later played a significant role in establishing the Calcutta Training School in 1859. His name is sadly banished to oblivion.

This tragic accident earned San Souci a bad name. The property was leased to a French company who were not serious to run it on a regular basis. They last performed there on 24 April 1844. Thereafter, it was used sporadically. A revolutionary event did take place on its stage in 1848, when for the first time an Indian named Baishnav Charan Adya played the title role in a production of Shakespeare's Othello. This amateur actor later played a significant role in establishing the Calcutta Training School in 1859. His name is sadly banished to oblivion.

San Souci has no relics left today of its theatre days, but the site houses one of the prime educational institutions of the city, St Xavier's college.

In September 1849, Father Carew purchased the theatre at a price of Rs 27500 and moved his St John's College there. The college was closed in 1855 and on 16 January 1860 a group of Belgian Jesuits took over both 11 and 10 Park Street to establish St Xavier's College. Later these two plots got a new number, 30 Park Street, as their address. On many counts San Souci has a importance place in Calcutta's cultural heritage. It is sad that not many records are available about the theatre and there are hardly one or two photographs now available.