## 1. Park Street

The street name may conjure visions of magnificent houses and rich people inhabiting them in grand style. But Park Street in the town of Berhampur close to the coast in south Odisha was an amazing place where middle class families lived alongside some very poor ones in buildings of different sizes and shapes and in remarkable harmony. But the beautiful small park in the middle of the street justified the name itself. With well-maintained lawns, flowering plants, shrubs and ferns along the sides of the park adding colour, it was not only a garden for the public, but also a welcome place for the boys to romp about and play games all evening till dinnertime. Sadly, it was not so for the girls given the segregation of boys and girls in all activities during the 1940s and even much later; moreover, the girls were not allowed out of home after dusk In the centre of the park there was a small building with a radio set installed in it that could broadcast via some speakers to a few dozen avid listeners who would gather in the park to listen to the evening news broadcasts from Delhi. For the elders the radio was the all-important thing. During the 1940s and even a decade later, the park was always referred to as "the radio". Radios were rare and middle class homes could not afford to buy a set. We boys said to each other: let's go to the radio and play. Even the elders said 'radio' instead of 'park'. When the news of Gandhi's assassination was being broadcast on January 30, 1948 in the evening, we were out playing in the park. A few elders came to give us the news and asked us to stand in silence or go home. I remember: many Park Street residents kept an all-night vigil at the park then, listening to the bhajans put out by the All India Radio.

The park was run by two fearsome-looking characters. Suribabu, an employee of the local municipality, was in charge of the radio operation in the evenings. Apart from the mandatory news in English, Telugu and Odia, he could dish out for listeners anything he fancied. Short but well built, he struck terror among us the boys on the lawns by a single bellow: Hey, stop the racket, go home, or else…. We'd then vanish for the moment but reassemble a little later in a far corner of the park out of Suribabu's eye. Many years later Suribabu and I became good friends despite the big difference in our ages. It was he that introduced me to chicken curry and paratha in the Khan restaurant in Cuttack, telling me in

jest not to eat grass (that is rice and sambar) at a price that the Khans would provide a far richer and more delicious fare. In a traditional south-Indian Brahmin family like ours, eggs, fish and meat were totally prohibited. Most in my generation among our family were strict vegetarians but the younger lot, especially our grandchildren, has now discarded the prohibitions, some not even knowing about their existence and cultural provenance. The other custodian of the park was even more fearsome in looks and action. Isro, a lean man with sharp features and curly hair, perhaps from a tribal community from the hilly Eastern Ghats close by, was the park guard. He wielded a big stick to drive us away from the lawns whenever he presumably felt some discipline was in order. He spoke an Odia dialect that we could not understand fully. But, over the years, as we grew up, we could communicate with him in our local Ganjami Odia dialect and he became a friend too, another valued resident of Park Street.

Most of those living in the street belonged to the middle-class, with their family heads in professions such as lawyer, doctor, schoolteacher and so on. These families had modest incomes: they were never in want, but they had no riches to flaunt either. A few others were perhaps wealthier, being in trading and business, belonging to the Vaisya community that specializes in such professions. But there were, as I said before, a few poor families living in small houses sandwiched between better-off households. There were two barber families squeezed between a school teacher's house and one in which a well-to-do merchant lived. One of the barbers was 'good' and the other 'bad' in contrast, as in a Bollywood movie. The good one went out in the morning from house to house in the street to do the barbering: shaving adults and attending to needed haircuts. He shaved my grandmother's head regularly! Widows like my granny were shorn off all hair, wore white saris, and not allowed the bindi on their forehead (the red spot that'd tell the world that a woman's husband is alive), and so on, practices that have not disappeared wholly even today. In many parts of India there were – and are still – restrictions even on what they could eat. The barber collected his wages as and when the park street lords pleased. Being 'good' he also trained his children in the family business and – most amazingly – organized a brass band that would perform at weddings and some religious ceremonies. The bad one, as you'd expect from a Bombay film script, never lifted a finger to

provide for his family. His sons and other members of the family took care of their daily needs. The bad barber weaving his way back home after his evening hours at the distant arrack (country liquor) joints was an unforgettable sight. Apart from them, there was a Medari (basket-weaving) family right next to the park. They made a variety of products for daily use from split bamboo – ranging from little baskets to big frames to partition rooms. Their whole family was usually out in the open on a portion of the road close to their dwelling, with their work in progress for all to see (and admire, as I used to). Another poor family lived at the west end of the street, supported by a son in the family who drove a horse carriage, known locally as a Jutka. The horses that drew the Jutkas, and all those who took care of the animals and the carts lived close to a Park Street extension in a virtual slum called Kapu Veedhi. As everywhere in India, from the remote past to modern times, the poor in Berhampur lived in close proximity to the not so poor requiring their services – to wash, clean and do all manner of odd jobs. [Modern urban geography tells us that this is an example of an optimal spatial arrangement, given the ever-present socio-economic inequalities. This is an insight that my colleague Keya Dasgupta at the Calcutta Centre gave me, which the computers would confirm as optimal given the economic and social inequalities. Servants living far away don't suit modern families. But the spatial patterns of living and the means for securing them were worked out by people themselves in Indian urban history through social practice. It is valid even now in all major cities. Every multistoried building with middle class families creates an enormous demand for domestic help of different kinds. The migration of families from the poorer regions supports this trend. So the poor and not so poor live in urban areas in close proximity.]

We lived in a rented two-storied house in the row opposite to the park. It had two roof-covered verandas open to the street at the front on each floor. As in most south India the ground floor one (called by us veedhi arugu a covered space of the house open to the street) was used to receive visitors, street vendors selling vegetables etc. Indeed the barber did his work there and so did a tutor who'd come to coach us (a number of us kids including me, some of my brothers and sisters, and a few visiting cousins as well) in arithmetic, English and so on. The upstairs veranda about 30 feet long and 7-8 feet wide was the collective bedroom. All of

us slept there on mattresses laid from end to end on the floor in the evenings, and rolled back in the mornings and stacked close to the walls in the inner rooms. The ground floor had two big rooms, apart from a dining room, a kitchen and another veranda towards the west, facing a courtyard, a part of which was covered with a thatched roof to house a cow or a buffalo. At the back of all this built up area there was a small shed that also could accommodate a cow. Indeed, for most of the time we lived there, there were two animals, a cow and a buffalo, but there were times when we had only one. Milk literally flowed at all times. The cattle were taken care of by a 'gollavadu' (cowherd) who'd do the milking at the appropriate times and take them out for grazing on the town commons. Upstairs, apart from the veranda, there were two large rooms, one of which was my father's, but not wholly out of bounds for us, and the other used by all for various purposes. For example, I sat there pretending to study, to satisfy my father about my diligence with schoolwork. In fact, I read stories from books I somehow collected from different sources or simply doodled on scrap paper. Behind father's room there was an open balcony from which one could see some buildings on a parallel street. Indeed one could see a small school building and its playground. This was the Santapeta School, my first school; I'll say more about it later.

Mornings began (in the early1940s) on some days with my mother and grandmother roasting coffee beans on a soft-coal stove (called a boggu-kumpati in Telugu) and grinding them in a hand-operated device. On other days the coffee powder from earlier grindings was presumably available for ready use. Anyway, the aroma of coffee would waft upstairs and wake us all up. It's an amazing fact that in many south-Indian households children were in those times introduced to coffee drinking at an early age. It's difficult to say when they were by custom weaned away from milk (at least partially) to get charged by caffeine. Historically, there seems to have been no ill effects of the practice.

My first granddaughter Ananya aged 13+ as I write this has unknown preferences for coffee, but Inara, the second one at 10+ sips occasionally from her mother's cup or has a cup done to her liking with milk. Their dad Ben loves coffee and pursues all its exotic varieties with an uncommon English divorce from addiction to tea, and their mother

Vijaya - my daughter- wants the brew at all times to taste just as her mother had been making it for years – from a combination of the 'pea berry' and' plantation' varieties available in south India. Lately however she has succumbed to coffee-maker ways far removed from the filtered delights and flavours of south-Indian coffee.

The three meals we used to have as children in Park Street were all based on rice, supplemented by dal, vegetables and finally curds – in various combinations at each meal. This meant that breakfast for us was a mini rice meal before we went to school starting at 10 AM. There was a lunch break at 12.30. School resumed at 2 PM and was done by 4.30 PM and there'd be a snack called tiffin, on some days, at home then – attlu (dosas), puri, pakoda, or some such. Dinner rice was at 7.30 PM or so.

What I remember best about the early Park Street life is my looking at the Santapeta School from our upstairs balcony. My elder sister V was in it. I went there a year or so after her. Then V finished her class 3 and was sent to the Town School (in our neighborhood, as well) to begin her class 4. I was then in class 2 at Santapeta and refused to go there anymore. I was forced to go, but I'd escape and run to look at my sister V's class at the Town School. I did things there to attract attention. I scratched on the bamboo partition of V's classroom with a broken pencil, made noises enough to disturb the class on the other side, and so on. Finally, unable to contain my tantrums, the head master – a neighbor and family friend - decided to put me in class 4 along with my sister. That was my first double promotion. So here I was in class 4 at the age of 7 (these days you've be 9 to be in class 4 – or grade 4 as Ananya was by rights). P.Uma Maheswar Patnaik was our unforgettable class teacher. Called by us "PU Sir" (and not "PUMP Sir", as some mischievous kids wanted to do), he drilled us constantly in basic arithmetic and English. But his lasting contribution to our batch of students was the development of handwriting, which we all practiced for hours under his supervision. Many years later I discovered that my own handwriting closely resembled that of a number of my class-fellows of that time.

Another unforgettable memory is about "gaba gaba mastaru" (GGB, fast fast teacher) who ran the Santapeta School. GGB, short and wide in noticeable dimensions, walked so amazingly fast that he actually seemed running. He used to threaten us all with a stick (that he never used) to

enforce discipline His booming voice had us all shrinking in fear in our places. Many years later I found how truly he was fond of his charges, and wanted to watch them grow and imbibe values of good citizenship. But in that school for little kids he was a terror nevertheless. His son P.V.S. Rao was my classmate for many years. Working at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research he was associated with a team that built TIFRAC the first ever computer in India. Later he did pioneering work on digitising fonts for Indian languages, unbelievably during the early1980s when computers were in a very primitive state. He was justly given a Padmasri award.

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**Additional Note: Cricket**

I remember the games we (boys only, of course) played on the street. We had to choose the times of play carefully so that the noise we made did not reach the disapproving elders. Cricket flourished in our street after the end of the Second World War, from the mid-1940s, more after Independence in 1947. An electric distribution pole on one side of the street served as the so-called wicket (stumps) at which we bowled. Equipment was, as you may expect with retrospective insight, was all sponsored and made gratis. This is how it went. Balls: There was only one 'club' in our town where tennis was played – by a few wealthy pretenders posing as sportsmen, seeking attention and acclaim from ignorant townsfolk, but with little playing skills. The southern side of the tennis court had a wall some 7-8 feet high over which the occasional ball sailed beyond. Behind that wall, there on some days we waited, 2 or 3 boys crouching to catch a ball that comes and to vanish before a hapless watchman could come around to retrieve the ball that went over. So we had a ball or two most times.

Now I must tell you about the bats: In Park Street there was at that time in one of the small houses an agent of Brooke Bond Tea. He was a bachelor and his house was full of cartons and boxes of tea to be sold to different traders in our town and beyond. The man was friendly and encouraged us to play in his house on its terrace, and in fact his was an open house to the boys of Park Street. The tea boxes came in different sizes and there were always some cracked or damaged in some way. The

tea agent gave us those boxes – some of them with sides as long as 30 inches. With that raw material we went to a ‘gadikhana’ that was essentially a carpentry/iron-smithy to repair wheels and axles of bullock and horse-driven carriages then plying in our town. Papayya, the owner of the shop liked us the boys of Park Street and made bats for us out of those long side-panels of the tea boxes we brought to him.

Let me describe those bats before I talk about the play. They were essentially one piece affairs cut from the packing wood fashioned out of the damaged panels. This meant they’d come in different sizes and shapes depending on the particular panel from which they are cut. The handle, likewise, was long or short, thin or thick, and so on. The bats were hard enough to hit tennis balls with, but the rough handles would frequently give us bleeding hands and thorny splinters of wood in our fingers. Then a genius (not I) discovered that tying a piece of cloth around the handles prevents these bloody disasters. That’s technological innovation for you.

Anyway the bats were good and balls were available. So we played, each honing his specific skills. But truly speaking we were all untested all-rounders in the making.