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The Asiatic Society



At the Park Street and Chowringhee Road crossing, stands a fairly modern-looking building, followed by a building reminiscent of the colonial-era architecture of Kolkata. These two are joined by a connector. Now, how are these buildings relevant? They belong to The Asiatic Society, an organisation which has been greatly influential in preserving old manuscripts, paintings, letters, and more, from across the world, and also India. Orientalism would not have been the same without the Asiatic Society.

The Asiatic Society was founded by Sir William Jones in 1784. Its main purpose was to further the study of the Orient, i.e., Asia. After space constraints in the building, a new one was constructed, with the erstwhile President Dr S. Radhakrishnan inaugurating it in 1961. The library of the Asiatic Society houses hundreds of thousands of manuscripts, journals, and more, with the oldest printed book being Juli Firmici's *Astronomicorum Libri* (1499). There are also letters, like the one sent in 1926 by Sir C.V. Raman to request to be allowed to "demonstrate some physical experiments" at the annual meeting. The museum also contains important lithographs such as an Ashokan edict, which was critical in deciphering the Brahmi script.

Flurys

Located in the Stephen Court Building, is Flurys, a tearoom which has been serving customers for five generations. Founded by Joseph and Freida Flury, a Swiss couple, in 1927, this was its original branch. Today, it is well-known for its Darjeeling tea, English breakfast, and more. It also used to be a favourite destination of Satyajit Ray, who had breakfast here each Sunday. Raj Kapoor adored the chicken patties here. One interesting fact is that Trinca's and Flurys were founded in a partnership between Joseph Flury and Quinto Trinca. However, they soon split and went their separate ways.



Fun Fact

The tea-house was also the den for Calcutta's artistic brigade. Satyajit Ray made a rare appearance for his piece of pastry there, when he chose to miss his regular "adda" at The Coffee House in Central Calcutta. Professors from Xavier's, like Lal and Vishwanathan, discussed the finer nuances of the English language in the decorous ambiance of Flurys, and, perhaps, looked the other way when they saw courtship between the two rigidly missionary institutions. There was then Mrinal Sen, the media-made rival of Ray. Sen's garrulousness rattled the tea-cups all right.

Oxford Bookstore

In addition to Whiteaway Laidlaw's famed department store, the Oxford Bookstore was a prominent institution in Calcutta under the Raj. In addition to books, the store carried upscale leather goods, toys, perfume, albums, photo frames, board games, playing cards, and silver and electroplated items, like most bookshops of the period. It has historically had a place in the city's life and is mentioned in the memoirs of several notable British and Indian leaders from the 20th century. It served as a message drop-off location for activists in the 1970s during the Naxalite insurgency, who would tuck messages into certain books for other group members to locate.

Fact Check

- ∞ India's only bookstore to curate multiple literary festivals like Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival, Apeejay Bangla Sahitya Utsob and Hindi Sahitya Utsav, Oxford Bookstore.
- ∞ It is now managed by the Apeejay-Surrendra Group and has no connection whatsoever with the University of Oxford
- ∞ The Oxford University Press had taken legal advice and been told that the geographical identifier 'Oxford' carried no protection unless teamed with 'University' or 'Press'



Queen's Mansion

At the corner of Park Street and Russel Street, stands a grand, six-storey building, whose dual blocks join at the intersection of the two streets. This is Queen's Mansion, earlier known as Galstaun Mansion, built by an Armenian businessman-Johannes Galstaun in the year 1920. It is symbolic of the power and influence that the Armenian community once held over Calcutta. It, at various points in the past, housed notable jewellers, the Magnolia restaurant, the Oriental Gas Company, which lit up Calcutta's streets, and more. The Imperial Bank of India also had an office in this building. In 1953, Galstaun Mansion was renamed the Queen's Mansion to mark the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. Now, it is owned by the LIC. Despite losing some of its original glamour, it still has a certain charm.



Credits

- ❖ Arya Bhattacharya - IX
- ❖ Aarav Kumar - IX
- ❖ Swapnendu Kundu - X
- ❖ Devaans Lohia - X
- ❖ Aditya Basu - X
- ❖ Jash Ajmera - X
- ❖ Yash Bengwani - X
- ❖ Harshit Choraria - X
- ❖ Soubhagya Ray - X
- ❖ Akshit Das - X
- ❖ Aryan Kumar Sinha - X
- ❖ Ritoshmit Chatterjee - X
- ❖ **Our Teachers**
- ❖ **The Calcutta Heritage Collective Team**

Bibliography

- ❖ Jones, W., 1824. Discourses delivered before the Asiatic Society: and miscellaneous papers, on the religion, poetry, literature, etc., of the nations of India. CS Arnold.
- ❖ Oxford Bookstore. (2022, January 5). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_Bookstore

