

## When the Park Stood Still

By Iyan Nekib

It was a breezy Saturday morning and the sun had finally managed to break through the sea of dull grey clouds (and pollution) for the first time in what seemed like forever. With the sun's rays finally enveloping the trees and with sunlight, dappling the park of the society that I lived in—called 'Ram Vihar', situated in the city of Delhi—it became evident that today was a somewhat special day. Even the birds in the area had seemed to taken notice of such a sight and broke out into songs since the break of dawn. Yet, while people and the birds as such were blissfully taking in and enjoying such pleasures of the day, I was busy sleeping peacefully in the confines of my home. After all my summer vacation had started, and what thirteen-year-old wouldn't want to spend their free time just happily snoozing away under such appropriate circumstances? However, my friend Rishi had different plans set out for me. It was in fact based on a pact that we had made before our summer vacation started, that we would arrive at 7 a.m. in the park almost every other day to play a game of soccer. Although it was something that we decided to do on a whim, having wanted to make good use of the days that our vacation provided us with, our goal was actually to be able to retain our childhood pleasures despite having to face the growing pressures of having to perform academically in school, something that grew more profound in our adolescence. That is to say, we wanted to spend as much time as possible enjoying ourselves before our vacations ended, and academics fully occupied us. However, I did not expect him to actually see our pact through as I too expected him to just catch up on sleep. That very Saturday morning, however, at around 8 a.m., I found myself being dragged out of bed by Rishi, then being changed into my sports attire before finally finding myself in the middle of the park, just standing there alongside him.

As the breeze blew the dried-out leaves around us, I found myself appreciating our decision to do such a thing. “I’m glad I was able to get you out of bed today,” he said suddenly. “Because if not I would have had to instead listen to my parents nagging me to perform better in the next school term.” At the time, saying stuff like that felt like something of a gag between us because our parents were very strict with us, especially regarding academics, during our adolescent years. The park was essentially just a small squarish piece of land with grass as green as emerald, having dark steel benches—for people to sit on—scattered all around and a circular sky-blue fountain covering up most of its space. It even had two Peepal trees, which shed the most beautiful golden red leaves whenever fall came around, placed opposite to each other near the entrance of the park. However, even though we were left with very little ‘space’ to go along with our activities, it didn’t deter us in any way. As we set up our ‘goal-posts’ by dragging around the dark steel green benches, flattening the lush green grass along the way, and eventually setting them up parallel to each other, Rishi and I would find ourselves arguing over the distance of those so called ‘goal-posts’. As we watched videos of our favorite soccer players performing stylish tricks with the soccer ball while attempting to recreate them, we found ourselves laying under the Peepal trees, taking refuge from the sun and ‘basking’ in the shade it provided after completely wearing ourselves out. With each kick of the ball and each high five we gave each other after scoring a goal, we could feel the weight of the expectations set by our parents slowly disappearing. Moments such as those made the park feel like an escape or rather a diversion, that is, just by going there and playing to our hearts content; it subconsciously allowed us to release all our pent-up worries and emotions of being judged or criticized by others.

As a matter of fact, that very ‘space’ managed to have an impact on relieving the stress not just in the lives of my friend and I, but even in that of the adults that lived there. It was an area where people from different walks of life, shapes and sizes would come to either bathe in

the sunlight surrounded by Peepal trees or to just simply sit in the shade and catch up with old friends. In other words, it was a place that allowed certain groups of people such as businessmen, elderly retired grandparents and housewives, who usually kept amongst themselves during the work week, to leave their satisfied daily lives and congregate there, all while providing them with a sense of contentment. One such instance that I will never forget is the time when the residential committee of our society planned to organize a Winter event with the main attraction being “Tambola” or “Bingo”, as it is known more popularly throughout the world, during the month of December. It was to be arranged one week before Christmas, and honestly what better way is there to spend that time than by competing for a cash prize of ₹8000 (roughly \$100)? As soon as the organizers announced the event, preparations commenced in full swing. From setting up string lights around the Peepal trees, to placing the chairs for people to sit in, to people reserving small stalls in order to set up various other fun little games around the border of the park, you could feel the entire place coming to life, slowly but surely. Soon after, I realized that the people who were participating in such an event were not putting in this much effort just for the cash prize. They pushed themselves because doing so provided them with an escape from their supposed repetitive lifestyle—from employees in suits and ties commuting in their car’s day in and day out, to housewives taking care of their families, to the elderly just walking around the society’s park—it was something that only became even more evident on the day of the event. The day of the event, people ranging from all ages poured into the grounds of our society and indulged in the activities and games that had been set up for them. Many kids had even set up their own little stalls under the string lights around the park, with each varying in complexity from the next. Some kids charged the adults to play with their toys that they brought from their homes whereas other kids set up elaborate games where they allowed the participants to ‘bet’ how much they would like to spend and would get either high or diminishing returns on how

they performed in the game. The adults on the other hand set up elegant clothing swaps stalls or offered refreshments such as cold drinks and ice-cream to weary bystanders. Throughout the evening, you could hear the collective cheers and groans of every person that participated in the event. Although such activities could be replicated in any other place, what made the park special was that it was able to create an ambience where everybody, even if for only a day, could just leave all their worries of being judged by others as well as personal dilemmas in the comforts of their home.

And so, with each month that passed, each festival we celebrated together, I could feel this community blossoming, and being able to witness such moments was comforting in its own way. My friend Rishi, the one who dragged me out of bed every day during our summer vacations, had something to say about this. "I've lived in many apartments ever since I was born and now even after leaving for college, I have not been able to recapture the magic of our park. There are some things in life that you tend to forget but our park wasn't one of them. It was something really special." Every morning, you could always see someone walking laps around it or just lazing about its sidewalk, minding their own business. It was as if they were drawn to it, or rather the tranquility it exuded. However, this was short lived and as time went on, the ambience of the park began to change, at least for kids such as Rishi and me. As we moved into a higher grade each year, we found ourselves being swamped with more responsibilities than ever before, while also having to perform well in our academics for the sake of getting into college. The park, in that sense, now could not provide us with the same relief we felt in our adolescence. That is to say, spending our free time in the park now felt like we were wasting our energy on frivolous activities and instead found that meeting each other through means of video chat was a more productive use of our free time. And as we became busier with every subsequent year, the number of events our society usually planned, such as the Winter event, started to diminish.

Perhaps planning such boisterous events just didn't seem feasible anymore, whatever the case may be, we never really received a clear answer on why the activities that took place around the park slowly ceased to be. Now, having left for college, as I fondly look back upon the memories the park created for not just me but even for the people who lived there, I can't help but wonder whether or not the park was something that only Rishi and I considered to be special. That is, was the park truly able to provide an escape from a supposed repetitive lifestyle for others just as it had done for us? Would the community really work towards preserving this 'sanctuary' or would they rather let it 'perish' as a memory of what it had been?