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Peering Through the Cracks in the California Dream

Bangalore's nostalgia for our manufactured past

A good rule of thumb in Bangalore, India is that one should not visit shopping malls on Sunday afternoons—particularly not on a rainy Sunday afternoon, when nobody inside the mall is going to be inclined to leave, and everyone out on the wet pavement will see the climate-sheltered building as a welcome relief. I have avoided malls on weekends these last ten years as they have mushroomed across my adopted city. I have avoided them so assiduously that I have forgotten my own rule, and here I am at Mantri Mall on a Sunday afternoon, attempting not to succumb to the general stampede of humanity.

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The demographic here is hard to place: families on outings, teenagers, students, IT professionals, seniors escorted by grandchildren. The commonality seems to be a combination of spending power and shopping frenzy. “Even your wallet will find our cuisine irresistible,” reads a large poster for a new restaurant. Multihued streamers echo the colors of the Indian flag: they hang from high above in green, saffron, and white, drawing the gaze upward and away from the crowds toward layers of shops rising out of sight—a many-storied, surreal homage to consumerism.

Swensen’s Ice Cream lies tucked away in a corner of the first floor of Mantri Mall. Boston-based Au Bon Pain once sat right beside it, but it has vanished, as stores have a way of doing in Bangalore. Outside Swensen’s, a sign proclaims that the chain has been “America’s favorite ice cream store for sixty years.” Having spent half my life in various corners of the United States, from the Pacific Northwest to the Northeast, and most recently Southern California, I ought at some point to have seen a place that sold “America’s favorite ice cream,” and yet I have never heard of Swensen’s outside India.

My husband and I seek refuge from the Sunday crowd inside the ice cream parlor, where we are greeted by a picture of Earle Swensen himself. The man is diminutive and white-haired, a broad smile on his face. He holds an ice cream scoop in one hand, arms open wide in welcome. Swensen opened the first branch of his ice cream parlor in San Francisco in 1948, an era and place that every piece of the store’s décor is designed to evoke. Stained-glass lampshades hanging above the counter spell out “Swensen’s” in exaggerated old-style lettering. On the walls, alongside brighter-than-life photographs of ice cream sundaes, hang sketch-like depictions of the Golden Gate Bridge and a row of Victorian houses. American pop music plays from the speakers, muddling the 1950s atmosphere with songs from the 1980s and 1990s.

The menu lists ice cream combinations with names like “Earthquake” and “Gold Rush,” with the inclusion of

flavors such as lychee and mango as a brief concession to the store’s actual Indian location. We order “Ring-a-Ding,” a name that evokes San Francisco’s cable cars and Frank Sinatra’s crooning. Our order looks impressive as it arrives in a tall glass, three scoops high and drenched in chocolate syrup, but the ice cream proves unexceptional. Bangalore has many better and cheaper options for sweets. As is increasingly common with multinational chains across India, the price of ice cream here is about the same as in the United States. Nonetheless, Swensen’s is packed with teenagers and twenty-somethings. Why is it so popular?

Swensen’s is a relative newcomer to India, one of the latest in a growing stream of American brands that are carving out niches and spawning hybrids across Asia. In the mid-1990s, when my family moved from rural Washington to Bangalore, this trend was just beginning. Pizza Hut was a novelty when it opened here, the year after we arrived. The line to get in stretched all the way down through the building on Cunningham Road. Now, there is little from across the Pacific, be it language or cuisine or branding, that cannot be found in this city.

Bangalore has morphed from the Garden City of India to the Silicon Valley of India, in the process becoming overwhelmed by gridlocked traffic beneath the yellow of an eternally smoggy sky. Bangalore’s skyline has lost the gentle contours of tree-lined avenues, replaced by jagged high-rises and new buildings under constant construction. Here, the only constant seems to be a yearning for imagined futures, alongside a burning nostalgia for a vanished past.

Swensen’s tastes of a nostalgia for a past that I have never seen. The ice cream parlor is filled with cultural cues meant to comfort the consumer with signs of a period of economic stability and general prosperity in post-war America. “Remember these good memories of childhood,” the décor seems to whisper, with photographs of children smiling at us in the California sun as we eat our ice cream in 1950s-style booths. “Remember the soda fountain down the street?”

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The chime of the cable cars? Old Blue Eyes? How good things were back then.

I can imagine those things, but I certainly cannot remember them. I have never been to San Francisco. Those are not my memories, and this is not my nostalgia. Nor does this nostalgia belong to the vast majority of the ice cream parlor's patrons.

Swensen's has shops all over Asia and South America. Bangalore alone has seven Swensen's ice cream parlors. The ice cream that markets itself as America's favorite, however, has largely disappeared from the United States. Although the chain once spread across the country, by the 1980s it was in retreat in its homeland. A friend of mine recently told me about a Swensen's on Bristol Street in Santa Ana, California, where he grew up: "Of the ice cream places nearby, it was by far the best quality," he said. "It had a premium reputation, and a lot of that was bound up with it being old-fashioned and old-style."

Only four outlets remain in the United States today, one of which is the original Swensen's in San Francisco. During the Great Recession, Swensen's, like so many other American brands, looked toward growing markets in the developing world. And as it crossed the ocean, the meaning of Swensen's 1950s semiotics fundamentally changed. Details that signified an imagined comforting past were transformed into signs of an imagined shining future.

Bangalore is replete with nostalgia for a world that never existed. The Krispy Kreme on bustling Church Street has walls decorated with sepia-toned photographs of small-town Depression-era Americana. Cheerful employees in anachronistic aprons manage a conveyer belt that shines in the warm lights, carrying lightly fried donuts that receive a final perfect touch, a decadent waterfall of sugar icing. "*Remember back when you could walk down the street to your neighborhood donut maker?*" this place seems to ask. "*Remember the time before malls and chain stores took over the world?*"

I don't, actually. Neither would any of the other customers here, many of whom are younger than me. But Bangalore is replete with imagined pasts, as commercial establishments and the popular media claim pieces of nostalgia for themselves. This sometimes makes the ever-changing present seem strangely out of reach.

Cornerhouse ice cream parlor was founded in Bangalore thirty years ago; enough time has passed since then to have seen the expanding city change several times over. On its walls are black-and-white pictures of a Bangalore that predates the store by decades. Here are the gentle curves of colonial-era architecture in pre-independence India, broad promenades where long-dead figures meander, dusty roads, and spreading trees. "*You remember,*" the images whisper. "*This is what you've lost.*" I recognize few landmarks in these black-and-white photographs, which also line the walls of seventy-year old Koshy's Restaurant, nearby. Between the two, the India Coffeehouse gives the impression with spartan blue paint and dated coffee ads that it has not changed decor in fifty years, despite the fact that this particular outlet is scarcely five years old.

My own memories are no bulwark against this deluge. I cannot tell you what stood where Krispy Kreme now stands, nor Starbucks, nor Swensen's, nor Taco Bell, another California import. I do not remember what was here before the India Coffeehouse. In five years or ten, these too will be gone.

Walking through the chaos of Bangalore, a city filled with newly minted nostalgia for an imported American dream, what I find myself looking for is a world that I have never known. I peer through the cracks in barred-up gates to find abandoned lots overgrown by spreading trees and crumbled buildings revived by squatters. Lonely artwork painted on walls speak of lives that spill outside the story's bounds. There is a world here beyond nostalgia, where I catch glimpses of other pasts, and perhaps alternative futures. **B**