

LUNCH WITH BS  
► KARAN PAUL | CHAIRMAN, APEEJAY SURRENDRA GROUP

# FAMILY BREW

From moving away from tea gardens to being married to a supermodel, the reticent Paul gives **Ishita Ayan Dutt** a rare glimpse into his life

Karan Paul has never been one for the front row or the high-octane Indian Premier League (IPL) auction table. It's "not his style." But that should come as little surprise. The chairman of the Apeejay Surrendra Group and co-owner of the Punjab Kings franchise (along with businessmen Mohit Burman and Ness Wadia, and actor Preity Zinta) has long mastered the art of making himself scarce. Painfully media-shy, he makes an exception for this lunch.

We are at Flurys on Park Street, the gastronomic hub of Kolkata. Anyone remotely familiar with the city would know of this iconic tearoom set up by Swiss couple Joseph and Frieda Flury in 1927. Several decades on, the patisserie retains a fan following — its long, snaking queues for breakfast or plum cakes a familiar sight during the holiday season.

A chance meeting had brought Flurys to the Apeejay Surrendra Group in 1965. The story goes that Karan Paul's uncle, the legendary late Jit Paul, bumped into Joseph Flury one morning while he was waiting to cross the road. Paul Senior made an offer Joseph couldn't refuse. So it comes as no surprise when Karan Paul picks Flurys for lunch.

Most dining places on Park Street don't take reservations. But a table for two has been reserved — one of the perks of lunching with the owner. The glass façade offers a view of a road that's almost synonymous with the Pauls — The Park hotel is a stone's throw away; there is Apeejay House, Park Mansions, Apeejay School, and so on.

My guest arrives presently and takes a seat. Dressed in a dark grey suit, the 55-year-old businessman cuts a dapper figure. "I am almost invisible, and hardly in Kolkata these days — about 12 days in a month," he says.

Invisible? I wonder at the paradox of it. How is it possible to be married to supermodel Indrani Dasgupta and yet be invisible?

Their marriage in 2014 had caused quite a flutter in Kolkata circles, particularly because it took one of the city's most suitable boys off the market — though Paul insists everybody rates "her" 10/10 and "him" 2/10. "I just swallow my ego and carry on," he chuckles. "But the good thing is, she rates me 6/10."

The staff at Flurys are on high alert today. The pink menu cards are already laid out on the table.

Drinks are in order. I opt for the staid fresh lime soda (sweet); Paul takes a while to decide between chilled coffee sprungli (inspired by David Sprungli's creation for his tea room in Zurich) and iced cappuccino. He finally settles for the cappuccino, minus the sugar.

A new egg menu is on offer, and Paul wants to try a "bunch" — akuri, choris (Goan-style three-egg omelette with spicy Goan pork sausages), croque madame, "and some bacon and sausages on the side".

After spending 47-odd years in Kolkata, Paul shifted base to Delhi. "I took a conscious call during the Covid pandemic that I wanted to be with my mother," he says. "It was a good decision because I got a chance to spend one solid year with her." His mother, Shirin Paul, chairman emeritus of the group, passed away in 2023.

But Kolkata is where businesses, head offices, and corporate teams are. "I don't want to suddenly shift people there; we have the ecosystem here," he says. "It's much easier for me to fly in and out than build infrastructure there (in Delhi)."

Turns out, Covid not only shaped where he lives and works, but also helped steer changes in the corporate structure. The Apeejay Group, one of India's oldest in the tea plantation business, has made an exit. Well, nearly.

Covid sharpened the minds, Paul says. "You had to make hard decisions on what was worth saving. And tea didn't make sense," he explains. "So, over a year and a half, we sold all the gardens, and have kept just a large one."

Rising wages and stagnating prices

have been weighing down tea gardens for long. But back in the day, with 17 gardens, the Apeejay Group was the third-largest in the country.

The food is served — the partiality to eggs is evident on the table. Paul starts with croque madame and akuri. I sample the akuri first.

Tea also has a painful connection with the Apeejay Group. His father, Surrendra Paul, was gunned down by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) suspects in 1990 while he was returning from a garden visit to Tinsukia, Assam. The incident left not just the tea world but the country shocked, and set the stage for President's rule in Assam.

You didn't think of exiting the gardens then, I ask. "My mother really wanted us to get out of the plantations, but it was an emotional decision to stay on and protect my father's legacy," he replies. The gardens in Upper Assam had been acquired by Surrendra Paul.

Back then, and until much later, tea was a cash flow business — the gardens made money and added to prestige.

Things are different now. High cost in a big company structure is a difficult proposition. The group, which has interests in hospitality, real estate, shipping, logistics, and retail, has turned its focus on higher margin and profitable businesses.

"We are evolving much more into services, and focusing on aspects like managing hotels or what we are doing in the FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) space," he says.

FMCG? Curiosity piques. Paul is more than happy to talk about it: "I see us being big in hot beverages — tea, coffee, hot chocolate. And we will look at iced tea and iced coffee in the ready-to-drink space."

Tea and coffee have been launched under brand Flurys and are available in modern retail.

The eggs have passed with flying colours — our conversation is peppered with "fantastic" and "really good".

And then there's pause — Paul spots

a customer buying Flurys tea. He calls someone to find out how many packets she has picked up, and appears excited by the answer: "Four".

The group acquired UK's Typhoo Tea in 2005 but sold it in 2021 to a clutch of private equity firms. So the current FMCG push is under the Flurys brand.

Flurys' F&B outlets have moved beyond West Bengal to Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, and so on. There are about 100 outlets now, and more to come.

Flurys isn't the only side of the business looking at an exciting journey ahead. "There is a lot going on in hotels. Warehousing, too, is a good focus — we want to take it from four to 10 million square feet," Paul says. "We completed 75 years in the shipping business last year, and the aim is to be the No 1 player in the dry bulk segment from about No 3 now."

The privately held family business — except for Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels, which got listed last year — is helmed by Karan Paul and his sisters, Priya and Priti.

Apart from setting goals and strategies for the group, Paul is directly involved in shipping, logistics, and schools. Priya is the chairperson of the Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels, and Priti leads the real estate business as well as the Oxford Bookstore.

"People don't get it. They want to identify each of us with specific businesses, but we work together," he says. "It's a close family. And it's been like that since my father died."

We indulge in affogato — Paul says he has lost weight and can afford it.

The lunch has been long and interesting. Flurys is Paul's territory, but aware of the format of this column, he requests that the bill be handed to me as we wrap up. Did they hear him right?! Is the bill to be handed over to the guest?! The staff is in shock and disbelief.

But for "Lunch with BS", the tables turn — the only guest here is Karan Paul.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

