

# LSG'S EVENT, 'ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY', WAS AN INSPIRING SESSION ON LEADERSHIP WITH HOSPITALITY HOTSHOT **PRIYA PAUL**

**L**adies Study Group's event, 'Anything but Ordinary', had Priya Paul, Padma Shri awardee and chairperson of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels, talk about her journey of a visionary leader, the family business and innovating with the hospitality industry at The Park Hotel, recently.

Having spent her formative years in Calcutta, where she studied in schools like La Martiniere for Girls and Loreto House, Paul has always cherished her connection with the city over the years, even when she moved to the US for college and later started her work life in Delhi in 1988.

"Our hospitality business started in 1967 with The Park Kolkata and in 1968 we opened another property in Visakhapatnam and in the 1970s in New Delhi. When I started in 1988, hospitality was dull and boring. We had an occupancy of six-seven rooms out of 225 in Delhi. The economic condition of the country only started moving in 1991. But that was a lesson that stood in good stead with me during Covid because we suddenly had zero occupancy," shared Paul.

She further shared how she started learning the ropes of the business from her father and later how her mother guided the three siblings when their father passed



**Priya Paul in conversation with Nikhil Khanna**

away. She also spoke about equal ownership of the business in the family—a rarity in those days. Climbing the ladder in the corporate world of hospitality, starting as marketing manager to becoming the general manager and later growing the business from three to 35 hotels, Paul at present aspires to grow the brand with 50 hotels by 2025.

"From 91-92, I was really influenced by where we could be. Hotels don't have to be dull and boring and I don't need everything

to be covered by marble and brass. I decided to do more radical things and thought of how to bring new design and art into our hotels and the first project that I tried to transform was Zen. I chose something black and white and a Pan Asian menu. From 1993 to 1994 we did Someplace Else, which is still a standing testament to success. It is 30 years old now. We had limited budgets and I wanted to make the places fun and different, places that I would hang out in. Vijay Dewan

Minnie Juneja, president of LSG at the event. "Paul shared her extraordinary journey, offering valuable insights into her experiences, challenges and achievements. Her narrative was a testament to vision, resilience and excellence, leaving the audience deeply inspired and motivated," said Juneja.



joined in 1991 and together we built that into a vision of leadership of differentiation. By the end of the 90s, we bought properties in Bangalore and one in Chennai. Within two years, we were able to become this national brand by the way we were doing hospitality.

"We decided to grow the business by 2000. So, we did two things—private equity and redefined our brand to expand in all cities. Our business has three segments. One is the Park Hotels, which are city-centre hotels; Park Collection, which are boutique properties at an unusual destination, and Zone by The Park, which are design and price conscious hotels growing rapidly across countries. We enjoy the highest occupancy in India year

round, that is, 90 to 92 per cent," said Paul.

After she spoke about the business and her inspiring journey in the business of hospitality, Nikhil Khanna, executive chairperson of Avian We, joined Paul for a conversation where she spoke about her Calcutta memories, her passion for social work and working for women's empowerment and rights and the change in the business in the last two decades.

"Calcutta is about nostalgia...I have so many memories about people from here. I have been in the industry longer than two decades. My business was always open to women. There were fewer women then but now there are many women in leadership positions. Hospitality has 20 to 30 per cent of women employees which is not bad. For me, the boards I have joined is my work-life balance. I didn't have to but those are my passion. I also bring those interests into my corporate life with our CSR policy which is driven by the UN SDG goals. My other interests are women rights and empowerment. It is something that I do in my free time but it is also something our company believes in. I personally support the legal rights of women," shared Paul.

**Priyanka A. Roy**  
Pictures: B Halder