

# The Telegraph

SUNDAY 13 JANUARY 2008

## Magic on the plate

It's a Saturday night and you are eating out. You zero in on a chic restaurant on Park Street hoping to lap up its nice ambience, good music and palatable fare. Well, if you are lucky, you will have some magic on your plate too!

Restaurants in Calcutta are turning out to be a more varied experience with some of them offering table-hopping magic to woo customers. And no, this magic is not just meant for keeping kids quiet and making them stick to their tables.

This is serious business, aimed at making the waiting period of guests more interesting. So don't be surprised if a man pops up at your table the next time, asking if he could show you a trick or two. Sometimes he catches customers unawares and at other times he takes their permission. But once the food arrives he's off again, unless he is asked to continue.

Table-hopping magic is popular in the West and some Asian countries. Some famous magicians started off with table-hopping to move on to bigger shows. David Blaine, the king of street magic in the West, began with table-hopping. It is performed up, close and personal, usually at restaurants and sit-down dinners, both by professionals and amateurs. It has come to India only recently.

"Only some restaurants in Goa and Mumbai offer table-



Sourav Ganguly and family enjoy magic over food at a city restaurant by Roshni Sil

hopping magic to attract foreign customers. But then the concept has not picked up yet," said magician Prince Sil. So when he and his team mooted this idea for Calcutta,

restaurant-owners were initially sceptical.

"Big magicians may be table-hopping or performing in the streets in the US, but in India your market value goes

down if you start conjuring tricks for pedestrians. In the 1980s, hotels like the Grand, Great Eastern and Kenilworth staged magic shows in their restaurants. But that was the

closest Calcuttans got to magic outside the stage. Only recently has restaurants like Sourav's, Chung Wah and Hotel Hindusthan International begun popularising this form of en-



Guests at dinner table under magic-spell of Prince Sil



Magician Susmit Basu performing at Sourav's

tainment," he added.

Sil — a veteran of 37 years — and his team were asked to perform on a trial basis for only the festive season at a popular restaurant in Park Street. However, the response was stupendous and soon they were taken in on the rolls and happily performing every Saturday and Sunday.

"Though the concept is new, Calcuttans are loving it. The biggest challenge is to hop to a table and catch the audience unawares. Some are reluctant initially, but once we start exhibiting our best tricks — which include card and coin magic as well as a miniature version of sawing a lady into half — the audience is spell-bound. So much so that often the food goes cold," Sil said.

For the younger members of his team, table-hopping magic has opened up new opportunities. "It is a bigger challenge than performing in a stage show as there is no escaping the probing eyes of the audience. But then the audience is loving it and the almost dying art is getting a new meaning in the Calcutta circle," said another performer Susmit Basu.

More than anything else Sil is using the opportunity to launch youngsters in the profession. "The crowd thronging a magic show is getting thinner. So table-hopping magic is considered a better alternative and has given the sagging spirit of newcomers a much-needed boost," said Sil.

Chandreyee Ghose