



Beef cutlets, at Bow Barracks restaurant in Bangalore

CRANKY KHANSAMAS AND KADAKNATH CHICKEN

RAJIKA BHANDARI *travels to the dak bungalows of Madhya Pradesh in search of hearty meals and faint echoes of Anglo-Indian culture*

GIRIDHAR, THE COOK

-cum-caretaker of the Sardarpur circuit house, in Madhya Pradesh, unfurled a sparkling white damask tablecloth and dropped it into place with a flourish. But, being a good and cautious Indian, he promptly covered the carved-wood dining table with a sheet of clear plastic to protect the tablecloth from clumsy diners and indelible haldi stains. Situated high on a hill, overlooking a river and the town of Jhabua, the circuit house was a classic, colonial bungalow, with a wide veranda that wrapped around the whitewashed building. My mother and I had arrived at the circuit house after a torturous eight-hour ride in a rattling jeep; she was there on work and I was on a quest to unearth the story of India's historic dak bungalows and

circuit houses.

After welcoming us with a quick cup of tea and Marie biscuits, Giridhar had hopped onto his rickety bicycle and headed down to the town to buy provisions for dinner, his skinny legs pumping furiously as he sped down the hill. The dining table fully set, with the white tablecloth and Hitkari china, the fruits of his shopping expedition were now ready to be presented: stuffed bhindi roasted to a delicious crispness, piping hot daal with just a hint of ghee and fresh coriander, a pea and potato curry, and creamy yoghurt. But this was not all: the highlight of the meal was a very special chicken dish, unique not so much for its curried preparation but because it was made from a type of rare feathered biped that was indigenous to the Jhabua

area and that, apparently, can still be found only in parts of western India and China. The legendary chicken, known as Kadaknath, is reared primarily by the tribals of the region and is regarded as a sacred bird, offered to the gods after Diwali.

The unusual and startling feature of the Kadaknath is its black flesh, whose stark contrast to the typically pale meat of poultry can test the enthusiasm of even the most adventurous of gourmands. I helped myself gingerly to a small piece of the chicken and concentrated on the vegetarian items, while Giridhar lurked behind the curtain to refill the dishes. The chicken was surprisingly succulent. Black flesh aside, the bird remains famous for its taste and its legendary restorative powers, from curing chronic diseases to serving

as an aphrodisiac. These birds are almost extinct in India today and I cannot help but remember with some measure of guilt that I unwittingly contributed to their dwindling population that night.

Giridhar was one of many cooks, or khansamas, that I met during my travels to India's historic dak bungalows and circuit houses, which have existed from the days of the Raj. Just as these old buildings are varied in their architecture, ambience and history, so too are their ingenious khansamas, who offer up a cuisine that culls freely from India's multicultural heritage, whether in the form of Mughlai-style mutton curries or 'continental'-style fish cutlets, and everything else in between. Many circuit houses also serve a distinctly regional cuisine — upma and vada alongside masala omelettes and French toast at circuit houses in the south, for example. While some khansamas are purists who have preserved their culinary heritage, others have taken shortcuts: in some places, the legendary Anglo-Indian favourite caramel custard has been replaced with a runny Brown & Polson custard drizzled over Kissan canned fruit.

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF

the Raj, food — how to acquire it and how to prepare it — was a vexing problem for the travelling British. All this changed in the 1840s when the government established the system of dak bungalows. It was only a matter of time before the British, with their predilection to alter their surroundings to their tastes and habit, influenced the food in the travellers' bungalows where they spent so much of their time, whether travelling alone or with their memsahibs and children. While some khansamas lacked experience, none lacked ingenuity and, over time, were able to whip up a hybrid Anglo-Indian cuisine despite the meagre cooking implements and facilities at their disposal. Because it was easily available and lent itself to so many variations, chicken became a staple. Blending two completely opposite cuisines, popular Anglo-Indian dishes came to include the curried country captain, kedgeree (kitchiri), Irish stew (irony-stew to the khansamas) and the

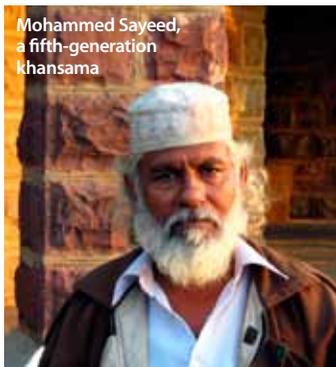
The Sagar circuit house
in Bundelkhand



delectable chicken cutlet that over time has taken on many variations, ranging from vegetarian to mutton and paneer cutlets. Caramel custard, or 'custel brun', as it was known among Indian servants, was another staple of the Anglo-Indian table because of the easy availability of eggs and milk. It was so ubiquitous that it acquired the nickname '365' because it was served almost every day of the year.

Although many of my generation had grown up eating cucumber sandwiches and baked vegetables, my immersion in the vestiges of Anglo-Indian cuisine occurred at an Indian boarding school, which, like many of its ilk, continued to suffer from a Raj-era hangover well into the 1980s and '90s. Along with the call of bugles and paying homage to the King's Colours, we partook in 'chotta hazari' (a quaint term for an early morning cup of tea) and consumed all forms of cutlets, Indianised shepherd's pie, and greyish mutton curries that appeared on the menu alongside Indian staples such as dal, rice and chapattis. The highlight of the week was, of course, caramel custard.

My pursuit of dak bungalows and their culinary heritage brought me to the Sagar circuit house in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh, a bastion of British rule in the early 20th century. Here, I made a fortuitous discovery: the resident khansama, Mohammed Sayeed, belonged to five generations of khansamas who had lived and worked in dak bungalows since the 1800s. His father, 82-year-old Ghulam Rasool, also lived at the circuit house. Father and son were dressed in crisp white kurta-pyjamas; Sayeed wore a crocheted white skull cap while his father had a turban wrapped loosely around his head. Their attire reminded me that most cooks or khansamas who served during the Raj were Muslims, who were perhaps drawn to the profession because they had fewer religious restrictions on the foods they were permitted to handle, although most did not touch pork. Many of them were also famous for their culinary skills, which they had acquired and perfected in the kitchens of the Mughals and the royal households of nawabs and diwans.



Mohammed Sayeed,
a fifth-generation
khansama

Ghulam Rasool, who was born in the neighbouring town of Damoh in 1926, had served during the time of a Mr. Watson, who was the superintendent of police of Damoh district. 'Huqum manana hi sab kuch tha,' recalled Rasool: the entire system worked on the obeying of orders. The British officers were accompanied occasionally by their memsahibs and a large entourage, espe-

cially when they were moving and needed a place to stay temporarily. Rasool also encountered several different armies from around the world who were stationed in Sagar during World War II. When the military barracks overflowed, many of the soldiers would arrive at the dak bungalow with their own provisions and would camp in its compound.

Mohammed Sayeed, Rasool's son, learnt how to cook at his grandfather's knee. His grandfather, a perfectionist, would beat him if he slipped up in any way, such as leaving a bone in the fish that was being prepared for a meal. Among special family recipes handed down through five generations were fish cutlets, beetroot wine, guava wine (a favourite with the memsahibs) and a ready-to-use custard powder especially formulated by Sayeed's family. Other dishes included the usual fare: vegetable stew; soup of tomato,

chicken, mutton, or vegetables; bread, butter and eggs for breakfast. "Soup hi soup" (soup and only soup)," lamented Rasool, a nostalgic smile wrinkling his face. It appeared that the typical Britisher hardly ate any vegetables even though these were plentiful in India.

When it was time for lunch, we sat down to a veritable feast prepared by Sayeed: mutton curry, chicken curry, tadka dal, gobi-aloo ki sabzi, roasted peas and an assortment of special pickles and chutneys. He insisted that I use a bowl for each of the curries to prevent their distinct flavours from blending together on my plate. The food was excellent and we ate silently and appreciatively. As a parting gift, Sayeed asked me which of his family recipes I would like, and I picked the fish cutlets (see box).

When it comes to extraordinary fish dishes, perhaps no one was more notorious and legendary in the annals of post-independence circuit houses than Bernard, the khansama of the circuit house at Bilaspur, in Madhya Pradesh. Extremely fond of the bottle, he was a temperamental cook, a culinary genius if the mood so took him. Officers of India's civil services, the IAS, who were touring the area on work, came away either praising Bernard for the memorable meals he fed them or cursing him for his foul mood, which caused many an officer to starve. In the early 1950s, Jawaharlal Nehru was to visit Bilaspur. The raja saheb of Sarangarh, a cabinet minister in the central provinces and Berar government (now Madhya Pradesh), was asked by the state's chief minister to attend to Nehru and ensure that he was comfortable at the circuit house. The anxious raja saheb asked Bernard what he would feed the prime minister and received the laconic reply, "fish". When asked what the next course would be Bernard again said, "fish". The raja saheb then asked Bernard whether he knew the seriousness of a visit by the prime minister, to which Bernard replied, "Raja saheb, Bernard in his kitchen is the king. If you cannot appreciate good food, please do not talk to me." True to his word, Bernard served fish soup, followed by fish cutlets and then a divine fish curry. To his credit, the pudding was sans fish.

MOHAMMED SAYEED'S FISH CUTLETS

A RECIPE HANDED DOWN THROUGH FIVE GENERATIONS

INGREDIENTS

▶ Boneless fish (usually sawar), eggs, onion, green chillies, coriander, bread crumbs, saffron, arrowroot, ginger, khus khus, almonds, cashews, pistachios, gram flour, and cumin, whole black pepper, black cardamom and cinnamon ground into garam masala

METHOD

▶ Boil fish lightly in a small amount of water. Remove bones and mash fish.
▶ Heat a small amount of ghee and then lightly fry gram flour and bread crumbs.
▶ Grind all fresh ingredients (green chilies, onion, ginger) in a blender and fry these separately in a little bit of ghee. Mix the ground fresh ingredients with the gram flour and bread crumbs.



▶ Finely chop and grind all nuts and khus-khus separately.
▶ Mix the nuts and garam masala with the rest of the fish mixture.
▶ Shape the mixture into small cutlets and dust lightly with arrowroot.
▶ Fry in butter or ghee.