

THE CURRY AT CAMBRIDGE

BY M. S. GILL, I.A.S.

In Cambridge one does not feel too home sick. There are a host of Indian students and some dons who can be easily picked out in a crowd by their familiar hues and precocious looks. There is the occasional sari or the kurta-churidar which brings elegance to the streets of this miniskirt land. But what truly brings a whiff of home is the Indian restaurant.

There are in fact many such restaurants here. Exotic names which recall days of glory — the Shalimar, Kohinoor India, the Taj Mahal, and of course the inevitable Bengali restaurant. Sad to say, there is yet no Khalsa Hotel.

Not all of them are Indian in the present-day sense of the word. Many are Pakistani. But even these have to proclaim that they serve Indian food. The English do not yet know of Pakistani curries! No doubt the Pakistan foreign office is seized of this important problem.

It is interesting to visit these restaurants. The dining rooms are small, intimate and cosy. The managers are slick haired Bengalis or well-fed, jovial Punjabis who will hug you if you happen to be from Nawanshahr Doaba! Younger brothers who have been smuggled over from the sub-continent wait at table. Though often illiterate, they speak English with the local lilt and rhythm: Thank you, Sir, 'Good-bye, Sir.'

One day, having heard a couple of these musical leave-takings, I wondered how the boy would wave me out. He just grinned sheepishly as if to say, "You know this is all play-acting for their benefit!"

The ladies cook in the kitchen and the warmth of Indian life is there with the children, the women and all local relatives crowded together in the little room. Many of the customers are middle-aged men and women, the "Koi Hais" of the Raj who feed their nostalgia on curry and rice. They shuffle in and out of the rain to warm their

bones with a bit of chillies powder. But there are others also; university students and plain folk tired of boiled cabbage and out to have fun and excitement with the magic of Indian cooking.

The other day, I was sitting in one of these restaurants over 'daal bhaat', the cheapest item on the menu. It was a little early in the evening and I was the only customer. Just then a group of three ladies in their mid-fifties walked in. Apart from sheer weigh, they had a rather commanding air about them — they could have been anything from Ministers to WREN Swt. Majors. Depositing their umbrellas and raincoats, they occupied a table near mine. The waiter, a Bengali in white jacket with next-to-no knowledge of English, or Hindi or that matter, came up and bowed. I could not help overhearing.

"Yes, Madam What I breeng for you?"

"Martha, dear, you order. You are the expert."

"Oh, no, Melinda knows as much if not more. Her father was something or other in India and was always cooking curries when he came home. Wasn't he, dear?"

"Yes, he was. And a problem he was too with all the smells and odours. Neighbours wouldn't have us. But it is all so long ago."

"Now, let me see. We can all have fried rice — no, lentil soup first, and then rice. And of course some curry. What about chicken Jal Farezi."

"What is Jaal Fareizi, dear?"

"Madam, it is sweet cook special way."

"That is not very enlightening, is it?"

"Well, what about Murg Mus-sallam then?"

"Is it anything to do with Muslims, Marjorie," Dangerous people I call them."

"No, madam, we serve no Muslim meat here. Only pure Hindu meat."

"Oh, dear, it is all so confusing."

"The simplest is chicken curry. We can't go wrong there, can we? And I will have a paratha."

"Melinda, dear, my husband always asked for chappatis. What is the difference?"

"Madam, chappati is paratha of second grade."

"You be careful of that, dear. My uncle Hubert once had one. He was never the same man."

"Yes, honey, let us stick to rice. And of course we'll all have papadums."

For the ignorant, I may mention that over the years the English have smoothed out the rough edges of the word "paapar". Now it glides out of the tongue as papadum! I guess it is in the Oxford long dictionary. What a long way it has come from the paappar Bazaar of Amritsar!

"And listen here, my man, no chillies," Melinda called as the waiter disappeared with the order.

The food arrived piping hot. The ladies relished the soup. They even had a bit of the rice and chicken curry. The manager beamed from his seat in the corner. And then something went wrong. Marjorie suddenly sat up checked and spluttered a bit and then screamed.

"Oh, the villain has poisoned me. My mouth is on fire. My stomach. Water. Help!"

We all rushed to her assistance. Someone poured water down her throat and dress. The manager fanned her forehead with a menu card, perspiration pouring from his own.

A quick court of enquiry was held. The evidence led to the conclusion that the good lady had swallowed a full green chillie. Melinda was furious. Picking up her umbrella she advanced towards the poor waiter.

"You rascal. I told you, no chillies."

I seized my chance and slipped out of the door, leaving my 'daal-bhaat' unfinished. I did not wish to be a witness to a murder.