

Irani trophies

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: *The cockeyed shah of Iran watches the cake decompose carefully in the cracked showcase,*

distracted only by a fly on the make as it finds in a loafer's wrist an operational base.

That's how an Arun Kolatkar poem immortalised those-fast vanishing relics of a gentler Mumbai—the Irani restaurants. In their comforting confines, crowded with black wooden chairs clustered around marble-topped tables, the city could take a short break from the hurly-burly of the day. For a brief moment, the chaos would be rolled back with a slurp of warm milky chai accompanied by one of the delectable Items of the Day, listed on a slate in shakily etched multi-coloured chalk.

But behind the indolent ambience lay fervid industry. The tantalising aroma of the crisp brun maska, khari biscuits, batasas and gaudy currant buns was also the sweet smell of yet another Mumbai immigrant community's success. And in the case of the Iranis, that culinary cliché of acculturation is especially appropriate—the community has contributed more than its fair share of spice to Mumbai's melting pot.

Iranis found their way to Mumbai in significant numbers in the second half of the 19th century. Adherents of Zoroastrianism, they are distinct from the Parsis who arrived about 1,000 years ago. Iranis initially spent backbreaking hours in liquor stores and bakeries, where they leavened bread to suit British tastes. Physically sturdy and "brave in business" as media man Boman Irani describes them, they also put in years cultivating orchard lands in Dahanu and Palghar, on Mumbai's outskirts.

In India, almost all the members of the community took the same surname—Irani. "We've continued appreciating the welcome India extended us," said writer Gustasp Irani. But how much of the past remains intact? On March 21, the day of the spring equinox, Mumbai's Iranis will celebrate Nauruz, as they call their New Year. The festivities will bear witness to the care with which the community has husbanded its culture for many decades.

Although few from the third-generation are completely fluent in Dari—the scriptless dialect adopted by their forefathers in the homeland, so that the Arabs couldn't understand them—Irani children know age-old customs well. On Nauruz day, family and friends will gather to par-

take of a beautifully laid thanksgiving table symbolising happiness and prosperity. It will be elaborately decorated with fresh flowers, rose water, dry fruits, a copy of the holy Khordeh Avesta, a portrait of prophet Zarathushtra and a mirror for good reflection. There will also be a goldfish bowl signifying an active life, green sprouts for healthy growth, sugarcane for sweetness, coins for wealth, seven articles whose Persian names start with the syllable 'Sh' and valued heirlooms embossed with ancestral motifs.

The repast is likely to consist of Osh-e-mir, a nourishing cereal and vegetable broth, fragrant pulao laden with meat, raisins and tart berries imported from Iran, not forgetting that tall glass of soothing-cool rose falooda. Most of all, there will be plenty of jovial conversation liberally peppered with typical turns of phrase like "Numo Khodu", which loosely translates as "touch wood". "Everything is Numo Khodu," chuckled Boman Irani. "It's a punctuation mark for pleasantly gregarious talk. We're a humorous lot, not prickly about being called 'jungle Irans' by the Parsis."

Parsis and Iranis speak different languages, eat different food and have a different sense of humour. "While the two groups seek to establish the true Zoroastrian vision, one major instrument in overcoming the obstacles to unity is an understanding of the story, the experiences and historical conditioning of the other," noted Zoroastrian scholar Dr Rashna Writer during a public lecture.

Today, Kayani and Bastani, facing each other across Dhobi Talao's Jagannath Shankarseth Road, are among the last Irani restaurants in the city. It isn't just economics that is driving them out of business. Many Iranis have chosen to leave India, settling around the world. One chikoo plantation farmer's son is going great guns with catering in Switzerland, another's a promising playwright in Canada, actress Perizad Zorabian's cousin tutors French children at L'Ecole Française, one enterprising lad heads a laundry chain in Beverly Hills. Boman Irani concluded, "You'd say redneck Irani kids are doing pretty good."

Many Irani restaurants today have been transformed into Udipi eateries. For some, that's cause for lament. For others, it's an indication that one more migrant group is cooking its way to success in the City of Gold. (This weekly series explores the numerous subcultures that add sparkle to the Mumbai mosaic.)

STARS AND TRIBES