

Sorry, no leg on chair, no combing hair, no sigret

On Jamshedi Navroz, Meher Marfatia raises a cup to the warm, vanishing space that is the Irani cafe

A community that's contributed its fair share of sugar and spice to Mumbai's melting pot, the Iranis invite culinary cliché. Orchards, wineries and bakeries were trades that this business people readily turned to, landing here from Persia in the 19th century, a thousand years after the first Zoroastrian immigrants, the Parsis.

In the comforting confines of the Irani cafe—vanishing relics from a once unhurried city—generations of commoners, writers and painters relaxed as they chatted over milky sweet chai (adapted from original Iranian black tea to suit local taste) and flaky khaari biscuits. These institutions have dwindled from 400 in the 1950s to barely 40, yet spawned a unique milieu echoed by popular art and literature. Gregory Roberts' *Shantaram* featuring Colaba's Cafe Leopold, possibly Mumbai's oldest running since 1871, is but a recent example.

Who hasn't smiled at quaint 'By Order' instructions, shakily lettered in coloured chalk at these teashop doors? In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salman Rushdie describes the Sorryno Restaurant, so called because of the blackboard at the entrance reading 'Sorry, No Liquor, No Answer Given Regarding Addresses in Locality, No Combing of Hair...No Sharing of Liquid Sustenance, No Feletone Calls, No Speaking of Horses, No Sigret, No Turning Down of Volume—It Is How We Like and No Musical Request—All Melodies Selected Are to Taste of Prop'.

Poet Nissim Ezekiel also warms to the theme in verse: 'No talking to cashier/ No fighting/ No credit/ No outside food...No



STILL LIFE: Sudhir Patwardhan's *Irani Restaurant*

spitting/ No bargaining/ No change/ No matchsticks/ No beef/ No leg on chair...' If the naysayers sound repetitive, Arun

Kolatkar offers details beyond slate-scribbled rules. 'The cock-eyed 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.' The lines afford a glimpse into the late poet's preferred hangouts which included the Military Cafe with its brio and brun maska.

Today young Shaan Khatau trains her lens on an ongoing weekly ritual at film critic Rashid Irani's Brabourne Restaurant in Dhobi Talao. Her documentary, *Waiting for Herzog*, "explores the madness of two worlds in transition, Bombay and the Irani cafe". City historians and moviemakers view the Irani cafe as the last bastion against globalisation. Also irretrievable, Rashid adds, is the easy camaraderie—making close friends of complete strangers; today's customers sit at isolated tables.

Despite a shift in clientele, the convivial cafe feel lingers. Photographer Mahendra Sinh worked on a picture essay for the Taj magazine in the early 1980s, charmed by the Irani restaurant's marble-topped tables and bentwood chairs. "It's nothing short of tragic that the cafe has almost been wiped out. In its passing away a bit of Bombay dies too," Sinh declares.

Theatre man Shiv Subrahmanyam's interest extends to more than mere nostalgia. He wrote and directed the 2002 play *Irani Cafe* keeping that background as a deliberate device: the restaurant as leveller. Subrahmanyam explains the narrative (through the words of the cafe owner) about multiple, often confusing, relationships among his 13 cast members. "The setting was intended as a metaphor for an entire city. Its characters, from shabby to upmarket, brought individual stories of love and longing. They were still able to connect, cutting across community accents and class levels," he says.

Artist Sudhir Patwardhan revels in the idea of the Irani cafe as a trans-cultural bond. Drawn during his college years in Pune to its bohemian ambience, he recalls rubbing shoulders with workers and dropouts. Everyone had an opinion on politics, philosophy, art and plain gossip. And everyone was heard. Patwardhan, who painted *Irani Restaurant* in 1977, says, "The place was our hangout, both an escape from and a growing out of what one was used to. Even the decor, with those wonderful mirrored columns, reflected the road outside and welcomed its bustle within. All-embracing public areas are not valued now, a great loss really."

Iranis are usually located at street corners—these prime "corner plot" locations were once considered inauspicious by Hindus. The Iranis, hoping to make twice the trade at a junction, looked towards ancestral Iran and uttered "Numo Khodu (Touch wood)!" Then they moved in, to serve the cup that cheers.