

Theri, you shall be missed!

What was worse was that it was we who were responsible for introducing Theri to the world and ultimately, to capitalism

By Themrise Khan

KHAIRPUR (1995-1997):

There is not much to do in rural areas, so one tends to observe to pass the time. Or one tends to talk to the locals. I remember blissful evenings sitting out in the garden of our rest house, talking with my colleagues, our driver and our rest house caretaker, Majeed.

Majeed was my local contact. He didn't talk much, but was quite entertaining all the same. Mostly for the fact that most of us spent a great deal of time trying to figure out whether he wore a wig or not. He did. He never really understood what we all did for a living. He catered for our NGO meetings and training sessions. He played host to our regular stream of NGO visitors, he cooked our favourite dishes whenever we were in town and he scolded us when he needed to. The most frequent memory I have of him is arguing with my colleague about the monthly expenses. He didn't think much of our accountants' problems with the receipt issue. His job was to cook and so he did.

He was mostly wary of us women in particular. He stayed away from us. But I think he eventually got used to us. I suppose he didn't have much choice either. I would ask him questions about himself, but he would never really give me a straight answer. He was more concerned about when to serve dinner. But he made us all feel safe, despite his quirkiness.

Majeed passed away a few years ago, of kidney failure. None of us could help him out.

Us, whom he didn't particularly like, but who were the last family he knew. May his soul rest in peace!

Did I say earlier that Kaak Mahal was the ultimate dining experience in Khairpur? I actually meant it was the second ultimate experience. The ultimate dining experience in Khairpur was Theri. It was my colleague who discovered it while based there. A half-hour drive from the city, Theri was a beaten down truck stop on the National Highway in Thari Mirwah sub-division. It was as rustic as they come. *Charpais* scattered about on the sandy roadside, which shuddered every time the traffic on the highway went by. Abida Parween blended jarringly with Lata and Asha, as truck drivers lounged around waiting to be fed after their long and arduous journeys.

The 'family room' didn't exist here. I was told that the first time our colleagues brought their female counterparts here for a meal, they were refused. This was no place for women. The scene was still fairly hostile on my first visit. We were quickly ushered into a corner of the covered veranda. Some rickety tables hurriedly put together for our comfort. You see, we had insisted that we would not eat in *purdah*. It was too hot anyway.

The men glared at us inquisitively. I felt uncomfortable. Ignore them, my colleague told me. It was nighttime, so the glare of the bright bulbs provided some cover. Aslam, our driver, provided the

rest. What was so special about the food here, I asked. Wait and see, I was assured. I didn't need to wait actually. The smell of spices and chicken wafted past and made me forget my discomfort. I just tried not to look at the offal lying close by. The meal came. And what a meal! No wonder truck drivers in Sindh drive with such maniacal ferocity. They all want to get to Theri in time for dinner!

The menu was nothing out of the ordinary, but the tenderness and freshness made it unnaturally succulent. Keep the hot and puffy *tandoori naams* coming, I urged in earnest. Definitely the best meal I have ever had.

On the way back home, the night-time transforming the mobile monsters into glittering coloured fairy lights. I had found my calling to rural Pakistan. It was dinner at Theri.

Over time, everyone at Theri soon got used to seeing women around. Word spread and many more NGO *wallahs* became regular clients. Men and women, all were welcome, some coming from as far as Sukkur and Nawabshah. It was too good an opportunity to be missed. If one thing was proven, it was that the more women ignore men, they'll lose interest in us eventually. And that's exactly what happened.

My last visit to Theri was after a gap of more than a year. It was a rude shock. Gone were the *charpais* and the dilapidated veranda. In its place, was an enclosed eating area, complete

with a private family room and garish green lights. High walls blocked out the roar of the traffic and proper tables and chairs were laid out around the now covered kitchen. Tables with tablecloths. The truck drivers were now catered to in a separate area away from the guests. The place was teeming with people, men, women and children. This once out-of-bounds truck stop had been transformed into a 'restaurant'. I couldn't believe my eyes.

You see, part of the experience of dining at Theri was its rustic and unkempt appeal. It was both a joy and a humbling experience to be able to eat shoulder to shoulder with everyone else. During those times, there was no difference between them and us. We were all the same—the city people, the truck drivers, labourers, and farmers—all of us. Now, we were once again the 'outsiders', receiving a privileged treatment, while the rest of them watched us from a distance, suspiciously eyeing our claims of equality. What was worse was that it was we who were responsible for introducing Theri to the world and ultimately, to capitalism.

Success (and business sense) had come to the owners soon enough. Capitalising on their popularity, this was their way of showing that they too could prosper. Not that there is anything wrong with that. All the best to them! But as I sat at the dining tables, the garish green bulbs distorting the faces around me (we had refused to sit in the family room; some things have to remain sacred after all), I couldn't help but feel that we had been robbed of one of the most culturally and dynamically exciting experiences of our short lives. Theri, you shall be missed!

Letters and articles are welcome and should be addressed to:

The Editor
Political Economy,
The News on Sunday
4th Floor, Al-Rahman Bldg.
11 Chundrigar Road,
Karachi-PAKISTAN

Voice: 9221-2630611-5 ext 2567

Fax: 9221-2410343-44

Email: editorpe@hotmail.com

All must include writer's full name, address and home telephone; contents may be edited for purposes of clarity or space.

News PES Aug 24, 2003