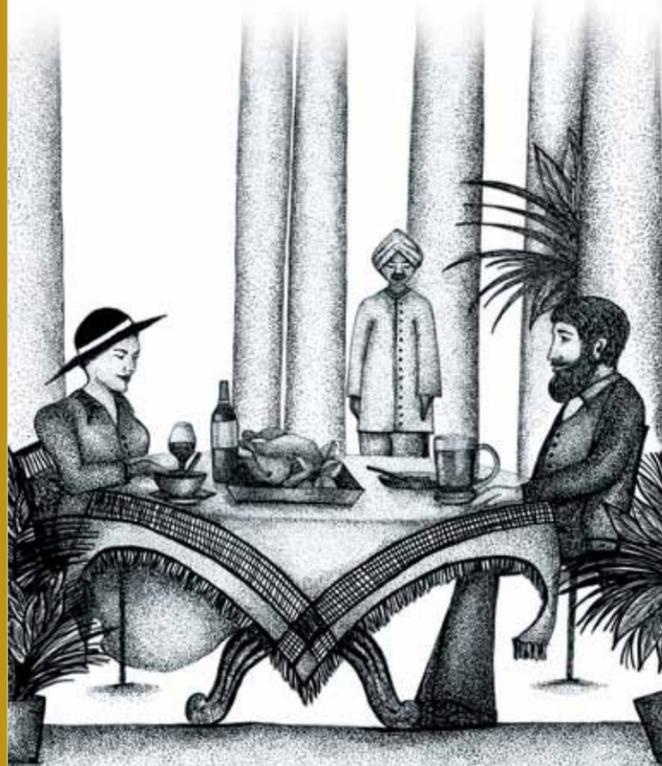


HOW THE DAK BUNGALOW FED THE PERIPATETIC RAJ

When they established the system of dak bungalows in the 1840s, the British were, in essence, reviving a tradition that had existed in ancient India and during the Mughal era: of providing travellers with shelter and food. The caretakers of these bungalows, the khitmutgars, were also the men who cooked for the British, and over time, their culinary skill and ingenuity gave rise to Anglo-Indian cuisine: Chicken Country Captain, Railway Mutton Curry, chicken cutlets and the masala omelette.

BY RAJIKA BHANDARI ILLUSTRATION BY NIKITA RAO



IN 1854, a 42-year-old British writer and political journalist set out to travel on business across India, from the old capital, Calcutta, to the new capital, Delhi. He decided the best way to do this was to engage a dak gharry from the North-Western Dak Company for a sum of Rs 138 that would take him on the Grand Trunk Road, which extended for 900 miles between the two cities. He paused to rest his head at several dak bungalows along the way and was intrigued by this notion of government rest houses for weary travellers. At one such bungalow, the khansama (the master chef), after greeting the traveller politely, asked him what he would like to eat. The traveller had heard many jokes about the food at such dak bungalows, that even if the khansama professed to a large repertoire of dishes, the final product was always 'a tough hen eaten twenty minutes after her last cluck'. He was to discover that it was no different at all the dak bungalows he visited during his long journey: the khansama's seemingly innocent question, 'What shall I prepare?' was always misleading since what it really meant was, 'How shall I prepare it? Shall the bird of the bungalow be roasted, boiled, grilled, stewed or curried?' Charles Dickens concluded quite wisely that there was no getting away from chicken and that if he couldn't alter the basic ingredient, he could, at the very least, consume it in all its possible variations, and so he asked for a different chicken dish at each resting place and 'had no sameness to complain of'.

Before dak bungalows, their khansamas, and the ubiquitous chicken on a plate, food — how to acquire it and how to prepare it — was a vexing problem for the peripatetic British. In the days before the railways, when journeys on land were longer and harsher, amassing provisions was an essential part of planning the trip. In her Letters from India, Lady Wilson describes to her relatives back in England how she managed while camping in Shahpur, Punjab, in 1889: 'You may well wonder how we are fed, for we are out in the desert, remember, in the barest and most thinly-populated part of the district, and about 60 miles from the headquarters. Well, to begin with, we carry with us our own groceries, which come out from England — or rather, as far as we are concerned, from the Army and Navy stores at Bombay — packed in tins. We have also our filter, and our supply of soda water and wine with us. We kill our own sheep and chickens, have our own cows, and make our own bread and butter'.

Buying food from the natives of the villages and small towns through which they passed was not always an option for the British: most of the local population was vegetarian and the British themselves ate a hybrid cuisine that still drew heavily upon European traditions and for which ingredients were not readily available. So, the only sensible option was to carry all their rations with them and to also take along cooks who could prepare the food, especially meat, to their liking. Sometimes these rations were supplanted with game. In 1638, Albert de Mandelslo, a German adventurer who travelled in Persia and India and had a penchant for shooting wildlife, journeyed with some British merchants carrying supplies of silver and trade goods to the factories that dotted the route from Surat to Agra. On the way, they shot wild ducks, deer and wild boars, all of which supplied the travellers with several hearty suppers.

Perhaps one of the largest retinues, and the most extensive preparations for food, was seen when Lord Auckland, the governor general of India, travelled from Calcutta to Simla in October 1837. The trip, for which planning began as early as June, helped Auckland learn first-hand about the region that fell under the East India Company's rule, and enabled him to show his allegiance to the friendship treaty signed in 1831 between Governor General Lord William Bentinck and Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a close ally and supporter of the British. While crossing the plains and approaching Allahabad, his cavalcade was of a scale not seen before among the British, and was rather more reminiscent of the pomp and pageantry that was typical of the Mughal emperors. Auckland's 10-mile-long elaborate retinue included 850 camels, 140 elephants, 250 horses, and 12,000 human beings that extended down the dusty plain further than the eye could see. It was an audacious display of British power and control, leaving a lasting impression on the native rulers. Accompanying this grand procession was the viceroy's French chef, St. Cloup, who, along with his entourage of cooks, turned out fancy and lavish spreads for the governor general and his guests, including the Nawab of Oudh...

In the years before the railways, India's large rivers, particularly the Ganges, were the major lifeline to navigate from one point to another,

with British travellers often sailing in a budgerow, a large keelless barge; most of these budgerows consisted of cabins with Venetian windows. This method was, in many ways, far less destructive than travelling over road. The custom of a cook-boat that would sail along the budgerow at mealtimes, and offer hot and freshly prepared foods, lessened the burden of carrying all the provisions. These boat-side meals were supplemented by a few essential provisions carried by the travellers, and by milk and eggs that were available from the villages that they passed. But this sort of travel added its own share of chaos, as observed by Mrs Postans, the wife of an officer of the Bombay Army, who sailed in a budgerow along the west coast of India in the 1830s. 'The whole scene,' she complained, 'is one of filth and confusion; fowl coops, cocoa-nuts, cooking vessels, coir ropes, and passengers mingled together, and surrounded by every ill savour

THE MASTER OF THE DAK BUNGALOW CAME TO KNOWN VARIOUSLY AS A KHANSAMA, A KHITMUTGAR...

that bilge-water and native cookery can produce.'

All this changed in the 1840s, when the government established the system of dak bungalows and thus, in essence, revived the tradition that had existed in ancient India and during the Mughal era: of providing travellers with shelter and food. The one key difference, though, between these buildings and their predecessors was that the former were also staffed by a manager who was an all-in-one cook, butler and factotum. This master of the dak bungalow came to be known variously as a khansama, a khitmutgar, a peon, a sepoy, and a mussalchee.

It was only a matter of time that the British, with their predilection to alter their surroundings to their own taste and habits, would also influence the food they were consuming 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, they were able to whip up a hybrid Anglo-Indian cuisine. In some instances, they were even able to prepare authentic English dishes, with the meagre cooking implements and facilities at their disposal. Because chicken was easily available, and lent itself to so many variations, it became a staple.

By no means a haute cuisine, a typical meal at a dak bungalow consisted of 'a breakfast of tea in big, thick cups, poured from a chipped teapot, and a buttered toast upon a willow-patterned plate which did not match anything ... the traveller would look forward to a lunch of the inevitable curry and rice, or roast chicken and chapattis, followed by a dinner in which the courses consisted of leg of mutton left over from an earlier repast, served upon cracked plates with metal reservoirs of hot water under them, and embellished with tinned peas of an anaemic olive pallor. Caramel custard was served ad nauseam

and the highlight of the whole meal would be the fresh fruit’.

This standard dak bungalow fare, for the most part, left much to be desired and became infamous as one of the worst aspects of the dak bungalow travel. The monotony of the food worsened, if not altogether induced, the ennui that set in between meals as travellers awaited their transportation to the next destination or when they took a break from their journey. In his *Rice and Curry on Forty Plates*, a hilarious mid-19th-century satire of a fictional mofussil in Bengal called ‘Kabob’, George Atkinson captures perfectly the languor of dak bungalow stays before the arrival of distractions and comforts such as fans and televisions: ‘The punkah of limited dimensions... affords but little mitigation of the burning heat. We lie recumbent on the cot... we have dozed; we have read the regulations that hang upon the walls forty times at least, till we know them by heart; we have drunk tepid beer, and warm soda has allayed our thirst; we have recorded our names in the book of fate and of the Bungalow; when, at last, upon a grateful ear the sounds of the relieving palankeen-bearers announce that the sun has set and that the hour of departure is at hand.’

Most khansamas were as tough and aged as the chicken they served, immortalised in Kipling’s verse, ‘Old is the song that I sing, Old as my unpaid bills, Old as the chicken that khitmutgars bring, Men at dak-bungalows – old as the Hills.’ Over time, the typical khansama of a dak bungalow gained a reputation for being a wily and skilful manipulator who could deceive his guests into believing that they had at their disposal every imaginable dish – ‘Hot rolls and buttered toast, cold ham and sausages, raised pie, and other delicacies’. But the khansama’s bountiful offerings were vastly exaggerated because, in reality, all the dishes were clever variations on a single theme: chicken...

Visitors to dak bungalows were completely at the mercy of the khansama, that ‘sweetly-smiling, sweetly-talking...venerable patriarch of self-complacent mien who is the purveyor of the institution, and with unbounded largeness of views, and a broad idea of his

own capabilities’. It was well-known that enterprising khansamas supplemented their meagre governmental salary by storing liquor and canned meats that appealed to their European visitors and that could be served to them for a tidy profit. For a hapless traveler, ensconced all by himself in a dak bungalow on a remote hilltop, there was no escaping this extortion.

Because of their somewhat dirty and scruffy appearance, perfectly innocent khansamas were occasionally mistaken for being scoundrels-at-large, especially by visiting memsahibs who feared much for their safety and honour... But, despite the unsavoury reputation of most dak bungalow khansamas, there appeared every now and then a rare khansama in the journals and testimonials of British travellers who distinguished himself either by the superior food he was able to put on the table, or by his general attentiveness and goodwill toward his guests. William Tayler, posted in Krishnaghur as a magistrate, recalls one such khansama. ‘Krishnaghur was celebrated in former days as the residence of many distinguished men, but the only living celebrity in our time was “Peter”, the superintendent at the dak bungalow. Some men achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them. How “Peter” obtained his greatness is not easy to say, but that he was great in his ways is not to be doubted.’ Tayler narrates a Latin ode composed by a friend of his, Pierce Taylor, a poet and artist who was so impressed by Peter that he wrote the ode in honour of the ‘hero of the Krishnaghur Dak Bungalow’. In simple English, the prose version reads, ‘Peter was an East Indian,

IT WAS THIS BIT OF MORBID DAK BUNGALOW THEATRE THAT GAVE THE CHICKEN ITS MONIKER: ‘SUDDEN DEATH’

fat and well-favoured, by profession manager and quasi-butler of the Krishnaghur Dak Bungalow, dispenser of grilled chickens, curry, pilau, and other Oriental dainties to weary travellers; ever-ready, ever on the watch for the coming guest, and with subordinates adept in the art of catching unsuspecting chickens when the traveller’s palankeen was seen in the distance’.

Even for a cook who was eager to please his visitors, there were few options beyond chicken, especially up-country. So he tried his creative best to vary the style of cooking and to adapt the dishes to what he perceived as the strange and unpalatable tastes of the English.

Countless British travelers, such as Foster (J F, assistant surgeon to Her Majesty in the 1870s), narrate a scenario such as this: the cook rushing out into the courtyard wielding a knife to catch the chicken just minutes before preparing the meal, the chicken rushing around the compound, screeching in an attempt to escape, and the final, desperate squawk as it was caught and met its inevitable fate. The dust from the arriving dak

gharry would barely have settled when the martyred chicken would arrive on the dining table in one of its many avatars – ranging from the ubiquitous Captain’s Curry to the quintessential Anglo-Indian invention, the chicken cutlet, and everything else in between. It was this bit of morbid dak bungalow theatre that gave the poor chicken its moniker, ‘sudden death’ – ‘chicken that had been decapitated, plucked, grilled and served up within 20 minutes of being ordered’. The chase of the doomed fowl by the knife-wielding cook became dak bungalow legend, though every now and then, there were reports of brave birds managing to hide beneath the chair of the guest who was soon to consume it in its grilled or curried form.

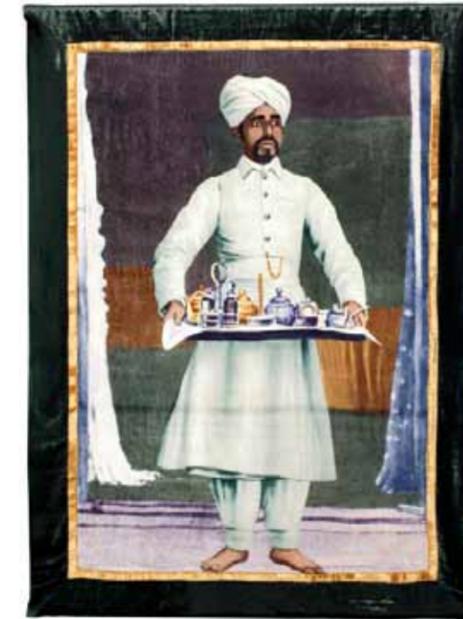
One of the most popular Anglo-Indian preparations of chicken was a dish called ‘Country Captain’. It is also a dish that has travelled the globe and has thus taken on many different forms: some globetrotters report consuming a dish called General Chicken at a Chinese restaurant, only to discover that it was indeed an unmistakable close cousin of the Indian Country Captain curry. In its very basic form, it is a curry or stew of chicken, enhanced with turmeric and chillies and served with ‘country bread’ or chapattis. The origin of the dish and its name is not clear: some claim that its origins were in a dark and grimy dak bungalow kitchen. Others claim that the dish was the brainchild of the commander of a ‘country’ (native or Indian) boat and hence the term ‘Country Captain’. The second explanation is probably closer to the truth as the dish seems to have found its way in the 19th century to coastal areas in different continents, like Liverpool in the United Kingdom and in the American South, leading Americans to mistakenly believe that the dish was native to their cuisine.

Other accompaniments to the ever-present chicken were kedgeree (khichri), chapattis, daal, Irish stew (iron-y-stew to the khansamas), and caramel custard by way of dessert. Breakfast was usually bacon, eggs, and bread, if any was available. Butter was not easily available, and in its place the cook was quite likely to offer the unsuspecting guests some red-currant jelly in a little bottle that has formerly contained pomade for the hair. Caramel custard, or ‘custel brun’, as it was known among Indian servants, was to become another staple of the dak bungalow dining table because of the easy availability of eggs and milk. Like ‘sudden death’, it, too, acquired a nickname – ‘365’ – because it was served almost every day of the year, or so it appeared. Some English travellers banned the dessert at home because they were forced to have more than their fill of it while staying at dak bungalows and eating at railway stations.

But some inspired cooks went above and beyond, experimenting with known techniques and inventing a repertoire of dishes unique to the menu a traveller could expect at these bungalows. Famed khansamas such as Bernard of the Bilaspur Circuit House and Peter of the Krishnaghur Dak Bungalow, who learnt to prepare a hybrid Anglo-Indian cuisine, offered up memorable dishes that could almost border on the sublime. One such dish and a star of Anglo-Indian cuisine was the delectable

OTHER ACCOMPANIMENTS TO THE EVER-PRESENT CHICKEN WERE KEDGEREE, IRISH STEW AND CARAMEL CUSTARD

chicken cutlet that survives to this day and has taken on many variations, ranging from vegetarian to mutton and paneer cutlets. When Lady D’Urban, the wife of Sir Benjamin, the former governor of Cape Colony, became gravely ill during her stay at the Cape of Good Hope in 1840 and was unable to consume the average meat dish, an ingenious Bengali cook from India accompanying the group came up with a ‘delicate little chicken cutlet’ that was at once easily digestible and delicious, so much so that the Lady consumed nothing else for the next several days.



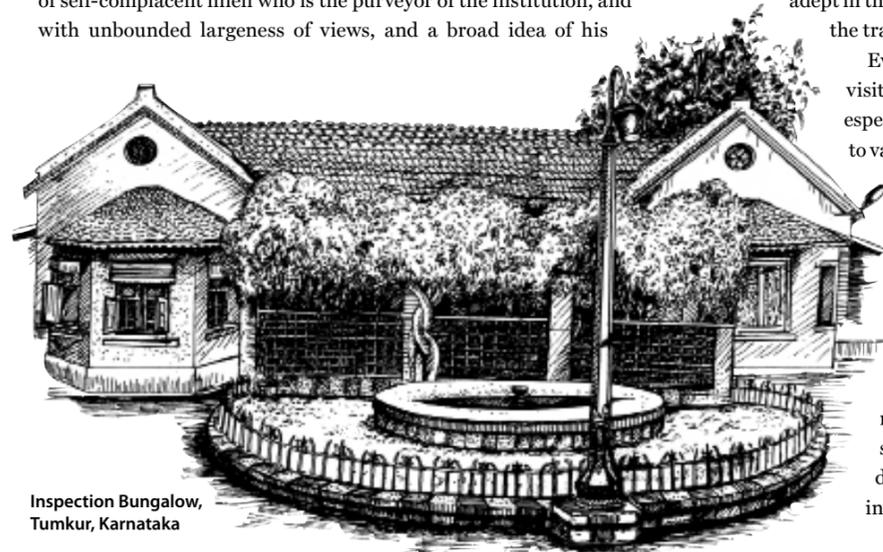
Khidmadgar | Devangana Kumar | Phototype postcard

The omelette, especially the trademark Indian masala omelette, was another preparation that dak bungalow cooks excelled in. Harriet Tytler observed during her travels that no one could cook an omelette – or grill a fowl – as well as an Indian cook. In her memoirs of the mid-19th century, she often lamented the slow demise of the old-fashioned and somewhat primitive style of cooking, a style that had its origins in a remote dak bungalow, but one that ultimately came to influence all Anglo-Indian cuisine and can even be found today in some shape or form in India.

With the arrival of the railways in 1853 and increased mobility across the country, often of the khansamas themselves, dak

bungalow cooking eventually made its way into India’s hotels, clubs and railway catering. It was here that these dishes found a more permanent home within a broader Anglo-Indian cuisine that was already well-established. However, here too, the quality of the food could be patchy – ranging from watery mutton curries and leathery roast chicken – with occasional flights of excellence, such as the delectable curries on the Calcutta-Puri lines or the Delhi-Calcutta Deluxe trains, or the ‘butler cuisine’ served on the ferries that went between Madras and Colombo.

With the increasing availability of dak bungalow and Anglo-Indian cuisine and its suitability to the English preference for blander foods,



Inspection Bungalow, Tumkur, Karnataka

the British lost out on the great culinary traditions of the people they ruled... This was an experience for which they would have to wait till the empire struck back, and the fragrant cooking of India overtook Britain.

Another place where dak bungalow and Anglo-Indian cuisine found a home was in India's pre- and post-Independence private ('public' in British parlance) and missionary boarding schools, most of which had been established by the British and continue to operate with a Raj-era hangover. Along with the call of bugles and paying homage to the King's Colours, all forms of cutlets, Indianised 'Shepherd's Pie', and greyish mutton curries have found their way into the menu, alongside Indian staples such as daal, rice, and chapattis. Camellia Panjabi, in her cookbook, *The Great Curries of India*, recalls that when she attended Queen Mary's, a missionary-run school in Bombay, 'baked fish, baked mince (cottage pie), dhol (English and Anglo-Indian for dal) and yellow rice, mutton curry and rice, coconut pancakes, and Malabar sago pudding' dominated the school's menu.

Indians of a certain generation still fondly recall Raj-era restaurants and eating establishments — such as Firpo's, Flury's and Nahoum's in Calcutta, Wayside Inn in Mumbai, and Wenger's and the Gymkhana Club in Delhi — that continue to serve Anglo-Indian cuisine par excellence. But these institutions have also witnessed a slow demise as their main clientele — Anglo-Indians — have themselves moved beyond India's shores. Moreover, as these cities have transformed into multi-cuisine havens, catering to a worldly and evolved palette, relatively unsophisticated dishes like vegetable cutlets are no longer enticing enough.

Restaurants such as Oh! Calcutta are struggling to keep the dwindling cuisine alive. 'We had to really search for a khansama who could make a proper railway mutton curry,' recalls Anjan Chatterjee, trailblazing restaurateur of several fine-dining establishments in India, 'or one who knew how to make chicken in an Anglo-

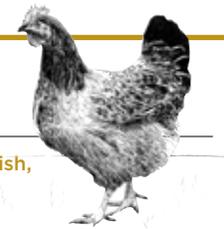
Draped in finger-licking masala made with fried onions, garlic and ginger, and accompanied with roast baby potatoes and boiled peas, it was a dish worth dying for. Salim insisted that the gobhi acquired its unique taste because it was cooked in its own juices — on dum — for hours, but there was also a strong rumour that the magic was worked by generous and clandestine sprinkling of flavourful mutton stock.' Like Salim Miyan, many of today's dak bungalow cooks are Muslims, oftentimes the direct descendants of Muslim khansamas who served during the Raj. Muslim cooks were perhaps drawn to the profession because they had fewer religious restrictions about 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

HOW TO MAKE COUNTRY CAPTAIN

Cold meats and curries are sometimes converted into this dish, the condiments for which are as follows: Two chittacks or four ounces of ghee, half a teaspoonful of ground chillies, one teaspoonful of salt, a quarter of a teaspoonful of ground turmeric, and 20 onions, cut up lengthways into fine slices.

☞ Cut up in the usual way an ordinary curry chicken. ☞ Warm the ghee and fry the sliced onions, which when brown set aside. ☞ Fry the ground turmeric and chillies, then throw in the chicken and salt, and continue to fry, stirring the whole until the chicken is tender. ☞ Serve it up, strewing over it the fried onions.

Recipe by a Thirty-Five Years' Resident, from *The Indian Cookery Book*, 1948



A CUTLET AS PERFECT AS THE ONE AT AN INDIA COFFEE HOUSE IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD

Indian style, where it's cooked in chicken fat, and then in red wine and garam masala.' But for now these dishes have survived safely on his menu. Pushpesh Pant, a culinary expert and die-hard foodie, reminisces about the days when such cuisine was readily available but can now be found only in the places where some of it once originated: dak bungalows. 'We have fond memories of a musallam bandh-gobhi (spicy cabbage) that was once served by Salim Miyan, the khansama at the Mukteswar Dak Bungalow with great fanfare when no murghi was available at short notice.

perfected in the kitchens of the Mughals and the royal households of nawabs and diwans.

The vestiges of Anglo-Indian cuisine can just barely be found in England, the country that provided one-half of the inspiration for it. But there, too, Bangladeshi food passes for authentic Indian food, and the newer forces of an ethnically influenced 'fusion' cuisine have all but wiped out the erstwhile curry culture, which the British took back with them after India's independence.

Today, if one seeks dak bungalow-style cooking, short of trudging to a remote dak bungalow in some obscure Indian district, one might find it in one of the many India Coffee Houses dotted across India. Themselves a Raj-era creation, coffee houses have stuck to their classic menu of South Indian and continental

cuisine that includes all the usual suspects: cutlets, keema omelettes, cucumber sandwiches, and baked vegetables. A cutlet as perfect as the one at an India Coffee House — no thicker than an inch, soft on the inside and crisp on the outside — is impossible to find anywhere else in the world. Especially if it is served with the signature accompaniment: a sweet and tart pumpkin sauce. ☞



EDITED EXCERPTS FROM *THE RAJ ON THE MOVE*, BY RAJIKA BHANDARI, ROLI BOOKS, RS 250