

Cooking for Change – The Malgudi Coffee Shop

Cooking for change? Yes. It's possible. A very small step forward, no doubt, yet *balmiki* girls cooking for Brahmins in the orthodox South Indian city of Mysore, is a mini revolution. It's breaking the barriers of untouchability and caste pollution. Let me tell you about it.

Mari Marcel Thekaekara (May 2, 2011)

The word balmiki meant little to me till December 1996 when Martin Macwan , founder of Navsarjan Trust Gujarat,talked about the plight of this community at a Delhi meeting. I put on my journalist hat and went to Gujarat where the Navsarjan Team took me from small town to small town to witness first hand the fact that on the eve of 50 years of India's Independence, balmiki or sweeper caste women still carried shit on their heads. It was a huge shock. I wrote about it in *Frontline* in 1997 and then published a book *Endless Filth* in 1999. Ten years later, I'd visited most states of India, reviewing the work funded by Action Aid and Christian Aid on this issue. The Safai Karmachari Andolan, Bejawada Wilson and his team, Ashif and the Jan Sahas team have all done commendable work on the issue.

In Ahmedabad, I discovered Gagan Sethi had employed two balmiki girls to cook for the Jan Vikas staff in the office kitchen, as a political gesture. Some staff were uncomfortable with the idea. Notions of purity, pollution and untouchablity are ingrained deep, almost unconsciously, in the Indian psyche. Gagan announced to the team that this was non-negotiable. Anyone who worked for social justice could not object to eating food cooked by a Dalit. If they had problems with this, they should quit. To me this was a brilliant gesture, and a mark of solidarity with the balmiki community. Not many NGOs put their money where their mouth is.

I'd interviewed hundreds of balmiki women from 1997 to 2007 and I always felt intrusive. I was getting their stories, listening to their pain and suffering. Every single woman had been traumatized by that first foray into her nauseating degrading workplace, the public toilets. Writing about it seemed inadequate. Too little to give back to them, though it was necessary to carry on a campaign about their plight. I always wished I could do something more. For over a hundred years, these girls' ancestors have cleaned filthy cess pools, the kind shown in *Slumdog Millionaire*. They muck out human excreta from private and public latrines. They think this is their destiny, their karma, because of the sins of a previous birth. What's more, everyone else thinks so too.

Gagan's experiment gave me an idea. My husband Stan and I were on the Board of The Green Hotel in Mysore, brainchild of Hilary Blume, Founder of the Charities Advisory Trust, UK. Profits went to local charities and we hired mostly Dalit staff from nearby slums. Hilary had always wanted a coffee shop. So I thought why not a coffee shop run by balmiki girls? It would

be a first for Mysore, a fairly conservative, traditional town. A first anywhere actually. This was also the first all women's cafe in the city and probably the first Dalit cafe in India.

Things suddenly began to move fast. I read an article in *The Hindu* about a young Frenchman Alexis de Ducla who started a bakery to train young Dalit men in French baking. I contacted him and he sent us a young baker who started us off with French pastries and cakes. We recruited twelve young balmiki girls from a nearby slum through friends, Joy and Philomena Maliekal of a local Mysore NGO. The girls were trained to run the coffee shop. They learnt amazingly fast. They were given classes in food handling, serving, laying a table, billing, reading the menu, etc. The English classes were fun. These were girls used to traditional, basic South Indian fare. They knew no other food. Suddenly they had to practice asking, “Would you like a Latte, Cappuccino or Espresso?” They learnt basic English, memorized everything on the menu. Repeated French names like croissant and quiche. Espresso and quiche were tongue twisters. But we insisted on Espresso, not Expresso. And soon they got it. They were trained in using the coffee machines.

The Malgudi Coffee shop is beautiful. We used traditional South Indian designs. A courtyard with a little patch of green, a tea plant, a coffee bush, sacred basil, rosemary, a pomegranate tree. And the colours were vivid Mysorean too. Cheerful sunshine yellow tablecloths. Traditional handmade Athangudi tiles from Chettinadu. We wanted these girls to work in a beautiful place, in a stylish, almost five star atmosphere. A huge departure from the filthy toilets their parents and grandparents had cleaned for over a century.

We chose traditional South Indian uniforms. A deliberate break from the unattractive new trend of fast food type uniforms favoured by the pizza and burger chains now popular all over India, with their baseball caps and badly made, cheap imitations of western trousers and shirts. Attire most unsuited to the average working class Indian woman.

So the Malgudi girls glide gracefully around their coffee shop, dressed in sunflower yellow and burgundy *langa davanies*, the traditional costume of young South Indian girls. This is a long, flowing, ankle length skirt with a blouse and a long pleated scarf draped over the blouse. They are poised and confident, and western guests especially, rave about how charming the girls look.



Mysoreans are proud of the fact that there is one restaurant in the city which brings back the charm of the past. The good old days.

About a year after the coffee shop opened, the chef left. To our astonishment, the girls took over the baking with complete confidence. They had never been formally trained in baking, but had picked up the skills perfectly while helping with the chopping, mixing etc.

French customers have approved the freshly baked croissants, British guests have raved about the Anglo-Indian bread and butter pudding, an American guest said this was the best chocolate cake he'd ever eaten and everyone has been ecstatic about the light, delicious lemon drizzle cake. The cakes are different. They are not mass produced. One taste and you can tell. The date and walnut cake is now being ordered by some Bangalore friends who send for it all the way from Mysore, 180 kilometres away! It's really special, they insist. A cake to die for.

The brown and multi grain bread is now sold through the local supermarket nearby, and has a steady stream of regular customers. Yoga students who flock to Mysore from all over the world, come to the Malgudi to buy the brown and multi grain bread. It's been voted the best in Mysore. And a variety of organic cakes, bread and biscuits are sent to far away Kozhikode every week. The Mysore media flocked to the opening and it was covered in most local papers and by television. When I pointed out to journalists that we had the best cakes in Mysore, one discerning reporter, said "Do you think I cover every coffee shop that opens here? I'm writing about this because balmiki girls baking cakes and serving food is a historic departure from centuries of untouchability. It's an enormous political statement."

I was glad someone seemed to have got the point. It's a very small initiative in the larger scheme of things. And someone criticized it as a sort of Gandhian experiment, not militant enough. But the girls are proud of working in an environment which would normally have been out of bounds for them.

Totally out of the realm of possibility. And I think it's important that we find new solutions, new breakthroughs, new models for livelihoods for the balmiki community.

I remember Martin Macwan telling me in 1998 that it was frustrating, because the people could only think of making brooms or drums. They could not think beyond that. But now, things are changing slowly. Navsarjan plans to train Dalits to open small village cafes, sell samosas and other snacks in tiny village shops. Martin's brainchild. This will transform the Dalit economy. And hopefully, untouchability will be a thing of the past in the next few decades.