

BY SANDEEP MUKHERJEE

NAAGARJI'S - THE FINAL FRONTIER

The initiation of the Indian palate to western fare ranging from hamburgers to chicken in fried batter has been fraught with emotion, controversy and political dispute. The depiction of America's food chains as symbols of western imperialist greed isn't new, at least not in the context of the past few decades. However, it appears that much of the resistance has been overcome, as India is dotted with KFC's Smiling Colonel and MickeyD's Golden Arches. Well not entirely! One small village of indomitable BITSians still holds out against the invaders.

Each year Anne Garber publishes a list of the planet's finest eateries. The *crème de la crème* of the culinary world. The champagne at these joints pours a pretty pink and the caviar's delectable... that, of course, is what I learned from the Internet. Needless to say, on account of my humble position in the world's food chain (literally!) I've not actually sampled the aforementioned delicacies.

That said, I'm thankful enough for having had many a satisfying meal at Naagarji's.

Even an optimist would be, to use an expression not dulled by extensive plebeian usage, "pushing it", if they recommended Naagar's to Ms Garber's List and 'tis also unlikely that Sinatra would feel the urge to burst out "Naagar! Naagar!" But for the discerning Pilani populace, no gourmet chef nor mass-food manufacturer could serve up a more satisfactory assortment of gastronomic goodies.

There are those who would make a strong case for *Shankar redi*, then there were (and I fear still are) still more who contend that C'not had all that it took to titillate and tantalize our taste buds... to them I, all the while quivering in disbelief at their audacity, choose to use the strongest expletive in my limited vocabulary – Baah! Still others may contend that *Munna Pavitra Bhojanalya* is where the edible excitement was at. I choose to direct their attention to page 42 of Philip Kotler's *Marketing Management* where he clearly specifies that comparison across market sectors is a No! No!

Sam chat, chai, shikanjee, jamun, burfi and, what every man, woman and child in Pilani quickly learns about, the *Kela*. Naagarji's had it all! And then some. After many a Mech Sol test did we seek comfort by drowning our sorrows in glasses of *shikanjee*. *Besan burfis* followed to ease the pain. With *jamuns*, our spirits rose to pre-test levels. *Sam chaats* elevated us to spiritual levels that would have the Buddhist monks of this world peeved at their inefficient standard operating procedures for the attainment of Nirvana.



While modern day writers, especially of non-fiction, are given a license to deviate from verity (or was it Macavity?) 'twould for certain push this piece over to the *avant garde* of modern day literature if I chose to touch upon hygiene issues – for there was none!

It was Jehangir's paradise – "If there is paradise anywhere on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here" – whether you were an animal lover or quite simply an aspiring lover.

Dogs, the odd monkey, camels, peacocks and even more dogs fought it out for scraps of edible excitement. Darwin would have beamed at the sight of his theories being played out in this microcosm – he may even have been swayed, in his moment of weakness, to open an account with Naagar.

For the Don Juans, de facto or not quite so, what better place to woo the woman, or, as it were in many a case, the multitude of wimmin', than at Naagarji's. Perched on bent blue benches, with the desiccated, barren tree branches above and the dirt and dust providing a suitable Gone With the Wind like ambience.

As the McDonald's and KFCs of the western world complete their conquest of urban India and continue to dilute our culture, gastronomic heritage and bring with them the calorific evils of the western world, Naagarji's remains our Final Frontier, the last bastion of our snacking traditions. We must prevail!

I trust you gentle readers are stirred to action and will do what must be done to hold the Pilani fort against the invaders. Let us raise our collective voice and say to the KFCs, McDonalds and Anne Garbers of the world... "Baad mein!" †