

OF BANQUETS AND BARAKHANAS

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“The army”, Napoleon is famously said to have remarked, “marches on its stomach.” That food, is a huge motivational force for the uniformed forces, I came to realize way back in 1971 when I joined the NDA. While the rigours of the high intensity physical training, the savage ragging (par for the course in those social media ‘mukt’ days) and the single minded focus of our professors on academics, made us long to jump ship at the first available opportunity, the only force that pulled us through without a doubt, was the alluring attraction of the daily fare.

The morning began with tea and chota hazri ie biscuits baked in our NDA bakery itself. Physical training and the drill periods followed, after which we rode back furiously on our cycles to our Squadrons (hostels for the uninitiated), for a quick bath and a change before heading off to the cadets’ mess for breakfast, which was truly the breakfast of champions. Except for Sundays when there was also parathas and dahi or some Indian fare, for the rest of the week, breakfast was truly English, commencing with porridge (a different kind each day ranging from cornflakes to dahlia to oats) followed by eggs, again made differently each day paired with ham, bacon, sausages, salami and the like with unlimited slices of toast. This was followed by again toast with jam or marmalade and downed with copious quantities of cocoa, coffee, tea or plain milk. All this was consumed by around 2000 cadets in about 20 minutes.

Lunch was usually Indian, again served with unlimited quantities of dal, two vegetables and a dish of meat, chicken or fish followed by slices of ice cream or fruit. Evening tea consisting with pastries, samosas, bondas, cup cakes, etc was served with coffee or tea after our games period at about 6pm.

Dinners, after our study period, were usually formal affairs called Dinner Nights that were held about four times a week. On these occasions, we were dressed in our formal mess kits which were blue patrols in winter and white patrols in summer. On these dinner nights, we ate with great synchronization to the accompaniment of the military band, normally of bagpipers and drummers. The meal commenced with soup and soup sticks to go along with the soup. The soup was served in soup plates, not in bowls or mugs as one is wont to have it in, in a restaurant or at home. This was followed by the main dish which was fried or grilled fish with tartare or mayonnaise sauce, or grilled or roast lamb or roast chicken accompanied with cutlets and a large helping of sautéed vegetables. I also do recollect pasta and baked dishes like shepherd’s pie being served on occasion. The highlight of the dinner nights was the pudding, again different every night. From the perennially ever popular Fruit Topsy to the exotic Trifle Pudding, the desserts were simply delicious, with my personal favourite being Caramel Custard. Then very formally, after the dishes were cleared, we were served water in wine glasses and a toast to the President of India was raised before we sat down for coffee to wind up the dinner. On occasion, when a dignitary was visiting the NDA, he would be invited to attend one of these. These were called Guest Nights but essentially, they were the same. The walls of the Cadets’ Mess are still adorned with framed signed Menu Cards by various dignitaries who were the Chief Guests such as Chou En Lai and Marshal Tito.

The food on camps and outdoor training exercises was much different. There was a rustic touch about it. No sandwiches or pastries here. It was also-puri or paratha with dry mutton/chicken/dry vegetables but what was the most rustic of all was what was given to us in IMA that soon followed our 3 years training in NDA. These Survival Rations were given to us for our 24 hour, 75-80 km speed march (actually a slow jog) that we were supposed to complete without rest or respite in full battle

gear with our personal weapons. It consisted of Shakkar Para, which were sticks of atta fried in sugary syrup and roasted chana (gram). A hearty breakfast, of course, awaited us on our return.

After commissioning, every regiment, unit and school of instruction we went to did try to emulate the food like what we had had at the academy but we always felt that they fell short despite their best efforts. Was it nostalgia or simply a case of 'What could be better than NDA?' Nonetheless, the food in the officers' messes was relished till we got married and expected our wives to be champion chefs! I know of many a marriage that floundered on this account but subsequently leveled off. While for newly married chaps from a civilian background, the comparison was always the wife's culinary skills with his mother's, and never with the college hostel cook, for the ex-NDA, it was the wife with the NDA chefs and never with his mother's however good she may have been. The poor wife never stood a chance!

The Barakhana is a unique event in any regiment. It is when the Officers, JCOs (Junior Commissioned Officers akin to Warrant Officers or senior Non Commissioned Officers of other armies) and the troops gather together for a meal, normally dinner except when in operational areas when the barakhana is a scaled down affair and is normally held at lunch time.) Here the menu is standard and takes on an all India character. The meal is preceded by drinks ie rum and soft drinks. Whisky and beer is not served though with the changing times, they have slowly crept into the bar menu. The snacks will normally consist of pakoras, roasted peanuts and sliced boiled eggs. An entertainment programme would be rustled up by the men. The kind of talent on display, never ceased to amaze me, every time. After about an hour or so of the entertainment programme, dinner would be served. In my 39 years of service, I do not recollect, a change in the menu. There will invariably be puri, sambhar (not dal), a mixed vegetable, a chicken curry, diced salad, papad and boondi raita followed by kheer. As youngsters, we would always look forward to the barakhana as it was one place where after a couple of pegs the men would get happy and a little boisterous too which invariably would result in a hard, punishing 5 km run in full battle gear with weapons the next morning. The last barakhana I attended was on the eve of my retirement at our AOC Centre in Secunderabad. This was a humongous affair with families in attendance. The menu was the same, only the attendees were many more, about 5000 and that included children.

The best banquets however, that I attended, were at the National Defence College New Delhi where I was appointed Secretary for two years after undergoing the course for one year. The course conducted here is pitched at a strategic level and all participants are senior officers (one star rank) from all three Services, police, foreign armed forces and civilian bureaucrats. There is a lot of interaction with foreign embassies and dignitaries. As Secretary NDC, I hosted a number of banquets for foreign delegations and also attended a number of banquets abroad. The ones I remember were an exotic lunch in The Hague, one in Pretoria, a dinner in Canberra, another in an Indian restaurant in Buenos Aires where our Ambassador hosted us with all three Argentinian Chiefs in attendance (can never imagine this to ever happen in India), and one with a sea food menu aboard an 18th century ship sailing in the fjords off Oslo.

Well, our neighbours too were not left far behind. I remember a long drawn out banquet in Colombo in 2006 hosted by the Naval Chief there where we were entertained with a wonderful cultural show. We also did manage to visit Pakistan too during my tenure as Secretary, and in Islamabad I had the most exotic Mughlai meal that I have ever had, at a banquet hosted by the President of Pakistan's National Defence University with nihari ghosht and paya being the highlights. I requested for and got the menu for their biryani from their chef. The highlight of the banquets during my tenure there was one exclusive private dinner held in our honour by the Ambassador of China Mr Zhan Yan and his wife in their beautiful, museum like, official residence at Chanakyapuri with just my Commandant Vice Adm Bhasin and his wife and Kalpana and self attending apart from two other Chinese couples.

There were about 16-18 dishes served at this formal sit down dinner with the accompaniment of an exotic Chinese liqueur called Moutai which is fermented sorghum. They were earlier informed that Kalpana was a vegetarian and so for every dish of ours there was a complementary vegetarian dish for Kalpana. The Ambassador's wife was from the Northern part of the country, near Beijing famed for its exotic fare. For that dinner, she informed us, the Ambassador had a chef flown down from there!

During my last year of service in Sep 2013, I visited the UK as the Director General Ordnance Services & Senior Colonel Commandant. The Headquarters of the Royal Logistics Corps who were my hosts was at a place called Deepcut in Surrey. This is where their Officers' Mess is also located. I was the Chief Guest at the Dinner Night there. It was a very formal affair with me in my Blue Patrols and the British officers in their equivalent mess dress. There were about 150 officers attending. My host for the evening was Lt Gen Mark Poffley, OBE, Master General Logistics. I have attached the card here which gives one a glimpse of what was on the menu.

As I was welcomed into their tastefully decorated ante room, I was struck by the display of medals on the walls, every inch of which seemed to be covered. We were served wine and chatted for about half an hour after which the pipes were sounded and we made our way to the old wood paneled dining hall which looked beautiful bathed as it were in candle light with strategically illuminated portraits of the Queen and other Royalty as well as Military figures beaming down upon us. I was escorted to the main table and was seated at the centre. As the dishes were served one after the other, we were making conversation, not too loudly as we were also intent on enjoying music played by the military band in attendance. The menu was exotic, to say the least and the helpings were really large. The dinner ended with toast, not with water but with wine, raised to the Queen of England and to the President of India after which speeches were made including one by me which I hasten to immodestly add, had the Brits in splits.

Now, well into retirement, or rather, re-attired, I look back to the wonderful times I have been fortunate to have had in the Indian Army and recount the great culinary treats that I have enjoyed, thanks in no small measure to me being completely unfussy about the food I eat. Nowadays, I do look forward to that odd occasion when I get invited to formal dinners at the local Army formations and take delight in the epicurean pleasures that the Army still has on offer.
