

East Indian Christians are not – as one might suppose – from the eastern but the western coast of India. Converted to Christianity by the Portuguese at their original habitats around Salsette and Basseln, members of this community later moved to enclaves in Bombay such as Mazagon, Bandra, Mahim, Cavel and Girgaum. Like Goan Christians, they adopted Portuguese customs, language, dress and food. Some years ago, we met Edythe Chaves, born in 1905 and Eunice D'Mello, born in the 1910s, two delightful ladies from the tranquil Khotachi Wadi in Girgaum. Both have passed away, but the memory of that meeting lingers.

The heritage precinct of Khotachi Wadi, comprising a collection of charming vernacular bungalow-style dwellings, is a rare and unique example of 19th century domestic architecture, which has fortuitously and miraculously survived the onslaught of the modern builder. The wadi was originally owned by a Hindu Khot (lessee of land, revenue contractor or farmer), who sold plots of land to his many East Indian Christian friends. Although some of the villas were demolished during the hectic building activity of the late 1930s and later, many, with elegant detailing in mouldings, wood and wrought iron work, survive as exquisite prototypes of Bombay architecture of this period. It is imperative that this charming and intrinsic part of our city's heritage be preserved diligently for future generations.

Edythe Chaves and Eunice D'Mello enlightened us on many aspects of their special cuisine. Before the advent of the Portuguese, Indian curries were coconut based, with cardamom, ginger, garlic, black and long peppers added for flavour, and tamarind or cocum for pungency. The Portuguese gifted India with a variety of plants discovered in the New World. These included the *batata* or potato, the *couve* or cabbage (which became *gobi* or *kobi*), and also the tomato, cashew, *ananas* or pineapple, the papaya and *pera* (*peru*) or guava, and, of course, *pao* (bread) and *biscoito* (biscuit). The introduction of green and red chilli peppers revolutionised Indian cuisine.

The result was an incredible synthesis of new cooking techniques and ingredients. The Goan and East Indian Catholic Christian communities retained most of their original recipes, but re-christened some of them with Portuguese names. The popular dish *vindaloo*, for instance, comes from the Portuguese *vianda* (meat) *d'alho*, *assad* from *assado*, *fogass* or *fugad* (from Portuguese *fogaca*, *fogo* or fire).

East Indian Christians generally avoid beef because of their Hindu origins, but many relish pork, which was favoured by the Portuguese. Meat, fish and chicken dishes are highly spiced with fresh masala pastes and the piquant 'bottle masala', which is a

72-year-old wins long, lone battle for heritage

By Kartikeya/TNN

Mumbai: It is a case which demonstrates how easily building norms are flouted in the city with the collusion of corrupt officials. But it also displays the courage of a 74-year-old who fought a long battle against injustice.

It all started with an argument in March 2003 when Pauline Fernandes, who lived in a cottage at Rajan village off Carter Road in Bandra(W), had protested the way her neighbour Hyacinth Fernandes got a boundary wall erected by encroaching a portion of her plot.

With an eye on the rising property prices, Hyacinth got his old cottage razed to make way for a two-storey building called 'Thelma Villa'.

Initially, Pauline lodged a complaint against the encroachment of her plot. But later when she came to know that the razing of the adjacent old cottage was itself illegal, she complained to the BMC saying that Hyacinth did not have the permission to build the multi-storey building.

Acting on her complaint, the corporation issued a notice to Hyacinth asking him to produce documents related to the case. But when Pauline found out that the BMC was only indulging in 'paper work', she asked the corporation for details of the steps it would be



The quaint cottage (above) that was illegally razed to make way for a multi-storey building (right). This is the cottage for which Pauline Fernandes fought a long legal battle and finally won

taking to stop the illegal act.

Unsatisfied with its response, Pauline then filed a writ petition in the Bombay high court against the building in July 2003.

But Pauline received a setback when the court dismissed her plea stating that the BMC was the right body to approach in the case and that the corporation was following the "due process of law".

The BMC, thereafter, issued a demolition notice to Hyacinth in December 2003 saying that he failed to prove the existence of illegal floors prior to the datum line

of 1964. However, the BMC did not act on its own order and Pauline, suspecting that the building would be regularised in the course of time, filed another writ petition in the court.

In the meantime, Hyacinth filed a suit against the BMC's demolition order in the high court, which ordered a city civil court to hear the case. When the civil court dismissed Hyacinth's suit in February 2004, he appealed to the high court.

During the course of filing petitions in the high court, Pauline's



lawyer Pradeep Havnoor got suspicious on the authenticity of the repair order dated April 1995, which was used as a basis by Hyacinth to demolish his cottage. The lawyer raised the matter in the high court, which ordered an inquiry into the case.

The BMC deputy municipal commissioner then conducted the probe and found out that the repair order was fake. A police complaint was lodged against Hyacinth and

his attorney Yusuf Khan.

Further in April 2004, when High Court judge H J Vajifdar upheld the city civil court order on the building demolition, Hyacinth moved a special leave petition in the Supreme Court in July the same year stating that the demolition would leave him and his family "without a roof" and would cause great financial loss to him. In another application later, Pauline asked the apex court to appoint an intervenor in the case.

On July 14, 2005, a Supreme Court bench comprising Justices Ashok Bhan and S B Sinha upheld the high court order and dismissed the special leave petition of

Hyacinth, thus clearing the way for the demolition order of the multi-storey building.

Finally, after winning the legal battle, Pauline, who spent Rs 85,000 in the legal case, told TOI, "I am relieved with the order as the long struggle had left me mentally exhausted." However, she regretted that neither the police nor the BMC took any action against those who forged the documents for the repair order.

main course at lunch or dinner is *balchao*, fish pickled in vinegar, garlic and chillis.

Curries like *frithad* which is made with chicken, mutton or beef, incorporate a variety of ingredients like red chillis, garlic, cumin, coriander, khus-khus, cloves, cardamoms, cinnamon, peppercorns and sesame seeds, onions, tomatoes and tamarind. Many popular dishes including *moile* with duck, *khudi* with chicken, *sambarin* with pork and *lonvas* with mutton, are given that extra touch of flavour with a spoonful or two of bottle masala.

The spices for this special masala are cleaned and dried in the sun. Each ingredient is then individually dry-roasted on a *tawa* or in a frying pan. "Bottle masala was made in the month of March", our charming ladies told us. "All the families joined together in making the year's supply and then putting it in bottles. So for the whole month, Khotachi Wadi would smell of chillis and spices. It was terrible when the chillis went up your nose. We had professional women who came and pounded the ingredients in a traditional wooden

okhli. Two women would pound together simultaneously with a wonderful timing and rhythm."

Traditionally, the staple accompaniment at East Indian Christian meals has been millet bread, *jowar rotis* or *bhakris*. On festive occasions, the *bhakri* is substituted with a variety of *arros* or *pulaos*, or with bread, *fugyas*, *polias*, *chatiaps*, *waddas* and *sannas* made of rice or wheat flour. *Aps*, thin bread of rice flour, have been all time favourites.

"The rice for the *aps* was washed, put in the sun and then pounded into flour. Then you boiled water with a pinch of salt and when bubbling, you added rice flour, stirred it briskly and turned it onto a platter. Kneading had to be done correctly and it was a real art at which some women were experts. They'd take a little ball of dough and pat it deftly between the palms into *aps*. They used to make the *aps* in the evening, pile them one on top of the other in a wicker *supra* winnowing tray and cover them with a damp cloth. When it was time for dinner, they'd start roasting them on the fire. That was also an art, turn it once, turn it again at the right time on a seasoned earthenware *tawa* or griddle, which we call a *khapri*. The *aps* must balloon on the *khapri* and should be quite soft."

At festivals, the Portuguese influence is evident in East Indian Christian sweets and desserts like *Bole de Rai*, *Bole de Coque*, *Bole de Bath*, *Bole de Portugal*, *Mass Pow*, *Recquejaun*, *Cordeal*, *Bolinha*, *Bibique*, *Dho-dhol*, *Lethry*, *Neuries* and honey-sweet. Members of the community relax only after the hectic Christmas preparations, which begin each year around the 20th of December.

"In the old days, it was mainly sweets of almonds and most of us have a special marble grinder inherited from our mothers-in-law which is used only for almonds", said Mrs Chaves and Mrs D'Mello. "Almonds are very expensive now but when they were cheap, we used to grind them with rose water to just the right, dry consistency to make marzipans. Certain women were specialists in this art. There was another sweet called Milk Cream. Milk and sugar are cooked till quite thick, then almonds and vanilla essence are added. That's again difficult because you must know when to take it off the fire. It must be white as snow with not even a hint of brown."

"We also make *Recquejaun*, which is probably a corruption of some Portuguese name. Boil milk, add sour lime juice to break it up and curdle it and then tie it in a clean cloth and let all the water drain out. Next morning, that has to be ground with almonds and sugar. Again, there is an art in cooking it after grinding. We really miss buying almonds in large quantities. Christmas sweets are just not the same without them!"

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