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TABLE FOR TWO

Serving, the North East

SANGEETA BAROOAH PISHAROTY



The Hindu

Professor Sanjoy Hazarika, Director, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research at Jamia Millia Islamia University, at the Italian restaurant, Ssence at The Suryaa in New Delhi. Photo: Meeta Ahlawat

Mothers are the best ambassadors of any cuisine, notes author-academic Sanjoy Hazarika

For a long time, dining at Suryaa in New Delhi's New Friends Colony has meant eating Chinese at Sampan. Today is different. I am at Ssence, the hotel's fairly popular Italian restaurant. My lunch guest is author-academic and a credible voice on the North East in the National Capital, Sanjoy Hazarika.

Hazarika, Director of the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) at Jamia Millia Islamia, is a soft-spoken academic, the type who measures each word before articulating it. Say, to my string of 20 words, he has a laconic reply, and those pauses between short sentences are a norm.

A gentle smile that seems to forever dwell on his face, takes a tad curious turn on seeing at our table at Ssence a specially crafted lunch menu for him by the restaurant chef. The first dish is amouse bouche, featuring mascarpone stuffed watermelon with a slice of parma wrapped melon paired with a cold melon shooter. It is a beautiful dish.

Digging into the first of the six course meal that comes paired with a variety of red and sparkling wines, Hazarika responds to my prodding to talk about C-NES's forthcoming work on the region. The Centre has been doing the pioneering work of documenting people and episodes — State-wise, to highlight the fight against the Raj. "After Meghalaya, it will be on Manipur and Assam in the next few months. We have also just brought out a book on climate change in the eastern Himalayas," he says.

Hazarika is categorical here and is certainly not using the term, 'Indian independence.' "There is still a big fat line for people there between what is called fighting against the Raj and for Indian independence," he states, hinting that the concept of one India that we know now is a post-Raj creation. He also dwells on "breaking the typical notion that North East is landlocked" and therefore poses a problem for its development, by borrowing an interesting example from historian Willem van Schendel's recent speech at the Jamia Millia Islamia.

"Recently, while delivering the keynote address at an international conference on the NE held by CNES, Prof. Schendel (known for coining the geographical term 'zomia' to refer to the huge mass of mainland Southeast Asia that has historically been beyond the control of governments based in the population centres of the lowlands) positioned Mizoram as the centre of the universe. From Mizoram, he moves to Myanmar, to The Great Wall of China, to Pakistan and finally ends the route in Europe."

Pity that Indian academics are yet to see the region in broad terms but Hazarika adds, "There is new work happening in some academic institutions in the NE, particularly in the Mizoram University. Though North East Hill University was built with a vision, it has lost its shine.

Ultimately, the idea behind setting up C-NES is to provide a platform to serious researchers both from and on the region in the National Capital. It was heartening to see 60 papers being read out at the last conference on the NE at Jamia.” Next semester onwards, “C-NES will offer postgraduate courses to students at Jamia on NE.”

Even as the conversation rolls, the chef’s courses continue. A bruschetta platter with balsamic caviar is followed by two cold soups. Particularly interesting is the asparagus soup served innovatively. A melting egg is broken into the soup bowl before the cold asparagus brew is poured over it — an enticing affair!

In the mains come duck leg confit with pumpkin and a lobster ravioli with lemon flavour. The duck is certainly something to write home about. Hazarika likes it too. It is anyway a familiar meat for an Assamese, particularly served during the Bihu feasts. “Another bird an Assamese is fond of is pigeon,” he says smilingly.

The chef follows up the main dishes with a mint and orange granita, the popular Italian half frozen dessert made from sugar. A yummy risotto is placed before us next. Talking about food, Hazarika admits cooking occasionally. “When I get tired of the maid’s cooking,” he adds with a laugh.

His mother was a good cook. “How privileged we were to enjoy our mother’s cooking. Mothers are the best ambassadors of any cuisine,” he notes. After his mother passed away, he and his brother, on discovering her recipe book, got it published. “It not only has recipes of Assamese dishes but also of North Indian dishes. It showed her wide interest in food,” he points out. Since more and more people are developing an interest in slow food and are laying an emphasis on taste, he is hopeful that North-eastern cuisine will find more takers than now.

I mention to him the successful running of C-NES’s boat clinics since 2005 which now provide health services to people living in as many as 3000 small islands in Assam and Hazarika adds to it the Centre’s community radio project too. “It is called Brahmaputra Community Radio Station situated in Dibrugarh. It bagged the Manthan Award South Asia and Asia Pacific 2014. The station has a huge collection of radio plays in four languages besides Assamese. Though it is meant for crises broadcast, the service also addresses issues like domestic violence and sanitation through plays, etc.,” he fills in.

Hazarika, the writer of the critically acclaimed “Strangers in the Mist”, is concentrating on writing three other books. “The first is a travelogue on NE; the second is a book of fairy tales, stories that I used to think up for my daughter when she was small. The third one will be on the politics and related issues of NE, something on the lines of ‘Strangers’,” he relates.

The wrap-up for the lunch goes beyond dessert. After serving us tiramisu and cannoli with berries, the assistant restaurant manager brings a card game. Three cards are to be pulled out from a pack and the right card will win the player a gift. We try. Eagerly. Alas, no luck! Thankfully, after a long conversation with Hazarika on his efforts to highlight the region long under a shadow, hope doesn’t leave my side.
