



ON THE CHAI TRAIL

Over a cup of Suleimani, **ANVAR ALIKHAN** meets up with **NEW YORKERS ZACH MARKS** and **RESHAM GELLATLY** at the Chai Shop at Taj Banjara and discovers that they know more about the chais of India, real and mythical, than most of us.

Zach Marks and Resham Gellatly are a pair of New Yorkers travelling through India, working on a book on the chaiwallahs of India. A mutual friend asked me to show them around Hyderabad, and I thought it would be amusing to meet up with them at the Chai Shop at the Taj Banjara. Zach is a writer, who used to work with McKinsey, and Resham is a photographer who was doing research in psychology.

Before meeting them, I took a look at their wonderful website, www.chaiwallahsofindia.com, about the adventures they've had while exploring the chai trail.

I STARTED BY ASKING THEM THE OBVIOUS QUESTION: HOW COME NEW YORKERS LIKE THEM GOT INVOLVED IN AN UNUSUAL PROJECT LIKE THIS? They replied that they got the idea when they were both in Delhi on Fulbright Scholarships a couple of years ago. They both happened to be teaching in government schools, and they happened

to have an extraordinary chaiwali and chaiwallah, respectively, in their lives. In Zach's case it was the chaiwali who served chai to the school staff, and who was "the ray of sunshine in the school." And in Resham's case it was the chaiwallah who had a stall outside the slum school where she worked, and who had virtually adopted her. Inspired by their experience of those two wonderful human beings, they decided they'd take a break in their careers to come back to explore the chaiwallahs of India, and do a book on them.

So they packed their bags and came to India. They've made a couple of trips so far, and have travelled the chai trail, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Gujarat to Assam, drinking chai, making friends with chaiwallahs and their customers, collecting their stories, and taking photographs. In the process, they've seen a lot more of Indian life than most of us have. I started by trying to tell them about India's chai culture, but I soon shut up, because it became obvious that they know a lot more about it than I do. (They also speak very good Hindi, by the way).



SO, THEN, WHO WERE THE MOST INTERESTING CHAIWALLAHS THEY HAD MET?

They tell me some of their stories: about the Bollywood chaiwallah who came to Mumbai with dreams of becoming a film-star, and ended up as a chaiwallah. Somewhere along the way he met Subhash Ghai, and they struck a chord, so now he's the unofficial chaiwallah to all Subhash Ghai productions, and travels around the world shooting with his film crews. Then there was the chaiwallah at IIM Ahmedabad, who had a stall just outside the campus. This was the meeting point where generations of IIM students used to escape from their regimen to drink chai and chat, often into the small hours of the night. He has thus gotten to know many of the corporate world's elite, and still keeps track of their careers. Then, there was the chaiwallah in Bangalore who sustained a student right through college, giving him three years of free chai, before he finally got a job and paid the chaiwallah back. And then, poignantly, there was the beautiful chaiwali in Kolkata with the long black hair, who, it turned out, started her chai business in order to support her paralysed husband, and kids.

But all the chaiwallahs of India have something in common, Zach and Resham point out to me: their chai shops are not just places that sell tea, they are little focal points of their societies, where people gather to chat, relax, exchange news and ideas, and the chaiwallahs are the catalysts who make it possible. Thus they hold a very special place in Indian life. And they work incredibly hard – often serving multiple customers at the same time, personalizing the chai to each one's tastes, chatting with customers, keeping an eye on accounts, dealing with the local mafia and on-the-take cops, and on their feet continuously from morning till night – all for a profit of maybe Rs 300 a day. I must say that was an observation that had never struck me.

We placed our order: a sampler of the Chai Shop's various Hyderabad snacks, including *lukhmi*, *tootak*, *khageena-paratha*, *Gadi Chowk ka kheema paratha*, *Thadiwali bun omlette* and *Badshah ki Apollo Fish*.



As you'd expect, our talk soon turned to the different types of Hyderabad chai: *pauna chai*, *sauameel ki chai*, *burkhewali chai*, *Sulaimani chai*, *Salahuddin ki chai*, *khada chamcha*, *oopar-neeche*, etc. Have I actually drunk all these types of *chai*, Zach and Resham ask me diplomatically. It's then that I realize that some of these *chais*, though seemingly famous are probably mythical today – neither I nor anybody I know has actually had, say, a *khada chamcha* (with so much sugar that the spoon stands up), or a *burkhewali chai* (with a 'veil' of cream on the top). Zach and Resham know far more about chais than I will ever learn.

Our conversation drifts to the many variants of salty chai that are unique to India – like the salty *sheer chai* from Kashmir; or the special chai that the Assam tea-garden workers drink, made from black tea, *nimbu* and salt, to rehydrate themselves after their back-breaking work; or the wonderfully refreshing *nimbu ki chai* from a chaiwallah in Kolkata, made with *kala namak*, *kali mirch* and a *Hajmola goli*.

Of all the thousands of photographs they have taken of chaiwallahs, which are their favourites, I ask. Resham says that from the professional point of view she's proud of the photographs taken in semi-dark, low-light conditions (which are quite remarkable). She's also proud of, for example, one of a chaiwallah crushing a pod of *adrak*: she had to shoot him for twenty minutes to capture the drama of the exact point of impact. But from the human point of view, one of their favourites was a photograph of a happy family at the Kolkata ghat at Durga Puja time. Poignantly, just an hour later the teenage son drowned during the immersion. The photograph is a document of the precariousness of human life, Resham reflected.

And what camera does she use, I ask, fully expecting her to talk about a set of fancy Nikon professional

cameras. But no, she has just one simple, six-year-old Olympus SLR with two lenses, recommended by her camera store guy for difficult chai shop conditions.

To end our meal we naturally ordered their version of Hyderabad chais: *Sulaimani chai*, *Salahuddin ki chai* and *Oopar-neeche*. Unfortunately, however, our lunch was ruined by a couple of aunty-jis sitting at the next table, whose children were running amok in the restaurant screaming in a demented manner right through lunch. When we tried to give the aunty-jis a dirty look, they just smiled back at us dumbly; I don't think they even realized there was anything uncivil in their brats' behaviour.

So what next, I ask Zach and Resham. Well, their first priority is getting the book out, of course. Maybe there'll be two books: one photographic, and the other narrative. And after that they're not sure. Maybe open a *chai* shop in New York. Starbucks' *chai* really sucks, they say; they can do a whole lot better than that. And what about going back to McKinsey, I ask Zach. Maybe, he shrugs. Maybe not.

MEAL FOR 2: Rs. 2,100

Chai Shop at the Taj Banjara is a unique idea, celebrating the chaiwallah culture of Hyderabad. Apart from typical Hyderabad chais, it serves an interesting range of Hyderabad snacks, from Gadi Chowk *ka kheema paratha* to Prenderghast Road *ka vada pao*.



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