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All roads lead to Paradise

Sohini Chakravorty



Ali Hemmati, owner of Paradise restaurant. Photo: Nagara Gopal

The Hindu

Paradise restaurant is a name synonymous with Hyderabadi biryani and one of the most prominent landmarks of the city. But its owner Ali Hemmati tells Sohini Chakravorty that he still has a long way to go

A Hyderabad tour has to include visit to the Charminar, learning a bit of history at the Golconda Fort, admiring the inexhaustible collection at Salar Jung Museum and finally experiencing the taste of the impeccable, infused with flavours Hyderabadi biryani. The one name that is synonymous with Hyderabadi biryani is Paradise restaurant.

Situated in one of the busiest areas of Secunderabad, Paradise is the one of the most prominent structures in the area. Traffic crisscross around the restaurant and pedestrians nudge each other to avoid coming in front of the oncoming vehicles. Amidst such chaos Paradise has been functioning non-stop for almost 60 years now. A red carpet leads inside the restaurant. Photographs of famous celebrities who have visited the restaurant hang on its walls. Each of the four floors offers a different ambience. Some of the photographs on the wall give a glimpse into yesteryears of the twin cities when Paradise was still a café.

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Paradise made its presence felt when the concept of dining out was still in its nascent stage in the city. The only other restaurant was a nearby Chinese restaurant. Recalling his earlier days in the business, "The challenge was to create a fine dining space for families without serving alcohol. A lot of people warned me against it but I wanted that as one of our USPs," says the proud owner. It was architect Frank Handrich, whose daughter is Dia Mirza, gave

shape to the existing structure of the restaurant. That's how Paradise family restaurant came into being. It still remains one of the few restaurants in the city where you can unabashedly lick your fingers or tackle that meaty portion daintily with a fork and a knife and nobody would bother noticing you.

Whether it was recruitment and staff training or promotion of the restaurant, adding a corporate touch and modernising the business helped him manage the operations. A strict training system is in place where the new recruits undergo training from the old staffers. Hired mostly from the city, recruitments are done every Thursday. "Never compromise on quality is our main instruction to the staff. We should never close. Even if our guests come at 4 p.m. for a quick biryani we should be able to serve him," says Ali Hemmati.

"When I started, I didn't know what a brand is and I never realised that it has become one. I feel we have a lot to do," says Ali Hemmati. Ask anyone in Hyderabad, the way to Paradise and they will direct you to the right place. The place has become a very prominent landmark. Even the bus stop is called Paradise. When asked what was this place earlier called? Ali Hemmati pauses for a brief moment to recall. "It was earlier called James Street but nobody refers to it by its original name anymore," he says after a thought.

On a typical day, he does a quick round of the two branches of Paradise in Masab Tank which is mostly a take away and Madhapur before coming to the one in Secunderabad. They are also in the process of setting up another restaurant near the NTR Gardens on Necklace Road. "Good food, great service and happy times" is the motto that drives them. Despite offering tandoor, Chinese, Mughlai food, the restaurant has remained true to the authentic taste of Hyderabadi cuisine. "We have not changed our recipes. It is the authentic recipe that people prefer and we want to keep it that way. One thing I have learnt about the restaurant business is that you can't fool people. You have to be sincere and have credibility in order to sustain," explains Ali Hemmati. Even the Paradise bakery adjacent to the restaurant is very popular. Fresh from the oven *Lukmi* and *chai* is a favourite breakfast menu among many. "Our gates open at five in the morning and even if we are five minutes late, these regular customers will start banging on the gate. This place has become a regular haunt for office goers, joggers and a meeting place for many," he says.

Apart from managing his business, philanthropy is also something Ali Hemmati believes. The Paradise Foundation was started to create a residential school for orphans where children will be provided with hostel facilities, food and education. Despite the success and popularity, complacency has not engulfed him. "The more successful we become, we get even more conscious of our brand. I will not rest until Paradise becomes a global brand," he says.

His childlike enthusiasm is very apparent when his younger brother Dr. Kazim, a managing partner in the business joins him for a chat. After a brief discussion of the business, both of them get engrossed in an animated discussion over the success of Starbucks the American coffee franchisee.

When asked what is it to own a brand like Paradise, the reply is, "Paradise belongs to the people of Hyderabad and not us."

Kitchen confidential

Giant cauldrons are lined one after the other which has the marinated meat. In other side of the kitchen, the rice is half boiled and then added with the meat. The tantalising flavours of the famous biryani waft through the kitchen. "The biryani is made in the conventional style where the rice and meat are put together in a handi which is sealed with a wet cloth. The dum is given using charcoal," explains Grandmaster Chef Rawoof. The kitchen opens at 11 in the morning and work continues till midnight. Whether it is the bakery, the kitchens for the multi-cuisine restaurants or biryani, one thing that is on everybody's lips is the ingredients that are used. "The ingredients are all genuine. We never compromise on quality," says Ali Hemmati. Most of the recipes have been standardised and experienced staffers train the new recruits to maintain the consistency. One such person is Chef Mohammad Hussain who has worked with the restaurant since 1954. "With precision we know what goes inside each batch. Even people at the merchandise department are so good that one look at the ingredient they will know if it's good or bad," explains B.V.S Ramakrishna, in-charge of the biryani kitchen and bakery.

Keywords: [Paradise restaurant](#), [Ali Hemmati](#), [Hyderabadi cuisine](#), [Lukmi](#), [Hyderabadi biryani](#)

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