

Second helpings

One of the marvels of Sundays at Andhra Bhavan is the sheer number of people who brunch at this cheap but cheerful canteen. Every Sunday, about 1,200 people tuck in to the spicy fare offered here. Not bad for a 250-seater restaurant. Obviously, service is swift, and you aren't encouraged to linger.

The vendors offering Telugu literature, pickles and "gunpowder" just outside lend an air of authenticity. We followed our noses to the canteen and jumped into the fray for prepaid coupons. The set-up is basic: plastic chairs and sharing tables is the norm, but the waiters are efficient, racing around with pails of vegetables, lentils and rice.

We ordered a thali (Rs 60), a chicken fry (Rs 50) and tried to order the special Sunday chicken biryani (Rs 90), only to be told that they'd run out. This was not strictly true; we watched, salivating, as a stream of regulars showed up to collect their orders of the stuff. It was only our pathetic pleading with the cashier that finally landed us a plateful. The spicy biryani, though tasty, did not quite live up to its

fame. But the chicken fry – with a squeeze of lemon on top – was truly delicious: a mouth-watering array of sour, salty and spicy flavours.

For the non-vegetarian dish, the choice was between either chicken or mutton fry or chicken or fish curry. Before we knew it, we were blinking at quantiles of food.

The thali is basic, but expansive – unlimited puris, rice, fried cauliflower, creamy brinjal, bhindi, a thick yellow dal, sambar and rasam. We were also served curd, pickles, gunpowder, a sweet dish and ghee beyond our most gluttonous dreams. The highlight of the thali was the sweet payasam with nuts and dates.

The spicy food really got our sinuses and sweat glands going and – because we forgot our hand-

kerchiefs at home – we had to make do with some waxy paper straight out of the waiter's pocket. On our way out, we grabbed a sweet paan (Rs 5) from the counter – the perfect way to round off a great

meal. *Sonal Shah*
Andhra Pradesh Bhavan Canteen,
1 Ashoka Road (2338-2031).
⊕ *Mandi House. Daily 8-10.30am,*
noon-3pm, 7.30-10pm. Alcohol
not served.



DHIRUBA DUTTA