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LIFESTYLE

# Cultural capital, kabuli chana and college admissions

August 6, 2023, 12:31 PM IST / Abhijit Banerjee in Tasing Economics, Lifestyle, TOI

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**Abhijit Banerjee**

Cooking, and eating, are often on Abhijit Banerjee's mind. But for the Nobel-winning economist, what starts with planning the night's dinner usually ends up in questions about ... MORE

We ate dinner together in our family. The four of us and my grandfather. The staples of our conversation were “one more boring meal” (usually me), “India is winning/losing” (my brother), “there is a new movie/song/play out” (me, my brother, my mother), “how could things get even worse for women?” (my mother). My father rarely led off on anything — his role was to find a humorous riff on whatever was being said.

Truth be told, we almost never got into an in-depth discussion — my dad's gentle, smiling cynicism set the tone of the conversation. Nonetheless, thinking back, I can see that this was often the first time I encountered many ideas or tried to react

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to them, often just to counter my dad's flippancy.



This is part of what sociologists call cultural capital. We — my brother and I — learned the right books to read and the right names to drop (and how), but also to connect ideas to names and names to other ideas. This is what conversations and narratives are built of. I am an academic, my brother an ad-man. We both market ideas, and what we learnt at the dinner table has served us well over the years.

The recent judgment of the US Supreme Court, undermining affirmative action in college admissions, made me think of that. Higher grades (and maybe better performance in sports, music etc) and not the student's family background, should decide who goes to Harvard or MIT, though the phrasing of the judgment leaves some room for ambiguity. The underlying claim seems to be that we can ignore just how much good grades owe to the cultural capital emanating from a

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house full of books and generations of teachers behind him/her (like me) and to parents able and willing to ferry their child from chess to clarinet to coding lessons (like we do for our children). It asks us to forget just how much harder it is to excel with parents who work multiple menial jobs and never have time for long chatty meals, who let the television be the morning nanny because they needed the rest, who never read books for fun because they never saw their own parents do so.

Students for Fair Admissions, the litigant in this landmark US case, want “merit-based” admissions, something we also hear in India. I would probably resist this idea even if we could agree on a measure of merit, since we have very limited ways of redistributing to disadvantaged groups and a great education is clearly one time-honoured route. But it clearly also depends on what we mean by merit. Even if we accept that merit is the potential for making the most of educational opportunities in purely academic terms, why would we ignore what it takes to do well in difficult circumstances? Why shouldn't the ability to excel without generations of cultural capital behind them and the hand-up from parents who are able and willing to devote their lives to their children's advancement not count as a sign of greater talent and future promise?

None of this says that affirmative action as currently practised in India or the US is perfect. Disadvantage comes in many forms: income clearly matters, partly because it buys the coaching classes and the tennis lessons. So does how the family

earns that income: teachers may not be paid a lot, but they have the time and training to help their kids. Where you grew up matters, as the important work of Harvard professor Raj Chetty and others shows — it helps to have good public schools and other kids of similar intellectual inclinations. But the monstrous history of race or caste-based discrimination casts its long shadow well beyond the differences in family income or location. For one, given the histories of exclusion in both these countries, only a very rare lower-caste or black family has many generations of higher education behind it, but there is also confidence, the history of being made to feel inferior, and cultural capital.

It seems obvious to me that given all this, past exam performance (and other non-academic successes heavily influenced by parental effort) should not be the sole measure of merit. How much of the underlying injustice we can fix with affirmative action in admissions is however less clear, given that people still need to live lives outside the school's door. When I joined JNU for my MA in economics, the top group in the admission list included me, the child of two economics professors, but also a son of a farming family that had barely enough land to live on, and several others from SC/ST families that owned small businesses or held low-level government jobs in smaller towns, for whom Delhi was a remote and exciting place. They were very different from my Kolkata friends, equally bright, but much more political, with greater awareness of India's ground reality, the depredations of caste and poverty, the way the system works and

fails. On the other hand, they never talked about food — my daily obsession, faced with the disastrous hostel meals. Food was food. Most days there was enough rice and dal. You take what you get and move on. Perhaps grumbling about the cooking only makes sense to those who don't have to worry about paying the school fees or repairing the roof.

In my family, we talked a lot about food. My grandfather would wax eloquent about some fish he had had, usually not at our house. I would complain — my mother would get upset, rightly insisting that we should be grateful for what we get. But she also tried, within the constraints of her limited budget and busy life, to make the food more interesting. We had a cook who produced a perfectly competent dal-chawal; my mother contributed the occasional roast, pie or crumble, but also Marathi delicacies like suralichi vadi and pomfret bhujna. In return, I would be her faithful sous chef, peeling carrots and popping peas, but also watching carefully what she does and listening to her explanations. That is how I learnt to cook. Perhaps more importantly, it is how I started to acquire my alphabet of smells and tastes, of food words and words of appreciation which changed my life. That vocabulary allows me, on and off through the day, to contemplate what I will cook or eat, and makes my everyday special. But it also opens the door to the world of food conversations, that connects me to people who might otherwise have no interest in me. Food talk is a social adhesive. In being brought up with it, I was privileged in ways that affirmative action will not directly fix: those who grew

up, because they had no choice, treating food purely instrumentally, are robbed of something precious in life, and the social power that comes with it.

With my own children, I try to involve them in cooking. The idea is for them to learn how to cook but also to participate in this cultural project of cooking and eating well that is so much the basis of my social existence. We are some distance from there: they are still very American, devotees of chicken nuggets and pasta, burgers and pizza, suspicious of the unfamiliar, especially if it involves vegetables. Being involved with the cooking, we hope, will change that. In my current plan, the first step was to up the voltage on the basic tomato-based pasta sauce; the second add some sauteed kabuli chana to the mix. The final step, and I have yet to get there, is to combine the kabuli chana with some greens and the tomato sauce to make a really delicious, adult sauce.

This is part of a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier.



## PASTA SAUCE FROM PUGLIA

Step 1: Drop two kilos of tomatoes (do this when tomatoes are juicy, and prices are low) into a pot of boiling water for 45 seconds. Fish the tomatoes out and plunge into iced water. Touching them lightly with a knife now will make the skin part and allow easy peeling. Cut them in quarters and remove the core (where the seeds live). Chop finely and put in a large heavy-bottomed pan with a tablespoon of coarse salt. Cook at low heat for 45 minutes, until the tomatoes pieces are melting (if using high quality canned crushed tomatoes instead, this step should only take 20 minutes). While the tomato cooks, heat 1 cup olive oil with 1 tsp chili flakes and one head of garlic, sliced in half through the middle (so that all the cloves get cut in half) at medium-high heat. After five minutes, add a loosely packed cup of basil leaves and when they stop crackling, strain and pour into your sauce. Let it simmer for 5 minutes and take off fire. This is the not-so-basic tomato sauce. Serve with pasta.

Step 2: While this is happening, fry 250 gms cooked kabuli chana (chickpeas) in 3 tablespoons of olive oil that has been infused with 1 tablespoon sliced garlic,  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon chili flakes,  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt and a pinch of black pepper till they start to brown. Take it off the fire. Make a coarse paste from another 250 gms cooked kabuli chana and cook in 1 tablespoon olive oil with  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon fennel powder and the tomato sauce from above. Cook gently for ten minutes. Serve as a pasta sauce with a topping of fried kabuli chana.

Step 3: Add 500 gms of stemmed spinach leaves or the same amount of pre-blanching and chopped broccoli rabe (not broccoli) when the kabuli chana is being fried and use it as a mix-in with the pasta sauce.

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