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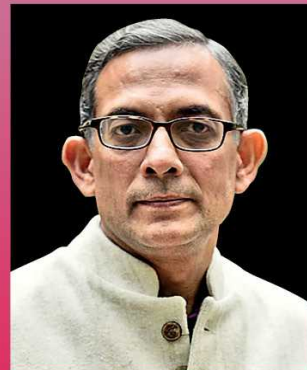
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Life

Khichdi To Egyptian Koshari, And The Magic Of Food Beyond Borders



TASTING ECONOMICS



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My first time in Egypt, some 30 years ago, I met something they called koshari, a rice and brown lentils dish, with a tomato sauce, a garnish of browned onions and, unexpectedly, some macaroni. It was filling, cheap and tasty, with a nice lift from a vinegary chilli sauce. Many years later, back in Cairo, I was talking to an Egyptian colleague about food. He mentioned something he called the national dish of Egypt, which turned out to be koshari. Since koshari sounds a lot like khichdi, another rice and lentils dish, I wondered aloud whether there might be a connection. My colleague was skeptical. Google, as usual, settled it in seconds. Koshari comes from khichdi, a gift from the Indian soldiers stationed in Egypt, probably during the first world war.

Curiously, a few months later there were news reports that khichdi was to be officially made India's national dish. This, perhaps predictably, kicked off a small Twitter-storm involving the advocates of biryani and ilish machh and many more. The government eventually declared that this was not the plan, but not before it raised interesting questions about what a national dish could mean, especially given that there are 1.4 billion of us. Is it the dish that gets the largest number of "votes", which I fear has some risk of ending up being pizza, especially if the voting age is set low enough? Or something more aligned with a nationalist project, the dish that best sells Indian cooking to the world? That's the way to chicken tikka masala, a pale impersonation of butter chicken masala, invented somewhere in the UK.



Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier

My instinct is to go in a different direction, to ask about the dish that reminds us the most of having grown up as an Indian. I suspect a lot of us, when asked that question, would end up naming something from the dal-chawal family, be it khichdi, bisi bele bath, rajma-chawal or sambhar-sadam?

It's been forty years since I came to the West. And yet there are still days when I wake up from a dream wondering when the light became so weak and the world turned quite so mute, when homesickness evoking a home that only exists in my memory, floods over me. My body wants some gili khichdi, Bengali style. Rice and roasted mung dal and whatever vegetables are at hand, the food of monsoon days when shopping is impossible and there is an irresistible urge to bury oneself under a blanket with a juicy novel.

I suspect that this occasional desire to cocoon oneself around a cherished comfort food is very common among immigrants. Despite what the politicians of the right keep insisting, most people in poor countries don't want to leave their homes, unless those homes are burning, either from the global heat or from some more local conflagration. One reason for that is that unknown places are frightening. Mahesh Shreshtha, a one-time PhD student and friend, wrote his thesis on how potential migrants to the Gulf (and Malaysia) in his native Nepal viewed their prospects. To do this, he interviewed more than 3,300 people at the passport office in Kathmandu who were there to renew their passport or get a new one. The core finding was that they have a vastly exaggerated sense of the risks: the median new migrant overestimates their chance of dying during their two-year sojourn in one of these foreign locations by a factor of 8. The truth is that just slightly over one in every thousand migrants will die during their stay abroad, but half the migrants believe that number is more like 11, a good quarter think it is more like 20, and a fair number think it is as high as 150. Strikingly even those who have already had at least one round-trip (and survived) think the death rate is 6 in every 1,000 and a quarter think it is closer to 18 (the truth, remember, is just over one).

The new migrants also overestimate how much they will earn. But the gap is small, maybe 25% (the return migrants get it spot on). The fears clearly dominate and unsurprisingly, several months later, a large majority of those in Mahesh's sample had not yet left, despite having gone through the trouble and expense of securing a passport.

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Part of Mahesh's project was to understand if it was possible to correct these misgivings and thereby encourage more migration. Even the correct (lower) migrant wages were many times what they would make at home, so migrating seems to make economic sense. He sent messages to a random sample with the true averages, both about earnings and mortality. The latter, appropriately, has the effect of boosting migration by 20% or more, confirming that a large number of potential migrants are held back by these forebodings. One reason that effect is not larger, however, is that beliefs don't move very much. Even after Mahesh's messages, the inexperienced would-be-migrant's estimate of the chance of dying away from home was still something like six times the truth, while those who had already been once (or more), completely ignored Mahesh's missives and stuck to their (statistically incorrect) guns.

To me, this unwillingness to accept Mahesh's (official and relatively accurate) numbers suggests that when his interviewees are supposedly reporting their objective risk of dying, they are actually articulating a much broader sense of disquiet, for which death is just the most vivid marker. Foreign countries are frightening, especially if you are going alone, as a guest worker, very much at the mercy of your employer (and his foremen) and, moreover, have a limited understanding of what your legal rights might be. What happens if you fall sick? If you are injured? If your child is sick and you are desperate to come back to see her? What do you do if you are sad, so sad that you cannot get up or move? Is there someone who will come and find you and help you back on your feet?

Newly arrived workers, we know from migration literature, try to quickly seek out co-workers or co-residents or ideally, a friend or a friend of a friend, someone to reach out and hold onto. I imagine them cooking and eating together, these groups of mostly men living without their families. Perhaps a big pot of khichdi, easily shared. Or a filling maafe rich in peanuts and coconut cream, cooked by a friend from Ghana. And perhaps one day a koshari, the hesitant contribution of an Egyptian co-worker. And perhaps that one will stick and become a habit. And one day, several years later, back in India or Nepal, in a wave of reverse nostalgia, they will make some koshari for their family, and leave them to wonder what was so special about this simple dish.

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



My version of Koshari

Separately soak 1 cup of dried lentils and 2 cups of rice for at least an hour. Prepare 250 gm of elbow macaroni (or some mixture of macaroni and spaghetti). Take 600 gm of onions sliced into half and fry in 8 tablespoons of oil in a heavy-bottomed saucepan with a pinch of sugar and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt, till a rich brown. Fish them out carefully and drain on absorbent paper. In the same oil cook 500 gm of very finely chopped onions at medium-low heat, adding one or two tablespoons of oil if needed, till translucent and almost melting into the oil. Add in the lentils, 4 cups water, 1 tsp salt, and cook for 25 minutes. Add the drained rice and cook for another 15 minutes or till the rice is done, adding water if needed. At the same time simmer 1 kilo of canned cooked chickpeas in enough salted water to cover them for five minutes. Drain and sauté in 2 tablespoons of ghee with 1 tsp cumin powder and 2 tablespoons of lime juice. Set aside.

While lentils are cooking, put 1 kilo of tomatoes in a blender with a pinch of salt and liquefy. Heat 2 tbs ghee in a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Fry 2 tbs chopped garlic and 1 tsp chili flakes in it for a minute or so before lowering the heat and adding 4 tablespoons of vinegar and 2 tablespoons of tomato paste. Mix the liquids and let them simmer for 30 seconds. Then add the blended tomato, 1 tsp ground cumin, 1 tsp ground coriander, 1 tsp ground Kashmiri mirch, 1 tsp salt, and a pinch of black pepper. Simmer for ten minutes.

Finally blend 600 gm tomatoes with 300 gm capsicum, 1 green chili (or more if you want), 1 tsp ground roasted cumin, 1 tsp salt, 3 tablespoons chopped onion, 1 tablespoon chopped garlic and 3 tablespoons of lime juice into a fresh tomato-cumin sauce.

To assemble, layer the lentil-rice with the macaroni and sprinkle the chickpeas on each layer. Pour the cooked tomato sauce over it and garnish with the fried onions. Serve with the fresh tomato sauce as a relish, along with some achar.

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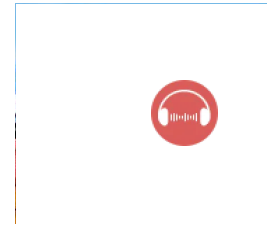
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