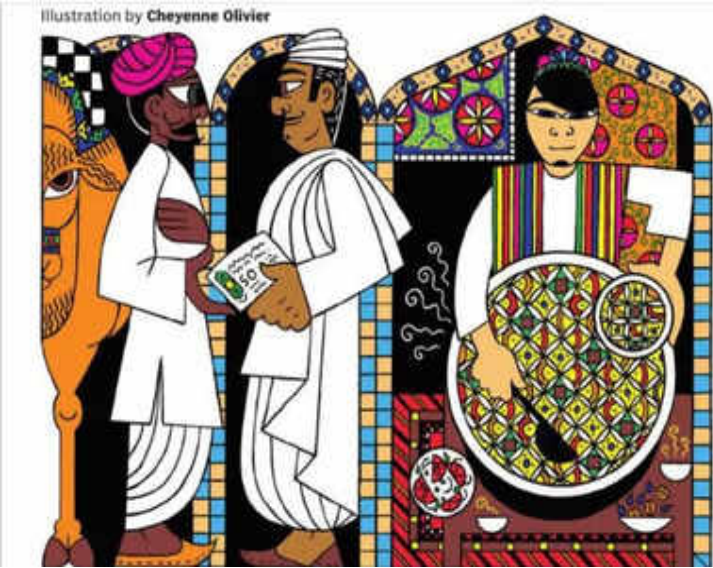


Plov: A pulao goes to Samarkand

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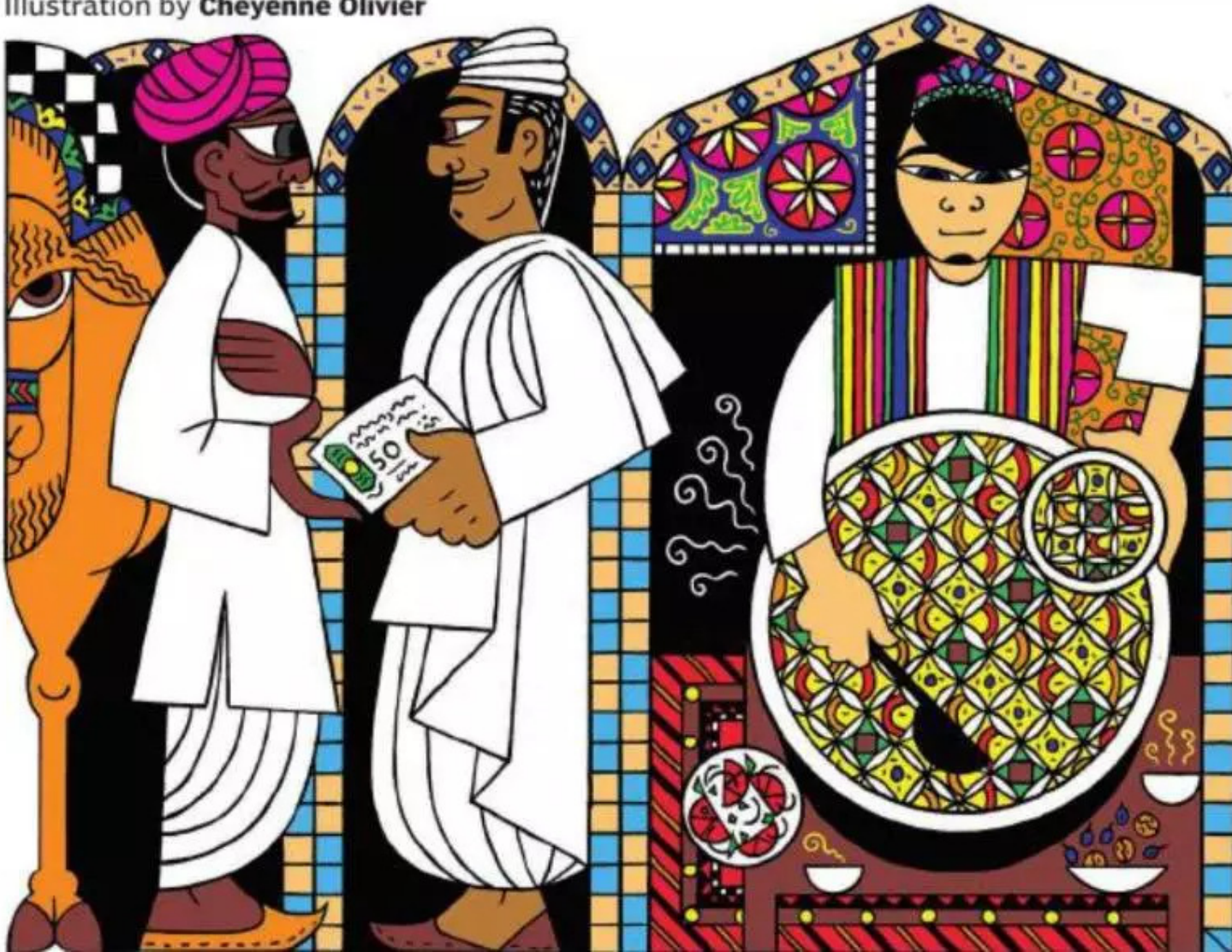


The first thing I notice in Tashkent's celebrated underground, even before the famous murals and ceilings, is a prominently displayed ad for a local university featuring a faculty member who was a Bengali, at least by name.

Tashkent is about the same distance from Delhi as Kolkata, just in a different direction. And despite the rather daunting mountains that come in the way, there has been traffic between South Asia and what is now Uzbekistan, at least for the last two millennia and probably longer. Anthony Jenkinson, an English explorer who reached the gates of Bukhara in 1557, reports that there were merchants from as far as Bengal to sell their prized white cottons, though in histories of the time, Multani and Shikarpuri traders,

both Hindus and Muslims, get mentioned the most. Many Hindus were in finance, a tradition that the Shikarpuris who moved to India after Partition (from Shikarpur in Sindh) continued.

Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier



A number of domed marketplaces from the sixteenth century have survived in Bukhara. Tourists like me wander through them, looking for gifts to bring home. In their heyday they were dedicated to specific products: the many domed Toki-Telpak Furushon was apparently dedicated just to headgear. Next to it is the beautiful Toki-Sarrafon with its mihrab-like entryway and dome topped by a second dome, which used to be where currency got traded. Hindu Indians apparently played an important role in that trade. I visualise a raised platform where the trader sat cross-legged, much like it used to be in Kolkata's Burra Bazar, with the white sheets that they sat

on (an unlikely idea in that dusty and muddy city, I must say) replaced perhaps by beautiful Bukhara carpets. A big part of finance in those days was moving money across space through the hundi system which, despite the best efforts of various governments, still exists all over South Asia. An Indian trader who had a profitable trip to Bukhara would deposit his earnings with someone in the Toki-Sarrafon before undertaking the trip through the Hindu Kush down to the Punjab plains, dodging brigands and the occasional overlygreedy local chieftain. In return, he would get a hundi, a piece of paper that entitles him to that amount in cash (perhaps after some deductions for the service) in Multan (say). But he could also use the hundi directly to pay someone, who might pay someone else with it. In this way, the hundi could circulate for a while until it got cancelled against a return transaction where someone in India was sending money to Bukhara (or elsewhere in that general area). The sender could be a trader, but it could also be a soldier of fortune returning home — Babur grew up in Farghana in southern Uzbekistan and his army had many Uzbeks. The imprint of our long-shared history is in the offensive Bengali word for an idiot, *uzbug*, but also in our shared love of that magnificent dish of rice cooked in a flavoured broth, *pulao* in Hindi, *pollo* in Persian, and *plov* in Uzbek. When you are a guest in Uzbekistan, every lunch and dinner veers towards a *plov*, rice cooked in a meat broth, studded with small pieces of lamb, julienned carrots and the delicious Uzbek black raisins. Indeed, when you are gorging on the wonderful fruits, the dumplings, the salads, and the many different eggplant dishes (I loved the rolls made from a thin strip of fried eggplant, stuffed with walnuts, spices, and cheese), be warned that there is always, I mean always, *plov* coming.

The cliché about Central Asia is that it is the land of the endless steppes inhabited by nomadic horsemen. And indeed, large parts of Kazakhstan used to be like that. But there are also the snowy mountains and barely inhabited high valleys of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as the Uzbek urban civilisations going back more than two millennia, that produced beautiful cities like Samarkand, Bukhara and Kiva. One thing that all of central Asia does share is *plov*; there are as many versions of *plov* as there are cities in the region, but all variants share the same basic ingredients and the idea of being cooked in a *kazan*, a heavy *kadh*i-like pot. When Uzbeks and Kazakhs living in Moscow or Madrid meet, there is, apparently, much talk of the merits of various competing *kazans*.

I cannot but wonder how these Hindu traders, many of whom were probably vegetarian based on current eating practices in these communities, found their place amidst these unabashedly meat-eating cultures. Long-distance financial transactions cannot happen without a great deal of trust, as we know from the fascinating

research by Avner Greif about the (Jewish) Maghribi traders around the Mediterranean, and their attempts at character assassination of those who had, purportedly, taken advantage of that trust. What happens if a soldier shows up at the Toki-Sarrafon with a hundi issued all the way say in Jaunpur (where there was a local Uzbek kingdom in Akbar's time), a couple of thousand dangerous miles away, and gets told that it could not be honoured because the original issuer was not trusted to repay?

Trust is not easy to come by when you are in a foreign country, especially since the hundi traders also acted as money lenders. There is in fact a record of a rant by a certain Mir Muhammad Amin Bukhari in the 18th century, accusing Hindu traders in Bukhara of exploiting Muslims. But the rulers of Samarkand and Bukhara protected them, no doubt partly out of their own financial compulsions, but also presumably because these traders were doing something right.

Much of the trust was no doubt built the old-fashioned way, by being there and delivering time after time. That is how it worked in the deals between software firms in South India and their foreign customers in the 1990s when Esther Duflo and I studied them. These were the early days of the industry and some suspicion had to be overcome. The new firms did it by accepting the blame for any problems that arose in course of the contract, whether or not it was their fault. But as the firm's reputation grew and the buyers got to know them, the buyer was more willing to accept that the problem with the software might have been their own fault and pay a part of the overrun. With the hundi traders there might have been something similar — when things went wrong for no fault of theirs they paid up nonetheless, an investment in their future. But as in many of these things, there was probably also a role for human contact, for connecting a face and a smile to the hundi and the money. A cup of tea together, or a plate of the wonderful Uzbek raisins, dried apricots and pistachios. And perhaps there were some, may be just a few, who had bent enough to the shape of the place to walk over to some nearby eating place, say in the shadow of the magnificent Kalon Minar, to share a plate of plov.

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

- To make plov, soak 2 cups of rice in cold water for a few hours. Cut 3 lbs (around 1.3 kilos) of bone-in lamb

shoulder into large pieces (2.5 inches or so along the largest dimension and as big in other dimensions as the meat allows) and put in a pressure cooker with one large onion peeled cut in half and a whole head of garlic with 6 cups of water and 1/2 tsp salt. Bring to a boil, skim any scum that accumulates. Then put on the lid and cook for 25 minutes at high pressure. Take the meat out and let cool for twenty minutes. Then take the bones out, being careful to leave the meat more or less intact (you should end up with pieces that are 1 inch or more along the largest dimension—the point is to avoid the meat falling apart, it will need to cook again). Put the bones back in the broth with the vegetables and let it simmer for another half hour or more. Strain it. The goal is to end up with 5 cups of clear stock, but you can add water to make it up.

- Peel 3 lbs of the tastiest carrots you can find and remove the top and the tip. Then julienne the carrots into matchsticks (don't grate them). In a large covered pot, put in half the carrots matchsticks at the bottom, then half the drained rice, the meat, 1 cup sweet and sour raisins, ½ cup barberries (or the same amount of alu bukhara), the rest of the carrots and then the rest of the rice. Add 4.5 cups of broth with 1½ tsp cumin seeds and 1 tsp salt. Cover with a towel to absorb the rising steam, put on the lid tightly, and cook at medium-low for half an hour or until the rice is done. Add the broth if the rice is a bit hard at the top.
- Serve with a spicy salad/raita made from tomatoes, sweet peppers, ½ cup chopped dill, 2 tablespoons lemon juice, salt and sliced chillies (to taste).



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