



FRI, APR 14, 2023 | UPDATED 23:54 PM IST



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## LIFESTYLE

# Breaking roza, building bonds

April 2, 2023, 9:15 AM 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

It must have been Ramzan in the year 1980 when we had this great plan of walking from College Street in Kolkata to Zachariah Street to arrive just in time for the sunset, and the subsequent revelries. There would be, I knew, sutli kebabs (kebabs so delicate that they need to be held together with a string), slow-stewed nihari served with sweet saffron-scented sheermal, kulfi-falooda bathed in bright pink rose syrup... At this point in the contemplation, I needed to stop to salivate, but it went on. Biryani, of course, Kolkata style, with eggs and potatoes peeking out from below the pile of rice and golden shahi tukras (ah those days when we never had to spare a thought for fat and sugar). And of course, haleem.

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Somebody had the bright idea that we should earn our iftar meal by taking a break from eating. No lunch, she insisted. At 10 am, with breakfast still jostling in our tummy, we all said yes. By 1 pm, brought up on the Bengali diet of at least four good meals a day, we started to wonder about the wisdom of our decision. By 2.30 pm, I was in statistics class, trying to ignore the grumbling in my stomach. Our teacher, never one to fight the innate dryness of the material, was juggling many matrices, but all I could think about is the gooey richness of a haleem, topped with strips of juicy ginger and fried onions. And the fact that there were still four good hours to go before we would get to eat.



This is why children from low-income families need school meals if we want them to learn well: my friend Rohini Somanathan from the Delhi School of Economics, along with Farzana Afridi

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from ISI and Bidisha Baruah from IIEE studied what happened when, in 2009, the Delhi government decided to extend the coverage of the free school meals program to upper primary students (it already covered the lower primary). They tested kids by giving them mazes to solve (which is a standard way to measure cognition without requiring the subject to read and understand something) and found that their performance improved sharply once they started getting the meals. It's hard, as I learnt that Ramzan day, to focus on anything but food when your stomach is rumbling.

And it is obviously not just about food. It is hard to think of anything else when we are waiting for a diagnosis or an exam result for a loved one, or for that matter, that one WhatsApp message from him or her that might never arrive. Our cognition is slave to our affective mind.

But for the poor this can be a double whammy: they are robbed of their ability to think clearly and act decisively precisely when they need it the most, when their entire survival is at stake. This might help us understand why, during the 'monga' months (after the crops are planted) of March-April and September-November, when there is no work available in the fields, a large fraction of the poorest families in Rangpur in north-west Bangladesh end up living on a starvation diet of 1,400 calories a day or less, even though there is work available in the cities and those who take up that option can afford a more comfortable 2,200 calories for their families. As the fascinating research by Gharad Bryan and Mushfiq Mobarak (another set of friends and J-PAL

colleagues) shows, this remains true even after they, with some encouragement from a local NGO, have successfully navigated one trip to the city and made a bunch more money than they would have not otherwise. They seem frozen in place by the contemplation of what is happening to them.

My training as an economist makes this feel slightly paradoxical, since we are used to assuming that people respond to need. At the same time, as someone who can't help worrying about whether his children would have enough to eat on their one-day school camping trip, it is impossible to really comprehend what it means for a parent to tell a hungry child that there is no food, and there won't be much more for several weeks. I suspect this brings with it a sense of overwhelming responsibility that can be quite paralysing.

This is why, even in a market economy, we need systems of mutual aid. Not charity, though that can be important too, but a norm of helping friends and neighbours in need, so that the act of asking can be easy, and not require us to make the hard choice between begging and starving. Most rural communities across the developing world have a version of this not surprisingly given how little control farmers have over weather, pests and the world markets — and data from rural areas shows that consumption does not go down nearly as much as income during bad times, suggesting that the households are getting help from somewhere.

Unfortunately, these forms of social support are far from perfect, and have a

tendency to break down exactly when the need is the greatest, like in Rangpur when everyone else around is also in straitened circumstances. This is why governments have to be ready to intervene, but it also helps to be connected to those who are unlikely to be in trouble precisely when we are. This is the distant city cousin who will find us a spot to sleep, and make some introductions towards a job.

Migration literature suggests that those connections can be a powerful inducement to leave home — indeed when I was growing up, many friends had “country uncles” who slept in their living rooms and played cricket with us. More than a third of the working men in Rangpur do go to the city during monga. The right connections may be an important part of why they are different.

Celebrations like Ramzan (or Ganesh puja), where the community does something together, exist in part to underline the importance of these ties. In my youth there used to be iftar parties hosted by wealthy Hindu families, partly to allow their Muslim friends and neighbours to avoid cooking after a long day of fasting, but also as an occasion to reaffirm those bonds. I hope (and suspect) that they still happen, and they serve, what to me is the most magnificent gruel known to man, haleem.

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

#### HALEEM RECIPE

This is my favourite way to make haleem, courtesy my cousin and foodie

extraordinaire, Vineet Shroff

Fry 1 kilo of onions sliced into half rings no thicker than your ear-lobes in a large (ideally 12") fry pan with ½ cup sunflower or some other neutral oil, with ½ tsp salt, till they are red-brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels or yesterday's newspaper. Save the oil in the pan.

Pressure cook 1 kilo of well-cleaned bone-in mutton, ideally with 50 gm extra fat from around the kidneys, with 1 cup water, 1/3 of the fried onions, 1.5 tbs ginger-garlic paste, 2 1" pieces of cassia bark/cinnamon stick, 5 cloves, 4 green cardamoms pods, 1 tsp caraway seeds, 1/2 tsp kebab chini or allspice, 1 tbs rose petals, 2 large bay leaves, 1 tsp peppercorn, ½ tsp salt and 4 tbs ghee for 35 minutes. The meat should be falling off the bones. Pick the pieces of meat off the bones, and strain and save the stock.

In the same pressure cooker (no need to clean), add 3/4 cups of broken wheat (dalia), 2 tsp each of black urad dal, toovar dal, chana dal, yellow mung dal and basmati rice, ½ cup cashews, ½ tsp salt and 4 cups of water. Bring to a boil (uncovered). Cover with a plate and leave off the heat for 30 minutes before pressure cooking for 20 minutes. The grains should be ready to mash up.

In a food processor or a blender, put in 4/5 of the cooked meat and blend to a paste. Take it out. Without washing the bowl, add the grain mixture and blend into another paste. Shred by hand the remaining 1/5 of the meat.

To assemble, heat the reserved oil, adding extra to cover the pan's surface if needed. When it reaches medium heat, add 1 tbs ginger-garlic paste, fry for a minute and add 1/3 of the saved fried onions, 1/2 packed cup each of chopped coriander and mint, slivers from 2 green chilles, 1/2 tsp black pepper and 1/2 tsp turmeric. Cook for another minute, lower heat and add 3/4 cup beaten yogurt, 1 tbs at a time, stirring between additions. Add in the meat and grain pastes, the reserved stock and the shredded meat, stirring well to blend and adding water as needed to achieve the consistency of a thick dal. Dribble 2 tbs ghee over the whole thing and bring to a boil. Your haleem is ready to serve. Serve in bowls, garnished with thin slivers of ginger, the remaining fried onions, fried cashews, more coriander and mint and lemon wedges.

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