



WED, DEC 06, 2023 | UPDATED 20:05 PM IST



THE TIMES OF INDIA

Opinion ▶ Times View Times Evoke City India World Entertainment Sports Spirituality Business Environment

NEWS / BLOGS / INDIA / Memories of ma, and the sweet melange of ghonto

INDIA

Memories of ma, and the sweet melange of ghonto

December 2, 2023, 9:07 PM IST / Abhijit Banerjee in Tasting Economics, India, Lifestyle, TOI

- FACEBOOK
- TWITTER
- LINKEDIN
- EMAIL



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

I was in Kolkata for pujo this year and since my mother's cook was on leave, I picked a restaurant that seemed nice. My mother hated it. She was bothered by these very well-built young men, who seemed to be part of the staff but did very little, and was convinced that we had somehow stumbled on a drug den. Even their very rich and mellow mutton qorma, redolent with mace and kewra, did little to mollify her. I vainly tried to convince her that she had it backward: this place, I explained, would turn into a nightclub after dinner hours and these were the bouncers, there to protect the rest from the drunk and drugged up. She was too grumpy to concede, so I relaxed into the good (but very spicy) chole.

WRITE FOR TOI BLOGS

ADVERTISEMENT

BLOGS BY ABHIJIT BANERJEE

- 1 Cooking for comfort in a crisis time
- 2 Wet dhotis, satin shirts and pujor bhog
- 3 Small bites and big bets: The challenge of philanthropy

That was the last time we went out for a proper meal. My mother, Nirmala Banerjee, passed away just a week after that. She was almost 88, but still, when she had the energy, like on that evening, immensely lively and feisty. I miss her all the time.



The next morning, she was in a more conciliatory mood, and conceded that nightclubs do need bouncers — when she was a student in England in the 1950s, they would often go out dancing and there would occasionally be trouble, and “with Indian males these days...”. Given that rather dire assessment, it may be surprising that she was always and adamantly of the view that women need the chance to go out and enjoy themselves, without the protective embrace of fathers, brothers, husbands or lovers.

The paper she was working on when she passed away, tentatively titled ‘Workers or Housewives?’ returns to one of her recurrent themes, the role of the family in shaping the labour force participation of women in India. In most developing countries, young women tend to enter the workforce at the cusp of adulthood. They then quit to get married and have children, and perhaps return to outside work when their children are old enough. We see this in Bangladesh and China now,

[MORE BLOGS >](#)

TOP VOICES



Arun Ram
Chennai Talkies



Jug Suraiya
Juggle-Bandhi

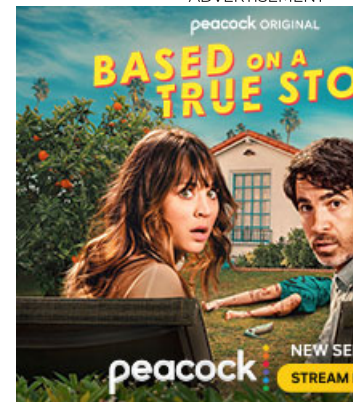


Chetan Bhagat
The Underage Optimist,TOI Edit Page



Bachi Karkaria
Erratica,TOI Edit Page,Tracking Indian...

ADVERTISEMENT



TOP EDITORIALS

- 1 Panacea for grief: Realise the eternity within
- 2 From 2016 to 2023: What changed for disabled soldiers
- 3 What jhumka? I said it first, in Bangalore!

but it was also true of currently industrialised countries in their early days of industrialisation.

India, she emphasised, is the one exception — women first get married and have children, before they consider seeking work. In other words, at the age where young women the world over are turning into workers — learning the work routines and the discipline, gaining the confidence to speak up for themselves, but also embracing the pleasures, the tight friendships, the giggly lunch-time conversations — Indian women are mostly at home, preparing to get married. It is then not so much of a surprise that most of them don't end up working — India has one of the lowest Female Labour Force Participation rates in the world, below, for example, Saudi Arabia.

“One important reason for this,” she wrote, “seems to be the absolute social imperative for women to strictly contain their sexuality within marriage, preferably in a monogamous, socially approved marriage. Violation of this taboo by a woman, whether by choice or by some compulsion, is considered her ultimate degradation”. Parents worry that if their daughter goes out to work and even more, if her work requires spending nights away from home, they might meet someone they like, or why not, just sleep with someone because they want to. Perhaps someone who is not fit to be a husband — already married, wrong caste, wrong religion, wrong gender.

Or worse, they might end up being coerced into having sex. Or simply acquire a jilted lover or angry aspirant, who goes around saying that they had sex, when she had been careful not to. The world

believes what it wants to believe, and it does not help that she was seen coming back late a few times.

Her point was that in a world where women are judged by their “purity”, and “sullied women” are deemed unmarried, families face a strong incentive to marry their daughter before they have a chance to go “astray”.

My mother understood these compulsions very well; she was an academic, but also an activist who helped create and run Sachetana, an NGO that fought for women’s rights. A lot of its work was in our neighbourhood, a transitional area between a solidly middle-class area and a large slum. I have no reason to believe that the middle classes behaved better, but they hid their secrets behind closed doors, while the slum-dwellers had no such option.

Domestic fights would spill over into the space in front of our house. He would start by calling her a slut, usually for complaining about his having spent the day’s earnings on booze, and it would get more anatomically specific from there. More often than not, she would hold her peace to avoid provoking him further, but there were days when, to our delight, she would weigh in on his nightly performance (or lack thereof). My mother would be screaming at the top of her voice from our verandah, telling them to shut up and go home, in a vain attempt to protect us from the facts of life, while warning him that she would call the police if he hit his wife again.

Casting aspersions on a woman’s virtue is what irate men do everywhere, but in South Asia, we take it a step further. Where else in the world would a man

murder a child or a sister for the crime of liking someone better than the man the family had chosen for her?

As my mother never got tired of repeating, this protectiveness keeps women from finding a job, without actually allowing them to take it easy. The economic pressure of a one-earner family, often reinforced by reminders about who doesn't "earn a living", creates a compulsion for women to contribute in every way they can. When they are not cleaning the house or cooking dinner for seven on a single burner, they wait on their in-laws or walk the children to school. In Rajasthan, they walk three miles in the sun to get water; in the lower delta of Bengal, they wade into rice fields, straining the standing water over and over through their pallu to catch a handful of little fish or shrimps. These might flavour a ghonto, the typically Bengali mélange of multiple vegetables cooked down in their own juices, for which she will also need to find some wild greens to pick.

While that sounds organic and vaguely romantic, my mother was adamant that this plethora of activities was a symptom of the problem. In her ideal world, each woman focuses on things that match her particular skills and equally importantly, is recognised by the family as doing something important. It could be something in the home, but for most of them, it will require stepping into the world.

And for that to happen, my mother insisted, we need to abandon our national obsession with controlling women's sex lives. Teach them about contraception and the possibility of violence, she wrote in her last piece, but don't keep them locked in.

There will be real risks, especially at the beginning, when you are the only woman out on the street at some late hour. But as more and more women take to the streets, it will become safer, as it was in the Mumbai where she grew up. They will cook fewer wonderful ghontos but choose when to do so, and life will be sweeter for all of us.

In that spirit this month, I offer the two dishes that I cooked during pujo, the last I will ever cook for my mum, a ghonto and a Bengali chana dal. I will brag a little; she said this was the best ghonto she had in many months; the dal she said nothing about, but she took two helpings. She was a tough lady.

Palong saager ghonto

Marinate 200 gm of tiny shrimps with salt and turmeric (or if you lean vegetarian, 15 small vadis). Fry them in 1.5 tbs mustard for 2 minutes at medium heat. Turn off heat and fish them out. Heat the remaining oil at medium high, throw 1 tsp panchphoron (a five-spice mix) and 1 green chili. After 1 minute, add 1 cup each of pumpkin and eggplant plus ½ cup muli (daikon) all in 2cm cubes, plus 1 tsp salt and turmeric and ½ tsp cayenne. Cover, set heat to medium low and cook until the vegetables are melting (20-25 minutes). Add 3 packed cups of washed spinach leaves, and let them wilt and blend in. Add 2 tsp freshly grated ginger and the shrimps, cook two minutes and remove. If you used vadis, break them into small pieces and garnish the dish.



Cholar dal

Pressure cook cup chana dal till soft. In 2 tbs ghee, cook 4 tbs fresh coconut cut into thin slices till they start to turn red.

Remove from the ghee. In the same ghee, fry 1" piece of cinnamon, 4 cloves, 4 cardamom pods and 1 bay leaf for a minute and then 2 tsp each of ground garlic and ginger. Fry for another minute and add 1 tsp each of turmeric, cumin powder, coriander powder, cayenne and salt. After a minute add cup finely chopped tomato and fry at medium heat till it's almost a paste (3 minutes or so).

Add the dal with its cooking liquid plus 1.5 cups of water and cook at low-medium for 10 minutes. Add the fried coconut, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup kishmish and 1 heaped teaspoon sugar. Simmer for 5 minutes. It should be sweet, savoury and a little bit hot. Adjust the balance of sweet and salty to your taste.

