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Sharbat Times: Beyond just surviving ever hotter summers

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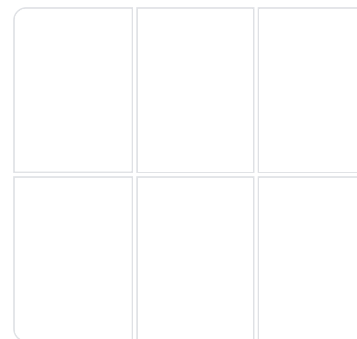
Abhijit Banerjee
Cooking, and eating, are often on Abhijit Banerjee's mind. But for the Nobel-winning economist, what starts with planning the night's dinner usually ends up in questions about ... MORE

As a child I remember quite liking the searing heat of the high summer, that sense of being almost erased by the sun's fierce gaze. There was high drama to be enjoyed — the sudden, fierce gusts, the quick-darkening clouds called forth, I used to think, by the earth's thirsty protests, the fleeting rain that dries almost as soon as it hits the ground, the bright light after it all passes, the grateful smell of the quenched earth... all of that I used to love.

One of my most vivid memories from the age of six is being caught in one of these summer storms, running home through an orchard of pomelo trees, dodging the heavy pomelos that the storm was

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scattering around the garden, and then running out, as soon as the storm subsided, to collect the pomelos and green mangoes that it left behind on the ground. It didn't hurt that early summer was the start of the mango season in Bengal, with the delicate himsagars making their first appearances, and the wonderful kachche meethe aam, the half-sweet green mangoes that are perfect with a dressing of chili, chaat masala and kashundi, Bengal's marvelous answer to French mustard.



All that deliciousness is thankfully still there. It is the weather that is turning on us. As I write, day-time temperatures in large parts of India are hitting a potentially lethal 45 degrees Celsius and we all know that this is not accidental, that what is coming is even worse. Just one more day in the year when the district average temperature goes above 35 degrees Celsius rather than staying in the more temperate 22-24 degree range, according to the careful work by my friends and colleagues Robin Burgess, Dave Donaldson and Micheal Greenstone

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(along with Olivier Deschenes), pushes the annual death rates in that district by 0.7%. Most of that happens in the countryside, where people need to work outside. Moreover, those very hot days are predicted to go from about 5 a year now, to 75 by the end of the century, if climate change is allowed to continue unabated (God forbid). In terms of brute numbers, it says that life expectancy will be 10.5 years less for rural Indians born between 2075 and 2099, compared to those born in 2000.

While recognising just how frightening this is, and the need for urgent and decisive action, it is easy to lose track of the fact most of us (hopefully) will need to go on living, and ideally, enjoying it. The current discourse on climate change is so dire that pleasure has no place in it, but it is hard to win a fight as big as that against global warming without reminding people of what they are fighting for.

Our reaction to the doomsday discourse right now is almost purely defensive: people are buying air conditioners in record numbers. There are estimates that the number of households in India with air-conditioning will go up 15-fold by 2050. This would be a very different India: an enormous part of today's socialization for everyone except the elites happens in the streets and the neighborhoods, in college courtyards and roadside dhabas, through tennis-ball cricket and pavement badminton. If people stop going out for a big part of the year because it is too hot, and wrap themselves in their air-conditioned cocoons, if mothers stop children from going out to play, if friends no longer congregate in ramshackle tea-

shops or under some shady tree (as we used to), if relatives don't walk over for random visits, society will be unrecognisably altered without anyone trying to change it.

Of course, there are other reasons to worry about this explosion in ACs. It is estimated that we will need a thousand 600 megawatt (read huge) power plants just to run the air-conditioners, and that by itself will push India into the highest global ranks for carbon guzzling, which will unleash a murderous cycle, where our own demand for comfort will drive further increases in temperatures, and make life even more impossible for those who cannot afford the protection of technology.

A big part of the problem is that the ACs we use in India right now are often extremely wasteful of energy. They are also quite cheap. One of the open secrets of marketing is that low upfront costs and a high usage charge makes it easier to sell (think of the attractively priced printers that then fleece you on the price of ink). To make matters worse, many of the new buyers lack the ready cash to buy the better machines, though they might know that they will eventually regret it. We need to act fast on this, making it impossible to buy the carbon-gluttons while offering easy loans and discounts to make the efficient ones affordable, which can apparently cut power consumption by a factor of five.

But those technologies won't solve the problem of growing isolation. For that we will need to reimagine our public spaces. Ultra-hot days are nothing new in India.

One simple mnemonic that helped us survive high-school history exams, despite inadequate preparation, was that good kings planted trees, dug wells and built seraikhanas where sun-weary travelers could refresh themselves (bad kings destroyed places of worship). Most governments in India pay lip service to planting trees, but much of urban India is shockingly bare. Growing the right kind of trees takes time, but it is one of the best-known antidotes to the weather. In the meanwhile, my hope/fantasy is that there will be shelters along the roads and in parks and playgrounds, with water to drink and some kind of cooling technology, open to everyone during the hot hours to break from the heat and refresh themselves. Inside there could be a stall, selling something cheap and delicious, nimbupani with a dash of kala namak, tart and spicy sattv ke sharbat, shaved ice with a brightly colored shot of fruit flavoring, mango-flavored iced tea or just cold water with slices of cucumbers steeping in it. What is important is that it remains a democratic space, a cooler (in all senses of the word) version of the tea-shops we used to frequent, where one could spend hours for the price of a cup and even the local rickshaw puller did not feel uncomfortable stepping in for a quick drink.

Some of this, especially the construction of shelters, will surely need state intervention and support. But to make anything function well at the Indian scale, with all its million local variations, communities need to act. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, villages used to have their own summer defence such as stepwells — gigantic underground living spaces built

around a well, cooled by the evaporation of the well water during the blazing summer months. I suspect there were many things about them that I would not have liked — the segregation of women, the exclusion of those from the wrong castes for example — but I am also sure they did much to give summer its own respite and delight. In my imagination, the guests were served plates of chilled and salted jamun, along with perhaps my most favorite fruit drink, a sharbat made from falsa. We need some of that joy too, if we want to avoid falling into the Gulag of airconditioned isolation — whether it is sitting in the shade of a beautiful tree, especially if there is small cooling breeze, reading something or just ruminating, or drinking something cold, lightly sweet or slightly savory with friends, ideally with a prospect of a mango later when it gets a bit cooler.

Recipes

Here are a few of my summer favorites from all over the world...

Mexican(ish) Horchata: Blend 1 cup raw rice (ideally some fragrant variety) and ½ cup blanched sliced almonds with a 1" stick of cinnamon and 3 cups of cold water for 3-4 minutes, stopping the blender several times if needed to prevent overheating. Chill overnight and then strain, first through a fine tea strainer and then through a muslin, repeating if needed to remove all grit. Add 3 cups cold water, 1.5 cups of cold milk, 1/3 cup sugar or sweetener and 1 tsp rose essence or vanilla (or both) and make sure the sugar mixes in.

Vietnamese-inspired mango tea:

You can make this with peaches and nectarines as well. Peel and thinly slice a ripe sweet mango (or more) to get 1 cup of flesh. Place the flesh in a small saucepan with 2 tbsp sugar or sweetener and cook at low heat for 7-8 minutes, as the mango softens and begins to give up its juices. Remove from the heat and let it cool. While the mango is cooking, boil 2 cups of water and add two regular tea bags into it.

Soak for five minutes. Mix with the mango mixture and a pinch of black pepper. Add two cups of cold water and chill for two hours.

Moroccan-style cucumber water:

I had this in Morocco for the first time. I won't swear that it was invented there: Fill a jug with 8 cups of cold water and thinly slice a small (150 gm) cucumber into it. Chill in the fridge for a few hours.

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

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