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# Wet dhotis, satin shirts and pujor bhog

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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](#)

My great-great-grandfather is one of the figures that most families probably have (or need to invent), whose impractical ways lost us our one chance of being really rich. My favourite from the many stories my grandfather told us about him is the one where he was bathing in the local pond when someone brought news that his stepbrother's family just had a son. He was about to head over there in his wet dhoti (this was before Speedo) when the messenger reminded him that he hadn't got his reward. He apparently hesitated for a few seconds, then just took off the dhoti and went off to congratulate the lucky family. In the buff.

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I often think of this story from the point of view of the recipient. Was he happy with the wet and probably much-used dhoti? Would he have preferred to wait and get some money, say? Or was he delighted by the flourish of that gesture, or slightly embarrassed by it, or both?

This gets to the heart of the economics of gift-giving: why do we take the trouble to give gifts? Why not just send the equivalent amount by UPI? Tagore, perceptive as always, framed this issue beautifully in a poem that we read as kids. It was puja season, as it will be soon, and two brothers were pestering their mom to see their puja clothes. When she does, one gets very upset — he was expecting something nicer — but as she explains, they just didn't have the money. The other, perhaps in reaction, says he loves the gift. The upset child runs off to the local magnate's house, which was being readied for the pujo. People were milling around, some no doubt were making themselves useful, others, I suspect, in the quite reasonable expectation that this

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being Bengal, there would be some mishti (sweets) soon. In my imagination, someone comes around with a large thali of chanaboras, dark and glistening with ghee and syrup.

The boy in the poem looks so crestfallen that amidst all this merry-making and mêlée he still gets noticed. The host very graciously gifts him the satin shirt that he wanted. But when he proudly comes home wearing it, his mother disdains it.

Re-reading Pujar Shaaj now, I don't think Tagore wanted us to be upset that the boy begged for it. Begging, after all, has a different status in Hindu culture than say in Protestant countries — sanyasis are meant to live by begging — there is no shame in it. It was rather the fact that the boy ignored what it meant to the giver — that, as his mother says in the poem, he didn't think of what his father had to do to afford even those cheap clothes in this year when the crops had failed, whereas for the rich man, it really meant nothing.

There is a 1993 piece, famous in our small world of economists, called 'The Deadweight Loss of Christmas' by Joel Waldfogel, then a young professor at Yale. He asked his students to tell him the market price of the gifts they got for Christmas, and the value they put on them and concluded that just at Christmas, between \$4 and \$13 billion dollars was "wasted" because the recipients did not like the gifts they were given.

What Professor Waldfogel did not ask is what those who didn't like their gifts would have thought if their grandparents had handed them cash? Would they wonder why it was different this year, if

their visible lack of enthusiasm about last year's (entirely unsuitable) sweater had something to do with it? Would it bother them?

In Waldfogel's data, grandparents were, in fact, more likely to give cash (or gift cards). Partly maybe it was harder for them to go shopping, but undoubtedly some of it was a recognition of past failures. On the other hand, none of the significant others in his data give cash gifts. This is telling — some grandparents may have given up on trying, but a lover cannot afford to.

We give gifts to signal that we care, that we thought of the person, of what she would like and the way her face would light up when she realises that someone had thought hard about her preferences. Economists recognise that sending the right signal is important, say when you want a job or have something to sell. But when we think of how we build and maintain our social connections, our instinct is to think about personal likes and dislikes, rather than as a central strategic element of our economic lives, as it would be for an anthropologist. Hence, the focus is on the happiness from possessing the gifted object, rather than on what the act of gifting does to our relationship. Which is how Christmas becomes a dead loss.

As the great French anthropologist Marcel Mauss reminded us in his wonderful essay on 'The Gift', we are always exchanging gifts, be it just an unexpected smile or a kind word or two. Visiting friends or family in my youth, there was always a moment for the question: "ektu mishti mukh kore jabi na baba (won't you sweeten your mouth before you go?)". It could be something very little, a batasha, a small

lump of sugar really, or a rewdi, an eye-ball sized lump of sesame seeds held together by sugar, but we knew better than to say no. The social account, as Mauss explains it, needs to stay open — there needs to be the easy possibility of another round of exchange in the future. Maybe the next time you will bring her a letter that went to the wrong flat, and she will invite you to sit for a few minutes and (mostly) lie about how school is going. Then the mishti, which you accept with a smile, hiding well the fact that you are a mishti snob who only likes the soft and less-sugary kind, but perhaps also noting that inflation was probably eating into her pension and that she seemed very lonely.

The point of the everyday gift is to make the more essential exchanges possible: maybe someday the misdelivered letter was actually important; the easy mutual connection, the fact that you would not think twice about coming over unasked, makes that transaction so much easier. This is why the quotidian gift needs to be small, just a token, just a reiteration of your connection and one that allows easy reciprocation (a few minutes of chit-chat, a mishti in recompense), so effortless that people mostly notice only when it's not honoured, when that last-moment mishti is turned down without an elaborate excuse (my stomach really hurts, the next time I'll have two).

Occasions like Durga puja (or Christmas or Eid) are special because we are allowed to break the everyday rules of gifting and offer something potentially exciting for the receiver (and therefore offering the giver a chance to express himself). For that reason, it does not demand reciprocation: your rich grandpa might buy you that suit

that you need for the next job interview, while you might just make him a beautiful card with a picture of your mum with him.

In a way, that is also how it works with prasad, the thali of mishti that you offer Ma Durga and take back blessed. She, after all, is all-powerful — there is nothing that she needs or lacks. By taking the mishti back and distributing them to your loved ones, you offer her the only gift you can, the acknowledgment of her grace and presence in your life. And maybe that is also why the bhog, the meal shared with the whole community, matters to her. Perhaps looking down it pleases her to see that despite all our differences (which probably make her sad), for these four or five days we, her children, manage to act as a family. That some of the more affluent among us take the burden of supplying banana leaves full of khichuri (khichdi), beguni (batter fried eggplant), chorchori (sweet potatoes, spinach, eggplant, drumsticks, and other seasonal vegetables, cooked in their mutual juices into a spicy paste), tomator chutney (you guessed, fresh chutney made from tomatoes), and much else. That for these few days, those who never cross paths will sit together and be served perhaps by those who are more used to being served than serving. That, as we surreptitiously glance at the person across the aisle, perhaps we notice in them the markers of our shared humanity.

#### RECIPE FOR SHEERA

I remember loving Durga puja bhog, though it's been years since I had some. The one thing I don't love is what Bengalis call sujir halwa, often dessert for one of the lesser meals. The Maharashtrian equivalent, sheera, is richer, fattier and

better. It's my Marathi mother's gift to our home cooking. Here it is, a gift for the readers.

Soak 25 strands (1/10 of a gm) of saffron and 1/3 cup of raisins in warm water (separately) and leave for 30 minutes. Mix 1.25 cups of water with 1.25 cups of milk and cup sugar and a pinch salt and bring to a simmer. While this is happening, fry 1 cup suji in a heavy kadhai in cup ghee at medium-low, till the suji is fragrant and is just beginning to turn red. Add the milk mixture, the saffron with its water and raisins without the soaking water to the fried suji and stir until the liquid is fully absorbed. Lower heat as far as possible, cover and cook, stirring occasionally to prevent it sticking. When you see the ghee seeping out from the edges (about 20 minutes at very low heat), take it off the heat, sprinkle cardamom powder and garnish with cashews freshly fried in ghee before serving.

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