Chhaunk

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On Food, Economics and Society

ABHIJIT BANERJEE

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juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar,
Near Holi Chowk, New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353452421
E-ISBN: 9789353458089

Typeset in Calluna Sans by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

Chhaunk

(Pronounced chh-on-k)

Also called ‘tadka’ (in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), ‘vaghar’ (Gujarati, Hindi) and ‘phoron’ (Bengali).

The process of tempering to finish a dish in Indian cooking. It involves spices being put in hot oil, which is then added to a dish to create an extra layer of flavour.

In Bengali, ‘phoron kata’ means passing a brief comment.

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Author's Note

Why does an economist write about cooking? Why would he want to publish recipes? The quick answer is that I am greedy; I love eating. When I eat something particularly memorable or read about a dish that sounds especially intriguing, I often try to make it. My hands are not skilled enough for French pastries, and sometimes, I fail even with down-home desi dishes. I still recall with horror the sticky mess I made while trying to replicate the wonderful *methiche aalan* that the well-known Delhi obstetrician and extraordinary cook, Ruma Satwik, had made for us. But I do often figure it out (sometimes after multiple tries), and over the years, this process has taught me a lot about the pros and cons of different cooking techniques. In other words, I have learnt what makes for a good recipe.

But I don't know whether I would have found the time to write a cookbook had it not been for the enforced confinement

of the pandemic. Cheyenne lived with our family through that strange period and, especially in the early days of swirling rumours about the impending Armageddon and the different shapes it would take, we found solace in planning complicated meals and executing them. Every day, around ten in the morning, I would show up in Cheyenne's room. She would look up from her drawing and ask, 'So, what are we cooking today?' We would discuss what was in the fridge, what might be available – this being the disrupted early days of the pandemic – and ultimately, though we tried not to articulate this thought to ourselves, how we could outdo the show we had put on in the past days.

The plan of working on a cookbook together emerged, inter alia, through those conversations. I had a collection of recipes that I had shared with friends and family, which could probably be turned into a cookbook, but it was nowhere close to being done. I showed the half-finished manuscript to Cheyenne, partly in the hope that she would take on the task of illustrating the cookbook. She was polite but blunt, very much like, now that I know her better, I would have expected her to be. In particular, she thought that the book did very little to connect to my identity as a development economist. Thankfully, she also signed up to work on it with me (after I promised to add more economics to the book).

When *Cooking to Save Your Life* came out, we were excited by the general public's reaction to it. Many of the interviews had thoughtful and interesting questions that forced me to try to articulate what is special about a cookbook written by an

economist. In the process, it became clearer to me that I think of a meal like an economist thinks about most things: how does one get to a specific objective (impressing/indulging/comforting/nourishing a particular person or group of people) with minimum time and hard work? It obviously helps to have dishes that come with interesting stories; dishes that surprise the palate or trick the eye – ultimately, dishes that leave an impression well beyond the effort that went into their making. *Cooking to Save Your Life* had a lot of these. But it also had many everyday dishes; I could see that they were chosen because they evoked specific moments from my life.

After the book tour ended and the interviews died down, we realized that we would love to keep going. Writing and presenting the book had made us much more aware of all the ways in which talking about food was like talking about everything else in the world – from politics to history to economics to culture – in a way that does not need to be academic or polemical. It was a way to plant ideas in the soft soil of food memories and kitchen stories, where they can germinate and grow without necessarily provoking the kind of quick and sharp reaction that is characteristic of today's social media-driven world. It offered me an opportunity to reminisce, to go back in my mind to all the people and places, and above all, all the Indias that have been a part of my long life.

We thought of doing a blog, but quickly realized that even Cheyenne, despite her millennial status, was not really comfortable with the pace that it sets. We were lucky enough to get a chance to do a monthly column in the Sunday edition

of *The Times of India*. We had an image of a reader on a slow morning, drinking sweet, milky tea and biting into a kachori redolent with hing or a still-warm idli enrobed in gunpowder, and that made us aim for a particular voice, slow and gentle but also rich and nuanced, enlivened by the vivid colours and shapes of Cheyenne's illustrations.

And that is how this book began about two years ago. Now that we have twenty-four columns, we can see that there are many recurrent themes that go back to our shared interests in the social sciences; themes at the intersection of economics, sociology, psychology and social policy that we have tried to draw out in the three new essays that we added to the collection of what were originally monthly columns. We have also added fifty-odd recipes that complement those that were at the end of each column and connect, in different ways, to that essay's themes.

We intend for this to be a very different book from our previous one – smaller, less ornate, more of a book to read rather than a cookbook. It is more about social science and ideas in general, with a wider range of recipes – from the unabashedly elaborate to the thirty-minute meals, from summer coolers to Christmas cakes. The organizing principle is that each essay offers an angle on the food (or drinks) that inspired the choice of the recipes that follow the essay. We hope the reading will inspire you to cook, and the cooking to read further.

PART I

ECONOMICS AND PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction

Since we published our previous book, two of the most important people in our lives are no longer with us. My mother, Nirmala, passed away in November 2023. Cheyenne's father, Bernard, left us in December 2023. They were, without doubt, the strongest influences on who we are. My mother was a professor; Bernard was a truck driver. But somehow, they were very similar people, at least in the ways they related to us: liberal, opinionated, loving, volatile, engaged with the world, and committed to living well. It is hard to think of their passing without thinking of how they live within us.

The ways our families and circumstances shape who we are, for better and for worse, fits well with one of the main themes in this book – why do we behave the way we do? Economics starts from the premise that the answer to these questions can be found in the pursuit of rational self-interest. Moreover, since self-interest, in principle, covers almost any kind of behaviour – if

I feel like donating the clothes on my back, as my great-great-grandfather once did (see 'Why Give Gifts?'), then that is my self-interest. Economists like to limit self-interest to one's pursuit of material well-being. One of the more exciting developments in economics in the last thirty years is the increased acceptance of the fact that most people are neither particularly self-interested (at least in that narrow sense) nor particularly rational, if rational means being able to effectively pursue that version of self-interest. This is the inspiration of the field that calls itself behavioural economics.

Several of the essays in this book are about why this can offer us a very different way of thinking about economic ideas. For one, while economists tend to think of preferences as being intrinsic and almost constitutive of who we are, behavioural economists emphasize the role of social pressures. Women's role in the world (whether they should work or stay at home, what they will do with an unwanted pregnancy, if they should wear a headscarf or not) is a subject on which society often feels comfortable to impose its heavy hand. My aunt was told that she should not take up the jobs she was qualified for because her in-laws would like her to stay home and serve them food.

The question is, to what extent are these the actual preferences of the husband or his family and to what extent is it just the socially appropriate thing to do? In a remarkable experiment published in the ultra-prestigious *American Economic Review,*[1] Leonardo Bursztyn, Alessandra L. González and David Yanagizawa-Drott show data that a vast majority of

younger Saudi men are comfortable with their wives working but think they would face social censure if they actually went through with this decision. The authors informed a random sample of 250 young men that the views of others actually lined up with theirs and found that the wives of those so informed were much more likely to interview for jobs in the next few months.

When I told my mum this story, she was enthused but remained sceptical of her target group – Indian guardians of young women – behaving this reasonably. As I write in 'Women and Work', the chapter that marks her passing, my mother would keep coming back to how Indian families damage their daughters by obsessing about protecting their virginity until they can be 'handed over' to a husband's family 'intact', and that responsibility can then be shifted to the marital family. This overprotection is why, she argued, Indian women never get enough of a chance to enjoy their youth, find their vocation and become who they could be instead of the unpaid cook and cleaner of the household. I love cooking and I don't mind cleaning dishes, but I am sure many women, even in the US, play that role out of a sense of duty rather than a love for spending time in the kitchen.

Social pressures, of course, are not confined to gender relations. 'Mango and Manners' is about table manners and how they serve to reinforce social distinctions. We already know that about what people eat – upper-caste Hindus are much more likely to be vegetarian than other Indians – but it is equally true of how we eat. Being more aware of just

how arbitrary our notions of good manners are, might help us become more tolerant.

Table manners, of course, are taught at the dinner table – my mother would calmly slap my elbows off the table because 'no elbows' was part of her education. In economic narratives, the dining table is a frequent metaphor for all the ways in which our parents mould us. Yet, as I write in 'Where Do Our Preferences Come From?', I learnt many things at the dinner table (not just where to put my elbows) – how to tell a story, how to take a joke against you (I am an easy target – now it is my kids who enjoy that), where the line between funny and nasty lies. But never how to choose a career or get better grades, or how to be patient with one's investments or frugal with one's budget. In other words, nothing that economists care about.

This does not mean that the family does not shape us. I am an economist; my parents were both economists. The dinner table conversations about why there was so much misery in the slums next door made me the kind of economist I am. But my parents did not intend for me to be an economist – they thought I should do something (even) more math-driven (like a mathematician, maybe). In other words, as I argue in 'Cultural Capital', it is cultural capital and not dinner-table instruction that makes us: the books that we had lying around the house, the conversations about them, and – why not – my mother's attempts to recreate minestrone and pasta al tonno with what she could find in the Calcutta (now Kolkata) of the 1970s. This is why I remain a firm believer in affirmative action. When people talk of how everything should be based on merit and not

identity, I want to remind them of the enormous advantages of growing up in a middle-class, upper-caste family like mine.

Behavioural economics has another important side, where rather than bringing ideas from sociology into economics, there is an attempt to deepen economists' understanding of psychology. It is easy, for example, to say that human beings are rational maximizers, but it is often hard to know what that really means. Is it rational to plan to exercise every other day, knowing that it won't actually happen? The answer is not obvious: it *is* useful to have goals – even ones that you will never fully reach – because they can act as a reminder that you need to do more. On the other hand, failing all the time can be discouraging. Perhaps it makes sense to set the goals lower.

Once we recognize that there is no one 'rational' choice in many situations – no ideal exercise plan that we can automatically adhere to by an act of will – the question of how to make plans that real humans can more or less stick to assumes a central role. 'Commitments We Can Keep' deals directly with this, but 'Energy-Efficient Eating' makes a related point. Saving energy while cooking may sound like a pain, but it can also become an interesting game where you challenge yourself to make something delicious with minimal use of energy. Once you think about it, that idea has wings – why not get your children to compete with you to switch off the lights, to ensure that the air conditioning is not leaking out, that you are not making two trips by car when one would suffice?

Abandoning the garb of the fully rational woman/man also gives us the language to talk about stress, anxiety, depression

and confusion. The piece titled 'Edible Distractions' talks about psychological strategies for dealing with COVID-19 – a lot of our succour came from cooking – but also their limitations. The piece titled 'The Burden of Age' was even more personal – about growing old and getting sick, feeling weak and losing control; about my grandfather and Cheyenne's father, as well as the increasing loneliness among the elderly in India and the plague of depression that seems to go with that. My mother lived more or less alone, but so do increasing numbers of the low-income elderly in rural India, and they, unlike my mum, do not have the advantage of someone whose job is to care for them.

Ultimately, for me, writing these columns is therapy. It allows me to revisit my childhood, my family, my many friends, my hopes and disappointments, and perhaps above all, the India that I love and never left. And through that, it allows me to discover just how much of the economics I actually trust – sometimes, I have to admit, without empirical warrant – links back to those very salient moments of my life. Read them, please, not only as something final and definitive but also as the tentative articulation of many thoughts and associations that I begin to discover in me.