

Book Review

Cooking a Pot of Rice

To the Bengali bourgeoisie, the class in which I had been reared, rice was the essence of a good meal and was no simple affair. First, one always ate white rice (Atap), none of that coarse brown nonsense, which one could never tell if it was properly husked or not, and, when cooked, always seemed to retain a faint gamy undertone. Before cooking, the rice had to be picked and washed free of all grit, the dust of Bangladesh.

By Khademul Islam

ABOUT six months after I came to America, I began to hanker for plain white rice, cooked the way my mother used to back in Bangladesh. I was tired of fried rice, of Mexican beans and rice, of the sticky Japanese stuff, of wild rice from Louisiana, even the rice in Indian restaurants-tired of what the whole, noisy medley of ethnic cooking had done to an elegant food staple.

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Second, one always ate it hot, freshly cooked, ladled out steaming from a bowl in the center of the table, never as a leftover. Third, the color wasn't a bright, hard-edged white but had a

softer, matte finish. Fourth, plain meant plain, white rice cooked without peas, carrots, or vegetables of any kind. No oil, butter, or margarine, thank you very much.

The right rice cooked properly, as my mother would say wrinkling her nose, never "smelled." It would have a clean, faintly starchy aroma. And cooked rice should never, ever be mushy, which could ruin a meal, if not possibly the day. In the perfect dish, each grain would lie as a separate, opaque entity in a delicate latticework, yet pliant. When squeezed between thumb and forefinger, it dissolved into a brisk skidmark of carbohydrate.

Though rice is cooked plain, no Bengali ever eats it plain; it has to be accompanied by either lentils, curried fish or vegetables. Or as a dessert delicacy, with mashed bananas and yogurt. Even the poorest, even the beggars, would scrounge up some salt and hot peppers, mixing it into the rice with their fingers before squatting to eat.

As a boy, I would accompany my father when he would go to the bazaar to buy the week's, or month's, supply of rice. On

weekends especially, men and women jostled each other on its crowded paths, some trailing children and servants in their wake. All the rice merchants would be in one section of the market, fat men sitting on stools in the heat fanning themselves with hand-held pakhals, keeping a hawk eye on their tiny empires of bulging rice sacks arranged in neat rows. There was rice of every variety. My father would stop in front of these open sacks of rice, scoop up a handful and look at the grains, assess color and shape. Hold it close to his nose for the bouquet, then pour it back in a slow shower. A beaded waterfall. After going through a few of these shops, he would ask the pricerice was a no-haggle item yet he would always ask and then in the din of the chaalmondi, skinny helpers would weight out the amount on large wooden scales and cheerfully lug it to the car. Or the rickshaw.

In America, of course, there was no bazaar to go to, and no way was I going into a supermarket to buy my rice. The Uncle Ben's was laughable, the other stuff too enriched and it seemed

to me that the rice was less important than the packaging. Hidden beneath layers and layers of shiny gloss. So I hit one of those Indian immigrants shops that dot Washington D.C.'s suburbs. I had never been to one before: Hmmm, not quite the haats back in the Old Country, but still, it had that familiar slapdash air about it. Spices, loose tea leaves and mango chutneys lined the rickety, narrow shelves. Bankers boxes of squash, spinach and cauliflower were stacked on the floor with ginger, garlic, and Coke in the refrigerated section. Dum maro dummar issued faintly out of two tiny speakers. The man at the counter looked like on of my uncles in Bangladesh, only more forlorn.

I headed for the 10-kilo bags piled on the floor. No good old Atap here, only Basmati, which was little fancier than what I wanted but it would do. Nicely. The gunnysack bags were sewn shut, which meant that I could not see or feel or smell the rice. So I did the next best thing: I studied the labels. Basmati from Pakistan came in bags with roses

and scales stamped on them. Bags from India tended towards elephants and the Taj Mahal (one from Dehra Dun had a princess with beauteous look).

Instinctively, I hefted several bags in trying to decide, chose one from Pakistan and carried it to the counter, suddenly reminded of blackened coolies unloading sacks of rice at sunbeaten railway stations, backs bowed by the weight. For a split second, I was a chasha in a gray-green rice paddy, barefoot in the water-logged clay, bending to plant tiny rice shoots by hand. Hare krishna here rammed chanted the speakers.

One day, much later, coming out of a store in Virginia with a bag in hand, I noticed a car pulling up, an Indian dad and his two children inside. Dad got out, but the children slid down in the back seat, trying to be invisible. Dad was probably an immigrant with a hankering for plain white rice, while his children, born here into an uncertain brownness, hated to go inside a funny-smelling place that literally screamed outsider. Messy, I thought, this business of being

squeezed in the middle.

I called my mother Betty Crocker in Bangladesh to get it right. She started to laugh, "You Cook?" Afterwards, I followed her instructions to a T.

First, I washed the rice, letting the water run from the tap into the bowl, scrubbing the grains. Thoroughly. It removed all traces of any smell. Rice exported to America was exceptionally clean, the usual grit picked out by nimble fingers elsewhere.

"Remember," my mother had said, "if you want pulao, soak it for an hour."

"Nah," I had replied, "no pulao."

After draining the water, I transferred the wet grains to the cooking pot. According to my mother, this was the tricky part, how much water to put in. Too much and the rice would get unspeakably mushy while too little would mean brittle shards of chalk.

"After you put the rice in the pot," she had said, "the water level should be three fingers above the rice."

"Okay," I thought as I added the water and put the pot on the

stove. Brought it to a boil, then cut the heat back by a quarter, put on Sachdev (the flute notes fireflies on an ancient landscape) and watched the rice. About eight minutes later, I took a spoon and lifted a few grains out from the middle. I blew on the rice to cool it, took a single grain and squeezed it between thumb and forefinger. Ah, almost there. I gave it a couple of minutes more, lifted the pot off the stove and dumped the whole thing into a colander, then set the colander on top of the pot. "Never cover steaming rice," my mother had said, "sure way to turn it soft."

And so right there in the kitchen of my basement apartment in Washington, D.C., I made my perfect pot of rice, with nothing else to eat it with, no lentils, no fried eggplant, no curried fish with tomatoes, but who cared? I was home!

The writer is a former teacher of the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka. He now lives in Washington, D.C. USA.

Fiction

An Asian Encounter with Romanian Communism

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

(continued from 9 December 2000)

Carmen's parents' house was a single-storyed building but long in size. Kitchen and storehouse were separated from the main building where as many as four bedrooms, dining-cum-sitting room were located. Apart from a central-heating system, they had their own arrangement to heat the rooms at the time when the temperature went down to below freezing point. At times, the temperature recorded was minus twenty Celsius. The floor of the houses in rural areas is not raised much.

Rouf was wondering about the housing pattern in Pakistan. The pattern of the housing in and around Bucharest, which is constructed by private individuals, resembled such houses in the towns in Pakistan. The floor of the house was raised at a certain height, but the construction of the house is a mixed one. For example, the floor is made of concrete and the four sides are covered by wooden sheets and the roof was made by a corrugated sheet. In some places, one can find single-storyed buildings in the towns, while two to five-storyed buildings are found in the urban areas.

"How come that you managed so many food items when there is a scarcity of food in the market?" Rouf enquired. She answered, "A family of five can buy food products from different markets and store them for use whenever necessary." Food and consumer items were progressively disappearing from the market. Long queues of people in front of the shops (food stores in particular) were a common sight. Apart from the main food course, different fruits, like cherries, grapes, strawberries, apples and maura were placed on the table as a part of dessert. It was followed by coffee and chicha, Romanian special wine. By the way lunch was served, Rouf thought that Carmen's family must be quite rich on Romanian standards.

Carmen's mother enquired about Rouf's family. Rouf replied, "I belong to a family of five members, which includes one brother and one sister." Except for Carmen and Christina, the rest of their family spoke only the Romanian language. Rouf was wondering if he could learn the language to be able to communicate with this family. After the food, both Carmen and Christina recited a poem of Romania on the request of their father. Carmen explained the contents of the poem which were as follows:

When it starts snowing again,

Caught by a longing.
Far off, I see myself, on a road.

Snowed on, slowly walking.
Wistfully, the balcony grows

Darker under the caves;
Against the pillar piled
With snow, a girl leans.

It was written by George Bacovia. Born on 17 September 1881, Bacovia died in Bucharest on 22 May 1957. Bacovia was a poet who loved to present a pessimistic view to the World, with strange colours. In his poems, white, grey, black, red, yellow colours dominate. For example, the poem, "Scene", is written in the following manner:

White trees, black trees,
Naked in the solitary park;
A scene of mourning, bleak
White trees, black trees.

His poem, "The Ghosts", reads like this:

With red lanterns, yellow, green,
The ghosts pass at night
over fields of grain,

And the dogs bark on in the night at the fields

The ghosts have entered the loft of an inn,

And the loft is seen to be queerly lit

By lanterns yellow and green.

Peter Jay wrote from Oxford in January 1979, "Personally, after five or six years of acquaintance with Bacovia's poems, I still find his peculiar brand of symbolism more arresting than any of the French poets from whom he learned Verlaine, Laforgue to some extent, Rollinat.

To be Continued

Interview

Scimitars in the Sun

N. RAM interviews ARUNDHATI ROY on a writer's place in politics.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, took the literary world by storm, winning among other things the 1997 Booker Prize and accolades from leading writers and critics. It continues to be one of the best-loved and best-read recent works of literary fiction round the world. It has sold six million copies in 40 languages.

Since then, the novelist has published (always, first in Indian publications) three major political essays. *The End of Imagination*, *The Greater Common Good*, and *Power Politics*.

Each has addressed a big and critical issue, an issue that has mattered to millions of people and to the present and future of India. The first is a passionately argued, unilateralist, anti-chauvinist, uncompromising moral protest against nuclear weaponisation in India and Pakistan. The second is an extensively researched, but equally passionate description of what the Sardar Sarovar megadam being built on the Narmada River and Big Dams generally have meant to the lives and future of millions of people in India. The third essay argues against the privatisation and corporatisation of essential infrastructure, examining in particular the privatisation of the power sector, which is at the top of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government's agenda to confine herself to fiction.

Roy has rarely given extended interviews on her writing or the subjects she writes about. She points out that what she wants to say is contained in the writing. She made an exception by giving this extended interview, in her New Delhi home, to *Frontline*.

N. Ram: Arundhati Roy, the Supreme Court judgement is unambiguous in its support for the Sardar Sarovar dam. Is it all over? Are you, as the saying goes, running on empty?

Arundhati Roy: There are troubled times ahead, and yes, I think we when I say 'we', I don't mean to speak on behalf of the NBA, I just generally mean people who share their point of view yes, I think we are up against it. We do have our backs to the wall... but then, as another saying goes, 'taint over till the fat lady sings' [smiles]. Remember, there are a total of 30 Big Dams planned in the Narmada Valley. Upstream from the Sardar Sarovar, the people fighting the Maheshwar dam are winning victory after victory. Protests in the Nimad region have forced several foreign investors - Bayernwerk, Pagen, Siemens to pull out. Recently, they managed to make Ogdgen Energy Group, an American company, withdraw from the project. There's a full-blown civil disobedience movement there.

But yes, the Supreme Court judgement on the Sardar Sarovar is a tremendous blow the aftershocks will be felt not just in the Narmada Valley, but all over the country.

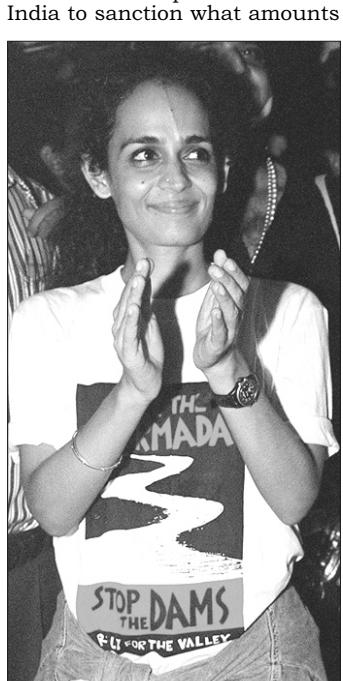
Wise men L.C. Jain, Ramaswamy Iyer have done brilliant analyses of the judgement. The worrying thing is not just that the Court has allowed construction of the dam to proceed, but the manner in which it disregarded the evidence placed before it. It ignored the fact that conditional environmental clearance for the project was given before a single comprehensive study of the project was done. It ignored the government of Madhya Pradesh's affidavit that it has no land to resettle the oustees, that in all these years M.P. has not produced a single hectare of agricultural land for the oustees. It ignored the fact that not one village has been resettled according to the directives of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award, the fact that 13 years after the project was given conditional clearance, not a single condition has been fulfilled, that there isn't even a rehabilitation Master Plan let alone proper

rehabilitation.

Most importantly, it allowed construction to proceed to 90 metres despite the fact that the Court was fully aware that families displaced at the current height of the dam have not yet been rehabilitated some of them haven't even had their land acquired yet! It has, in effect, ordered the violation of the Tribunal Award, it has indirectly endorsed the violation of human rights to life and livelihood.

There will be mayhem in the Narmada Valley this monsoon if it rains and of course, mayhem if it doesn't, because then there'll be drought. Either way the people are trapped - between the Rain Gods and the Supreme Court Gods.

For the Supreme Court of India to sanction what amounts



to submergence without rehabilitation is an extraordinary thing. Think of the implications - today, the India Country study done for the World Commission on Dams [WCD] says that Big Dams are gold mines for politicians, bureaucrats, the construction industry... But the really sad, ugly part has less to do with government than with the way our society is structured. More than 60 per cent of the millions of people displaced by dams are Dalit and Adivasi. But Adivasis account for only 8 per cent and Dalits about 15 per cent of our population. So you see what's happening here - a vast majority of displaced people don't even weigh in as real people.

Without it being taken into account, without it giving pause for thought, without it affecting the nature of our country's decision-making process.

The government doesn't even have a record of displaced people, they don't even count as statistics, it's chilling. Terrifying. After everything that has been written, said and done, the Indian government continues to turn a deaf ear to the protests 695 big dams 40 per cent of all the big dams being built in the world are being built in India as we speak. Yet India is the only country in the world that refused to allow the World Commission on Dams to hold a public hearing here. The Gujarat Government banned its entry into Gujarat and threatened its representatives with arrest! The World Commission on Dams was an independent commission set up to study the impact of large dams. There were twelve commissioners, some of them representatives of the international dam industry, some were middle-of-the-roaders and some were campaigners against dams. It was the first comprehensive study of its kind ever done. The report was released in London in November by Nelson Mandela. It's valuable because it's a negotiated document, negotiated between two warring camps and signed by all the commissioners. I don't agree with everything that the WCD Report says, not by a long shot but compared to the Supreme Court judgement that eulogises the virtues of big dams based on no evidence whatsoever, the WCD Report is positively enlightened. It's as though the two were written in different centuries. One in the Dark Ages, one now. But it makes no difference here. There was a tiny ripple of interest in the news for a couple of days. Even that's died down. We're back to business as usual. As they say in the army - 'Bash On Regardless'.

You must have an explanation, a personal theory perhaps, of why the government is so implacable, so unwilling to listen?

Part of the explanation - the relatively innocent part, I'd

say - has to do with the fact that belief in Big Dams has become a reflex article of faith. Some people -

particularly older planners and engineers - have

internalised the Nehruvian

thing about Big Dams being the

Temples of Modern India. Dams

have become India's secular

gods - faith in them is impervious to argument. Another

important part of the explanation has to do with the simple matter of corruption. Big Dams are gold mines for politicians, bureaucrats, the construction industry... But the really sad, ugly part has less to do with government than with the way our society is structured.

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And another thing - what percentage of the people who plan these mammoth projects are Dalit, Adivasi or even rural?

Zero. There is no egalitarian social contact whatsoever between the two worlds. Deep at the heart of the horror of what's going on, lies the caste system: this layered, horizontally divided society with no vertical bolts, no glue - no intermarriage, no social mingling, no human - humane - interaction that holds the layers together.

So when the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away, it happens silently. It doesn't create the torsion, the upheaval, the blow out, the sheer structural damage that it might, had there been the equivalent of vertical bolts. This works perfectly for the supporters of these projects.

But even those of us who do understand and sympathise with the issue, even if we feel concern, scholarly concern, writerly concern, journalistic concern - the press has done a reasonably persistent job of keeping it in the news - still, for the most part, there's no real empathy with those who pay the price. Empathy would lead to passion, to incandescent anger, to wild indignation, to action. Concern, on the other hand, leads to articles, books, Ph.Ds, fellowships. Of course, it is dispassionate enquiry that has created the pile-up of incriminating evidence against Big Dams. But now that the evidence is available and is in the public domain, it's time to do something about it.

Instead, what's happening now is that the relationship between concern and empathy is becoming oppositional, confrontational. When concern turns on empathy and says 'this town isn't big enough for the two of us', then we