



A Dubious, Anecdotal Guide to Khichuri

TAREQ ADNAN

I The Fatima Az Zahra Mosque is not as famous as the other mosques in Jeddah; it's not as big nor as boastful as the King Saud Mosque because it's not trying to make the same statement. It's not even the most eye-catching masjid on this side of the Red Sea. That accolade is reserved for the Island Mosque, which is flatteringly lit and comes with a kiddie playground so as to allow the grown-ups more time to contend with their imperiled souls.

No, the Az Zahra mosque is quieter. It's floating on pylons and is a little older, feels a little more deserted with the massive courtyard and the yawning boardwalk that extends from it. Going there meant early mornings and a long drive, trips reserved only for the Friday prayers.

I have precisely two abiding memories of this mosque. I usually took a book with me because well, I was and still am, easily bored when it comes to any exercise in self-improvement. Of course, you could argue that reading is a form of improvement but I've never eaten my cake and had it too.

The first memory consists of walking away in the middle of the prayer with my kid brother, and going out into the courtyard to play. We were young enough that the consequences, an irate father, didn't seem to matter very much. The second time, as a newly minted teenager, I did the same thing. I went out into the courtyard to read my book, a collection of folktales and lore. Not the Book, just a book. The consequences this time didn't matter at all; my father had given up by that point.

Afterwards, we went home to khichuri. The meal was just as ritualistic, as endemic to Fridays, as the prayers themselves. I remember rushing through lunch so I could get back to reading. You see, the book was fascinating. It expanded on the Disney compendium, relaying the tales in their original form. There is an element of vengeance in all stories that become folktales. It appeals to the baser desires in all of us, operating in worlds where making things right has cosmic significance.

These anecdotes are trite and obvious. But, walking away from things is something I've perfected.

II Khichuri requires no real precision. It is at once an expression of technique and one of well-meaning ineptitude. I like to imagine I know what I'm doing whenever I make khichuri, my culinary skills manifest with an instinctual elan. That it never consistently turns out the same is part of the charm.

Measure out two cups of rice and one cup of lentils; the lentils should always be half the amount of rice. Of course, your mother will tell you that you should use a mix of two types of daal for it to be proper khichuri. But you've maintained a lifelong inability to follow instructions and your body resembles a temple, old and crumbling.



As a matter of principle, you only allow yourself to acknowledge your feelings for as long as you are willing to procrastinate on making dinner. When the hunger pangs become unbearable, you are ready to start cooking. Wash the rice and the daal and slice an onion.

III During my pubescent years, my parents took stock of my life, since I was already a middle aged 13-year-old with no direction. And thus, I embarked on a second career as a dogsbody. If there was something that needed doing, it was something that needed to be done by that kid with poor motor control. I failed miserably at every task assigned to me but I must admit, I was a pretty average vaudeville performer.

My mother would watch over me and tell me stories, being careful to stay out of my way as I went about my chores. I learned the family apocrypha, the reason my father was bitter, how my uncle hates my other uncles and why you must never cross a river at night with your hair uncovered.

That last one was a topic of particular interest. She has a fondness for horror and a

natural inclination towards the supernatural. Shoes and sandals were never to be left overturned, a pillow should never be sat on. She would go to great lengths to explain that there were good djinn and bad djinn but only ever focus on the bad ones.

My mother's stories were along the lines of reinforcing traditional caution, a very literate form of cosplay. They were concerned more with keeping yourself safe while living in abject fear of everything one encountered, from the bamboo groves to the open fields. There are always demons and dainis in the trees and you could get lost without ever seeing the forest.

But you cannot stop the future from happening to you.

IV Khichuri begets khichuri, by which I mean that the fear of messing up needn't cripple you. If you put in too much water and it turns to mush, that is still khichuri, a delicacy from a different part of the desh. If you burn it, it's khichuri, just slightly smoky.

Put the pot on and add oil. When it heats up a little, add raw cumin, about a teaspoon. Add a bay leaf, two or three cardamoms and a

cinnamon stick. With the raw spices, add your sliced onions and fry.

When the onions are translucent and start to brown, add turmeric, chili powder and ginger and garlic pastes. When the resulting slurry starts to stop smelling like powdered sneezes, it's time to add the rice and lentils.

The grains need to be mixed and fried in the spice, on medium low heat for about ten minutes and stirred throughout. This is to make the khichuri jhor jhora. When you're done, add six cups of warm water. The ratio of water to the rice and daal should be about double. Crank up the heat to and begin the long boil.

At this point, you'll remember that you forgot to add salt. You will start to question the series of decisions that led you here, alienated from the rest of the world. Add the salt now, you will invariably get it wrong but you can live with your mistakes. You've learned how.

V In Dhaka, on Fridays, I would purposely oversleep. I was old enough by then that waking me up wasn't someone else's responsibility anymore. After my father and

brothers had left for the Friday prayers, I'd drag myself out of bed and start the day.

The Baitun Noor Jameh Masjid is in Uttara, adjacent to the Sector 6 park. For a mosque in Dhaka, it's on the larger side. A three-story box with a minaret that went up much further into the sky, it had arched windows that didn't really look the part. On Fridays and Eid, the faithful would spill out into the road and the park beside it.

The park itself is an oblong copse of trees, dead grass and crisscrossing brick pathways. It always had aunties with their ornas tied down, wearing sneakers that garishly complemented their kameez, walking in leisurely determination. On Fridays, with their domain encroached on by Jumah, they would take their breaks on the benches, on the side furthest away. They'd wait, their ornas untied and covering their heads, proof against bad luck.

I used to use the Friday prayers as an excuse to roam around outside. I knew approximately when the ceremonies ended and would time my return just a few minutes after my father. No one really noticed how I would skip the khichuri and lunch altogether. I'd gotten over fairytales a long time ago.

VI When the water has boiled down a little and you can see the rice peeking through, reduce the heat to low, and put the lid on. You're only about five to ten minutes away from finishing up but this is the most important part. Don't walk away. If you walk away, it'll burn. This I can guarantee you. What you need is rapt contemplation to quell the sense of dread and banish the mean spirits from your shoulders.

When the last of the water has boiled away, turn off the heat. What you'll be left with will be khichuri. It might be mushy, it might be dry, or over or under salted. It could even be burnt at the bottom; but it will be khichuri.

If you cannot swallow the small lies, how will you ever believe in the bigger delusions?

VII You grow up with the stories you are told. The first ones you hear are either sweet folktales or religious screed. And then there are the more personal stories; peopled with relatives and taking place in houses that you've lived in. It's an oral tradition that is uniquely yours and one that settles upon you more closely and more durably than any of the other things you're asked to believe in. A large part of any experience as a person involves fantasies; believing in things that may never come to fruition, abandoned lives. A khichuri is never the same, one Friday to the next.

You spend years growing up hoping that at some point, the turmoil in your head will start to subside. I have some bad news for you.

I am so sorry.

A study into zero-tolerance policies within the existing political structure

YASHAB OSAMA

There is an undercurrent of strife today within our already complex social structures. These discords are appearing on the ideas of a nationalistic morality. The populist Shahed Khan in his essay "On the topic of right and wrong" very convincingly lays out what is right and what is wrong. In these bare minimums of his brand of morality we are to find virtue. A wrong can be right if it is used for something Shahed has arbitrarily decided is good. Capital punishment is also the way forward. Death rates are climbing as capital punishment by crossfires becomes more acceptable.

In this context, the state's failure lies in adopting "zero tolerance" policies for things that should require some tolerance such as corruption, drugs, corruption in the healthcare sector, militancy, corruption



in banking, gambling and corruption in development work.

Asif Azad in his seminal work on The Country's zero-tolerance levels titled "My soon-to-be seminal work on The Country's intolerance level" posited that the curve of our zero-tolerance is S-shaped. It stays flat for a while, begins to rise around election terms, falls very slowly later and then rises soon after as necessitated by changing circumstances.

But Azad's work is more of a political statement than anything else. It presupposes that zero tolerance is an actual indicator of something. That people in The Country actually care. Bare facts indicate otherwise.

Azad's work also warrants the question of whether this new lack of tolerance is retrospective in nature. It seems not to be as the S-shape illustrates.

The Country's zero-tolerance policy has also exposed foundational weaknesses in its political and even apolitical structures. People with the closest proximity to the powers that be are being caught in the dragnets of their own machinations.

This in itself is an act of lunacy. For a true Kleptocracy would never allow for such hindrances in its functioning. By boxing ourselves in zero-tolerance boxes, we are becoming intolerant, which is not the course we wanted.

For the state to reignite the fire of Kleptocracy, we need to be more tolerant, as the world demands. And less vague too. Tolerance is indeed the buzz word of the future and by future, I mean our future, because comparison to other states is our only excuse for failing in most things.

At this juncture, right before we grab that middle-income prize, the idea of morality, and of zero tolerance, must be rubbished immediately. And the narrative must be refocused on the benefits of a Kleptocracy: the new trains, the highways and the electricity.

Happy voters. Look at our shiny new toys.

Bangladesh becomes top Covid-19 tourist destination

SHARMILI TAGORE

Bangladesh has become one of the hottest tourist destinations this year at a time when other countries are scrambling to control the spread of the dreaded Covid-19.

The Southeast Asian country, on the other hand, has seen an opportunity in the crisis. "Our people are resilient. They survive dengue, floods, polio and bad politicians. Our people are also welcoming and they know they can survive this virus," Tourist Minister Akmal said. Akmal, who himself is not a citizen, had actually come to Bangladesh from Australia, a country which has renewed lockdowns. It's why he was made a tourist minister.

"Our beaches are open with proper health measures in place. Have you been to Alfred's this Eid? Jam-packed. But with the proper health measures in place," Akmal said.

When asked what the health measures were, Akmal said he was not aware.

Tourists, however, aren't arriving in the country for its borrowed cultures only, but also because of its stellar health system.

"Ninety-five percent of all the beds in the Covid-dedicated hospitals are free. This obviously means we have tackled the virus," the country's unhealthy minister said. The minister had given himself an A-grade in July

this year for a job well-done.

"Look at the comparison. We only have some two-hundred thousand cases. But it's over eighteen million worldwide. The numbers don't lie," the unhealthy minister said, borrowing a phrase from famous wrestler Scot Steiner.

With so many empty beds, tourists are guaranteed treatment of some sort. "This will be Bangladesh's year. Just you wait and see," the minister said.

When asked why so many of the visitors were Chinese and why they were thronging to see mobile phone network towers in particular, the minister said that was none of any body's business.

"It's not like the Chinese have designs to take over our telecommunications sector," an agitated minister replied.

