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“Chutney”

Ravi Prakash,
India.

ravi.shravasti@gmail.com

I am not a fast food fanatic. But I don't mind eating street food occasionally if a friend insists or if I am too hungry to resist the idea of fat, oil and hygiene. Besides, I don't know why a kind of peckish temptation compels me to stop the bike near a fast food stall, at least once in a week. Sometimes, my inner ideal self accuses the other worldly self of being a gourmet, but right then, the worldly self retaliates, “It's just a matter of changing the taste.”

Like a well-informed resident of the town I know by heart, which stall serves which fast food best. And if a newcomer comes in the fast food business, he can hardly escape from my meticulous observation and he is bound to go through the test of my taste. At least, once, I go there to check if his item is any better than my favorites. Yes, I have my favorite different stalls for different snacks. Even though I am not a regular customer to them, but the stall-owners know me well, because whenever I go there, I talk to them about themselves.

So, one day, almost two years ago, while coming back home from my day job I saw a new stall of momos. The owner was standing on the other side. He looked young - of my own age - twenty six or twenty seven, clad up in jeans and t-shirt and a red visored cap on head, he looked happy. I had never seen him before. He certainly couldn't be of this town. As he was new, there were not too many customers around - just two or three people were standing there holding their plates and enjoying momos. I decided that I would surely go to his stall someday, just to check if his momos are worth relishing or not...by my connoisseurly tongue.

The popular culture believes that momos have a Chinese origin as the name's etymology points to northern China and also because it resembles Chinese dumplings. It spread out in other adjacent countries by ancient caravan routes. The momo which is popular in India, Nepal, Bhutan and other South Asian countries is supposed to have its origin in Tibet.

I have savored momos in Nepal also. I was there last June. In Nepal, momos are usually served steamed and with mustard sauce. My first encounter with this delicacy must have been in my hometown, but it was Gorakhpur district in eastern U.P. (Uttar Pradesh) where I developed a real taste for it.

I was teaching there in a school. One of my colleagues, a potbellied person who taught Zoology and was quite a virtuoso in playing *tabla*, introduced me to the best local stall there. He was a localite, while I wasn't. Sometimes I think what a combination of paradoxes he was! He was a great *tabla* player, an expert in Yoga, Ayurveda and Reiki science. Except that, he was quite fond of eating fried chicken and mutton korma and biryani. And yes, momos also.

The school provided us rooms to live and our lunch and dinner and breakfast were organized by the school mess. If anyone ever has the experience of eating regularly in a mess, he might know what a punishment it is.

So, to lessen the severity of that punishment we used to go out in the evening for a walk and to eat something tasty, spicy and hot. At least, once in a week, we used to go to that momo stall.

My colleague, that potbellied teacher of Zoology, the *tabla* virtuoso, the expert in Yoga and Ayurveda and a voracious meat-eater used to sip two paper-cups full of hot chutney (sauce) and I would just watch him in stark amazement doing this. Of course, it was not the usual mustard sauce at natural temperature, it was something of a decoction mixed with garlic, ginger, onion, vegetables, cumin, black pepper, salt and some other herbs and spices. Even once I said to him, "why do you do this? I agree, it's delicious, but the way you're consuming, it will burn your ass in the morning." And he just laughed and said, "all that matters, in momos, is Chutney. Without Chutney, momo is just like a light-bulb without light, a key without keyhole, a body without soul. Got it?"

Yeah, I got it. Chutney is the soul of momos, not the fillings in it.

Let's get back to my hometown where I saw one day the new momo's stall in the market.

Enough of nostalgia!

Though I had decided to visit that new stall some day, but I couldn't go there even after a month. One day, when I was on the way back to home from school, it started raining. I had forgotten my raincoat. The distance between my home and school, where I teach, is twenty-five kilometers and more than half of it is laid down by the wide road having nothing on the both sides to take a shelter in case if starts raining. Naturally, I got drenched, and in a way, I liked it. When I was about to enter the market, the downpour had stopped and it was drizzling now, and the wind started making me shiver.

As I was in no hurry, I was driving the bike at minimum speed in second gear, besides, doing a 'fast and furious' scene on puddles and potholes of the road was certainly not a good idea. I was enjoying the weather, though shivering a little at the same time. While I was busy at the Nature's blessings and enjoying it, my eyes fell on the same stall which I had seen a month ago. It looked like that the owner had just arrived and after preparing his pots and pans, he was expecting a customer, but in that drizzle no one had appeared yet. Seeing the vapor rising from his boiling pot, I felt a strong craving suddenly to savor hot-hot momos with spicy and pungent Chutney.

The weather was so romantic and the thing that happened next was so fantastic for a story-seeker like me that if someone had asked me that time if there is a formulae of heaven on the earth, I would have told him this-

“rain + momos + chutney + a story = heaven.”

I stopped the bike, got down and ordered a plate of momos. The stall-owner who was of my own age, asked, “would you like it steamed or fried,” “steamed,” I said. He again asked, “*paneer* or veg,” and I said, “veg.”

He had two big pots full of chutney, one of green chutney and the other, of red. None of them were frothing or bubbling, they were still at normal temperature. He served me a thermocol plate, put six momos and onion chips and sprinkled a chat masala on them. He took another paper cup and filled it with green chutney, then mixed some of the red in it and squeezed a slice of lemon.

He said to me, “now dip the momo in the chutney, and mix the green and red and lemon-juice round and round, then savor it.”

“Thank you for the instructions,” I said.

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“Sir, you came first time to my stall, so it’s my duty to tell you how to enjoy the snack properly. Nothing so special to be thankful.”

“I appreciate it. Where are you from by the way? I am living in this small town since my birth and never saw you.”

“I am not of this place. My native place is Kasganj.”

“Oh! That’s near to Agra, isn’t it?”

“Just a hundred kilometers from my home, it takes two hours only by bus.”

“Great! Well, what brought you to this town? You could easily go to Agra and have a better business. That’s a tourist place, you know, the Tajmahal and many historical forts.”

I was eating momos, and the same time, talking to him. I’m a damn good multitasker.

He didn’t make an instant reply. His hands stopped for a while which were busy in serving another customer who just had arrived. He smiled mysteriously, then looked at me, and uttered just two words, “long story!”

“I’m a story-seeker, and I’m in no hurry. You can tell me,” I assured him.

“What do you do them, to those stories?”

“I ruminate them. And the more I ruminate, the more delicious they become.” I told him munching a hot chunk of momo blended with greenish-reddish Chutney.

He looked puzzled. Maybe, he didn’t get what I just said. I was eating and waiting for him to speak. The drizzle hadn’t stopped yet, and by looking at the clouds, anyone could tell they were preparing for another downpour. After a considerable pause, he spoke-

“You work for a newspaper, don’t you?”

“Ah! For God’s sake, no, not at all. If there’s anything I hate, that is a newspaper. And working for it? Not a chance, dear. Newspapers are doomed. They are just a medium of advertisement and propaganda now. I’m in the most innocent business that is called ‘teaching’. I am a teacher.”

“Oh! That’s good. A relief.”

“Why? How? Have you done something that mustn’t be told to a newspaper man?” It intrigued me to know more about him.

“Sir, you want to know all in the first meeting. Don’t you think it’s unfair,” he said with a forced smile.

I had to agree. He was right.

I finished the momos. It was really better than any stall’s in the town. The Chutney was yummy. Exceptionally delightful! It was so well mixed-up and diluted in a way that I wasn’t able to guess the ingredients. Neither it was sticky, nor watery- a sign of good Chutney. Just perfect!

Well, I wanted to know more about him, but he had told me already that I wanted to know ‘all’ in the first meeting. Or in the first order? Or in just one plate of momos? I was taking his story rather cheaper than it actually deserved. I thought: should I come another time? And that ‘another time’ would come after a week. Have I really that patience to wait? I thought and thought and ordered another plate. That, I think now, was the prettiest idea to continue the chat.

While he was serving another plate, in order to start the chat afresh, I asked-

“What is your name?”

“That I can tell you, sir. My name is Santosh Yadav.”

“That’s good. So what brings you here, Santosh?”

I repeated the same question that had been waved off politely by just two words ‘long story’, and this time, I hoped that he might tell me the expanded version of those two words.

He couldn’t control his smiling and said, “Certainly I will tell you. Since, you’re a story-seeker, and a ruminator of them.”

And he did tell me how the fate brought him here, near the border of Nepal, in a backward town of district Shravasti. He said-

“Sir, we are a small family of four members- my father, mother, a sister and myself. We were in business of fast food for long times. In Kasganj, my shop had a reputation and people used to wait in queues to purchase our items. We had a variety of these - *Samosas*, *Fritters*, *Kachauris*, *Imartis*,

Burgers, Noodles and Momos also. *Samosas* and Momos, at my shop, were considered special by townspeople. Everything was good unless one day an accident happened.”

“And what was that accident?” I asked.

“I cut the hand of a man. That bastard was the son of a big shot.”

“Chopped it off?”

“Almost. It dangled after the elbow’s end. It was a deep cut. D-e-e-p!” He emphasized on the word, ‘deep’.

“But why after all?” I asked in amazement.

“He misbehaved with my sister.” He said in a cold unemotional way.

“Oh! Now I got it. After then, you had to go through a brawl, a lawsuit, murder and rape threat etcetera. Am I right? And then, being frightened, you decided to leave your native place? Is that correct?” I asked in a sympathetic tone.

“Yes, in a way, you’re right sir. They threaten to annihilate us. They were influential people, had big connection and we just couldn’t compete with them. Our social and financial status was of no match. We certainly would be a fool to expect justice from the system. There is no justice, only verdicts, and it always favors to the strong side, to the wrong side. Justice, if it really exists, exists between equals.”

“You’re at mistake man. There are no verdicts even, only the dates, dates of hearing. Justice dies its own death between dates and verdicts. And you’re right about another aspect of Justice, it happens between equals only.” I corrected him a bit while enjoying the momos that had just been served. He remained silent, lost somewhere, took the money from another customer without a word. When the other customer went away, I again pinched him again by my question-

“Tell me what happened exactly and how you came here?”

“I was made the villain in the whole case. And people were accusing my own sister for misbehavior. Media, police, district administration, none of them was ready to listen my side as why I had to do this. I had to send my mother and sister with my father to a distant relative who

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agreed to help us. It was necessary for their safety. Somehow I got the bail and because it's permissible to travel within the state I searched for an aloof and backward place to live and earn."

"That's why you chose this small town."

"Yes, after all, I had to do something to earn the living and expenses of the lawsuit that is still in process. It has been two years since then and I don't know when it will be at final hearing."

"Hmm, I wish the verdict would come in your favor. What else can I say? Well, tell me one more thing, did you cut the hand of that bastard just because he misbehaved with your sister once?"

"No sir, it was not just once, it was the third time he misbehaved and he just went on a level that was intolerable."

The air was tense by his emotional and provoking statement. I couldn't think of what to ask him again. Another customer had arrived and he placed his order while I was busy in thinking what would I have done if I were at his place. Would I have gone to Police? And would they have listened and behaved in accordance of my complaints? The taste of Chutney was in void for a time and I just kept eating silently. When I came back from that trance without a solution, the effect of that peppery, piquant and juicy taste provoked me to ask a sudden question that I myself had never considered to ask, it came just out of the blue. I asked-

"How do you make this Chutney? What are the ingredients in it?"

He saw me for a moment, mystified, then again that mysterious smile played on his face and he said,

"That I can't tell you, sir. I'm sorry. I didn't tell this even my girlfriend. A business is business. It must not reveal its secret. If you wish you can take this order as complementary, but I'm sorry to disappoint you. I just can't tell."

And I was dumbfounded. Ashamed. I said-

"It's okay. Absolutely fine, indeed. Moreover, I'm impressed. I liked your business etiquette."

I paid him 10 extra bucks as a tip and thanked him for the wonderful snack and for letting me know about his story. He thanked me back. I rode on my bike and started for home. It was getting dark

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due to the black clouds hovering over and they could rain anytime. But I was pleased on my own, in fact, I felt a kind of satisfaction that day. The drizzling water on my head never felt so beautiful. I realized, the world is still not bereaved of real people. Some still exist.

Although, I had made up my mind to write this story, but being a hopeless procrastinator, the dilly-dallier that I am, I couldn't even start it for more than a year, I just ruminated it, like I had told him, whereas, the story kept impaling me whenever I sat before my laptop.

But now, I agree. Whatever happens, happens for good.

A year passed off. I kept going to that stall and kept enjoying the momos. We talked. But I never revealed, never gave any hint that I am planning to write his story.

Due to the Pandemic, when the first lockdown was announced in March, his stall, too, disappeared along with other stalls in the town. All shops, except medical stores and vegetables' carts, were shut down. Gourmets like me longed for *samosas*, fritters, momos and Chutney. People who owned stalls made their items at home and sold secretly. Fast food became a smuggling item and people consumed them in private. I, too, had bought once or twice some samosas and momos, but just as I dipped them in the Chutney and placed in mouth, the tongue was quick to compare with the previous taste that I was used to, and it tasted tasteless then and I couldn't eat.

Two whole months, April and May, passed off, and I didn't get the glimpse of Santosh anywhere, however, I used to go market regularly for purchasing the essential goods. There was neither momos, nor Chutney, nor Chutneywallah. Silent, gloomy and deserted market looked like weeping at the loss of its hustle and bustle and frightened at large by the presence of Policemen at every nook and corner, at every crossroads, and it was clear by seeing the scattered people here and there that Pandemic had first robbed them of their style and taste. I, too, was no exception.

In June, the district administration provided some relaxation, and other shops started to open by their sides on alternate days. It was like, if shops at right side of the market-road are opened on Monday, the shops at left side will be opened on Tuesday, and the shops of other side will remain close. Though shops were allowed to open, but the carts (except vegetables') and stalls were not allowed, so the cart and stall-owners decided to bring their items in a park that was big enough to maintain the proper distance.

When I came to know this, the gourmet in me became restless to visit there, in the hope of getting the soul-satisfying-taste of that Chutney. When I visited there, I saw a long line of stalls and carts of various fast foods. They had maintained proper distance, nonetheless, due to the excess of people, it looked crowded. My eyes were searching Santosh and his stall and I saw him in the end corner of the park. I moved the bike in that direction.

Santosh saw me and greeted by making a nod. I smiled in response. I made somehow a safe place to stand near his stalls and ordered a plate of momos. He didn't look at ease. His face hadn't that charm and happiness that it used to have. He talked less to customers, and no one even cared to ask what was it that turned a happy face into a sad one. Everyone around was busy in relishing his momos with Chutney. Chutney was all that mattered to them, the whole town liked it. I was watching Santosh serving my plate. He unanimously did what he had to. Someone demanded more Chutney, he gave; someone demanded more onion chips, he gave, someone asked for chat masala, he sprinkled that on momos again; he was doing everything like a robot, and I, standing aside, was searching for his mysterious smile on his face that he never made, not even a single time. "Here you go, sir," he said to me when he had finished serving my order.

I took a momo and dipped it in the Chutney and mixed the red, the green, the lemon-juice round and round, after a while, when I had mixed it well, I placed that momo in my mouth and munched it. Oh my goodness! For the old taste! For the three-months-old taste that I was bereaved of! Down with the lockdown!

While thinking all this in my mind, I was laughing in my heart, just at relishing the delicacy that is called momos. When I came at ease after munching two-three momos and saw that Santosh was still in the same pensive, serious mood; robotic, not a flash of emotion in the eyes- it seemed like he had forgotten to blink. At last, I asked-

"How are you? Is everything Okay at home? You must have visited there? How's going the lawsuit?"

I put too many questions. He blinked. Yes, he did, and prepared himself to reply. He said-

"Yep, everything is good at home. I visited to my mother and sister, met my father. The lawsuit is in process, I don't know when it will come to an end."

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“Hmm, it will come to an end, eventually. You just have to wait.”

“Yeah, I hope so,” said he, in the same languid tone.

“But why are you so sad?” I had to ask at last.

He looked at me, thought for while, as if searching for something for a response, and said finally-

“My girlfriend dumped me.”

I stopped munching, adjusted myself and asked-

“But why?”

“Because I didn’t tell her the recipe...of the Chutney.”

At first, I was shocked. Bemused! But I remained silent, said nothing, kept eating, kept munching, kept relishing the taste, and when I finished, I said-

“A business is business. It mustn’t reveal its secret.”