

It's Like a Curry Sandwich

by Skanda Prasad



"Count Me In" by Namita Paul

Then, the sautéing. Baptise in angry oil
cumin from the Levant, onions, garlic,
ginger from Nusantara; chillies and
capsicum, fiery shells of the Columbian
Exchange, and tomatoes
red like Aztec blood; hissing
aroma assailing the house, settling
on next month's clothes.

Step three. The bubbling of the stew:
Vegetables — julienned, smashed, diced,
boiled, quartered, regressed to inchoateness,
New World and Old coalesced in roils
of butter; unblended by salt and spices:
cinnamon, turmeric, cardamom, and black
pepper — the Indian heart of the dish—
Moluccan cloves, Iraqi fenugreek,
and dried chillies, suffusing
into each other
like a murmuration of starlings
and crowned with a grove of cilantro,
lime, and tearfully shredded onions
atop *ghee*-toasted rolls of well-risen bread.

III

'Pav Bhaji'

Paõ: Bread — from the Portuguese patois
of Vasco da Gama, First Count
of Vidigueira, Second Viceroy of India,
Admiral of the Seas of Arabia, Persia,
India and *all* the Orient, discoverer
of routes known to Arabs, Indians,
and Chinese
only for millennia;

who, in search of '*Christians*
and spices', misheard *Krishna* as Christ,
thought temples were bastard churches,
and the natives, lost Catholics;

who, when laughed out of court for his gifts
to the *Samoothiri* of Malabar — sugar, oil,
honey, six hats, and four scarlet cloaks—
decided to help himself
to sixteen fishermen — savages,
bravely seized — as he decamped
from God's own country.

He must've liked the taste enough
for a bigger helping on the second sojourn:
Arab trade ships, fishing villages, factories,
lips and ears of a Hindu priest — the same one
who'd introduced him to the Malabar King—
helpfully replaced with the ears of a dog,

and four-hundred pilgrims,
Mecca-bound, looted, beaten,
locked in their ship, and burnt to a crisp:

fish folk, coolies, mothers squeezing their babies
through red-hot portholes, merchants, cooks
stewing vegetables — *Bhaji* — for dinner
after the evening prayers, genuflections
towards a land they'd never see.

IV

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'Paav Bhaajee'

Ordered one, this time with clear vowels,
clenched jaw, and the extra sprinkle
of *Americanese*, so I'd be understood
when asking for cheese on top

No rap waiter this time, just a kid,
Aum tattoo and coifed moustache,
greeting us with *namaste y'all*, mangling
the names — I made him repeat
Sev Bataataa Dahi Puri five times
for a laugh, stretched out
till the check arrived
with my chai *latte*.

I taught myself to cook
Paav Bhaji the next day.