

Head Curry

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*M*Y FATHER CANNOT EAT A MEAL without meat.

Even if my mother cooks meat six days and six nights in a week and makes vegetable for just one meal, he makes a face, pushes the rice around in the plate, shoves the plate towards my mother and refuses to touch the food.

That is because my father was born in a coastal village in Ongole district. He was born to my grandfather who exported fish to Madras by sea. Right from childhood he had his daily fill of fish, prawn, meat and eggs and grew up strong and healthy, and so got thoroughly used to eating meat.

But what he likes most among all the various kinds of meat is—curry made of ram's head.





To tell you the truth, almost all organs of the ram's body are indescribably tasty: the thighs have one taste; ribs have a different taste if cooked with tamarind leaves; the heart has one taste when grilled over the fire, and another if made into a sweet curry; the liver has another flavor; lungs have yet another taste; and if you cook the intestines with *gongura* it is simply superb. But what tops it all is 'head curry.'

Once a ram is slaughtered, thirty people can share its meat. But only one person can claim the head. That is why whenever my father felt like eating head curry, his craving became a headache for me.

The reason is . . . there is a man called Maabbasha in my town. Though he is a goldsmith by profession, he cannot make enough money to make both ends meet (poor thing, he has only girl children). To make extra money, he slaughters a ram and sells its meat every Sunday.

As he does everything in front of one's eyes—brings the ram, slaughters it, skins it, cuts the meat into pieces—people generally prefer to buy the meat from him rather than in the open meat market. And since Sunday is a busy day in the meat market, one is never sure whether the meat-sellers are selling sheep's meat or ram's meat. That is why . . .







My father knows that Maabbasha's ram is much sought after. Bribing me with money for a film, he sends me to Maabbasha's house on Saturday evening itself to make a booking for the head-piece.

I rush to Maabbasha's house happily. Leaning on his front door made of thin iron sheet, I tell him, "Oh Maabbasha . . . my father wants the head-piece tomorrow. He wanted me to inform you." Maabbasha replies, pulling his red silk lungi up to his stomach, "That is fine. Mind you, you can't get the head-piece on credit. Tell your father that he will get it only on cash payment."

Since Maabbasha knows everyone in the village, he gives meat on credit to everyone. But, as the head-piece is most sought after, he demands instant cash payment. After all, the pleasure of seeing some currency notes in the cash box at the end of the day is special, isn't it?

I rush back home after getting an okay from Maabbasha, to inform my father about this and share his joy. But my mother comes into the scene to pour cold water on his happiness. My mother, though she agrees with my father on other issues, simply refuses to listen to him on the matter of head curry.

She would say, "Why the head piece . . . Waste of money, and a whole lot of work. If you bring intestines, one can make a delicious sweet curry and relish it." She prefers curry made of intestines.

Father would start pleading, pulling her saree pallu.

"Please don't say that. For my sake, if you cook the head curry in your style, I can eat till my stomach is full, my precious!"

Mother would agree, after a lot of pleading from my father.

I wake up early on Sunday, go to Maabbasha's house, throw the money on his face, take the head-piece and the legs, put them in the wire basket, and reach home, making a pattern with the water dripping from the freshly cut meat pieces on the road.

Just to say something, Mother would comment, "Looks like a full-grown ram, doesn't it?"

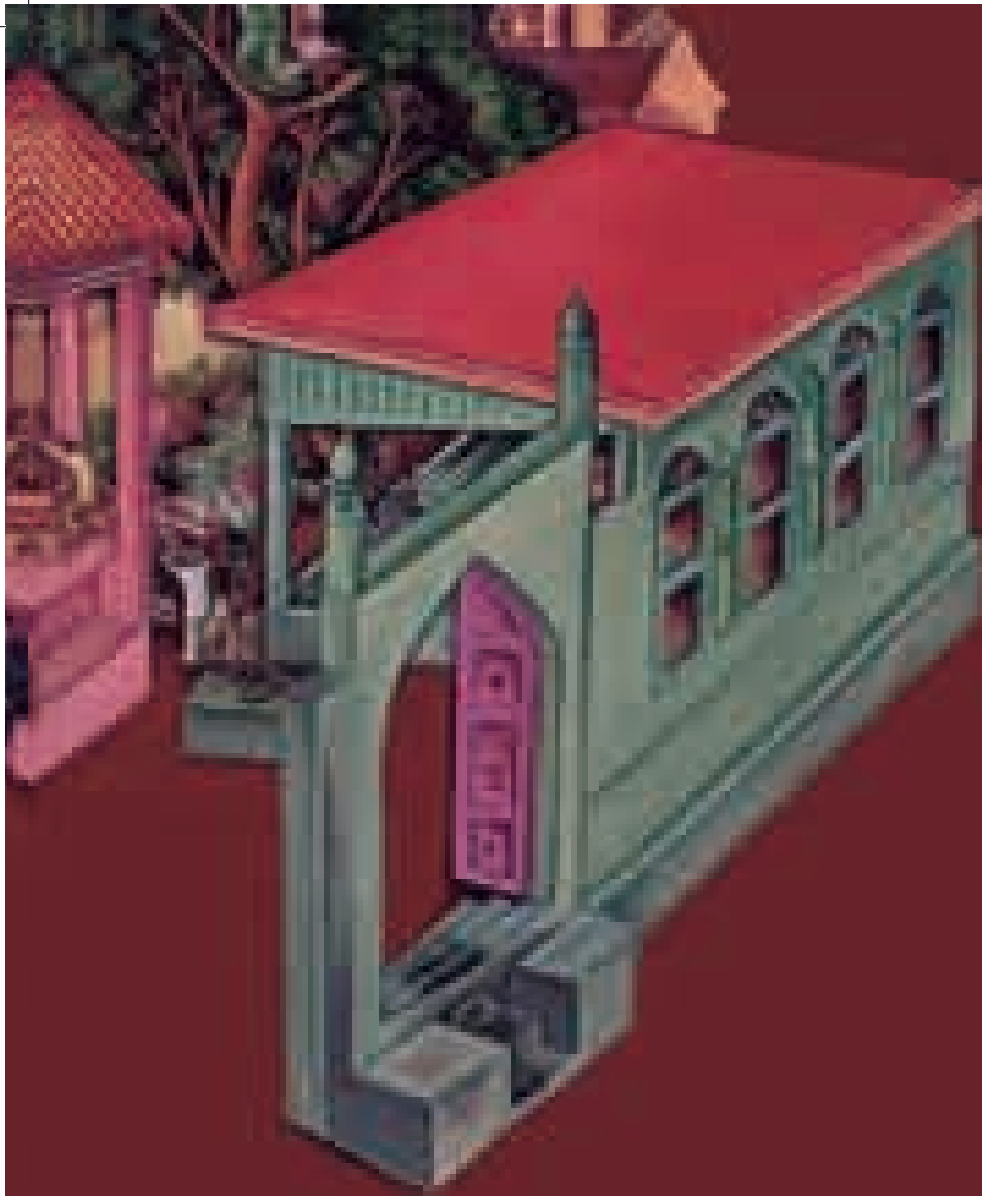
Not allowing mother's comment to settle, Father would retort, "Absolutely not, the ram hasn't got its horns yet."

"Anyway, what have I got to lose; Kadeera, get up and get it smoked first," Mother would me.

Then, holding the basket aloft, I would have to go to the iron-kiln workers near Venkateswara theatre. By that time, there would be several children like me, who have come to get the head-piece smoked, numbering almost two for each kiln.







It is wonderful to watch the way the couple at the kiln that I go to smokes the head. The husband sits in front of the hot coals, turning the head-piece, pierced with an iron rod over the coals. The wife sits in front of the air pump, pumping air and handing over the coals to the husband.

The entire kiln chamber gets filled with a lovely smell when the new hair on the ram's head starts crackling with the heat from the burning coals. Once the head is well-smoked, he brands the nose and the ears with a red-hot iron rod to ensure that no worms remain inside. The wife, meanwhile, hits the hooves with a hammer, removes the nails, and neatly brands all the cracks in the hooves. The charge for completing all this work is two rupees.





But breaking the smoked head is a greater art than this.

While Mother is not so skilled in this art, her sister is an expert. Once the head-piece reaches home, one has to plead with my aunt to come. When she is brought home and given some nice tea, she settles down with the head-piece in front of the cement tub, holding a blunt knife.

First, she splits the head with the knife, puts the brain aside, throws the jaw bones away, cleans the tongue and cuts the meat into neat pieces—with the skill of someone embroidering a flower.

Once everything is done, all the small and big pieces of meat are collected into a large cooking vessel.

Out of courtesy, Mother would say to my aunt, “Why don’t you stay for a little while? You could take some curry home!”

My aunt knows that Mother would not part with even a spoonful of the curry, whatever she might say.

“I have to go now. If you really want to send the curry, send it with the boy,” she says.

“Okay, sister,” replies Mother, erasing those words from memory at that very moment.





After her sister has left, Mother puts the cooking vessel on the stove.

Once the curry starts cooking with fresh coconut, tomatoes, cinnamon, ginger-garlic masala . . . wonderful smells start emanating from the kitchen.

Taking in the aroma, Father starts pacing the room, humming *da da da* with joy.

In the kitchen Mother removes the vessel from the stove, ensuring that the curry is cooked and that the salt is just right; and at the very same time, she puts the *kadai* on the stove. Then she fries the brain with a little oil and a little masala till it is brown and removes it within three minutes.

Now we have head curry on one side, and brain fry on the other. Once both are ready, without waiting even for a minute, she spreads the mat and gets ready to serve.





Father rushes in to sit down with a plate, still humming *da da da*. Mother sits down saying, “I haven’t had *nashta* in the morning, I am dying of hunger.” Grandmother sits on the doorstep saying, “Give me a few handfuls.” Behind her, I, my elder brother, my sister, my younger brother . . . join the queue.

Sitting around in a circle, eating the head curry—so full of fat that it sticks to the hand, the small black pieces tasting heavenly—mixing it with hot rice, with brain fry as the side dish . . . all the headache that plagued us till then disappears, leaving us with the feeling that THE WORLD IS A BLESSED PLACE.

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Head Curry tells the mouth watering story of cooking Sunday lunch in young Khadeer's family.



Different Tales unearths stories from regional languages: stories that talk about the life – worlds of children in communities that one rarely reads about in children's books. Many of the stories draw on the writers' own childhoods to depict different ways of growing up in an often hostile world, finding new relationships with peers, parents and other adults. They take us on enticing journeys as they speak of delicious cuisines, ingenious little games, unexpected lessons at school and heartwarming friendships.

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