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## FINDING DEMOCRACY

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It all began with a distress signal. While the necessary task forces responded at the ground level, a group of vultures began to hover above. They observed and waited, anticipating death. The waiting period had grown in the past few years, owing to better medicines, and the vultures were forced to think of alternatives.

One day, the vultures swooped down and offered to assist the task forces.

"We have been watching you from above and feel that we ought to assist you in some way. Allow us to cook your meals. We believe that your supplies and our workforce can make a great team. The profit is of course immeasurable in a democracy like ours. Taste our food and you will see how every ingredient contributes its rightful flavour".

The next day, the vultures cooked up a feast, while the task forces focused on distress calls. The vultures used the opportunity to camouflage their natural instincts of stealthy hunting tactics in exuberant pomp. They drowned out the

voices of sputtering mustard seeds and clattering spoons in the blaring noise of electric chimneys. One of the vultures discreetly added a chilly or two and whispered, "An extra tear shed may only add a pinch of salt to the experience".

The feast was like a culinary pageant. The vultures flew great distances to source unusual ingredients that added a wonderful variety to an otherwise mundane meal. The tangy touch, of course, came from the partially fermented ingredients that they were adept at picking. The task forces were too busy to catch a whiff of the vultures' hidden intentions and were grateful for every meal. The feasts grew grander as time passed and the task forces turned up, more gleefully each time, to indulge in every dish that was laid out.

Coalitions tend to be popular because of their diverse composition; like the curious kick one gets out of a treat comprising the neighbours' left-overs. All one would need for an Indian meal is a large platter. Cutlery is for the apprehensive. We fearlessly pile



on an assortment of textures, consistencies and tastes without a quibble about getting our fingers into hot gravy. The greed for exotic variety doesn't let such occasions slip away till we realize that we have far more on our plate than we could possibly digest. The large helpings can also pose minor irritants, like the gravy running into fresh salad on one side, or the *papad* getting soggy from the steaming rice. But sheer exhilaration over the food overshadows the fact that we are robbed of any singularly distinct flavour and reconcile to the sole experience of being stuffed.

The task forces were content with their work; a contentment carefully orchestrated by the vultures who no longer waited for the dead. There were sweets for every occasion and any protests about excess sugar were cleverly overturned. "What harm could a little bit of sweetness do? After all, don't we love sugar-coated pills? They are remedies for the soul; or perhaps placebos..." one of the vultures said, as the dessert was being passed on. Any possible upsets from the food were brushed off as a routine cleansing. Nobody noticed the pile-up of fermenting carcasses on the periphery.

Over time, the vultures aged and their feathers changed hues. Their original instincts for

feeding on the dead began to kick in. Now that there was such a huge stockpile of the dead, they had no inclination to cook for the task forces. They began to add more of the decaying ingredients into the meals. The task forces appeared more drowsy and sozzled after each meal. They saw little amiss, for they had acquired a taste for such flavours. With their bellies full, their motivation diminished and complacency sedated their community into a long-lasting stupor.

Meanwhile, word had spread about the new relationship between the vultures and the task forces. Many researchers began to visit and study the system. Some members of the task forces saw an opportunity to get richer and began business ventures to cater to a new wave of tourists. Some even began creating feather merchandise. Feather-pens, feather-bookmarks, feather-coats, feather-pillows, feather-caps, feather-belts and so on were sold as souvenirs. "They are an endangered species and these may be the last of our supplies", a merchant declared. "You may not get the same when you return next time", he added.

Only a privileged few had access to the inside world of vultures and their outstanding culinary laboratories. A particular researcher who frequented the vulture world happened to pass

by the souvenir shop one evening and commented to her companion, "This is precisely the problem with the market these days. They sell products that reflect a diluted version of reality. Even the information from supposed research is twisted to suit the market. But in actual fact, I've had some of the finest meals cooked by vultures".

"But I thought they feed on the dead", replied her companion, a doctor.

"No, no! That's just a myth", she said dismissively. "I've studied them for a long time now as a culinary specialist".

"But..." said the doctor after a contemplative pause, "I find it hard to believe that vultures cook their own meals. It seems to go against their inherent nature. I now hear that they use unique techniques to enhance the flavour of normal ingredients. Increasing the potency of selected flavours might cause an imbalance to the point where one day, the subtler ingredients may be done away with completely, without much thought to the nutri..."

"Well, I don't see anything wrong with that", she cut him abruptly. "You must also not

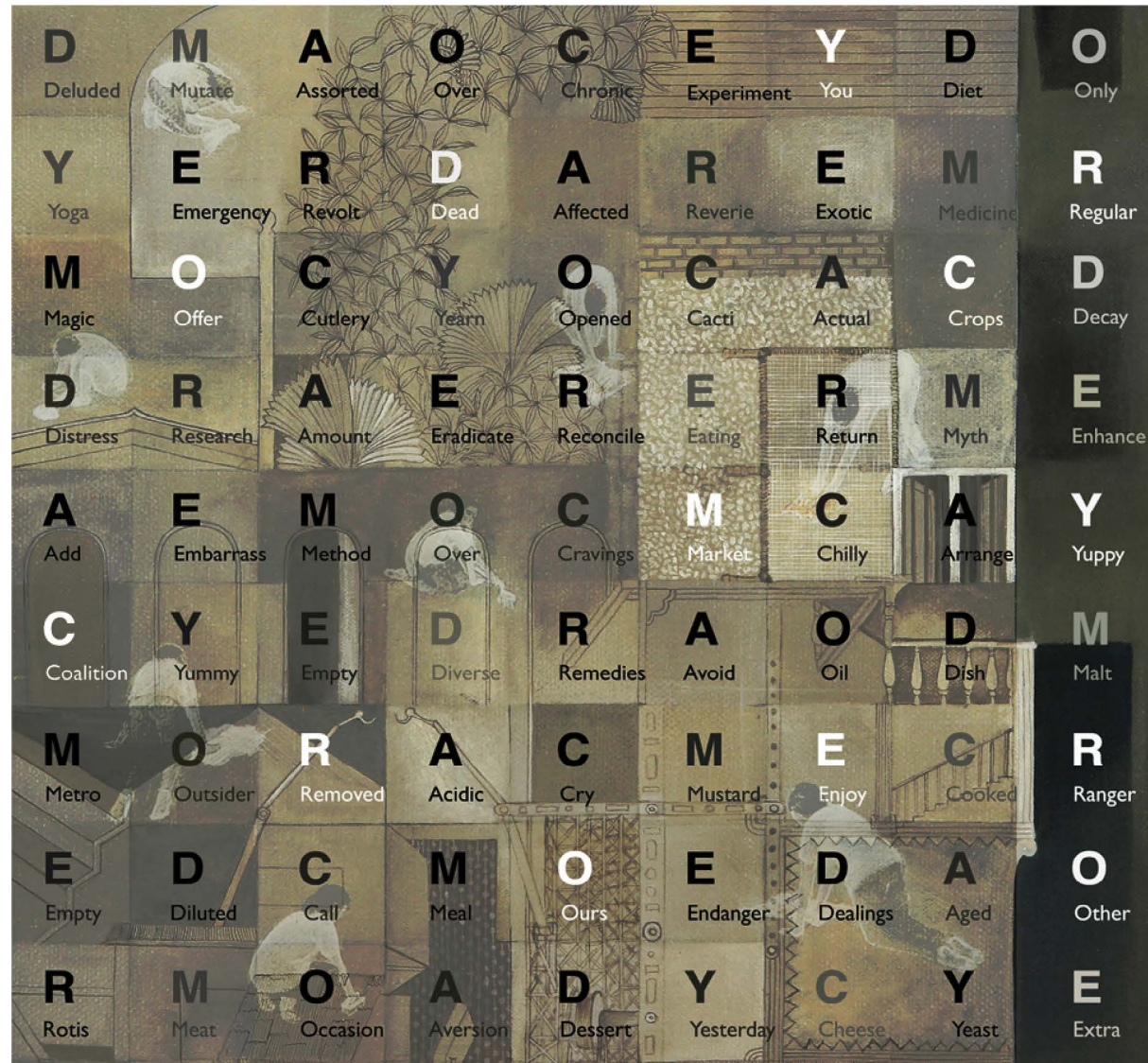
ignore the fact that their current culinary experiments are unparalleled. For instance, I just heard yesterday that the vultures have now discovered a method of frying an egg without breaking its shell! Not only does it taste good, it apparently looks stunning. The oil seeps in through the minutest cracks on the shell to create intricate burn patterns on the inside. The resultant texture promises to be a rewarding sensation for all tongues".

"Fascinating", said the doctor in a dry manner, his sarcasm going unnoticed by his friend. "So, with all this wonderful exposure you must be one of the lucky few with a progressive diet that can potentially eradicate the concept of a health-care plan".

"Well, not yet. I do suffer from intermittent indigestion, sleeplessness, hives and an overall numbness in my body. It's rather strange. I cannot seem to feel anything that touches me", she responded. "All this despite having a regular diet... vegetables, dal, rice, rotis, some meat. I have a sweet tooth, though. And those munchies... who can resist hot pakodas once in a while? We



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Trace routes to a DEMOCRACY by moving up, down or diagonally; but without skipping over or reusing the same square.

all have our cravings, don't we?" She wandered into reverie for a few moments but quickly added, "Would you suggest some remedies that could relieve these symptoms?"

"Hmm... from the little I can deduce, it sounds like a classic case of a chronic ailment. You could try introducing some changes in your diet or your habits. A sustained period of healthy, home-cooked food might do the trick. It would also help to be aware of every ingredient in each of your meals", he ended.

The researcher had a tendency to be extreme and took the doctor's suggestion one step further by choosing to grow her own crops. She opted for natural manure over chemical pesticides but noticed that the pests were not affected. They thrived on her crops, leaving very little for her to harvest. Her farm became a battlefield and she returned every day feeling a little more depleted than the day before and with less crop in her hand.

The vultures had stopped feeding on the dead and the living got sick from the stockpile of decay. New life forms emerged which could only mutate and never degenerate. They were no longer connected to human life and adorned faces went unrecognized.

The researcher no longer reaped what she sowed. Brinjal seeds shot up into cacti. She devised a method of removing their spines before adding the leaves to her salad. But the ghost of the brinjal seed continued to haunt her with hives. Deluded by her own condition, she developed an aversion to most food and deteriorated gradually.

It is uncertain whether she died of hunger or of dementia; her distress calls had been diverted to a recorded message: "All lines are busy. Please try again, later".

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Illustration by author