

Kamal's Favourite Meal

The potential role of agrobiodiversity in school meal programmes through the eyes of a young boy

A fictional story inspired by field notes collected in rural Madhya Pradesh, India

In Kamal's home, the day begins with the lighting of the *chulha* — a traditional stove made of clay and brick — that sits on the floor at one end of his mother's kitchen. Tucking the *pallu*¹ of her *sari*² in at the waist, his mother encourages the firewood to catch flames with lit stems of dried *toor dal*³ plants. The heat from the stove spreads slowly across the room, and by the time Kamal and his sister have their morning *chai*,⁴ it will be quite warm. Mist still sits heavy on the wheatfields outside but homes across the village are stirring awake.

For the moment, Kamal sleeps cosily under heavy blankets in an inner room. The hut's mud walls keep most of the winter cold out; however, the deep *cling-clanging* of cow bells float through and into his dream. Kamal keeps his eyes tightly shut, trying hard to stay in his dream. It was a wonderful one. He was picking *channa leaves*⁵ (he knew exactly where to find the best ones) for his mother who was waiting to cook his favourite dish. He just wanted to get to the part where his mouth would be filled with its delicious taste! But it was no use. The clatter of pots and pans being moved around in the next room accompanied by the impatient sounds of the calves jostling one another in the back garden signals that the day has begun. Unable to lie still any longer, he hops out of bed to start his chores. As he herds the cows to their field, a yellow-orange sunrise breaks in the sky above him and over the emerald hills of Gadiolari,⁶ in Madhya Pradesh, India.

Later in the morning, their chores done, Kamal and his sister are washed and dressed for school in neat, blue uniforms. Kamal remembers that he has a big game of *gilli danda*⁷ that afternoon. His team would be playing against the team from the neighbouring village. He fills his pocket with roasted gram⁸ — his favourite post-school snack. He would share it with his close friends, Tarun and Rahul, but he hopes that they bring their own snacks as well. He runs out of the house, past the porch where his mother is braiding his sister's long, dark hair into two neat plaits for school. His sister calls out for him to wait so they can walk together but he pretends not to hear. If he cuts through Tarang *bhaiyya*'s⁹ field, school is only a short walk away.

The field lies empty for now, its flat, fallow earth waiting for the next crops to be sown. In the neighbouring fields, Kamal can see bundles of wheat straw waiting to be carried into storage. They would serve as fodder for cattle through the season. Absentmindedly, he picks up a stick to draw trails in the dry mud, tapping the ground here and there, as his mother had taught him, to warn snakes of his approach. But Kamal knows that he's unlikely to encounter any exciting creatures at this time of day. A flock of sparrows scatter in a cloud of alarm at his approach but he barely notices them. The family dog runs after them playfully. As he does every day, he trots behind Kamal until they reach the school gates. Then he goes off on his own adventures.

¹Pallu: That part of a sari that is draped over the shoulder

²Sari: A traditional garment worn by women. Yards of fabric designed as a single, continuous piece is wrapped and pleated around the body in a specific arrangement. This arrangement can vary from one region to another

³Toor dal plants: 'Pigeon pea' or 'split pea' plants in English. Once the dal or legumes are harvested, the plants are dried and used to light chulhas through the year

⁴Chai: A warm preparation of tea with milk that is commonly consumed across India

⁵Channa leaves: Also known as 'chane ka saag.' These are tender, edible shoots of the chickpea plant (*Cicer arietinum*). They are harvested by pruning the top part of the young chickpea plant before the pods mature. This seasonal plant is commonly eaten in the winter

⁶Gadiolari is a fictional village

⁷Gilli danda: A common outdoor game played by children with two differently sized sticks. The 'gilli' is a small stick that is the equivalent of a ball and 'danda' is the bigger one that serves as a 'bat'

⁸Roasted gram: A common snack made by dry roasting Bengal gram or chickpeas

⁹Bhaiyya: Translates to 'brother' but it is commonly used to address older males

The school itself is a small building surrounded by large open grounds for the children to run around and play. A peepal tree stands in the far corner, its branches spread out wide, bearing hundreds of leaves that rustle in the slightest breeze. It offers students a relaxing, shaded corner on hot days. Kamal can see its leafy crown from the window of his classroom; he's spent many an afternoon daydreaming as he stared into its green leaves. At the centre of the compound is a tall flagstaff on which the Indian national flag is hoisted on national holidays. Their daily school assemblies are also held in front of this flagstaff before the students file into their classes. In Kamal's opinion, history was the only subject worth listening to because he found the stories exciting.

Around mid-morning, Kamal's tummy rumbles, his thoughts stray from the lesson to the possibilities of lunch. He can tell that the *rasoiyya*¹⁰ have arrived and are already cooking the midday meal in the tiny kitchen next door. The scent of whole spices tempering in oil wafts into their classroom, followed by ginger-garlic paste, which always stirs Kamal's appetite. He knows it's nearly lunchtime when he can smell the starch of the rice that's being cooked. He could picture a large pot of it quietly bubbling away on the fire — a much bigger one than the one in his mother's kitchen. Lunch is probably going to be lentil stew and rice. Most likely with a vegetable dish to go with it. What Kamal would really like is beautifully puffed up hot *pooris*¹¹ but those are usually served on special occasions. Kamal is still hopeful that they'll be served crispy *poppadums*¹² to go with the rice.

At the clanging of the lunch bell, the children transform their classroom into a lunchroom by rolling out long mats on the floor, and pulling out stainless steel plates and glasses. Kamal sits cross-legged along with the rest of his school as the hot midday meal is served. Today's plate is, as Kamal had predicted, rice and lentils with a side of carrot *sabji*.¹³

The last bell of the day rings a few hours after lunch. It's met with a lot of clattering and chattering as about a hundred students noisily leave the building. Six of them, including Kamal, Tarun and Rahul, make their way to the bus stop to get to the neighbouring village for the big *gilli danda* showdown! They have about a 30-minute journey ahead of them. Snacks are brought out and passed between seats. Besides Kamal's roasted gram snack, they enjoy *charoli ke*

laddu,¹⁴ *rotis*¹⁵ and roasted groundnuts. Tarun (who privately thought that he had the best technique in the team) demonstrates the ideal batting angles to Meghana and Priya who're only half-listening.

Kamal turns to the window, letting the wind wash over his face. He has a familiar anxious feeling in the pit of his stomach and is trying to stop it in its tracks. He closes his eyes and tries to focus on something else. Something solid that he can count on. Like dinner. He knew that no matter what happened at the match, at around 7.30 or 8 that night, he would be at home, in their warm kitchen. His mother would probably be around the *chulha*, focused on ensuring that everything is cooked in the right order. What would he like for dinner? Rice with a side of sautéed amaranthus, *taro*¹⁶ root prepared in that crispy way he likes and ... was it the right season for mushrooms? A bit of potato fry and *channa leaves* wouldn't be unwelcome either! He knows that his dinner may not have the same mix of veggies, but was sure that his mother (who was an excellent cook) would serve up something equally diverse. He draws comfort from the thought of a tasty dinner.

Eventually, they arrive at the other village's school grounds where the match is to be played. Players from each team gather behind their captains for the coin toss. A small, scattered group of onlookers cheer intermittently. The other team wins the toss and announces that they will bat first. A little hole is dug in the ground, the *gilli* balanced across it and a circle drawn around it. The first player is a tall girl, her brow is furrowed with determination. She grasps the *danda* firmly and with a quick flick of her wrists, lands a precisely aimed shot that has the *gilli* jumping high in the air. Another strong stroke of the *danda* sends it far across the field. And so, it begins!

The fielding, Gadiolari team manages to get two of the other team's players 'out' in the first innings. They have a score of 90 to chase in the second half. It is a nail-biting afternoon filled with some spectacular shots, almost-dropped catches, and a few actually-dropped catches. Between keeping an eye on the other team to make sure they don't cheat and racing around to catch the *gilli* from his fielding position, Kamal doesn't have a moment to feel nervous again. So, when he finally walks up to the centre to take his turn with

¹⁰Rasoiyya: Cooks

¹¹Poori: A type of flatbread, usually made with wholewheat flour. It puffs up when fried in oil, popular with children

¹²Poppadam: A traditional crisp, usually served with rice-centred meals

¹³Sabji (sometimes written as 'sabzi'): A word that translates literally to 'vegetable.' As it is in this case, it's often used to refer to dishes made largely with vegetables. Here, carrot sabji refers to a vegetable dish made with carrots

¹⁴Charoli ke laddu, or 'laddu of charoli seeds': a 'laddu' is a small ball-shaped Indian sweet. Laddus can be made with various flours and ingredients. This one is made with the seeds of the charoli tree (sometimes called chironji) as the key ingredient

¹⁵Roti: A traditional flatbread usually made with wholewheat dough rolled out in flat circles and cooked on a dry hot pan

¹⁶Taro: A native tuber crop, its roots and leaves are used in traditional cooking recipes

the *danda* under the late afternoon sun, he is clear-headed and determined. His first few strokes send the *gilli* faaar across the field. "...six, seven, eight..." they count the runs according to the length of the *danda* "...eleven. *Eleven* runs!"

Between cheers and pats on the back, Kamal, feels a gust of cool wind sweep past. An afternoon of running and playing has them sweating, and the refreshing breeze, however brief, is very welcome. He glances at the direction it came from and catches a quick glimpse of a kitchen garden. He's hustled back to the game before he can be sure. The match ends with Kamal's team winning by two runs! In a generous display of sportsmanship, the host team invites them to the *jujube*¹⁷ tree in the back garden to have their pick of the ripening fruits. They turn the corner at a tamarind tree to step into a space filled with saplings and trees! Kamal had never imagined that a school garden could look like this. It had just been watered, so the air is cool and filled with the pleasant scent of wet earth. Two tall *jujube* trees stand by the wall which offers the perfect perch to pick the fruit from. *Tendu* (Indian forest persimmon) trees stand alongside, they look young and it will be a while before they produce fruit. Most of the space is taken up by the kitchen garden. Sitting on the wall by the *jujube* trees, munching on the fruit, Kamal looks at the landscape outside the school. Beyond the wall, he sees vast uniformly arranged fields and toward the horizon, a few dense clumps of trees.

He turns his attention back to the garden and tries to identify as many plants as possible. Neat rows of spinach, amaranthus, cabbage ... is that *taro*? Yum! Something that could be *barbati* (long beans) growing on supports. He recognises rows of pumpkin and cucumber intercropped between the leafy vegetables, at least one of which is mustard greens. The richly coloured reddish-purple Amaranthus or *lal saag* is unmistakable. Kamal can tell that they would be incredibly tasty when lightly sautéed in a *kadai*.¹⁸ A lone guava tree stands in the midst of this richly diverse spread. Sparrows twitter noisily as they fly around, a koel perched on one of the topmost branches of a mango tree sounds its musical but mournful call every now and then. Kamal turns to pick some more *jujube* fruit to take home for his *dadi*¹⁹ and tries to imagine his own school with this garden.

Having gone straight from the bus stop to his chores, he is dead on his feet that evening. Once he washed up, he makes his way to the kitchen, his tummy prickling with hunger. He pauses at his *dadi's charpai*²⁰ to empty his pockets of the *jujubes* he had collected for her. *Jujube* trees often grow wild along paths around the village, and she had once told him that, as a child, she couldn't resist picking a few every time she passed them. The kitchen is exactly as he expected it to be. His mum hovers around the *chulha*, his sister is doing her homework, and the warm room is filling up with the smells of dinner. His mum **is** cooking *channa leaves*! There is also cooked and seasoned pumpkin (which was harvested from the plant that climbs onto the roof of their house), sautéed *lal saag* and *rotis* hot off the fire. Kamal didn't know this yet, but his mother had made a rice *kheer*²¹ to enjoy at the end of the meal. Looking down at his plate, he remembers the school garden he saw this afternoon and fleetingly wonders if a plan could be hatched to have one in their own school. It would be quite exciting to see his lunch plate resemble tonight's dinner!

The research behind the story

The story is inspired by a research of the Alliance Bioversity-CIAT, supported by the CGIAR Policy Innovations Research Program, and led by Meghajt Sharma Shijagurumayum, Natalia Estrada Carmona, Smitha Krishnan, Marlène Elias, Sarah K. Jones and Samrat Singh.

The research, taking place in Madya Pradesh (India), explores pathways to better link local livelihoods, community knowledge, and India's diverse food heritage with school meal programs. It invites the diversification menus while rethinking of how food, agrobiodiversity, and public procurement can intersect to support more sustainable and contextually rooted food systems.

This story is part of a narrated series linked to the [Agrobiodiversity Index](#). The story was written by Ananya Doraswamy, in collaboration with Silvia Martinez, Roseline Remans, Natalia Estrada Carmona, Sarah Jones, and Meghajt Sharma Shijagurumayum.

¹⁷*Jujube: Red date (Ziziphus jujuba) native fruit tree*

¹⁸*Kadai: A specific pan used for cooking. Often made with cast iron*

¹⁹*Dadi: Grandma*

²⁰*Charpai: A traditional, woven bed*

²¹*Kheer: A sweet dish usually served for dessert with milk, rice and raisins being key ingredients*