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Salt, sugar, pepper politics

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My friend Jean Michel, whom I consider among the world's best French chefs, always tells me that the balance of salt and pepper is the most critical part of a savory dish to capture the guest's taste buds. He says he disrupts a sweet dish with a pinch of salt to raise the sweet's savory undertone. All this is quite understandable in Western models of Cartesian dualism, the philosophy of mind and body distinction developed by René Descartes.

Hi-funda pepper and salt: Let me now recount other tasty pepper and salt effects. As a guest lecturer in an MBA school in Europe, after a general introduction, the first question I threw at a global group of senior management attendees was, "What's the difference between salt and pepper?" I expected a quick answer but it swelled into a big subject, perhaps because the almost 100 participants in the class were from different countries. I'd allocated 20 minutes for them to write and explain salt and pepper, but the 5-6 people in every table were keen to narrate with examples. The result was fascinating. Technocrats, scientists, managers of different subjects equated the result, or turned the subject around in their mouths towards gravitation, density, weight, analysis of its nature connect and so on. In sum, they were happy weighing the subject as heavy

substance. I gave them full liberty of expression, without interrupting their serious case, but I could never imagine it would occupy my whole session. In those pre-PowerPoint days, this first slide in my OHP presentation was so well thrashed that I did not need to open the 19 other slides I had prepared. My session was enthusiastic and far-reaching. When I put my "Thank You" slide saying we salt makes savory products tasty, and pepper that adds spicy zing to the tongue, everybody was thrilled: "The best of marketing action is simplicity," they concluded.

Pepper, salt, sugar disruptive social

phenomenon: On returning to India, I find pepper, salt and sugar have a totally different aspect at the social level. When I take a Caucasian friend to a coffee shop or restaurant and invite them to have *nimbu pani* (fresh lime water) or *lassi* (Indian milk shake), my conversation in placing the order flummoxes them. Should it be salty, sugary or both; I confidently answer the waiter's queries on more salt, rock salt or black salt and sometimes less sugar, leaving my friend quite curious about the meaning. Europeans take it as perversion and want to taste such a concoction but very few seem to like the taste. This is the way that I can clearly express how different India is. The typical South Indian curd rice plays more with the salt and spices effect to enhance taste, but my 83-year-old Bengali mother will put a touch of sugar in it, and that's my cultural education, the taste I have grown up with is what my tongue will accept.

Among the country's biggest snacking consumption is "chaat." It now seems to have

become a kind of luxurious snack too because 5-star hotels have a special counter to make chaat. On one side the chefs handle Indian chaat, on its opposite side is Japanese sushi. You can imagine the contrast of chaat vs sushi. Chaat is definitely a more disruptive cultural phenomenon as it has salt, pepper, sugar and a fourth element, the sour aspect with tamarind as the base. Now I observe that this disruption has been extended to Indian politics as well.

Pepper, salt, sugar politics: On a daily basis, different political party members use umpteen types of pepper to create hot topics. Aside from peppering up Parliament House, they have spicy, fiery street protests that pull out historical perspectives and legendary politicians of yesteryear to justify their authenticity. The idea is to scorch with peppery subjects. From time to time the media acts as a catalyst by adding some sweet syrup in it and the debate rolls on to gather weight and speed along with it. The public laps up this disruptive situation, the mudslinging debate is the taste we have become habituated to.

Then suddenly another political drama puts salt on all the wounds that have opened up like corruption, minority issues, regional racism among others. Salt, pepper and sugar can be flung from any direction; this is exactly the way we enjoy our political debate every day. In this kind of unstructured form you will find some disruptive catalyst political party playing with the death of farmers; another political party will count in which state what number of farmers committed suicide. When the debate veers into the corruption topic, it again flogs the salt, sugar, pepper imbalance, who did more, who did less. Similarly when politics-talk hits the riots, it's who killed how many people where. As of now, no political party has found a great solution to balance pepper, salt, sugar and sour, the way we get them in our chaat, *nimbu pani or lassi*.

Uniqueness of Indian politics: Undoubtedly, no country in the world has this disruptive taste legacy of combining pepper, salt and sugar the way its specific to Indian culture. This multi-dimensional taste belongs to Indians and extends into our social tolerance levels. So who will win the forthcoming parliamentary elections is totally dependent on how the trio-taste of salt, pepper and sugar pans out in electioneering.

In the meantime, to tide over the 24 days left to know the outcome, all political parties and media have become fantastic shakers, shaking up the salt-pepper-sugar of political antics to find or destroy the right balance. But who knows the right balance? Perhaps the end taste will be sour like tamarind (imli), a very India-centric disrupting taste that's succulently sour. This is our political drama that connects hugely to the mouth taste of our 1.2 billion people. Let's enjoy our salt, sugar, pepper politics, perhaps along with tamarind.

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