

## **What racists don't understand about Zohran Mamdani, biryani and the West's uncivilised' culinary history**

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*It was not before the 15th century that the wealthy merchant class in Italy and the upper crust of Europe started using forks regularly, even though the less fortunate looked at it as ridiculous and lampooned its use by the rich*

Award-winning film director Mira Nair's son, 33-year-old progressive Zohran Mamdani, is shaking up Trump's America as few could. He swept the Democratic Party's primary nomination process, defeating the redoubtable Andrew Cuomo and is contesting the New York city mayoral elections. This is historic, as he keeps shattering at least three of Donald Trump's most aggressive planks — toxic anti-immigration hounding, his belligerent (Islamophobic) support to the Benjamin Netanyahu government as it kills thousands of people in Gaza and the devastation of welfarism and minimal equity for the needy. So stung is Trump with the young challenger that he has inflicted the most vitriolic McCarthyistic abuse on him, calling him a “communist lunatic”.

What is more worrisome is the avalanche of racial censure that Mamdani invited — for eating his biriyani with his fingers. This is exactly the way it should be and is eaten by all south Asians and many others. Republican member of Congress, Brandon Gill and professional India-baiter, far-right activist Laura Loomer, called this “uncivilised”. The fact that most Americans eat their pizza slices and burgers by hand and dream of “finger licking good” Kentucky Fried Chicken was conveniently forgotten.

Forgotten also was the fact that for some 15 centuries after Christ, commoners in the west ate from wooden plates and bowls and used pieces of bread to pick up the sauce or gravy that remained, even after their knives had poked and picked whatever food they could. Till the late medieval period, water in Europe was not only repellingly cold but rather hazardous to drink, especially from contaminated rivers and pools. It was more so in crowded, unsanitary urban areas, though the poor hardly had any choice. Those who could afford it drank only beer, ale, wine or other spirits and many hardly ever came in contact with water — even for cleansing or hygienic purposes. Undergarments were stitched on to bare bodies for several months a year right up to recent times, which explains the western craze for perfumes and sweet-smelling flowers.

In fact, those who are convinced that using fingers to eat is uncivilised would baulk at the very idea that the civilised fork was unknown to the west, until an eastern Byzantine princess brought it to Venice in the medieval period. She was married to the city's Doge — the duke or the ruler, who has nothing to do with Elon Musk's whirlwind slaughter of public posts and welfare schemes. More interesting is the fact that the

princess carried this quaint piece of cutlery, a two-tined gold fork, from the Byzantine Empire, basically to pick fruits that were preserved in syrup and sugar, known as suckets. The pretty lady felt it was logically the most efficient and clean method of eating a sticky sweetmeat, but the Church was scandalised.

Sarah Coffin explained in the *Scientific American* (touché) that “The fork was associated with the life of luxury and sweets. This somehow got translated by the Church as being a negative form of decadence. It wasn’t associated with Christian values on the grounds that it wasn’t essential to life. Instead, it was perceived as something that would be used by a seductress of the East.” By the way, Coffin has authored six award-winning cookbooks and is the founding editor of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, that was named the 2012 Publication of the Year. Most recently she was named Editor-in-Chief of the digital resource *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Food Studies*. Coffin goes on to explain that the fork was late to join the knife and spoon to complete the West’s cutlery trio. “The fork started its existence as a utensil to hold a piece of meat or to hold something while you carved it. Its entrance into individual usage comes really as a dessert object.”

Sweets from the Byzantine and the very-Muslim Ottoman empires were among several other foods from the Orient that left their mark on the cuisine of Europe — from which arrived Trump’s legit Americans. Noodles came from China and was loved by Italians, leading to further development as different delicious pasta preparations of Italy. Coffin suspects, however, that “instead of learning how to use chopsticks, Italians preferred to repurpose an implement they already had. In order to eat long noodles, they used a toothpick-like utensil called a *punteruolo*. It was made more efficient by the addition of another prong.”

It was not before the 15th century that the wealthy merchant class in Italy and the upper crust of Europe started using forks regularly, even though the less fortunate looked at it as ridiculous and lampooned its use by the rich. In fact, northern Europe refused to use this cutlery for centuries and accepted it only in the eighteenth century. This was when the Industrial Revolution produced forks in bulk and at affordable prices. Even so, Europeans carried their own cutlery set for personal use to dinners and invitations.

South Asians and people of the Middle East considered water-cleaned hands to be purer to pick up their food which invariably had more variety and came with their own gravy. This necessitated the use of fingers that are far more adroit in picking up dispersed food on plates or clean leaves than knives or forks. The high-gluten and low amylose (high amylopectin) wheat of China and Southeast Asia was more elastic and sticky and led naturally to their noodles (lamian) and dumplings. These are/were best held and picked up by chopsticks. Similarly, their glutinous rice (nuòmǐ) or Japonica rice (jǐngmǐ) have almost no amylose and are naturally so sticky and cohesive that chopsticks are indispensable. On the other hand, most South Asian rice varieties fall under *Oryza Sativa* subspecies *Indica* that have some 30 per cent amylose. They are

thus less, sticky and more fluffy, lending themselves to fingers for picking up and eating.

So, what uninformed racialists need to understand is that different people use their best-suited methods to navigate through their specific bounties of nature and their own methods of cooking.

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