

The Doli

<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/musings/we-might-be-smart-but-ants-are-smarter-520580>

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The ants formed an almost straight line to one of the legs of the table; and then another line going up the leg and onto the tabletop where the mithai was. I watched this coordinated procession with fascination and thought about all that E.O. Wilson said about how amazingly smart creatures they were. Except this time, they were spoiling a perfectly good piece of barfi!

The coordinated way in which the ants were passing on the barfi crumbs reminded me of the song "Saathi haath badana" and photographs from the building of Bhakra Nangal where workers are passing baskets of building material like a human conveyor belt. But it also brought back memories of a wonderful contraption for storing food- the humble Doli.

Keeping food safe from nasty things like cockroaches, ants, flies, lizards, rats etc. was very important in the pre-refrigerator days. It was not just left-over food but also things like boiled milk, bread, curd while it was setting etc. Our kitchen did not have any drawers or cupboards- it just had a bunch of ledges on which old newspapers were spread and dry groceries stored in old Kissan jam bottles or dalda tins. And of course, there was no refrigerator.

What we did have was the humble Doli. This was an exceptionally well designed object whose original designer could easily have won the best functional designer award. The one we had was a cuboid, about 2 feet wide, 2.5 feet deep and 3 feet high. The top, bottom and the frame were solid wood while the other four faces had a wire mesh. The front had two doors which also had a latch to put a small lock in, presumably to avoid pilferage by maids.

There were two shelves inside the doli which allowed one to store things. The wire mesh ensured that there was air circulation without the danger of flies, rats,

cockroaches and lizards. Everything which could attract vermin was safe as long as it was kept inside the doli and the latch was firmly closed.

That left the small problem of ants- the latched doors were as much of an obstacle for them as the Maginot line was for the Wehrmacht. They would easily come from the spaces around and below the doors.

And so an incredibly simple solution was devised against ants. Four large left-over diyas from Diwali were taken and filled with water. The four legs of the doli were then placed in these so that the water acted as a moat since the ants would not cross the water barrier. Of course one had to make sure that the diyas were always filled with water but that was a minor inconvenience.

In time, we acquired a refrigerator and the doli lost its *raison d'etre*. However, like everything else in an Indian household, it was not discarded but instead upcycled. Since the refrigerator was a small one, there was no space in it for all things which needed to be protected. Thus, instead of storing cooked food in the doli, it was now used for storing stuff like dal, sugar or atta. However, since these were not things one needed on a regular basis, invariably the water in the diyas would evaporate and the ever vigilant ants would make an "antline" for their food! After all, we might be smart, but ants are smarter. Long after we are gone, they would still be around on our planet- happily working as a team and getting along with their lives.

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