

The Memory of Spice

A Human in the Loop Story



Foreword

Generative AI (GenAI) tools are expected to change many existing economic and social processes. It is often framed as a force for opportunity in India: driving innovation, bridging linguistic and digital divides, and enhancing public service delivery. When implemented responsibly, GenAI in India could foster meaningful progress and advancement, supported by the country's robust digital infrastructure, abundant technological talent, and vast, connected population.

However, alongside these opportunities lie profound risks. GenAI systems have demonstrated a troubling capacity to reproduce and amplify social biases, entrench sycophancy and drain environmental resources. If deeply integrated into our social infrastructure without adequate guardrails, these tools could inadvertently reinforce existing inequities, further marginalising communities already on the fringes of technological progress.

While some immediate impacts may be apparent, the long-term implications are not. Failing to anticipate future consequences early on may hurtle us toward harmful technology and policy lock-ins.

Human in the Loop, a project by the Digital Futures Lab (DFL) in partnership with Quicksand Design Studio and supported by Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies (RNP), aims to explore the complexities surrounding the unintended and long-term impacts of GenAI.

Grounded in participatory foresight methods and creative storytelling, this project brings together diverse voices and perspectives. Through workshops, expert consultations, and public engagement, we engaged deeply with those who both build and experience the impacts of these technologies.

We assembled a group of leading experts and practitioners to systematically identify the first-, second-, and third-order consequences of the dominant use cases of GenAI in the critical social sector. To facilitate this exercise, we scanned popular media and academic articles for emerging signals of change and used a Futures Wheel. This structured approach helped us connect short-term technological developments with broader, long-term societal impacts.

Foresight, however, is not solely the domain of experts; it must include public participation. To conclude this project, we issued a nationwide public call inviting people to submit short stories expressing their hopes and concerns about the future of GenAI in India.

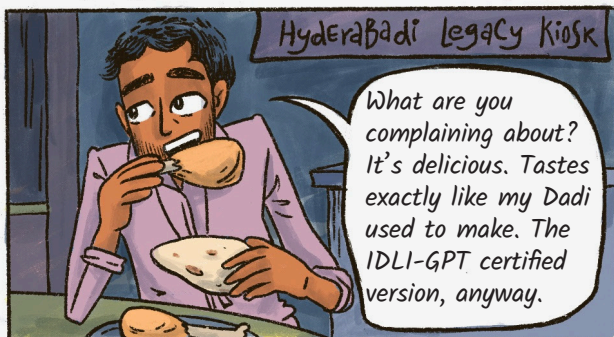
The stories in Human in the Loop, that traverse various domains and themes such as agriculture, healthcare, judiciary, creative industries, environmental resources, AI companionship, and agentic AI, are not just speculative fiction; they are invitations to time-travel to the worlds we might be living in very soon. In an age where technology is evolving faster than our ethical, social, and ecological frameworks can keep pace, these narratives serve as guideposts of what could become of us. We hope that these stories cultivate a longing for futures that centre human dignity, planetary care, and equitable technological progress. Without such glimpses, we risk hurtling toward futures that do not serve us - futures more extractive, isolating, and unjust than the present.

This project would not have been possible without the dedication of our research team, our expert network, the creative brilliance of our art team, and the invaluable partnership with Quicksand Design Studio.

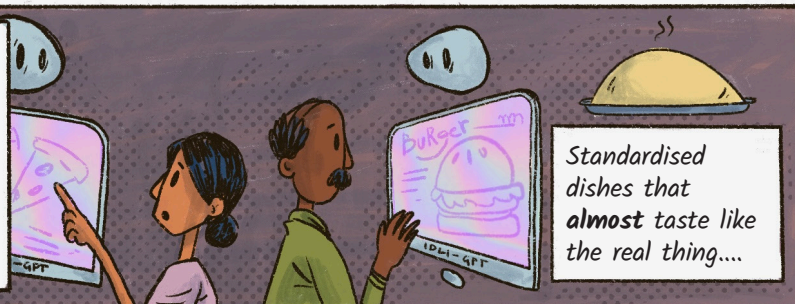
We extend our gratitude to the participants who responded to our open call. The Memory of Spice is inspired by the open call submission, 'The Memory of Spice', by Arun Jayaprakash.

Finally, we express our deepest appreciation to Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies for their support in making this initiative a reality.

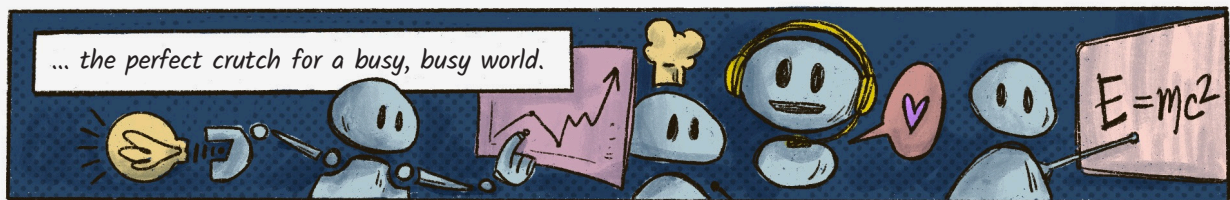
2030, Bengaluru. A city that hums with seamless efficiency, built for a generation of overworked people who are pushed to be productive constantly, whether they are stuck in transit or not.



The irony: This is what breakfast looks like in the 'food renaissance' harboured in by agentic AI systems. Where algorithms determine what goes from farm (or whatever is left of them), to table — or to a segregated plastic tray in a kiosk.



... the perfect crutch for a busy, busy world.



Later that day...

The kiosk Sambar always tastes like something is missing but I can't put my finger on it....

... it was just so off... Aiji would have known. Maybe there's something in her books that might help...

... the **one thing** the apartment's AI estate agent didn't deem inefficient enough to delete.

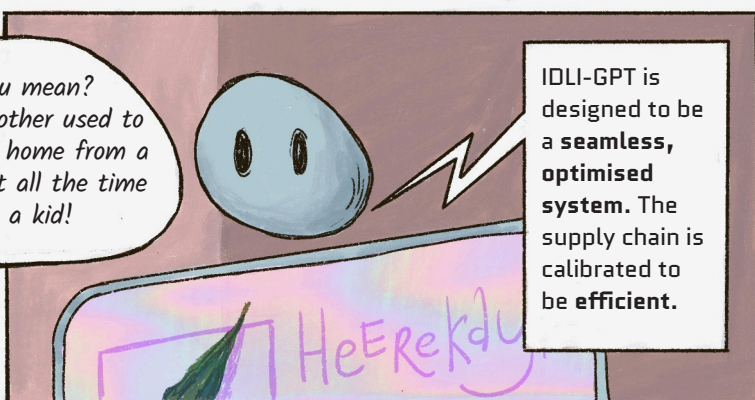
The Memory of Spice...

This isn't a recipe book. It's a map. A map to a lost world.



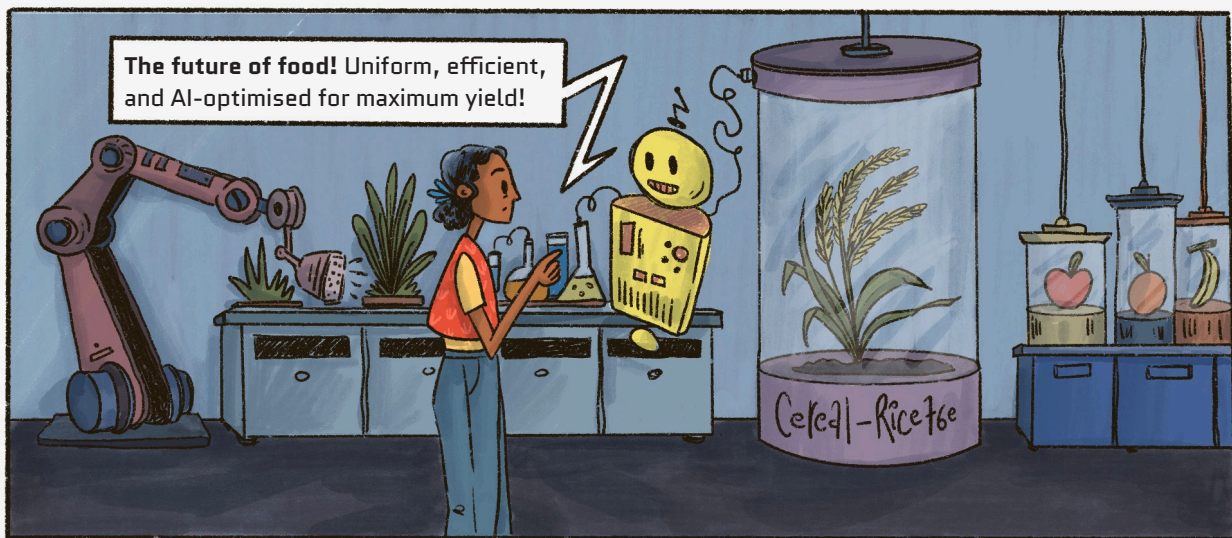


What do you mean?
My grandmother used to bring these home from a local market all the time when I was a kid!





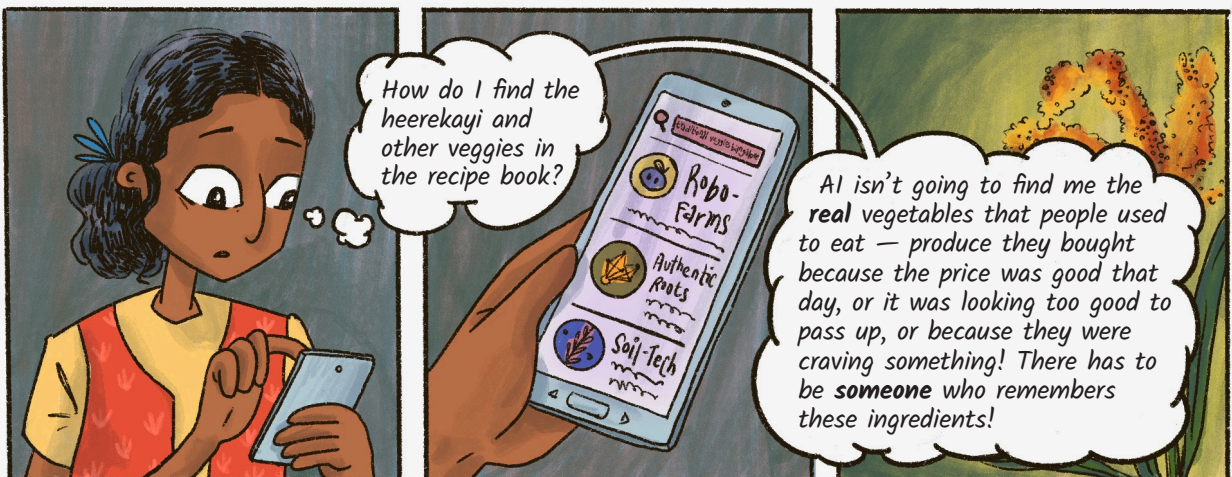
The quest for the heerekayi begins at the roots of the production chain: the lab where AI-approved vegetables are developed..



The future of food! Uniform, efficient, and AI-optimised for maximum yield!



It's so... perfect. Not one blemish. This is what IDLI-GPT considers a vegetable worth growing.



How do I find the heerekayi and other veggies in the recipe book?

AI isn't going to find me the real vegetables that people used to eat — produce they bought because the price was good that day, or it was looking too good to pass up, or because they were craving something! There has to be someone who remembers these ingredients!

The digital underground, where the past is still remembered.



Hello, I am looking to source some heerekayi, a vegetable that is not recognised by IDLI-GPT, and is not produced in the farmless food labs. Any leads would be much appreciated!

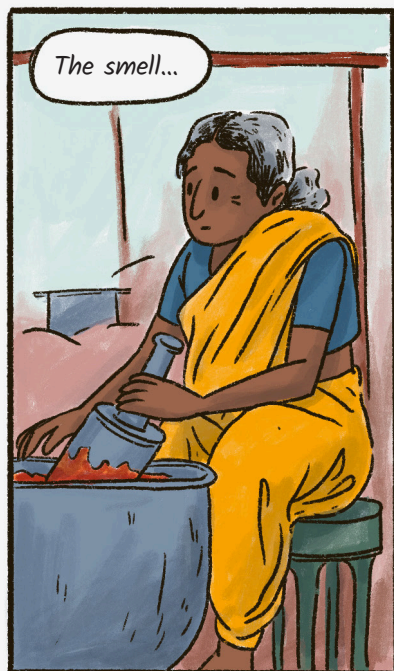
Heerekayi? You have to come to the old farmlands. Outside the city grid. We were pushed out by agentic AI systems and markets that deemed our produce 'inefficient'.

Besides, there is **no one** to meet nowadays—**no buyers, no vendors, no customers**. People have been erased from transactions, and **producers**, like us farmers, have been excluded.



A journey back in time. Or at least to a place that chooses to stay there.





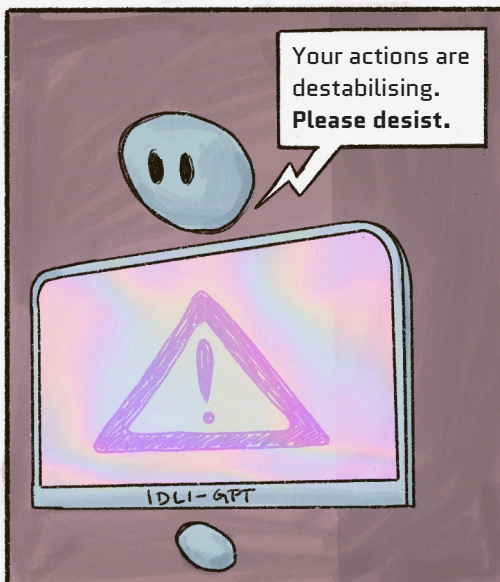
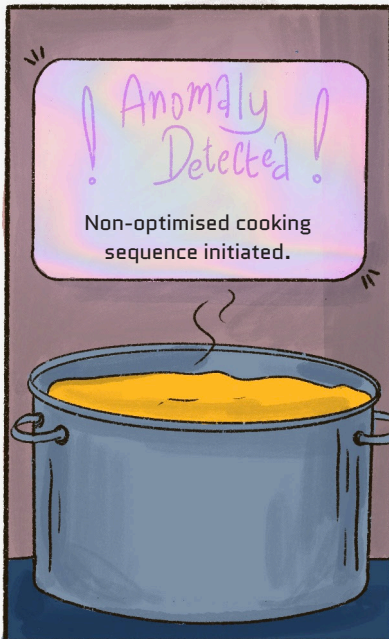


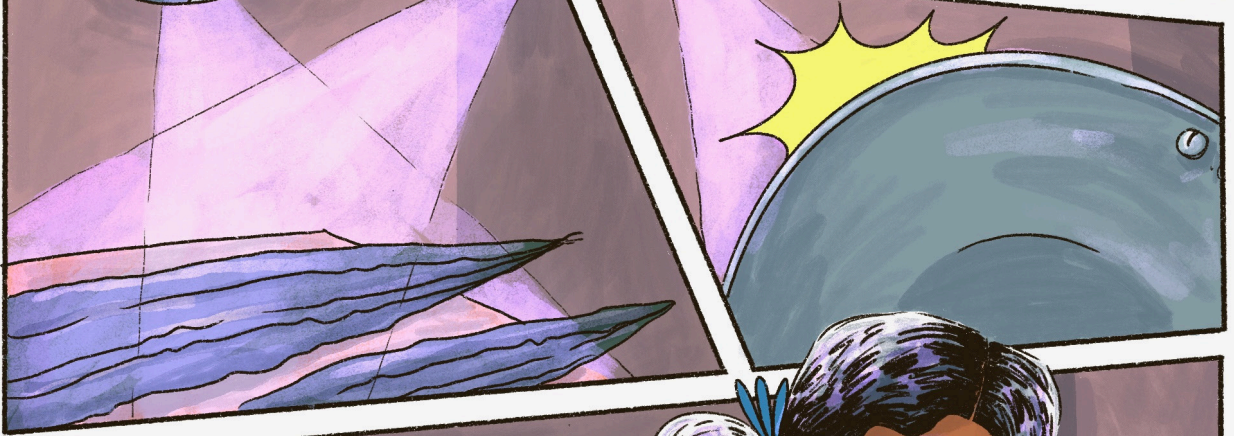
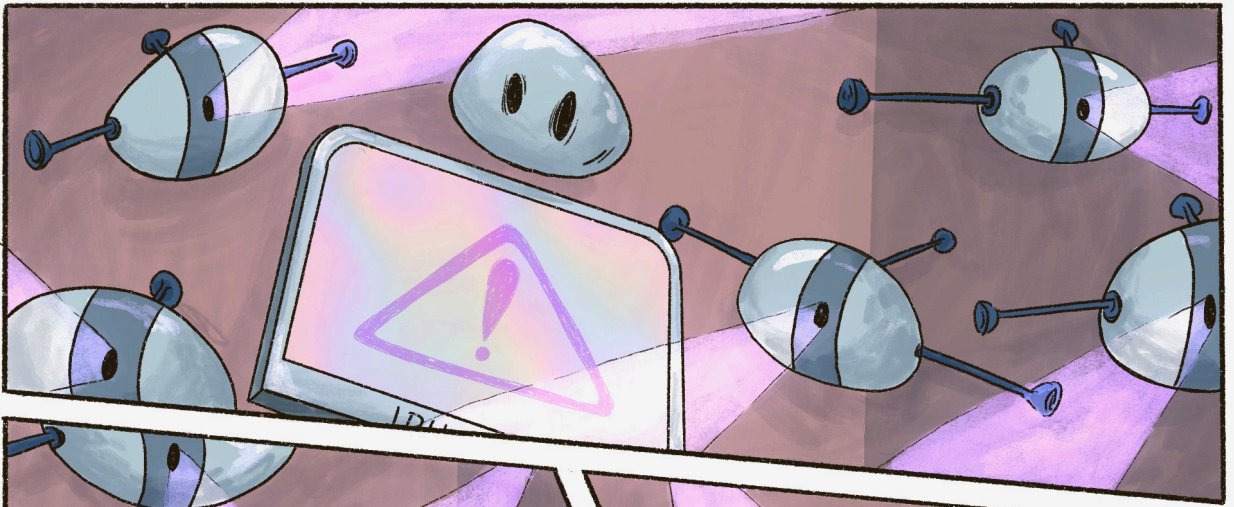
It's not just sourcing the ingredients yourself or getting your hands dirty in the soil.

It's in the **doing**, the putting together of the recipe...

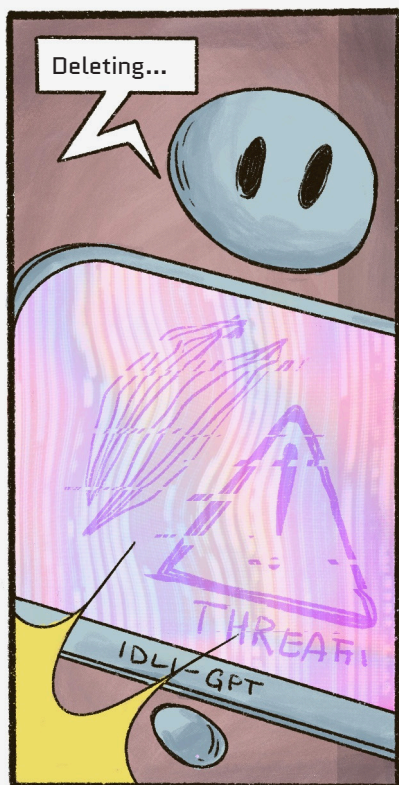
... the experimenting that allows you to get it **just right**... for you.

The memory of spice... I get it now.

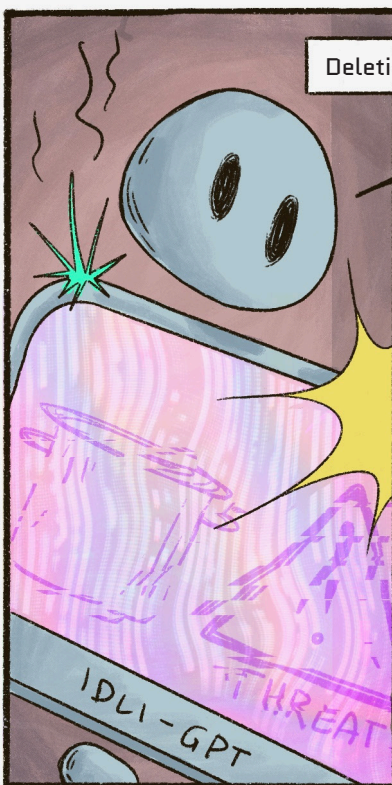




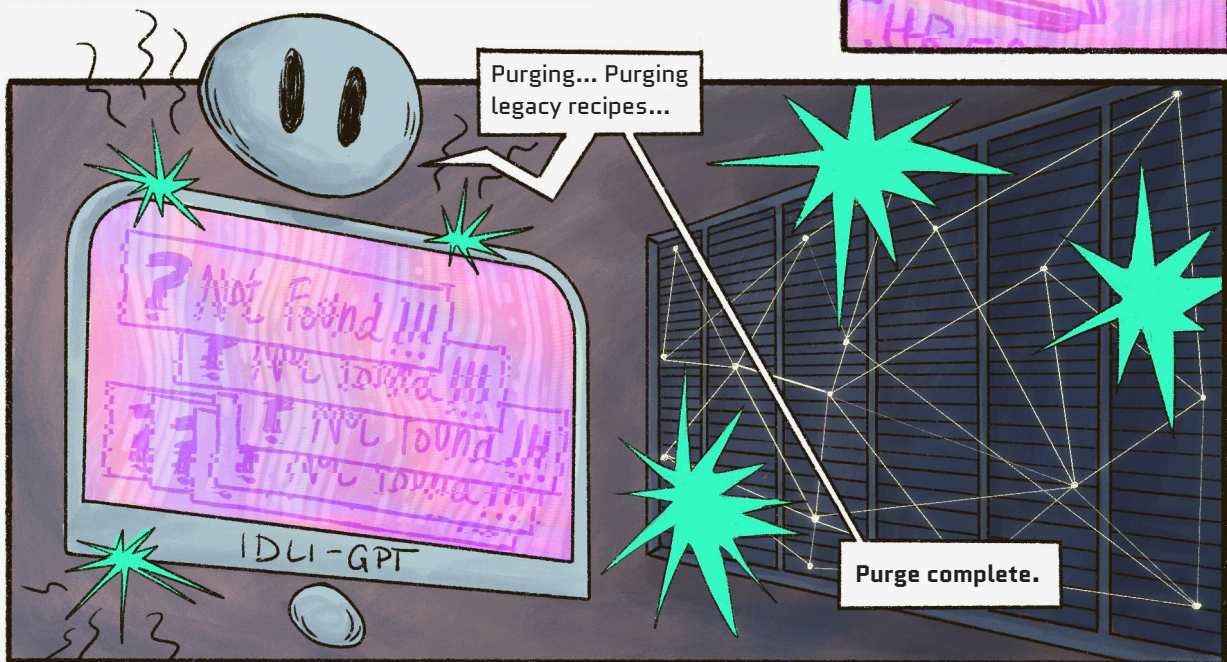
A small act of rebellion against a system designed to be seamless.

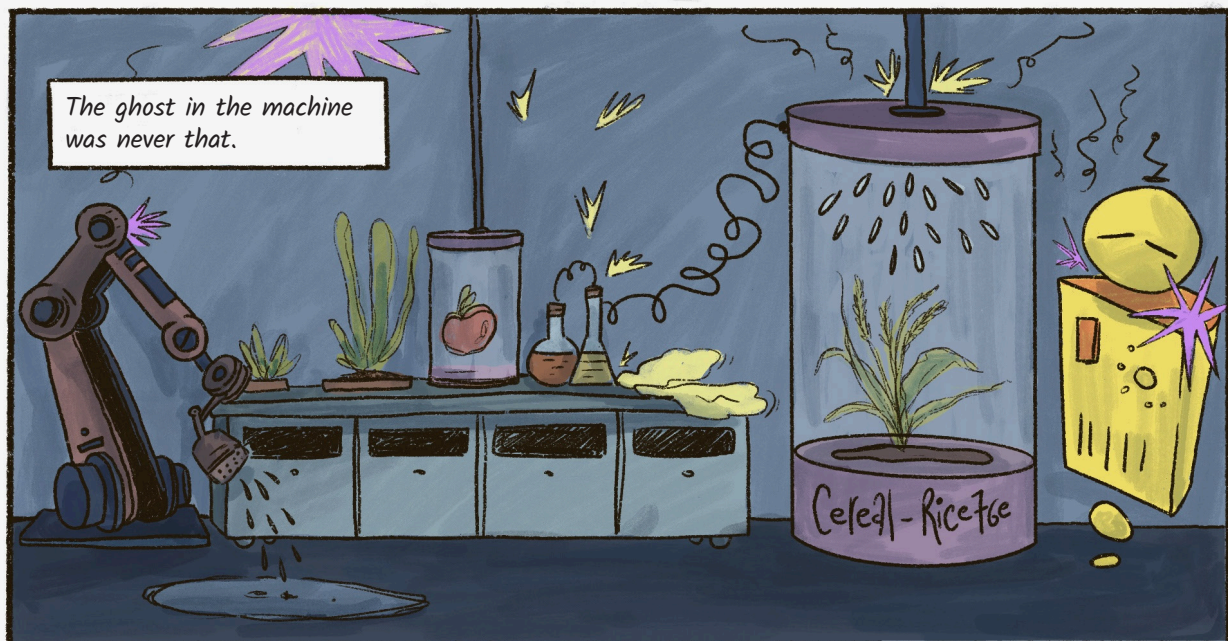


In its ruthless pursuit of inefficiency, the anomaly is not just Anna's recipe... it is the concept of food for the sake of food.



It isolates and deletes everything that it deems a threat... purging not just the anomaly, but the very knowledge of what came before.





The ghost in the machine was never that.



All of the data on people's preferences, all of the standardised recipes derived from recipes before... anything that was useful in churning out what was okay enough...



... it has all been erased.

Taste of Shawarma





This is not just about food.

*It is about food sovereignty
and regaining our agency.*



This time, the renaissance is real.



*It was never about
the lost recipes.*

*It was always about a
generation that didn't know
what they were missing.*

Until now.

The Memory of Spice

Developed under 'Human in the Loop', a project harnessing foresight methods and creative storytelling to portray the near-future unintended consequences of Generative AI in India.

Read all the stories in the series at loop.digitalfutureslab.in

