

The traditional Bengali Lifestyle:
Food and Spices – "May my
children live in milk and rice!"
- Dr. Jharna Chatterjee



Ask any Bengali person or anyone who is familiar with the Bengali culture, and he or she would most probably say that the "Bengali culture" has a few dominant features: rice, fish and 'adda' (informal chats where topics range from politics and popular or unpopular teachers and professors to movie-, cricket- or soccer-stars and the latest hit songs – the sky is the limit!).

Rice, Lakshmi in Bengali Culture

Rice is the central theme in Bengali kitchens, nay, in the day-to-day existence. In many poems and songs describing the province/state of West Bengal and also Bangladesh, green or unhusked golden seeds (paddy or 'dhaan') are synonymous with wealth (goddess Lakshmi). Farming in rural Bengal has remained pretty much unchanged for hundreds of years, with farmers tilling the soil with the help of a pair of bullocks and a plough, planting the seedlings and cutting the mature plants manually. Rice is grown primarily in the rainy season and is ready for harvesting in late autumn. Then some are processed by boiling (parboiled or 'siddha chal') and some without boiling (atap) and husked and stored. At this stage, there might be several further processes in place using specific types of rice to make popped rice (khoi), puffed rice (moori) or pressed rice (chira) – used as snacks, eaten with milk/yogurt and fruits, or sometimes made even tastier by cooking them with molasses made from date-palm syrup, and forming them into balls ('moas') – something like rice-crispy squares.

What do the Bengalis eat?

For everyday main meals, the Bengalis tend to eat rice (bhat) with lentils (daal), vegetable (torkari) and fish (machh) dishes cooked with a variety of spices. Sometimes, curried eggs are served as a replacement of fish. Vegetarianism is quite common, especially among the Vaisnavite sect (the worshippers of Visnu, one of the Hindu trinities). Vegetarians do not eat meat, fish or eggs, but do eat milk-products.

Different types of vegetables, fruits and fish are available in the six Bengali seasons – summer, rainy season, autumn, late autumn, winter and spring. Cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, beets, eggplants, tomatoes, spinach, peas and other vegetables are usually found in the winter; a wide variety of leafy vegetables are eaten year-round; bitter gourds or other bitter leaves such as margo are cooked and consumed especially during spring – as an antidote to chicken pox. During the summer and rainy seasons, the variety of vegetables dwindles. Typically fruits are not part of the main meals, except bananas, mangoes or jackfruit – served with (occasionally condensed) milk as dessert. A cooked sweet-and-sour fruit dish, chutney, may be eaten following the main dishes for cleansing the palate and preparing it for tasting the heavenly desserts. Ripe, dark brown tamarind or star fruit, plum, tomato, prune, date, olive or green mango is used to make chutneys. Some Bengali people eat rice twice daily, for lunch and dinner, while some opt for rooti, parota or luchi (variations of round, flat bread made at home with whole wheat or all-purpose flour) for the evening meal. Meat (goat or chicken) is consumed less frequently; in families that eat meat, it might be served on Sundays for lunch, as a special treat. There is a special rainy-day dish made of rice and lentils, vegetables and spices; it's called "khichuri" – essentially one dish that can serve

as a complete meal – supposedly to make cooking and serving easier. This dish is usually served with fries of all kinds.



Some Bengali food items – Above: clockwise from left-hand corner: rice, salad, daal, curried okra, beans, squash, chicken, lamb with potatoes, fish, shrimp and chutney. Below: in the far corner luchi (puffed, deep-fried golden round bread); a big plate full of daal, vegetables, fish dishes in individual bowls with deep-fried fish cakes in the centre, and a smaller plate full of desserts made of milk-products. On the right side, a plate full of a typical Bengali dessert item, also made from milk-product.

For weddings and other special occasions, the meals are usually more elaborate. Depending on the socio-economic status of the host, the items could include polao (spiced and buttered fragrant rice, also known as pullao or pilaf), fried vegetables, fish, vegetable and fish dishes, chutney with papadam (deep-fried or baked dried, thin lentil discs), sweet yogurt and delectable sweets mostly made from milk. Often, these meals were traditionally served to hundreds of people on rinsed pieces of banana leaves - organic, biodegradable and disposable! [In "Little India", Singapore, this can still be seen.] The guests used to sit on cloth-made seats on the floor in rows and ate using their dexterous fingers. This tradition has completely vanished in present time, at least in urban communities – use of tables and chairs, china, paper or stainless steel plates and glasses, and plastic cutlery is the norm today. Fifty years ago or earlier, all the food items for a feast used to be prepared on the premises by expert cooks supervised by and at the specification of the hosts. Now caterers supply and serve food on almost all big occasions.

The prominence of rice in the Bengali culture is evident in the poem "Annadar atmo-porichoy" – in which the goddess Durga (Annada, means one who gives rice) took the disguise of a mortal woman and utilized the services of a boatman to cross a river. However, the boatman realized that this was no mortal when an iron object turned to gold at the touch of her feet! He then asked for a

boon, "May my children live in milk and rice!" Translated to plain terms, he was asking for freedom from poverty and assurance of good food for his children.

The first solid food a baby officially takes around six months of age, is called "anna-prashan" or "rice feeding" ceremony that features 'payesh' or delicious Indian rice-pudding (no eggs, only fine, fragrant rice cooked in condensed milk and sweetened) as the primary course. Rice-pudding is also a compulsory item for birthday celebrations like cakes in Western society and for 'sadh' (which means wish), a grand feast for soon-to-become mothers. While inviting someone for dinner, the host may humbly say, "Please come and have daal and bhaat (cooked rice) with us," even though in all likelihood the meal would consist of many more dishes. During the time of dire scarcity, people would say "Rice is abundant in our home now." The opposite would be true – there would be no rice, but it is considered bad luck to say so.



A typical presentation of a special, festive dinner consists of a silver (or stainless) plate with rice (and sometimes a paratha) in the centre, with some fried vegetables and fish, surrounded by silver bowls containing various accompanying dishes. "Aiburo-bhat" is the 'Bengali' version of a bridal shower – pampering the would-be-bride with a gourmet home-made feast served with a flourish, gifts and wishes from girl friends and blessings by aunts/sisters/mother/grandmother etc. Water (also served in a silver glass) is the most common drink to go with meals. Blessings are accompanied with putting a few 'dhaan' seeds and a few blades of green grass on the head of the person to be blessed – a symbolic wish for prosperity and vivacity respectively. A lamp represents all that is good (fire is the eternal purifier and light represents positive force) and is always present on special occasions. Right: (Photo taken by Malcolm Day.) a special meal for a 'would-be-mother'. The dessert dishes, of which rice pudding is the primary item, are hidden from the view.



Left: The image of goddess Lakshmi, representing wealth and prosperity, is sometimes shown as holding a spray of golden rice stalk (dhaan) in her right hand and a pitcher full of gold in her left. Right: a stalk of 'dhaan' woven into a piece of straw mat – to be kept at home as a good luck charm for prosperity.

All about Spices

Bengali people use many different spices to prepare their dishes. All kinds of seeds, barks (e.g., cinnamon and mace), and leaves are used whole or split for the initial 'phoron' – that is, frying them to flavor the oil – such as kalojeera (onion seeds), jeera (cumin), mustard, anise, fennel, celery and whole green or red chilies, peppercorn, cloves, cardamom pods, cinnamon sticks, bay leaves, shredded or cubed coconut. A combination of five different seeds is called "panch [means five] phoron". Similarly, cinnamon, cardamom and cloves are combined to make "garam masala" and are used whole for phoron, or in powder or paste form at the end. The vegetables are sautéed in this oil, then depending on the type of dish, different combinations of spices in powder or paste form would be added to the saucepan, wok or frying pan, turmeric being the most common, with cayenne, cumin, coriander, mustard, ginger, onion, garlic, asfoetida, saffron, poppy, sesame, nutmeg, mace and again, cardamom (large and small), cinnamon and cloves keeping company. Chopped fresh 'Cilantro' or coriander leaves are often used for additional flavor in some dishes.



Clockwise from the top (in 1:00 O'clock position) whole cloves, cinnamon sticks, jeera, kalojeera, anise seeds, mustard seeds. Cardamom pods are in the centre.



Clockwise from the top: cayenne powder, panch foron, jeera, cumin powder, whole red chilies, methi (fenugreek). Turmeric powder, the most prominent spice is in the centre.

In "Mistress of Spices", a novel and now also a movie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni describes poetically the attributes and the mythical origin of turmeric:

"Turmeric the preserver, keeping foods safe in a land of heat and hunger. Turmeric the auspicious spice, placed on the heads of newborns for luck, sprinkled over coconuts at *pujas* [worship], rubbed into the borders of wedding saris. Rub it on cheek, forehead, chin. ... It will erase blemishes and wrinkles, suck away age and fat." "I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas [gods] and asuras [monsters] churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between." (p.13). It is traditional in Bengal (probably in entire India) for the bride and the bridegroom to get smeared with turmeric paste before they take a bath/shower to prepare for their wedding ceremony.

The 'Mistress of Spices' tells us about another very popular spice used by the Bengalis, "*kalojeere*" or kalojeera, "the blue-black seed" that is said to have magical properties, such as protection against the evil eye. Red chili "was born of Agni, the god of fire... dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this bland earth." (p.39). Tilo, the heroine of this fiction says: "Amla [Amlaki, a sweet-sour fruit] ... to help bear the pain that cannot be changed, pain growing slow and huge like a monsoon cloud which if you let it will blot out the sun." (p. 83). "Fennel, mouri, colored like the freckled house sparrow that brings amity where it nests, spice to digest sorrows and in their digestion make us strong. Fennel equalizer, who can take power from one and give it to the other when two people eat of you at the same time" (p. 111). "Peppercorn which has the ability to sweat your secrets out of you" (p. 158). Tilo washed the ginger or *ada* – "root of gnarled wisdom", three times in lime water, sliced it translucent-thin and dropped them in a pan of boiling water to drink the honey-colored liquid for its beneficial effects. "Golden ginger used by Charak [an ancient Indian healer] to relight the fire that simmers in the belly."

A Brief History of Spices

History (source: F. Rosengarten, Jr. 1969. The Book of Spices) tells us that some of the spices such as turmeric, cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, mustard seed, black pepper and the long pepper were known in India for thousands of years, as mentioned in Ayurvedic texts like the works of Charaka (1st century AD) and Susruta (2nd century AD). Babylon's garden was known to cultivate cardamom and turmeric in the 8th century BC, and some believe that the seeds or other propagating material originally came from India. One ancient Ayurvedic recommendation has continued to modern times as a popular habit among many Bengalis: certain spices such as fennel/anise seeds, cloves and cardamom, combined with lime and some betel-nuts wrapped in betel leaves (paan) and chewed after meals are supposed to increase the flow of saliva and aid digestion, as well as work as a mouth-cleanser and breath-freshener. Before the prevalence of lipsticks, paan was used to color the lips too!

Hippocrates (460-377 BC), author of the famous Hippocratic Oath of medical ethics had instructed his followers about the use of many medicinal plants or herbs such as saffron, cinnamon, thyme, coriander, mint, and marjoram. We are told that at least half of these herbal remedies suggested by Hippocrates are still used.* *De Materia Medica* written by another renowned Greek author and physician, Dioscorides, still holds an honorable place among all medical professionals. Dioscorides conducted a careful analysis of all the herbs and spices known at the time of Christ and documented their benefits and characteristics.

Specific spices and ingredients are associated with specific cultures, but my guess is that most probably Indian cooking uses the largest number of spices. Just as the Indian subcontinent can boast of immense diversity in ethnic background in terms of language, religion (people from all major religions call India 'home'), geographical characteristics, traditional dress styles and

appearances of its people, the food habits also present the same diversity – adding colorful "spices" to Indian life, enriching it infinitely and making the attribute 'subcontinent' real.

* Personally, I remember using crushed marigold leaves for treating minor cuts in my childhood; and of course, everyone knows about the soothing effect of the thick liquid from aloe leaves on burns. Ginger, onion and garlic have earned their prestigious places as remedies for nausea and cancer and heart problems respectively. As children, we were administered a hot liquid drink for colds. As far as I remember, this liquid used to be prepared by boiling in water crushed ginger, cloves, peppercorn, wild basil leaves and honey/crystallized sugar. I have seen some people fry garlic or kalojeera in oil and rub this oil on chest to alleviate the symptoms of a chest cold. Tender branches of Margo tree have been in use in Bengal as natural toothbrushes for centuries. There was another popular medication I have seen being used many times: a combination of lime (or 'choon', a semi-liquid white ingredient taken with paan) and turmeric paste applied to a sprained ankle or injured foot to reduce the pain and swelling. Ajwan seeds or a liquid medicine made with ajwan are still widely used for indigestion and other stomach ailments, both as a preventive and as a treatment.

[Author's note: This article is for people who might wish to get informed about Bengali lifestyle in terms of food and spices. The photos used in this article were taken by the author, with one exception. The word "Bengali" refers to the language while "Bengalee" refers to the people of Bengal, grammatically speaking. However, to avoid adding to the already numerous annoying red markings of the spelling feature of my software, I have used the spelling "Bengali" for both.]