

Shukto- Nutritious and Healthy Bengali Cuisine

Kunal Adhikary*¹ and Rahul Sarkar²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Floriculture, Faculty of Horticulture, BCKV, Mohanpur, Nadia, West Bengal 741252

²B.Sc Hotel Management, Bhartiya University, Coimbatore.

Corresponding Author*: adhikarykunal102@gmail.com

SUMMARY

What Bengal thinks today India thinks tomorrow – this popular statement was enough in earlier days to understand the importance of rich culture and heritage the Bengal is carrying with since then era. As India is a vast country so it will be a great challenge to highlight its Socio-economic influence on food and culture within this limited scope of boundary. Food habit is one of the inseparable parts of our daily life. Lots of food and different style of cuisines are available in this era, out of which some are having nutritious value as well as attractive taste for tongue. For most part of the country and the world, West Bengal is the hub of rich and sinful sweetmeats. But did you know the land of Roshogollas, Sandesh, Cham Cham, Kaala Jaam and Mishti Doi also has a popular bitter dish without which the afternoon meal is deemed incomplete. It is Shukto, a bitter-sweet medley of vegetables that has to feature during lunchtime in Bengal or any Bengali festivity, which is made with vegetables like bitter gourd, neem leaves, sweet potato, Bengal gram, raw banana, French beans and drum sticks. Shukto is a rich stew of stir-fry vegetables, cooked in mustard oil and spiced with paanch-phoron (spices mixture), ginger paste and spicy chillies. It is a good appetizer.

INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the Bengali delicacy originated from Portuguese cuisine whose influence was quite well-known along the shores of Bengal. During their rule in India, the Portuguese tweaked a similar dish using locally available ingredients, such as the bitter gourd. They used it to develop a dish which worked as a mouth freshener combined with a couple of other vegetables. The dish stayed even long after the Portuguese left. The Bengali's made it their own with the addition of milk and their favourite mustard seeds and oil. In one of the major research article, food researcher Pritha Sen likes to differ, and doubts the possibility of the Portuguese connection in the emergence of the dish. Elaborating on how the custom of eating bitter dates back to the ancient Ayurvedic dietary practices, she says, "The Portuguese arrived in Bengal in the 16th century and the medicinal value of eating bitters at the start of a meal was laid down from ancient times by the great sages and physicians of Ayurveda, Charaka, Susruta, Dhanwantari. The shukto was a cooling agent in the hot, humid climates of *Anga*, *Vanga* and *Kalinga*, what I would like to refer to as the Undivided Bengal. It was also said that it excited the digestive juices before the start of the actual meal". It finds mention in the *Mangalkavyas*, a corpus of narrative poetry composed in Bengal in the medieval age; it finds mention in the life and food habits of Sri Chaitanya of the Bhakti movement, times before the Portuguese. Some findings are mention in meals requested by the gods of their spouses! For example, in one of the Mangal kavyas, Lord Shiva requests Goddess Annapurna, the deity of plenty, to cook shukto for him.

'Dudh Shukto' is a very popular dish prepared in most Bengali homes, with milk added to the bitter dish to help alleviate the taste and make it more palatable. Bengali cuisine is renowned for its rich range of subtle and fiery flavours. It is also famous for its traditionally developed multi-course tradition, unlike in many other parts of the country. In a Bengali thali, food is served course-wise rather than all at once and Shukto kick starts a quintessential Bengali lunch with its bitter tinge. It is very rich in essential minerals and nutrients.

Some popular women creations in Bengali cuisine related to festivals

Another popular creation of Bengali women called Gota Sheddho (whole boiled) which is still popular in Bengal and very closely attached with Saraswati Puja. The name is so called because none of the vegetables are cut and cooked whole together with whole grain daal without any spices, onion, garlic etc and finally drizzled with pure mustard oil to enhance the flavour. Poush Parbon is another very popular festival in Bengal and it is the time when we get to see different type of rice cakes are prepared in almost all the Bengali families. This festival is named after the Bengali month Poush and it is observed on the last day of the month known as Poush Sankranti. The freshly harvested paddy along with Khejurer Gur (date palm syrup) are used to prepare various Bengali sweets along with coconut milk known as Pitha (Rice Cake) and offered to Goddess Lakshmi. (Banerjee, 2018)

Bengali Philosophy in food

Women's of Bengal were very imaginative about the variety and result is many creation of community food like savouries. The women of colonial Bengal distinguished the food in four different sectors e.g.charbya, food which is to be chewed like rice , fish etc.Choshya , food which is to be sucked, liquid like ambal, tak etc. Lehya means food which is to be licked, like chatni and Peya means drinks like milk at the end of meal. The savouries created by them mainly enjoyed in the afternoon and mostly sour in taste and made with raw mango, ripe tamarind, Chaalaa (elephant apple) mixed with salt and kasundi (traditional home made mustard sauce of Bengal), mustard oil and green chilli. This type of constant effort and experiments conducted by the women of Bengal ultimately sketched the path of modern Bengali cuisine which is so unique worldwide.

Once a wife of a Bengali poet who was Hungarian lady told proudly that:

“Bengalis uses so many spices in the food and adopt such innovative style of cooking that one can make a pair of old shoes edible”.

Nutritional value of Shukto

Minerals	Vitamins	Lipids	Other
Calcium,Ca: 126.56mg; Copper, Cu: 0.15mg; Iron, Fe: 2.07mg; Potassium,K: 91.77mg; Magnesium,Mg: 34.76mg; Manganese,Mn: 0.54mg; Sodium: 4.15mg; Phosphorus,P: 79.93mg; Zinc, Zn: 0.74mg	Carotene: 10.15ug; Carotene-beta: 0.11ug; Folates: 0.71ug; Niacin: 0.37mg; Riboflavin: 0.03mg; Thiamin: 0.07mg; Vitamin E: 0.16mg; Tryptophan: 0.21g; Vitamin A: 1.67ug; Vitamin B6: 0.03mg.	Lipids16:1c: 0.01g;18:1c: 0.62g;18:2 n-6 c,c: 1.6g;18:3 n-3 c,c,c (ALA): 0.03g; Fatty acids, total monounsaturated: 1.24g; Fatty acids, total polyunsaturated: 1.85g; Saturated Fat: 0.46g; Fatty acids, total cis monoenoic: 0.62g; Fatty acids, total cis polyenoic: 1.63g ;Fatty acids, polyunsaturated, total Omega n-3: 0.03g; Fatty acids, polyunsaturated, total Omega n-6: 1.6g	Campesterol: 1.14mg; Cryptoxanthins: 1.78ug; Delta-5-avenasterol: 0.52mg; Phytosterols: 5.25mg; Phytosterol: 4.42mg; Beta-sitosterol: 3.41mg; Stigmasterol: 0.17mg Proximates: - Total Fat: 3.76g Protein: 2.29g Sorbitol: 0.38g

(Source: <http://www.nutritionfacts.com/recipes/bengali-shukto>)

CONCLUSION

Since women were under social restrictions on those days, slowly household work and cooking have the women's forte for ages and this ultimately emerged as the maximum benefit to the evolution of Bengali cuisine. They have given birth of a parallel Bengali cuisine for themselves. Many of such dishes are now still available in old Bengali cook books because in modern days the female of Bengal have come out of the kitchen life proving their worth in other aspects of life. Now's a day where lots of peoples are suffering from various ailments and lots of many more fatal diseases are also affecting the human health, healthy dishes like Shukto is proving very beneficial for the human being.

REFERENCES

Banerjee B. (2018) Food & its socio-cultural significance: Food Habit of Bengali Women - A historical backdrop. Institute of Hotel Management, Kolkata.
<http://www.nutritionfacts.com/recipes/bengali-shukto>