



A typical Bengali Thali

## Quintessentially Bengali cuisines that are not Bengali

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A Bengali is known to the outer world as a “bhadralok” (the typical dhoti Punjabi clad Bengali), an intellectual, a culturally inclined and politically conscious individual, an adda (gossip) loving personality, who loves travelling and lastly, and most importantly a person who is a connoisseur of good food.

Bengal is known for its sweets and Bengalis do have a sweet tooth probably matching with their language. One cannot imagine a typical Bengali platter without rice and fish (mach bhaat) and ending with a variety of traditional (and novel) Bengali sweets (mishti). The younger generation identifies Kolkata's cuisine with rolls (paratha with stuffings of meat), biriyani and Kolkata type Chinese dishes. Bengal boasts of not only giving India her National Anthem and National Song but also gifting palatable and widely appreciated confectionery that has, over the years, even crossed the boundaries of India and have become popular far and wide.

But do you know some of the typical Bengali cuisines which Bengalis cannot do without, which are inseparable from the Bengali food platter, let alone the Bengali psyche, and which have great culinary appeals to many Indians and even foreigners, are essentially not Bengali but have roots in distant foreign lands?

I am sure it would be a startling revelation if it is stated that Bengalis owe their famed sweets, - sandesh and rosogollas, - to the Portuguese and their quintessential addatime snack singara (the Bengali equivalent of samosa) to the Persians.

Let us delve into the unbelievably fascinating culinary history of some of the quintessentially Bengali cuisines which have become inseparable aspects in the life of a Bengali whether staying at Kolkata or Kuala Lumpur, Siliguri or San Francisco.

### Sandesh & rosogolla: the chhena revolution (with a Portuguese twist?)

The bond between Bengalis and sweets seems almost eternal. In Bengali culture guests are treated to variety of sweets on any occasion, be it a joyous one or even a sad one. Any ceremonial Bengali meal is deemed incomplete without sweets at the end, notably sandesh, rosogolla and mishit doi (sweet curd). The world of a Bengali revolves around sweets. West Bengal's rosogolla has received a GI tag in 2017 recognizing its origin from West Bengal. Ironical as it may appear, West Bengal observes 14th November as state Rosogolla Day as it also observes World Diabetes Day. Sandesh has been referred to as the emblem of Bengaliness.

Sandesh, rosogolla and other Bengali sweets are made from chhena (cottage cheese). While these Bengali sweets are undeniably local creations and innovations, their very existence is linked to the Portuguese influence. Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 17th century, curdled milk was considered impure and thus inauspicious and could not be offered to



Hindu deities. The Portuguese, with their cheese making traditions, are credited with popularizing the use of acid (like lime juice) to curdle milk leading to creation of chhena. Thus, this Portuguese love for cheese changed the culinary landscape leading pioneering Bengali confectioners like Nabin Chandra Das to create rosogolla and sandesh using chhena—a byproduct of curdled milk.

### Singara: the triangular traveler

This Bengali equivalent of samosa is probably the most favorite and most ubiquitous tea time snack in Bengal. This neatly folded, tightly packed savory is a must on a rainy evening, during any adda session, or even in the midst of a busy diabetes OPD, usually enjoyed with hot piping milk tea. The Bengali singara is distinctly triangular with a noticeable "seam" and its filling is a delightful mix of diced potatoes, cauliflower, peas and sometimes even peanuts—a true Bengali vegetable medley! Originally named samsa (from Persian sambosag meaning triangular patty), the singara had its birth in Persia (present day Iran) and spread to Egypt and Libya and to the Indian subcontinent. Samosa was introduced to South Asia by the middle eastern chefs of the Delhi Sultanate; introduction of potato, the indispensable filling of a traditional Bengali singara, was again a Portuguese contribution. How singara got its name is not known for certain but the name may have been derived from the local name of the fruit—water chestnut or water caltrop, to which the snack has a similarity in looks.

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### Chop: the humble potato goes global

Bengal is known for chops of various kinds – fish chop, mutton chop, vegetable chop, potato chop (aloor chop), banana chop (mochar chop) ,-- to name only the more popular ones.



Telebhaja (deep fried snacks) is a favorite street food that is enjoyed while on the go with puffed rice (muri) and tea. The term chop originally comes from Anglo-Indian cuisine and its food processing practice and chop in Bengali translates into a small cutlet, fritter or croquette. Thus, the chops of Bengal have a connection with the British and aloor chop of telebhaja fame, - the much talked about and universally affordable and available, ultimate

Bengali street food snack, draws its origin to British and Portuguese roots.

### Shukto: the bitter sweet conundrum

Shukto is a traditional Bengali preparation, a popular vegetable dish in its purest form, bittersweet and salty in taste, consumed with white rice as a starter or appetizer to any meal, particularly lunch. It is served at the beginning of any Bengali meal on a daily basis as also in social ceremonies like annaprasan (rice initiation ceremony), wedding lunch or in shraddha (memorial meeting of the dead). Shukto serves as a cooling appetizer in the hot and humid climate of Bengal.

Though shukto has roots in ancient India and was likely inspired by Ayurvedic principles for digestive health, it is believed by some to have been influenced by Portuguese cuisine during their colonization in Bengal. The Portuguese reportedly used a similar dish, possibly as a palate refresher featuring bitter gourd and



local ingredients, a practice which was later adopted by the Bengalis incorporating their own flavors of preferences, and ingredients like milk, lentil dumplings (bori), mustard oil and unique spices.

### Potoler dolma: the Ottoman opulence

Ask any Bengali, he or she will tell you that potoler dolma (also pronounced as dorma) is atypical Bengali delicacy often served in ceremonial meals. This is a Bengali dish featuring stuffed pointed gourd that has a fascinating history rooted in cross cultural culinary exchange. The word dolma itself originates from Turkish word dolmak meaning to be stuffed. Infact, in Türkiye and Northern Cyprus share taxis or minibuses run which are called dolmuş that often ply, seemingly stuffed with people. Stuffed vegetable dishes have been part of Levantine (roughly Ottoman Syria) cuisine for centuries. The origins of dolma likely stem from Armenian culinary traditions before being integrated into Ottoman Turkish cuisine.



The Armenians, who migrated to escape Turkish persecution, brought their culinary traditions including dolma with them to Calcutta. It is possible that dolma was first cooked by the Turkish chefs in the royal kitchens of Alivardi Khan or the culinary delicacy could have emerged from the kitchen of Armenian settlers near Saidabad, particularly from the cooking arena of wealthy businessmen like Khoja Wajib.

The Bengali version of potoler dolma can have minced meat, shrimps, fish, soaked gram flour, coconut or cottage cheese as its filling but the prawn stuffing was probably introduced by the Armenians.

Potoler dolma is today not only popular among Bengali Hindus but is also served as a delicacy during Eidul fitre or Nouruz (Parsi New Year) or Armenian Christmas

### Pulao : the Persian pleasure

If you ask any Bengali kid what he or she wants to have in any happy ceremonial meal, the answer invariably will be polau mangsho (polau and meat). The typical Bengali basanti polau is known for its vibrant yellow colour and mildly sweet taste. The word basanti refers to the yellow hue, which is achieved by adding turmeric or saffron. It is a delicacy often prepared during festive dinners as in Durga Puja or Bengali New Year.

The polau has a rich culinary history matching its rich taste and is rooted to Indian and Persian traditions. It is believed to have originated earlier than biriyani. The name came from the Persian or Arabic word pilaf or pillaao.

Pilaf finds its reference first in the writings of Avicenna; mentions are also there in Yajñavalkya's Smṛiti and Tamil literature.

During the Mughal era, pulao became a staple in royal kitchens, often enriched with saffron, nuts and aromatic spices. The Shahjahani zard pulao, a saffron-infused rice dish, is believed to have influenced the development of basanti pulao. Over time, the zamindars of Murshidabad adapted the dish to their taste incorporating gobindo bhog rice, ghee, cashews and raisins to create a unique balance of sweetness and aroma.



### Biriyani : the Nawab's potato paradox

Kolkata is known to the younger generation Indians for its biriyani. Kolkata biriyani has a distinctive taste and composition. This is one food stuff which is popular both as a street food as well as an important food item in the menu of upscale eateries.

Biriyani's culinary history is a fascinating blend of Persian and Indian influences. The origin of biriyani can be traced back to Tolsfahan's beriyān (fried meat on flat bread) evolving into beriyāni brinj (rice biriyani).

While biriyani reigns supreme across the Indian subcontinent, Kolkata's version stands apart. It's the one where a humble potato isn't just allowed, it's essential!

Legend has it when the dethroned Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was packed off to Calcutta by the British, his entourage brought the Awadhi biriyani to the city of palaces. The Kolkata biriyani's defining mark is the invariable chunk of a large potato. There is really no documented evidence, but it is assumed that with rising expenses and eroding of experience over generations meat chunks were reduced and potato pieces added instead. A true Bengali biriyani lover today would rightfully complain if a plate of Kolkata biriyani was served without the potato chunk—it has indeed added a delicious dimension to the biriyani.



There is indeed an outlet in the southern part of Kolkata which is run by a person who claims to be a descendant of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh and serves authentic Awadhi biriyani, the Kolkata style.

### Chingri malai curry : creamy prawn puzzle

Chingri or prawn malaicurry is another very much Bengali delicacy cooked and served on special occasions. This iconic Bengali prawn curry, luxurating in a rich, creamy coconut milk gravy is a culinary enigma. While the exact origin is debated, some theories suggest Malayasian influence, with the name malai potentially referring to the creamy texture or a Malayasian connection. The dish has somewhat similarity with Malay curryudang (cocunut prawn curry) and may have its roots traced to spice trade. Be that as it may, specific blend of Bengali spices and preparation method make it uniquely Bengali and supremely tasty, regardless of its potential distant cousins.



### Epilogue

Bengal has been colonized by many foreign powers in her chequered history and had led in opposing colonial dominance and oppression. But at the same time she has imbibed many good things from those invaders and the culinary sphere is one such. Bengal had become the melting pot of many civilizations ranging from the central Asians, the British, the Portuguese and other European powers. Receptive as we are in our thoughts, Bengalis have been quite generous in accepting the goodness of foreign cuisines and incorporating them into her own with necessary adaptations and innovations. Thus the Bengali cuisine has evolved over decades and centuries into a very rich, diverse and dynamic one.



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