

Much ado about the bhorta

What does it take to be the quintessential Bengali? Some would say it is the celebrations that help us connect with our roots; most others would suggest the values and the etiquette and love for tradition.

But for once, all would agree that food is one of the most important factors that connect us all and bhortas are right up there amongst the list of scrumptious items.

Bangladeshis feel a certain kind of ownership when they speak about the bhorta. Try to convince one 'desi', that the sound should not be 'bhorta' but 'bharta'; they would immediately cringe, squirming in their seats.

'Mach-e Bhaat-e Bangali' is a popular adage but so is 'Bataa aar Bhorta'. To understand the depth of the attachment we must delve a bit into history.

In the pre-Independence era of Bangladesh, bhortas were regular staple food for the average household - easy to make, with no expensive ingredients used; clarified Anisa Zaman, a Dhaka based social anthropologist.

However, according to Zaman, today, the bhortas have surpassed the staple food tag and emerged into every household, breaking all sorts of barriers.

It is not only during special occasions that we enjoy the delectable item but almost on every occasion that calls for a desi celebration - a menu without different types of bhorta would simply be incomplete. What is it exactly about 'bhortas' that make us Bangladeshis go weak in the knee?

Some would say that it's the spices, while few others would rave about the fresh ingredients. But most would agree that the magic actually lies in the hands of the cook.

The key technique is that a bhorta must be made with the press of the human hand, cascading all the hidden feelings, love and affection.

Yes! That's the secret technique and one of the most important ingredients to a bona fide, taste bud tantalising bhorta.

Delving a bit more into history, we would also be able to find that Bengali Muslims in the united India were the first to discover bhortas and use it to fill up their plates.

Later on, the rules transcended every race and religion, encouraging most of the

there are about 100 types of leafy green vegetables and more than 500 types of fish; there was definitely no way to escape the conception.

The story may seem ordinary and comprehensible until now. But here's the interesting part. How did this poor man's diet transcend all barriers to become a bonafide savoury item and a nationally acclaimed

writes on to reveal a terrific story that intertwines the story of the bhorta with the story of Bangladeshi people.

The country and its people went through a lot of struggle and conflict with huge impacts on their identity. In 1947, the united India broke away to form a united Muslim majority Pakistan. East Bengal separated to become East Pakistan.

Then in 1971, East Pakistan fought fiercely to break away from West Pakistan and become our very own sovereign Bangladesh.

The entire transformation was not just a war on the frontiers or just a political struggle. It was much more than that; it was a war between ideologies and culture.

According to cultural historian and writer Niaz Zaman in her book 'Bosha Bhat To Biryani: The Legacy Of Bangladeshi Cuisine'; Bangladeshis divulged head first, looking for uniqueness in every aspect calling for a serious separation. Biryanis, kormas and kebabs, no matter how much loved, became a remnant of foreign culture after independence.

Bangladeshis learned to look deep within, to the simple regional roots of the bhorta, bhajis (sauteed vegetables) and panta bhaat (fermented rice) and hence began its long journey with the bhorta and Bangaliyana (Bengalhood).

Having said all that, besides being super tasty, bhortas have been able to do the unimaginable - lower the gap between the rich and the poor's dietary traditions and help build a sort of association between countrymen that transcends any sort of social and psychological barrier.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury

Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel

Food prepared by chef of Lakeshore



populace in Bengal to adapt to the tasteful delicacy. Hindus however have been known to skip garlic as a key ingredient, unlike the Muslims.

So, ever wonder how the fondness intensified in Bangladesh? Some would say it was inevitable.

With a riverine dominated topography,

dish?

The narrative becomes a bit more complex from here; we must address a serious sociological phenomenon.

The creation of Bangladesh as a nation did not happen in just a single day, admits noted food connoisseur and journalist Pritha Sen, in one of her online reports. She

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