

BHOG, as we know it

Foodies in the southern peninsula of Asia must know who Kaniska Chakraborty is! They must know that he also goes by the name of 'Dudefood' on social media, is an ardent food blogger, and claims to have an alter ego — of a true blue food enthusiast.

...And all this doesn't come as a surprise because his mother, Krishna Chakraborty, an ardent food enthusiast herself, is equally committed to food, and in the process, raised a son who takes pride in devoting most of his spare time to...

Yes! You guessed it right— food.

So, when we were on the lookout for people knowledgeable about Puja and Bhog recipes, we just knew no one fits the bill better than Mom Chakraborty herself!

And our expectation was accurate. Krishna was full of delight, to be able to share her thoughts on the matter.

"Durga Puja is the time of the month when every Hindu tries to be a part of the Bhog process, either by preparing it, or consuming it.

"Bhog unites people; as long as there is some scrumptious khichuri, no one complains about the shouting, screaming, or the serpentine queues formed in front of the purohit (priest)!"

But the constituents of Bhog differs between families, some offer completely vegetarian dishes, while others offer fish, chicken, buffalo, lamb, and even pigeon!

Krishna explained the complex nature of the menu, "Our familial tradition has been to offer 'veg-dishes.' There are

so many other families that offer meat and

items as well, like rice pudding, luchi-halwa, sandesh, and lots of narkel naru (coconut laddu) and gurer naru (coconut and jaggery laddu)."

In ancient times, Puja had strict protocols and stringent culinary rules; only male Brahmin cooks, also known as thakurs, shouldered the responsibility of preparing the Bhog. We wanted to know whether the same system existed in the present day or not.

"Today, things have changed immeasurably; womenfolk from every Hindu household are proficient in preparing Bhog, the tradition of cooking, with the help of Thakurs, has almost ended!" Krishna said.

But is it vegetable Khichuri all throughout the 10 days, or is there any difference to the schedule? We wanted to familiarise ourselves with the course...

Krishna was insightful, explaining, "The first few days, we are very content with our lives and everything around us, because Ma (goddess Durga) is with us, she decides to visit us on Earth, but on Dashami, the mood is slightly sombre, because she chooses to leave. Her stay with us is over for the year. There is no special Bhog on this day, just left-over food from the night before, and paanta bhaat (fermented rice)."

As we discuss more about the changes that can be witnessed over the years regarding Puja and Bhog, Krishna sounded a little bit anxious. "Today, most of the sweets offered as Bhog are store-bought instead of home-made, unlike the good old days, and why shouldn't it be?"

No one has the time to prepare so many dishes! Everyone is busy with jobs. Plus, with the waning joint-family culture, there's no extra help from other members of the family. Instead, one has to do everything by themselves. So, many things have changed in the course of time — which was probably unthinkable back in the day," confessed the culinary expert.

An important information that Krishna imparted was that both the 'veg' and 'non-veg' dishes prepared as Bhog are sans onions, garlic, and seasoned turmeric. "In the past, the food was explicitly simple; people were not even familiar with the use of onions and garlic in their food. There was no extra glamour. People used to cook their daily food and Bhog with whatever was available in the pantry, and perhaps, the culture remained," elaborated Krishna.

And then there is the curious case of the dishes; number of thalas offered to the priest as Bhog, from the enormous 72 count to the smaller fifteen, ten, or even five thalas at a time.

fish to the goddess, but these offerings must be sacrificed in her name first, before considering it as Bhog. The cooking process of the *niramish mangsho* is slightly different from the regular meat dishes," explained the seasoned cook.

"We put forward vegetable khichuri, with stir-fried bitter gourd, eggplant, raw banana and spiced potato curry (dum aloo) with deep fried flat bread (luchi); there's a lot of sweet

