

PERSPECTIVE

BY SHAHANA HUDA



The rice story



Traditionally, farmers in Bengal produced many variants of rice, many of which are fast disappearing. These grains were used to prepare dishes on special occasions. Shahana Huda Ranjana takes a walk down memory lane and remembers the agricultural heritage of this land, and the culinary delights that are now remnants of the past.

Back in the days of yore, on a visit to my paternal grandfather's house in Nilphamari, a particular sight caught my fledgling eyes, 8-10 people sitting on a floor-mat laid out in the veranda and eating heartily. They were farmers, also known as 'proja' in the area. Grandmother used to feed them with buckets full of tinted rice, vegetables, green chillies and onions. Sometime later, I

noticed a peculiarity regarding the rice — it didn't resemble the typical variant which we regularly consumed as *bhaat* or *khichuri*. The grains were comparatively smaller and rounded. Later, I came to know that it was known as the *Kaun* — a common produce in the northern regions. The poor and the underprivileged commonly enjoyed a plate of this unique variety of rice as it was nutrition heavy, and made a person feel fuller for longer.

On another instance, I saw the same people preparing a special dish out of ripe jackfruit and *kaun* rice. They sliced the fruit in half and mixed the contents with *kaun*. This certainly increased my curiosity for the special variety and my grandmother, having sensed my interest, offered me a plate,



added with onions, oil, mashed potatoes and fried egg. My aunt also offered a plate of *kaun* rice pudding with thickened milk. Oh! What a delicacy it was.

In the later years of my life, I saw the same variety of rice in the organic stores of Dhaka. The stores were selling the same thing at a much higher price. The years



have also taught me that with *kaun*, we could prepare a dish of plain rice, *khichuri* (hotchpotch) and even rice pudding. But I was still sceptical about the taste of *kaun* and jackfruit as a combination!

A similar narrative that I experienced was with chipped rice or the *khude bhaat*. Back in the day, when it was commonplace, and almost a ritual to wash and clean rice at home, broken bits were separated and fed to the poor. Sometimes even 'chipped pilaf' was cooked as a delicacy. Overtime, this ritual of cooking pilaf with broken bits of specialty rice was given a name — *boukhud*.

In Mymensingh, the same preparation is known as *boubhaat*. Nowadays, in many restaurants we get to see the same preparation of *boukhud* alongside regular pilaf rice. *Boukhud* entails, chipped rice

khichuri (hotchpotch) prepared with a dash of ginger, turmeric, dried chillies and onions stirred into the mixture. This dish needs to be accompanied with spicy eggplant, potatoes, dried fish, and a fried mixture of mashed black cumin and mustard.

This special rice can also be an exclusive item for breakfast. Another interesting menu that could be the prepared with the *khude bhaat* is the semolina-rice pudding.

A particular variety of rice that is famous in the regions of Sylhet and Chattogram is the *bashful*. The breath-taking aroma can be experienced at most restaurants in both of these districts. The specialty rice is fine-looking, almost like *basmati*. However, these look very different when uncooked; usually shorter and plumper in shape; when cooked the grains lengthen to incredible proportions, with excellent aroma and taste.

On most occasions in these districts, the *bashful* rice is often cooked in combination with fish, mutton rezala, skinny fries, thickened *shonamug* lentils, mashed-fried vegetables and *murighonto* — a spicy aromatic dish entailing fish head and flavoured rice. A vegetable concoction or a vegan *khichuri* is also a popular item prepared with the *bashful*.

Not long ago, in Bangladesh, people used to make rice cakes and hotchpotch out of *atapchaal*. Even today, the plump variety of this special rice is available at certain rice markets. However, *atap* is not a good selection for the preparation of pilaf; instead, in bigger-scale ceremonies, the *atap khichuri* is primed with a significant dose of milk.