

## **BENGALI CUISINE:**

### **HISTORY:**

- 1) A distinct culinary tradition emerged in Bengal based on the availability of local ingredients. The great river systems, heat and humidity combine with the fertile soil to allow rice and an abundance of vegetables to thrive; these became the corner stones of the diet. Mangoes, bananas, coconuts, and cane sugar grew in abundance; fish, milk, and meat were plentiful; yogurt and spices such as ginger and black mustard would season the dishes.
- 2) Even though fish and meat were generally popular, there was a predisposition to vegetarianism, based on religious principles, that has continued to the present.
- 3) Rice, the staple of Bengalis since ancient times, has remained untouched by the currents of religious change and its preparation has held to a continuing high standard. One crop a year was sufficient to sustain the people, providing ample leisure time for the Bengalis to pursue cultural ideals: folklore, music, and the culinary arts. Before the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th century, the staple of Bengali cuisine was locally grown rice, as it is today. According to *Shunya Purana*, a medieval text, fifty kinds of rice were grown in Bengal.
- 4) In the 9th and 10th century, there were over 40 varieties of rice, 60 kinds of fruits and more than 120 varieties of vegetables in Bengal. Vegetables included cucumber, carrot, various kinds of gourds, garlic, fenugreek, radish, lotus root, mushroom, eggplant, and green leafy vegetables. Among the fruits eaten were peaches, water melon, banana, mango, amalaka, lime (nimbu), grapes, oranges (imported from China or Indochina around the beginning of the Christian era), pear (also introduced by the Chinese), jujube, almond, walnuts, coconut, pomegranates, bananas, and many fruits with no Western equivalent.
- 5) Until the 12th century, spices used in Bengali cooking were limited to turmeric, ginger, mustard seed, long pepper, poppy seeds, asafoetida, and sour lemon. Long pepper was replaced first by black peppercorns brought from the west coast of India and later by the cheaper chili, which thrived in Bengali soil. Spice traders also brought cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves. Various methods of preparation were used, including frying in both shallow and deep fat. Cooking media included ghee by those who could afford it, mustard oil, still popular today in Bengal, and sesame oil.
- 6) The European traders introduced food from the New World - potatoes, chillies, and tomatoes. Bengalis incorporated them into their diet, combining them with a variety of native ingredients creating new dishes.
- 7) The Bengali love of sweets goes back into the Middle Ages. Sugar has been grown in Bengal and India since ancient times, as indicated by its Sanskrit name, *sharkara*. Texts dating back to the 12th and 13th century texts describe a number of dishes based on milk, partly thickened milk, and milk solids.

BENGAL, the land of *maach* (fish) and *bhat* (rice), of *rosogolla* and *sandesh*. The cuisine of West Bengal differs from that of Bangladesh. The Brahmins of Bengal eat fish and no celebration is complete without it. The market is flooded at anytime with all sizes and shapes of carp, salmon, *hilsa*, *bhetki*, *ruji*, *magur*, prawns, *koi* etc which can be fried, steamed or stewed with curd. Most of the Bengalis will not touch the salt water fish complaining that the fish is not sweet enough. Historically, food in Bengal has always been strongly seasonal. The range of food materials in moist and fertile Bengal is exceptionally wide, ranging from cereals, tubers and rhizomes, vegetables, green pot herbs to a variety of spices and fish.

The most important part eating Bengali food is eating each dish separately with a little bit of rice. Bengali cuisine is a combination of vegetarian and non – vegetarian dishes. A day begins with *moori* (*puffed rice*) with potatoes, cucumber, green chilli and mustard oil, *tea or milk*.

### **CUISINE CHARACTERISTICS:**

1. The staple food of Bengal is **rice and fish**. The fishes commonly used in this cuisine includes Hilsa (*Ilish*), Carp (*Rui*), Dried fish (*shootki*), Indian butter fish (*pabda*), Clown knife fish (*Chitol maach*), Mango fish (*Topsey*), Sea Bass (*Bhetki*), Prawns / Shrimps (*Golda chingri / kucho chingri*), Catfish (*Tangra / Magur*), Perch (*koi*), *Katla*. Lightly fermented rice is also used as breakfast in rural and agrarian communities (*panta bhat*).
2. The principal medium of cooking is **mustard oil**. A distinct flavour is imparted to the fish dishes by frying them in mustard oil, before cooking them in the gravy. Mustard paste is also commonly used for the preparation of gravies.

3. Fish is also steamed by the Bengalis (e.g, *Bhapa Ilish* ). The most preferred form of meat in Bengal is mutton, or goat meat. *Khashi* (castrated goat) or *Kochi pantha* (kid goat), is also common.
4. **Special seasonings** such as i) *panch phoron* - a combination of Cumin seeds (*jeera*), Fennel seeds (*mouri*), mustard seeds (*sorse*), Methi seeds and onion seeds (*kalonjee*). Sometime Celery seeds (*radhuni*) also becomes a part of the panch phoron. (ii) Radhuni (iii) Poppy seeds (*posto*) are extensively used in the cuisine.
5. The **garam masala** made up of Cloves (*laung*), Cinnamon (*dalchini*), Nutmeg (*Jaiphal*), Mace (*Javitri*), small and large cardamom (*Elichi*) etc.
6. Bengalis also eat **flowers** like those of *bokphul*, pumpkin, banana, water reeds, tender drumsticks and peels of potato or pumpkin.
7. A lunch consists of Rice, *Bhaja* (assorted fried items including vegetables and fish), Leafy vegetable - *Saag* (palong saag, Pui saag, Lal saag etc), Sukto, Various dals (lentil) such as *Moong*, *Masoor*, *Beuli*, *Arhar*, *Cholar dal* etc, followed by different Vegetarian preparations, Fish and Meat (Chicken or Mutton) preparations. This is followed by the *Chutney* and *papad* and finally the sweets of which there are endless mouth watering varieties such as *Rosogolla*, *Sandesh*, *Misti doi*, *Rabri*, *Mihidana*, *Sitabhog*, *Rajbhog*, *Kamalabhog*, *Kalakad* etc
8. Roti, Paratha, Luchi are also common.
9. The very common snacks include the “*Jhal moori*” various kinds of *Telebhaja* (*Chops* - vegetable, egg etc, *Beguni*, *Peyazi*), *kachudi*, *singhada*, egg roll, chicken roll, puckha (puffed mini stuffed with mashed potato and dipped in tamarind water), nimkis (maida dough rice with black onion seeds shaped into triangles and deep fried), chanachur etc.
10. **Sweet Dishes** reflect a special culinary expertise of the state and the variety is one of the largest in the global culinary spectacle. The most common ones include: *Rosogolla*, *Sandesh* (*Narompak* – soft or *korapak* – hard), *Misti doi*, *Rabri*, *Mihidana*, *Sitabhog*, *Rajbhog*, *Kamalabhog*, *Kalakad*, *Chum chum*, *Jolbhora*, *ladycanny/ladykini*, *Chaler payash*, *Chenar payash*, *darbesh*, *Malpoa*, *shor bhaja*, *langcha* etc. The two basic ingredients of Bengali sweets are sugar and milk. The milk is thickened either by boiling it down to make a thick liquid called *khoa*, or by curdling it with lemon juice or yogurt to produce curds, called *channa*. Sugar is not the only ingredient with which the sweetness is imparted in the sweets, various jaggery (*gur*) which includes patali gur, khejur gur (date jaggery) etc. The main body of the sweets are mostly made of *coconut*, *til seeds*, *rice*, *rice flour*, *refined flour* etc apart from *Chenna*.

Traditional home made delicacies include the following:

- Various kinds of *Pitha* (a pancake like sweet base of semolina or flour which is rolled around a variety of fillings like coconut and kheer and fried in ghee - *chandrapuli*, *gokul*, *pati shapta*, *chitai piṭha*, *aski pithe*, *muger puli* and *dudh puli*). *Pithas* are usually made from rice or wheat flour mixed with sugar, jaggery, grated coconut etc. These are usually enjoyed with the sweet syrups of *Khejur gur* (Date tree molasses)/ they are usually fried or steamed – the most common ones include *bhapapitha* (steamed), *Pakanpitha* (fried) and *Pulipitha* (dumplings)
- *Moa* (flat rice or puffed rice bound with jaggery cooked to a correct degree and then made into dumplings). Another popular kind of moa is Jaynagarer Moa, a moya particularly made in Jaynagar, South 24 Parganas district, Paschimbanga (West Bengal) which uses *khoi* and a sugar-milk-spices mixture as binder. Moas are made specially during winter.
- *Naru* (Grated coconut or til seeds bound with cooked jaggery or sugar and formed into dumplings) etc.
- *Aamsotto* (thickened mango pulp) is another home made delicacy.

### A TYPICAL BENGALI MEAL STRUCTURE

The procession of tastes at a meal runs from a bitter start to a sweet finish.

- To start with, especially at lunch, is *Sukto*.
- Rice is first savoured with ghee, salt and green chillis, then comes dhal accompanied by fried vegetables (*bhaja*) or boiled vegetables (*bhate*), followed by spiced vegetables like *dalna* or *ghonto*.
- Then comes fish preparations, first lightly-spiced ones like *maccher jhol*, and then those more heavily spiced.

- This would be followed by a sweet-sour *ambal* or *tauk* (chutney) and fried papads. The chutney is typically tangy and sweet; usually made of *aam* (mangoes), tomatoes, *anarôsh* (pineapple), *tetul* (tamarind), *pepe* (papaya), or just a combination of fruits and dry fruits called mixed fruit chutney served in *biye badi* (marriage).
- A dessert of *mishti-doi* (sweet curds), accompanied by dry sweets, or of *payesh*, accompanied by fruits like the mango, will end the meal, with *paan* (betel leaves) as a terminal digestive.

Traditionally meals were served on a bell-metal thala (plate) and in the batis (bowls, except for the sour items). The night meal omits shukto and could include luchis, a palao and a dalna of various delicately spiced vegetables.

### **COMMON BENGALI COOKING STYLES:**

1. AMBAL : A sour dish made either with several vegetables or with fish, the sourness being produced by the addition of tamarind pulp.
2. BHAJA : Anything fried, either by itself or in batter.
3. BHAPA : Fish or vegetables steamed with oil and spices. A classic steaming technique is to wrap the fish in banana leaf to give it a faint musky, smoky scent.
4. BHATE : Any vegetable, such as potatoes, beans, pumpkins or even dal, first boiled whole and then mashed and seasoned with mustard oil or ghee and spices.
5. BHUNA : A term of Urdu origin, meaning fried for a long time with ground and whole spices over high heat. Usually applied to meat.
6. DALNA : Mixed vegetables (echor) or eggs, cooked in a medium thick gravy seasoned with ground spices, ginger especially garom mashla (hot spices) and a touch of ghee.
7. DOM : Vegetables, especially potatoes, or meat, cooked over a covered pot slowly over a low heat.
8. GHANTO : Different complementary vegetables (e.g., cabbage, green peas, potatoes or banana blossom, coconut, chickpeas) are chopped or finely grated and cooked with both a phoron and ground spices. Dried pellets of dal (boris) are often added to the ghanto. Ghee is commonly added at the end. Non-vegetarian ghantos are also made, with fish or fish heads added to vegetables. The famous murighanto is made with fish heads cooked in a fine variety of rice. Some ghantos are very dry while others a thick and juicy.
9. JHAL : Literally, hot. A great favourite in West Bengali households, this is made with fish or shrimp or crab, first lightly fried and then cooked in a light sauce of ground red chilli or ground mustard and a flavoring of panch-phoron or kala jeera. Being dryish it is often eaten with a little bit of dal pored over the rice.
10. JHOL : A light fish or vegetable stew seasoned with ground spices like ginger, cumin, coriander, chilli and turmeric with pieces of fish and longitudinal slices of vegetables floating in it. The gravy is thin yet extremely flavourful. Whole green chillies are usually added at the end and green coriander leaves are used to season for extra taste.
11. KALIA : A very rich preparation of fish, meat or vegetables using a lot of oil and ghee with a sauce usually based on ground ginger and onion paste and garom mashla.
12. KOFTAS (or Boras) : Ground meat or vegetable croquettes bound together by spices and/or eggs served alone or in savoury gravy.
13. KORMA : Another term of Urdu origin, meaning meat or chicken cooked in a mild yoghurt based gravy with ghee instead of oil.
14. KASSA: This is a way of cooking for specially red meats like lamb or mutton is bhunoad in a very thick spicy masala of onion, ginger, garlic, chilli powder, turmeric powder and cumin powder and made into a gravy sort.
15. PORA : Literally, burnt. Vegetables are wrapped in leaves and roasted over a wood or charcoal fire. Some, like eggplants (brinjals/aubergines), are put directly over the flames. Before eating the roasted vegetable is mixed with oil and spices.
16. PHORON: It is predominantly the kind of tempering, which is used in the preparation of lentils, with various lentils having their own tempering.

### **COMMON BENGALI COOKING EQUIPMENTS:**

1. Bonti :- A curved raised blade attached to a long, flat cutting vegetables, fish and meat. The bonti used for fish and meat is kept separate from vegetable bonti and the non-veg ansh-bonti (ansh implies scales of fish).
2. Hari :-A cooking pot with a rounded bottom, slightly narrowed at the neck with a wide rim to facilitate holding, while draining excess of rice water.
3. Dekchi :-Referred as saucepan without a handle, usually of greater depth. Used for boiling, sautéing
4. Karai :-A cooking pot shaped like a Chinese wok, but much deeper. Used for deep frying, stir-frying as well as for preparations and sauces and gravy. It's usually made of iron or aluminium and usually has two-looped handles.
5. Tawa :-It's a griddle, used for making porothas.

6. Thala :-A circular plate of authentically brass, but now a days of steel, on which food is served.
7. Khunti :-Long handled implement of steel or iron with a flat thin belt-shaped piece, used as stirrers.
8. Hatha :-A metal spoon with indentation, used as stirrers and also for transferring food stuffs.
9. Sarashi :-An equipment, used for holding vessels hot on range.
10. Chakni :-A sieve.
11. Chamuch :-A spoon.
12. Sheel nora :-Grinding stone, slab of 16 inches by 10 inches and a small bolster-shaped stone roller 9 inches long. Both the slab and roller are chipped from time to time as they are worn smooth.
13. Hamal Dista :-Mortar and pestle, which could be used in place of sheelnora. Usually used for grinding spices to a fine powder or to a fine paste with the addition of water.
14. Dhenki: A long wooden board mounted on a short pedestal, in the middle, much like a sea-saw. The tradition Bengali instrument of taking the husk off the rice.
15. Ghutni: It is a wooden hand blender used for pureeing lentils and sauces.
16. Jhanjri: It is a large wier meshed flat spoon used for deep frying fish or breads.
17. Belun chaki: Round pastry board and rolling pin.
18. Kuruni: It is a uni - tasker, to grate coconuts.

### **BENGALI FOOD ITEMS:**

#### ghee bhat

- Dolma or Patoler Dolma: The name is coming from Turkey, but the food is different. The vegetable Patol is stuffed either with a combination of grated coconut, chickpeas, etc. or more commonly with fish and then fried. The fish is boiled with turmeric and salt, then bones are removed and then onion, ginger and garam masala are fried in oil and boiled fish is added and churned to prepare the stuffing.
- Paturi: Typically fish, seasoned with spices (usually shorshe) wrapped in banana leaves and steamed or roasted over a charcoal fire.
- Polau: Fragrant dish of rice with ghee, spices and small pieces of vegetables. Long grained aromatic rice is usually used, but some aromatic short grained versions such as Kalijira or Gobindobhog may also be used.
- Tarakri : A general term often used in Bengal the way `curry` is used in English. Originally from Persian, the word first meant uncooked garden vegetables. From this it was a natural extension to mean cooked vegetables or even fish and vegetables cooked together.
- Chorchori : Usually a vegetable dish with one or more varieties of vegetables cut into longish strips, sometimes with the stalks of leafy greens added, all lightly seasoned with spices like mustard or poppy seeds and flavoured with a phoron. The skin and bone of large fish like *bhetki* or *chitol* can be made into a chachchari called kanta-chachchari, *kanta*, meaning fish-bone.
- Chhanchra : A combination dish made with different vegetables, portions of fish head and fish oil (entrails).
- Chhenchki : Tiny pieces of one or more vegetable - or, sometimes even the peels (of potatoes, lau, pumpkin or patol for example) - usually flavored with panch-phoron or whole mustard seeds or kala jeera. Chopped onion and garlic can also be used, but hardly any ground spices.
- Chitol Macher muitha: Chitol is a fish specially consumed during the Durga puja. The meat from the back part after removing the bones is shaped into koftas and simmered into a gravy.
- Chingri malai curry: The preparation is a speciality of the cuisine and is normally prepared during the special occasions. Prawns are stewed in a gravy made with boiled onion paste, thickened with coconut milk with a touch of red chilli powder and turmeric.
- Doi maach: This is a classical preparation of Bengal in which the fish is stewed in a yoghurt based gravy.
- Kasha mangsho: This is a semi – dry preparation of the lamb that gets a unique dark colour from the iron kadhai in which it is cooked and caramelized sugar. This can be had with luchi.
- Dhokar dalna: A gram flour batter is cooked with spices and then spread on a tray and steamed. It is then cut into small pieces in the shape of a diamond and deep – fat fried. The fried dumplings are now stewed in a gravy of boiled onion paste, thickened with gram flour and whole spices.
- Kobiraji cutlet: This preparation is made from the chicken breast which is marinated with turmeric, salt, ginger and garlic paste, onion paste, green chillies and red chilli powder. The marinated chicken is coated in a light batter of rice flour and eggs and deep fat fried until golden brown.
- Aloo posto: Potatoes are cooked in freshly ground poppy seed paste and flavoured with different spices and turmeric.
- Chop: Croquettes, usually coated with crushed biscuit or breadcrumbs.

- Cutlet: Very different from the Cutlets of the Brits, this is referred typically to a crumb coated thinly spread out dough, made generally of chicken/mutton minced, mixed together with onion, bread crumbs and chillies. Generally it is then dipped in egg and coated in breadcrumb, fried and served with thin julienne of cucumber, carrots, radish and onions. Often an egg mixed with a teaspoon or two water and a pinch of salt is dropped on top of the frying cutlet, to make it into a "Kabiraji" the Bengali pronunciation of a "Coverage" Cutlet, influenced by the British.
- Shukto: This is a dish that is essential bitter, made up of neem or other bitter leaves, bitter gourd, brinjals, potatoes, radish and green bananas, with spices like turmeric, ginger, mustard and radhuni (celery seed) pastes.
- Shak: Any kind of green leafy vegetable, like spinach and mustard greens, often cooked till just wilted in a touch of oil and tempering of nigela seeds.

**BENGALI BREADS:** Though Bengalis, primarily loves to eat rice, yet there are a few typical Bengali Breads, which are quite famous in various parts of Bengal. Some of the prominent among these are,

1. Luchi :-Eaten for mainly snacks, equivalent to the north Indian poories (the difference is that luchi is made out of refined flour and fried without colour) and taken very commonly with cholar dal tempered with coconut.
2. Khasta Luchi :-The dough is much richer with fat and flaky. Hence, known as khasta kachuri.
3. Porotha :-It is a kind of flaky bread, made out of whole wheat flour and is essentially triangular in shape.
4. Roti :-Whole wheat flour bread, toasted on griddle.
5. Radhabollobbi :-An urad dal stuffed poori made out of whole wheat flour normally had with *aloo dom*.
6. Dhakai porotha :-Flaky, layered bread from Dhaka in Bangladesh.
7. Matter (green peas) kachuri:-Flaky bread, stuffed with matar (green peas) paste and deep-fried. Heing is commonly used in the green peas mixture.

**SEASONAL AND FESTIVAL CONNECTION WITH BENGALI FOOD:** The Bengali calendar is a solar one based on the six seasons – two months for each of Grishma, Summer; Barsha, Monsoon; Sharat and Hemanta, early and late Autumn; Sheet, Winter and Basanta, Spring.

#### **Summer - Grishma :-**

- Summer vegetables include lau, white gourd, or okra or potol, the small striped gourd or parwal, karola and uchche
- Meat, eggs, onions and garlic, on the other hand, are studiously avoided.
- Neembegun – where small dices of aubergines are fried with the leaves of neem trees is said to have anti-chicken pox properly.
- Especially for lunch menus during summer sukto (a stew of seasonal vegetables, with bitterish in taste) is an integral part of every household menu. And, among the other dishes which makes up the menu, are Moong dal, Masoor dal and lemon, Macher jhol, lau-chingiri, lau-ghanto etc

#### **Monsoon - Rainy (Borsha):**

- The most well-known Bengali dish associated with the monsoon is **Khichuri**, rice and dal cooked together and panchphoran and ghee. There are of course many kinds of khichuris, depending on what kind of dal is being used. The consistency may be thin, thick or dry and fluffy like a pilaf, plain or with seasonal winter vegetables like new potatoes, green peas and cauliflower added to the basic rice-dal mixture. The one constant factor is the use of atap rice, usually of the short-grained variety.
- The vegetable varieties include kachu or taro, pumpkin, kumro, green like shashni shak, puishak, kachu shak. The monsoon is also associated with the **ilish**, called hilsa by the British. It is referred to as the caviar of the tropics.

#### **Sharat - Hemanta - Autumn :-**

- It's the season of festivity. First too come is Lord Biswakarma (god of tools) in which day fire is not lighted in any household. So, all the foods are cooked a day prior and hard. Next, to come is goddess **Durga**. The day of Astami is purely vegetarian, whereby for lunch we have **khichuri**, with papors and pickles, and at dinner after spending the whole evening Pandal hopping, there would be round golden fried luchis, puffed up like a balloon. However, if a lot of fat is observed during the process of making the dough, the bread instead of becoming puffy becomes flaky and is known as khasta luchi. Though luchis, can be eaten with anything, the two classical vegetarian dishes associated with this ceremonial occasion; a potato dish called **alur dam**, and a dal made with yellow splitpeas and tiny pieces of coconut. Alur dam to Bengali means a dish of potatoes, usually whole or quartered, cooked with a thick spicy sauce. It is usually eaten with luchis or wheat-flour chapatis, but not rice. And the dessert course being

**kheer** (simply reduced milk) or **payeesh** (rice cooked in milk and cardamoms flavour). Navami, being the last day of Durga's stay, is gastronomically opposite of Ashtami, meat eating is the order of the day, but without any onion or garlic. And on the evening of Bijoya Dashami, the images in the community **pandals** are loaded on to trucks and taken to the nearest river, the Hooghly in Calcutta, for the final site of bhashan – throwing them into water. It is then in the wake of departed Goddess, that the most beautiful aspect of Bijoya Dashami comes **discarding all ill-feelings of hostility, anger and enmity**. Within the family the younger people touch their elders' feet (pranom) and receive their blessings, while contemporaries embrace each other with good wishes. As the evening deepens, relative's friends and neighbours drop in to convey their Bijoya greetings. They are offered sweets.

- By the end of the month of Kartik (October), urban Bengalis resume their normal pattern of life in school, college and offices. But in rural Bengal this is a time of great expectation. For the following month, **Agrahayan** (November), is also the time to harvest the rice that gave the region its soubriquet, 'Golden Bengal' (**Sonar Bangla**). The name itself, Agrahayan, is compounded of two words – agra (best or foremost) and hayan (unhusked rice).
- Once the rice has been harvested, rural Bengal propitiates the gods for their bounty through the joyful festival of **nabanno**, which literally means 'new rice'. An offering to god of milk, gur, pieces of sugar cane, bananas and above all the new rice.

### Sheet - Winter :

- In the country one can feast your eyes on fields of mustard awash in yellow blossom, on patches of maroon-red lalshak, on the subtle greens of cabbages on the earth and the climbing vine of the lau spreading over thatched roofs and bamboo frames.
- In the city markets the rich, purple aubergines are offset by snowy-white cauliflower's peeking from within their leaves, carrots, tomatoes, beet, cucumbers, scallions and bunches of delicate corriander leaves invite you to stop cooking and make only salads.
- The infinite variety of leafy, green spinach, mustard, laushak, betoshak, muloshak,
- But somehow the most important and joyful thing about winter to a Bengali is the opportunity and ability to eat far more abundantly than during any other season, to indulge in all the rich meats, prawns, eggs and fish dishes.
- The colonial years have left behind the festivities of Christmas and New Year which the Bengali has enthusiastically adopted and the early winter month of Poush sees the **pithaparban**, a folk festival designed specially for the making and eating of large quantities of sweet.
- Cabbages, potatoes and peas became the base for a spicy winter ghanto which rivals the mochar ghanta has been a favourite since medieval times.
- Cauliflower's, combined with potatoes, were made into a rich and fragrant dalna that was a wonderful variation of the summer specialty, the potal and potato dalna.
- As for green peas, the Bengali spurned the plain boiled version served on the dinner tables of his British ruler and made delectable savories like matarshutir kachuri or chirar pulao or the filling for shingara (Samosas) with them, aside from adding them to other vegetable dishes.
- Perhaps, one of the major festivals of winter is the Saraswati puja – goddesses of books and the official harbinger of spring. During Saraswati Puja, eating of **Gotasheddho** is compulsory, whereby none of the vegetables are cut and one just boiled whole. The goddess is offered fruits like apple, shakalu, sugar-cane bits, bananas, dates and kul (a kind of plum) that would be offered to the goddess. The bananas offered to Saraswati are special type, very sweet, but full of large black seeds.

### UNIQUENESS OF BENGALI CUISINE:

An abundant land provides for an abundant table. The nature and variety of dishes found in Bengali cooking are unique even in India. Fish cookery is one of its better-known features and distinguishes it from the cooking of the landlocked regions. Bengal's countless rivers, ponds and lakes teem with many kinds of freshwater fish that closely resemble catfish, bass, shad or mullet. Bengalis prepare fish in innumerable ways - steamed or braised, or stewed with greens or other vegetables and with sauces that are mustard based or thickened with poppyseeds. You will not find these types of fish dishes elsewhere in India. Bengalis also excel in the cooking of vegetables. They prepare a variety of the imaginative dishes using the many types of vegetables that grow here year round. They can make ambrosial dishes out of the oftentimes rejected peels, stalks and leaves of vegetables. They use fuel-efficient methods, such as steaming fish or vegetables in a small covered bowl nestled at the top of the rice cooker.

The use of spices for both fish and vegetable dishes is quite extensive and includes many combinations not found in other parts of India. Examples are the onion-flavored kalonji seeds and five-spice (a mixture of cumin, fennel, fenugreek, kalonji, and black mustard). The trump card card of Bengali cooking probably is the addition of this phoron, a combination of whole spices, fried and added at the start or finish of cooking as a flavouring special to each dish. Bengalis share a love of whole black mustard with South Indians, but the use of freshly ground mustard paste is unique to Bengal.

All of India clamors for Bengali sweets. Although grains, beans and vegetables are used in preparing many deserts, as in other regions, the most delicious varieties are dairy-based and uniquely Bengali.