

The Hour of the GODDESS

Memories
of Women,
Food and
Ritual in
Bengal



'At once a rich, sensuous experience of tastes, colour and fragrances; an intensely personal memoir, historical documentation and social critique' —*The Hindu*

CHITRITA BANERJI



THE HOUR OF THE GODDESS

Memories of Women,
Food and Ritual in Bengal

CHITRITA BANERJI



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Seagull Books Private Limited 2001

First published in paperback by Penguin Books India in association with Seagull Books 2006

Copyright © Seagull Books 2001, 2006

All rights reserved

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN-13: 9-780-14400-1422 ISBN-10: 0-14400-142-X

Typeset in Perpetua by Mantra Virtual Services, New Delhi

Printed at Chaman Offset Printers, Delhi

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser and without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above-mentioned publisher of this book.

*For all the generations of Bengali women who created,
enhanced, and preserved a culinary tradition of
excellence and innovation*

CONTENTS

THE HOUR OF THE GODDESS 1

FEEDING THE GODS 11

PATOLER MA 27

A DOSE OF BITTERS 35

FOOD AND DIFFERENCE 47

CROSSING THE BORDERS 59

THE BONTI OF BENGAL 75

FIVE LITTLE SEEDS 85

WHAT BENGALI WIDOWS CANNOT EAT 95

HOW BENGAL DISCOVERED CHHANA 105

FOOD, RITUAL AND ART IN BENGAL 125

REFERENCES 143

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 145

1

THE HOUR OF THE GODDESS



In New England, as I look out of my window, there is more colour in the leaves than on people during the autumn. The farm stalls and supermarkets proliferate with vegetables and the prospect of warm kitchens is once again welcome. Autumn, in this northern latitude, is the time to start wrapping up, to draw inward from the far-flung activities of the summer, start the school year, and buckle down to the serious business of living.

Thousands of miles from my window, there is a place where autumn is the antithesis of such earnestness. In eastern India it is the holiday season, marked by three major religious festivals. In that lush tropical delta crisscrossed by countless rivers—my native region of Bengal—there is nothing misty or wistful about autumn. It comes riding vigorously on the heels of a receding monsoon. It dissipates the cloud cover, banishes the enervating moisture from soil and air, and lets the earth bask under a kindly sun in a blue, cloud-flecked sky. Its primary icon is that of the many-armed goddess Durga, a resplendent figure, all gold and red, riding a lion and carrying ten different weapons in her ten hands, a potent symbol of victory and hope who destroys the dark demon Mahishasura.

The ebullience of nature and the liberating effect of the holiday season is complemented by another potent pleasure. Autumn, and later winter, is the time to eat well, especially to indulge in the richer foods that are so hard to digest in the heat of the summer or the persistent dampness of the monsoon. The presence of the goddesses elevates food to an almost suprasensory experience. Many Bengali favourites, including meat, are also cooked for them. Once the food is ritually offered and supposedly accepted by the deity, its very nature is transformed. However illusory it sounds, I know that a major part of the pleasure of many festive foods is associated with the

ritual of offering. As if, by preparing and offering food, the earthbound worshipper can bridge the gulf between mortality and divinity.

Whenever I think of the autumn festival of Durga, and of the subsequent ones honouring the goddesses Lakshmi and Kali, I am overcome by the aroma of hot, puffy *luchis* (deep-fried puffed bread), of *alur dam* (slow-cooked spicy potatoes) nestling in a glistening, dark, tamarind sauce, of golden *chholar dal* (yellow split peas) spiced with cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and cardamom, its thick texture flecked with tiny coconut chips fried in sizzling mustard oil. The richness of meat cooked in a fragrant, spicy sauce extends pleasure to the edge of sin. My tongue wraps itself around the cool memory of a rice pudding made with milk evaporated to a rich, pinky-brown creaminess and combined with fragrant *gobindabhog* rice, crushed cardamom seeds, and pistachio morsels.

As with eating, celebration too is marked not by restraint, but by boundless enthusiasm. The autumn festivities are about inclusion and community participation. The bursting bounty of the fields is matched by the joyful throngs, dressed in vibrant new clothes, milling about the streets and visiting the neighbourhood pandals, temporary enclosures where images of the goddess are enshrined for the festival. Celebration in Bengal is inevitably chaotic, exuberant, cacophonous, and above all, public.

My memory of these festivals is always connected to that of my first Christmas in America. Arriving as a student in the autumn, I had kept my homesickness at bay by imagining that Christmas would be a compensatory event. I anticipated the same kind of energy, laughter, and fragrance that festivals had always meant for me. Instead, I found myself inhabiting a ghost town. All the students in my dormitory, except for two other

hapless foreigners like me, had gone home. The cafeteria had shut down. Even the city streets were deserted. Christmas, I discovered, like other festivals here, was a very private family event behind closed doors. The joys of giving, receiving, merrymaking, and eating were off-limits to all but the inner circle. Walking the deserted streets, I went past houses whose windows glowed with many lights. I saw people gathered around tables, the flickering flames of candles. I laughed to myself, wondering what would happen if I rang the doorbell of a house and asked to come in.

Of course I did no such thing. But the pent-up nostalgia for a lost autumn returned forcefully in the desolate winter. I was suddenly filled with a determination to hold on, to capture memory in every shape and form so that neither time nor distance made a void in my heart. No longer afraid of feeling sad, I concentrated instead on remembering every autumn ritual that had sent me forward, year to year. The aromas of signature festive foods came and wrapped me in a comforting cocoon. But I realized with a pang that I did not know how to cook any of them. They had always appeared magically from the loving hands of my mother and relatives. I decided then to learn without any waste of time. Eagerly, I wrote to my mother, asking for recipes and directions and embarked on an experimental period of long-distance cooking lessons.

It has been many years since then. The very different beauty of the New England autumn has, over time, become as precious to me as the remembered season of Bengal. And now, when my calendar shows the beginning of another festive period—three days of worshipping Durga, to be followed by Lakshmi and Kali—and I remember how incense smoke and the crushed petals of marigold, hibiscus, and tuberose lend their scents to the redolence of cooked offerings and delectable family meals,

I, too, am connected. Messages from the goddesses come rustling through the rich-toned foliage of sugar maple, oak, and beech; and memory swells potent, as the aromas, textures and tastes transport me back into a different world.

LUCHIS

FOR SIX PEOPLE

INGREDIENTS

500 gm (1 lb) of flour

2½ teaspoons of ghee or peanut oil

300 ml (10 fl oz) of water

1 teaspoon of salt

METHOD

I usually take 500 gm (1 lb) of flour, which makes five or six luchis for each person. For big eaters you need more. I put the flour on a large tray or platter, preferably with raised sides, add salt and ghee or peanut oil and mix them well. (You can make sure that the oil is sufficient by taking a handful of the flour and pressing it tightly in your fist. If the flour adheres in a lump, the oil is right; if it falls apart, mix in just a little more oil.) After the oil has been well mixed in, the flour has to be kneaded into a dough with water. I generally start with 300 ml (10 fl oz) of water, which I keep adding slowly to the flour as I gather it in from all sides of the tray to make one lump. If you find you still need a little more water, then carefully sprinkle some over the dough. Too much will ruin the dough, making it too thin. Once the flour has become a neat lump, the hard work of kneading starts. The more you do this, the better the quality of dough and the puffier the luchi. Usually ten to twelve minutes of forceful kneading with both palms, pressing

down with the base of the palm, is good enough. At the end, the dough should feel elastic when pulled apart. It is then divided into the little round portions called *nechis*. Each one is smoothed over between the palms and pressed to flatten it, then rolled out on the board as thin as possible to make a 12.5 cm (5 in) *luchi*. The traditional way is to dip the *nechi* into a bowl of oil and then roll it out so that it does not stick to the rolling board. However, the oily surface can be slippery, and the easier way out is to dust each *nechi* very lightly with flour before rolling. A perfect circle is hard to achieve, but this is the ideal. As I roll the *luchis* out, I keep them side by side on a large dry platter or sheet of newspaper spread on the kitchen counter. It is best not to let them overlap too much because they might start sticking to each other. Once seven or eight have been rolled out, I put the *karai* on the stove, heat 120 ml (4 fl oz) of peanut oil in it and start frying. To do this well, hold one side of a *luchi*, lower it gently into the oil—still holding it—and set it afloat like a paper boat. This way you avoid a splash and prevent the thin disk of flour from crumpling up. As it puffs up like a balloon, turn it over with a spatula, fry for a minute more and gently lift it up along the side to drain off all excess oil. A good *luchi* should not be too brown, but creamy-beige in colour. I keep rolling the rest of the *nechis* in between bouts of frying. Hot *luchis* should never be covered, or they will go limp.

CHHOLAR DAL

FOR FOUR PEOPLE

INGREDIENTS

250 gm ($\frac{1}{2}$ lb) of yellow split peas

3 bay leaves

3 whole red chillies
One half of a whole coconut
2 tablespoons of sizzling mustard oil
1½ teaspoons of whole cumin seeds
½ teaspoon of ginger paste
½ teaspoon of ground chilli
1 teaspoon each of fresh ground cumin and coriander
400 ml (13 fl oz) of water
3 teaspoons of sugar
1 tablespoon of ghee
2 teaspoons of ground garom mashla
Salt to taste

METHOD

For chholar dal to feed four people, my mother would weigh out the yellow split peas and cook them in the pressure cooker with double the amount of water, bay leaves and whole red chillies. She left the cooker for about fifteen to twenty minutes on a high flame. By then the cooked dal would be of a thickish consistency and the individual grains would be soft but unbroken. This she would empty out in a bowl and set aside. Then she would take one half of a whole coconut and pry out half the flesh from the shell. The brown skin at the back would be painstakingly peeled with a sharp knife. If you find this too hard, you can try soaking the coconut for ten minutes in a bowl of hot water. Once peeled, the coconut would be chopped into tiny pieces and fried in the sizzling mustard oil in a large karai until they turned pink. She would add whole cumin seeds to the coconut and fry them for a couple of minutes before adding ginger paste, ground chilli, fresh ground cumin and coriander and salt to taste. Once all this had been fried for

two to three minutes, she would pour the dal into the karai. (On bad days when there were no freshly ground spices and she had to fall back on powdered spices, she would pour in the dal after frying the coconut and the whole cumin, adding the other spices later.) The dal would be checked for salt, water added, and the whole mixture assiduously stirred until the grains were mashed. Some sugar would be added; this is a dal in which the sweetness should be a little pronounced. Just before removing the dal from the fire, she would add ghee and ground garom mashla.

ALUR DAM

FOR FOUR TO FIVE PEOPLE

INGREDIENTS

500 gm (1 lb) potatoes
3-4 dry red chillies
3-4 teaspoons of whole cumin seeds
3-4 teaspoons each of cumin and chilli powder
1½ teaspoons of tamarind extract
3 tablespoons of mustard oil
2-3 bay leaves
1 teaspoon of panch phoron
A tiny pinch of asafoetida
¼ teaspoon of turmeric powder
400 ml (13 fl oz) of water
Salt to taste

METHOD

To make alur dam, boil and peel the potatoes—in that order—and quarter them. Take dry red chillies and whole cumin seeds. Toast them in a dry frying pan over a medium flame until the chillies are dark brown. Remove and grind

them as fine as you can in a pestle or on a grinding stone. (If, however, this seems too much trouble, take 3-4 teaspoons each of cumin and chilli powder and roast them together in a frying pan. The taste and flavour will be pretty good, though not as good as that of freshly ground spices.) Next, take tamarind extract and mix it smoothly in a bowl with 60 ml (2 fl oz) of hot water. Set aside. Heat mustard oil in a karai and throw in bay leaves, panch phoron and a tiny pinch of asafoetida crumbled between your fingers. As the panch phoron stops sputtering, put in the potatoes and sprinkle the turmeric powder over them. Stir repeatedly until they turn golden brown and pour in the water. Once it comes to the boil, reduce the heat to medium and simmer for four to five minutes. Then add salt to taste, 2 teaspoons of the roasted spices and the tamarind paste. Stir thoroughly for another three to four minutes and taste to find your balance of salt and sour. You can add more or less of the roasted powder depending on your tolerance for hot food. If the gravy becomes too thick, or too sour, more water can be added.

2

FEEDING THE GODS



