

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

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Bangladesh, although a small country, is rich in ethnic and ecological diversity that influence its tradition, culture, and food types. The deltaic plains of Bangladesh have been famous for rice production from its alluvial agriculture landscapes that have prominently figured in the food habits of the Bangladeshi people. The arrays of waterbodies and the diverse fish therein offer many dishes to brand the nation with the epigram “Fish and rice make a Bengali” more meaningful. Being a country with a Muslim majority, Bangladeshi people usually adhere to the strict rules of the Islamic faith for all aspects of life, including food intakes and dining etiquette.

Wetland products, rice and fish, are traditional favorites with vegetables, *dal* (lentil soup), and occasionally meat also forming a part of the daily staple diet. The rural Bangladeshi people usually start their day with “Panta bhat” – semifermented plain boiled rice soaked overnight in water. This watery rice is then consumed with salt, onion slices, and green or fried chili to fill up the tummy. In urban areas, people generally have their breakfast with handmade *ruti* (bread) prepared from wheat flour, or *parata* with mixed fried vegetables, eggs, and tea. Some people take loaves of bread with banana and milk. There is no practice of taking cereals, but traditionally in winter, *muri* (puffed rice) or *cheera* (flattened rice) or *khoi* (popped rice) is preferred along with milk or yogurt and *gur* (molasses).

The coursewise lunch and dinner more or less comprise a similar set of items such as rice, curry, *vaji* (fried mixed vegetables or leaves), *bhorta* (mashed potato or vegetable or dry fish), and dal. Curry is a variety of dishes with fish, meat, and vegetables either alone or in combination with other vegetables cooked alongside with a blend of spices and herbs. *Bhorta* is made from smooth, fiery, and flavorful mashed veggies or fish either fresh or dry, made with mustard oil, onion, garlic, and red or green chilies to enhance smell and delicacy. *Alu bhorta* (mashed potato), *begoon bhorta* (mashed eggplants), and *shutki bhorta* (mashed dried fish) are the most common accompanying the meal in a rural diet. Innumerable varieties of freshwater fish (*ruhi*, *ilish*, *catfish*, *small shrimp*, etc.), assortments of fruits and vegetables (leafy green, beans, potato, tomato, pumpkin, etc.), and meat (beef, chicken, mutton, and duck) are always the distinctive features of a meal across Bangladesh. Bangladeshi recipes and dishes

exhibit intense aromatic flavors derived from various spices and herbs such as garlic, ginger, lime, coriander, cumin, turmeric, and chili. In some dishes, cardamom and cinnamon are used for enhancing natural flavors in authentic Bangladeshi cooking.

The expression “Baro mashe tero parbon” translating into “Thirteen festivals in twelve months” indicates the occurrence of festivals throughout the year. Each of these festivals brings special food and making its cultural heritage richer. The *Pohela Baishakh* (first day of the Bengali New Year) is deemed to be noncelebratory without fried *ilish* (Hilsa fish) with *panta bhat*. The country’s biggest harvesting celebration *Nabanno* usually marks the harvest of Aman paddy that turns in the preparation of different kinds of heritage “Pithas” (rice cakes) and sweets. Historical old Dhaka has an age-old tradition of hosting the “Iftar” market that brings unique and rare Iftar items during the month-long holy Ramadan. A grand Iftar delicacy in this market is known by the quirky name “Boro baper polay khay” meaning “Eaten by the son of wealthy man.” It is made with a mixture of chickpeas, minced meat, potato, flattened rice, eggs, shredded chicken, spices, and butter. “Biryani” or “Polao” served with meat curries, and desserts signify the religious celebration of a heavenly fervor. Chicken *roast*, mutton *rezala*, *borhani*, and desserts are featured in the wedding and social fiestas.

Snacks are ubiquitous in the daily lifestyle of Bangladesh with tea. A trendy snack is *shingara* with spiced vegetables, chickpeas, and potato wrapped in thin dough, and fried. *Dal puri* is another popular item where flattened flour dough is stuffed with mashed lentils and fried in hot oil. The favorite *fuchka* is a small crispy dough shell filled with thick *chatpati*, finished with grated eggs, and tasted with tamarind juice mix. *Moghlai parata*, *samosa*, *alu puri*, *piyaju*, *pakora*, *haleem*, *jhal muri*, and *kebab* are some much-loved items to add on the snack list.

Bangladesh is endowed with a subtropical monsoon climate that favors the production of a great variety of fruits. These are famous for their taste, flavor, and sweetness. Major fruits include mango, banana, papaya, jackfruit, pineapple, guava, lychee, pomelo, and lemon. The jackfruit is the national fruit for its large size and juiciness. Varieties of mangoes and lychees offer a unique taste and are a delicacy of the Rajshahi, Satkhira, Kustia, Jashore, and Dinajpur regions. Barisal, Patuakhali, and the southern districts are famous for Guava, Amra (*Spondias mombin*), and Chalta (*Dillenia indica*) production.

Homemade rice cakes popularly known as “Pitha” occupy an essential place in the Bangladesh tradition and culinary culture. Although pitha is a favorite for celebrating the winter, it is always prepared and cherished in any Bangladeshi dining table throughout the year. Most pithas are sweet, based on rice or wheat flour, and accompanied with sugar syrup, molasses or date juice, milk, coconut, and spicy gravy. Engraved with attractive designs, regional, and mouthwatering names of pithas have enriched the cultural heritage of Bangladesh. Bhapa pitha, puli pitha, chittoi pitha, and patishapta are some prominent pithas prepared round the year.

Bangladeshi cuisine has a rich tradition of *Misti* (sweets) and desserts. Sweets are mostly milk-based. Attractive sweet treats include *roshmalai* (miniature fried cottage cheese balls dipped in a creamy base), *Misti doi* (sweetened yogurt), *Chomchom* (a syrup-coated cake made from paneer), and *Jilepi* (dough fried in a coil shape dipped in sugar syrup). The art of Bangladeshi *Misti* has reached a stature of excellence bringing each region to have its own set of delicacies. From the *Porabari's Chomchom* of Tangail to the *Kachagolla* of Natore, and *Monda* of Muktagacha, *Roshmalai* of Cumilla, *Balish misti* from Kurigram, *Misti doi* (sweet yogurt) of Bogura, the massive list is bound to get the mouth of anyone watering. *Kheer*, *payesh*, and *jarda* are excellent rice-based desserts flavored with cardamom, saffron, sugar, milk, dry fruits, and nuts and typically served after a meal in festivals and special occasions.

Bangladeshis quench their thirst with a variety of juices, drinks, and traditional beverages. The familiar drink is green coconut water, while *cha* (tea) is the nation's standard beverage. Other trendy drinks include *bel-er shorbat* (wood apple juice), lemonade, sugarcane juice, date juice, yogurt-based *borhani* and *lassi*, and *faluda* (rose syrup with vermicelli and milk), which are equally enjoyed. An age-old *chelay mod* – traditional alcoholic beverage brewed from rice and wild herbs are the favorite drink among the *Adivasi* (tribal) people consumed during daily life and festivals.

Bangladesh by tradition is rich for its delicious foods, sweets, pithas, fruits, and savories. Certain food has become an essential element of a particular celebration and festival, while some special foods entice people in a colorful ceremony. Bangladeshis enjoy the tastes of these delicious traditional foods for ages, and generation after generation, attributing many of the properties of these foods for health and nutrition.