

[Feasting in the Land of Gods](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2005](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 2005

FOOD

Feasting in the Land of Gods

Our intrepid New York correspondent takes us on a five-day vegetarian tour of Mumbai and New Delhi where dining and devotion blend like milk in milk

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For Hindus, food and religious devotion are intricately entwined. I grew up in New Delhi and remember all too well the tiny silver Deities of our home shrine, all dressed up in their pretty silk robes. Every Monday, my mother would bathe these miniature Gods and change their clothes, which she would make herself. She would snip little holes in the middle of small squares of multicolored fabric--then, slip these pieces of fabric over their heads. When these miniature Gods were finally dressed and decorated, she would offer them tasty fruits and sweets on a small silver platter, beautifully arranged with fresh flowers from our own garden.

When we sat down to meals, my mother would first say a silent prayer and place a portion of rice, vegetables and dhal on a plate as an offering to God. This food would later be given to a cow that came meandering through our neighborhood, or to the pushy crows that congregated on our lawns, cawing loudly, edging out the tiny sparrows.

After we would abstain from taking food during a religious festival, my mother would break our fast by feeding children from the neighborhood--giving them gifts of money or fruit as well. Whenever we observed a religious celebration in the homes of our relatives and friends, there would always be a typical Sindhi meal complete with alu tikkis (potato croquettes), chick pea curry, rice and spinach

cooked with dhal and vegetables. This meal would first be offered to the Deity being worshiped, then fed to the priest. Only after this would we partake of the food. Even when we honored the memory of beloved family members who had passed away, we would begin by offering them food along with our prayers. Since this food offering was for a loved one, it would always include the very finest of fried snacks along with our favorite sweets.

As a child, I used to look forward to going to the temple, because it always meant getting a sweet treat. The Lord would never send us away from his home without some prashadam (a food offering). I still remember the sweet choori--a sugary paste of besan flour with nuts and fruits mixed into it. Once, while attending a puja in a small temple at Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, we were offered a complete vegetarian meal on banana leaves. During our visits to Haridwar, we would frequent a small shrine run by an elderly Sindhi couple. They always gave us food that was so aromatic and fresh, with small clay cups of homemade yogurt.

While good vegetarian food was the dietary mainstay of our home, my family also ate meat. I was, however, a finicky meat eater. At the market, I agonized over the glaring eyes of dead fish and the squawking of live chickens awaiting their demise. Gradually, I moved towards vegetarianism. Now it's been 15 years since I last tasted meat, and I certainly have not missed it one little bit.

Vegetarian food is special because it does not sustain a vibration of pain and suffering. Whether it is consumed in a five-star hotel or a temple basement, this gentle cuisine has a distinctive purity and fullness about it. It makes eating a way of bowing down, of dedicating one's existence to the Almighty. Individually, we might not be able to save the world, but we can at least avoid the perpetuation of violence inflicted just for the sake of taste.

Traveling companions: Because worshiping in temples and enjoying vegetarian food comprised such a large part of my childhood, I was naturally inclined to enjoy a good deal of both during my most recent trip to India. I was traveling on a five-day program with the Friends of India delegation. Twenty of the ladies among us were Americans experiencing India for the very first time. The remaining ten were like me: born Indians now living in the US. It was a wonderful experience for us all. For me, it was an opportunity to see India both as a tourist and as a native--as a newcomer and an old-timer. Through the eyes of my 20 American colleagues, this land of my birth looked like a wild amalgam of color, confusion, beauty, poverty and

extravagance--all pushed to the extreme.

Everywhere we went, there was food, food and more food. When it comes to nurturing guests, India has no equal. She's always in overdrive, be it drink, food, entertainment or warm embraces. As an Indian Hindu, I know well the loving care that pervades the extended family structure here in India, but I was personally taken aback to discover this same adoration being expressed in a larger context to and within our diverse traveling group. During our whirlwind tour, we were hosted, toasted, loved and made welcome in that special way that is exclusively Indian. We became instant family and have remained so to this day.

In Bombay, I stayed with my niece who is a devotee of Radhaswami and cooks only vegetarian food. Each morning for breakfast we enjoyed freshly grilled Sindhi kokies--flatbread embedded with chopped onion, tomatoes and chillies--with homemade yogurt and red papaya. In the afternoons, we feasted on peas and paneer (homemade cheese) or cauliflower and potato. This kind of food can't be found in New York, where I now live.

Our group shared many official dinners at grand hotels like the Oberoi, the Hyatt and the Taj. These were elaborate affairs featuring tables laden with a wide variety of international cuisine. Although non-vegetarian food was featured, there was always plenty for vegetarians to eat, be it continental, Chinese or Indian food. We all experienced such a wonderful feeling of being pampered. I think I must have eaten paneer cooked in 20 different ways!

The city of Bombay is booming with a variety of restaurants featuring food from different parts of the world. Anywhere you go, there is an amazing variety of innovative dishes for vegetarians. That's one of the wonderful things about India. All menus feature lots of veggie choices.

Although things have admittedly improved in the US over the past few years, high-priced dinners in five-star hotels there in the States too often offer too little for vegetarians--sometimes nothing at all. Often, when I ask for a vegetarian meal at an American business dinner, I am offered fish. Still, gone are the days when a vegetarian traveling anywhere must suffer on bread, water, lettuce, pizza and fries.

Temple time: In India, worship is very much a part of daily life. Every morning as I rushed toward the Gateway of India on my way to the Taj Hotel to meet the members of the delegation, I would pass a small roadside temple cramped in on a small niche of pavement. Even in this humble shine, the Deities were bedecked with fresh marigold garlands every day and offered reverence like I've rarely seen anywhere. This is so typical of India. The finest devotion is not reserved for the finest temples.

As the sun rose on the expansive Bombay waterfront, I saw people scattering seed for the birds and placing pieces of bread on the parapet for the seagulls. For the Hindus of India, this sort of food offering is considered an act of devotion to the Lord. Again--the unique beauty of India. God is worshiped everywhere and in all things.

There is at least one wonderful activity from my childhood that is now most certainly lost forever, at least for me: eating spicy bhel and chaat papri from street vendors. Having lived abroad, I have learned to tactfully avoid something we used to call "Delhi belly, " more commonly known as serious indigestion. While traveling in Bombay, I was tactfully cautious and stayed with popular eateries like Kailash Parbat in Pasta Lane, a street filled with delicious Indian foods hot enough to make you cry. Other vegetarian places that have stood the test of time are two well-known Gujarati eateries named Satkar and Purohit.

As I traveled with my tourist friends, I experienced the many material wonders of a booming India--new malls, skyscrapers and fly overs. But I set aside one full day to visit temples on my own. After all, how could I come to Bombay and not at least go to the Siddhivinayaka Ganapati Temple? On my drive in from the airport, I had seen literally thousands of devotees on the streets en route to a celebration at this temple. I couldn't wait to go myself.

I visited the temple on a weekday. Even then, there was a large crowd that included the old and the young, the rich and the poor, mothers with babies and parents with school children in uniforms. Many people regularly visit this important Ganesha temple. It is a part of their daily religious life. Every day, devotees line up for a view of its black stone icon with four hands. This particular statue of Ganesha is rendered with a third eye--just like Lord Siva. Flanking Ganesha are Goddesses Buddhi and Siddhi, signifying wisdom and success.

It is said that all dreams are fulfilled at this temple. This feature alone keeps the crowds coming. Students walk long distances to this temple as an act of sincerity and devotion before taking their school exams. Wives hoping to become pregnant come to pray. It is said that when the famous Indian actor, Amitabh Bachchan, was injured, thousands came here to pray for his well-being.

In this temple there is a granite sculpture of Ganesha's mount, the humble mouse. Standing five feet tall and plated with intricately crafted silver, this icon is an artistic masterpiece that is hard to ignore. Hundreds of devotees daily encircle this mouse and whisper their deepest desires into his ears, fully believing that he will then pass their messages on to Lord Ganesha. I performed this ritual. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to be whispering my deepest hopes, desires and fears to this silver magnificent Mushika, as he is called.

We also visited the simple Mumba Devi temple in whose honor the city was renamed Mumbai. Outside, the street was crowded with flower sellers, walking vendors and small shops through which worshippers thronged on their way to God. Bombay is not only a city of temples. There are also many churches and mosques here.

Snacking along the way: In Delhi, I visited a bazaar called Dilli Haat. This delightful shopping and eating oasis was a showcase for crafts and foods from many different regions of India. I immediately purchased seven small brass Ganesha murthis. Each one was playing a different musical instrument. The whole experience was just so enchanting. The same artisans who crafted these little masterpieces also wrapped them up for me in newspaper so that I could carry them safely. Where else but India could one have such a humble and kindly shopping experience?

Soon enough, we started tasting some of the cuisine made available in the many small stalls tucked away all around us. We ate a dosa here and a plate of channa there. This is the way it is done here in Delhi. Dilli Haat is a place where you can eat a lot of food, have a great time and spend very little money in the process.

Indeed, Delhi is full of such cheap treats. The street foods available at Nathuram's in Bengali Market and at the Sweet Corner in Sunder Nagar are absolutely delicious. Each suburb has its local market where a remarkably varied range of low-priced

eats are readily available.

Just to relive a little of my childhood, I visited the Parthewali Gali--literally, "Flat Bread Lane "--in Old Delhi, where narrow winding lanes lead you through a maze of displays featuring tantalizing flatbreads and sabzis, all made by the same family for decades.

The city also has a number of moderately priced restaurants like Banana Leaf, a cozy caf   offering South Indian delicacies. A place called Khana Khazana features a purely vegetarian, all-you-can-eat buffet for about 50 cents. There are also the old standards like Volga, Kwality and Embassy where, as a youth, I consumed many a satisfying meal of chana-batura, palak paneer and creamy black dhal. Another place to pick up a reasonably priced vegetarian meal with a lot of variety is at the International Center. This charming place, set amidst pleasant greenery, is quite picturesque.

For lovers of black dhal, the best places to go are Moti Mahal and the Bukhara at the Maurya. These spots are famous for non-vegetarian food but their dhal, paneer and fresh breads are truly gourmet.

What I found surprising was the number of eating establishments offering international cuisine. One evening, I went with two vegetarian nieces to Shalom, a Middle Eastern restaurant, where we managed to feast upon humus, falafel and spinach pastry. On another night, we went to an upscale Italian place called Olive Bar, where we found a great choice of vegetarian pastas and salads. And these were all restaurants that featured meat. We also had Thai food at a restaurant called Cosmos, where again we discovered a whole array of vegetarian dishes. Delhi is expanding in all directions, with huge apartment complexes, malls and multiplexes coming up everywhere. All of these new places are packed with new restaurants to investigate, but alas, the time is short and the subject is vast.

The major five-star hotels are also surprisingly kind to vegetarian palates. At the Park Royal, I enjoyed a virtual Chinese banquet with all kinds of different vegetable dishes. At Restaurant 360--a chic, contemporary eatery in the Oberoi--a huge buffet featuring one of the largest varieties of international vegetable dishes I have ever seen anywhere stretched out through two large banquet rooms.

The restaurant I enjoyed most was Haldiram's. It's a simple little place, but you can really splurge there on street foods, because everything is safe. All items are made with bottled Bisleri water and are moderately priced. Plus, it's truly democratic. There are families, couples and teens all enjoying India's most popular street foods. In the 1940s, Haldiram Bhujawalla was a humble little eatery. Now it's a thriving chain, offering Indian snacks, mini meals and continental dishes as well as Tandoori and Chinese food. And every single item is pure vegetarian.

Another wonderful quality about India is its festive spirit. And everyone there celebrates religious holidays with food. When I was invited to a relative's home for dinner, I struck it rich. It was Sivaratri, a very popular celebration honoring Lord Siva, which is observed even by meat-eating Hindus. My host family employed a superb cook who really outdid himself, preparing a meatless meal of more than 15 dishes. Some of these delicacies-- like a fragrant yogurt curry and puffy puris made out of the dough of green peas--had been family specialties for generations.

My trip would not have been complete without visiting the Lakshmi Narayan Temple, also known as Birla Mandir. This was the first temple I ever attended in my life. So, I experienced some treasured childhood memories while there. Arriving before the temple doors opened, I relaxed amidst the stone elephants, caves and ponds of a nearby garden complex which I had visited as a youngster. This place had seemed such a wonderland when I was young. Now it looked a bit ordinary, even a little rundown. Looking into the water of a nearby pond, I saw the reflection of a statue of Vasudeva carrying the child Krishna in a basket on his head. I turned my head to look at the statue directly, but it was not there. It had been taken away years ago. As a child, I was so inspired to see this giant statue rising majestically out of the water. Now it was gone. Yet not really. In a way, it was still there--even if only in my mind.

When the temple doors opened, I ascended the cool marble stairs with my offering of marigolds. There they were, the radiant faces of Siva, Lakshmi Narayan, Radha Krishna and Durga, just as I had remembered them--so peaceful and content. It was like I had gone back in time.

Delhi has many temples, ranging from the magnificent marble edifices in the rich suburbs to makeshift shrines lining the India's many dusty roadsides. In my sister's neighborhood in Greater Kailash, there is a lovely Siva temple on a small hill. She insisted with great conviction that wishes and prayers are most surely answered

there.

A small Hanuman temple in the heart of the city is one of the most popular in New Delhi. It is also one of the city's oldest. Devotees throng to this place, especially on Tuesdays. I still remember the sweet, orange-colored prashadam offered by the priests.

Time always seems to move too quickly when you've got a lot that you want to do and see. Before I knew it, it was time for me to go. I had been lost in nostalgia, connecting the past with the present. Now it was time to continue my journey into the future--but not before my sister-in-law helped me awaken one last, wonderful memory.

She bought me a large box of pista mithai made from real pistachios, not those commercial, artificially green-colored barfi that seem to be sold just about everywhere. It gleamed like a box of emeralds. To me, it was so precious. Holding it in my hands, I was immediately transported back into my childhood again. There I was, just five years old. My father was giving me this same treat. He would go all the way to Old Delhi just to buy this treat for me. Right then and there, I promised myself that I would save this rare delicacy to offer to the Gods on Deepavali, the Hindu festival of lights.

I had my final taste of Indian vegetarian cuisine on the airplane. Believe it or not, it was quite delicious--steaming pullao, spicy vegetable curry, papad, yogurt and a small container of pickle, not to mention rice pudding. Yes, Air India might not always be on time, but you can count on them for decent vegetarian food.

As I returned to my home in New York City, my suitcases were bursting with Indian shopping, and my head was full of Indian memories. My favorite mementos: that box of pistachio mithai and a small black stone Siva Lingam I had purchased at the Birla Mandir, fitting keepsakes from my feasting in the land of Gods.

And as for my lady companions from the Friends of India delegation, especially those 20 from America, our good-byes were warm and heart-felt, but not final. Just

recently, we all got together in New York for a reunion at the Princeton Club followed by dinner at Jewel of India. The warmth of our camaraderie was almost palpable as we each took turns talking about how India had impacted our lives and made us friends forever.