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Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 2001

FOOD

Blessed Rice

Meet the wonder grain that feeds our families, blesses our ceremonies and decorates our homes

Deep down beneath the granite mountains of Colorado, where you might expect to find a secret US Defense Department stockpile of missiles awaiting the end of the thaw from some awful nuclear winter, lies another kind of reserve. It is a dark, clinically sterile cold room, kept meticulously at 42 degrees and a relative humidity between 25 and 30. This is not the vault for a lethal chemical gas antidote or a vaccine for some exotic virus. These chambers, maintained by the United States Department of Agriculture, hold one of the strategic guarantors of human survival--16,474 varieties of rice. If that sounds like a lot, it's a mere fraction of the planet's diversity. India alone (where rice is said to have originated) had 50,000 varieties under cultivation over the centuries. Today most of India's rice comes from fewer than ten varieties.

Uncle Sam is not spending all that money to save Uncle Ben's pre-cooked, short-grain, sticky-white,

highly-polished, nutrition-free, artificially-enriched rice for future generations. Uncle Ben's is a kind of paradigm of the West's naivete and historical neglect of rice. It opted for quick-cooking, high-yielding grains, while the East bred its strains for taste and texture. To export, the West selected for long shelf life. In the East 90% of all rice is consumed within eight miles of the fields where it is grown. Did you know that rice yields 6,000 pounds per acre and that 25% of the meager 20 pounds of rice each American consumes in a year is imbibed as beer?

"As rice goes, so will go the world's encounter with starvation," Dr. Charles Balach, the Texas-based guru of America's rice breeding program, now retired, told Hinduism Today. This is a man who knows his rice. He bred the variety that feeds most American appetites, a task that took him eight years. He observes, "Rice has been cultivated for at least 7,000 years in China. Farmers spent generations selectively getting the 'bad' genes out of a strain, and it's very easy for us to introduce those back inadvertently as we try to improve a strain."

That's exactly what happened, says Dr. Robert Dilday of University of Arkansas' Rice Research Center. "Breeders here were going for the high yields. In the process we didn't recognize, and thus we left out, important strengths."

Fortunately, they developed a germ plasm program and collection, the one mentioned above. "There are thousands of very ordinary varieties there, seemingly useless. But they may hold some special quality we will want in the future, and it will be there. That's the beauty, and the justification, for this massive collection effort."

Dr. Dilday is beguiled by the variants: from the Japanese Super Rice Kernel (twice the length of the longest long grain, akin to a 12-foot-tall person) to the messy Purple Bran that when it flowers "stains your fingers like you were picking blackberries." Then there are killer rices. He doesn't call them that, preferring "allelopathic," the term scientists use to describe the ability of certain plants to produce natural chemicals that suppress or even kill weed growth within an 8- to 10-foot radius. A grain that controls its own competition, without chemicals? It's a farmer's dream, and rice breeders have found six of them.

Americans are relative newcomers to rice cultivation, with a mere 300 years spent growing a handful of types. They are partial to wheat. Rice may sustain half the world, but in America it has been an export commodity known only in an insipid encounter with an anonymous soup ingredient or as a rare substitute for potatoes. Not anymore. There is a rice revolution going on in North America, and a smaller one in Europe. Basically, when immigration laws changed to allow more Asians in, millions answered the call. From Thailand, Cambodia, India, Korea and China they brought with them their culture, their clothing, their language and, of course, their pen

When a Thai housewife cooked the Texas long-grain (which traces its roots to Indonesia, then Madagascar and thence to South Carolina in the 17th century), she was totally underwhelmed. Where was the taste? What happened to the sweet aromas she was accustomed to? Nothing. Zip. Not only that, who could eat this Yankee carbohydrate with chopsticks? Not even a black belt epicure could handle this dry grain where every pellet is an individual. In India it is said, "Rice should be like brothers: close but not stuck

together."

But Thais were accustomed to rices that, like Thai people, stick together (stickiness is determined by the ratio of two different starches, amylose and amylopectin). Some varieties are so sticky that if you put a chopstick in a bowl, the entire mass comes out together. Thai gourmets and gourmands love that kind. They break it off with their hands, dip it deeply into a spicy gravy and savory the morsel. One theory is that cultures which eat with chopsticks evolved sticky kinds, fork-eaters selected very dry specimens, and those of us who eat with our hands developed in-between varieties.

Faced with their finicky family's famished frowns, Asian women forsook all hope of getting decent rice in the US and began importing it. Tons of it. In fact, 39,690,000 pounds in 1993, nearly 10% of all the rice consumed in America. Farmers who didn't know a Basmati--which means "Queen of Fragrance"--from a Jasmine suddenly woke up to the new reality. Asians had highly sophisticated tastes and would not settle for anything less than

grandma had cooked over an open fire. They were even willing to pay a premium for quality, a big one. Aged Basmati sells for nearly ^{us}\$2.00 a pound! The wheels of free enterprise cranked up. Breeding programs began, expensive ones focused on one goal: produce and market an aromatic rice that equaled that most popular of all importeds, Thai Jasmine.

Thai Jasmine is the monarch of short-grained sticky rices. Its smell is alluring, its texture is described as not-too-wet-not-too-dry, and its taste is savory sweet. American breeders imported a Thai strain from the famed International Rice Research Institute in Manila. They crossed it with a high-yielding Philippine stock, added a little of this, a sprinkle of that and after many years celebrated the christening of Jasmine 85. It was to be the import killer. Hundreds of acres went under the Texas

plow in 1989. Thai cooks by the thousands eagerly hauled home the first heavy bags of Jasmine 85, steamed it in the old country way, served it up and--"Yuck"--never went back for more.

"What happened?" marketers mourned. "¿Que fue lo que paso?" southern farmers fretted. "What happened?" rice breeders brooded. No one could explain. It tasted and smelled the same. It cooked the same. It looked the same. It was cheap. Yet it was a giant flop. Spurious stories spread that only US rats would touch it. Thai rodents preferred starvation. Well, that was the story.

This real-life disaster was a turning point in US rice consciousness. Americans, who pride themselves as the world's most

efficient rice farmers, realized they couldn't detect differences which Asians readily perceived. They had made the mistake of not putting a single Asian on their select quality committee. "Before this experience, we did not recognize the subtlety of it. Or maybe we didn't believe it. Now we believe. It started with the Asians, but now the Anglos are picking up on it too," Dr. Bill Webb confided.

The search intensifies as imports continue to grow. US researchers now respect the preferences of the strong Asian market, and they have redoubled their efforts to match qualities found in Southeast Asia. In private they confess, "We're no longer trying to replace the rices from India and Pakistan, but to develop a kind of poor-man's Basmati." Nor can they just bring rices in and plant them. It's against

the law. Besides, rice adapts itself to climates, to soils and weather patterns, not to mention birds, insects and diseases. All grains must be bred to US conditions. Those who touted the glories of Texas Long Grain now speak wistfully of approximating a Punjabi Basmati or an Italian Arboria. They are breeding Purple Bran, Spanish Bahia, Black Japonica and dozens of others, hoping to capture the burgeoning niche market for specialty, fragrant rices. For the record, our own absolutely favorite rice at Hinduism Today's offices, one with no equal in all three worlds, is the ruddy, fluffy Red Country rice, known as Urarisi in Tamil, grown near Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

Rice history: Although it is still unknown exactly when and how people started growing rice, archaeologists have

uncovered evidence that rice was present in Indian civilizations 8,000 bce, according to Tuk-Tuk Kumar, author of *The History of Rice in India*. She argues that rice husks used to temper clay pottery at Koldihawa and Mahagara sites indicate that a domesticated rice was grown at that time. Other researchers document a slender, wild strain called *Indica* growing on Himalayan slopes about 4,000 years ago. Extraordinary in yield, nutrition, resistance to disease, adaptability and savor, rice migrated around the globe with little promotion. Today, India's prized aromatic rice, Basmati, is found as far from its birthplace as Kenya and California.

Hinduism's ancient scriptures have many references to rice. Kumar notes that the *Yajur Veda* describes the preparation of

rice cakes as a ritual offering. In the Atharva Veda, rice, along with barley, are described as "healing balms, the sons of heaven who never die." Smritis tell how Goddess Devi Lalithambika is known to be especially fond of payasa annam, sweet rice. Indeed, husked rice is always present in even the simplest Hindu puja as one of the offerings. So revered is rice that, if mixed with turmeric powder, it can substitute if necessary for an offering of costly items for the Gods such as dress, ornaments, even flowers.

Auspicious grain: Rice is also a potent symbol of auspiciousness and fertility. South Indians call rice Anna Lakshmi. Anna means "food" and Lakshmi is the Goddess of Prosperity. From ancient times, Dhanya Lakshmi has been depicted holding a few sheaves of rice in

her hand. The most special offering to Lord Ganesha is the modakam, a ball of sweet coconut/jaggery fill, covered with a thick rice paste. The first food fed a child is rice. In Rajasthan, when a woman first enters her husband's house, a measure of rice is kept on the threshold. This she scatters through her new home inviting prosperity and happiness. In South India, raw rice, mixed with kumkuma to redden it, is known as mangala akshadai and showered over newlyweds. At a harvest festival, Thai Pongal, rice is ceremoniously cooked. Surya, God of the Sun, is worshiped and the nature spirits are thanked.

But this reverence for rice is not restricted to India. The Angkabau of Sumatra use special rice plants to denote the Rice Mother, Indoea Padi. The people

of Indochina treat ripened rice in bloom like a pregnant woman, capturing its spirit in a basket. Even the Sundanese of West Java, who consider themselves Muslims, believe rice is the personification of the rice Goddess Dewi Sri. In Thailand, when you call the family to a meal you say, "Eat rice." In China, the word for rice is the same as food. The Toradja tribals of Indonesia consider rice to be of heavenly origin. So hallowed was the grain, that it was taboo to plant any other crop in the rice fields. The Ahnishinabe Native American Indian tribe of North America say their ancestors saw in visions tracts of wild rice. So they migrated to the central part of USA/Canada, found the rice and to this day gather and trade it for their livelihood.

Good eating: Dietetically, rice is cherished as a cholesterol-free, protein and calorie cornucopia. Most people in Asia obtain 60 to 80 percent of their calories from rice. Rice becomes a "complete protein" when eaten with beans or lentils because the enzymes in rice help to process the proteins in the lentil. As a result, rice is rarely served in India without some kind of lentil or dal.

Rice is prepared in many different ways. In the Far East, it is often squeezed into noodles. In South India, it is soaked overnight and made into fluffy idlis or thin, crepe-like dosas. In Northern India, it is often cooked with sweetened milk to form kheer. People in Gujarat celebrate Sharad Purnima by soaking flattened rice in sweet milk which they drink at night. Drinking this dood-powa on this night is

said to protect health. In Northern India, people celebrate the festival of Diwali with sugar candy, batasha, and khil, puffed rice.

In addition to its value as a food, rice serves other purposes in Asia. In Japan, every home is floored with elegant rice mats, called tatami. Villagers wear rice straw sandals, and the whole nation unwinds daily on a delicate rice wine, sake. In rural India, cooked rice is used as a glue. A verse in ancient Tamil literature says women would dress up in elegant sarees starched with rice kanji, the excess water drained after the rice is cooked. Rice flour is used by housewives to make the beautiful religious kolam designs, each dawn in front of their homes-and at temples for festivals to ward off negative energies.

In recent times rice has been the subject of nasty international disputes over "patents"--as if anyone could lay claim to this ancient and essential foodstuff. And now there are attempts to genetically engineer an improved rice, attempts being embraced in India while being rejected out of hand in Europe and attracting ever-increasing opposition in America. Perhaps the saying, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it" should be applied to this already miraculous plant.

Source, Jaffna Country Rice: Asian Trade Center, 99 Select Avenue, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada M1V4Y8