

# Foods Habits Of 12Th Century Ad In India And Its Helth Benefits With Special Reference To Sriharsa's Naisadhacaritam

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**Abstract:** Food refers to anything that is eaten to get energy and keep the body healthy. It forms an important part of human life. Food habits are formed or changed by factors like education, economic status and availability of food etc. Food habits affect people's food choice. Just like Indian culture, food in India has also been influenced by various civilizations. Foods of India are better known for its spiciness. Throughout India, be it North India or South India, spices are used generously in food. But one must not forget that every single spice used in Indian dishes carries some or the other nutritional as well as medicinal properties. Let's come to the point. In 12<sup>th</sup> century there was a poet in India named by Sriharsa. Sriharsa wrote one Famous Epic that was Naisadhacaritam (which is otherwise known as *Naisadhiyacarita*). Sriharsa was one of the greatest poets and his *Naisadhacaritam* is still a very popular *mahakavya* in the arena of Sanskrit literature. This *mahakavya* is written in twenty two cantos. It contains 2830 verses altogether. (This number may vary in different editions). The love affair between Nala, the king of Nisadha and Damayanti, the princess of Vidarbha is the main theme of the treatise.

**Keywords:** Foods Habits, 12<sup>th</sup> Century Ad, India, Health Benefits

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Sriharsa's *Naisadhcarita* we have found references of various types of eatables and also the method of preparation of some of those eatables, which were popular in the then society that is 12<sup>th</sup> century in India. It is seen that there were two kinds of food viz. vegetarian and non- vegetarian. Rice, wheat, barley, sugar and ghee seemed to be the main foods and various dishes were made from these ingredients. Following are the eatables which are mentioned in this *mahakavya*.

**ODANA-** "Odana" i.e., **boiled rice** seemed to be the principal food of that time. It has been mentioned as "*kura*" also in some verses<sup>1</sup> Boiled rice was liked by most of the people. As it was excellent in taste, people eagerly ate rice. It was white in colour, and fine, soft and fragrant. It was cooked unbroken and was served hot in the beginning of the dinner with vapour coming out of it<sup>2</sup>. From the whole part of the rice, one part was enjoyed in the beginning of the meal leaving other part on the dish to eat with curd at the end of the feast.<sup>3</sup>

Rice serves as a dietary fastener for more than 3.5 billion people worldwide, according to Columbia University, and boiled rice comes packed with beneficial nutrients. Boiled rice serves as a moderate source of energy, providing fuel to get us through the day. A standard half-cup-serving of boiled white or brown long-grain rice contains approximately 104 calories. It helps us to feel full and also protects against cardiovascular disease. Boiled rice also helps us consume more iron and copper. Iron helps our body to produce red blood cells which are needed to transport oxygen, while copper helps us in proper brain functioning. Both minerals contribute to a healthy metabolism and allow us to make the energy needed for day-to-day functioning. White boiled rice contains beneficial vitamin B-9, which helps us in healthy cell growth. Sylvie Tremblay holds a

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**APUPA OR PUPA-** *Apupa* or *pupa*, a small round cake has been mentioned in the poem<sup>4</sup>. Generally this popular food was prepared from **wheat flour** with the mixture of sugar and then it was fried in ghee or oil. According to Sriharsa, the cook who prepared this type of cake occupied a high seat to get rid of severe heat of the fire place<sup>5</sup>. A cup of flour contains 86 grams of total carbohydrates. As a result, eating foods containing wheat flour provides energy you need to get through the day. Wheat flour also contains protein. Among the nutrients in wheat flour are the B vitamins, which collectively support your metabolism to help your body derive energy from your food.



**DADHI- Dadhi, i.e., curd** seemed to be very popular in Sriharsa's time. Specially, curd prepared from the milk of buffalo with holes visible on its solid mass was enjoyed by people very much<sup>6</sup>. According to Narayana, curd of buffalo milk is very tasty.<sup>7</sup> Generally; it was taken at the end of the meal with sugar and rice etc. In Sriharsa's time, it was enjoyed either separately or sometimes mixed with other things, such as sugar, rice, red pepper and black mustard etc.



Buffalo milk is [rich](#) in protein, [calcium](#), [iron](#), phosphorous, [vitamin A](#), and other important compounds, but is also notably higher in fat content than traditional [cow milk](#). In comparison to cow milk, there is actually less cholesterol in buffalo milk, which is a good thing for anyone [concerned](#) about their cardiovascular health. Research has shown that, similar to cow milk, buffalo milk is also impressively high in protein [content](#). In fact, milk from a buffalo has about 10% more protein than its cow-derived cousin. Vitamin A and [vitamin C](#) are found in significant amounts within buffalo milk, and these two [vitamins](#) are key to the functioning of our immune system and the overall protection of the body. Both of these vitamins act as antioxidants, cleansing the body of dangerous free radicals and toxins that can cause chronic illness. Furthermore, vitamin C [stimulates](#) the immune system into producing more white blood cells, milk from buffalo actually has more calcium than cow milk, making it even better for the prevention of [osteoporosis](#) and general bone strength and resilience. This is in addition to the [number of other](#) essential minerals found in buffalo milk, including [copper](#), [manganese](#), phosphorous and zinc. There is [more](#) potassium in buffalo milk than regular cow milk, and since potassium functions as a vasodilator, buffalo milk can help you lower your blood pressure. Buffalo milk has considerably more fat than cow milk,

In the poem, we have found a reference of liquid *dadhi* mixed with red pepper and sugar named as “*manda*” i.e., surface of liquid *dadhi*<sup>8</sup>. Narayana has mentioned this type of *dadhi* as “*mastu*” i.e., sour cream.<sup>9</sup> In modern time we all know that *Lassi* is a traditional milk beverage consumed in summer season for refreshment and is prepared from *dahi* (Indian yoghurt). For the preparation of *lassi*, *dahi* is blended with water, sugar, salt, and spices such as cumin seeds and coriander leaves. The presence of spices decreases thirst. *Lassi* is a probiotic product now. It is a very healthy drink. *dahi* is a naturally fermented milk product obtained from boiled cow or buffalo milk and soured using mixed lactic

cultures. It is used in daily diet as a potential source of B-complex.



**KARAMBHA-** Another type of eatable named as “*karambha*” is referred to in the fourth canto of the *mahakavya*.<sup>10</sup> Pfo K K Handiqui has translated the word “*karambha*” as “**curd rice**”.<sup>11</sup> But according to Mallinatha, when barley flour was sprinkled with curd then it was called “*karambha*”. C.f.- ‘*Dadhyupasiktasaktu karambha*’<sup>12</sup>.



**PAYASA-** Like *dadhi*, “*payasa*” was also a very popular dish in India. Mallinatha has given the synonym word of *payasa* as “*paramannam*.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand Prof K K Handiqui has translated this “*payasa*” as “milk-rice”.<sup>14</sup> It is one of the sweet dishes of Indian recipe which is liked by most of the people. At present it is prepared by boiling rice in milk and adding sugar or molasses till the rice gets its softness. Sometimes other spices such as pistachio, almond, cardamom etc., are added to it for flavor. But it is seen in the *Naisadhcarita*, that people of Sriharsa's time enjoyed “*payasa*” by adding ghee along with milk and rice for fragrance, which was looked like a expanse of sand with streams of clarified butter.<sup>15</sup> However, the habit of eating *payasa* with *ghee*, is not common now-a days. Instead of ghee people today enjoy other spices in it for fragrance which are mentioned above. In one place of the poem, *ghee* has been described as sweeter even than nectar.<sup>16</sup>



According to dietary total calories of one serving of *payasa* per people are almost 215. Cinnamon which is good for blood sugar

**LADDUKA-** “*Ladduka*”, which is now popularly known as “*Laddu*” is a traditional Indian food. This “*Ladduka*” is found in Sh's *Nc* also.<sup>17</sup> Narayana has given “*modaka*” i.e., pleasing as its synonym word.<sup>18</sup> “*Varsopala*” a variety of “*Ladduka*” has been mentioned by the poet.<sup>19</sup> Pfo K K Handiqui has translated it as “sweet meat ball.”<sup>20</sup> These were showered before the guests like hailstones in the banquet scene. “*Varsopalas*” were very big and round in shape like

pomegranate. According to Narayana<sup>21</sup> these were prepared with the ingredients of rice flour, camphor, sugar, cardamom and cloves etc.



## Health Benefits of Cardamom Organic Facts



Helps to cure stomach disorders

Reduces risk of colorectal cancer

Aids in improving blood circulation

Helps improve cardiovascular health

Good remedy for nausea & vomiting

Effective remedy for curing urinary tract diseases

Gives relief from asthma, sore throat & hiccups

Other Use: Cardamom pods and seeds can be chewed as a breath freshener

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## Health Benefits of Clove



- Helps with cough and cold symptoms
- Natural mouth freshener
- Fights Nausea
- Helps gastric upsets
- Avoids bloating
- Reduces mouth ulcers
- Fights tooth pain & bleeding gums
- Helps control high cholesterol levels
- Increases blood circulation
- Antiseptic

## 10 Health Benefits of Ginger

1. Ovarian Cancer Treatment
2. Colon Cancer Prevention
3. Morning Sickness Relief
4. Motion Sickness Emedy
5. Reduces Pain & Inflammation
6. Heartburn Relief
7. Prevention of Diabetic Nephropathy
8. Migraine Relief
9. Menstrual Cramp Relief
10. Cold & Flu Prevention



## Benefits of Sesame Seed Organic Facts



Reduces signs of premature aging

Strengthens muscle tissues, skin and hair

Facilitates digestion and prevents constipation

Boosts oral health, cellular growth and metabolic function

Helps to prevent diabetes, cancer and heart disease

Protects DNA from harmful effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy

Caution: Excessive intake may cause irritation in stomach and colon

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## BENEFITS OF PISTACHIO Organic Facts



Boosts immune system

Gives relief from constipation

Improves body's metabolism

Reduces risk of heart attacks & strokes

Beneficial for digestion & intestinal health

Aids in wound healing & cellular growth

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**SAKTU**- "Saktu," a special kind of eatable, is mentioned in the nineteenth canto.<sup>22</sup> According to Narayana "Saktu" was that type of

food which was prepared from **barley flour** with the proper mixture of water.<sup>23</sup>



Barley is very good for skin. It reduces risk of gallstones, strengthens immune system, prevent osteoporoses, controls blood cholesterol level, prevent type 2 diabetic, cancer and heart ailments. It has Vitamins and mineral also.

**KSIRAVATA**- Another sweet food is mentioned in the poem that was *Ksiravata*.<sup>24</sup> Pfo K K Handiqui has translated it as “cream ball”<sup>25</sup>. It was reddish in color. Narayana has told that at first the ball of the Masa i.e., **bean**, was fried in hot oil or ghee and when it got its reddishness, it was taken out and put into the thick milk. According to the Ayurvedic system, milk has unique nutrition that cannot be provided by any other foods. Thus this cream ball was prepared.<sup>26</sup> It was round in shape and was served at the end of the meal. Thus serving of this *vata*, indicated the end of the feast.<sup>27</sup>



Beans are a super healthy, super versatile and super affordable food. Beans are high in **antioxidants, fiber, protein, B vitamins, iron, magnesium, potassium, copper and zinc**. Eating beans regularly may decrease the risk of diabetes, heart disease, colorectal cancer, and helps with weight management.

**PARPATA** (XXII.149)- According to Narayana, “*parpata*” was that type of thin food which was prepared by rice-flour filled with **sesame**.<sup>28</sup> The word “*parpata*” seems to be changed into “*papada*” in modern Indian dish.

**PINYAKA**- Like “*parpata*”, another thin flat food, named as “*pinyaka*” has been mentioned in the last canto (XXII.85). It was made from sesame.

Sh has mentioned a special type of preparation which was prepared with the mixture of **black mustard** and curd (XVI.73-74). Narayana has mentioned this type of food simply as “*vyanjanavisesam*.”<sup>29</sup> It was white in colour and taste was pungent. So people shocked their heads while eating this food. Yet people

enjoyed it very much. **Black mustard** is a good source of vitamin A. Mustard greens or leaves of mustard plants are an excellent source of essential minerals including potassium, calcium and phosphorous **PRALEHA**- The use of “*praleha*” i.e., broth is mentioned in the banquet scene (XVI.85). According to Narayana it was prepared from the eatable like “**ginger**” etc. As in the verse the word “*sneha*” was found, Narayana has mentioned about the existence of oil or ghee in the broth<sup>30</sup>. It is also said that people commonly enjoyed this liquid oily food touching it with the tips of the fingers.

**TEMANA**- Mention of “*temana*” a special type of non-vegetarian dish is found in the poem. Pfo K K Handiqui has translated it as curry, which was mild, savory and flavourful.<sup>31</sup> This type of curry was cooked with the flesh of either deer or fish or goat or birds and people very commonly ate this curry (XVI.76, 86). This has shown that non-vegetarian foods were also very popular in Sriharsa’s time.

In the *Nc*, we have found references of various types of drinks also, which were used by people of that period.

**WATER**- **Water** was the main drink in Sriharsa’s time. It was regarded as life and nectar for all (XVI.90). It was made cool as ice with current of air and fumigated with fuel of **aloe wood** (XVI.89).



**MILK**- Milk was suggested to be a nourishing drink at that time (XI.41). People of that period, drunk the **milk of buffalo**. From the buffalo milk curds were prepared which were enjoyed by people very much. Comparing to the cow-milk, people of that period seemed to like buffalo milk more. According to the Ayurvedic system, milk has unique nutrition that cannot be provided by any other foods.

**PANAKA**- Mention of a special type of drink is found in this poem, that was called *panaka* (XVI.99). Pfo K K Handiqui has translated *panaka* as wine<sup>32</sup>. But Narayana has mentioned it as a sweet drink prepared from the fruits like **grapes** etc.<sup>33</sup>

**FANITA**- In the 18<sup>th</sup> canto of the poem, a special type of pungent drink has been mentioned which was called as *fanita*.<sup>34</sup> According to Narayana it was prepared by milk or sugar sprinkling along with the flour of **black pepper**.<sup>35</sup> Pfo K K Handiqui has translated it as a seasoning of **molasses** with **red pepper** sprinklings.<sup>36</sup> Red Peppers protect heart. Amara has given its synonym as “*matsyandi*”



i.e., an unrefined sugar.<sup>37</sup>

**Surapan(WINE)**- Use of wine is also seen in the poem. People generally did not drink wine, yet in some occasions it was used. Here it should be mentioned that wine was specially prohibited for Brahmins (XI.68). But only in the *sautramani* sacrifice it was permitted to be used (XVII.182). Over drunken person's unsteady condition has also been mentioned by the poet (VI.111). In the poem, it is stated that people had enjoyed wine with the company of others. Towards the end of the poem we come across that Nala, the hero himself was marry making with several women, while taking wine and Dy, the wife of Nala was a bit angry with him for that act (XX.80).

After taking foods and washing hands people generally chew **betel nut** and **betel leaves**. This Indian tradition was found to be very common at that time. People took betel nut and betel leaves in various occasions and in various places as a habitual act.<sup>38</sup> They placed different spices (camphor, clove etc) inside the betel roll and gave different shapes also e.g. scorpion etc (XVI.110), may be for a stylish look. These betel nuts were very hard to break by teeth (X.83). It was seen that people served these nuts and leaves in beautiful pot. E.g. in one verse we have seen a beautiful swan shaped golden pot containing the betel (VI.72).

The reason behind its increasing popularity is its capability to boost energy. Consuming betel nuts assist in treatment of stomach worms. Chewing betel nuts helps prevent nausea. Betel nuts could be chewed just before traveling to avoid vomiting sensation. In accordance with Ayurveda, betel nut is considered to encourage the nervous system.

In that society, we have found an auspicious food of Indian tradition that is "**madhuparka**"(XVI.13). Generally it is prepared with honey, milk, sugar, ghee and banana fruits. It is like a sweet dessert and it is offered to God during puja in Assam also. But at that time it was prepared with the mixture of honey, curd and butter. People enjoyed it very much.

The use of various types of fruits also found at that time. These were **mango** (XV.20), **wood-apple** (XVI.95), **banana** (IV.8), **pomegranate** (XVI.100) **palm** (IV.42) **sugar-cane** (VI.80) etc. Banana serves as good nutritional sources of carbohydrates, minerals such as potassium and vitamins such as B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>3</sub>, B<sub>12</sub>, C and E. Ripe banana fruit is used for treating gastric problem, since it is alkaline in nature, neutralizes the acid conditions and helps in formation of thick protective mucus layer [45]. Banana fruits are rich in iron. Mango is a rich source of antioxidants. vitamin B1 prevents the damage of the brain cells. Fresh or dried fruits are high in soluble fiber, which is shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease by cutting cholesterol and regulating blood sugar levels to help control diabetes. Fiber seriously slows absorption of sugar into the bloodstream, controlling blood sugar and improving levels of blood-sugar hormones, thus helping control Type 2 diabetes. Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Choose a small or medium-sized portion over a large one (or eat only half of the large one). Load up on fruits, rich in fiber, which prevents overeating and helps keep the blood sugar steady. .but, the important thing is to increase the variety of different fruits that one eats. Eating more fruit and vegetables also helps to improve the overall balance of the diet. Bananas, Grapes Mangos help to protect the heart. Pomegranates protect heart and help control diabetes.

Sugarcane is rich in **antioxidants** so it helps fights infections and boosts the **immunity**. It's rich in iron, magnesium, calcium and other electrolytes so it's great for dehydration. It helps cure the **common cold** and other infections and also fight fever as it boosts the body's protein levels. Besides these, there are a few more great health benefits of sugarcane juice that you must learn about.

1. Sugarcane juice is a diuretic which means that it helps treat urinary tract infections, kidney stones and ensure proper functioning of the **kidneys**.

2. According to **Ayurveda**, sugarcane juice helps strengthen your **liver** and is thus suggested as a remedy for jaundice.

Pomegranate juice contains higher levels of **antioxidants** than most other fruit juices. It also has three times more **antioxidants** than **red wine** and **green tea**. The **antioxidants** in pomegranate juice can help remove free **radicals**, protect cells from damage, and reduce **inflammation**.

Pomegranate juice recently made a splash when researchers found that it may help stop the growth of **prostate cancer** cells. The juice of a single pomegranate has more than **40 percent** of your daily requirement of **vitamin C**. It prevents Alzheimer disease and protect memory. Pomegranate juice is in the running as the most heart-healthy juice. It appears to protect the heart and arteries.

Thus we have found that people of that society were fond of different type of foods. They loved to eat tasty and delicious dishes. Also it is seen that they tested different varieties of pungent and sweet foods of veg and non-veg menu. The basic five elements can be related to dietary foods: *ether/space* for popcorn, wafers; *air* for beans, cabbage, cookies; *fire* for chilies, pepper, ginger; *water* for soups, melons; and *earth* for fried foods, cheese. Different combination of these five elements delivers different tastes such as sweet, pungent, sour, bitter, saline, and astringent. Every taste and element combination has an impact on health. For example if water element gives sweet taste, which is responsible for increase in blood

production. The majority of earth and fire elements leads to acid taste which helps in digestion and removal of vata. Combination of water and fire results in saline taste, which removes *kapha*. Excess combination of air and ether gives a bitter taste, which increases the appetite and removes the harmful doshas (pathogenic factor). A pungent taste is the result of predominance of ether and air, which improves digestive power while astringent taste helps in restoring balance between *doshas* [85]. Ayurvedic health foods

Based on the dominant constituent of the body, *doshas* are classified into *kapha*, *pitta*, and *vatta*. Basic principles of ayurvedic diet are *kedara kulya nyaya*, *khale kapota nyaya*, and *kshira dadhi nyaya*. These three principles describes different aspects of digestion and digested food function in the body [82].

*Kedara kulya nyaya* is the first principle of ayurvedic diet. This principle describes the initial digestion process, where one of the basic elements, fire, breaks food materials into biological elements (nutrients), which are circulated throughout the body in the *ahara rasa* via the circulatory system. *Khale kapota nyaya* describes selectivity of nutrient by tissues, where every *dhatu* (basic tissue) selects the specific nutrient for its nourishment. For instance *rasa agni* selects plasma cells, protein molecules are selected by *mamsa* cells (muscle cells), while iron molecules are chosen by *rakta agni*. *Kshira dadhi nyaya* governs transformation of *asthayi dhatu* (immature tissues) into *sthayi dhatu* (mature tissues). *Rasa asthayi dhatu* (immature blood cells) transforms into *sthayi dhatu* (matured blood cells) by the action of *rasa agni*. This principle explains different processes and their concepts involved in growth and development of tissues.

Ayurveda groups five basic elements (ether, air, fire, water, and earth). Essential humors known as *tridosha*, namely *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha* are composed of these five basic elements. From the ether and air components, the bodily air principle known as *vata* is manifested, which regulates breathing, mobility, and central and sympathetic nervous systems. The fire and water components in the body constitute the fire principle known as *pitta*, which regulates the digestion and assimilation process in the body. The earth and water components known as *kapha* functions in heat regulation, lubrication, and formation of mucus and synovia [83]. These three *doshas* govern all physiopathological, psychological, and biological functions of the body, mind, and consciousness. Imbalance in these *tridoshas* leads to disease or disturbance in body function. For example, air element encourages fire element in the body. Therefore, to control fire element, water element is necessary. For restoration of the balance, dietary recommendations are given according to the individual's body constitution (*vata*, *pitta*, or *kapha*). [84]

- <sup>11</sup> Vide, Ph, op.cit., p-550
- <sup>12</sup> *Mc* on verse IV.64 of *Nc*.
- <sup>13</sup> *Mc* on verse XVI.70 of *Nc*.
- <sup>14</sup> Ph, p-238
- <sup>15</sup> vide, *Nc* / XVI.70.
- <sup>16</sup> *Nc* / XVI.71.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid* / XVI. 103.
- <sup>18</sup> *Nyc* on the verse XVI.103.
- <sup>19</sup> *Nc* / XVI. 100.
- <sup>20</sup> vide, Ph, p-241.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Varsopalah Karakastattulyanamelakarpur-Rasarkaralavangatandulapistaracitanam - golakanamativrttanam laddukavisesanam' - *Nyc* on the verse XVI. 100.
- <sup>22</sup> *Nc* / XIX .14.
- <sup>23</sup> "Jalamisrayavacurma" - *Nyc* on the verse XIX.14.
- <sup>24</sup> *Nc* / XVI. 98.
- <sup>25</sup> Vide, Ph, p-241.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ksiravata dugdhamadhyaksiptamasa-Sadhitavatakhayapakannavisesah.*  
- *Nyc* on the verse XVI.98 of *Nc*. "
- <sup>27</sup> cf-'bhojanasamaptisucakam ksiravatadi'  
-*Nyc* on the verse XVI.98 of *Nc*.
- <sup>28</sup> "Parpatatah salitandulapistaracitascipitas-tilasamkulisamnaupadamsavisesa" - *Nyc* on the verse XXII.149
- <sup>29</sup> *Nyc* on the verse XVI.73.
- <sup>30</sup> "Praheha vatakadini ksepattailadibindavastaranti"  
- *Nyc* on the verse XVI.85.
- <sup>31</sup> vide, Ph, p-240.
- <sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p-241
- <sup>33</sup> "panaka draksadisadhitamadhura-rasapradhanapeyadravyarupa  
---"*Nyc* on the verse XVI.99 of *Nc*.
- <sup>34</sup> *Nc*, XVIII.118
- <sup>35</sup> "Janitesu dugdhavikararupesu khandavikaresu  
Va panakesu madhye sa supasasraprasiddhamaricavacurnana katurasapi.  
---*Nyc* on the verse XVIII.118.)
- <sup>36</sup> vide, Ph, p-279.
- <sup>37</sup> vide, *Nyc*.
- <sup>38</sup> vide, *Nc*, XV,77, XII.76.

- <sup>1</sup> *Nc*, XVI . 79, 90, 106
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, XVI.68
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid*, XVI.80.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid*, VII. 61.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid*, XV.12
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*, XVI.93-94
- <sup>7</sup> "Mahisya dadhi svadutaram bhavati" - *Nyc* on XVI.93 of *Nc*.
- <sup>8</sup> *Nc*, XI. 49
- <sup>9</sup> *Nyc* on verse XI. 49 of *Nc*.
- <sup>10</sup> *Nc*, IV.64

In our series on eating more like our ancestors, Chef Seeto goes back in history to discover an ancient civilisation that can be traced back more than 70,000 years ago — the ancestral Indians. While rice, wheat, barley, and barbecued animals flavoured with spices and fruit formed the basis of the cuisine of the past, how different are Indian descendants eating today? The dietary habits of India are quite well known. There are more than 1.2 million Indians of different religious beliefs that hold life sacred, with many of them vegetarians.

While Hindus forego beef, Muslims find pork abhorrent.  
Yet were these habits followed in ancient times?

What did the Indian people eat hundreds or thousands of years ago as an ancient civilisation?

The lessons of learning one's ancestral diet are important for all of us, regardless of which tribe or civilisations we belong to, because our unique DNA helps determine our specific nutrition needs.

A quick look at the modern diet of Fijians with Indian ancestry reveals a huge gap and lack of the essential vitamins and minerals that their ancestors ate.

If you are of Indian descent, are your people from the Southern state of Kerala, where coconut oils and coconut milk provided flavour and a natural fuel source of good saturated fat?

Or do you belong to the Northern states where the food of royalty dates back to the Persian and Mughal empires that combined fruits and spice into deliciously spiced dishes for intense flavours and healing ingredients?

Or are your people from the colourful and spicy region of Uttar Pradesh with its richly red chilli tandoor and unleavened chapatti breads? Whatever your ancestry, the answers to a healthy diet for your body can be found in the past.

The diet of early Indians

Historians believe that today's Indians are descendants of a very old civilisation that left Africa more than 70,000 years ago and spread throughout South Asia as hunter-gatherer tribes who lived off what they could catch and forage.

The earliest modern Indians, the Harappan or Indus Valley civilisation, date back more than 5000BCE, and ate mainly wheat, rice and lentils, and occasionally cows, pigs, sheep, goats, and chicken.

The arrival of the central Asian Aryan nomads in 1500BCE did not seem to have changed Indian eating habits, but by 300 BCE under the Maurya Empire, a lot of Hindus felt that animal sacrifices added to your karma and kept you from getting free of the wheel of reincarnation.

Animal sacrifices became less popular, and although people didn't give up eating meat entirely, they ate much less of it, and a lot of people became vegetarians.

In the Gupta period, around 650 AD, Hindus began to worship a Mother Goddess. Cows were sacred to her, and so Hindus stopped eating beef.

And then around 1100 AD, with the Islamic conquests in northern India, most people in India stopped eating pork as well, because the Koran forbids it.

People could still eat sheep or goats or chicken, but most of the people became vegetarians, and only ate meat very rarely or not at all.

The vegetarian food that Indians ate had to be rich in proteins, calcium and iron to compensate for a diet without animal meats. Fresh milks, beans, peas, nuts and seeds provided that source of nutrition.

## II. THE WRONG OILS IN INDIAN COOKING

Animals like goats, yaks and horses provided fresh milk that could be churned into butter and ghee as cooking oils in the ancestral Indian diet.

The good fats and healthy oils found in nature are an important part of a balanced diet, but the processed oils that most of us use today offer very little nutritional value.

The ancient Harappan squeezed their own oil from nuts, seeds and coconut.

These cold-pressed oils retained their essential vitamins and minerals because they are not heat treated.

In the 1900s when butter use was higher than vegetable oils, heart disease was rare.

By 2012, the consumption of processed vegetable oils was 14 times that of butter, with heart disease now the leading cause of death in most Westernised nations including the South Pacific.

So what are the good oils?

Try cold-pressed virgin coconut, virgin olive and avocado oil or ghee, which all offer health benefits but also need to be balanced in a diet to keep cholesterol levels in check. Whereas the iTaukei are consuming too much processed oil through margarine and fried foods, Fijians of Indian descent are eating too much unnatural oil through their cooking of curry and qisi.

Far removed from an ancestral diet

Some people may believe that spices and curry are bad for you, but that couldn't be further from the truth; it is how you cook them.

Turmeric, fennel, cinnamon, saffron and cumin have been an integral part of herbal Ayurvedic medicine for the ancient Indians, and were used to add flavour to foods but also to prevent disease and aid in digestion and growth. Saffron contains a powerful cancer-fighting acid that is said to inhibit the spread of disease.

Cumin, or jeera, not only aids in digestion but contain special compounds that are said to fight prostate cancer in men. The problem with the diet of modern Indians is not the spices and curry but an excess consumption of processed cooking oils, refined carbohydrates and sugar.

Combine this high risk NCD-diet with a lack of fresh fruits, crunchy vegetables, leafy green vegetables, fresh milk and plenty of legumes (beans, peas, lentils), and you realise just how far removed the modern Indian diet is from their ancestral people.

On your next visit to the doctor, ask to find out what essential vitamins and minerals are missing in your body.

The results may go a long way to explain why you are more susceptible to colds, flus and sinus problems than others; or why you have continuous gastric issues; or why you never seem to be able to put on more muscle mass.

Learning to adopt the diet of our ancestors is not easy as we grow older and have more stubborn eating habits.

But to break the cycle of bad diet for the next generation, the answer is simpler; don't give your infant children the same food as you eat. Before they can walk, talk back and make their own bad choices of food; feed them the fresh foods of your ancestors.

So what is the perfect diet for Fijians of Indian descent? Go ask your grandmother!

Next week: Chef Seeto shares his knowledge of his own ancestral people — the Chinese. Ancient Chinese physicians learned to harness the power of healing foods thousands of years ago, and when combined with a special way of eating their meals, stumbled on the perfect Chinese diet.

\* Lance Seeto is the executive chef, author and food writer based on Castaway Island, Fiji. Follow his adventures on [www.lanceseeto.com](http://www.lanceseeto.com). Through his culinary eyes, the world looks delicious.

### III. CONCLUSION

One of the biggest advantages this dish has over others is that it is extremely easy to make.

Before we get to the recipe however, let's have a look at 5 common health benefits of curd rice:

- **It aids digestion:** Curd rice is the best home remedy for an upset stomach because it is easy to digest and works against bloating and indigestion. The curd in curd rice is also rich in probiotics that promotes the growth of healthy gut bacteria thus relieving constipation and abdominal pain triggered by it.
- **It cools the body:** Curd rice should ideally always be eaten cold. Curd is a natural fire extinguisher that cools the body and helps maintain internal body temperature. Thus if you're feeling feverish or if it's simply a very hot day, try some curd rice.
- **It can act as a [stress buster](#):** Curd contains probiotics, antioxidants and good fats. This helps the brain deal with pain and emotions like stress. This makes curd rice not only a tasty dish but also a stress busting one.
- **It aids [weight loss](#):** A bowl of curd rice can fill your stomach and keep you from snacking. It also has negligible calories when compared to the same amount of fried rice or pulao. This makes curd rice a good meal to indulge in when you're attempting to lose weight.
- **It boosts immunity:** Being easy to digest is only one of the reasons curd rice is the best food to eat when ill. Curd is rich in antioxidants that give the body power to fight infections. It also gives the body much needed energy when ill.
- Even WHO is all praises for this 'nourishing meal' of curd rice. I could go on in this vein, instead let me present you five solid reasons why you should include curd rice in your diet everyday.
  1. It boosts digestion and works best for stomach upsets, indigestion and bloating.
  2. It's a good natural substitute for pro-biotic and antibiotics for very young children during early stages of fever.
  3. Has the mercury risen too high for your comfort? Just add some curd to your diet and you will feel better.



- 4. Curd is also a natural fire extinguisher after a very spicy meal. A small cup of curd will keep those spice tears away.
- 5. It's high in calcium and good fats and a must have in high protein diets.
- 6. You apply it on your skin or on your hair for a soft, healthy glow.



- 10. Curd is a good stress buster and great mood lifter. Studies show that both the probiotic bacteria and the good fats present in curd lower activity in parts of the brain that

deal with pain and emotion, especially when consumed over a long period.

- Image courtesy Shutterstock

a serving of **boiled rice** contains 26 grams of carbohydrate.  
There are 4 calories in 1 gram of carbohydrate; for steamed **rice**, 124 of the total calories,

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