



TWELVE MONTHS, THIRTEEN FESTIVALS

बारह महीनों में तेरह त्तेहार। बारो मासे, तेरो पावन॥

Written and Illustrated
by
Aditi Raychoudhury

≡ About this book ≡

लेखिका के विचार | চিন্তা-ধারণা॥

Experience the vibrant tapestry of Bengali culture and beyond in thirteen festivals. I used the literal translation of the phrase 'Baaro maashe, taro porbbon', which in my mother tongue, Bangla, means 'Thirteen festivals in Twelve months' to capture thirteen of my most cherished festivals from a land where there is a festival for just about everyone all through the year .

From the humble sowing of seeds to bountiful harvests, this book seeks to capture the origin of these age-old festivals beyond their religious practices. Feel the palpable excitement in the air, the anticipation of new clothes and delectable treats as you travel back in time to my proverbial "village" of "aunties" and "uncles". Vivid illustrations and evocative storytelling bring to life childhood shenanigans and the joyous coming together of communities as these celebrations entwine with the rhythm of life.

Written as a series of vignettes from the "little" me this book seeks to challenge stereotypes, promote cross-cultural understanding and bridge a generational gap for readers everywhere.

As an added treat, this book includes a few festive recipes, adding flavor and aroma to the reading experience.

Pack your bags and get, set to go!

-Aditi Raychoudhury

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বসন্তনব্বই



Hey, noone's looking. Can you hurry up and give me a few more kool?

VASANT PANCHAMI

वसन्त पञ्चमी । বসন্ত পঞ্চমী॥

Yippee! The air is crisp and the skies are blue. Its Vasant Panchami, the fifth day of Spring. Even though it is called the fifth day of Spring, it's actually a time to kick off the transition from winter to nature's full-blown splendor forty days later. For us Bengalis, it's also time to honor Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge, wisdom and creativity. This celebration that honors the awakening of nature falls anywhere between the end of January to early February of the Gregorian calendar. We dress in yellow to pay homage to the mustard fields that are flush with neon yellow flowers.

I used to love everything about this festival - starting with surrendering pencils, pens, brushes, paints, books, instruments and other tools of learning at Saraswati's feet, so that she can bless them and help us on our journey to knowledge and creativity. Parents of little children eagerly await "Haatey-Khori" or "Chalk-in-hand" - just like mine did when it was time for us to write our first alphabets. It is considered particularly auspicious to start our first steps towards education with the blessings of Ma Saraswati.

Unlike some other festivals that I grew up with, this festival is often very intimate in scale. It is typically organized by students in schools and colleges. However, since I lived really, really far away from my school, it was always held at one of my favorite 'uncle's' home - Chatterji Jethu¹. He wasn't related to us - but, growing up we didn't call our elders by name or even as Mr. or Mrs. So and So. Everyone was an uncle or aunty who took their roles as stand-in uncles and aunties very seriously.

Chatterji Jethu was lean, sprightly and a wonderful gardener. This time of the year, his garden was aglow with multitudes of dahlias and marigolds. But what endeared him most to me was his quiet affection, gentle smile, and patience. Lots of if when we would badger him over and

¹ Term for your father's older brother.

over and over again about picking the litchis in his yard in the summer. And sure enough, we would get a call from him soon as the litchis were perfectly ripe for our raiding.

This generous spirit was shared by his wife, Chatterji Jethima² who was known for her cooking skills through out our neighborhood – especially her luchi, ghughni and aachaar² which we relished during our frequent visits to their home. Even though this pujo was relatively small, it still needed more than just Jethima's hands to feed our little community.

Aunties would sit down with their bontis³ and shil-noda⁴ to prep mounds of vegetables and spices with lightning speed and precision while laughing through hours of adda⁵. Uncles wrestled with giant vats of food under the watchful eyes of our aunties, while we played in the yard eagerly waiting for bhog⁶ - luchi, aloor dom, khicuri, begun bhaja, labra, bhaandhaa kopir chochori, papod bhaaja, and kool⁷, lots of kool - both fresh and as chaatni! Yes! That day had finally arrived when we could eat kool - a mildly tart and sweet aromatic fruit absolutely forbidden for consumption before Saraswati pujo.

But, really? Wait for prayers before we could eat kool?? We have waited long enough for this fruit to be perfectly ripe and ready to eat. There I am with my sister, throwing caution to the wind as we creep in to steal some kool after everything has been beautifully arranged for Saraswati Ma to consume and bless. Will eating kool before the ceremony make her petulant enough to dump a bunch of math problems that we can't solve? Or will it mean getting one of the many wars throughout India's long history mixed up with another? And.. and... the unthinkable - failing grades!! But, did we care? Eating this fruit before the ceremony has taken place is worth every dip in grades. Yummm...mmm...mmm...



² Jethu's wife

³ Small fried bread, whole yellow split pea curry, sweet and savory Indian preserves.⁴ A curved blade attached to a horizontal base.

⁵ A flat grinding stone.

⁶ Idle Chit-Chat.

⁷ A feast blessed by God.

⁸ Indian jujube, Ziziphus mauritiana



POILA BOISHAKH

নয়া সাল মুবারক | পহেলা বৈশাখ ॥

Pohela Boishakh, the first day of the month of Boishakh, marks the first day of the Bengali Calendar - a combination of the Hindu Surya Siddhanta¹ and the Islamic Hijri² calendar. I hope this leaves no doubt that this festival, which falls on 14th-15 of April, defies - yet again - the British attempt to keep Hindus and Muslims apart by partitioning Bengal into West Bengal and Bangladesh, where Pohela Boishakh is celebrated on an even grander scale.

In Dhaka and Kolkata, the nerve center of Bengali culture, residents join a 'Prabhat Pheri' with traditional sculptures and folk paintings and songs that reinforce our shared history. The air resounds with "Subho Nobo Borsho!" Have an Auspicious New Year!

People also visit neighborhood stores that they have long established bonds with and conduct a business transaction for 'Halkhata', the opening of the new financial ledger. This ceremonial purchase could be as small as a sondesh or as expensive as a silk saree or gold jewelry.

The days leading up to Pohela Boishakh start to feel festive with cleaning the house, decorating it with flowers, making sweets, along with the mounting anticipation of new clothes, elaborate meals with family and friends, and stuffing ourselves with delectable sweets from the moiras Bengal is famous for.

While my little town in Odisha didn't have any parades, my Didu's visits transformed our home into an even grander space than it already did with its flower decorations that I very much enjoyed creating. My Didu took it to the next level, by covering the entire floor with a beautiful alpona, a folk art form that neither my Ma nor I were deft at. My Didu would start from the corner of the room furthest from the door with an unpredictable little swirl and zig-zag her way quickly across the floor unfurling intricate flowers, vines, paisleys like a magic carpet using nothing

without ever touching the floor. I would watch with astonishment as she expertly created whatever pattern she could dream of including her own take on some traditional motifs such as paddy leaf, lotus flowers, owls associated with Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity. Didu would also draw borders across and around each doorway in the house with Lakshmi's feet and a wavy pattern with curlicues to represent a stalk of grain that climbed half way up around the door frame, to ensure that the Goddess wouldn't forget any room.

Unlike today's world, where we preserve every piece of art by posting their pictures on social media and impatiently waiting for the 'likes' to rack up, my grandma was a traditionalist. She enjoyed the creative process immensely and saw no need to preserve the finished product like a precious work of art that it very much was. Much like Buddhist sand paintings, the alpona would be wiped clean the next day and a new one would begin on a freshly mopped floor. Without stencils, reference patterns or elaborate tools she was free to go wherever her imagination would take her. As a result each design was always fresh and unique.

Didu gave us pieces of fabric well ahead of Pohela Boishakh to have our hand-made outfits ready in time. Ma would stop by the local tailor to have my brother fitted for bell-bottomed pants and a collared shirt. Our dresses would start with a trip to an accessory shop. I felt so excited, as my mother fussed over laces, trims, showy buttons, and embroidery threads. She would take our measurements and proceed to cut, embroider and sew like a woman possessed.

We often got fabric from another favorite "uncle", Mondol Kaku. We would squeal "Mondol Kaku! Mondol Kaku!!" and wrap our arms around his long legs soon as he arrived. During one Pohela Boishakh, he brought for me a soft cotton fabric - the color of rice-husk. It was so light and airy! My mother made a simple knee-length dress with a peter-pan collar, short puffed sleeves, and buttons down the back. What it lacked in howy trims and buttons, she more than made up for it by embroidering an elaborate cluster of flowers with silk threads across the bodice.

Eventually, Mondol Kaku got married. Bondona Kakima had bright eyes and was quick to break into a dimpled smile. A year later, they had a beautiful little baby boy! We couldn't wait to play with our little "brother" but he cried. A LOT! He was born with a serious medical condition. And he was in PAIN!. Mondol Kaku went from being a playful person to one consumed with meeting doctors and following up on medical procedures. It wasn't long before they moved to Kolkata to avail of its advanced medical facilities and skilled surgeons. We missed him terribly but we always met up for a grand meal with his extended family during our visits to Kolkata.

It was the summer of 1985. We had met with Mondol Kaku for our usual meal. Soon after we returned home, my father got a call. Minutes into the call, he started sobbing uncontrollably. Between his stifled words, we learned that Mondol Kaku had succumbed to a massive heart attack. He was barely forty.

We continued to have meals with Bondona Kaki and Kaku's extended family. We eventually lost touch, but not before knowing that his son was doing well.

As we end the old year, and hope for good things in the new, my Pohela Boishakh remains entwined with my memory of that dress and our dear Mondol Kaku. If one life could be exchanged for another, then thriving of his young son is to me a profound reminder of how far a parent is willing to go to save their child.





The Big Reveal!

SHOSHTI

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“Thunka-tha-thang! Thunka-tha-thang!” The dhakis are charged and playing their dhaks. Our hearts are beating as loud and fast as this welcoming sound that carries through the air. She is here ! She is here! The day we all have been waiting for! Maa Durga has made her journey from Mount Kailash, even though this is a time of rest and relaxation for her. In fact, like all mothers, she has been woken up from her much needed sleep before she is fully rested by Rama who is waging his own battle with Ravana for stealing his wife, Sita. And, there is no wrath greater than a mother awakened from her sleep.

A long long long time ago, Durga used to be worshiped in the Spring, when she was awake and energetic till Rama invoked her in the fall during his battle against Ravana. Rama was so terrified when he heard that Ravana had summoned his formidable brother, Kumbhakarna to go to battle, he desperately turned to Brahma, the creator, for advice. Upon which, Brahma asked Rama to seek Durga’s blessings even though this was really not the best time! Worried that waking up the sleeping Mother may not be a great idea, and rightly so, Rama expressed his concerns. So, Brahma decided to act as the priest. Despite this Okal bodhon, or untimely invocation, Durga the all merciful still obliged and promised to channel her strength into Rama’s arrows. And, since she was already awake, why not invoke her to destroy Mahisasura as well?

However, for us Bengalis, the battle is merely a backdrop to a much more exciting event, which is to have her back in her maternal home here on earth. I can hardly wait for the exact time before sundown when her face will be revealed. Given that most of the Bengali pujos I attended during my formative years were in the eastern state of Odisha, Maa Durga’s Protima didn’t often follow the traditional style that the legendary makers of Kumartuli in Kolkata have been slaving over. In fact, we are speculating which Bollywood star she will resemble as that was often the case in my small town.

But before we can find that out, a water-filled kalash (pot) is kept at the base of the Bel tree. And, now for... the.. best... part... Her face is finally unveiled. Who cares which actress she resembles this year? In my mind's eye, she looks awake..radiant.. and ready to settle into her home symbolized by the Bel tree because she had blessed Rama by appearing in the form of a bel leaf.

Finally, Amantran, through which the deity is invited and given a grand welcome, especially by married women, like my mother, who looks even more radiant with all that sindoor on her forehead. I look back and forth between the goddess and my mother, and slowly they seem to blend. As Durga starts to look more and more like my mother, who like Durga, was always valiant enough and ready enough to go to battle against anything and anyone who posed a threat to her family, sleep be damned!



MAHASHTOMI

महाष्टमी | षशष्टमी ॥

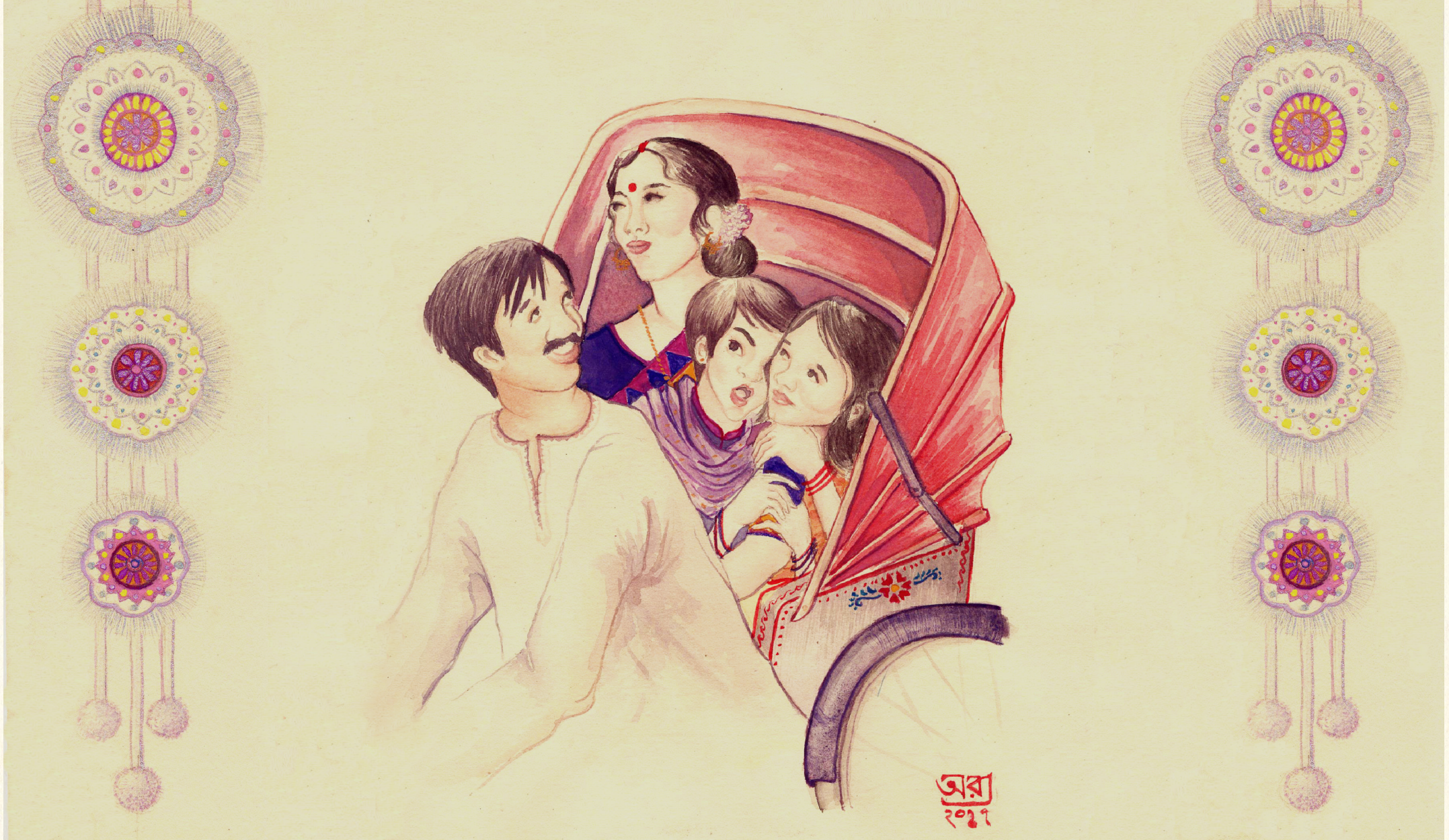
After I had moved to Delhi for college, pujo was a time, just like Maa Durga, to be with my parents, who had moved to Kolkata by then. This big metropolis and the nerve center of Bengali culture and intellectuals was a big change from the small town I had grown up in. The pandals of Raurkela were neither as creative as Kolkata, nor were they as crowded. The madness that grips Kolkata during pujo is not something anyone outside of Kolkata can understand or imagine, except for those who live in Bangladesh. Yes, we Bengalis seek every event to defy the British attempt to create hate amongst us by dividing Bengal along some trumped-up religious grounds. It is no surprise that Durga Pujo in Kolkata is now a UNESCO World Heritage site as a Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

It is the first Asian festival to receive this prestigious recognition. When the mere mention of Durga puja sets any Bengali heart to a wild beat, this honor only intensifies the love and pride we hold in our hearts for this grandest of festivals, simply know as Pujo.

Like Vasant Panchami, and Dol Jatra, Durga Pujo is yet another instance for us to seize the opportunity to showcase the best examples of art, music and dance. It continues to remain a thriving ground for individual artists who create the idols, and for collaborative artists and designers to design the pandals and lights. As with some of the previous festivals in this book, the divides of class, religion and ethnicities collapse as crowds of spectators walk around to admire the installations. And this is THE NIGHT to do it. Its Ashtomi - Pujo's biggest night. After all, Maa Durga has managed to do what every other God failed to do. She has annihilate Mahisasura the shape shifting buffalo demon in an epic battle.

After offering Anjali and eating delicious bhog in our neighborhood pandal, we decide not to venture out in the evening. My mother no longer has the energy to jostle through the crowds and my father's biggest joy continues to remain in quietly watching over his family - not in pandal hopping. As, for me, I am old enough to go out on my own, but my brother has just moved to the US for his Ph.D, and my sister is still a child.

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Unlike my brother, who never lost his tight grip on our little hands as we ran towards the chariots during Ratha Yatra, I am not so confident, of holding on to my sister tightly enough to not lose her in the bustling crowds. As for venturing out alone, where is the fun in that? Suddenly..

“Knock, knock, knock!!!” It’s Monoronjon, our local rickshaw puller.

Those who are familiar with Kolkata, know that rickshaw pullers are our solution to that last quarter mile problem of not walking to various modes of an otherwise efficient public transit system. Within every few blocks is a “rickshaw stand” marked only by a huddle of rickshaws. If you live in that neighborhood, you eventually start using the same rickshaw puller to take you places - the bus stop, the metro station, the bazaars and more. In our case, that man was Monoronjon. A conversation ensues in Bangla.

“Boudi, don’t you want to go out and see pujo?”

“Naa, its too crowded to be enjoyable.”

“How can that be? Its Ashtami, Pujo’s big night. How can you not want to see the Protima. No one stays home on Ashtami. I will take you through the backlanes. You have to come.!”

And, so we did! Through the narrow back lanes of our crowded middle class neighborhood with its huddled shelters and narrow lanes and to all the pujos within at least a mile around our house - from destitute slums to the high class neighborhoods. My sister and I hung on to our mother for dear life as Monoronjon expertly swerved his way through the winding streets and impenetrable crowds. A good three hours later – we were home.

“Eyyi jey, Monoronjon! You took us around quite a bit. How much do I owe you?”

“Sheyki baudi? How can you even ask me that? Its pujo. I asked you to come with me. You didn’t ask me to take you.” And so it took Monoronjon, our illiterate, dirt-poor rickshaw puller to remind us that pujo is so much more than new clothes, food or commerce. It is about sharing joy.

The Food! THE FOOD!

खाना-पीना। खाबार दाबार॥

The Indian Kitchen

रसोई | शँभल ॥

A few essentials (images and texts)

Bhogeyr Khichudi // भोग खिचड़ी // ভোগের খিচুড়ী //

I chose to include this as the first recipe, because this simple, one-pot melange of rice, lentils and seasonal vegetables is a staple in different parts of the country, even though the name and ingredients vary according to region. In Bengal, khichudi is a constant in all bhogs, rainy days and summer days, and the one I used to look forward to the most - on wintry days when the freshly harvested potatoes are at their butteriest, and the pearly white cauliflowers are at their most aromatic. Add to that freshly shelled English peas, a few spices and mustard sized grains of fragrant gobindo bhog rice¹ and shona moong² to get a nutritious and easily digestible meal. In fact, it is the first complete meal given to an infant for this very reason. I made a friend for life when I made this dish for her infant son who lapped it up over jarred baby food. And, no Saraswati pujo is complete without topa kuleyr chaatni. Let's get cooking!

Prep: 30 mins Cook: 30 mins

Serves: 4-ish servings (What's a serving anyway?)

INGREDIENTS:

Gobindobhog Rice¹: ½ cup

Shona Moong²: ½ cup

Green peas: ½ cup

Cauliflower florets³: 1 cup

Potato, 1" cube: ½ cup

Tomato chopped (optional): ½ cup

Ginger, fresh grated: 1 tbsp

Ghee³: 2 tbsp + more for serving

Hot water: 3 cups

Salt: 1 tsp (adjust to taste)

Jaggery⁴: 1 tbsp

Whole spices:

Bay leaf: 2

Dry red chili: 2

Green cardamom: 4-5

Cinnamon stick⁵: 2"

Clove: 4-5

Cumin: 1 tsp

Ground Spices:

Turmeric: 1 tsp

Red chili (Optional): 1 tsp

Bengali Garam masala⁶: 1 tsp

[Ingredients and method to be laid out and illustrated by hand]

Notes and Substitutions:

¹ A short grain, white, aromatic, sticky rice having a sweet buttery flavor. While there is no substitute for its fragrance, you can use Sona Masoori, Jeera, Ambe Mohar or Joha rice. Please donot use basmati, bomba or arborio rice.

² Shona moong is a special kind of very small grained and fragrant yellow moong lentils. Substitute with organic yellow moong.

³ Clarified butter.

⁴ Substitute brown sugar or coconut sugar.

⁵ Preferably Indian cinnamon.

⁶ Dry roast 3/4" Cinnamon Stick, 2-3 green cardamoms, 2 cloves over medium heat. Cool. Blitz in a spice grinder to yeild approximately 1 tsp. Increase by upto 10 times and store in a cool dry place. **Donot** use packaged garam masala.

⁷ Indian wok

The End

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समाप्त । अग्राप्ति ॥