

FOOD AND FESTIVALS

By Mugdha Thosar

We celebrate every Indian Festival with great joy, with our friends and family, and of course delicious food!!! As every festival is different and we celebrate them in lot of different ways. The food related with each festival has many varieties. The delicacies prepared are very specific for each festival. We all enjoy them in each of those festivals but many people don't know how this tradition of foods has started. Their preparation in those festivals has some purpose, there is science behind it.

All these festivals are spread across 12 months in a year and each of them is associated with different season. So naturally, the food preparations are also seasonal. Use of seasonal ingredients is commonly seen in every recipe. And it's not only based on availability of ingredients but it's also used in a scientific way to fulfil our body's needs of nutrients in each season.

Makar Sankranti is celebrated in the month of January which happens to be in winter season. Temperature and humidity are low in this season. Our body needs warmth and fatty oil containing substances, to maintain skin integrity, as it dries out due to low humidity. 'Til-Gul' ladoos are prepared in Sankranti. The purpose and science behind this are, these ladoos are made from til (sesame seeds), which provide high energy in the winter season. 100 gram dried whole sesame seeds provide 573 calories and are composed of 50% fat, and 18% protein. This energy is converted in the form of heat, which provides warmth to our body. It is composed of fat which helps in regulation of skin moisture and integrity. Another dish prepared in Sankranti is gul-poli. Gul poli is basically a roti stuffed with jaggery. Jaggery is an excellent source of iron, zinc and selenium. Selenium helps in preventing the growth of cancerous cells. It also helps to keep body warm.

After the Sankranti comes the festival of Holi at the end of winter season. The culinary preparations around this festival are also indicators of seasonality. Holi, which comes in the

month of Phalgun, is a celebration of the end season of barren winter and the onset of fertile spring, which is symbolic of new life. During this period of seasonal transition, the human immune system is believed to weaken. So, popular Holi must-haves are often items that help cool the body and improve gut health in general. In Maharashtra, there is a tradition of making Puran poli – sweet. Fried flatbreads stuffed with a filling of yellow gram and cane sugar or jaggery – perhaps indicates to the festival's agrarian origins as a harvest festival. Holi falls usually around the time wheat, gram and sugarcane are harvested in India. Gram provides high protein which is necessary in this transitional period. Kanji, a fermented, deliciously tangy drink made with carrots that is known for its cooling and curative properties, is a Holi staple in the North.

Gudhi Padva signifies the arrival of spring and also it is the start of Marathi new year with the month of Chaitra. Traditionally, families prepare a special dish that mixes various flavours, particularly the bitter leaves of the neem tree and sweet jaggery (*gul*), it is prepared in form of small ladoos. This is eaten as a reminder of life's sweet and bitter experiences. Additionally, neem leaves have profound health benefits. It is believed that consuming neem leaves leads to purification of blood. Also, as summer season starts from this festival, neem leaves provide cooling effect to our body.

After Gudhi Padva, the most awaited festival is 'Ganesh Chaturthi'. Lord Ganesh is God of wisdom. We prepare 'MODAK' for Ganesh Utsav. Modak is a special and beloved dish with shredded coconut and jaggery stuffed inside. The combination of coconut and jaggery is believed to be ingenious i.e., it helps improve our intelligence.

Then comes the big festival of Navratri, which comes at the start of winter season. As per the name, there is celebration for nine consecutive days. On each day, various dishes are prepared for 'NEVAIDYA' viz. kheer-puri, shrikhanda, pumpkin puri, puranpoli, etc. These foods are recuperative as well as we get essential nutrients for dry season.

Diwali is the biggest festival in India. Diwali is the festival of lights. It is celebrated all across the country so obviously there are varieties of dishes that are prepared for this occasion. In Maharashtra various snacks are made like chakalis, karanji, anarsa, chivda, shankarpale and ladoos. Ladoos are not only prepared as a sweet but also, they are very nutritious as they are made from pulses or their flours. In Telugu, *teepi gavvalu* translates to sweet shells. It is made by rolling a dough made up of flour and jaggery into pretty shell shaped curls that are then deep fried and dipped in sweet sugar syrup. A winter sweet treat loaded with dry fruits, *Pinni* is a Punjabi Diwali favourite. Whole wheat flour is roasted in rich homemade ghee with dry fruits, *khoya* and sugar until it turns to a golden-brown colour. It is then shaped into delicious *laddoos*.

These are only a few examples of our festivals and food preparations. This list can go on and on, but now I sum up with these significant festivals of India.

We celebrate these festivals every year and follow all the traditions of food preparations as well. But we don't know the science behind it, why those specific food items are made in each of the festival. This has been our tradition from the beginning and they have been very thoughtfully designed by our past generations. Their purpose is not only celebration but also to benefit human body according to seasons and to fulfil our body's need of nutrients.

That's why, follow our own culture and traditions, they are not just mythical but are also scientific and beneficial. Don't celebrate our festivals blindly!!!

Bio

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