

# An Action Research in Cultural Revival

Food offerings in rural cultures  
of two Bengals during festivals

Ganadhar Pal



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Published by  
**People's Institute for Development and Training**  
People's House, A-12, Paryavaran Complex  
Saket-Maidangarhi Road, New Delhi-110030  
Phone: 29532408, 295311282, 29531296  
e-mail: [pidt@del6.vsnl.net.in](mailto:pidt@del6.vsnl.net.in)

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2006

Typeset and printed by  
FARM DIGEST  
5/32, Patel Gali, Vishwasnagar  
Shahdara, Delhi-110032  
Phone: 22388405, 55346811

## **Pitha<sup>1</sup> A contribution of Bengali women beyond religious and political borders**

About 10000 years ago agriculture was invented and provided ways by which food was ensured throughout the year. Since the invention of agriculture the technology of agriculture has been used all over the globe. The climatic condition determines the kind of grains or vegetables and fruits that are grown. Rice is a grain that is grown extensively in Asia and has had profound effect on the culture of the people of Asia However even among the rice-eaters there are endless variations.

“Mixing hard science with personal anecdotes, Nabhan convincingly argues that health comes from a genetically appropriate diet inextricably entwined with a healthy land and culture.” – **Publishers Weekly**

Do your ears burn whenever you eat hot chilli peppers? Does your face immediately flush when you drink alcohol? Does your stomach groan if you are exposed to raw milk or green fava beans? If so, you are probably among the one-third of the world’s human population that is sensitive to certain foods due to your genes’ interactions with them.

Formerly misunderstood as “genetic disorders,” many of these sensitivities are now considered to be adaptations that our ancestors evolved in response to the dietary choices and diseases they faced over millennia in particular landscapes. They are liabilities only when we are “out of place” on globalized diets depleted of certain chemicals that triggered adaptive responses in our ancestors.

In **Why Some Like It Hot**, an award-winning natural historian takes us on a culinary odyssey to solve the puzzles posed by “the ghosts of evolution” hidden within every culture and its traditional cuisine. As we travel with Nabhan from Java and Bali to Crete and Sardinia, to Hawaii and Mexico, we learn how various ethnic cuisines formerly protected their traditional consumers from both infectious and nutrition-related diseases. We also bear witness to the tragic consequences of the loss of traditional foods, from adult-onset diabetes running rampant among individuals of northern European descent.

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There are opinions that learned behavior is also transmitted genetically thus making subtle changes in people. Food is a common element between the food of the Kings and beggars in an area.

Thus food is a significant element in culture. The other important element in culture is religion that which people follow together. The culture has tow important roots. The food and religion. In Sanskrit the word Dharma means, ‘that which hold people together’. All the religions of the world have locale-specific foods that are part of observance of religious rituals and religious taboos.

Food is an important part of religious observance and spiritual ritual for many different faiths, including Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. The role of food in cultural practices and religious beliefs is complex and varies among individuals and communities. If we observe carefully the taboos and preferences for ritual food we can locate the place of origin of emergence of a particular religion.

There are many forms of cultural expression that tell us much about the life and history of peoples. Variations in food recipes from different cultures are enormous and show the creativity of women, who generated such a marvelous variety. Often on the basis of very simple grains and rudimentary utensils and tools most wonderful dishes have been developed. Today some of these dishes illuminate tables of star restaurants serviced in an ambience that is inhuman and other worldly.

While the great religions ruled the roost there are subliminal religions that are not part of traditional practices of religion. Like food the practices of these religious observances remain subliminal and are ignored by the religion. In Bengal the observances of "Bratas" are related to wish fulfillment and are/or thanksgiving.

A good harvest is celebrated in which there are no priests involved and are entirely a woman's affair perhaps also reminiscent of the women's original role in inventing agriculture. The festivals in Assam, come as the 'Rengali Bahu' with dances and songs accompanied by eating of freshly-harvested rice. This is clearly thanksgiving to an undefined God. The toil and labor comes as golden rice with its inviting flavor when poured on a mud floor and fills the home with joy.

There are numerous occasions on which the Bratas are held. For instance to which for various wants and needs, to secure good health and livelihood. The young women wish for good husband or for cure of diseased person in the home. Welcoming the rain or wishing for it is also part of such rituals. Many of these observances are not religion-specific and are observed by both Hindus and others and are parts of original religion of women. The conversion to Islam has not affected these Brata observances whereas these parts of culture have become essential part of the very many religious practices such as the marriages.

### **Migration and cultural crisis**

Each migration brings with it certain amount of cultural crisis. The migrations have become part of life for many people because of political reasons or for urban pull. Migrations beyond the borders into foreign countries are increasingly growing. In these circumstances many of cultural artifacts are being forgotten, yet their memory

lingers on as something that they had once loved. To revive the traditional food eaten using festival was taken up as an action research project.

### **Action research in revival of traditional rice-based sweets**

The purpose of the project was to experiment with the traditional sweets that are being left behind as a forgotten part of the rural cultural artifacts. The new generations of Bengalees living on both sides of the border especially living in urban areas in the two countries or outside them in foreign countries have a latent love for villages, have become nostalgic about sweets that are mixed with reminiscences and nostalgia of the past.

We will explain that though sweets of Bengal are well appreciated and in fact famous throughout the world, they are based mainly on milk. Whereas, traditional sweets of rural Bengal are based on rice. Some of the special rice that was used for particular sweets is no more available and is extinct. With these and many other limitations we wanted to go ahead with our experiment.

The Idea was first mooted by some village women that these products may also have a market potential and can boost the rural economy. They complained that biscuits and other condiments made in factories are making inroads even in very remote villages, whereas they felt that home-made products were as good and retained the money within the village.

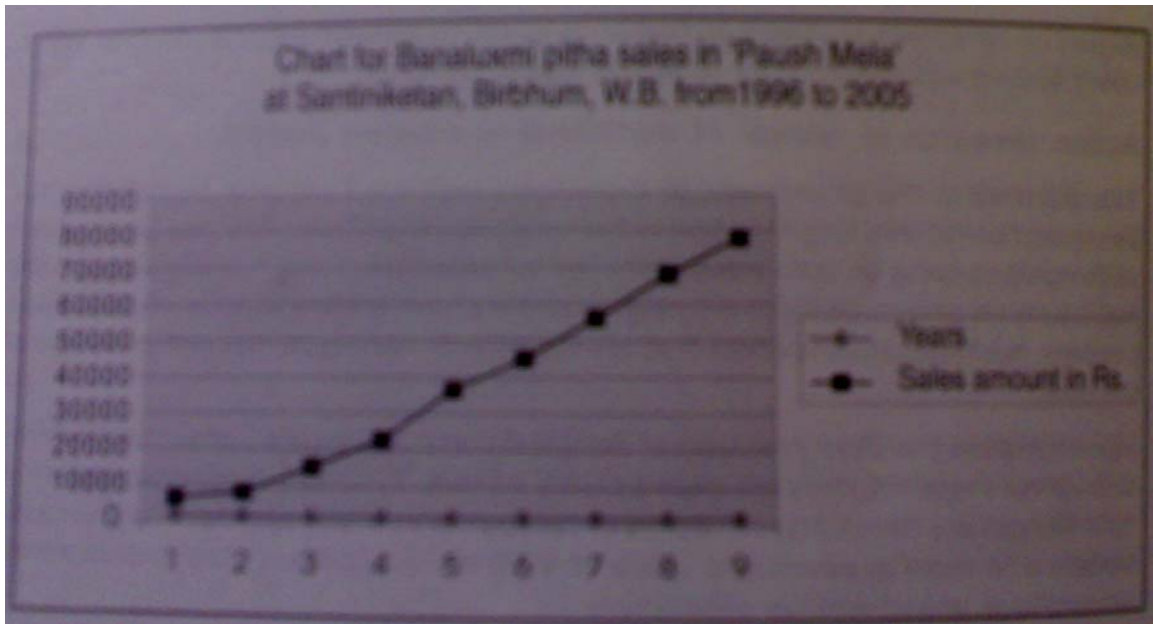
The project taken up, was for promoting traditional rural rice-based varieties. As the locale for promotion was the Paush Mela in Santiniketan where Bengalees from all walks of life, from non-resident Indians to village folks and urban and semi-urban areas participated. The visitors to the fair also had one characteristic – latent love for rural culture.

The two institutions that were involved in starting the program were:

PIDT's emporium Sanhati Vipani and  
Banaluxmi, an NGO specializing in food products.

Banaluxmi a socially committed organization enthusiastically responded to our effort of making village sweets and selling them through PIDT's emporium known as Sanhati Vipani. Banaluxmi had a difficulty that they were far from the Mela and it would have been difficult for them to bring freshly-made sweets for selling. They also were not sure that whether such a product will have a market. PIDT was interested in performing the action research project and helped Banaluxmi all the way to start the shop and keep supplies moving from their kitchen to the shop.

The process was followed from 1996 to 2004 showing steady growth in sales of these sweets. A curve showing the growth in the sales of these products in the Mela is given below.



Years	Sales amount in Rs.
1996	6797
1997	8417
1998	15405
1999	22891
2000	36500
2001	45000
2002	56000
2003	68000
2004	78000

We will give below a year-by-year progress report of the project that ran for over eight years. Though we are writing the action research report the process continues to grow and PIDT's involvement is no more essential. Further the idea has now been lapped up by the commercial manufacturers. Thus we may expect that the effort has proved it's purpose and will grow.

We give below a year-by-year account of the progress of sales and spread of the sales outlet and entry of village women and enthusiasm of the middle class women who composed a book of village sweet recipes.

Year-to-year progress of the project is given below:

## **CASE STUDY of revival of a cultural regeneration effort of PITHA PULI**

Cultural degeneration has been taking place for a long time in Indian villages. Traditional drama “Jatra” from epic of Ramayana and Mahabharata did not attract the villagers. These have been gradually replaced by themes made in imitation of dramas written in imitation of films.

Each form of expression has its own message. “Media is the message,” so said Marshal McLuhan<sup>2</sup>. He also said, “we become what we behold.” Thus influences of modern times are so powerfully changing the human behavior creating life goals and needs. Advertising techniques have overwhelmed the culture of the global village and the remote villages of Birbhum<sup>3</sup> which are the locale of study are no exception.

Village sports like ha DoDo, kaoadi or archery have lost ground to the international cricket in passive enjoyment of watching T.V.

There is one example. In 1982 PIDT had started work with tribals in the Singhpur village of Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh. In the village in Shadol district tribal people lost all their independence that they could practice following indigenous knowledge and skills. Their income declined, their housing and health condition became poorer because the traditional skills and knowledge had waned from the inroads of external technologies that made them poorer in all that they possessed.

They even lost skill to make ‘Patia’ (a mat stitched by date leaves) for sitting and resting though raw materials were freely available. They used to sit in the mud, on dust etc.

A tribal woman (name Thunki) from Shankargarh (M.P.) went there for training them to help them acquire their lost skill. It may be noted that cleanliness and self-sufficiency were vital part of the tribal culture which they had lost.

Since 1986 PIDT has started many different activities as part of regeneration of culture like recording of traditional songs in local dialect, exhibition of their wearing, eatable items, dress, forest products, ornaments, instruments for music and dance, craft works and collection of different types of seeds.

There are two purposes of the above works:

1. To educate the people about the beauty of enjoying items of their own creation rather than aspiring for purchased items.
2. Marketing of some of their products so that their economic condition may become better.

In 1992 PIDT started a marketing network namely Sanhati Vipani (Collective Shop) at Bolpur for promotion of rural, eco-friendly organic products, processed food, food for



making healthy soil, and other items. The Collective also promotes Handicrafts and produce of the villagers. As a result the demand and consumption of these items is gradually increasing.

For many years it was a dream to create market for different types of rice recipe as it may create immense scope for employment for the women. From the ancient time there are many types of food recipes existing in India. They have their own identity and differ from one area to another. These are hand-made and home-made food preparations.

As the folk songs, rituals etc. are the component of culture, food habits and skills of preparation are also vital component of the culture of the society. Mostly these are recipes used to prepare exclusively for eating by their family members and guests and neighbors on the occasion of festivals like 'Nabanya' and 'Paus Parban' and other days of the harvesting month. There are numerous occasions when these type of recipes are created by women and made by them.

The women are also carriers of traditions from one village to another thus creating an endless variety of these sweets. The skills of preparation are brought about by the women when they marry in villages further from their own. If the bride comes from long distance she takes with her a little of the craft from her village.

Skill of cooking is an important contributor to taste. Variation in taste arises from the lifestyle of women. The skills of preparation of these sweets change if bride comes from a long distance she takes with her a little of the craft from her village.

Formal education and emerging modern life style reduces need and efficacy of home education and life skills in every sphere get substantially negated. Thus buying becomes a solution and the skills in cooking that had been a preserve of women is shifting away to modern machines and market economy.

Nostalgia for home products are real wants in Bengal. Thus it was decided to revive the dying craft of making home sweets that are quite different from those that are available in the market.

Banaluxmi a commune is attached to Sanhati Vipani since 1992. banalaxmi is a cultural and environmental commune. They agreed to participate in the project by making these sweets and selling them. They were very impressed to know of the idea.

### **1996 Paush Mela**

Finally it was decided that in the year (1996) it will first sell Pitha in Sanhati Vipani stall in Paush Mela<sup>4</sup> which used to participate in the exhibition ground on the

occasion. In order to make a success of the program, the following steps were taken since the month of April 1996.

1. Continuous discussion and promotion with the customers that came to Sanhati Vipani boutique for purchasing in 'Bolpur' super market.
2. Discussion with numerous members of local organizations and well-wishers of the organization.
3. In October 2006, Sanhati Vipani printed large number of leaflets and distributed them among the people personally. The leaflets were also distributed door-to-door in the local area through newspaper agents.
4. Pasted posters in different important places in the local area.
5. In the beginning of December 1996 Sanhati Vipani booked a stall as usual in the exhibition ground on the occasion of Paush Mela.
6. A jeep was deployed to carry 'Patha' from Banaluxmi to Sanhati Vipani stall in the Paush Mela.

From 21 December 1996 women members with other women from outside and local area started to prepare different types of Pitha. Paush Mela started on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1996. On 23<sup>rd</sup> early morning PIDT jeep went to Banalaxmi to carry the Pitha and on the same day in the early morning about 7-30 AM, we started to sell different types of Pitha. "Thekua" (produced by women of PIDT Lokshala) in the stall of Sanhati Vipani in the exhibition ground was also sold.

Our early advertisement brought in a large number of customers and sales were sharp, but some members from Mela Committee of Visva Bharati came and told us that Pitha sale would not be allowed in the exhibition grounds. In their opinion any sweet stall would not be allowed there. For selling sweets, a separate stall should be booked in the area reserved for food stalls.

In the exhibition ground large numbers of educated people, professionals, lovers of eco-friendly products come. So it was the best place to propagate the new idea. A gain in that year there was no scope for booking a new stall in the Mela ground.

There was no vacant space in the Pitha by hawking in the Mela. For the last three days we sold Pitha by hawking. Courage and commitment for marketing prevented decaying of food and helped to boost our good image in favor of 'Pitha'. In the year 1996 total sales of Pitha was Rs. 6,797.

### **1997 Paush Mela**

Like the previous year we followed the same procedure. Some of the customers also made suggestions to make arrangement for selling Pitha after the end of Paush Mela. Unlike the previous year we booked the stall, but not in the exhibition ground, but a separate stall in the Mela ground. From the beginning we were aware of difficulties which might occur during the Mela.

PIDT Lokshala also sent its jeep along with Pitha 'Thekua'. Like last year this year too people showed great interest in buying Pitha. In 1997 'Babli' one of the local organizations also opened a separate stall.

In 1997 we sold Pitha worth Rs. 8,417.

After the Paush Mela one of the local entrepreneurs opened a temporary stall near Hati Bagan and continued selling Pitha throughout the winter season.

### **1998 Paush Mela**

Like the previous year we made all arrangements for selling Pitha in the Paush Mela. We provided jeep for carrying Pitha and made necessary arrangements for running the stall. During the year total Pitha sale was Rs. 15,405. After Paush Mela one of the entrepreneurs opened a temporary stall near Hati Bagan and continued for the winter season and Babli also opened a stall.

### **1999 Paush Mela**

Like the previous year we arranged all things for selling Pitha. The total sale of the Pitha was Rs. 22,891.

### **2000 Paush Mela**

This year we could not provide our jeep as it was involved in an accident when it was coming from Jagdishpur PIDT Lokshala to Bolpur in which some of our staff members were seriously injured, but we continued the program.

We hired a jeep for carrying the goods. The total sales were Rs. 36,500. As there was increasing demand for Pitha, they started to sell Pitha from their own campus. In this year they also had a stall in 'Megh Mela' in Sriniketan.

### **2001 Paush Mela**

In this year Banaluxmi decided that they could run Pitha stall and the role of propagating this item through their own effort though they would take help whenever necessary. In this year sold Pitha worth Rs. 45,500 they also sold Pitha in the Sriniketan Magh Mela. There they sold Pitha worth about Rs. 15,000.

### **2002 Paush Mela**

This year they sold Pitha worth Rs. 56,000. They also sold Pitha in Sriniketan Magh Mela through their counter they started full-fledged counter in their center.

### **2003 Paush Mela**

In this year there were two full-fledged stalls except Banaluxmi Pitha stall had come out on the exhibition ground.

One was run by Visva Bharati Palli Charcha Kendra and the other by local women in Santiniketan. Once Paush Mela committee had objected to sale of Pitha on the above ground, now they have accepted that food precipy is also a skill Seeing the environment of Pitha 's popularity some of the women sat on the footpath and sold Pitha like 'Dhoka5' etc. in large numbers.

This year Banaluxmi sold Pitha worth about Rs. 68.000 Others stalls like 'Lakhisri' sold Pitha worth about Rs. 15.000. We could not collect the data from another individual stall and women who were selling Pitha.

### **2004 Paush Mela**

In this year the number of Pitha stalls increased. The number of village women selling Pitha on the roadside was increasing . There were also of the road. Sales of Banalumi in the Paush Mela was worth Rs. 75.000. This year they sold Pitha in Sriniketan Magh Mela and Suri mela also.

### **2005 Paush Mela**

There were some stalls of the handicrafts, but selling Pitha as a food item. On the footpath more than ten women of poor calss sold Pitha in different places on the large Mela ground.

It was very interesting to observe that people were purchasing Pitha by standing in queue. Sometimes people were not getting Pitha because Banalxmi was unable to meet the demand.

A person from Banaluxmi toald us if they could get enough supply of Pitha in time then they could sell it. The total sales amount might have crossed Rs. One lakh .They sold Pitha worth Rs. 80.000 in the Paush Mela.

The sales during the Mela has been increasing as our figures show. Futher Banaluxmi is getting orders for marriage parties from Kolkata and nearby cites. Several sweet meat shops in Kolkata are regularly selling selling Pitha.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of Pitha puli program was the marketization of this product for the survival of women making Pitha. It has been successful after continuous effort for seven years. Form this effort is has not only got a place in the rich persons menu, but also generated scope for employment of women.

Educated people are not only taking interest in propagating the value and importance of traditional recipes, but publicizing them through print media.

'Srimati Mahila Samiti' one of the women groups which is linked with the Sanhati Vipani from the beginning and had given a lot of help for propagating Pitha puli recently published a magazine. In this magazine they have published a special article on preparation of Pitha puli.

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1. Pitha is used as generic name for many varieties of sweets prepared by village women of both Bangladesh and West Bengal. They make them during festivals some of which cut across the religious divide.
2. The famous communication specialist and social observer.
3. A district in West Bengal.
4. 'Paush Mela' a fair 90 years old is organized by Visva Bharati in Santiniketan in last week of December every year. This fair also got a status of international fair. Lakhs of people from different parts of the country and abroad attend the fair.
5. A rural product, but from outside West Bengal.