

MOVEABLE FEAST BHUBANESWAR

Food yatra

*A bright haul at Market Four. Facing
page: two's company at Lingaraj Lassi*

SOITY BANERJEE GETS A TASTE OF THE FAMILIAR AND THE ECCENTRIC
IN ORISSA'S CAPITAL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANDIPAN CHATTERJEE



I PACKED MY BAGS, my appetite and two well-masticated bones of contention: one, rosogollais Oriya by descent, and two, *oorey thakurs* (Brahmin cooks, a majority of whom crossed over from Bhadrak on the border to Midnapur and eventually to Kolkata in the nineteenth century) taught Bengali's how to cook. I had heard the war trumps blow a million times back home in Tollygunge—the duel dealier with each course. And it is through this muddy prism of shared food histories and quarrels that I began to see Oriya food. We were on a food hunt in Bhubaneswar and I was prejudiced.

Natural osmosis. Neighbours who shared their recipes over centuries and forgot to copy right the *panach phutan*, I surmised. Or file a patent for pitha, puli and, crucially, for rosogolla. Joined at the hip, Bengal was a key cohort. The two were even banded together in the national anthem: Utkala-Banga. Yet in its 2,500 years of recorded history, Orissa had imbibed foreign flavours and shared its own with more sources than fish in the Mahanadi and colours in a Sambalpur silk. Maritime trade links with South and Southeast Asia; ruling dynasties of Buddhists, Jains, Savites or Vaishnavites, each with its own religious proclivity for *amisa* (non-vegetarian) or *nirvanisa* (vegetarian); generations who migrated to and from Bengal, Assam, Bihar, central and southern India; and regions aligned until 1947 as the Madras Presidency.

Clearly I had over-valued the influence of Bengal. Not unlike my clan of self-proclaimed gourmards whose culinary perambulation on the annual pilgrim-age to Puri ends at a Dada-Boudir or Mashir Hotel, I discover now that Oriya food is not the regurgitated, bastardised

mush I had taken it for. Its restraint in spices, rustic yet understated flavours, were becoming of the state's rich culinary past—a past that still simmers in the earthen pots of rice, dals and vegetable curries of *chhapan bhog* served as *midaprasad* at the Lingaraj or Jagannath temples. Yet we don't know nearly as much about Oriya food as we do, say, about Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, Malayali or Andhra cooking, all of which have found their way to the communal tables of the great Indian metro.

Fortunately for Bhubaneswar, **Dalma** (92.38459237) on Sachivalaya Marg is attempting to do what Rajdhani did for Gujarati food and Oh! Calcutta for Banglaramza. But it'll be a while before they expand their current brood of six—in Bhubaneswar, Rourkela, Bangalore and Delhi—to taste pan-Indian success. Until then, find your way to the youngest shine in town for a sunshine-yellow melamine thali (₹70) of dalma (dal cooked with vegetables), rice, kanika (sweetened rice), besara (vegetables cooked in mustard paste) or ghanio (tempered with panach phutan), khata (spicy, sweet chutneys), potato bharta, kheeri (rice pudding) and baar chura, a notable curiosity of this coy cuisine that can outshine an entire meal. Small lentil dummies sun-dried, fried till crisp, crushed and tempered with garlic and spices, or laced with mustard oil, finely chopped onions and green chillies, wedged somewhere between *cheel* and *dal* poi.

The non-veg thalis (₹85-130) are pared down to a curry of fish, crab, prawn, chicken or mutton with dalma and rice. That *ramsa* (mutton) and *kakada* (chicken) are clearer than crab and prawn indicate our courtinates in handlocked but close-enough-to-smell-the-sea Bhubaneswar. The lunch I paid for and waited longingly

to dip into, though, was pakhal (₹75), Orissa's summer staple of leftover rice fermented overnight, often mixed with a little curd and tempered with mango ginger, cumin, mustard and curry leaves—light, uncomplicated succour in a bowl. In (undivided) Bengal, we know it as *pana bhar*, eaten with raw onion, bhajias or potato mash, salt and dried red chillies. Assam calls it *pan-ta* or *poita bhar*, and stirs in milk for variation. Chhatisgarh serves it as breakfast in the villages. But finding it in a restaurant anywhere is like stumbling upon gold in your backyard.

PAKHAL is that tattered comforter that's prized but never aired in the presence of a houseguest. Even in Kolkata, where a surge in revivalist Bengali restaurants has put obscure recipes back in circulation, *pana bhar* is rarely seen on the menu. So in Bhubaneswar, where eating out for the Panigrahis and Mohantys is an annual exercise that usually involves chilly chicken-chowmein at the local mall, finding pakhal for a price is nothing short of a miracle. To its credit though, the capital city has room for many such pleasing anomalies. Among them the curious case of the Dalma brigade—a befuddling bunch of spinoffs called variously **Dalama** (7673763848) or **Odisha Dalama** (9661038965), with varying spellings and unvarying food.

Ignored by the tourist hurtling down NH 203 to Puri and Konark, Bhubaneswar's redemption has arrived on a different route. A steady traffic of well-travelled, well-heeled patrons, breezing in and out on frequent calls of business, has stirred the pot of a minor revolution. Mr Deep Pocket, who expects, even demands, an Oriya meal in Orissa, has forced the five-stars and bust-

ITS RESTRAINT IN SPICES IS BECOMING OF ORISSA'S CULINARY PAST... THAT STILL SIMMERS IN CLAY POTS OF BHOG



ness hotels to serve at least a few local delicacies. The **Trident** (0674-2301010) has a small but well-executed selection, rustled up by a chef with roots in Orissa. Now **Marion** (2380850) slips in chenna tarkari and *sonisa maacha* between *matar-paneer* and *jhalfrizi*. And **Phulbani** (3017000) at the Swosti Premium—once the bastion of all things Oriya, now a shadow of itself—offers a couple of thalis that are hard to find fault with.

For the magnum opus, head to Mayfair Lagoom's **Kanika** (6660101)—an exclusive Oriya restaurant (the only one in its price bracket: ₹1,000 for two) wheedling you to eat everything your friend from Cuttack always talked about but never dished out. We got so excited and ordered such a pile that the waiter had to rein us in ("But madam, are you sure..."). And the chef came out alarmed to meet the champion diners who hadn't

Clockwise from left: bhog at Anant Vasudev temple on its way to being blessed; and Dalma



finished eating three hours after the starters arrived. Following a botched affair at the sarkari **Kalinga Ashok**, with many a local dish in sight and enough Pipli umbrellas and lampshades to turn you colourblind, we held on to the Kamika's exhaustive four-page menu even after the third dessert had come and gone. Kadaiti manja rai (banana shoot in mustard sauce), janhi posto (ridge gourd in poppy seed paste), chhatra besara (mushroom in mustard), chhuna machha tarkari (small, bony fish in a gravy), chandi machha bhaja (marinated pomfret on a griddle)... We ate as if there was no tomorrow—and there wasn't going to be one for us, at least not in this city.

FARLIER IN THE DAY at Market Four, thick on the ground with buyers and byers crammed with writhing fish, I was a happy cat, dreaming up ways to make some of that heavy haul find its way to me and not to the Ma Manasa Wedding Hall. Crabs from Chilika, pomfret from Paradip, rohu from Chandampur and the first batch of fish from Baleswar blushing like new brides—I could have twenty meals without repeating a fish. But at almost all the restaurants, it was rohu and chingudi that made their obligatory appearance. The rest never quite made that final lap to my eager plate. A last-ditch effort to sniff out a fish-full free lunch on FB ran aground too.

The only (almost) free lunch in town, though, doesn't include fish and is not dished out to atheists. The mahaprasad served at the Jagannath temple in Puri, the Lingaraj temple or some of the smaller temples like the Anant Vasudev is cooked eight times a day, every day, in earthen pots that are never stirred. Relying on local ingredients and spices that were used as far back as the twelfth century, the pandas keep the tomatoes brought in by the Portuguese, for instance, well out of the Lord's sight. It might seem a bit excessive at first, but one look at the soot-stained pigeonhole kitchens with thatched roofs and wood-fired ovens, and it all fits in like the metre of an ancient shlok. It's a sight to behold (at fixed times in the mornings and evenings) when the lean, muscular men in Cuttack half-dhotis carry large, cylindrical pots into the garbhagriha. Blessed with a complex set of mudras, they are then carried to the **Anand Bazaar**—a large courtyard where the prasadi is sold to eager men and women seeking temporary salvation for ₹80–100 (meal for four). The manna also travels to different corners of the city, often to different cities as well, to mark the cycle of birth, death, weddings and successes. Vegetarian by default, the sacred threshold is only ever breached by a fish during Dussehra when Ma Durga arrives' at the Jagannath temple in Puri.

Walking away after the banana leaves have been cleared, the young Chittan Paanda, our self-appointed guide, thrusts a handful of what looks like a cross

between Kurkure and munakku into my palm. It's nadi, he tells me. Another of those felicitous Odia oddities made with urad dal, rice meal, hing and other spices, deep-fried in ghee. Added to practically everything that comes off the stove—dals and vegetable curries, in particular—the nadi absorbs the goodness, swells and gives to the slightest persuasion. Frankly, I didn't see the point of it in curries. I loved it as is—and put the whole lot in my backpack, dipping into it whenever the next meal seemed distant (a rare occurrence).

It's hard to go hungry in Bhubaneswar for longer than three minutes' driving time. Pushcarts, peddlers on bicycles, on foot, in clusters of green chicken-coop tin sheds—they're everywhere. Crawling along pavements, crouching in corners, sending out smoke signals to the burgeoning band of snack-monsters. A far cry from the small coterie of Odia restaurants competing for the custom of the local customer. Overrun by ricki and vada stands, the city has few homegrown snackables. What it does instead is blend in its eccentricities into innumerable nibbles to make them its own. Dahi vada (₹10), for instance, is a mound of vada, ghnuni, aloo dum, bhujia, onion, chutneys and, mercifully, some dahi. The most popular mid-morning, mid-afternoon and mid-evening snack, it is often to be seen riding on a bicycle in large aluminium handis strung on either side of the handlebar. Chaat (₹10–15) is yet another jumble-de-goop of bhajia, papri, ghnuni, bhujia, coriander, chutney, carrot,

Facing page (clockwise from top left): swaro-puli at Venus Inn; Lingaraj Lassi; chandi machha bhaja at Mayfair Lagori; gajula at Masina Chowk; a large crab at Market Four; chaat at Rupali Square; and the Kamika restaurant. This page: Dahi vada on Jangam



THE CITY BLENDS ITS ECCENTRICITIES INTO INNOCUOUS, FAMILIAR NIBBLES TO MAKE THEM ITS OWN

Clockwise from right: rosogolla at Pabala; chenna tarkari at Konka; Mausiina Chowk; deep-fried moluruli fish; beeti shop; and litchis near Japath

cucumber, beet and (hold your breath) coconut shavings. I couldn't stomach the idea. But if you're willing to go where no non-Oryza has been before, try the outlets at **Rupali Square** or **Unit Nine** (opposite Dalma), with its quaint, boxy carts painted in cheerful colours and named, without exception, after a goddess or two. Ma Mangala or Tarchi won't come to your rescue, when the bomb explodes on your palate though.

The city's only native snack, a crêpe made with urad dal and rice meal, can be found at two breakfast push-carts at the **Mausiina Chowk** (near the Lingaraj temple), where hungry hands scoop vermicelli khiri or ghugni with a stack of chakulis (₹10). For vegetable fritters served with ghugni, head to the **Unit Four market** (near Rabindra Mandap). Or go to **Rajpath Chowk** (Bapuji Nagar), where a row of shops recently resurrected after a short-circuit disaster sell generously coloured and deeply fried seafood (₹30) and chicken pakodas (₹30) once the sun is down and the spirits are up. The beverage stop is at **Lingaraj Lassi** (in Shaheed Nagar) – a shop that doubles up as a mini-factory with whirling Sumec mix-ies, electric coconut shavers, milk and rabri on the boil. I was so taken by the buzz and the ludicrous pink bottles on display that I swallowed three fourths of my glass of yogurt blended and topped with rabri, laced with coconut, cashews and candied fruit. Lesson learnt: excess is not always a good thing.

NOT UNLESS it's a reference to Bhubaneswar's most famous ambassador, the chhena poda (₹100–120 for a kilo). A wheel of cheese, whose charred sail-leaf-wrapped countenance can inspire no poetry. But a single encounter with its dense, smoky, toothsome-ness can spur the most rapturous ode. The trouble is it's hard to tell a stodge from a winner. And there is no real consensus on where to go. If the flies don't bother you, any of the neighbourhood sweet shops or independent vendors (Unit Four is a good bet) will do. We were led to **Venus Inn** (2597738) and **Nimnapara Sweets** (7381503029) in Bapuji Nagar and were certainly not disappointed. They also introduced us to swaropuli or khoya wrapped in

NO FRIDGES HERE, JUST THE COLD EMBERS OF A STOVE THAT CRADLED THE CHHENA PODA



milkskin, chhena goja, rasaboli or deep-fried discs of chhena in syrup, artismade with gur and rice batter, and the flaky phenigaja, usually brought back in cane baskets from Puri as prasad. **Bikala Nand Kar**'s (2546691) in Shahid Nagar is the one-stop shop for rosogolla.

IF THERE WERE sweetmeat 'appellations' in Orissa, Nimnapara (40km from Bhubaneswar) and Pabala (15km away) would stake their claim to chennajilli, fried mishapen orbs of chenna dipped in syrup, and rosogolla and chhena poda (respectively).

We rode Tapan Kumar Jena's three-wheeled chariot to Pabala on a baking afternoon. The heat trickled down my neck and the tar on the road ahead bubbled. Suddenly Tapan—our GPS, food guide and auto-driver rolled into a jolly, rotund man—let out an uncharacteristic squeal. Rows of ramshackle, dusty shops revealed themselves on either side of the highway. The legacy of one man, Ketu Behara, who first sold his syrupy load half a century ago, Pabala is now a merry cluster of sixty-five shops at last count. No fridges here, just the cold embers of a stove that cradled the wheels of chhena poda overnight. And countless rosogollas swimming in aluminium tubs browed by long hours on the boil in a thick, thick syrup. As the rainclouds gathered, we headed back to the auto. So did Tapan, but not empty-handed. "For my wife," he mumbled. "She is in Khandra, my *shashur bari*. We've just had a child, you see." Some things are always the same, no matter where you are. No quarrels there.



Top to bottom: chhola tarkari (bhog); prawn pakora at Bapuji Nagar; and Tapan Kumar Jena's chariot

