

How we got our Pao ?

Written by W.J.Pais

The Portuguese usually get a bum rap in discussions about Indian food. Talk about their contributions to our cuisine, and you'll hear references to vindaloo, balchao, sorpotel, sausages, and disgusting sweet Goan wine. Nobody will mention that they brought the chilli to India and transformed our food forever.

But there's also another Portuguese contribution that usually goes unheralded. And if you live in the western states of India (Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc) you will know that this is a far more significant contribution than is usually acknowledged.

We know that till the Muslims got here, Indians were not great bakers. We know also that those Indians who ate wheat (i.e. north of the Vindhyas, and not a lot in the East) tended to eat atta or wholewheat flour. Maida or refined flour came with the Muslims.

Our experiences with maida parathas and naans only start from the arrival of Muslim traders and rulers and when maida did penetrate south of the Vindhyas, it was as part of Muslim cuisine (i.e. the Malabar paratha of Kerala). Even now, in large parts of India, Muslims remain the best traditional bakers because of their skill at using maida. (My guess is that something like 80 per cent of the traditional bakeries in Bombay are Muslim-owned).

But Muslims in the north of India are not big on bread. If you go to a Muslim locality in Delhi, Lucknow or Allahabad and order a kebab or a korma, you'll be served some kind of roti, paratha or naan with it. You won't get a bun or a slice of bread on the side.

If, on the other hand, you go to Mohammad Ali Road or any such area where Muslim vendors ply their trade in Bombay, you may well get some bread with your curry. And some dishes — say the famous keema pav — are designed to be eaten with bread.

So why do Muslims in the west of India like bread more than Muslims in North India?

Well, that's where the Portuguese enter the picture. As Lizzie Collingham points out in her authoritative *Curry – A Biography*, the Portuguese landed in parts of India (Cochin, Goa etc) where the locals ate rice. But they missed their crusty bread, and in any case, they needed bread for Holy Communion. They could find wheat flour in Goa but yeast was hard to come by. So they started using a few drops of toddy to ferment the dough and created the various Goan breads we know today: the round gutli, the flat pav, etc.

It is from Goa that bread first travelled to Bombay and became a staple among locals. By the time British arrived with their nasty white bread, the Portuguese-Goan pav had already been well established. And so British bread became an upmarket sort of dish, useful for making toast or sandwiches. But the food of the streets used pav, which could be sliced open to stuff an

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omelette into it or served alongside a spicy keema or a korma. And Bombay's Goan community continued to use it as an alternative to rice.

But there was always a Hindus v/s the rest kind of divide. Pav became the food of the minorities (Muslims, Catholics etc) while Hindus stuck to traditional (and non-maida) breads like rotis, pooris, etc, even in Bombay. If you look at the snacks that developed in Bombay, bread of any kind hardly played a role, except in Christian and Muslim areas.

Then, gradually, the communal barrier was broken. The most famous example was the growth of pav bhaji stalls. I checked with Wikipedia, the most convenient if not most reliable source of information about Indian food habits, and discovered that it claims that pav bhaji was the food of Indian mill workers in 1850.

And the rest is history: The first pav bhaji stalls in Bombay were located near the old Cotton Exchange, because traders waited for the New York cotton prices that came in late into the night and early in the morning.

I'm sceptical of this claim because my sense is that the first pav bhajiwallas appeared all over Bombay in the late 1950s and (more likely) the 1960s. They opened in the evenings and did not go home till early the next morning.

The first stalls were located near the old Cotton Exchange, because traders waited for the New York cotton prices (in the '60s, these were carried prominently in all Bombay papers) that came in late into the night and early in the morning. But soon the pav bhaji stalls spread all over the city and by the late '60s such restaurants as Tardeo's Sardar Pav Bhaji were packing them in.

Why pav? Why not pooris or bhaturas as in North India? My guess is that the roadside guys near the Cotton Exchange found it easier to toast pav on their tavas than to make fresh Indian breads. Plus, the principal component of pav bhaji is Amul butter and the bread soaked it up better than any Indian roti would have.

If pav bhaji become popular in the mid to late '60s, then vada pav caught on even later.

The idea was pretty basic. You take a batata vada (a staple of Gujarati and Maharashtrian cuisine) and place it inside a pav you have sliced open. But vada pav seems to have been Maharashtrian in origin and when it caught on in the '70s, it was as a Maharashtrian snack. A few years later came the Kutchi dabeli, which was the same basic idea as the vada pav but squeezed the potato mixture into the bread and pressed it tight without bothering with a patty or a vada.

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So, what made the difference? How did the Portuguese pav cross the communal divide and become one of Bombay's most recognisable breads? My guess is that has something to do with convenience and education.

During my childhood, a pav was still regarded as something alien or – to put it crudely – kind of downmarket. Many people (including the eminent food historian KT Achaya) speculated that it got its name from being a quarter of a loaf. Many not-so-wise Gujaratis of my acquaintance said that the dough was kneaded by the feet, hence the name. Actually, what's probable is that we use the Portuguese name: pao. No great mysteries there.

It became part of the different forms of Bombay cuisine from the mid-'60s onwards because a) these misconceptions began to evaporate and b) the roadside hawkers lacked the wherewithal and facilities to make bhaturas or pooris from scratch. Most lived in slums in the northern suburbs and took local trains to work. So they tried to carry as little paraphernalia with them as possible.

That simple explanation accounts for the ubiquity of bread in all forms in roadside food stalls. Keema pav is still hard to get in non-Muslim areas but the vegetarian bread dishes are easy to find: pav bhaji, vada pav and now dabeli. A more recent invention but probably just as famous is the Bombay sandwich, which does not use pav but uses normal sliced white bread.

Curiously enough, while other Bombay street food staples like bhelpuri have travelled to each corner of India, the Bombay bread snacks have been less well received. You do get pav bhaji pretty much everywhere and versions of pav-keema are catching on, even if the keema recipes differ from the classic Bombay version.

But it's hard to get a Bombay sandwich in Delhi. Vada pav appears on a few upmarket menus but is not the chaat staple that, say, bhelpuri is. A dabeli is relatively (if not almost entirely) unknown in much of North India. And so on.

Why don't these dishes travel well? I'll tell you. Despite my love for my hometown, I'm not a fan of the double starch sandwich. My view is that a good sandwich takes starch (bread) and uses a non-starch as a filling. So a ham sandwich or egg sandwich or a cheese sandwich or a hamburger makes perfect sense. Even sandwiches made with real vegetables (tomatoes, cucumber, peppers, etc) appeal to me.

But the principle behind a dabeli (except for the Jabalpur one which I wrote about in these pages) or a vada pav is that you take a starch (potato) and put it into another starch. Somehow that just doesn't work for me. And I'm guessing it doesn't work for many people outside of

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Bombay.

You can get away with mixing potato and wheat if you lower the quantity of both starches (an aloo paratha) or if the bread is used to soak up a buttery gravy (pav bhaji). But I'm sorry. A potato sandwich does not do it for me.

So let's go back to the Portuguese and to the Muslim street foodwallahs of pre-1960s Bombay. Think of a pav topped with delicious Goan sausage. Of a pav sliced roughly open and stuffed with masala omelette and onion. Or of spicy keema soaking through a hunk of bread.

Now that's what I call a sensible use of bread!

From HT Brunch, January 18, 2015

Webmaster: We thank Mr. Sangvi for this nice article.