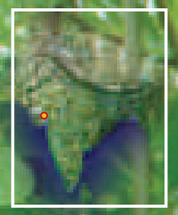

Paan
The story of a heart shaped leaf

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Photographs © Sandesh Bhandare

Here is a heart-stealer – the leaf that plays a significant role in social, religious and cultural rites and practices. It is traditional, it is contemporary, and it is the essence of Indianness.

Noorjahan, the mother of Mughal emperor Shahjahan, is said to have once found a leaf which when eaten along with some distinct ingredients not just acted as a mouth freshener but also gave a red lipstick like colouring to the lips of the chewer. Needless to say, this heart shaped leaf called the Paan or the beetle leaf captured the queen's heart, just like it has mesmerized royalty and commoner alike over the centuries.

Noorjahan, in fact, was not the one who discovered paan. Its mention in the age-old epics and Vedas show that the scholars of Ayurveda found that these leaves were very good palate cleansers and breath fresheners. It is said that Sushruta, the father of Indian medicine, studied the paan's qualities in detail and found that apart from being a digestive, paan also helped to strengthen the voice, tongue, teeth and guard against diseases. Incidentally, the association of paan with cancer is not due to its individual trait but is the synergistic effect of the ingredients put in the paan like tobacco, catechu or katha and betel nuts or supari that increase the risk of oral cancer and not the leaf.

Today, paan is as much part of a traditional Indian feast as kheer or sweet served at the end of the meal. So much so that some find the feast incomplete without being served a triangular shaped beeda of a paan with some 8 to 10 ingredients packed inside the leaf. These ingredients may basically consist of the lime or chuna, catechu or katha, betel nuts or supari and other varied add-ons like rose petals, fennel seeds, cardamom, tobacco and other ingredients, depending on the taste and preference of the chewer. Many naïve to the fillings used in a paan believe that all paan leaves when eaten leave the lips, tongue and mouth red. The truth is, the red colouring comes from the catechu spread on the paan and the leaf if eaten without these other inclusions has a bitter sweet, mint like quality leaving the mouth with no colour as such but a distinct after taste.

This taste too may vary depending on the variety of paan you are chewing. There are the world famous varieties of Maghai and Jagannath of Benaras, the desi mahoba of Bengal, the small and fragile chigrleyele of South India which is more popularly known as the madraasi paan and also the ambadi and kariyele varieties from the south that have thicker black leaves and are mostly eaten with tobacco.

The paan leaves come from a creeper, which thrives well in moist soil under the shade of trees or bamboo roof and requires lot of care and attention. A typical creeper can bear light green healthy leaves for twenty years or more but after two decades, farmers prefer to plant new creepers as the spicy taste of the paan leaves seems to get milder with time. It is believed that the leaves absorb the identity of the region they are growing in and so give a very unique regional flavour, aroma and taste when finally served.

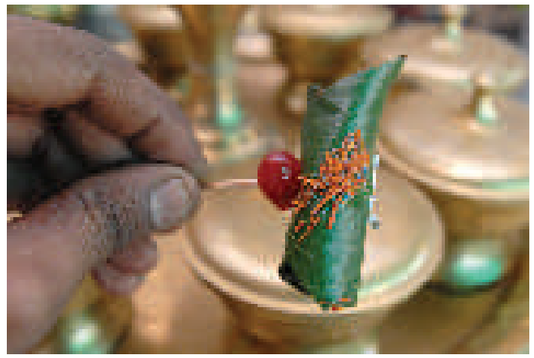
Just like wine connoisseurs swear by the wine they like, in India there are paan connoisseurs who can wax eloquent about the paan they like and how its taste differs from all the other varieties. Like wine, even the way the paan beeda has to be eaten is of great consequence to get the desired taste. One doesn't just put the paan in the mouth and start chewing, instead it is pressed slightly between the molars and chewed with labour, slowly and passionately to let the juices of the leaf intermingle with the individual taste of the varied ingredients and finally give a refreshing, sweet, bitter mint like flavour. Those who do know the proper code of conduct of paan eating also feel that it is quite important not to eat or gulp down the paan but chew it and once the juices run dry, throw it like a chewing gum. Of course, not every paan eater has a sense of public etiquette and often one finds the walls of public places spattered with red – the careless art of modern paan chewers.

All this apart, the palm leaf plays a significant role in social, religious and cultural rites and practices. It has been an important part of wedding ceremonies and holy rituals. In Hindu homes, the whole paan leaf is offered to the lord as part of the puja. In a traditional Bengali wedding, the moment when the bride and

groom see each other for the first time is marked by a ceremony called the shubho drishti or the pious glimpse. What makes the ceremony enchanting is the way the bride increases the anticipation of the groom by hiding her face behind two paan leaves held in each hand and then finally lifting her leafy veil for the traditional love at first sight. Indeed, the paan leaf's popularity as a means to appease lovers is legendary. There are innumerable madhubani paintings where Lord Krishna and Radha are seen with each other amidst a background of trees, peacocks, fountains and a distinctive paan daani or a paan box kept nearby.

This paan daani too is not of less significance. Although the use of such a box to keep paan leaves in has diminished, there was a time when people revered their paan daani as much as the paan itself. These had beautiful shapes of peacocks or leaf motifs and separate compartments inside for keeping the different ingredients and the paan leaves. What made these boxes extra special was while the designs were good to look at they also served the purpose of keeping the paan leaves fresh and well aerated.

The tradition of carrying a paan daani has now been replaced by a less fanciful but practical paan shop. Visible every few steps on the roadside, it is sometimes hard to fathom how a person sitting in a little four feet by four feet kiosk can dish out almost five hundred paan in



an hour. And without any exaggeration many paanwaalas (owners of these shops) sell almost 3000 paan a day owing to the huge demands of their customers. Here people wait patiently to taste the delicious paan made by a particular paanwaala who like a master chef creates his speciality.

Most shops keep a few dozen meetha paans ready to be served in promptu. These are the varieties that have no added tobacco or betel nuts but mostly sweet ingredients like cherries, rose petals, sugar, fennel seeds and coconut scrapings. The paan shop also serves as a local meeting place for young and old to discuss politics, arts, daily gossip and of course films. In fact, films too have done their share to immortalise the paan with songs like 'paan khaye saiya humar…' or 'khaike paan benaras waala….'

Speaking about the paan and not mentioning Lucknow is like speaking about a tree without mentioning the birds that make it their home. Lucknow is essentially home to paan. It is this city that has lifted paan eating to the pinnacle of refinement. Here you will find many fanatical paan lovers. The age old customs of carrying a paan daani, keeping the paan leaves fresh inside a red coloured cloth called the shaal-baaf or decorating the paan beeda or bilourie, as it is called here, with silver foil to make the savoured delicacy more valued, are very much intact in this paan loving city. Even Ibn- e-Batuta, the famous traveller, has mentioned in his travelogues about how serving a paan to the guests was a sign of ultimate respect and hospitality in Lucknow. The fascination of this city for paan is such that the heart and spades in a deck of cards too are called the laal paan and kaala paan respectively.

From colouring lips to staining the city walls, from being offered to gods and goddesses to being considered a sinful carcinogenic treat, the paan has grown to be known by many terms over the years - a national pass time, a holy offering, a refreshing treat and by far the best and most fitting ending to a delectable Indian meal.