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Poha—Krishna’s Favorite

By Aparna Heroor

The Memory

Some of my childhood memories consist of an unforgettable aroma emanating from the kitchen in the morning: the aroma of milk boiling away on the gas stove, coffee dripping in the stainless steel percolator, and peanuts, onions, potatoes, curry leaves, green chilies, and spices frying away in the thick aluminum *kadhai* (wok)—with the intermittent clunking of the huge stainless steel ladle against the *kadhai*, announcing that breakfast was on its way—not just any breakfast, but one of my favorites, Poha!

Poha is a common breakfast item in India, more prevalent in the western state of Maharashtra. Every summer when we visited my grandparents in Aurangabad, the historic town in Maharashtra, almost everybody we visited would offer us *pohe*, as they call it in Maharashtra and parts of Goa, along with *chaha* (Chai/tea) and that is what we ate! That beautiful yellow poha with crunchy peanuts, garnished with fresh green coriander leaves and pure white freshly grated coconut—oh, what a treat it was!



Figure 1. Savory Poha

Poha is flat “beaten” rice in the form of flakes available in varying degrees of thickness. The very thin variety is mostly used to make a delicious savory snack called *chivda* that contains roasted peanuts, raisins, and spices. The thick variety is used more in the southern part of India. It is called *Atukulu* in Telugu, and *Avalakki* in Kannada. There are a few notable differences between the Maharashtrian and South Indian versions of poha. The first is the color. The former is usually yellow, because of the use of turmeric, whereas the latter is usually white because there is no addition of turmeric. The next difference is that the Maharashtrian version uses cumin seeds whereas the South

Indian version uses mustard seeds. Maharashtrians also tend to add extra amounts of sugar to their food. That is quite evident in their poha when compared to the South Indian version. South Indians tend to use a lot of curry leaves and freshly grated coconut in their preparations compared to Maharashtrians. Poha can also be used to make a very humble, yet significant, dessert preparation.

I had an arranged marriage right after college, like most Indian daughters, and I moved to America thirteen years ago. I sure was a happy bride, but I missed home, especially once I became an expectant mother and started getting those pregnancy pangs. One such morning I yearned for some sweet poha. At that time, I was still a novice in culinary matters, so my approach to satisfying my craving for sweet poha involved mixing up uncooked poha flakes with milk and *jaggery* (whole cane sugar), and then warming it up in the microwave until the poha flakes were soft enough to be consumed. It was simple and tasty and above all, satisfied that craving, although I must admit that my shortcut microwave method would not have impressed culinary purists! It was later, when I called my mom and told her about my solution to my cravings, that I found out that sweet poha was in fact Krishna's favorite food!

Krishna: The Legend

The literal meaning of the word *Krishna* is dark. According to Indian mythology, Krishna is considered to be the eighth avatar or reincarnation of Vishnu, the God of Protection. Apparently, Vishnu plucked a white and black hair from His head. The white hair went into Rohini's womb and that is how Balarama, Krishna's elder brother, was born. The black hair entered Devaki's womb and that is how Krishna, the dark-haired one, was born.

I would be surprised if a child in India didn't know the story of Krishna. Every child

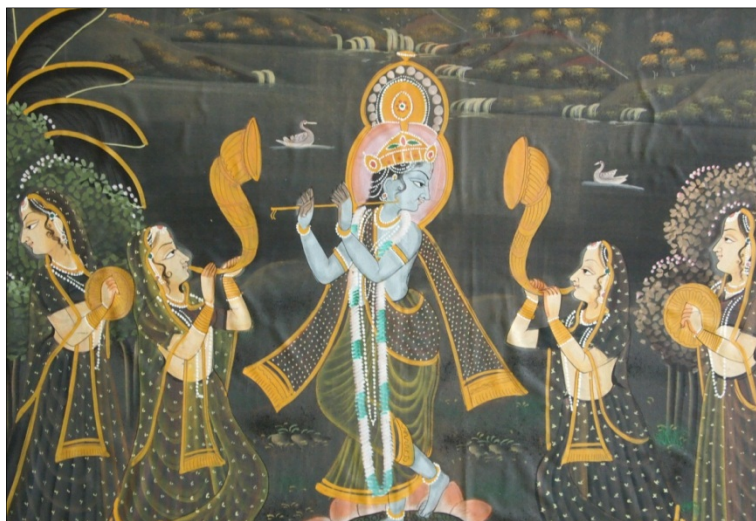


Figure 2. Krishna

born to Indian parents has either heard the story from elders or read books on Krishna. The story goes that Krishna was born to Devaki and Vasudeva. Devaki was the sister of Kamsa, the ruler of Mathura, who was married off to Vasudeva, son of Shoorsen, another ruler of Mathura (Mathura is

now a city in the Northern state of Uttar Pradesh in India). However, Krishna was raised by Yashoda in Gokula. Yashoda was Nanda's wife. Nanda was the chief of the

Gopas, a tribe of cowherds, in the small village of Gokula. There are many beautiful stories and songs depicting the mother-son bond between Mother Yashoda and Baby Krishna. He later became the King of Dwaraka and played a major role in the epic tale of Mahabharata

The Story of Krishna and Sudama

Krishna's childhood friend was a Brahmin named Sudama. Krishna grew up to become the King of Dwaraka, whereas Sudama and his family were living a life of dire poverty. The story goes that one day Sudama's wife, fed up with their life of poverty and misery, reminded Sudama that Krishna, the Lord of Dwaraka, was his childhood friend and that he should go meet Krishna. She thought that Krishna, being the King, might be able to help them. She kept requesting Sudama to go meet Krishna, until finally Sudama agreed. Since he was going to meet Krishna after so many years, he wanted to give him a gift. However, Sudama was so poor that he could not afford any extravagant gifts. He asked his wife if there was anything in the house that he could take for his friend. His wife thought for a moment and immediately came up with an idea. She took a handful of poha, mixed it with jaggery, tied it up in a cloth, and handed the little bundle to Sudama to take to his friend, Krishna. With the bundle of poha in his hand, Sudama set off on foot towards Dwaraka to meet Krishna.

After several days of walking through deep jungles, he finally reached Krishna's palace in Dwaraka. He was stopped at the gate by the palace guards. He told them that he was Sudama, Lord Krishna's childhood friend. Soon Krishna came running out with open arms to greet his dear friend. He took him inside the palace. They talked for hours together recollecting their childhood memories. Suddenly, with a twinkle in his eye, Krishna asked Sudama for his gift. Sudama, though hesitant, extended the bundle of poha that his wife had sent for Krishna. He was a bit embarrassed and told Krishna that was all he could afford. Krishna was thrilled. He exclaimed, "Poha! This is my favorite food!" and he immediately ate a handful, followed by yet another handful, which left only one handful in the bundle. At that moment, Krishna's wife, Rukmini, the reincarnation of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, asked Krishna not to finish the remaining handful of poha as she wanted to taste it herself!

Sudama spent that night in Krishna's palace. He left the next morning to go back to his family. He was overjoyed that Krishna had remembered him and had treated him like his own brother. That in itself was a great gift to him. When he finally reached his village, the huge magnificent palace that stood in place of his old hut took him aback. For a moment, he thought that perhaps he had lost his way. But to his surprise, his wife and children, garbed in fine silk and jewelry, came running toward him. They looked happy. He realized that it was all through Krishna's benevolence. Even though he had not asked for anything, the Lord already knew everything about

his dear friend. Sudama and his family lived a happy and comfortable life thereafter.

The gist of the story is that wealth and social status have nothing to do with true friendship. It also shows that in spite of being poor, Sudama had given his friend everything he had (the poha). In return, even though Sudama did not ask for anything, Krishna gave him all that he needed. There are many other inferences that one can draw from this story. However, the one inference that I am particularly interested in is that Poha was Krishna's favorite food!

Celebrating Krishna's Birthday

Each year, sometime between August and September, we celebrate *Janamashtami*, or Krishna's birthday. We make tiny footprints with sidewalk chalk starting at the front door, leading all the way to

Krishna's idol that incidentally happens to be in one of the cupboards in my kitchen! I make it a point to prepare sweet poha as well as savory poha on this day and first offer it to the Lord. I keep a bowl each of sweet and savory poha in front of Krishna's idol and then we all eat the *prasadam* (food that is first offered to God). This is exciting for my kids because they imagine mischievous little Krishna



Figure 3. Sweet Poha

tiptoeing into the kitchen to steal the food! Over the years, this has become a tradition of sorts in our family. Besides—what an apt way to celebrate Krishna's birthday—by making His favorite food!

Now that you know the background behind Poha, don't you think you ought to try it? It is, after all, food loved by Lord Krishna Himself!

Aparna Heroor has an MSc in Microbiology from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in India. She is an active food blogger, and her blog is called, "Yet another Foodie," that includes recipes and ruminations. She is passionate about learning more about food, its relationship with culture, and the nutritional benefits of different foods. She believes that sharing food is the easiest way to connect to a person, and then by extrapolation, a culture. She moved to the US from India in 1997.