



BENGALI MEAL

Aim: This is an exercise in experiencing the Bengali attitudes and customs regarding food for an ordinary situation (not a feast) and to engage with issues of cross-cultural mission and the day to day life of a missionary.

Time: Excluding food preparation time, this role-play will take up to 1 hour for the meal followed by discussion about the issues raised.

Items:

- Food: Boiled rice, Salt, Dhal (lentils), Curried vegetables, Curry (optional)
- Equipment: 1 large dinner plate and 1 glass per person, jug and bowl for washing hands at the door, saucers of salt on the table, serving dishes, serving spoons, enough seats for the first sitting (or space for sitting on the floor), a space for the women and children to wait.
- People needed: People to eat the meal in two groups. (men and boys), (women, girls and small children); host, who will control the dining room; the matriarch, who will control the women in serving the meal; a woman to rinse the hands at the door; four women to set the tables and serve the food; men and boys to eat first (other women, girls and young children to wait outside); women, girls and young children to eat second, waited on by single women and married women without children; single women and married women without children to eat when they have finished serving.
- What food is thought to be important? Boiled Rice in large quantities (an adult may well eat a cup of uncooked rice in a meal); lentils cooked with spices and onions; soup-like consistency: "Lentils are a standard part of a Bengali meal, and are a staple source of protein in poorer households. In Hindu homes the lentils are served with rice before the curries, but in Muslim homes lentils follow the curries. Even the order in which food is eaten proclaims which community you belong to!"
- Curried vegetables - whatever is available; pumpkin, beans, aubergine, green bananas, potatoes, cauliflower, greens, etc cooked with spices, chilli, ginger and onions; fish, meat or egg curries - the quality of curries will depend on the wealth of the household; fish is the first priority, usually with small bones; egg (boiled and curried) are a great curry; meat curries are the food of the rich,
- or of very special occasions; chicken is popular, and the whole carcass will be cut into easy eating pieces.





Other facts about the food:

- The best pieces will be served to the most important members of the household.
- Goat curries are also popular.
- Beef curry - would be unacceptable to Hindus or maybe even Hindu converts.
- Pork curry - unacceptable to Muslims or most “Muslim” believers.
- You may find that Hindus and Muslims will not eat food prepared in your kitchen if they believe any taboo food is handled there.
- On special occasions there may be a salad of tomato, onion, cucumber - sliced and sloppy as a side dish.
- For feasts there will be special Indian sweetmeats, which are very sweet. Some are loaded with syrup. Sweet yoghurt is very popular. This is served on the same plate as you have used for curry and rice, and also eaten with fingers.

How are meals served?

- Segregated groups. Men and women are served separately. Men and older boys are served first, served by the women, directed by the matriarch of the house. Women girls and younger boys are served later, often by the single daughters and the younger daughters-in law.
- Places for each person will be set with a large plate turned upside down and a glass of drinking water. The glass will be on the left of the plate. This may be for people to sit crosslegged on a mat on the ground, or at a table. No knives, forks or spoons.
- Washing hands - as people enter the place where the meal is served one of the women will have a jug of water and a bowl and will pour water over the right hand of each person.
- Once the people have sat at the table they may pour a little water from their glass on their plate and rinse it, and then place it in front of them on table (or floor).
- They will then be served with a mountain of rice, followed by a pinch of salt to one side of the rice. It is permitted for person to push rice to one side of plate, or to touch it with their right hand while waiting for the next dish.
- It is at this stage in a Christian household that the host will either say grace or ask somebody to say it.
- The women would then serve either the lentils (if the community have Hindu roots) or the vegetable curry (if the community have Muslim roots). In serving the food it is expected that the women will serve at least two spoons of the dish. To refuse to accept the second spoon, is to wish the household a poor marriage for their daughters. Therefore if





you want to control the amount put on the plate you must persuade them to put a small amount on the first spoonful. It is hospitable to serve great quantities of food, and the women will be unhappy if you only eat a little. It is not rude to leave some rice on your plate. If the server is being over-pushy with food, the one way to stop food being put on your plate is to hold your hands palms down over your plate. The server will never serve food on to the back of your hands. Once the first dish is served you may start eating that with the rice. Not everything is served at once.

- No tea or coffee. Desserts are not usually served.
- Once the person has finished eating they will usually drink the glass of water, then get up and wash hands at a nearby sink and go outside to a place (apart from the women) and probably eat aniseed and betel nut. Visitors would leave. Any conversation would be before the meal.

Etiquette:

- Shoes are removed at the door, hands are rinsed before eating, when eating with your fingers it is only permitted to use your right hand, you can mix your food with the tips of your fingers and form it into a ball but you should not get the rice and curry above the second knuckle, if the curry is very hot, it is better to eat a banana than to drink water.
- It is well to be prepared with a handkerchief in the left hand pocket, for a good curry will often cause the nose to run.

Guide to people serving the meal:

- Set the table with plates and glasses. Glass to the upper left hand side of the plate
- One person will pour water over the right hand of each person as they enter the room.
- Fill the glasses with drinking water
- Serve rice and salt on to the plates prior to the saying of grace. Rice should be in a mound and salt on the side of the plate.
- Once grace is said one person will serve two spoonfuls of the lentils to each person.
- Another will watch to see when a person needs more rice and serve two spoonfuls.
- Once some lentils have been eaten one of the women can begin serving the curried vegetables. Two spoonfuls per plate
- Rice, lentils and vegetable curry will be served as directed by the matriarch of the household.
- Clear up table after the men have finished eating.

See below for recipes.



RECIPES:

Lentils

Ingredients:

1 cup red lentils	1 tspn salt
tspn chilli powder (opt)	1 medium onion
1 tspn garam masala	3 cups of water
1 tspn turmeric	1 tbspn butter
2 tspn crushed ginger	2 tbspn fresh coriander or parsley

Method:

- Soak the lentils 30 mins in enough water to cover them
- Boil the 3 cups of water in a saucepan. Drain the lentils and add to the boiling water. Add salt, turmeric and chilli powder.
- Bring to the boil, turn the heat low, and continue cooking with the lid on, until the lentils are tender – about 15 mins. Mix well.
- Melt butter in a frying pan. Saute chopped onions and ginger.
- Stir in the garam masala and coriander or parsley just before taking off the heat. Pour this mixture into the lentils. Stir well.
- Serve with curry and rice.

Mixed Vegetable Curry

Ingredients

2 tbspn ghee or oil	2 large onions, finely chopped
1 tspn chilli powder	2 capsicums (green and red, sliced)
tspn turmeric	tspn ground black pepper
2 tspn coriander	2 tomatoes, peeled and diced
1.5 kg mixed vegetables (aubergine, potatoes, cauliflower, beans, peas carrots etc)	
1 tspn brown sugar	1-2 tspn salt to taste
1 cup boiling water	
2 tbspn tamarind pulp (OR 4 tbspn vinegar)	

Method:

- Soak the lentils 30 mins in enough water to cover them
 - Boil the 3 cups of water in a saucepan. Drain the lentils and add to the boiling water. Add salt, turmeric and chilli powder.
 - Bring to the boil, turn the heat low, and continue cooking with the lid on, until the lentils are tender – about 15 mins. Mix well.
 - Melt butter in a frying pan. Saute chopped onions and ginger.
 - Stir in the garam masala and coriander or parsley just before taking off the heat. Pour spoonfuls per plate.
 - Rice, lentils and vegetable curry will be served as directed by the matriarch of the household.
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