The Curious Case of Asafoetida

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Abstract: Asafoetida is an important spice in Indian cuisine. Popularly known as Devil's Dung owing to its sulphurous odour, asafoetida is used both as a flavouring agent and for its medicinal benefits. This paper outlines the culinary and cultural implications of asafoetida in Indian food. Divided into four parts, it traces the history of asafoetida, which first arrived in Greek and Roman food as a replacement for the once-revered herb, silphium. The paper then looks at asafoetida's foray into Indian food and explores the agricultural aspects of the Ferula plant whose taproots yield the spice. As the commercial variety of the plant does not grow in India, understanding the production and import of the crude spice becomes imperative. In the last part, the paper talks about how asafoetida served as an alternative for aphrodisiacs like onion and garlic in the strict vegetarian South Indian Brahmin community, and in the meat consuming communities of Kashmiri Pandits and Bengali Brahmins. Through popular cookbooks and blogs, the paper elaborates that with time, the prohibited ingredients have become common in the food of these communities. But asafoetida also continues to be an equally important ingredient, thereby establishing its culinary value as a spice. The paper highlights these nuances.

In a recent interview, cookbook author and food writer Madhur Jaffrey reminisced about her early food struggles in a foreign land. Having moved to London in 1955, Jaffrey longed for the familiar flavours of her homeland, a memory she aptly conveyed using the following lines:

> There is this pea-green smog that comes in at 3 o'clock and you see nothing. This was just after the War, and the food was simply awful. I was dreaming of *hing jeere ki alu* or *bhara hua karela* while having some watery cabbage mess or transparent roast beef at the canteen.[1]

When it comes to spice-infused Proustian memories for Indian food one would expect to encounter a homage to the local street food, *chaat* that is flavoured with a mishmash of spices, or a fiery curry that contains a homemade spice blend. Instead, Jaffrey was seeking the comfort of a spice that is also called as the stinking resin, India's umami bomb and Devil's Dung – asafoetida or asafetida. *Hing Jeere ki Alu* are potatoes spiced with cumin and asafoetida.

Asafoetida or hing as it is commonly known in Hindi is a dried latex obtained from the taproots of perennial herbs which mainly grow in Afghanistan and Iran. By itself, asafoetida is not something one would dream of bringing close to their food, owing to its

strong aroma. But the minute a tiny amount of the spice is introduced to hot oil as part of the tempering; it transforms the whole dish, lending a unique umami flavour.

Asafoetida is not fiery like the red chilli, warm like the garam masala or exotic like saffron. Google images of Indian spices and you will see vibrant shades of yellow, red, green, and black represented by turmeric, chilli powder, cardamom pods, and whole pepper. The lacklustre asafoetida does not make an appearance in these multicoloured canvases. Yet, in communities where it is used, the spice is essential and possibly even irreplaceable. This is why its journey to becoming a fitting ingredient deserves a special mention. Although several medicinal benefits of asafoetida have also been recorded, this paper will focus on the role of asafoetida as a spice.

Divided into four parts, the paper explores the history of asafoetida and its entry into the kitchens of India. It also looks at asafoetida from an agricultural point of view, before outlining the culinary and cultural implications of the spice in Indian cooking.

And Then There Was Asafoetida

To understand asafoetida, one would have to take a step back in history and learn about an altogether different herb – silphium. A favourite among Greeks and Romans, it was literally loved to death. When the Greeks colonized the ancient city of Cyrene, modern-day Libya, they encountered the herb in 631 BC.[2] Silphium soon became a star of the region, widely used as a vegetable, a condiment, and as feed for animals. It also had a range of medicinal benefits. So much was the herb revered, that coins from the region have its inscription imprinted on them.[3]

So what happened to silphium? The herb disappeared from the landscape entirely by the first century AD. Despite having strict rules in place, silphium was repeatedly harvested and overgrazed, its popularity as a contraceptive not helping. In her comprehensive article on silphium, science journalist Zaria Gorvett notes that the herb could have either gone extinct or is possibly hiding in plain sight as a weed. Nevertheless, silphium's decline brought a 'stinky' yet reasonable substitute, asafoetida into the picture.[4]

In the blog, Tavola Mediterranea, archaeologist and award-winning food blogger Farrell Monaco recreates the Apician recipe Parthian Chicken using asafoetida. Monaco explains that even though silphium is listed as an ingredient, the name of the dish suggests that it was probably made using asafoetida. The alternative resin from Parthia, modern-day Iran, was a cheaper substitute.[5] The discovery of asafoetida dates back to 328 or 327 BC, when Alexander's soldiers found it in Afghanistan, thinking they had found silphium. They used the herb to digest raw horse meat.[6]

Hing Diaries

After the end of the Roman empire, asafoetida's mention seems to be limited to its medicinal use in the European region.[7] In her blog post, Monaco writes,

> Some of these dinner recipes tell me that Romans enjoyed cooking with wine and spices that literally hit the sinus cavity with a wallop when you're heating them together in a broth over a flame. Ajwain, asafoetida, vinegars, wines, cumin and ground pepper pack a powerful punch [...].[8]

If I were to read the sentence in isolation, I would think she was talking about Indian food, barring the wine part, of course. Ajwain or carom, cumin, ground pepper, asafoetida –add lentils, coconut, a few vegetables and you have just made a South Indian *kootu* – a thick gravy often eaten with rice. After Roman food, it looks like asafoetida decided to continue its legacy in a similar atmosphere – in the company of bold flavours.

With the source of asafoetida being geographically close, it comes as no surprise that the spice entered India at some point. The Ayurvedic treatise *Kashyapa Samhita*, one of India's oldest texts on medicine, mentions that asafoetida was imported to India from Afghanistan.[9] Ayurvedic principles form the foundation for Indian food. Over time, Asian, European, and Persian influences have also left their imprints. Asafoetida stands at the intersection of all of these factors.

In his definitive guide to Indian food, K.T. Achaya writes that meat dishes spiced with asafoetida are mentioned in the Indian epic *Mahabharata* which documents events that possibly occurred in the eighth century BC.[10] Epics apart, there are several historical references that provide a glimpse into asafoetida's presence in Indian food. In *Manasollasa,* a twelfth-century AD compendium written by a king of the Western Chalukya dynasty (spread over southern and central India), there is a recipe for fish scrotums roasted in fire and cooked in hot oil along with cardamom, rock salt, pepper and asafoetida.[11] *Ain-i-Akbari*, a book that records the third Mughal emperor Akbar's (AD 1555-1605) administration and the culinary practices of the time, mentions that foods were spiced with large quantities of saffron and asafoetida. So much was asafoetida used that European visitors to the country complained about the pungent spice.[12] Asafoetida is also mentioned in the sixteenth century AD in Portuguese physician and herbalist Garcia de Orta's notes. 'All the Hindus who can afford it buy it to add to their food. The rich Brahmins, and all the Hindus who are vegetarian eat a lot of it', he observed.[13]

Garcia de Orta's stay in India coincides with the Vijayanagara Empire in south India. Records from the era indicate that foods were seasoned using clarified butter and spices such as cumin, fenugreek, mustard, pepper, and sesame seeds. Many digestive spices were commonly used during this period.[14] Asafoetida is not mentioned here, even though de Orta noted that it was used as a seasoning sauce among Brahmins and Hindus. The spice was probably a part of the digestive ingredients. The seasoning in south Indian food remains the same even today. Asafoetida also made its way to the Anglo-Indian tables. During the colonial era, post hunting or *shikar* as it is known in Hindi, cooks would often stir up flavourful sauces that included chillies, cayenne pepper, asafoetida, and wine to accompany the meat.[15]

Bringing Asafoetida Home

While cooks in colonial India added asafoetida to their sauces, the first colonial capital of the country, the city of Calcutta (Kolkata) had its own interesting link to the spice. In the nineteenth century AD, Calcutta saw many businessmen from Afghanistan who came into the city to sell *hing*, dry fruits and *attar* or perfume. Known as *Kabuliwala* in common parlance – people from the Kabul region – they went door to door, making asafoetida easily available.[16] As the legend goes, it was a *kabuliwala* who gave the founder of Laljee Godhoo & Co – India's most popular asafoetida brand – the inspiration to set up an industry to manufacture the edible spice.[17]

India receives its asafoetida in the crude form from Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.[18] The perennial herbs from which the dried latex is obtained belong to the Ferula genus. There are several species in this genus spread across Europe, Central Asia, and North Africa. Asafoetida gets its name from *Ferula assafoetida*, an important species in this family. Although many commercial varieties of the plant exist, the most important source of the spice is *F.assafoetia* Linn., which grows in Iran and Afghanistan.[19]

Different varieties of asafoetida exist in the market, based on the country of origin and the way the spice is obtained from the plant. As someone who uses asafoetida in her cooking almost every day, I have never made an attempt to purchase a brand that provides a so-called superior quality of the spice, nor do I know to identify one. I seek some solace in the fact that *hing* dealers in the busy Delhi markets are not aware of the different varieties either. When food writer Marryam Reshii enquired about the number of *hing* types they dealt with, they gave her an exaggerated number of seventy-four, which Reshii later clarifies, is definitely not true. Based on provenance, the best asafoetida to have on the shelf is Kandhari – sourced from Afghanistan, followed by the Iranian variety, and the asafoetida that is obtained from the Herat region of Iran.[20]

The process of obtaining asafoetida from the Ferula plant is not that easy. When the plants are four to five years old, before the onset of flowering, the foliage around their carrot-like roots are removed. The living roots are laid bare with the stem cut out, and incisions are made. The resin produced is collected in pits dug in the soil. The slicing of the roots and collection of resin is repeated for a few weeks until no more resin is obtained. The exudate is then processed for the crude form of the spice.[21]

Nestled in the hill station of Palampur in the northern Indian state Himachal Pradesh is the Institute of Himalayan Bioresource Technology. Here, scientists are taking the first steps to initiate asafoetida cultivation in India. Dr Ashok Kumar, a Senior Scientist at the institute working on this project, informs me over a phone call that they imported the planting material or seeds from Iran. He explains that even though there are many wild varieties of the Ferula genus growing in India in the Himachal region, like *Ferula jaeschkeana,* the goal of this project is to propagate the commercial variant. To facilitate

conducive growing conditions, cultivation trials are being conducted in the mountainous Lahaul and Spiti regions of the state. Dr Kumar adds that since India is so reliant on the import of asafoetida, growing the plant in-house will aid farmers and consumers.

Despite this reliance, not much is known about asafoetida as an agricultural crop. In source countries, asafoetida is also obtained from plants growing in the wild, which is why substantial data is not easily available. In the *Handbook Of Herbs and Spices*, former Executive Director of Spices Board of India, C.K. George explains that import data on asafoetida is not well organized. Data obtained by him for the years between 2005 and 2010 show that the import quantities are often erratic.[22] The asafoetida that is imported is made more palatable by blending it with flour and edible gum. This edible form is called compounded asafoetida. Despite all these impediments, asafoetida is easily available in the Indian stores. While fifty grams of the popular brand is priced at about eighty rupees (Indian Currency) some of the more niche brands sell about ten grams of *hing* chunks for more than three hundred rupees – almost four times the price of the regular brand.

India also exports processed asafoetida. When New York- based cookbook author and television personality Padma Lakshmi showed her Instagram followers how to make an Indian raw mango curry, I saw her reach for the same brand that I use in my kitchen in India. One of her viewers was quick to ask about the spice. 'Many devout orthodox Brahmins and Jains don't eat onions or garlic so they'll only use asofatida [*sic*]. It gives the same sulphuric flavor. Use it sparingly,' Lakshmi wrote in response.[23]

Onion, Garlic, Asafoetida

What Lakshmi elucidates in her response is essentially the crux of asafoetida's use in Indian food. The spice seems to have become an unintended player in the caste-system induced food prohibitions. The ancient Vedic society was one divided based on four castes – the brahmins or priests, kshatriyas or warriors, vaishyas or traders and agriculturists, and sudras or service workers. As Colleen Taylor Sen elaborates in her book, *History of Food in India*, the *Dharmasutras,* or ancient texts written as extensions of the Vedas, dictated how people should function within their respective castes. These rules included dietary restrictions as well. Onion and garlic were prohibited for Brahmins as they were considered aphrodisiacs.[24]

Ayurveda also classifies foods as *Rajasic*, *Tamasic* or *Sattvik* – based on how they impact the body on consumption. The goal, in essence, is to consume *sattvik* foods; which do not disturb the body, its functioning, and are conducive to one's spirituality.[25,26,27] Onion and garlic are considered *rajasic* and *tamasic*, owing to their pungent nature. It is said that such foods promote negative emotions like anger, anxiety, and lethargy.

Apart from Brahmins, Lakshmi also mentions Jains in her response. Jainism is a religion that is rooted in *ahimsa* or non-violence and believes that everything in nature is alive. In terms of food, this translates to stricter rules which go beyond avoiding meat. The rules of

Jainism prohibit the consumption of vegetables that grow underground, as pulling plants from their roots is essentially killing them. Onion and garlic are again shunned for reasons outlined earlier and the added prohibitions of this religion.[28]

In essence, asafoetida fills both culinary and cultural voids. Owing to the presence of sulphur compounds, the spice provides an experience similar to consuming onion and garlic. If the traditions outlined above had not changed over time, then that's all there would be to the story of asafoetida. Instead, asafoetida has managed to mark a strong presence in Indian food despite the changing culinary preferences and a shift to a diet that is becoming more global. I have no better way to explain this than to look into my own family.

My mother was raised in an orthodox Brahmin family that belonged to the state of Tamil Nadu in south India. Although onion and garlic had already become a regular in my grandmother's kitchen, they were prohibited on auspicious days like Tuesdays and Fridays, and on festival days. Foods were spiced mainly with green and red chillies and flavoured using coriander seeds, cumin seeds, and pepper. Every time sizzling hot oil was prepared for tempering, asafoetida made its way into it. The quintessential garam masala was not a part of my grandmother's cooking. After her marriage, my mother moved to the northern part of India, where she was exposed to flavours a lot different from her mother's kitchen. Garam masala found its way into our home, and my school lunches often included both south Indian and north Indian variants, making them an equal part of my upbringing. Asafoetida continued to be a part of our south Indian dishes, especially the *Sambhar* – a thick soup-like dish with vegetables cooked in tamarind juice, lentils, along with a spice blend called *sambhar* powder. I grew up seeing equal parts *sambhar* powder and garam masala renditions on my table.

I moved to the United States of America for a brief period in my mid-twenties, expanding my food dictionary further. I experienced familiar foods in a new form, and new foods in a familiar form. When I moved back to India, along with *sambhar* powder and garam masala, my kitchen cupboards were also populated with pasta seasonings and herbs. As always, asafoetida sat in the corner of the shelf.

Pat Caplan explains these changes in her research that explores the veg, non-veg food divide in the city of Chennai (formerly Madras) in south India. As Caplan notes, food habits among the middle class are now influenced not just by the inherent rules of a caste, but also by interactions with people within a society, especially in an urban setup.[29] Earlier, interactions were limited, and people rarely ventured outside their castes, making changes in diets sparse. But with changing times and exposure to information, we see these rules adapting to the new world. For example, Caplan shows how eggs were introduced in Brahmin families as a way to improve nutrition for the children.[30]

Despite these shifts, and having access to the original experience, asafoetida continued to hold its position in the kitchen; an important reason being that changes were not adopted

all at once. Some families continued with traditional food practices. For example, Caplan writes that when she offered 'pialo' (pulao or pilaf) to a mixed caste group, one Brahmin woman refused the food on account of the presence of onions, while another did not have an issue with the dish.[31] Although Caplan attributes this to the food being cooked by her housekeepers, such discrepancies exist even today in some families.

While the example of the Tamil Brahmin community denotes asafoetida's role in a strictly vegetarian construct, there are some Brahmin communities where meat is allowed, but the onion-garlic rule stands. The most prominent example of this is Kashmiri food from the Jammu & Kashmir province in northern India. The cuisine of the region is divided into two major types – the Kashmiri Pandit cuisine and the Kashmiri Muslim cuisine. In her book, *Multiple Flavours of Kashmiri Pandit Cuisine,* Annapurna Chak explains that asafoetida became a way to distinguish between the two. While the Hindus used generous amounts of asafoetida and yoghurt, the Muslims used onions and garlic. She elaborates that the Pandits mainly ate mutton; chicken, eggs, onions, and garlic were prohibited. Along with asafoetida, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and dried ginger were used to spice the gravies.[32] These rules have now become flexible, and to represent this change, her book includes recipes that use onions, garlic and asafoetida as ingredients. She also provides a chicken version of the *Rogan Josh*, a mutton-based gravy, and uses asafoetida for seasoning thus establishing that now, the plates are open.[33]

The first-ever cookbook published in India in 1831 was called *Pakrajeswar*. Written in Bengali under the guidance of the king of Burdwan, a region in the state of West Bengal, recipes in *Pakrajeswar* had a strong Mughal influence to them, and were mostly non-vegetarian. They included meat like mutton and fowl. One notable aspect of the cookbook was that there was no mention of onion and garlic in any of the recipes, even though Mughal recipes did use them in their mutton preparations. A note at the beginning of the book clarified that onion and garlic were not listed in the ingredients as they were hardly consumed. It was only in 1879 that a Bengali cookbook published by an unnamed author introduced onion and garlic in the written form, indicating that they were considered acceptable then.[34]

Similar to the Kashmiri Pandit community, the Bengali Brahmins consume meat, but as shown by their earlier cookbooks, onion and garlic were avoided. In her analysis of Portuguese influence on Bengali food, Colleen Taylor Sen breaks down these rules on how certain kinds of fish, venison and game meat were allowed, but mushrooms (along with onion and garlic), beef, duck meat, and boar meat were not allowed. She also gives a glimpse of the spices that were used in Bengali cooking until the twelfth century AD - mustard seeds, poppy seeds, long pepper and asafoetida.[35] Utsa Ray, on the other hand, highlights that asafoetida was introduced by Bipradas Mukhopadhyay, who published his Bengali cookbook *Soukhin Khadya-Pak* in 1889 – ten years after onion and garlic had already made

their way into Bengali food.[36] This could either indicate that asafoetida was not used for a while in the interim, or it was not acknowledged in written accounts.

Bong Mom's Cookbook is a popular blog and cookbook by Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta which provides a peek into modern Bengali kitchens. Here, flavours decide what goes into a dish and not prohibitions. Datta is a New Jersey-based engineer who decided to document the recipes of her home state - West Bengal.[37, 38] For example, while discussing the recipe of a red lentil soup, Datta says one can influence flavours in the lentils by adding the quintessential Bengali five spice or onions or fenugreek seeds or asafoetida.[39] In stark contrast to the historical cookbooks, Datta's blog and cookbook has generous mentions of onion, garlic and asafoetida and makes allowances for improvisation where needed.

While these nuances are interesting to note, they do not mean that the prohibitory rules have completely vanished from India's culinary landscape. In another popular Bengali food blog, I find the recipe for *Niramish Alu'r Dum* which is described as the 'Bengali "vegetarian" curried winter potatoes' (*niramish* means vegetarian). As the dish is made without onions and garlic, it can be used as an offering to God - the writers share.[40] The potatoes are spiced with asafoetida among other spices in this recipe. Datta also explains in her blog that strict vegetarianism is practised by Bengali widows; a restriction that is observed in many vegetarian communities as well where they consume food without onion and garlic.[41] Additionally, in many communities, food that is prepared after a death in the family is devoid of onion, garlic, and in some cases like the Tamil Brahmins, even asafoetida.

The above examples go to show the role asafoetida plays in communities that are strictly vegetarian and in communities that are predominantly vegetarian but have some allowances for meat consumption. Does this mean, asafoetida by itself is not a favoured ingredient? Well, in seeking the answer we find ourselves in Kolkata again eating the asafoetida flavoured fried pastry – *Hinger Kochuri*. Interestingly, the origins of this dish will take you to north India. Immigrants who moved to Kolkata for trade introduced this pastry which has somehow become synonymous with the place of arrival and not the origin.[42] Asafoetida is also a crucial part of the pickling process. The recipe for the Mango *Hing* pickle, for example, requires just four ingredients; raw mangoes, salt, red chilli powder and asafoetida. Of course, it goes without saying that asafoetida adds a dash of magic while seasoning a dish. When the popular Indian food magazine, Goya Journal, asked fourteen women across different communities to name an ingredient crucial to their cuisine, a respondent from the Sindhi community (people who migrated from the Sindh region of Pakistan), mentioned asafoetida. The spice makes all the difference to their chickpea gravy, and aids in digesting it.[43] That's asafoetida in a nutshell. Its addition to many lentil-based dishes, maybe due to its digestive properties, but one simply cannot ignore the flavour contribution.

Perhaps the most fitting use of asafoetida is in the preparation of the famous *Chhappan Bhog* at the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha (a state in eastern India). The fifty-six-course

meal (*chappan* in Hindi is fifty six) offered to the deity is then served to at least 10,000 people, on a daily basis. 'All of the ingredients for these fifty-six dishes are local', writes Varud Gupta in his book *Bhagwan ke Pakwaan : Food Of The Gods*. 'Food of the Gods' is a lesser-known moniker for asafoetida. Since no onions and garlic are used in this elaborate preparation, asafoetida makes its way into the sacred temple kitchens to fulfil its role.[44] The food is eaten by people across communities.

Conclusion

In many ways, the study of asafoetida's culinary journey is a study in contradictions. Brought in as a replacement for the ancient herb silphium that was known to be a contraceptive, asafoetida found itself in Indian cuisine as an alternative for ingredients that were considered aphrodisiacs. First used to digest raw horse meat, the spice later played a crucial role in caste-based food prohibitions, while also providing a fitting solution for strict norms of vegetarianism. The ingredients asafoetida was brought in to replace are now widespread in Indian kitchens. Yet, asafoetida remains an essential spice for its medicinal value and its culinary contributions. Just for its never give up spirit, asafoetida deserves a special mention in dialogues about Indian spices.

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Notes

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