

Indian addiction

A tradition from ancient days, the eating of *paan*, which is woven into Indian history and the myths and legends of the past, is still enjoyed all over the sub-continent today

Story by Ahana Nagda



THE BETEL LEAF, FROM THE PIPER BETEL PLANT, IS REPUTED TO HAVE HEALING PROPERTIES FOR ALL KINDS OF AILMENTS FROM SORE THROATS TO RESTLESS NERVES

Every time I pass a *paan-wala's* (*paan-seller's*) shop, the image of my 91-year-old Dadi (grandmother) with a half-reproachful, half-embarrassed look on her lined face flashes into my mind. This afternoon I was standing at a *paan-wala's* stall, waiting to place my order. The recollection of the obstinacy with which Dadi, addicted to the betel leaf stimulant herself, dissuaded her grandchildren, especially the girls, not only from eating *paan*, but also from going to *paan-walas*, made me smile to myself. This *paan-wala*, his fingertips stained red with *katha* (red liquid), folded betel leaves with practised ease. I'd invited friends to dinner and planned to round off the meal, Indian-style, with *paan* which I would serve, chilled, on a silver tray.

Round the *paan-wala* there were half a dozen customers. A short, squat man with unusually big hands leaned against his motorbike, puffing on a cigarette bought from the *paan-wala* who also sold single cigarettes. Beside him, a younger man toyed distractedly with a packet of branded *Pan Parag*. Four other men sat on the pavement, chatting cheerfully while they chewed mechanically on the lump of *paan* tucked away under a bulging cheek. Every *paan-wala* attracts a following – *paan* aficionados who've taken to his formula and who return to him up to five times a day to perk up.

'*Sada ya meetha?*' ('Do you want plain or sweet *paan*?') the *paan-wala* asked, gesturing to me with a jerk of his head. Before I could answer, a burly man strode up to the *paan-wala* and patted him on the back. A regular, I supposed. 'Make me *paan* and be quick!' he demanded in Hindi and promptly plopped down on the pavement. Eager to join in the conversation, he turned to the others and commented on a popular film star. Nothing about his manner indicated hurry now.

I could tell an addict by the anxiety with which he wanted his *paan* and the satisfaction with which he settled down to gossip after he got it. 'Seems Bhatt's youngest daughter has run away from home. Don't ask me why!' the smoker said, grinding his cigarette butt into the tar road with his foot. Local rumour, Bollywood scandal or world politics: anything is grist for gossip over *paan* – a bite-sized Indian digestive consisting of aromatic substances wrapped in a betel leaf. While his customers jabbered away, the

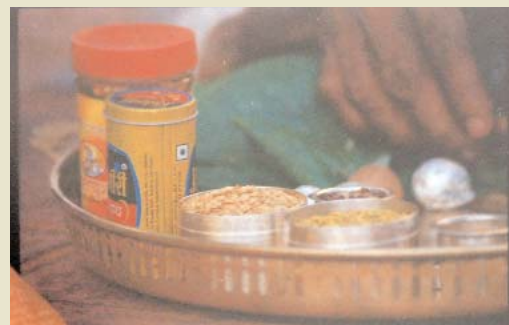


paan-wala was quiet; and except for his rare, pertinent comments – which showed that he was something of a classified section in a newspaper – I would've thought he wasn't listening. He knew, among other things, who wanted to sell his house, who was looking for a spouse, whom to contact to get odd jobs done and, not surprisingly, lots of juicy tidbits about private lives.

In retrospect, it's little wonder that Dadi, wagging her gnarled finger at me, dished out 'girls from good families don't go to *paan-walas*' over and over with annoying insistence. When I started college, she tweaked this advice to 'young women from good families don't go to *paan-walas*'. Dadi was dead now and I was a working woman, so while I still felt a twinge of unease when I went to *paan-walas*, I dismissed it as silliness.

'Children don't eat *paan*' was another rule Dadi imposed. And so, as with any forbidden thing, my attraction for *paan* was proportionate to her obstinacy. What's more, vivid illustrations in popular comics like *Amar Chitra Katha* had romanticised *paan* in my child's mind. I was moved by the generosity of queens who assumed responsibility for the needy women whose *paan* they'd accepted; and the courage of courtiers who took on challenges presented by kings by picking up the *paan* they'd placed on a silver platter. Every time I laid my hands on the plastic bags lying around the kitchen after the adults had taken *paan* from them, and sucked the red liquid that had leaked out, I was diabolically pleased. But I never expressed my triumph; instead I rinsed out my mouth quickly, as brick-red lips would've meant trouble.

Many years later I learned that the innocuous-looking *paan* had aphrodisiac and addiction-related associations, which made Dadi balk at the idea of children having it. It's said that the Indian Queen Noor Jahan ate *paan* to perfume her breath and colour her voluptuous mouth brick-red, which she thought her husband found attractive. Elsewhere, a ravishing courtesan is believed to have enticed an Indian king away from his tearful wife by craftily giving him *paan* stuffed with heady substances. More innocently, the Princess Kadambari, by the act of handing a heart-shaped betel leaf to her wooer, felt that she'd given her love – and life – to him. ▶





THE PAAN-WALA, WITH RED-STAINED FINGERTIPS AND DEVOTED FOLLOWERS, CREATES PAAN MASTERPIECES INCLUDING THE MEETHA PAAN WITH LIME PASTE AND CHUTNEY, AND ZARDA PAAN WITH AN ADDED DASH OF TOBACCO

Unaware of these suggestive stories, the *paan-wala* fixed the burly man his customary *paan*, then turned to me once more. 'Twelve *meetha* Calcutta *paan* please,' I said. Between the two most popular varieties, I preferred the bigger, dark green, more pungent, shiny Calcutta to the Banarasi betel leaf. He dunked twelve fresh betel leaves in a bucket of water, gave them a quick shake and snipped off the stems before placing them side by side, face down, on a gleaming brass plate – which he cleaned with slices of lemon every day. He then slapped some lime paste, *katha* and gold-coloured chutney on them and sprinkled them with mint-flavoured powder and finely chopped areca nut. He added a few strands of saffron and pinches of aniseed, coriander seed, cinnamon powder, cardamom powder and other spices. To complete my order for *meetha paan*, he spooned colourful cubed papaya candies, dried coconut flakes and some sweet rose-petal chutney (*gulkand*) over the mixture. *Sada paan* contains no sweet substances and *zarda paan* has an added dash of tobacco.

Whenever I caught Dadi tucking into *paan*, we got into playful arguments about her double standards. As a child I followed Dadi's *paan* rules, but when I grew up, I began to question them. When she said 'children don't eat *paan*', I asked her why she did. Sometimes Dadi told me off for being cheeky; sometimes she acted offended or simpered and justified her *paan* eating by singing, in a weak voice, a well-known song from the Hindi film *Don* which roughly says that eating Banarasi *paan* wakens dull minds.

Dadi cleverly blamed her love of *paan* on her age. She complained that her mind was often fuzzy, her spirits low, her nerves restless. She suffered from flatulence. She always felt uncomfortably cold and was prone to sore throats. And the betel leaf from the Piper betel plant – a climbing plant native to the hot, humid parts of Asia – was reputed to cure all these ailments. According to Sushruta, an eminent Ayurvedic doctor of ancient India, *tambulam*, Sanskrit for betel leaf, is anthelmintic, anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, astringent, blood-purifying, carminative, digestive, invigorating and it helps cure bad breath. The verse concludes with the affirmation that these qualities are not found together even in heaven.

Equally ignorant about the goodness of the leaf, the *paan-wala* formed my 12 *meetha paan* into cones, folded the edges and held them in place with a clove, and slid each one into a plastic bag. I paid him a mere four rupees for one *paan*, dirt-cheap in comparison to the coveted thousand-rupee *paan* available at select shops in some Indian metropolises. This extravagant connoisseur's delight contains gold and silver dust and occasionally a hint of some illegal drug, or that's what I've been told. But I was no connoisseur and was happy with a simple indulgence; I couldn't resist taking the last *paan* from the *paan-wala's* hand and putting it on my tongue. As soon as I bit into it my mouth was filled with an exotic blend of tastes and smells. At this moment, aside from its digestive qualities and its traditional associations, *paan* was irresistible. I understood why Dadi made such a case for craving it. ■

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