

## **SUBU KA CHANA**

'Chana' is a typical produce of the Indian sub-continent. I am at a loss to find out a suitable English term for it. Some call it 'gram' and others prefer to call it 'chickpea'. Call it by any name 'Chana' will be 'Chana' always — a useful source of nourishment to Indians.

Lots of stories are woven around the rich properties of 'Chana'. It is said that once Chana approached God with a complaint. Its grouse was that it was harassed relentlessly from beginning to end by people. As soon as it sprouts people go for it. Some eat it raw. Some boil it and others fry it. As if that was not enough people sprinkle salt, pepper and chilli powder over its scalded skin. Some squeeze even a lime over it to add to its woes.

When raised as a crop, it has to undergo a long spell of torture. As soon as it grows green leaves village women would pluck them to make curry. Green 'Chana' is used as savoury and snacks.

The ripened seeds are be used for consumption in endless ways. It is parched, roasted, turned into paste and ground into powder. Some would even pickle it with unripe mango and other edible objects.

"Please deliver me from this ordeal, my Lord", 'Chana' pleaded to Lord. "I cannot take it any longer".

"Run and run fast, my child", Lord advised. "Seeing you even my palate is tingling and mouth is watering. Before I gobble you up, run".

Poor 'Chana' ran for his life. It slipped and fell heavily down on its face. This way it bent its nose. That is how it acquired the bent nose that it carries even today.

Another legend about 'Chana' belongs to historical times. It is well known that Aurangzeb had dethroned and imprisoned his father Shahjehan. Mughal emperors enjoyed a high status in public eye. Even a cruel despot like Aurangzeb could not disregard the public opinion even in the mediaeval days. Hence he could not put his hapless father to sword though there was hardly any love lost between the two. Hence he decided to make Shahjehan's life as

miserable as he could. He sent a message to his imprisoned father — choose a job to perform and one cereal or food item to consume. He, his status of being ex-emperor of India notwithstanding, was not to be fed without rendering a service to the State in return.

Shahjehan considered his options and sent back the message: he would do the job of teaching the children of the royal household and he would like to get 'Chana' for his wages. On hearing this Aurangzeb remarked, "He has not rid himself of the imperious airs in spite of incarceration".

Shahjehan had chosen well. In a class-room the teacher is the king. He could still retain his authority albeit within the class-room only. The 'Chana' could be used for making bread, dal, curry and savouries. It is rich in protein and minerals. It would nourish him well.

Shri J.N. Dar was a Gandhian in his beliefs and practices. Having worked in rural areas he was well aware of the qualities of 'Chana'. Hence he decided that all of us should have regular daily dose of germinated 'Chana'. This was the first thing to be had before we left for P.T. Since Shri Dar had a Lucknavi Urdu accent. He used to call this morning ritual as 'Subu ka Chana'. The name stuck. Normally it should have been welcome to all of us — in fact most of us revived the practice when we grew up; but at that stage somehow or the other it did not click.

School children are very averse to authority. Anything made compulsory is resisted strongly. If you want to ensure that school children do not read a particular book — however good it may be, make it a compulsory text book. I have read all works of Charles Dickens except 'A Tale of Two Cities' for the precise reason that it was prescribed as a text-book for my undergraduate studies.

'Subu ka Chana' suffered the same fate. After a few days the boys would throw away the germinated chana in the backyard of Ashrams.

My Ashram had a good stretch of rich soil in its backyard. The germinated grams soon took roots and within a month or so we had a flourishing crop of 'Chana' in our backyard. When the cold season came its purplish-brown pretty blossoms added quite a bit of colour to the environment.

One fine morning Shri Dar paid us a visit. As was his wont he started inspecting every nook and corner. When he came to the backyard he was greatly pleased to see the lush green patch of chana crop interspersed with pretty tiny flowers.

“The horticulture section seems to have done a good job”, he observed; “I had seen this patch barren a few months earlier. Now they have been able to raise a healthy crop in it”.

“Call the horticulture instructor”, he asked me, “he deserves a shabash”.

With trepidation in my heart I went to fetch Shri Raghuvansh Narain Singh, our horticulture instructor. He was a thin and frail man with a perpetual frown on his face. He was seen smiling rarely.

He was curious to learn as to why he had been summoned by Pradhanjee. I tried to give him a bit of advance briefing to prepare him for the encounter.

“This is about the chana-crop, Sir”, I told him. “Pradhanjee is very pleased to see the fine crop that we have raised under your able and kind guidance in the backyard of Shanti Ashram”.

“What chana-crop are you talking of”, Raghuvanshaji was rather brusque. “I know of no chana crop. I have had nothing to do with it”.

“No need to be modest about your achievements, Sir”, I tried to play up to his ego. “One need not blow one’s own trumpet but one should gratefully acknowledge others’ praise”.

Raghuvanshaji quietly came to the place where Pradhanji was waiting for him.

Shri Dar praised his efforts and wanted to know what kind of chana-seed had been sown. He wanted to convert one of the barren patches near the Chalet - his residence, into a chana-field like this one.

Raghuvanshaji looked around in bewilderment for a while. Then he folded his hands and bowed down slightly. A big smile spread on our faces. We thought that the instructor is acknowledging the praise in humility. We were off the hook.

“Sir”, Raghuvanshaji spoke in a quiet but firm voice, “This chana

was not grown by us. These boys throw away the 'Subu ka chana' in this backyard. Every morning this stretch of land is littered with the 'Subu ka Chana'. Most of it perished but some have taken roots and the plants have grown. I have nothing to do with it, Sir".

The face of Pradhanji took the hue of the chana-flower. He left the place in a huff.

Later an order was issued by him to all housemasters that henceforth they would make us consume the 'Subu ka Chana' in their august presence.

There ended our agricultural enterprise.

