

CHILLIES – The Prime Spice – A History

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SUMMARY: Chillies are known from prehistoric times in Peru. They are believed to have originated in the tropical America. It is also said that chillies have originated in the Latin American region of the New Mexico and Guatemala as a wild crop around 7500 B.C. as per the remains of the pre – historic Peru. The people native to these places domesticated this crop in and around 5000 B.C. Chilli is said to be the first ever domesticated crop in America. At that time, Chillies were cultivated by the farmers together with a primary crop to protect the primary crop from any damage from birds. Columbus carried chilli seed to Spain in 1493. The cultivation of Chilli spread rapidly from Spain to Europe. Chillies became popular in the whole of Asia rapidly and native Asians started cultivating this crop as well. The south Asian climate suited this crop and since its introduction in the 16th Century has been increasingly cultivated in south Asia. Chillies are the cheapest spices available in India and are eaten cross all groups of people. The most important chilli growing states in India are Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, which together constitute nearly 75% of the total area. Andhra Pradesh tops the list in dry chilli production followed by Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Orissa and Karnataka. In Uttarakhand chilli pepper or Mirch would have used after British came to power in Garhwal. Today in terms of area and production though Uttarakhand may not be in the top of the chilli growing states in the country but chilli of Uttarakhand has a special place owing to their colour and pungency.

Key Words: Pepper, spice, Cultivation, Chilli, Varieties

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I. INTRODUCTION

Chilli is a fruit of the plant ‘Capsicum annum and capsicum frutescens’ that come from the genus capsicum belonging to the family of Solanaceae which also includes tomato and potato. Capsicum is derived from the Greek word ‘Kapsimo’ meaning ‘to bite’. Originally from South and Central America, their popularity continues to grow across the world due to their ease of cultivation, frequently sharp taste and attractive appearance. There are more than 200 common names in use for this spices. The most common include Chilli pepper, paprika (sweet varieties), christmas pepper (ornamental), bell pepper (hot varieties).

II. WORLD

Chillies peppers are thought to have originated in the northern Amazon basin and so, by natural geographic spread, are indigenous throughout central America, South America, the west Indies and the most southerly states of the U.S.A.

The Tepin or Chiltepin pepper (*Capsicum annum* var *glabriusculum*) is reputed to be the oldest variety in the world and is commonly called the “Mother Chilli”. It grows wild in northern Mexico and up into Arizona and Texas where it is now the State Chilli. It is particularly hard to domesticate but in the wild it grows best in seemingly impossible harsh habitats. In areas of extremely low rainfall, such as the Sonoran desert, it can be found thriving in the partial shade provided by a Desert Oak or Mesquite. In these conditions this supposedly annual plant has been known not only to survive but also to fruit for up to 20 years. This is an interesting feature of most chillies, if they are in conditions they like, they will not only thrive for several years, they will also be more prolific fruiterers in their record, third and fourth years.

The Tepin is truly a wild pepper and it is further south in Peru and Bolivia where we find possibly the earliest domestication on a variety of chilli, Recoto or Locoto, Some 5000-6000 year ago. Evidence has also been found for chilli cultivation in Ecuador from around the same period. Later the Aztecs were famous for their love of chilli and it featured heavily in their diet (Dave, 1999 and May, 2012). The ancient Inca and Aztec civilization used and worshipped the chili. The Aztec used chili in normally every meal and created the first chili chocolate [The name chili derives from the ancient Aztec dialect of Nahuatl which called the pepper chiltepin] The Incas worshipped the chilli as one of four mythical brothers who feature in the Incan creation

story. Chilli was brought to the rest of the world by Christopher Columbus who discovered America in 1493. Columbus had set from Spain to reach India to bring spices such as black pepper back to his country. Columbus not only mistook America for India but also mistook chilli as a 'black pepper'. That is how the chilli got the name 'Chilli pepper'. He took chili pepper back to Spain where it became a very famous spice. Chillies were cultivated around the globe after Columbus.

Christopher Columbus encountered chillies on his first voyage to the Caribbean in 1492 and though he did not bring any back on that voyage [they were taken to Spain on his second voyage in 1495], he does write of "a 'pepper' that the natives called 'Aji' which was better in taste and nature than ordinary peppers". ['Aji' is a Caribbean word for chilis] Wanting to prove that he had opened a new easterly route to the Indies, Columbus was keen to associate Aji with Asian "pepper".

Diego Alvarez Chanca, a physician on Columbus's second voyage to the West Indies in 1493 brought the first chillies to Spain and first wrote about their medicinal qualities in 1494. From Europe chillies spread rapidly to India, China and Japan. In Europe they first were grown in the monastery gardens of Spain and Portugal as botanical curiosities but the monks experimented with their culinary potential and discovered that their pungency offered an inexpensive substitute for black pepper, which was so costly that they were used as legal currency in some countries. Within 50 years of its discovery the humble chilli pepper had spread across most of the then known world (Dave, 1999 and Kenneth, 2000, May, 2012).

From Spain chili spread to South Asian countries like India and China, chili was introduced in China and spread further to Japan. Soon chili was accepted as an important spice in the local cuisines. At first it was used only for ornamental purposes as many exotic plants then unknown but soon became a common food. It is assumed that the monks of the Royal Monastery of Santa Maria de Guadalupe, in Estremadura, Spain were the first European to discover the taste of hot peppers and add them to their kitchen. Originally cultivated in monasteries, seeds were then spread throughout Spain and Europe by traveler monks. It was in 1600 that through trade routes from South America, Portuguese and Spanish traders introduced the Chilli pepper in Africa, India and Asia.

The spread of chili peppers to Asia was most likely a natural consequence of its introduction to Portuguese traders, who aware of its trade value would have likely promoted its commerce in the Asian spice trade routes then dominated by Portuguese and Arab traders. Today chillies are an integral part of South Asian and South East Asian cuisine. (Dave, 1999, May, 2012)

Chilli is considered as one of the most important commercial spice crops and is widely used as a universal spice, named as wonder spice. Different varieties are cultivated for varied uses like pickles, vegetable, spice and condiments. The remarkable spread of the chilli is a piquant chapter in the story of Globalization.

III. FOLKLORE AND UNUSUAL USES

Throughout the world and all through history, chillies have been put to various exotic and unusual uses – from deterring vampires and werewolves in Eastern Europe, to deterring marauding wild elephants in modern-day Assam. They are used in a significant proportion of the most celebrated hangover cures worldwide and can even be an active ingredient in makeup – as blusher, giving cheeks a healthy glow. Chilli eye drops have been used as a cure for headaches and chilli powder has even been rubbed on the thumbs and fingernails of children to prevent them sucking their thumbs and biting their nails (May, 2012).

IV. INDIA

Every Indian woman knows this simple truth: the chillies rule the kitchen. But did you know before the Portuguese brought it to India, no one in India ever used chillies? Seems unbelievable but apparently before Vasco-Di-Gama came along and changed everything we used Pippali (long pepper) and not chillies. Long pepper is native to Bengal and in the 16th Century it also grew wild on the Malabar coast. According to the French trader Jean Baptiste Tavernier, long pepper used to be thrown into Muslims' palaces by the handful'. It was used not just in cooking but also in Ayurveda as a cure for impotency.

People think Portuguese took most of the spices from India but truth be told while we had pepper here, they were the ones who brought us the chillies. Chillies were brought from South America to India by the Portuguese through their trading colony of Goa. India is now the largest producer and exporter of chillies in the world, growing a wide variety of different types.

In India two types of pepper existed before the arrival of chili pepper – Black pepper and Pippali. Black pepper was called round pepper and Pippali was called the long Pepper. In ancient India, Black Pepper, Corn, Triphala, Turmeric and Pippali were the source of heat in cooking, chili pepper was introduced to India only about 500 years back by Portuguese and Spanish traders. During the 16th Century, Chili and pippali were both used interchangeably. It was easier to grow chili peppers, so the Pippali became less available.

Portuguese traders introduced chili pepper to India during the 16th century. 'Vindaloo' still remains one of the hottest dishes prepared in Goa using chili pepper, an old Portuguese colony in India. At present there are four

types of chilli pepper used in India – namely – Lal mirch, Hari Mirch, Degi Mirch (Paprika) and Shimla Mirch (Sweet bell pepper). In 1498 the portuguese explorer Vasco-da-Gama reached Indian shores bringing with him the pungent spice. Chilis were brought to Asia by Portuguese navigators during the 16th Century. Chillies became extremely popular in India after it was first brought to India by Vasco-Da-Gama. Chilli found its way in ayurveda, the traditional Indian medical system. According to ayurveda, chilli has many medicinal properties such as stimulating good digestion and endorphins, a nature pain killer to relieve pains.

Barely 30 years after Vasco-da-Gama set foot in India locals were enthusiastically growing chillies on the western coast (they were called Gowai Mirchi suggesting that they were originally grown in Goa). From there chillies spread to South India and then to the North. Long pepper is now, only used in some arcave vegetable pickles. Before it was black pepper that as used to give the pungency that is so characteristic of Indian Food. In one of the sections of Ain – i – Akbari, written in 1590 A.D., there is a list of 50 dishes cooked in Akbar's court all of them used only black pepper to impart spiciness.

While the black pepper vine grows almost only in Karala, chillies can be grown in almost every backyard or cultivated in the fields all over the country. Thus they were easily available everywhere at a low price. (Rai, Pandey, Singh, 2004).

India is the world's largest producer, consumer and exporter of chili peppers. Guntur in Andhra Pradesh produces 30% of all the chillies produced in India and the state of Andhra Pradesh as a whole contributes 75% of India's Chili exports. There are more than 400 different varieties of chillies found all over the world. The World hottest chili 'Naga Jolokia' is cultivated in hilly terrain of Assam in a small town Tezpur India.

Today it is unimaginable to think of India cuisine without the hot spice, chili. India has become world's largest producer and exporter of chili, exporting to USA, Canada, UK, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Malaysia, Germany and many countries across the world. It contributes 25% of world's total production of chili. Some of the hottest chillies are grown in India. Indian chillies have been dominating international chili market. Majority of Chili grown in India is cultivated in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Maharastra, Karnataka, Gujrat, Tamil Nadu and Orissa.

The fiery new spice was readily accepted by the natives of Africa and India. From India chili peppers travelled not only along the Portuguese route back around Africa to Europe but also over ancient trade routes that led either to Europe via the Middle East or the Monsoon Asia. In the latter cases, if the Portuguese had not carried chili peppers to the South East Asia and Japan, the new spice would have been spread by Arabic, Chinese, Malaysian, Vietnamese and Javanese traders.

India spice sector is zooming at great pace. During the time period the exports of various spices and spice products have shown a remarkable increase of 23% both in terms of their quantity and value. India is producing more than 4 million tonnes of spice and is exporting around 180 spice products in over 150 nations. Formed in the year 1987, the spice Board in the flagship department working under the rein of the Ministry of commerce and Industry Government of India, for encouraging the spices export.

A joint initiative of farmers, exporters, the spice Board, the Department of Agriculture and agriculture universities is needed to open a new platform and chalk out action plans relate to improvement and enhancement of the quality of spice especially of Chillies in Andhra Pradesh.

Inaugurating the Sugandha Sangamam at Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, an initiative to make development of chillies sustainable and assured that every possible step would be taken to improve the quality of spices produced in Andhra Pradesh and ensure better prices to the farmers. The event was organised by the spice Board in association with the world spice organization. (Chadha, 2002)

The programme was aimed at strengthening the supply chain from the farm level to the exporters and was organized against the backdrop of falling quality of Chillies, a major source of foreign revenue for the country. Global demand for chillies has increased and the need to consolidate and maintain India's position as a world leader in this sector is gaining importance. The Board will complete the construction of the spice Park in Guntur soon and also make functioning of the quality lab more effective for the benefit of the farmers.

V. UTTARAKHAND

In Uttarakhand chilli pepper or Mirch would have used after British came to power in Garhwal. Today chilli cultivation cover wider area of Uttarakhand, where majority of area comes under organic farming. In Uttarakhand organic chillies is being grown in the bio villages identified by the Directorate of Agriculture in various districts. Even though the area under certified organic chillies at present is small, the same is likely to go up due to preference by the farmers. In terms of area and production Uttarakhand may not be in the top of the chili growing states in the country but chili of Uttarakhand has a special place owing to their colour and pungency.

Area is Betalghat block Nainital district, Sult and Syaldeh blocks of Almora district, Beironkhal block of Pouri Garhwal district and Lohaghat of Champawat district are the major chili growing pockets of the State.

Chilli of Betalghat and Lohaghat command premium price in the market for their very high levels of pungency which is evidenced by high values of scoville Heat units, a method to express the capsaicin content is chilli.

In the hills of Uttarakhand Chilli are grown in a wide range of soil ranging from sandy to clay loam mixed with gravel and coarse sand. Pusa sadabahar, Pusa Jwala and Pant C-1 are the chilli varieties for cultivation in Uttarakhand. However many of the farmers are growing varieties procured from Pantnagar for long and even using their own seeds.

VI. TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

Technical guidance for organic chili cultivation is being provided by Master Trainers at the block level working with the Department of Agriculture. Service Providers of Uttarakhand organic commodity Board at the district level also help these Master Trainers in guiding the farmers. Apart from this G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Uttarakhand organic commodity Board may also be approached for technical and marketing of the produce.

VII. EXPORT ORIENTED PRODUCTION

Spice Board support production, processing, certification and marketing of organic spices. The spice Board is also implementing the scheme for Export oriented Production, during the XI Plan where in assistance is being provided for promotion of organic chili under various programmes.

VIII. SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

At present dry chilli are being marketed by the farmers mostly in the Village itself to traders. Some of the farmers sell dry chilli at Ramnagar and Haldwani, mandies chilli is one of the major commodity traded in Ramnagar Market. Since the chili of the target area commands premium price due to their pungency, marketing has not been a problem for the farmers. The movement in chilli prices is inversely related to the market arrivals. The market arrival of chili in the country is highest during the period of May – September and lowest during October – November. Conversely, the price of chilli is highest in October – December. The harvesting season in Uttarakhand hills starts from September and extends upto November. The low market arrivals during this period also helps the farmers of Uttarakhand to realise better prices apart from their quality.

Organic Producers Group (OPG) are formed in each of the Bio Village which are commodity specific. These groups are involved in Production, Grading and Packaging of organic Products. Master Trainers at block level working with the Department of Agriculture give feedback to service Providers working with Uttarakhand organic commodity Board at a higher level. Two nodal person (Supply Chain Officers) in each region i.e. Kumaon and Garhwal are placed for effective supply chain Management. (Rai, Pandey, Kumar, 2006)

Uttarakhand organic commodity Board has facilitated marketing of organic chilli by bringing these organic producers groups in contact with marketing partners registered with them. Buyers are directly linked to these groups for procurement. Further, the organic producers Group are in the process of setting up common Facility Centres for handling various organic commodities.

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IX. CONCLUSION

Chilly in reported to be a native of South America and is widely distributed in all tropical and sub-tropical countries including India. The Portuguese are most responsible for inflicting Chilli peppers on the world. They took to them right off and transported to Africa and to their trading post in Goa, India.

At the time, the Portuguese empire, the first truly global empire, traded with and often colonized areas as widespread as South America, East and West Africa, China, India and Japan. In 1500, the explorer cabral landed (probably by accident) in Brazil and over the next 200 years, chillies spread quite swiftly through the Empire, eventually becoming indigenous to the cuisine of all the Portuguese colonies.

Although as early as the sixteenth century the monks of Spain and Portugal experimented widely with chillies in cooking, quite strangely the use of chilli pepper did not spread widely across Europe from Portugal but rather back from India along the spice routes through central Asia and Turkey. The British colonization of India marks the beginning of the spread of chilli and in particular curry spices into British cuisine. Initially this

was in the form of fish molee and lamb curry, staple dishes of the Raj. Today, an astonishing 7 million tonnes of chillies are grown every year worldwide. Although Mexico still grows the widest variety, India is the largest producer, growing approximately 1.1 million tonnes and supplying nearly 25% of the world export market of red chillies.

Health and Dietary Benefits

Chillies are cholesterol free, low sodium, low calorie, rich in vitamins A and C and a good source of folic acid, potassium and Vitamin E. They have a long history as a traditional remedy for, amongst others, anorexia and vertigo. They have more scientifically recognized application in the treatment of asthma, arthritis, blood clots, cluster, headaches, postherpetic neuralgia (shingles) and burns.

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