





## The Favourite Few

Being able to find hilsa and Bengali-like greens was vital since Sankar concludes by debating which was Vivekananda's favourite food. The ice cream that he encountered and loved in the US comes close, but doesn't make the final cut "because, after Swami Vivekananda developed diabetes, he could no longer have it".

It comes down to shukto, the characteristic Bengali dish of bitter greens, with banana flower curry (mochar dalna) and hilsa with Indian spinach, which is the creeper called pui-shaak or Malabar spinach.

Sankar decides that the latter wins, due to an incident when Vivekananda was travelling down the Ganges and found hilsa, but insisted on looking for the spinach as well.

One man said he had some and would happily give it, if he could get some wisdom from the Swami, who willingly gave him some in exchange for the leaves. There's a lot more of interest in the book, including Vivekananda's thoughts about the healthfulness of Indian food which, like Gandhi later on, he would come to question after exposure to the health food movement in the West.

It all adds up to a suddenly vivid picture of Vivekananda which, frivolous as it may seem, does more to interest me in larger teachings than all the lifeless memorials to him.

But, perhaps, I should have paid attention to my grandmother who, like my father, admired Vivekananda's works, but went to the Sharada Math, the women's wing of the Ramakrishna Mission. She always came back talking not so much about the spiritual lessons she learned there, but the simple and utterly delicious food she was given as meals and prasad.

Even today, when she's too old and incapacitated to go there herself, she occasionally gets the prasad from them and relishes it more than anything else she eats.

It could be the spiritual virtue in the food, but it could also be what is to be expected in an institution founded by a man who knew the value of food in sustaining the spirit in every possible way.

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