

# The colour of the skin

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*Eat them whole*

Don't rinse away the skin of your dals. Not only do they add texture and health to your food but also help small farmers

On a bright December morning during my first season of farming, I was excited about harvesting my crop of organic green gram and looking forward to eating what I had grown. The work didn't end with sowing, tending and harvesting. There was sun drying the gram and processing (beating the pulses to remove the pods, winnowing and cleaning it to remove the soil and stones, etc.).

Yet, despite all this, I realised my organically grown green gram contained smaller grains, which sometimes did not cook well. I was also faced with the reality of insects attacking the pulses within a couple of months or less.

I found

from our neighbours in the village that they split the pulses immediately after harvest to prevent insect attack. According to them, split pulses keep much longer. However, I am used to whole pulses — be it green gram, cow peas or chick peas — because we also sprout some. But this set me thinking. The villagers ate their pulses split but with the skin intact (except for tuvar dal, for which most of the skin is removed).

But, in the urban diet, the skin is usually banished. The pulses in the market not only do not have skin but are also polished to a sheen. Moong dal (split green gram) comes in a golden glory, urad has graduated from being split to whole without skin, masoor has an orange glow and split chick or pigeon peas without skin wink at us from everywhere. These are preserved using chemicals and last quite a while.

Until a couple of decades ago, dals were eaten skin and all. An abiding memory of my early childhood is idli/dosa batter being ground on a stone and the ritual of washing the soaked urad dal (with skin) before grinding it. The loose skin would be rinsed off during the washing. Despite the intention to rinse off as much of the skin as possible — so that the resultant idlis looked white — some of the adamant skin clung on and provided us with fibre.

I decided to bring the skin back to the pot. The experiments began with the black-as-night urad. I soaked the split urad with skin, rinsed away about 50 per cent of the skin and ground the rest into my batter to give me marbled idlis (though it is hardly visible in the dosa). My farmer friend gave me another wonderful method to use the whole urad with skin. She recommends soaking the whole urad, sprouting it and then grinding it for idli/dosa batter. The result is idlis and dosas full of fibre.

Pigeon peas (tuvar dal) was another story. Its skin is not easily digestible and process of removing the skin is quite complex and manual. The whole pigeon pea is soaked in large vats, drained and allowed to sprout. Then it is dried and stored. Once the whole dal is ready to be processed, it is split. Thus processed, pigeon peas have about five per cent of skin left and this adds texture to the cooked dal.

But I lost the battle with the split moong. I decided to make green gram paruppu along with the skin. When I cooked it, the skin stuck to the walls of the vessel. I scooped up the excess skin and lightly blended part of it into the dal. It did not go down well with the paruppu lovers at home. So we are still with the golden yellow moong dal.

Eating dals without the skin has implications for farmers as well. Large machines and huge quantities are required to process the pulses to meet the urban market demand. This discourages small farmers and as a result many grow just enough for their own needs. India today imports pulses, which are stored in granaries for years. If we adopt dals with skin, especially the organic ones grown naturally, we not only get the much-needed dietary fibre but also help small farmers with binding the soil and building their incomes.

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