

# The Mistress of Spices

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

## A Before Reading

1 a Look at the picture of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni on page 4. What autobiographical details can you guess about her from this photograph? Now read about her life on pages 4–5. How accurate were you?

b The word ‘mistress’ has several different meanings. Read the *Note About This Story* on pages 6–7. Decide which of the following dictionary definitions is intended by the author in her title *The Mistress of Spices*.

**mistress** / noun

- i. a woman who is having a sexual relationship with a married man
- ii. a woman who is in control of a situation: + **of** *Helen is very much mistress of her own affairs.*
- iii. *Br E* old-fashioned a woman school teacher
- iv. *old fashioned* a woman who owns an animal
- v. **Mistress** old-fashioned used for talking to or about a woman

Extract taken from *The Macmillan English Dictionary For Advanced Learners*

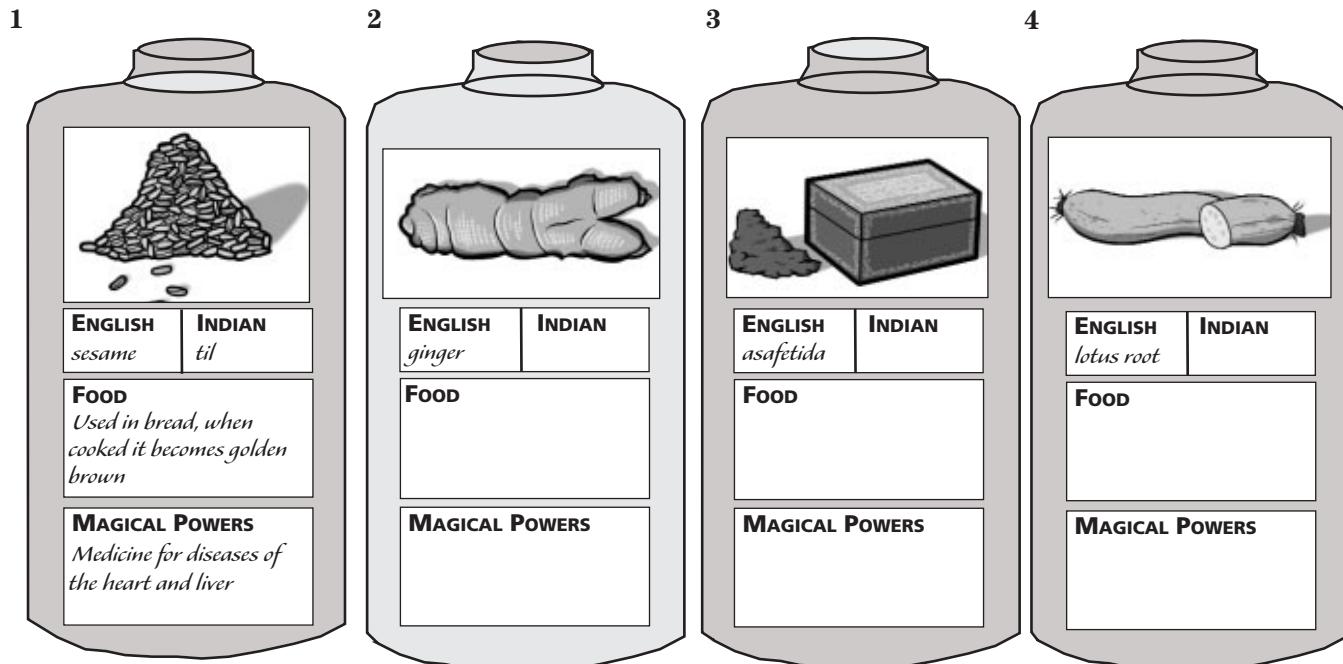
2 a What do you think are the main differences between the lifestyles and culture of people from a village in India and people from a big city in America? Write a list.

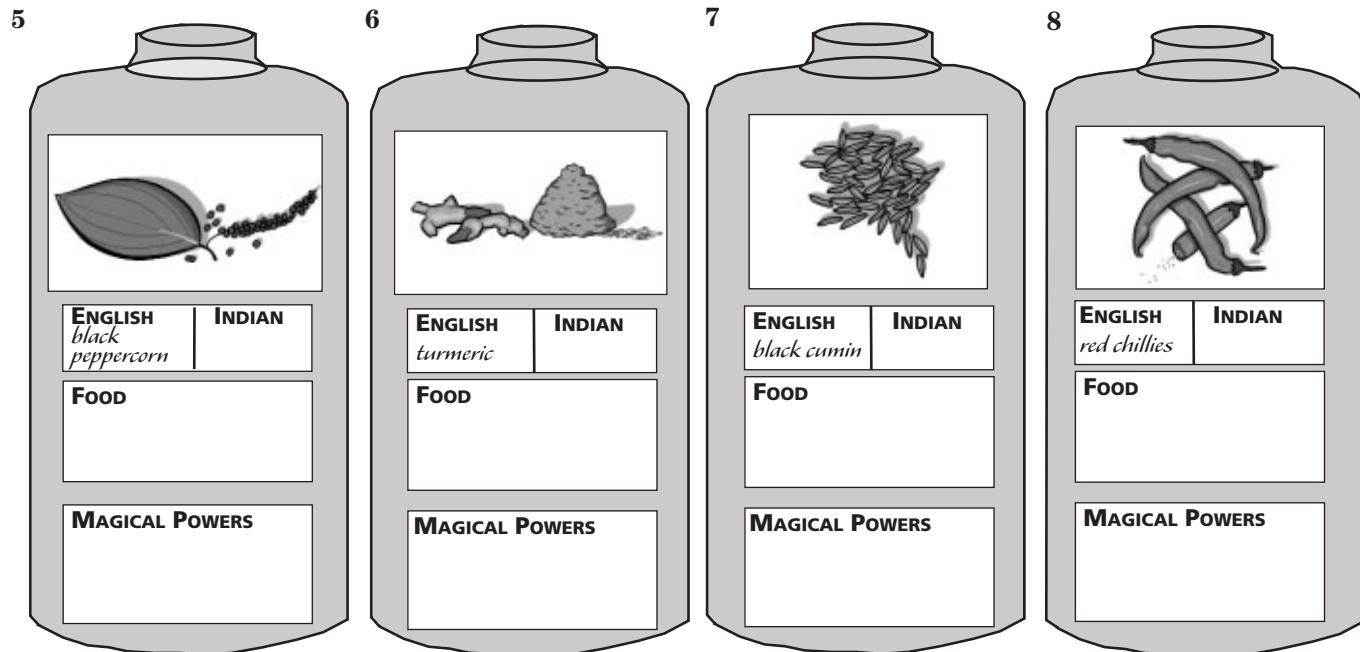
b What sort of problems do you think a person from a village in India would have as an immigrant in America? Write some notes.

3 Read about the spices on pages 7–8.

a Have you ever eaten any of these spices? Which foods have them as an ingredient?

b Look at the information on pages 7–8. Complete the labels below. No 1 has been done for you.





### B While Reading

4 Make a record of how spices are used to help the characters in the story. Complete the chart below.

Character	Spices	Reasons	Results
Lalita	Turmeric (p21) Fennel (p34)	– for love and luck and to take away old age. – to strengthen her mind.	– she finds support for battered wives in a magazine Tilo gave her and she gains in confidence (p68).
Haroun and Hameeda			
Jagjit			
Raven			
Tilo			
The Grandfather and his family			

5 *I open the door and Ramu goes inside the room where Geeta is waiting. When I hear their cries of surprise, I close the door behind him. I am praying that the spices will work their magic, and solve this family's problems. (page 63)*

In this section Ramu and his daughter are speaking, but we do not know what they are saying. Read on to page 64 to find out the result of their conversation, then try to imagine what they said to each other. Complete the dialogue below.

**Geeta:** Father, what are you doing here?

**Ramu:** I came to get some medicine for your grandfather, he's got terrible bad stomach pains. And why are you here?

**Geeta:**

6 "What have you brought me?" asks Haroun curiously. And suddenly I know what I must give him. Not the gun. Violence is not the answer to Haroun's problems. Instead, I take the silk bag of lotus root from my neck and put it into his hands. (page 73)

Now imagine that Tilo gave the gun to Haroun instead of the lotus root. Write the end of Haroun's story.

### C After Reading

7 I have broken too many of the rules, and now I must be punished. (page 61)

Complete the table below by answering the following two questions:

a) Which of the Mistress rules does Tilo break?  
 b) What do you think are the reasons for each rule?

Number	a) Rule	b) Reason
1	Do not look in a mirror (p18, p71)	It is important not to be vain because a Mistress must not want anything for herself. She is there only to help others.
2		

8 Imagine you are a social worker and you are trying to help one of the people described in *The Mistress of Spices*. Write a letter to a charitable organisation and ask for money to provide help for them. Give examples of the problems the person is having and say how you can use the money to help improve their life.

Dear Sir/Madam,  
*I am a social worker in Oakland, California...*