Modern Asian Studies **46,** 3 (2012) pp. 703–729. © Cambridge University Press 2011
doi:10.1017/S0026749X11000515 First published online 17 October 2011

*Eating 'Modernity': Changing dietary practices in colonial Bengal**

UTSA RAY

Rabindranath Tagore Centre for Human Development Studies, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK), Salt Lake Campus, 27/D, DD Block, Sector 1, Salt Lake, Kolkata 700064, India
Email: utsaray@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Colonial transformation of the relations of production contextualized the cultural articulation of a new set of values, prejudices, and tastes for the Bengali Hindu middle class. These cultural values, together with the political and economic conditions of colonialism, formed the habitus of this class. This paper tries to understand this self-fashioning by the middle class through their construction of a 'Bengali' cuisine. A distinct enthusiasm for new gastronomic possibilities defined this cuisine, and yet, at the same time, it possessed important elements of continuity from pre-colonial times, evidenced especially in the reinstitution of caste-based norms of gastronomy. The resultant cuisine was cosmopolitan yet still Bengali.

Introduction

Since the 1950s, the rise of a *new* middle class in colonial India has been the subject of a rich and varied historiography. Earlier scholarship was focused on delineating the economic origins of the phenomenon. However, in the more recent past, historians have developed a serious interest in understanding and explaining the cultural politics of the middle class in colonial and post-colonial India. Several historical and

* This paper is part of my doctoral dissertation, *Culture of Food in Colonial Bengal* (Pennsylvania State University, 2009). Generous support from the Department of History, Pennsylvania State University, and the Research and Graduate Studies Organization at the same institution, enabled me to pursue my research. I am grateful to Mrinalini Sinha, Kumkum Chatterjee, Joan B. Landes, Nancy S. Love, Gautam Bhadra, Hari S. Vasudevan, Samita Sen, and Rochona Majumdar for their comments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

anthropological studies have enriched our understanding of how the middle class fashioned itself into a *modern yet non-Western* community.[1] In light of this recent scholarship on cultural self-fashioning in colonial India, this paper seeks to understand how a new discourse on Bengali cuisine impinged upon the self-articulation of the Bengali Hindu middle class. This paper thus seeks to demonstrate how the question of gastronomic taste and consumption not only became a marker of identity for the middle class, but actually came to define their everyday existence in colonial Bengal.

Even a cursory look at the archive—an array of the writings of cookbook writers, food columnists, journalists, homemakers, satirists, and fiction writers—reveals that there was a sea change in the material culture of the Bengali middle class from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Refinement in food, education, music, literature, and deportment defined this middle class and also affected their households. This change in middle-class habitus was memorably observed by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), a key figure in Bengal's literary renaissance, who described in 'Prachina o Nabina', a satirical essay (first published in 1879 and again in 1887), how needles, threads, books, and carpets had come to displace ladles, broomsticks, and pitchers in Bengali households.[2] The claim for a refined Bengali cuisine needs to be contextualized within this changing material culture of colonial Bengal. These changes heralded a surge of writings on refinement of taste (henceforth referred to as a discourse of taste) that would haunt authors even in post-colonial India.

The discourse of taste that emerged from the array of literature depicted Bengali cuisine as a fine art which was on its deathbed. Forms of sentiment that played in the writings of the colonial Bengali middle class constantly remembered a 'lost' culture of cuisine. But then they reconstructed this world through creating an aesthetic of what they had lost and which they continued to cherish. Bengal as a liberal, cosmopolitan, and yet familial, idea was born from this discourse of taste. Unlike food cultures in other parts of the world,

[1] Tarlo, Emma (1996). *Dress and Identity in India* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press); Mazzarella, William (2003). *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham; London: Duke University Press); Venkatachalapathy, A. R. (2006). *In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History* (New Delhi: Yoda Press).

[2] Chattopadhyay, Bankimchandra (1376 BS [*circa* 1969/70]). 'Prachina o Nabina' in *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol. 2, (ed.) with an Introduction by Bagal, Jogeshchandra (Kolikata: Sahitya Samsad), p. 251 (First published in 1361 BS [*circa* 1954/55]).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bengali cuisine not only refused to become national, but by remaining emphatically regional, its domestic nature was also kept intact. This cuisine supposedly flourished in the domestic space of the home where women provided it with a unique character. In *Bhojan Shilpi Bangali*, Buddhadeb Basu (1908–1974) wrote that the element that sets apart 'Bengali' cuisine from all other cuisines is its distinctive nature of domesticity.[3] Although this characteristic prevented 'Bengali' cuisine from becoming a part of world cuisine, according to Basu, it also saved 'Bengali' cuisine from the vulgarity of commercialization. 'Bengali' cuisine originated in the home and by familial affection.[4]

It must be remembered that for the colonial Bengali middle-class authors like Rwitendranath Tagore or Prajnasundari Devi, being a Bengali was not narrowly defined. The making of a 'Bengali' cuisine was part of a regional history project undertaken by a group of people who did not believe that being immersed in a region was contradictory to their sense of cosmopolitanism. Bengali intellectuals, like Buddhadeb Basu and Gopal Haldar (who also considered themselves to be gastronomes) defined Bengali cuisine as liberal and cosmopolitan, with the potential to incorporate all other flavours and indigenize them, so representing a synthesis of different cultures. But this cuisine's forte lay in its non-commercialization. These gastronomes thus tried to carve a niche for Bengali cuisine in the larger discourse of nationalism, keeping it distant from other cuisines that had been commodified. However, the regional as well as cosmopolitan nature of Bengali cuisine emerged from myriad caste, class, communal, and gendered negotiations.

This paper is divided into two broad sections. The first section explores the intrinsic hybridity that came to characterize the process of producing a 'Bengali' cuisine, which generally utilized Bengali ingredients and British modes of cooking, but sometimes these basic elements were reversed or rendered more complex by the addition of others. It will be argued that Bengali cuisine was hybridized as a result of the appropriation and incorporation of different elements. However, the middle class made an attempt to make the 'foreign' influence on taste indigenous. This indigenization was often done by alluding to a mythic 'Golden Age', an invented Vedic 'tradition'. But, in another sense, hybridity also refers to the influence of different

[3] Basu, Buddhadeb (2004). *Bhojan Shilpi Bangali* (Kolkata: Bikalpa Prakashani), p. 18.
[4] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sub-regional influences on Bengali cuisine that fractured the notion of an integrated Bengali cuisine.

The second section will explore the evolving contours of the gastronomic experience in urban and rural settings. The changes that took place in the development of new eateries and new social feasts will be examined and juxtaposed with their criticism by the middle class in order to delineate the contours of Bengali cuisine. These restaurants and feasts often became objects of social critique: first, the intermingling of castes in the modern restaurants and the social feasts were looked down upon; second, the new eateries, and especially the new mode of feasting, were also criticized because they came to stand for the profligacy associated with city life. To counter these new changes, the middle class began to idealize a village community imagined to be a cultural repository of domesticity and simplicity. The village thus became a symbol of Bengal's past. The material world of these 'idyllic' village communities, however, often clashed with its cultural imageries and the macabre aspects of hunger left indelible marks on the aesthetics of the discourse of taste.

The making of a 'new' hybrid cuisine

No discussion of 'hybridity' is complete without engaging with Bhabha's theorization of the 'hybrid' as 'almost the same but not quite'.[5] Here a word of explanation is called for regarding how the concept of 'hybridity' has been defined in this paper. In principle, Bhabha's argument that the colonizer and the colonized were both constitutive of the experiential domain of colonialism is accepted, but 'hybridity' here has been defined as the intermingling of different elements in food, resulting in something completely new, and which represents the original only in a very remote sense. Seeking the origins of 'Bengali' cuisine will tend to dilute the diversity of the culinary cultures from which this cuisine stemmed.

Hybridity became a frequent feature in the recipes we find in most of the Bengali periodicals from around the late-nineteenth century. For example, a mutton chop recipe or a potato stew recipe contained ingredients like *ghee* or clarified butter, often used in Hindu ritual

[5] Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge), pp. 85–92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

practices and Indian cooking.[6] But, at least for some, consuming the 'foreign' also included the danger of adapting something that was alien. Thus this alien had to be indigenized, and this process had to be so smooth that someone could easily gorge on a muffin, and yet not be bothered about losing their identity, since the muffin was made of potato and *patol* (a vegetable produced and consumed in Bengal).[7]

The 'foreign' was sought to be incorporated into the indigenous through the invention of a 'Vedic tradition'. The attempt is evinced in the writings of two members of the Tagore clan: Rwitendranath Tagore and Prajnasundari Devi, the wife of Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the famous littérateur of Assam. In her cookbook Prajnasundari did not show any alarm over the mixing of cuisines. She was not particularly concerned about preserving the authenticity of food. Similarly, Tagore too was not critical of the hybridity of Bengali cuisine. In fact, in his *Mudir Dokan*, he observed, 'Just as the Europeans are adapting our rice these days, European food like chops and cutlets have been domesticated (*gharoa*) amongst us.'[8]

Both Tagore and Prajnasundari were of the opinion that several European dishes derived their names from those of Indian ones. And, in playing on the partial homonymy that existed between the European and Sanskrit names of certain foodstuffs, Tagore made an elaborate argument that European food derived from Indian cuisine and thus has always been hybrid. He argued that most European food, like pies and pancakes, derived their names from 'Vedic' roots, for example, the Vedic '*pup*' (cake) and 'pie' belonged to the same genre of food. Since Vedic '*pup*' had transformed into the Bengali '*pua*', it was not improbable that '*pup*' had been distorted to become 'pie' in English. He further argued that 'pastry' was derived from the Sanskrit '*pishtak*'. For Tagore, the English always 'fed on Indians'. He argued that even bread, which constituted one of the staples of the English diet, was not English but had Vedic origins.[9]

> The word bread came from '*bhrastra*', which means a pan for frying bread. *Bhrath* came from *bhrastra* just like Maratha is derived from Maharastra. '*Bhrath*' became '*brot*' in German and consequently 'bread' in English. 'At first Europeans were satisfied with the bread. . . These days they are fattened

[6] Devi, Prajnasundari (ed.) (April 1902). *Punya*, Year 3, Vol. 8 (Kolikata), pp. 49–51.
[7] Devi, Sucharu (ed.) (April 1905). *Paricharika* (Kolikata), pp. 268–269.
[8] Tagore, Rwitendranath (1316 BS [*circa* 1909/10]). *Mudir Dokan* (Kolikata), p. 66.
[9] Ibid., pp. 89–93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with our rice and lentils, but even this seems trivial when I see that they have always enriched their country since ancient times by borrowing from the gigantic store of knowledge in India.[10]

Not to be left behind, Prajnasundari claimed that both the Bengali word '*bhaji*' and the English word 'fry' originated from the Sanskrit etymon associated with cooking, '*bhrija*'.[11]

Thus, according to Tagore and Prajnasundari, all that was 'new' had its origins in the Aryan Vedic tradition. They argued that the food that modern India presumed to be a mixture of 'the East and the West' was, in reality, a product of the Aryan Vedic tradition.[12] This reference to the 'Aryan' tradition was a fixation of cultural nationalism. Thus, on many occasions middle-class Hindus claimed that whatever was labelled 'modern' or even 'Western', such as women's education or women's volition in marriage, had existed in ancient India.

In Bengal, the middle-class literati imagined and constructed a 'Golden Age', when, for example, they argued, all women knew how to cook. Chakravarti argues that nineteenth-century Hindu men constructed a Hindu-Aryan identity to compensate for the loss of their self-esteem in the wake of colonial conquest.[13] Given its association with vigour, conquest, and expansion, the Aryan identity was seductive for Hindus in general. It was more so for Bengali Hindu men, given the colonial state's derision of their 'effeminacy'.[14]

In many senses Tagore's strategic play on homonymy was inspired by the work of comparative philology that had been pioneered by British Orientalists like Sir William Jones. Jones had argued that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic, and Old Persian all descended from one proto Indo-European language.[15] It was again he who publicized the claim that Vedic literature was the repository of the most ancient written records of Indo-European languages.[16] Tagore's arguments

[10] Ibid., pp. 92–93.

[11] Devi, Prajnasundari (1990). *Amish o Niramish Ahar*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers), p. 32 (First published in 1900).

[12] Ibid., pp. 43–44.

[13] Chakravarti, Uma (1989). 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past' in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (eds) Sangari, Kumkum and Vaid, Sudesh (New Delhi: Kali for Women).

[14] Ibid., p. 47.

[15] Jones, William (1807). *The Works of Sir William Jones*, 6 Vols, (ed.) Jones, Anna Maria, cited in Trautmann, Thomas R. (1997). *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press), p. 38.

[16] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were predicated on romanticizing an 'Indian' tradition and were often conjectural. Nonetheless, the chief point is that a search for the indigenous etymology of 'foreign' words enabled the middle class to soak in 'new' pleasures because the 'new' in their discourse of taste was interpreted as 'not-so-new'.

The middle class were discovering themselves as a community of taste through their adaptation, incorporation, and localization of new pleasures. Concrete examples of such hybridization are replete in the recipe columns and cookbooks available in colonial Bengal. The first Bengali cookbook, *Pakrajeshwar*, came out in 1831.[17] *Byanjan-Ratnakar* (1858) followed next.[18] *Pakprabandha,* written by a Bengali woman who remained anonymous, appeared in 1879. However, none of these had the success of Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's (1842–1914) cookbook, the *Soukhin Khadya-Pak*, published in 1889. Later, two volumes of *Soukhin Khadya-Pak* were published together as the *Pak Pranali* (1906/07).[19] Before the book came out, Mukhopadhyay had been publishing a monthly periodical of recipes (also known as *Pak Pranali*) since 1883. The next significant publication in the genre was Prajnasundari Devi's (1870–1950) *Amish o Niramish Ahar* (1907).

The image of the 'modern Bengali woman' was at the centre of these cookbooks, which aimed at expanding her 'modern' culinary skills. In fact, in the nineteenth century various domestic manuals and women's journals began publishing recipes for the benefit of the 'modern' women. And from the late nineteenth century the inclusion of culinary skills in the educational curriculum became an issue for discussion.[20] When middle-class Bengalis insisted upon the inclusion of cookery in the curriculum at schools, they often argued that this was because cookery was a part of the curriculum in Britain too. However, this cannot simply be called a 'derivative' modernity. Unlike in Victorian England, where cookery was clearly part of women's education, in colonial Bengal the discourse of cooking was gendered in a more complex way.

In Victorian England a clear-cut demarcation was visible between the public and the private spheres, whereas in colonial Bengal the

[17] Tarkalankar, Bishweshwar (1286 BS [*circa* 1879/80]). *Pakrajeshwar*, 2nd Edition (Kolikata) in (2004) *Pakrajeshwar o Byanjan-Ratnakar* (Kolkata) with an Introduction by Shripantha (First published in 1831).

[18] Ibid.

[19] Mukhopadhyay, Bipradas (1906/07). *Pak-Pranali* (Kolkata).

[20] Borthwick, Meredith (1984). *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849–1905* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

demarcation was much more complex. Although women were situated in the space of the family kitchen and had the responsibility for preparing food, the knowledge of cooking came primarily from men. While women were not considered lesser beings so far as the art of cuisine was concerned, it was often lamented that they had forgotten their natural knack in the matter. Hence women needed the guidance of men. Cooking became an object of reification. It was defined as the most important of all household activities since it produced food. Everything around cooking had to be sacrosanct and clean as it came to be prepared with *Yagna* (a Hindu worshipping ritual involving fire), and the kitchen was considered a sacred place where even the scriptures could be read.[21] According to Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, the educationist and journalist, a home that did not promote good cooking was not a good home as it neglected a component of the sacred rites.[22] But what was considered to be a woman's domain was being co-opted by middle-class men who began to take a keen interest in the subject of cookery and wrote about it. But then writing a recipe was a much more complex and gendered performance. Recipes were written from within a public/professional domain instead of a private/domestic one. Women were active participants in contributing to recipe columns and writing cookbooks. The innumerable recipes that women produced cannot be explained away as being engendered by the hand of patriarchy. Through the production of recipes, cooking as a domestic act crossed the boundaries of house and home. Through the writing of recipes, women created new identities for themselves, which were not much different from those of the men who also wrote recipes. Thus when we juxtapose Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's cookbook with Prajnasundari Devi's we have to read them as creative endeavours of gastronomes, setting aside their differences in gender.

Both Mukhopadhyay's and Prajnasundari's cookbooks are classic testimonies to the changing diet of the Bengalis. The vegetarian recipes that Mukhopadhyay described were mostly made from vegetables already available in India. However, the cosmopolitan Bengali gastronome also took delight in new vegetables such as cabbage and cauliflower. Since cabbage was a new vegetable, Mukhopadhyay deemed it necessary to first introduce cabbage to his readers.

[21] Mukhopadhyay, Bhudeb (1302 BS [*circa* 1895/96]. *Paribarik Prabandha* (Hooghly), pp. 138–141; Majumdar, Pratapchandra (1936). *Stricharitra*, 3rd Edition (Kolikata).
[22] Mukhopadhyay, Bhudeb, op cit., pp. 189–197.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mukhopadhyay tried to make his readers aware of different categories of cabbage, like drumhead and sugar loop, and they also learnt from *Pak Pranali* that cabbage seeds were brought into India every year from abroad. A detailed discussion of how to choose and clean a cabbage preceded the recipes in the first volume of *Pak Pranali*, the periodical: this discussion was imperative since cabbage was a new vegetable.[23] In the periodical, as well as the cookbook, so-called Bengali recipes happily coexisted with 'new' recipes, which ranged from British to Italian to French cuisines. Recipes included Jewish fried fish, Italian mutton, French cutlets, English chops, plum pudding, ginger pudding, hasty pudding, orange jelly, Irish stew, orange custard, and the like. What has to be noted in this context is that the nomenclature itself was becoming hybrid. For example, Mukhopadhyay had recipes for 'English *bhuni khichuri*' (*khichuri* being a dish made of rice, lentils, and spices consumed commonly by people all over India) and 'English *shik kebab*' (*shik kebab* again was a form of skewered mutton generally eaten by the Muslims in India).[24] The British who resided in India loved *khichri/khichuri*.[25] Mukhopadhyay went one step further and gave an English flavour to Indian dishes. He was creating a cuisine that was a synthesis of incorporation and localization. The end result was a 'new' cuisine that would shape the identity of the Bengali middle class.

This play on nomenclature was perhaps most evident in both Mukhopadhyay's and Prajnasundari's use of the term 'curry', which was often an English innovation of an Indian recipe of a mixture of spices. We get to know about recipes such as lamb curry, egg curry, prawn curry, and English rohu fish curry in Mukhopadhyay's cookbook.[26] However, for Mukhopadhyay, curry had an entirely different definition, quite dissimilar to what the British recipe writers had to say. Mukhopadhyay defined curry thus: 'Europeans learnt to cook "curry" from the Jews and the Jews learnt it from the Muslims.'[27] When Mukhopadhyay described recipes for 'curry', he was quite emphatic that he was either following the Muslims or the English. He did not consider 'curry' to be a Hindu dish and hence put its name

[23] Mukhopadhyay, Bipradas (1883). *Pak Pranali* (Kolikata), pp. 98–100.
[24] Sharma, Bipradas (1313 BS [*circa* 1906/07]). *Pak Pranali* (Kolikata).
[25] Burton, David (1993). *The Raj at Table: A Culinary History of the British in India* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber), pp. 83–85; Collingham, Lizzie (2005). *Curry: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus), p. 119.
[26] Mukhopadhyay, Bipradas, op cit., pp. 276–279.
[27] Ibid., p. 272.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

within quotes. He wrote that the English did not use ground spices in their 'curry' and he invented something called the 'Calcutta-curry-powder' which was made of a mixture of one tablespoon of poppy seeds, one tablespoon of turmeric powder, half a teaspoon of red chilli powder, half a teaspoon of ground cumin, and one teaspoon of salt.[28] Collingham argues that curry was created for the British in India.[29] Her interpretation of curry is, of course, drawn from her readings of Anglo-Indian memoirs and cookbooks. However, it seems from Mukhopadhyay's account that the colonized were eager to erase all their connections with curry. Hence Mukhopadhyay connected curry to a different trajectory, but his insistence on curry being an outside influence on Indian cuisine should not make us think that he was interested in some sort of an indigenist gastronomy. Far from it: Mukhopadhyay, in fact, was the archetypal middle-class Bengali whose 'life-world' was a mélange of both British and Indian elements.

Although Prajnasundari was not so emphatic about severing ties with curry, she hardly used the English formulaic recipe for curry, which was generally made out of a hodgepodge of spices known as curry powder.[30] She used different recipes for curry and these recipes were applied to quintessentially Bengali vegetables like *enchor* (green jackfruit) and *mocha* (banana blossom), and fish like *hilsa* and *parshe* (almost iconic ingredients of Bengali cuisine).[31] She used different spices for each curry recipe. Again, her play on names in this context is noteworthy. She named one dish '*firingi* [Anglo-Indian/Eurasian/European] *curry*' even though she used *patol* (wax gourd), a vegetable native to Bengal, in the recipe.[32] Neither *firingi* nor curry can be called either British or Bengali, but hybrid.

Although Mukhopadhyay claimed that 'curry' did not originate in India and hence could not exactly be called an 'Indian' dish (here he equated India with Hindus), he was not necessarily aiming to create a so-called authentic and indigenous cuisine. His book included a number of recipes from other regions of India. For example, he stated that yellow lentils grew better in northern India than in Bengal and therefore they tasted better if they were cooked in a 'Hindustani' (non-Bengali, specifically northern Indian) way. In this

[28] Ibid., p. 273.
[29] Collingham, op cit., p. 118.
[30] Devi, Prajnasundari, op cit., Vol. 1; and Devi, Prajnasundari (1995). *Amish o Niramish Ahar*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers) (First published in 1907).
[31] Devi, Prajnasundari, op cit., Vol. 1, p. 336, Vol. 2. pp. 236, 245.
[32] Devi, Prajnasundari, op cit., Vol. 2, p. 235.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recipe, Mukhopadhyay incorporated asafoetida which was not used frequently in Bengali cuisine as yet.[33] Similarly he included recipes for Kashmiri lentils and Gujarati dishes in his cookbook. In drawing from other regions, his intention was not to make Bengali food a stand-in for all-India food. Rather, he wanted to enrich Bengali food by drawing upon a variety of gastronomic traditions from around the country and, indeed, from other national cultures.

In his essay on Bengali cuisine and nationalism, Sengupta describes how the kitchen, the essence of Bengali domesticity, became integral to Bengali Hindu middle-class nationalism.[34] He writes about Bengali and Indian kitchens in the same vein, thus promoting the idea that the nationalist discourse of the Bengali Hindu middle class was just another form of Indian nationalism. However, Mukhopadhyay and many other such cookbook writers clearly demonstrate that their intention was to make Bengali cuisine more iconoclastic and global, rather than to intervene at the national level or indeed to make this new food part of the nationalist discourse.

Kiranlekha Ray, whose book *Jalkhabar* came out in *circa* 1924, showed similar tendencies in writing recipes.[35] Through her emphasis on the use of language, Ray made a clear distinction between what was foreign and what was not. A significant feature of her cookbook was that whenever she wrote down a recipe that did not have an Indian name, she put the word in English script alongside the Bengali script. If she wrote 'omelette' in Bengali, it was always followed by the word 'omelette' in English within parenthesis. Similarly, when Ray used highly technical terms, such as 'crystallization', 'amorphous', and 'fermentation', she preferred to write the word in English. However, she showed considerable courage in incorporating 'foreign' elements into 'traditional' recipes'. Although her husband professed, in the introduction to her cookbook, that the recipes for yoghurt and '*sandesh*' were authentic recipes from *Varendrabhumi* (northern Bengal), she had included vanilla and strawberry essences in these preparations.[36]

Ray came from what might be called an upper-class Bengali Hindu background. Her husband was a landlord in Dighapatia in northern Bengal. He was a member of the *Varendra* cultural society which took an

[33] Mukhopadhyay, Bipradas, op cit., pp. 118–119.

[34] Sengupta, Jayanta (2010). 'Nation on a Platter: the Culture and Politics of Food and Cuisine in Colonial Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44:1, pp. 81–98.

[35] Ray, Kiranlekha (2000). *Jalkhabar*, (ed.) Chattopadhyay, Aruna (Kolikata) (First published in 1331 BS [*circa* 1924/25]).

[36] Ibid., p. 65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

active interest in promoting the regional history of *Varendrabhumi*. He also encouraged his wife to write *Varendra Randhan*, a history of food in this region. Writing a history of a region was definitely an integral part of self-fashioning because it excavated the 'life-world' of the people of the region. This was a time during which Bengal as a cultural entity became an object of academic and antiquarian inquiry.[37] What is noteworthy in this context is that even within the idea of Bengal, we find a sub-regional consciousness of history. This middle-class project of writing history was aimed at infusing a sense of belonging in the region. Indeed in other parts of India too, for instance in contemporary Maharashtra, there was a keen interest in sub-regional specializations. Many such histories developed around the narrative of caste-based identity formations.[38] Sudhir Kumar Mitra's *Hooghly Jelar Itihas o Bangasamaj*, Satish Chandra Mitra's *Jashohar-Khulnar Itihas* or Kiranlekha Ray's *Varendra Randhan* exemplify how a region's history was imagined to have existed in everyday life.[39] This sense of belonging in a region, however, was as much about figuring out the 'traditional' recipes of the *Varendra* region as about having a '*jalkhabar*' (generally an evening snack but it can also mean breakfast) that consisted of a

[37] Bengal certainly had a tradition, which pre-dates the colonial period, of mapping its different regions in terms of the special items that were cooked in different districts. However, this pre-colonial tradition of the territorialization of food production and the culture of consumption could be the subject matter of another essay.

[38] Basu, Nagendranath (1318 BS [*circa* 1911/12]). *Banger Jatiya Itihas: Brahmankanda* (Kolkata: Bishwakosh); Basu, Nagendranath (1334 BS [*circa* 1927/28]). *Banger Jatiya Itihas: Barendra Brahman Bibaran* (Kolkata: Bishwakosh); Basu, Nagendranath (1334 BS [*circa* 1927/28]). *Banger Jatiya Itihas: Barendra Kayastha Bibaran* (Kolkata: Bishwakosh); Basu, Nagendranath (1335 BS [*circa* 1928/29]). *Banger Jatiya Itihas: Uttar Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda* (Kolkata: Bishwakosh); Basu, Nagendranath (1340 BS [*circa* 1933/34]). *Banger Jatiya Itihas: Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda* (Kolkata: Bishwakosh). An example of sub-regional history writing is provided by Bandopadhyay, Nabinkrishna (1910–11). *Bhadrapurer Itibritta* (Murshidabad: Kanika Jantralay), cited in Chatterjee, Kumkum (2009). *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. 265. For a broad discussion of caste-based history writing, see Chatterjee, op cit., pp. 62–89. For a discussion on how Maratha regional consciousness and its relationship to a broader concept of nationalism was reflected in history writing from the late nineteenth century, see Deshpande, Prachi (2007). *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press).

[39] Mitra, Satish Chandra (1335 BS [*circa* 1928/29]). *Jashohar-Khulnar Itihas*, Vol. 1, 2nd Edition (Kolikata) (First published in 1321 BS [*circa* 1914/15]); Mitra, Sudhir Kumar (1962). *Hooghly Jelar Itihas o Bangasamaj*, Vol. 1, 2nd Edition (Kolikata) (First published in 1948); Ray, Kiranlekha (1406 BS [*circa* 1999/2000]). *Varendra Randhan* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha) (First published in 1928 BS [*circa* 1921/22]).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

jam tart or grilled chicken.[40] It is possible to perceive a self-conscious separation of Ray's class position here, for she would surely have known that such '*jalkhabar*' would have sounded alien to an ordinary middle-class person, even in the cities of Calcutta and Dhaka. What one ate in the form of '*jalkhabar*' imbued the gastronomic narrative of Bengal with a cosmopolitan flavour. In this context it should be mentioned that '*sandesh*', something claimed as 'authentic Bengali' by Ray's husband, was actually made from *chhana* or cottage cheese that the Portuguese had brought into Bengal.[41] These new recipes did not remain confined to cookbooks. New eateries that sprang up in colonial Bengal and new feasts often served such new and hybrid food.

'Old' and 'new' food: Reformulating the rhetoric of caste

Gastronomic pleasures reached their heights by the end of nineteenth century, both because of the slowly increasing number of hotels and restaurants and because of the new cookbooks that made it easier to enjoy 'exotic' cuisine at home. For many Indians, consuming 'new' food was not always possible within the domestic sphere. For them, the new hotels and the restaurants that sprang up in Calcutta in the nineteenth century had their attractions. They formed a convenient locus for those who wanted to enjoy a chicken cutlet without being concerned about polluting their home. At the same time, the pleasure of eating out could be realized in these new public eateries. This new experience, however, did not pass without comment. A central point of criticism was that the city had become a place of excess and greed. The expenditure on the feasts symbolized that excess in consumption. Closely connected with this criticism, however, was a rhetoric of caste that had been reformulated and readjusted to suit modern times. Thus the defence of caste became a defence of a simple and aesthetic 'tradition', imagined in an idyllic village life.

While the middle class certainly visited the new public eateries, the food that they consumed there was mostly denied entry into the middle-class Bengali Hindu household. Bipin Chandra Pal

[40] Ray, Kiranlekha, op cit., p. 65.

[41] Achaya, K. T. (1994). *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. 132.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(1858–1932) wrote about this public/private divide in Calcutta.[42] When he first came to Calcutta from Sylhet in eastern Bengal, Pal stayed in a hostel. Residents were not allowed to bring in food that could offend Hindu sensibilities. However, by this time loaves and biscuits had become quite common in Calcutta and there was no ban on bringing these foods into the hostel. Residents could of course consume what they wanted outside the hostel.[43] Pal and his friends discovered the pleasures of the new gastronomy in the newly emerging hotels. Later, Pal, obliged to be on a vegetarian diet after his mother's death, followed it only at home. But, as he tells us, his evening meals always consisted of the boiled eggs and crabs that he relished in the public eateries.[44] There was thus a sharp distinction between what was consumed at home and what was eaten in the public eateries. However, notions of the public and the private also need to be problematized in this context. A hostel, which was considered a 'public' place as opposed to home, had rigid rules for food, whereas at least some—like the Tagores and other upper middle-class Hindus—had started enjoying 'new' food in their homes. But generally speaking the newly emerging hotels served as the locus of gastronomic pleasure. These eateries not only introduced new food, they also changed the eating patterns of the middle class.

The Spences' hotel was one of the first hotels established in Calcutta in the 1830s. In the 1860s it transformed into a limited company owned by both the British and Indians. In 1841, a second hotel, named the Auckland hotel, started up, which later became the famous Great Eastern hotel, where Bipin Chandra Pal and his friends were counted as frequent visitors. Bengalis also started taking an active interest in the hotel business in European quarters in the 1870s and 1880s. The Sen brothers, for instance, started the Esplanade hotel in 1874 and another the next year.[45]

Those who frequented the fancy restaurants set up by the British, and later by the upper-class Bengalis, in Bengal were small in number. The lower ranks of the middle class were more likely to visit small eateries and hotels. By the 1940s, several small eating places had

[42] Pal, Bipin Chandra (1932). *Memories of My Life and Times. In the Days of My Youth (1857–84)* (Calcutta), pp. 180–225.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Roy, B. V. 'Calcutta, Old and New: Taverns and Hotels', *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, Vol. XLV, No. 3, 14 December 1946, pp. 45–46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cropped up in Calcutta. These tiny eateries, like the Basanta Cabin, serving toast and boiled egg, and the Chachar hotel, were all run by Bengalis. Two other small Bengali hotels called Café-de-Monico and the Bengal Restaurant were established around 1936. Although many of these hotels were given so-called English names such as the Café-de-Monico, they were more likely to be owned by local people. Other eateries called '*pice* hotels' (where a full meal was supposedly served for one-sixteenth of a rupee) or '*bhater* hotels' (rice hotels where daily meals were served), which catered to people with small budgets, chiefly students, also emerged by the 1940s. These places served meals consisting of rice at a cheap price.[46] In *Adarsha Hindu Hotel* (*Ideal Hindu Hotel*), the acclaimed novel by Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay, the famous Bengali littérateur (1894–1950), the hotel was primarily a rice hotel where daily meals were served for daily wage earners and other office workers.[47] The hotel was situated near the railway station so that the travellers could easily come and eat at there. Although not one of the high-end hotels, this hotel was divided hierarchically into first and second class.[48] While those who ate in first class would get better quality food, like split green *gram*, those who ate in second class could only expect a combination of red *gram* and split black *gram*.[49] Often the latter's lentil soup would be mixed with rice starch if the supply was less than the number of customers.[50] Bandopadhyay's novel described how these rice hotels functioned and portrayed an image of an ideal rice hotel where everyone would eat similar meals.

Overall, the new culinary pleasures were enjoyed by a wide social spread, although to a limited extent. Since many of these foodstuffs were produced on a large scale, their price was naturally quite low. As a result, new food like tea could be consumed even by those on the lower rungs of the social ladder. A number of Bengali novels of the period attest to the fact that even the poorest took delight in drinking tea. Thus in a sense the pleasure cut across class and caste boundaries, which were becoming a matter of angst among many middle-class Bengali Hindus. *Ratarati* (*Over the Night*), a short story written by Rajshekhar Basu (1880–1960) (who wrote under nom de plume Parashuram and who was a famous Bengali satirist)

[46] Gupta, Pratulchandra (1990). *Alekhya Darshan* (Kolkata), pp. 30–43.
[47] Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhshan (2005). 'Adarsha Hindu Hotel' in *Upanayas Samagra*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Mitra o Ghosh) (First published in 1940).
[48] Ibid., p. 321
[49] Ibid., p. 381.
[50] Ibid., p. 321.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

demonstrates this point. In *Ratarati*, Charan Ghosh, a middle-class gentleman, comes to a hotel, called the Anglo-Mughlai Café and located somewhere in Calcutta, with his friend Mr Chatterjee in order to find his son Bantul.[51] Charan Ghosh is aghast by the smell of meat in the restaurant. However, it is full of young customers, like Bantul, who take delight in foodstuffs like 'French Malpoa' (a Bengali pancake) made from chicken.[52] But what really captured the imagination of the people was tea. In this context, the endeavours of the Indian Tea Association to popularize tea were very successful indeed.[53] In fact, as Collingham argues, tea often improved intercommunal relations. It was considered to be free from the burden of associations with purity and hence easier to share with members of the other castes.[54] It was this potential of the new public eateries to expand the frontiers of social interaction that attracted criticism from respectable middle-class society.

Ramesh Chandra Ray was a doctor who wrote a tract on the restaurants that were gradually emerging in Calcutta. By the 1920s they had become ubiquitous in Calcutta. Ray was concerned about the unhygienic atmosphere and the unhealthy food in these restaurants. However, he made a cultural analysis and in the process brought class into the sphere of nutrition.[55] It seems from his tract that, for Ray, restaurants implied small, 'low' eateries and not the new and extremely sophisticated large restaurants, mostly established by the British. The latter were hardly frequented by the middle class. Upper-class Bengali Hindus sometimes visited these clubs and restaurants, but not the middle middle or the lower middle classes. It is for this reason that Ray considered students to be the most important patrons of the restaurants. These restaurants, according to Ray, were made dirty and unhygienic by their staff who, in Ray's own words, 'are recruited from a class in which venereal is almost universal'.[56] There could be a 'gentleman proprietor', but, in Ray's opinion, he was

[51] Parashuram (1919–1920). 'Ratarati' in *Parashuram Galpasamagra*, (ed.) Basu, Dipankar (Kolikata: M.C. Sarkar and Sons Pvt. Ltd., 1992), pp. 226–242.

[52] Ibid., pp. 228–229.

[53] Bhadra, Gautam (2005). *From an Imperial Product to a National Drink: The Culture of Tea Consumption in Modern India* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, in association with the Tea Board India).

[54] Collingham, op cit., p. 201.

[55] Ray, Ramesh Chandra 'Restaurants: Mend or End Them!', *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette,* Vol. 11, Health Supplement, 29 March 1930, pp. 18–19.

[56] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

deceived by his personnel who cooked and served at the restaurants.[57] Ray made a lengthy analysis of the adulteration of food by the lower-class staff in the restaurants. He described curry that was made from stale meat and leftover cutlets that were converted into potato chops; veal was passed off as lean mutton and lard was used in several restaurants in place of *ghee*.

In a satirical essay, Bholanath Mukhopadhyay ridiculed the new middle-class gentlemen who ate with various castes in the new restaurants.[58] Similar was the surprise of Durgacharan Ray who wrote a fictional travelogue[59] in which he described how the gods who had come down from heaven to take a tour of the world were aghast at the way Bengali Hindu men were consuming food prepared by Muslims, which constituted a threat to the caste status of the upper caste Hindus.[60] Both Mukhopadhyay and Ray resented the idea of eating with other castes, which was a characteristic feature of the public eateries, as opposed to the communal eating of earlier times when men only ate with their caste brethren. In a sense these authors were contributors to a discourse of taste, refined in content, and in many senses defined by a negation of other tastes.

The reference to caste was thus central to the discourse of taste. It has been argued by scholars like S. N. Mukherjee that although *bhadralok* (respectable society, chiefly represented by the Bengali Hindu middle class) as a category was exclusively a Hindu group, caste did not play a role in the selection of this group.[61] Men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of living, and received a similar education could be considered a *bhadralok*.[62] While it is true that it was possible for men belonging to the lower castes to climb up the social ladder on the basis of the characteristics mentioned by Mukherjee, it does not undermine the fact that the significance of caste never really died down for the *bhadralok*. It may not have played a role in the formation of the middle class as a class, but it was ensconced in the quotidian identity of the middle class. In fact, the caste question was being reformulated and intrinsically related to the issue of food as 'pure' and 'impure'. Certain types of food such as rice came to be

[57] Ibid.
[58] Mukhopadhyay, Bholanath (1389 BS [*circa* 1982]). *Apnar Mukh Apuni Dekho* (Kolkata: Pragyabharati) (First published in 1863).
[59] Ray, Durgacharan (1984). *Debganer Martye Agaman* (Kolkata: Deys Publishing).
[60] Ibid., p. 258.
[61] Mukherjee, S. N. (1977). *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha).
[62] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imagined in terms of 'pure' or 'impure'. The sharing of cooked food, basically meaning rice, symbolized the unity of the family. Family in this context implied clan. Thus if a person partook of rice cooked by another, it meant that the latter's clan was accepted by the former's clan.[63] This association of cooked food with rice is best exemplified in Bipin Chandra Pal's memoir in which he narrates an incident that took place in his hostel in Calcutta: an inmate refused to have rice cooked by his friends since he was a Brahmin and his friends were not. However, he did not mind consuming curries or *dal* (lentils) made by the non-Brahmins. He told his friends that no one would ever ask him if he had taken curries or *dal* cooked by non-Brahmins.[64] As Pal said, 'The Bengali idiom never used curries or *dal* as the name for cooked food, *bhat* or cooked rice was the only term used in this context.'[65] In an essay on 'traditional' feasts, Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, a noted journalist, discussed in detail the fact that rice was served only in the houses of the Brahmins. No one partook of rice in the house of a person ranking lower in the caste hierarchy. In fact, as Chattopadhyay claimed, Shudras considered rice served at a Brahmin's place as *prasad* (sacred food that is offered to the gods) and not merely food.[66] Caste thus became an element of the past that was to be cherished.

These issues regarding the relationship between food taboos and caste can be understood most clearly in the case of the new social feasts, which became a major irritant for those imagining this 'tradition'. The new forms of caste rigidities that emerged were clearly visible in the critique of new feasts. Interestingly, Kedarnath Majumdar (d.1333 BS [*circa* 1926]), who wrote a regional history of Maymansingha, noted with ridicule that there was a reverse casteism by the lower castes, in this case the Untouchables, who refused to take rice served by the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas (who ranked lower than the Brahmins in caste hierarchy but were much higher than the Untouchables). Muslims too refused to eat at the house of the Kayasthas, which they had always done in the past.[67]

[63] Inden, Ronald B. and Nicholas, Ralph W. (1977). *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

[64] Pal, op cit., pp. 180–225.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Chattopadhyay, Jogendrakumar (1341 BS [*circa* May 1934]). 'Sekaler Bhoj' in *Bangasri* (Kolikata). Republished as 'Smritite Sekal: Amader Lok Amader Katha' in (1998 and1999) *Aitihasik*, Vols VII and VIII, (ed.) and compiled by Mukhopadhyay, Prabir Kumar (Kolkata), pp. 617–618.

[67] Majumdar, Kedarnath (1906). *Maymansingher Itihas* (Kolikata), pp. 197–199.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Although there was a difference in opinion on the role of caste in social feasts, one unifying theme ran through these discussions of feasts. This unifying theme was that of a simple pristine village life where money did not have an overriding influence. In the self-fashioning of the middle class, money took a backseat and learning, which was reflected in culture, civility, and respectability, became a predominant factor.[68] In the discourse of taste, the ideal type of Bengali cuisine seemed to be the regular affair it was in the villages, where caste rules were observed almost as aesthetic practices. Caste and money became interlinked through the critique of the new feasts.

Caste was thus interpreted in terms of a just society and a value-system. The new feasts were disdained not just because they flouted caste rules, but also because many felt that these feasts were an excuse for squandering money. Calcutta's nouveau riche became responsible for transgressing the caste rules as well as for 'vulgar' display of splendour in the discourse of taste. Majumdar convincingly demonstrates in her work that from the late nineteenth century every aspect of the Bengali marriage ceremony assumed a strictly ritualized, standard form, with its attendant feasts and trousseau.[69] Giving of lavish gifts was accompanied by printing menu cards, not just for weddings, but also for other occasions such as engagement ceremonies. These menu cards provided the upper and the upper middle classes with an opportunity to exhibit their wealth through new modes of display.

A 1925 wedding menu card from urban Calcutta discloses the enormous array of food that was served at the celebration. The card was divided into different sections, like vegetarian, non-vegetarian (fish) and non-vegetarian (meat), finger food, pickles, fresh fruits, dried fruits, desserts, and various kinds of juice.[70] The list was a long one. Vegetarian items included fried flour bread, fried eggplant, fried pointed gourd, sweet rice, green jackfruit curry, cabbage ball curry, mango chutney, ginger chutney, dried apricot chutney, and papaya chutney. Non-vegetarian items included rice made with fish, a

[68] Bhattacharya, Tithi (2005). *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848–85)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

[69] Majumdar, Rochona (2003). 'Marriage, Modernity, and Sources of the Self: Bengali Women c.1870–1956'. Unpublished dissertation, Chicago: University of Chicago; Majumdar, Rochona (2009). *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press).

[70] Menu of the wedding reception of Pratima Devi and Kanailal Gangopadhyay, from Indubala Devi's album.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

vegetable made with fish heads, a hodgepodge of fish, *bekti* (a type of fish) fry, shrimp with bottle gourd, fish balls, prawn kebab, two other prawn preparations, roast carp, *hilsa* (a type of fish) made with yoghurt, and four forms of meat preparations. Among the fruits offered were oranges, apples, pineapples, mangoes, pears, guavas, papayas, Indian plums, cucumbers, and bananas.

One engagement menu surpassed even this wedding menu. In 1927, an engagement ceremony for Indira Devi served fried flour bread, fried leafy vegetables, fried pointed gourd, Bengal gram, vegetables made with banana blossom, cauliflower and peas curry, cottage cheese curry, rice made with cottage cheese, cucumber *raita* (a yoghurt dish), ground raisin chutney, and a chutney made from dried apricots and dates among the vegetarian items. There was also a long list of non-vegetarian food, and unlike the former wedding menu, this menu's dessert section was divided into three sub-sections, according to different categories of sweet. Even beverages had two sections: the juice section and the 'fancy water' section, which incorporated new beverages like soda water, lemonade, lime juice soda, and ice-cream soda.[71] Another engagement ceremony two years later, in 1929, incorporated peach pudding, pear pudding, pineapple pudding, and ice cream in its menu.[72]

This excessive expenditure on food served at weddings became a point of criticism for the middle class as they felt that this huge display of money destroyed the sanctity and simplicity that had been regular features of earlier feasts. The new feasts epitomized the increasing dominance of the market economy and the professionalization of cooking, and were juxtaposed by the middle class with the 'traditional' feasts that the women of the house used to cook.

The commercialization of agriculture had resulted in a decline in peasant subsistence production which necessitated a migration to the towns. A large number of the men who migrated from the villages to the city in search of work often took up cooking as a profession. While at home cooking was considered a feminine task, when translated into being a profession, it became a male job, making for a distinct demarcation in the realm of culinary practice. Thus, increasingly, occupational cooks who were mostly men became a common sight at social feasts.

[71] Menu from the 'blessing' (*ashirbad*) ceremony of Indira Devi, from Indubala Devi's album.
[72] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Not only was the practice of hiring cooks, who were mostly male, an intrusion into the domestic space of the middle-class Bengalis, it was also an indication of the growing professionalization of something that had been considered a 'natural' task. Unlike each household, which had its own novel cuisine, the hired cooks implied that a standardization of cooking was taking place. Mahendranath Datta lamented that with the coming of the Brahmin cooks, the uniqueness of food cooked by each woman disappeared for ever.[73] Basantakumar Chaudhuri wrote:

> These days no one's mouth is watered by the mention of the vegetables cooked by the *Ganguly* (a Brahminical last name) women, fish curry cooked by the women of *Mukherjee* (another Brahminical last name) household or the rice pudding made by the women of *Chakrabartys* (Brahminical last name). Earlier elderly women cooked with a sacred attitude after taking a bath and being clad in a clean *saree*. The food they served reminded one of *Annapurna* (deity giving rice). And now fake Brahmins cook for the feasts. These days women cannot stand the smoke exhausting from the kitchen. Thus culinary art which was the novelty of Bengal is fast disappearing.[74]

This emphasis on novelty is inextricably linked with the question of authenticity. As Terrio argues in the context of chocolate manufacturing in France, craft commodities that bear the social identity of their makers are generally produced in limited quantities. Traditional methods are used in crafting these commodities, and hence they provide continuity with the past.[75] These commodities are different from those produced for the mass market. Terrio aptly says that the historicity of these goods gives them special value. Similarly, in the case of women's cooking in colonial Bengal, what made it special was this imagined continuity of their cooking, which was different from what the male cooks conjured up. The latter's food, as already stated, smacked of standardized cooking made in return for money. According to some texts, Westernization led to the degeneration of indigenous

[73] Datta, Mahendranath (1973). *Kolikatar Puratan Kahini o Pratha*, 1st Edition (Kolkata: Mahendra Publishing Committee), p. 12.

[74] Chaudhuri, Basantakumar (Jaisthya-Asharh 1338 BS [*circa* May/June–June/July 1931/32]). 'Baje Kharach', *Grihasthamangal*, Year 5, Nos. 2 and 3 (Kolikata), pp. 30–35.

[75] Terrio, Susan J. (2005). 'Crafting Chocolates in France' in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader*, (eds) Watson, James L. and Caldwell, Melissa L. (Oxford: Blackwell).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

culture and a decline in principles.[76] The aesthetic value of a proper 'Bengali' feast seemed to lie in its domesticity.

There was, however, hardly any consensus on the issue of what exactly constituted the aesthetic of a 'Bengali' feast. The degeneration of indigenous culture was a widely debated issue. The custom of '*sora bandha*' (taking leftover food home) is an instance which showed fissures in the discourse of taste. Saratkumari Chaudhurani (1861–1920), who was a regular contributor to journals like *Bharati, Bharati o Balak, Sadhana, Bangadarshan, Manasi, Sabujpatra, Manasi o Marmmabani* and *Biswabharati*, welcomed the disappearance of '*sora bandha*', which she described as a vulgar ritual, from new feasts.[77] '*Sora bandha*' implied that guests could take whatever they could not eat (and even more food) back home with them. For Chaudhurani, therefore, the new feasts symbolized civilization and an advance in aesthetics. However, for those who idealized an 'imagined' village life, the obliteration of this custom signified an erosion of affective memories. According to Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, there were two reasons for the disappearance of this custom. First of all, he held Western civilization responsible for disaffection for the family. Second, he argued that new feasts had become so elaborate and expensive that it was no longer possible to sustain such a ritual.[78] Chattopadhyay narrated an incident to elaborate his point:

> Once a landlord saw a young man leaving without taking his leftover food. He became upset and said, 'These days men have become really selfish. Is your own consumption in the feast going to fill the stomach of your family? How could you forget your mother and siblings who are waiting for you?'[79]

In a way romanticizing customs like '*sora bandha*' was linked to the idealization of a village life, which the middle class had left behind when they migrated to the big city. For a long time the indigenous middle class who settled down in Calcutta had ties with the rural areas of Bengal where they had their permanent homes, and they regarded their residences in Calcutta as temporary. Even when

[76] Chaudhuri, Basantakumar, op cit., pp. 30–35; Sen, Kaviraj Indubhushan (1928). *Bangalir Khadya* (Calcutta), p. 69.

[77] Chaudhurani, Saratkumari (Poush 1316 BS [*circa* December 1908/09]). 'Meye Joggir Bishringkhala' in *Bharati* (Kolikata). Reprinted as (1357 BS [*circa* 1950/51]) *Saratkumari Chaudhuranir Rachanabali*, (ed.) with an Introduction by Bandopadhyay, Brajendranath and Das, Sajanikanta (Kolikata), pp. 215–222.

[78] Chattopadhyay, Jogendrakumar, op cit., pp. 617–618.

[79] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they permanently settled down in Calcutta, the middle class often retained their rural ties. Social relationships of this group tended to be determined by the villages they had come from rather than the city itself.[80] The image of a self-sustaining village community became a locus where an archetypal Bengali cuisine was a possibility. Hemantabala Devi (b.1894) compared the 'traditional' world with the 'modern' world in a rhetorical passage in her autobiography:

> I do not like this tea-drinking life. What did we eat in those days? Bitter leaves soaked water, soaked chickpeas with ginger, salt, and molasses. Then someone would have fruits, puffed rice or flattened rice. Some might eat leftover fried flour bread. Others might have eaten puffed rice with cucumber, puffed rice with radish, puffed rice with coconut, puffed rice with boiled or fried vegetables... Having 'foreign' food like bread, eggs and cakes insulted Indian culture... We should sit properly on the floor and eat rather than sitting at the table...You can have 'foreign' food in the hospital, but at home you should have what you can offer your God.[81]

There was a subtle critique of colonial economy in the romanticization of villages and of subsistence economy. Panchkari Bandopadhyay, a well-known journalist, narrated nostalgically that no one ever bought rice from the market in the past. Villagers had their own paddy fields which would supply them with whatever they needed. If anyone bought food from the market they would be called '*lakshmichhara*' (one deserted by Lakshmi, i.e. prosperity).[82] In a sense this glorification of a subsistence economy was a critique of the increasing circulation of money and a growing market economy, which encouraged consumerism. Thus whatever could be bought came to be an object of annoyance for many.

In the imagination of the Bengali middle class, Bengali cuisine was thus associated with a 'life-world' that was shaken by the onslaughts of capitalist modernity. The apocryphal village cradled this 'life-world'.

[80] McGuire, John (1983). *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadralok in Calcutta, 1857–1885* (Canberra: South Asian History Section, Australian National University), p. 10.

[81] Devi, Hemantabala (1992). *Hemantabala Devir Rachanasankalan,* (eds) Bagchi, Jasodhara and Sen, Abhijit (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing), pp. 239–244.

[82] Bandopadhyay, Panchkari (1358 BS [*circa* 1951]). *Panchkari Bandopadhyayer Rachanabali*, Vol. 2, (eds) Bandopadhyay, Brajendranath and Das, Sajaniknata (Kolikata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat), p. 308. Paul Greenough demonstrates that Lakshmi was portrayed as a compassionate mother who took pity upon the poor and suffering by giving them subsistence in the mythology of Bengal: Greenough, Paul R. (1982). *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The 'villager' became an alter ego for the middle class. The food of the past mentioned in the texts was basically an upper caste Hindu food. The majority of the villagers were Muslims and lower castes like Haris, Bhowries, Dhangars, and Domes. Often, especially in times of scarcity, the lower castes survived on consuming snails, frogs, crabs, shrimps, and even snakes.[83] Only a few villagers could afford plenty of vegetables, milk, fish, and rice. These groups might have had a few fields of their own where they grew produce. Thus when they shifted to the city, it seemed like a great loss of a 'life-world'. However, for the majority, that is the lower classes, whether living in the village or in the city, life had never been easy. They benefited neither from the 'pure' uncorrupted food imagined by people like Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay or Panchkari Bandopadhyay, nor from the new pleasures of gastronomy.

It was revealed in a survey on the Bengal Famine of 1943 that the day-labourers, petty agriculturalists, artisans, and traders who formed more than 65 per cent of the population of Bengal could not afford to pay for milk, meat, eggs, vegetables, and sweets. In many cases they produced these products, but even under normal conditions their low average income forced them to sell them in order to purchase rice.[84] An average diet of a lower class villager remained almost unchanged throughout our period. Their diet consisted of very coarse rice and *dal* (lentils). Vegetables were consumed, but only occasionally.[85] In a survey of a village in the Midnapore district of Bengal, Baboo Bisweshar Banerjee, the deputy collector, found out that an ordinary villager could hardly afford two full meals of coarse rice and they chiefly ate tank plants for their subsistence.[86] The condition of the lower classes varied from one district to another. Irrespective of regional differences, however, it can be argued that a meal twice a day was something that the lower classes could afford only in ordinary times and that the situation changed in times of scarcity.

[83] Letter from R. D. Hume, Esq., Offg. Collecor of Beerbhoom to the Commissioner of Revenue, Burdwan Division. Proceeding No. 330, Dated Soory, 29 June 1874 [File 13–708-711], *Proceedings of the Hon'Ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Scarcity and Relief*. (Calcutta, July 1874).

[84] Das, Tarakchandra (1949). *Bengal Famine (1943)* (Calcutta), p. 2.

[85] Letter from N. S. Alexander, Esq., Commissioner of the Burdwan Division to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department. Proceeding No. 7RG, Dated Burdwan, 6 April 1888, *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal*. (Calcutta, 1888), pp. 9–18.

[86] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

During these times, the decline in standards of living was steep. Satishchandra Dasgupta, the Gandhian nationalist, led a relief camp during the scarcity of 1931 in Bengal. He reported that in Camp Roumari, in the Rangpur district of eastern Bengal, children ate arum stalks without salt. In another place called Kathgirai, a man named Bastulla ate the dirt that came out after husking rice, and which was generally given to the cow. Observers noticed that men, women, and children remained hungry for three consecutive days. The situation deteriorated to such an extent, reported Khsitishchandra Dasgupta, that Zaher Sheikh, who had been the secretary of a local cooperative bank, survived on arum leaves.[87]

The above description of the condition of the people in the villages dealt a rude blow to the romanticization of a village life where a simple and yet aesthetically superior Bengali cuisine might have existed. The dark and macabre sides of gastronomy reached its height with the Bengal Famine of 1943. In a survey on the destitute in Calcutta, Das, a lecturer in anthropology, described the condition of the famine-stricken in detail.[88] He lashed out virulently at the government relief centres in Calcutta, where, he maintained, the food distributed lacked in both quality and quantity. The government's insistence on distributing *bajra* (millet) in these relief centres wreaked havoc on the digestive systems of the stricken. Their digestive systems, the author suggested, already weakened by consuming unwholesome food, were worsened by eating *bajra*.[89] A passage from the survey revealed the horrors of the famine:

[87] Dasgupta, Khsitishchandra (1931). Report in *Sankat Tran-Samiti* (Kolikata) pp. 13–17.

[88] Das, op cit.

[89] Ibid., pp. 6–7. A similar situation could be seen during the scarcity of 1873 when the government of Bengal, instead of paying attention to producing more food crops, almost forced people to consume rice imported from Burma. Although they complained against consuming this rice on the grounds that it was unwholesome, the government dismissed their claims as unfounded. The colonial state argued that the people of Orissa who died in 1866 after eating Burmese rice were so weakened by starvation that they could not digest any food. However, the government did admit that Burmese rice had actually harmed their digestive systems more than ordinary Bengali rice would have done. Letter from C. Bernard, Esq., Offg. Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Statistical Department to the Commissioners of Patna, Bhaugulpore, Rajshahye and the Superintending Engineers of the Soane Canal and the Northern Bengal Railway. Proceeding No. 4031 [File 14–5], Dated Calcutta, 18 December 1873, *Proceedings of the Hon'Ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Scarcity and Relief*. (Calcutta, December 1873), p. 590.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Calcutta they took to cast-off skins of vegetables and to rotten fruits. They collected the former from the streets and the latter from near about the fruit-stalls in the markets. The receptacles of street-garbage were regularly hunted, morning and afternoon for the crumbs of food which were thrown into them... Even the carcasses of dogs, rats, cats, etc. were welcome-food to these miserable remnants of humanity.[90]

New pleasures had broken down many caste taboos. The pain of the famine had a similar effect. The 'purity' of food or caste remained in texts, but the materiality of the situation made the fluidity of caste much more palpable. The famine almost did away with caste rules regarding interdining.[91] In Calcutta, Hindus received cooked food from the Muslims and vice versa.[92] In Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay's novel *Ashani Sanket* (*Sign of Thunder*), also about the Bengal Famine of 1943, even the priestly class was ready to eat snails (eaten by the lower castes) when the famine struck them.[93] These violent images left indelible marks on the discourse of taste that the Bengali Hindu middle class had constructed as an epitome of aesthetic and refined gastronomic practices.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to analyse the self-fashioning of the middle class in colonial Bengal through the prism of 'Bengali' cuisine. This cuisine was definitely characterized by what Bourdieu defines as the negation of other tastes.[94] However, colonial conditions necessitated a different aesthetic, a distinct making of taste that marked 'Bengali' cuisine as significantly different from French haute cuisine, and the Bengali Hindu middle class as different from Bourdieu's bourgeoisie. The 'Bengali' cuisine that emerged in colonial Bengal never assumed as public a character as haute cuisine assumed in France. In this paper it has been argued that this lack of commercialization of 'Bengali' cuisine actually became a marker of its aesthetic superiority in the Bengali Hindu middle class discourse of taste.

[90] Das, op cit., p. 8.
[91] Ibid., p. 9.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhshan (2005). 'Ashani Sanket' in *Upanyas Samagra*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Mitra o Ghosh) (First published in 1959).
[94] Bourdieu, Pierre (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Although it never became widely commercialized and never became part of the rubric of a standardized Indian cuisine, Bengali cuisine cannot be labelled as indigenist. The point was to introduce a cosmopolitan element into the domestic and yet keep its essential 'Bengaliness'. The resultant cuisine was hybrid, in many senses like its makers. Inspector Sundar babu, one of the chief characters in Hemendrakumar Ray's (1888–1963) detective fictions emphasized that he adored the British because they had brought the chicken cutlet to Bengal, but he also celebrated the 'invention' of *sandesh* and *rasogolla* by the Bengalis.[95] In Ray's fictions, Bengali domestic servants could make excellent potato salads and teacakes.[96] The narrative of Bengali cuisine is thus as much about the celebration of domesticity and regional cosmopolitanism as it is about the fissures that helped in the self-fashioning of the Bengali middle class. The more 'refined' the cuisine, the more distanced it became from the cuisines of the lower orders. Also, while some aspects of what could be labelled 'Mughlai cuisine' was appropriated within this Bengali cuisine, it was scoured and rinsed so well as to make it look like a Hindu cuisine, thus erasing elements of its 'other'. Distaste was a key element in the Bengali discourse of taste. In contemporary Bengal, a few restaurants serve what may be called 'Bengali' cuisine, all of them making a claim for the authenticity of the food they serve. These high-end restaurants are mostly patronized by middle- and the upper-middle class Bengalis. Innumerable small roadside eateries that feed fish curries to the lower-middle and the lower classes are lost in this new making of a Bengali cuisine.

[95] Ray, Hemendrakumar (1986). 'Sajahaner Mayur' in *Hemendrakumar Ray Rachanabali*, Vol. 9, (eds) Datta, Geeta and Mukhopadhyay, Sukhamay (Kolkata: Asia Publishing Company), pp. 11–12.

[96] Ray, Hemendrakumar (1983). 'Sonar Paharer Jatri' in *Hemendrakumar Ray Rachanabali*, Vol. 5, (ed.) Datta, Geeta (Kolkata: Asia Publishing Company), p. 71.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000515 Published online by Cambridge University Press