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CULTURE OF FOOD IN COLONIAL BENGAL

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Abstract

In “Culture of Food in Colonial Bengal” I seek to relate the rise of a new middle-class in colonial Bengal to the development of a new gastronomic culture. I argue that the 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. I investigate the historical specificities of this instance of class-formation through an exploration of the discursive and non-discursive social practices that went into the production of a new “Bengali” cuisine. Drawing on government proceedings, periodical literature, recipe books, and visual materials, I demonstrate that the Bengali Hindu middle-class created a new cuisine, one that reflects both an enthusiasm to partake of the pleasures of capitalist modernity and an anxiety about colonial rule. The Bengali Hindu middle-class gave a double-faceted response to these new gastronomic possibilities. A distinct enthusiasm for the satisfactions of modernity was counterbalanced by an agonized awareness that this specific cultural innovation arose within a political context that was fundamentally alien, racist, and exploitative. This double-faceted response resulted in a discursive project, the articulation of a set of values, prejudices, and tastes that I have called the “rhetoric of cuisine” of the Bengali Hindu middle-class. The “rhetoric of cuisine” was an aesthetic choice tied to the upper caste and patriarchal agenda of middle-class social reform. My dissertation investigates how this rhetoric made possible certain social practices, including the imagination of the act of cooking as a classic feminine act and the domestic kitchen as a sacred space. These acts of imagination possess important elements of continuity from pre-colonial times, especially evidenced in the reinstitution of caste-based norms of gastronomy. Thus, the deployment of the “rhetoric of cuisine” was simultaneously anti-colonial yet capitalist, cosmopolitan yet gendered and caste-based.

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Introduction

The Telegraph, one of the popular English language dailies in Bengal, has a regular food column. I am one of its regular readers, not just to further my research or to enhance my culinary pleasures but also to enjoy the prose of its author, the food critic and musician Nondon Bagchi. In one such column, Bagchi describes his meeting with Yvonnick Jegat Deniau, the executive chef at the Park, a five star restaurant in Calcutta. Yvonnick Jegat Deniau who hails from France accompanied Bagchi to the market to buy Bengali vegetables; after making his purchases the chef used them to stuff *kumro phul* (pumpkin blossom) with prawns and a stuffing made of *patol* (wax gourd), onion, garlic, tomato, and a basil pesto sauce to make a steamed French dish.¹

I have chosen the above column as an introductory narrative to a similar history of hybridity, the formation of a so-called authentic Bengali cuisine in colonial India. This hybridity of food is a product of capitalist modernity which would not have been possible without the “Columbian exchange.” The emergent cuisine 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. Whatever the degree of heterogeneity, the resulting dishes were presented as the products of an “authentic” cuisine. Bengali cookbooks and recipe columns discussed even such hybrid dishes as “guava jelly” in these terms. Over time the Bengali Hindu middle-class constructed a

¹Nondon Bagchi. “French flavors from Bengali bazaar.” *The Telegraph* (April 25, 2006). It needs to be mentioned here that both pumpkin blossom and wax gourd predates Columbian exchange in Bengal. For reference see K.T. Achaya. *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.129.

modern discourse on taste. I maintain, therefore, that colonial conditions produced a new, hybrid “Bengali” cuisine, which however was cast in an idiom of authenticity and a specifically modern understanding of the “traditional.” The contestation of hybridity and authenticity is not surprising, given the contradictions inherent in modernity itself. The cuisine produced from it reflected the pleasures as well as the pains that the colonial middle-class experienced under colonial modernity as well as the hegemonic discourse they formulated around it. Food became a locus for the construction of the refined middle-class self, something that set them apart from the peasantry and the working classes on the one hand, and the Europeans on the other. In dealing with cuisine to understand the making of this social community, I draw on Niharranjan Ray who argues that the quotidian facet of culture tells us the most intimate history of a people.² My conceptualization of cuisine also tries to narrate colonial modernity through one such practice: the culture of food.

Consumption and Colonial Modernity

In arguing that a “modern Bengali” cuisine emerged from colonial modernity, I place my work in the historiography of consumption in India. I draw on works of scholars such as A.R. Venkatachalapathy and Abigail McGowan who touch on the issue of pleasure in the act of consumption in colonial India. They both argue that consumption was an act of making capitalist modernity one’s own.³ In this context it is worthwhile to

² Niharranjan Ray. *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparba* (Kolkata: Deys Publihing, 1400 BS [c.1993]) p.17. first published 1356 BS(c.1949)

³ A.R. Venkatachalapathy. *In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006), Abigail McGowan. “An All-Consuming Subject? Women and Consumption in Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth Century Western India.” *Journal of Women’s History*. vol.18, no.4, (2006):31-54.

remember Arjun Appadurai's conjecture that consumption is social and active rather than private and passive.⁴

In his essay on coffee drinking in colonial Tamilnadu, Venkatachalapathy maintains that coffee became a cultural marker of the colonial middle-class. Some of the middle-class intelligentsia considered coffee to be a symbol of the West and they held reservations about coffee invading the domain of the countryside and domestic space of women, the last bastions of "tradition." However, by the turn of the twentieth century, coffee captured the imagination of the middle-class, becoming an icon of modernity.⁵ However, coffee also became the marker of caste and class. A good coffee, for instance, could be made only from cow's milk, a belief that reflected the ritual importance of cow in the Brahminical discourse.⁶

McGowan argues that access to goods became central to the construction of an upper class and an upper caste elite identity in the Bombay presidency. She is critical of the dominant historiography that reduces changes in consumption to narratives of westernization and industrialization involving displacement of hand-made goods by modern, machine-made western products. Since consumption was so important in the making of an elite identity, nationalists took advantage of it and asked Indians to make national industrial regeneration possible by consuming local handicrafts.

The translation of colonial modernity into quotidian practices, as seen in the making of a Bengali cuisine, illustrates both hybridity and a playful mimicry. I argue that the pursuit of culinary pleasure was bound up with colonial modernity. Drawing on

⁴ Arjun Appadurai. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." in Arjun Appadurai ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) first pub.1986, p.31.

⁵ Venkatachalapathy. *In Those Days*. p.16, 27-28.

⁶ Ibid. pp.16-20.

Saurabh Dube's work on enchantments of modernity, I suggest that modernity manifested through Bengali cuisine, created its own enchantment of "authenticity."⁷ For Dube, the processes of modernity create their own enchantments that extend from a teleological understanding of modernity to hierarchical oppositions between binaries such as East and West and tradition and modernity. In my thesis, I have argued that the commodity of food and the new culture of production, cooking, and eating that grew around it carried an aura of seduction emanating from modernity. The self-fashioning of the Bengali Hindu middle-class arose from their critique and appropriation of this new gastronomic culture. From a materialist reading, food emerges as the most palpable object of a colonial modernity whose implications were as much cultural as material. It is around food that the life-world of the colonized people revolved. While it symbolized the misery of hunger, food also offered the gastronomical pleasure that gradually led to the construction of a "modern" cuisine.

History of Gastronomy

The noted French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826) reminds us of the important role of taste- with its inherent link to hierarchical notions of cultural refinement in any discussion of the formation of a cuisine. For Brillat-Savarin, gastronomy is the epitome of taste.⁸ It denotes the life world of an individual. He writes:

The material subject which gastronomy treats of is everything that can be eaten; its immediate object is the preservation of the individual; and the means by which it effects its purpose are cultivation to produce, commerce to exchange, industry to prepare, and experience to

⁷ Saurabh Dube. "Introduction: Enchantments of Modernity." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4 (Fall 2002):729-755.

⁸ Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Gastronomy as a Fine Art or the Science of Good Living*. Trans. by R. E. Anderson (London: Chatto and Winders, 1877).

discover how everything can be best turned to this account.⁹

As far as sensory conditions are concerned, taste according to Brillat- Savarin is defined by gastronomy which for him is more than simply the art of cooking; rather, it plays a significant role in the development of taste in the individual and has an impact on his rational faculties and his moral nature.¹⁰ Brillat-Savarin's individual is the bourgeois individual such as himself. Beginning his professional life as an attorney, Brillat-Savarin was elected as a member of the Constituent Assembly in France in 1789. Until his death in 1826, he remained a judge in the Cour de Cassation. When he discusses gastronomy as a fine art and a sign of good living, Brillat- Savarin had this background in mind. For him, gastronome is not a glutton; he is a connoisseur who possesses a refined sense of taste and culture, both of which are indispensable in understanding gastronomy.¹¹ This implicit, but nonetheless hierarchical sense of taste can be traced back to the Humanist tradition in Italy. Exploring new notions of taste that emerged after the Renaissance, Brian Cowan demonstrates that Humanism in Italy tried to balance both dietetics, the science of eating for good health, with gastronomy, the art of eating well for pleasure and as a sign of cultural refinement.¹²

In academic writing, structuralists were amongst the first group of scholars to pay sustained attention to the concept of taste. The major influence was that of Claude Levi-Strauss for whom cooking constitutes a crucial cultural code.¹³ In fact he regards the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Brian Cowan. "New World, New Tastes: Food Fashions after the Renaissance." in Paul Friedman ed. *Food: The History of Taste* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2007) pp.197-231.

¹³ Claude Levi- Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology I*(London: Jonathan Cape, 1970)

gustatory code as the most significant code, since its decipherment permits the anthropologist to view human society, with all its variation, as a structure producing meaning. The gustatory code therefore reveals a common structure that contains meaning. The structuralist approach has enriched our understanding by its clear recognition that taste is shaped culturally. However, this approach often fails to understand that taste cannot be defined exclusively by a static structure and that tastes change and develop over time.

Mary Douglas disagrees with Levi-Strauss's notion of a universal gustatory code. While Douglas takes into consideration disparities in social relations, she tries to explain hierarchies and the social exclusions implicit in them by treating food categories as codes.¹⁴ According to Douglas, it might be better to consider the food itself as a code, rather than follow Levi-Strauss and treat language in this way. By making food a code, social relations would be more adequately explained. In spite of these nuances, Douglas remains true to structuralist thought, since she still treats food categories as an essentially static code containing meaning. She overlooks the change in meaning and the categories themselves over time.

Scholars such as Stephen Mennell have taken issue with precisely this idea of a monolithic, static structure. Mennell argues that the notion of an unchanging structure cannot fully explain the continuous flow of events.¹⁵ He sees food preferences, as other cultural patterns, as historical realities. Even in tribal societies, human diets evolve. According to Mennell, any understanding of this changing pattern in taste requires an

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal." in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997) pp.36-54. first pub.1972.

¹⁵ Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford,UK, New York,USA :Basil Blackwell, 1985).

historical analysis. He is emphatic in emphasizing the distinct historical processes that shape different cultures. He refuses, for example, to equate national cuisines with fixed cultures. Through a discussion of the French and the English cuisines, Mennell attempts to demonstrate that no single factor determines the similarities and differences between them.¹⁶

Applying Norbert Elias's "figurational" or "sociogenetic" approach to the history of cooking and eating in England and France, Mennell introduces the concept of hierarchy in cuisine. Within a developing social formation, modes of individual behavior, cultural tastes, intellectual ideas, social stratification, political power, and economic organization are closely related to each other in complex ways that change over time in ways that Mennell seeks to explore.¹⁷ Mennell's chief disagreement with the structuralist school of thought lies in the latter's use of structure to emphasize the homogeneity of the groups they study. Mennell argues that these uniformities are exaggerated and that it is necessary to look at the evolving conflicts and competitions among social groups to understand the development of cuisine.¹⁸

Mennell traces the evolution of culinary practices from the Middle Ages to modern times in Europe, a period that witness the transformation of a common eating culture to that of national cuisines. Mennell indicates that upper class tables in Italy, France, and England were furnished with dishes prepared by methods and by recipes that were common property across the continent.¹⁹ According to Mennell the crucial transition from the medieval to the modern times, occurred with the invention of the printed book,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp.15-16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp.50-51.

which had an enormous effect on the world of cookery.²⁰ Mennell's allusion to increasing social differentiation as a result of print is significant in this context. Through the medium of cookbooks, which were among the earliest of printed texts, food became a mode of expressing social differentiation. The impact of printing also produced increased social stratification. Printing amplified literate and urban culture, gradually obliterating the traditional cultures of the less educated classes.²¹ Although printing gave rise to more marked national differences in cuisine, Mennell refuses to offer any single factor as responsible for the making of national cuisines. It was the social and economic conditions in each country that determined the evolution of individual cuisines.²²

The development of a distinct haute cuisine, Mennell attributes to the French Revolution and the proliferation of French restaurants at that time.²³ Chefs who earlier cooked in courtly kitchens now became associated with these restaurants. This haute cuisine, as Mennell indicates, widened the gap between professional and domestic cooking and, consequently, the gap between male and female cooks. In England, the domestication of cooking was evident in the 18th century. As a result, French cuisine captured commanding social heights in England in the 19th century, and haute cuisine, defined over time by national differences, became the marker of class differences in English society. The distinction between professional and domestic cooking also resulted in gender divisions, since domestic cookery was seen in both countries as primarily the preserve of females.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid, pp.62-65.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.pp. 102-127.

²³ Ibid, pp.134-135.

²⁴ Ibid.p.200.

Mennel's has thus formulated a more nuanced definition of the creation of particular cuisines. He has enriched our understanding by showing that multiple factors, including those of class, gender, information technology, and national imperatives have shaped taste. Drawing on Mennel, I explore the manner in which a particular historical context has shaped the development of a cuisine. The idea of a "Bengali" cuisine was nurtured by the specific social and cultural conditions of colonial Bengal. The writings of Bengali middle-class Hindus are particularly replete with this new rhetoric of taste. From such discourse, a new cuisine, one with strong implications for class, caste and gender, was born.

Imperialism and National Cuisines

I intend to go beyond Mennel's arguments on the formation of particular cuisines, by highlighting the constituent role of imperialism in the making of national cuisines. This role, I argue, challenges the aura of authenticity that often still haunts the discussions of particular national cuisines. I draw on works of scholars such as Alfred Crosby, Sidney Mintz, and James Walvin in order to highlight imperialism's influence in the development of national cuisines. In the early 1970s, Alfred Crosby proposed that imperialism shaped the world by bolstering the exchange of commodities.²⁵ In Crosby's opinion, Europeans enhanced their own ability to live in the Americas by distributing Indian plants and seeds to areas where they had not been known in pre-Columbian times. It was chiefly in order to enhance the growth of European settlements that the colonial settlers imported European plants, such as cauliflowers, cabbages, radishes, lettuce, and

²⁵ Alfred W. Crosby. *The Columbian Exchange; Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972).

European melons to the New World.²⁶ It was, however, the food produced by the Native Americans, Crosby argues, which changed the diet of the world. The Native Americans grew maize, beans, peanuts, Andes potato, sweet potato, manioc, and squashes, all of which could be grown almost anywhere.²⁷ For instance, beans, tomatoes, sweet potatoes and cacao have played important roles in the agriculture in Africa.²⁸ The population explosion of India and China can be partly linked to adoption of American foods in those countries.²⁹ Overall Crosby demonstrates that most of the cuisines in the old world are a consequence of “Columbian exchange.” The hybridity and richness of Bengali cuisine can also be attributed to the same source.

Crosby fails, however, to talk about the drive for profit and the ruthlessness of colonial rule in the period when the food of the New World was introduced into the Old.³⁰ Scholars such as Sidney Mintz and James Walvin have challenged Crosby’s work, by demonstrating that the profit making motive and the exercise of the might underpin the so-called “Columbian exchange.” In his classic work on sugar, Mintz argues that this commodity became enmeshed in the whirlwind of imperialism.³¹ According to Mintz, the history of sugar use in Britain progressed from the popularization of sweetened tea and treacle among privileged consumers in about the 1750s to the beginning of mass consumption of this product after 1850.³² A new culture of tea emerged in Britain in the course of this development.

²⁶ Ibid. pp.68-70.

²⁷ Ibid. p.170.

²⁸ Ibid. pp.186-187.

²⁹ Ibid. pp.191-201.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc, 1985), *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

³² Mintz. *Sweetness and Power*.pp.147-148.

Tea, when sweetened with sugar, became an extremely popular beverage in the English working-class. A decline in the intake of calories by workers beginning in the eighteenth century and the climate of England encouraged the use of tea.³³ Over time, tea sweetened by sugar, came to define English society at all levels. However, Mintz's primary contribution lies in his allusion to the role of force and power in generating meanings. Mintz maintains that it is essential to look at the class structure of a society in order to understand birth and circulation of cultural meanings. These meanings are stimulated and manipulated by the ruling class, who profit from them.³⁴ Mintz has enriched our understanding by showing that the availability and price of sugar were the direct consequences of imperial policies partly shaped by market conditions. The working class took up sugar as the laboring day was changing with rapid industrialization. For Mintz, the ideas of meaning and power touch in this historical context. Sugar was turned into one of the people's opiates.³⁵

This mass commodification of sugar required a huge colonial labor force. Thus, the enslaved Africans who produced raw sugar, and the English working class who consumed its refined form, kept the imperial system working. Mintz writes:

The profound changes in dietary and consumption patterns in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century Europe was not random or fortuitous, but the direct consequences of the same momentum that created a world economy, shaping the asymmetrical relationships between the metropolitan centers, and their colonies and satellites, and the tremendous productive and distributive apparatuses, both technical and human, of modern capitalism.³⁶

³³ Ibid. p.110.

³⁴ Ibid. pp.152-153.

³⁵ Ibid.p.174.

³⁶ Ibid. p.158.

Drawing on Mintz, James Walvin develops the narrative of foodstuff as commodities within the imperial system.³⁷ According to Walvin, it was colonialism that transformed some local and hitherto insignificant crops into instruments of profit, public taste, and global exploitation.³⁸ In fact, British material well-being developed as a function of global trade and imperial settlement. This transfer of crops, Walvin argues, was not a smooth exchange, but a violent one. Further, he suggests imperial economic and military power compelled people in the colonies to adopt imported foodstuffs, on which the British export depended.³⁹

Mintz' and Walvin's argument on the ruthlessness and forcefulness of imperialism is sound. However, I would like to alter it somewhat by suggesting that by investing so much power in the imperial forces, these scholars leave absolutely no agency for the colonized subject. Even under the aegis of colonialism, it was possible for the subject population to resist the colonial system. In this context scholars, such as Nupur Chaudhuri, Jennifer Brennan, Susan Zlotnick, Pia Chatterjee, and Lizzy Collingham have enriched our understanding, by showing the actions of people who made a hybrid cuisine possible. These scholars focus on the hybridity of Anglo-British cuisine that emerged as a result of imperial expansion. Chaudhuri, Zlotnick and Chatterjee maintain that "foreign" products like curry and tea were domesticated in Britain.⁴⁰ Nupur Chaudhuri shows that with an increase in the travel of British women to India, tastes for Indian dishes became

³⁷ James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nupur Chaudhuri. "Shawls, Jewelry, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain." in Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel eds. *Western Women and Imperialism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) pp.231-246, Susan Zlotnick. "Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. vol.16, no.2/3, *Gender, Nation, and Nationalisms*, (1996):.51-68, Piya Chatterjee. *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

widespread amongst all social classes in British society.⁴¹ Thus, in Chaudhuri's view, British women served as agents for many middle and upper-middle class families in Britain to acquire the taste of Indian material culture.⁴² Zlotnick takes Chaudhuri's argument a little further by arguing that British women incorporated curry into their national diet, domesticating it as British food and erasing any "foreign" stigma from it. Denying the Indian origins for curry permitted its naturalization.⁴³ In domestic manuals and cookbooks the origins of curry are traced to the reign of Richard II. This conversion of the exotic or foreign into familial, Zlotnick argues, was made possible through the association of curry with women's domain of home and kitchen. Curry was in fact naturalized to the extent that the British could give it back to India as the gift of a "civilizer."⁴⁴ Piya Chatterjee makes a similar argument with relation to the importation of tea into Britain. According to Chatterjee, tea was an exotic product that was domesticated and made quintessentially "English."⁴⁵ The acceptance of tea into the daily life of the British depended upon imperial expansion.⁴⁶ While Zlotnick concentrates on the appropriation of the other to make the self, Chatterjee pays more attention to the civilization of the other by bringing him or her into the folds of reason.

Brennan and Collingham focus on the making of the Anglo-Indian identity in India.⁴⁷ Collingham argues that an "authentic" Indian food has never existed, either in ancient India or in contemporary Britain. In fact, Anglo-Indian cookery represented the

⁴¹ Chaudhuri. "Shawls, Jewelry, Curry." p.240.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Zlotnick. "Domesticating Imperialism."

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Chatterjee. *A Time for Tea*. p.21.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.49

⁴⁷ Jennifer Brennan. *Curries and Bugles: A Memoir and a Cookbook of the British Raj* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1990), Lizzie Collingham. *Curry: A Biography*. (London: Chatto and Winders, 2005).

first pan-Indian cuisine in the sense that the British adopted recipes, ingredients, techniques, and garnishes from all over the subcontinent and combined them in a coherent repertoire of dishes.⁴⁸ She argues that even after the seizure of India by the British crown, the attempts by the British colonizers to retain their identity by consuming English food was bound to fail; since English women often did not know how to cook, the hybridity of cuisine was unavoidable. Moreover, Indian kitchens were not prepared for British cooking. As a result they often had to depend on the *Bawarchis* (Indian Muslim cooks) who incorporated their own knowledge of cooking while conjuring English food.⁴⁹ Jennifer Brennan in her reminiscences of her childhood in colonial India also mentions that Indian cooks and their British mistresses together created a cross-cultural cuisine in Anglo-Indian homes in India.⁵⁰

While Chaudhuri, Zlotnick, Brennan, and Collingham allude to often ignored agents of imperialism who made hybrid cuisine possible, their arguments do not touch on resistance. Since they discuss Anglo-British culinary developments, their works do not relate the process by which the colonized made a “foreign” cuisine their own. In this dissertation, I argue that the so-called authentic Bengali cuisine that emerged in Bengal indigenized new pleasures of capitalist modernity. In this making of the “Bengali” cuisine, colonized subjects were themselves the actors. The construction of a Bengali cuisine through the daily rituals and practices surrounding food in colonial India reveals a process of indigenizing modernity, whereby the colonial was critiqued at the same time as a colonially-produced middle class succumbed to the pleasures of the modern.

⁴⁸ Collingham. *Curry*. p.119.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pp.162-163.

⁵⁰ Brennan. *Curries and Bugles*. p.15.

Colonial Modernity

My analysis of a new Bengali cuisine is formed from an encounter with the rich historiography on colonial modernity. While global anti-colonial struggles from the 1940s point out the Janus faced view of modernity, Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism* (1978) provides an academic perspective. Said contends that Europe had dominated Asia politically for such a long time that even seemingly objective Western texts hold, almost unknowingly, a prejudice against the East. His contention is that not merely has the West politically conquered the East, but also that Western scholars have appropriated the exploration and interpretation of the Orient's languages, history, and culture for themselves. As a result, Europe has become the norm from which the "exotic" Orient deviates. Said concludes that Western writings about the Orient depict it as an irrational, weak, feminized "Other," contrasted to the rational, strong, masculine West, a contrast that derives from the need to create "difference" between the West and the East.⁵¹ Nowhere, perhaps, is this creation of a "difference" between the West and the East more manifest than in the identification of the West with modern and the East with tradition.

Said's work has had an immense influence on several scholars who have provided alternative ways of understanding the history of modernity in the age of European imperialism. These scholars maintain that modernity cannot be explained without colonialism. In many ways, the colony has often served as a site that molded the learning experience of the metropole. Colonial capital made the narrative of modernity possible. As early as in the 1940s, Eric Williams alluded to the decisive role that colonialism played in the making of Western capitalism. "The West Indian islands became the hub of

⁵¹ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

the British Empire, of immense importance to the grandeur and prosperity of England.”⁵²

Williams categorically states that the slaves produced sugar, cotton, indigo, molasses and other tropical products, the processing of which created new industries in England. The profits obtained from the colonial trade provided one of the main streams of capital accumulation in England that financed the Industrial Revolution.⁵³

The post-Saidian historiography has gone beyond demonstrating the economic underpinnings of European modernity in colonial conditions; it has demonstrated that capitalist modernity owes its origins to colonialism.⁵⁴ The historiography on colonial modernity, however, has not succumbed to an economic reductionism; cultural, social, and political aspects too have been an integral part of the study of colonial modernity. While most of the later works on colonial modernity remain indebted to Said, they have also criticized his work.

One of the critiques of Said is that he ignores the self-representations and resistance of the colonized and focuses on the imposition of colonial power. Scholars of colonial India, most notably Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, address the creativity of indigenous responses to colonial modernity in India. In his noted work on nationalism, Chatterjee challenges Benedict Anderson’s contention that anti-colonial nationalists in India imagined their new nations in political terms borrowed from the West. On the contrary, they produced their own cultural domain within colonial society

⁵² Eric Williams. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Introduction by D.W. Brogan (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964) p.52. first published in 1944.

⁵³ Ibid. William’s thesis has been critiqued by several scholars for its controversial take on slavery. However, Barbara Solow and Stanley Engerman have argued in a compilation of essays on Williams that scholars may disagree on the details of Williams’ argument but the general outline of his thesis still remains persuasive. Barbara L .Solow, Stanley L. Engerman. *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁵⁴ Timothy Mitchell. “Introduction”. in Mitchell (ed.) *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

well before they began their political battle with the imperial power. This domain was the “spiritual” sphere represented by religion, caste, women, and the family.⁵⁵ Chatterjee explains in detail his formulation of the cultural domains of the “material” and the “spiritual,” which differ from the “public” and the “private.” According to Chatterjee, the political domain in colonial society was under alien control and the colonized excluded from its decisive zones by a rule of colonial difference. In Europe, even as the distinction was drawn between the spheres of the private and the public, of “man” and “bourgeois,” and later of “man” and “citizen,” the two spheres were nevertheless united within a single political domain and made entirely consistent with its universalist discourse. The colonized, however, could not allow the intimate domain of the family to become amenable to the discursive regulations of the political domain (the outside world of statecraft, science and technology), which inevitably meant a surrender of autonomy. Herein lay the difference of an Indian modernity from the Western one. The nationalists constituted a new sphere in a domain marked by cultural difference. Thus the Bengali Hindu middle-class constructed two separate spheres: the spiritual or the inner and the material or the outer. The latter was the ground surrendered to colonial power, the former was where the nationalists began to fashion their own hegemony. Matters like family and religion became issues to be debated in the spiritual sphere, which was completely distinct from the material, and which was much more significant for the middle-class.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Partha Chatterjee. *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's arguments are in the same vein as Chatterjee's. According to Chakrabarty, European history has shaped the concepts of the modern world.⁵⁷ Any other history is always read in terms of European history, assimilable only as local histories, thus in the process losing their autonomy. Ideas related to bourgeois domesticity, privacy, and individuality, according to Chakrabarty, came to India via British rule. These ideas, which created modern educated Indians, came from European modernity. However, this modernity came to be questioned by the Indians who tweaked two fundamental tenets of European modernity. These two tenets, in Chakrabarty's opinion, were the nuclear family based on companionate marriage and the secular and historical construction of time.⁵⁸

Chakrabarty goes on to explain how exactly the "Indian modern" was different from the "European modern." The received ideas of modernity were modified first by counter posing the cultural norm of the patriarchal extended family to the bourgeois patriarchal ideals of companionate marriage. A new patriarchy was constructed with a redefined version of the old one. Secondly, European modernity was modified by mobilizing on behalf of the extended family, forms and figurations of collective memory that challenged the separation of the "sacred" and the "secular" time on which the modern (read European) idea of history was based.⁵⁹ To prove his point, Chakrabarty chooses the symbol of "*grihalakshmi*" (a good housewife who resembles the goddess *Lakshmi*) and of the peasantry. A truly modern Bengali housewife was supposed to inculcate European education and ideas of bourgeois domesticity, but she would be

⁵⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations*. no.37. Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories, (Winter 1992):1-26.

⁵⁸ Ibid.p.11.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.15.

different in the sense that she would also embody the principles of *grihalakshmi*. *Lakshmi* was the goddess of well-being, traditionally worshipped in Hindu families.⁶⁰ The other similar figure in colonial India, was that of the peasantry or rather the peasants' sense of "mythical" pasts, which challenged the Western notions of a linear time.⁶¹ In Chakrabarty's opinion, the strength of Indian modernity lay in its being "different" from the European modernity.⁶²

Lata Mani goes beyond the binaries of the "Indian Modern" and the "European Modern" or a singular debate on tradition or modernity to look at how both tradition and modernity can be constructed simultaneously. Looking at the debate on widow burning or sati that raged in Bengal from 1780 to 1833, Lata Mani demonstrates that this debate took place between competing versions of modernity.⁶³ Both tradition and modernity were produced at this historical juncture where tradition itself was being seen as a "modern" category. The colonized became an active participant in this debate along with the colonizer, as it was felt that a construction of a "tradition" would be the best strategic mode to counteract the colonizer. Tradition could either be used to show how the pre-colonial past was devoid of any such practices or to valorize this practice.⁶⁴ In other words, "tradition" itself was a colonial construct.

Several scholars have argued that a sole focus on any such notion of "difference" can only reconstitute once again the construction of a Western "self." Drawing on Mani's work, Mrinalini Sinha argues that one needs to focus on historical and materialist

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp.18-19.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

discussion of an event such as sati to get away from its colonial understanding.⁶⁵ Sinha introduces us to the concept of “imperial social formation” by which she implies that the British modernity or tradition as well as the Indian modernity or tradition are products of and shaped by their place within a shared imperial space: a space that artificially relegates “tradition” or “culture” to India and “modernity” to Britain.⁶⁶

These strands within the feminist historiography of colonial India, together with what has been called a “new imperial history,” clarifies that discussions of colonial modernity need to go further than merely re-inscribing the colonial legacy of “difference” between tradition and modernity or India and Europe.⁶⁷ Historians writing in this vein such as Ann Stoler maintain that binaries like the “colonizer” and the “colonized” are not fixed. They argue that this “difference” is not stable and has to be constantly defined and maintained.⁶⁸ According to these scholars, both colonizing and colonized elites are produced through imperial interconnection. Europe is made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters are shaped by conflicts within Europe itself.⁶⁹

My work on food shows that the twin pillars of modernity, reason and progress, are mere promises. They are never realized. In fact, colonialism demonstrates how reason which is supposed to contain a promise of universality is never actuated in the colony. I

⁶⁵ Mrinalini Sinha “How History Matters: Complicating the Categories of ‘Western’ and ‘Non-Western’ Feminisms.” in *Is Academic Feminism Dead? : Theory in practice, The Social Justice Group at The Center for Advanced Feminist Studies*, University of Minnesota ed.(New York: New York University Press,2000)pp.168-186.

⁶⁶ Mrinalini Sinha. *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ Mrinalini Sinha. “Britain and the Empire: Toward a New Agenda for Imperial History.” *Radical History Review*. 72:1, (1998):163-174.

⁶⁸ Anne Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper. “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda.” in Frederick Cooper & Ann Laura Stoler eds. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997) pp.1-56.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

argue that even the colonizer is produced by the colonial conditions. The colonized responds by indigenizing modernity, which is already fractured and hybrid. Through my focus on the introduction of new foods in colonial Bengal, I will try to show how it was internalized in the cuisine of Bengal itself. Bengal served as a laboratory where “rational” experiments of the colonial state were carried out. These experiments, which often resulted in failures, makes the loopholes in colonial knowledge-system apparent. Both the British and the Bengali middle-class produced their own ideas of modernity from the colonial experience. While the Bengali middle-class indigenized modernity by adapting and resisting new cultures around food, the British who lived in India also shaped their world through their interaction with what they grew and what they ate in the colony.

My work on the formation of a new Bengali cuisine in colonial India is framed within this larger discussion of colonial modernity whose challenge to Eurocentrism does not consist in positing authentic Indian alternatives, but in demonstrating the constitutive role of imperialism in both British and Bengali cuisine. In fact, there is hardly anything that might be called an “authentic” British cuisine. Majority of the British cookbooks written for the British residents in India included recipes from all over Europe. And Indian *soojee* could easily be used in place of semolina. Raymond Sokolov has demonstrated that culinary traditions in almost all countries are results of radical change, of additions of exotic ingredients, and importations of ideas from all over the world.⁷⁰ Thus Mexican food bears little resemblance to the almost meatless food of the Aztecs.⁷¹ However, according to Sokolov, one need not think that colonies were the only places to change their food habits because of colonization. Sokolov argues that what one knows as

⁷⁰ Raymond Sokolov. *Why We Eat What We Eat: How the Encounter Between the New World and the Old Changed the Way Everyone on the Planet Eats* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

⁷¹ Ibid, pp.11-12.

French cuisine was not recognizable as distinctly French before the time of the Napoleonic period. It is only after Georges Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935), the famous French restaurateur and culinary writer, codified haute cuisine that the modern French cuisine became apparent.⁷² I argue that as a result of constant interactions of different cuisines, a hybrid cuisine was produced in colonial Bengal that emanated partly from a sense of pleasure in capitalist modernity. However, this pleasure was limited only to the elites in the colony. The majority of the population could hardly partake of this pleasure that became even more apparent with outbreaks of famines.

Situating Bengali Cuisine

The history of the colonial middle-class in Bengal needs to be mapped out in order to foreground the history of “Bengali” cuisine. One might ask the question why am I calling this cuisine a “Bengali” cuisine? Was there not a “Bengali” cuisine in ancient or medieval Bengal? In his *Bangalir Itihas (History of the Bengali people)* Niharranjan Ray has described the social structure of ancient Bengal as the history of the Bengali people.⁷³ His book draws our attention to the social and the material history of the Bengali people in ancient Bengal. However, people in ancient Bengal did not conceptualize themselves as part of a “Bengali” nation. This idea was associated with colonial conditions. The Bengali Hindu middle-class, who constituted their own ideas of identity, taste and aesthetics through new forms of social institutions, constructed this idea of the “Bengali” nation.

The material culture of the colonial Bengali middle-class defined their habitus. Refinement in food, education, music, literature, and deportment defined this middle-

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Niharranjan Ray. *Bangalir Itihas*. p.10.

class. These quotidian practices also embodied the essence of “Bengaliness” for this middle-class. The rhetoric of cuisine is one of the fulcrums on which this idea of a regional nationalism rests. The colonial Bengali middle-class did not try to find a place in the larger geography of the nation through this rhetoric of cuisine. In fact, the “Bengali” cuisine which was the outcome of this new rhetoric had very specific contours. It assimilated different elements, but it never claimed itself to be national. The middle-class discourse on taste construed this cuisine as essentially “Bengali.” The colonial Bengali middle-class took pleasure in the fact that this cuisine was not commodified.

My thesis focuses on both material and discursive histories in colonial Bengal following the revolt of 1857 and the transfer of power from the East India Company to the crown. Assumption of power by the British crown carried along a systematic imperial intervention in political and socio-economic structure of the colony. On the one hand, the British state feigned a distance from its subjects. On the other hand, there was a much more rigorous imperial intervention instituted through bureaucratic modes of power. It was in dialogue and resistance to this new imperial intervention that the colonial middle-class formulated a new discourse of politics. The particular socio-economic context of colonial Bengal and the peculiar position of the Bengali middle class within it produced this discourse.

Mrinalini Sinha argues that the politically self-conscious Indians occupied a unique position, representing a distorted masculinity in colonial ordering of masculinity in India. This group of Indians, represented by the middle-class Hindus came to be known as the “effeminate *babus*.” This designation was tied up with political, economic, and administrative imperatives of colonial rule in the late 19th century. Thus, while

effeminacy denoted all inhabitants of Bengal in the past, by the second half of the 19th century, only the Bengali middle class was described as “effeminate.”⁷⁴ The Muslims (vast majority of who belonged to the laboring classes and were underrepresented in the Western educated community), the lower classes, and some of the lower castes were absolved from the charge of effeminacy. Effeminacy was applied to the middle-class Bengali Hindus, a majority among the Western educated community, whose expectations from colonial education remained unfulfilled.⁷⁵ The revolt of 1857 had veered the colonial state away from the Western educated elites to the traditional ruling elites, since the revolt was seen as a warning against the radical restructuring of “traditional Indian society.”⁷⁶

According to Sinha, indigenous elite’s self-perception of effeminacy arose partly from their economic decline in the second half of the 19th century. Unable to control the economy, the professional class defined itself as against the traditional Indian elites as well as the vast majority of the population.⁷⁷ However, indigenous elites, as Sinha argues, accepted the label given by the colonial state but tweaked it to their own advantage. The middle-class Bengali Hindus held the colonial state responsible for “emasculating” the Bengalis. Sinha maintains that the middle class identified their own emasculation with national emasculation.⁷⁸ This strategy served to mark their own hegemony over other social groups. Thus, the new rhetoric of taste that was created and the new cuisine that emerged therein bore the mark of a middle class Hindu Bengali cuisine, which appropriated other cuisines in its fold. The material conditions that disconnected the

⁷⁴ Mrinalini Sinha. *Colonial Masculinity*.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.16.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p.4.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

middle-class from its subordinate classes have been described by both Rajat Kanta Ray and Partha Chatterjee in their works. Unless one understands the material conditions under which the colonial Bengali middle-class was produced, it is not possible to know how the cuisine that was produced and still survives is a middle-class construction.

In eastern India, racially discriminating administrative policies encouraged an exclusively European dominated economy of Calcutta and its hinterlands at least till the outbreak of the First World War. The result was a check to the growth of Indian enterprise. There was however no dearth of professional and service groups whose numbers continued to rise thanks to the needs of British commerce and British administration.⁷⁹ Rajat Kanta Ray has described this process of the decline of Bengali entrepreneurship and the rise of the professional Bengali elites as a two tiered formation of the middle-class.⁸⁰ The first stage in the formation of social groups in Calcutta contained the making of compradors attached to the officers of the East India Company, or private British traders. There were a few entrepreneurs who emerged from their ranks and made huge fortunes by speculative and commercial activities in the first half of the 19th century. However, as the industrial capitalism of Britain made further inroads into the economy of Bengal, the European business houses, which acquired local expertise themselves, no longer needed Bengali partnership. Bengalis were not taken as partners in the new export-oriented manufacturing enterprises which developed in the second half of the 19th century. This led to a collapse of the Bengali industrial enterprise and an increasing dependence of these families on income from land. Growing dependence on land, and adoption of the life style of the older landlords of Bengal, turned the new rich

⁷⁹ Rajat Kanta Ray. *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

families of Calcutta into landed notables within two or three generations. The second stage in the formation of the middle-class contained making of the intermediate layer who populated the new apparatuses of the colonial government after the rebellion of 1857. They were the products of western education, which in its turn had transformed traditional groups of rent- receiving literati into a set of English educated professional class. However, soon this group of people discovered that despite their qualifications, they would always lag behind in the administrative structure of the colonial state.

The grievances of both these groups constituted middle- class politics in colonial Bengal. According to Ray, British economic interest did not allow an overall development of the economy by Bengali entrepreneurs. Instead, British capital twisted the economy into a colonial mold which impaired the organic connections between the literate and rustic levels of the Bengali society.⁸¹ The urban professional Bengalis had no independent position in the economy, nor did they control the new productive forces that could be invested in their struggle for political power. This lack of a productive role, as Ray argues, failed to connect the middle-class society of Calcutta with the working population of Bengal.⁸²

Partha Chatterjee also argues that higher education in the English language, solely as a means of entry into a profession, remained confined to Bengali middle-class men. Their concentration in urban professions created the enormous distance of this group from the sphere of social production.⁸³ The distortion of the economy of Bengal, or what Ray describes as the creation of the dual mold, shaped the cultural refashioning of the

⁸¹ Ibid.p.11.

⁸² Ibid.pp.29-35.

⁸³ Partha Chatterjee. *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question. Vol.1* (Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi & Company, 1984).

middle class. Thus their critique of colonial rule took a strange form which appropriated the colonial state's critique of them as their vantage point.

Scholars like Ray and Chatterjee have made us aware that the socio-economic background of the colonial Bengali middle-class was responsible for its distance from other social groups. The number of Muslims amongst the Bengali middle-class was also low compared to the Hindus, perhaps because of their relatively late response to Western education.⁸⁴ There was also a resistance on the part of the Bengali Muslims to join the British created professions. The majority of the *Sharif* (elite) Muslims hated the idea of working in a government office as derogatory to their honor.⁸⁵ Since the new Hindu Bengali middle-class was a product of western education to a large extent, their politics was formed in an urban context where major colonial institutions flourished.

Colonial Calcutta became the habitat of this new Bengali middle-class. Calcutta was expanding from the last years of the 18th century. Much before the take over of India by the crown, Calcutta began to attract European institutions, communities of merchant and indigenous professional classes. It also became a locus for migratory labor.⁸⁶ Vast majority of the population began to settle down in Calcutta from the latter half of the 18th century and the early 19th century, when Calcutta was being transformed from a small European settlement into a prosperous commercial city.⁸⁷ By 1850, Calcutta's population reached the number of 400,000. I focus chiefly on the professional classes from amongst this population. The indigenous middle class who settled down in Calcutta, for a long

⁸⁴ Bidyut Chakrabarty, "Social Classes and Social Consciousness." in Sirajul Islam ed. *History of Bangladesh (1704-1971). vol.3, Social and Cultural History* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992) p.175.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ P.J. Marshall. "General Economic Conditions under the East India Company." in Sirajul Islam ed. *History of Bangladesh (1704-1971). vol.2, Economic History* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992) pp.79-80.

⁸⁷ S.N. Mukherjee. *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977) p.16.

period had ties with the rural areas of Bengal where they had their permanent abode compared to their temporary residence in Calcutta. Even when 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.⁸⁸

Scholars such as S.N. Mukherjee, Pradip Sinha, and John McGuire have argued that the conflation of rural ties with urban habitus formed the politics of colonial Bengali middle-class. Pradip Sinha describes this middle-class as belonging to a society which bore an attachment to a tradition that was born from a compromise with new developments.⁸⁹ Sinha argues that this conflation arose because the educated middle-class community acquired a structure whose rural foundations were strong.⁹⁰ John McGuire in his discussion on middle-class nationalism argues that the indigenous press acted as an agency for two types of nationalism. According to McGuire, on the one hand, the press provided a forum for a nationalism based on idealized pre-capitalist relationships. These relationships required Indians to maintain and revive what were considered traditional interests. On the other hand, it acted as a means for the expression of nationalism based on the Westminster model, in which Indians would eventually hold power.⁹¹ S.N. Mukherjee also endorses the argument of Sinha that the indigenous elites' politics in colonial Bengal consisted of two idioms- "traditional" and "modern."⁹²

⁸⁸ John McGuire. *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadrakalok in Calcutta, 1857-1885* (Canberra: South Asian History Section, Australian National University, 1983) p.10.

⁸⁹ Pradip Sinha. *Nineteenth Century Bengal: Aspects of Social History* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965) pp.91-92.

⁹⁰ Ibid. pp.141-143.

⁹¹ McGuire. *Making*. p.65.

⁹² Sinha. *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1993).

My argument slightly differs from the one afforded by the above scholars. I argue in my dissertation that the Bengali Hindu middle-class used a modern idiom that cannot be described as a combination of the “tradition” and the “modern.” Whatever has been described as traditional elements by Sinha, Mukherjee, and McGuire is actually a product of the contorted socio-economic context produced under colonial rule. Even though the middle-class incorporated substantive elements from the Victorian middle-class it was given a different color to suit their own purpose under colonial rule. Through new mediums of expression, and modern constructions of a blissful “tradition,” Bengali middle-class Hindus constituted a modern “Bengali” cuisine which can be best described as hybrid.

Print-medium enabled the Bengali Hindu middle-class to voice their opinion through various forms of literature, such as journals, memoirs, and autobiographies. While this literature provides evidence of a sense of loss that the middle-class experienced under the oppressive new working conditions in Calcutta, and the images of a so-called idyllic life in the villages, what needs to be remembered is that this blissful “traditional” village life was more of an imagination than real. The modern colonial situation necessitated the construction of a “traditional” pre- colonial village life. However, along with these literatures, print also made available a number of other literatures. These were the cookbooks and the recipe columns published in periodicals as well as domestic manuals. These recipes evince that the new life in colonial Calcutta was bringing in certain forms of pleasure. Undoubtedly, the colonial Bengali middle-class reeled under economic crisis. However in their quotidian life, they created something they could call their own. A serious reservation against the pleasures of capitalist

modernity needs to be juxtaposed with an incorporation and simultaneous indigenization of those pleasures, which resulted in the making of an “authentic Bengali” cuisine.

Chapter Outline

My understanding of cuisine is drawn from Sidney Mintz who argues that cuisine helps us analyze an entire community; it is not just an allusion to culinary culture.⁹³ In addition to this, I argue that cuisine needs to be analyzed in its entirety. I have divided my chapters as stages in the formation of a cuisine, which begin from the production of food as a commodity, goes on to preparation of food, consumption of food, and finally nutrition that emanates from food. The chapters are arranged in a way to show how a new taste emerged in colonial Bengal. This new taste that emerged was constituted through the imagination of a “tradition” that itself was a product of colonial modernity.

In my first chapter, I discuss the agricultural policies of the colonial state in relation to food crops. In this chapter as well as in the subsequent chapters, I have laid out the overall material background of a new discourse on cuisine in colonial Bengal. I also narrate the responses to changes, which took place in several practices associated with food. These responses, often discursive, verged on the construction of a “tradition” in order to draw a picture of a perfect and authentic “Bengali” cuisine. In this process, who ate what, who cooked, or where one ate, became significant questions to ponder. In my view, the Bengali Hindu middle-class’ perception of their own identity is directly linked to the construction of an “authentic Bengali” cuisine. In their self-fashioning, the Bengali middle class also reconstituted older hierarchies of gender, caste, and class anew. In chapter 1, I analyze the colonial perception a “scientific and rational form of agriculture,” which was realized through a cultural perception of the colonized as incompetent. The

⁹³ Sidney Mintz. *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

colonial state's introduction of new food crops and profiteering practices were connected to this cultural perception. The Bengali middle-class Hindus responded to these experiments through either adaptation or by a cultural critique of these policies. I demonstrate in this chapter that there was a similarity between the colonial state's policies and the Bengali middle-class' adaptation of new food crops: both the former and the latter put the blame of the failures in experimentations solely on the shoulder of the peasantry. This scorn for lower classes also forms the crux of my other chapters.

In my second and fourth chapters, I describe specific contexts that defined efforts of the middle-class to distance themselves from others, especially, the lower classes. Sometimes this distancing was done through aestheticizing women's cooking that assimilated gender with class. My discussion of women's cooking vis-à-vis the appointment of male cooks demonstrates how the middle-class cuisine wanted to create a distance from any association with the lower classes. However, I also show the futility of such practices. Although aestheticization situated women in the private sphere, the very association of the male cooks with the same private sphere problematized the notion of the private and the public. The Bengali Hindu middle-class also drew this boundary line with other classes through a language that had a scientific tenor. Emergence of a scientific discipline of nutrition is discussed in the fourth chapter. A concern for the revitalization of Bengali identity turned colonial critiques of the Bengali middle-class into a project of self regeneration through scientific discipline. In this process a scientific discipline became confluent with a cultural discourse on the "body." The middle-class argued that this body needed to be "pure." In this context, "pure" contained two connotations. "Pure" meant something that was not adulterated. Cast in a scientific

language, “pure” also implied that the body necessitated a distance from the lower classes.

Issues of caste and cuisine are directly taken up in my third chapter. Here I argue that the critique of new eateries and new public feasts on the ground of caste- relaxation in reality tends to show how caste taboos were breaking down. In this chapter, I delve into the deeper meanings of authenticity and hybridity. I argue that while some of the Bengali middle-class claimed a particular form of cuisine as “traditional” and therefore authentic, others could at the same time claim the hybrid food of the colonial modern to be equally authentic. However, the meaning of “authenticity” was much more complex. One could bring in the question of authenticity even in the case of new recipes like guava jelly. Several women’s journals actually argued with each other about how “authentic” their recipes were. This discourse on authenticity was not limited to a discourse of the colonized. I demonstrate that the hybridity of the new cuisine put both the Bengali and the British cuisine within the same analytical field. I argue that neither was “authentic” through a survey of British and Bengali cookbooks written in colonial Bengal as well as of wedding menus.

In my conclusion, I argue that this specific historical situation created a new sense of taste amongst the Bengali middle-class Hindus. Their idea of a “tradition,” symbolizing abundance, informed their gastronomic interest for all times to come. They aestheticized this “tradition” and extracted their pleasures from the “modern” that emerged from colonial modernity in order to carve their niche as Bengali gastronomes.

Sources

I have looked at both government and non-governmental documents for this dissertation. Any study of food in colonial Bengal should begin with revenue proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of undivided Bengal. These documents, chiefly stored in the West Bengal State Archives in Kolkata, are useful in understanding the colonial state's interpretation of a "rational" agriculture. These documents along with other official documents on scarcity and famine are also evidences of the staple diet of the general population in colonial Bengal. I have also consulted Municipal Records housed in the Town Hall, Kolkata. Most of these tracts are from the Municipal Gazettes. In addition to such tracts, I have further read several proceedings and reports of the Municipal Department on new restaurants and eateries. These proceedings are significant for understanding new laws of adulteration and consequent appraisals and critiques that these laws brought about.

Among the non-official records, I have utilized the proceedings of the Agri-Horticultural Society of India, in Alipore, Kolkata. These documents also corroborate my thesis about the colonial state's attempts to introduce British fruits and vegetables in the Indian soil and their failures. Advisory tracts on gardening, written by the Bengali Hindu middle-class, also provide evidences of such experiments. Apart from this, I have also looked at other non-governmental documents such as published tracts on agriculture by the colonial state, stored in the West Bengal State Secretariat Library, Kolkata and the National Library in Kolkata in order to understand the agricultural policies of the colonial state.

Autobiographies, memoirs, articles written in the newspapers and Bengali language tracts in journals such as *Shanibaber Chithi* and *Mashik Basumati*, which I have consulted, have been utilized in all the chapters in order to understand how the indigenous elites appropriated and critiqued the new changes that took place in the realm of food. For these documents, as well as the cookbooks and recipe columns published in journals such as *Punya*, *Paricharika*, and *Antahpur*, I have chiefly relied on the archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences and the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in Kolkata. Amongst the documents I have consulted at the CSSS the ones that need to be mentioned specifically are the early 20th century wedding menus and advertisements on new food and beverages, like tea, and information about restaurants. For these sources, I am especially grateful to Professor Gautam Bhadra. These recipes address the larger question of authenticity and hybridity that runs through this dissertation.

This dissertation has been unable to retrieve the voice of those who were neglected in the middle-class discourse on Bengali cuisine. In order to gather information about their diet, I had to depend on colonial and middle-class sources. Occasional voices of dissent by the lower classes could be only partially extracted from these sources.

Chapter 1: Introducing “foreign” food: A narrative of colonial agriculture in Bengal

Introduction

Bengal was the first colonial settlement of the British in India where the British initiated most of the experiments of their rule. It served as a laboratory where the British colonial state was reordering the scene of agrarian production with an express intention to introduce “scientific” and “rational” agriculture in the colony. This reordering of existing structures was based on a cultural stereotyping of the colonized subject as backward and inept at agricultural practices. This definition of rationalization and development, of course, was driven by sheer needs of global capital. However, a crude desire for profit-making was whitewashed by what the colonial state propounded as ideals of improvement in the colony. I also explore responses of the Bengali Hindu middle-class to these so-called attempts at rationalization and improvement of agriculture. The checkered trajectory that these responses followed could be sometimes affective and sometimes a harsh critique of the colonial rule. Despite the myriad nature of the responses, an aestheticization of material practices associated with food was at constant play. However, these aesthetic practices of the middle-class not merely implied a desire to cope with the “new” situation under colonial rule; it also included the drawing of a boundary between them and the peasantry. This same middle-class could also launch a virulent attack on the colonial state when the need arose.

The colonial state introduced new crops and vegetables keeping in mind the ideas of “improvement.” The response of the colonial middle-class to these experiences was double-faceted. While some welcomed these changes in agriculture, others provided a strong critique of the profiteering motives of the colonial political economy. A thoroughgoing analysis of these agricultural practices and their critique is needed in order to understand the discourse of taste articulated in the material culture of food in colonial Bengal.

Adaptation of new food crops, or what is more popularly known as the “Columbian Exchange,” has been a concern for several scholars. Historians such as Alfred Crosby, Sidney Mintz, and recently James Walvin have dealt with this question of “Columbian Exchange.” At the heart of this debate on production, of course, lies a broader question of colonial modernity. Alfred Crosby discusses the exchange of commodities between the “new” and the “old” world. Although Crosby admits that the majority of the population in the Americas was decimated by the colonizers, he mentions it almost as if it was an accident rather than a deliberate process of dominance.¹ Crosby’s work has been qualified by scholars like Sidney Mintz and James Walvin who argue that “Columbian Exchange” can hardly be called an exchange. It was rather an imposition of the “old world” on the “new world.”

Mintz argues that the emergence of British consumption of sugar took place against a backdrop of overseas expansion and colonial conquest.² Sugar, which was earlier a rare and precious imported medicine and spice, became cheaper at this time with

¹ Alfred W. Crosby. *The Columbian Exchange; Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972).

² Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc, 1985), *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

the plantation economy.³ As the sugar cultivation in the plantations of West Indies grew, sugar became a mass product in Britain. Mintz writes:

The profound changes in dietary consumption patterns in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe were not random or fortuitous, but the direct consequences of the same momentum that created a world economy, shaping the asymmetrical relationships between the metropolitan centers, and their colonies and satellites, and the tremendous productive and distributive apparatuses, both technical and human, of modern capitalism.⁴

Drawing on Mintz, James Walvin argues that the British Empire almost forced on its colonies an urge to possess items available only from Europe. These included, for example, French brandy and wines for African consumption, and goods grown and manufactured by the slaves in America for the use of those slaves from Africa on board the slave ships.⁵ Susan Friedberg posits a similar argument in her discussion on French colonialism in Burkina Faso. Friedman argues how the French officials forced villagers to cultivate potatoes and green beans, forbidding the latter to sell their harvests. This forced cultivation was mainly pursued in order to bring the European garden to the colonies.⁶ Friedberg demonstrates that European vegetable gardening became a required subject at all local schools, intended to teach the local peasantry “improved” farming techniques by the 1930s. As a result, a market developed for cultivated garden vegetables in place of gathered varieties.⁷

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mintz. *Sweetness*. p.158.

⁵ James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) pp.174-176.

⁶ Susanne Friedberg. “French Beans for the Masses: A Modern Historical Geography of Food in Burkina Faso.” in James L. Watson & Melissa L. Caldwell eds. *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (Malden, MA, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2005).

⁷ Ibid. pp. 27-30.

While I have dealt with the coercive policies of the colonial state in relation to food crops, I have also documented various responses to these policies. Even when the colonized subjects accepted the new food crops introduced by the colonial state it was not always under the rule of force. They adapted these food crops to their diet and internalized them in their cuisine. I intend to show that both the critique and the adaptation led to the construction of “Bengali” cuisine.

Agricultural Policies of the colonial state

Several scholars have discussed the impact that the colonial state’s agricultural policies had on production in Bengal. These works typically tend to be quantitative histories as they focus largely on decline or growth of a particular commodity based on statistical evidence. Along with that, they are concerned about distributive justice in peasant society. For example, Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri endorses Amit Bhaduri’s argument that in eastern India there was not a sharp dividing line between the production and the consumption patterns of the peasants.⁸ Bhaduri has argued that what a peasant marketed in eastern India was not his “surplus product,” but part of his food stock which was vital for his family’s consumption.⁹ This was true especially in case of Bengal where Chaudhuri argues commercialization of under-tenures was quite a new development under British rule.¹⁰ It meant that the *zamindars*(landlords) leased out, in perpetuity or for short periods, portions of their own estates at a rent to peasants, which was much higher than the revenue *zamindars* paid to the government. The result was peasant indebtedness. This indebtedness necessitated distress sale of the peasant’s food crops. The consequent

⁸ Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri. “Commercialization of Agriculture.” in Sirajul Islam ed. *History of Bangladesh (1704-1971). vol.1 Political History* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992) pp.400-401.

⁹ Amit Bhaduri. “The Evolution of Land Relations in Eastern India under British Rule.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, (Jan-March 1976):49-53.

¹⁰ Chaudhuri. “Commercialization.”

depletion of his food stock obliged him to buy food from the market in those months when there was not enough food for him grown on his fields. Chaudhuri calls it an example of distorted commercialization as it blurred the usual distinction between a subsistence crop and a commercial crop.¹¹ In fact, it is in this context that rice becomes significant as a commodity. Rice increasingly began to play the role of a cash crop from being a subsistence crop.

Chaudhuri explains the process of commercialization by showing the relation between a cash crop like jute and rice, which was both a cash crop and a subsistence crop.¹² The growth of commercial crops such as jute resulted in the reduction of the aggregate acreage of rice cultivation. Under the stimulus of rising prices of jute, peasants cultivated a larger portion than usual of their holdings with jute, relying for the purchase of food on the money derived from the sale of jute.¹³ While this had a definite impact on the production of local rice, a growing urban and industrial population necessitated an expansion of the rice trade. According to an official estimate of 1874, out of the twenty million *maunds* (1 *maund*=82.3pounds=37.4 kilograms) that was imported into Calcutta for the sole purpose of export, seven million *maunds* of rice were consumed by the population in Calcutta.¹⁴ Ashok Sen's arguments are also in the same vein. He, like Chaudhuri, argues that for the vast majority of the peasants, sales were motivated by the compulsions of rent payments and other wants which they could meet only by selling the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Chaudhuri. "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal 1859-1885." in David Ludden ed. *Agricultural Production and South Asian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹³ Ibid.p.153.

¹⁴ Ibid.

staple product.¹⁵ As a result between 1896 and 1906, total food grains output went down by 1.28% per year. Food grains productivity declined to 0.75% per year.¹⁶ However, overt rent burden cannot be blamed solely for the depletion of food grains, especially of rice. So-called improved methods of cultivation introduced by the colonial state failed to enhance the food producing capacity of the land.¹⁷

Partha Chatterjee explains this phenomenon of the commercialization of rice in great detail. This event, which began in the late 19th century, continued into the 1940s. Total exports of paddy and rice from Bengal to other provinces of India and abroad comprised between 4.5% and 7.5% of Bengal's annual production.¹⁸ Rice was gradually playing the role more of a cash crop than of a subsistence food crop. But even then, rise in the price of rice resulting from the exports of rice, was subject to fluctuations in the world market. Saugata Mukherjee, for example, argues that in the 1920s one could see large increase in the exports of rice from all the important rice growing countries of South-East Asia, like Siam, Indo-China as well as from Burma. The import of Burma rice was one of the chief reasons behind a substantial fall in the price of rice after 1930s.¹⁹

While these scholars have enriched our understanding about the commercialization of agriculture, and the consequent economic impact on peasants, what has often been overlooked is the cultural paradigm of colonial production. As they focus mostly on the commercial aspects of food crops and the relationship between subsistence

¹⁵ Asok Sen. "Agrarian Structure and Tenancy Laws in Bengal 1850-1900." in Asok Sen, Partha Chatterjee, Saugata Mukherjee eds. *Perspectives in Social Sciences. Three Studies on the Agrarian Structure in Bengal 1850-1947* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1982) p.61.

¹⁶ Ibid.p.46.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Report of Bengal Paddy and Rice Enquiry Committee* 2 vols. 1940. cited in Partha Chatterjee. "Agrarian Structure in pre-partition Bengal." in Sen, Chatterjee, Mukherjee eds. *Perspectives*.p.185.

¹⁹ Saugata Mukherjee. "Some Aspects of Commercialization of Agriculture in Eastern India 1891-1938." in Sen, Chatterjee, Mukherjee eds. *Perspectives*.pp.256-257.

crops and cash crops, what has often been ignored in their narrative is the relationship between agricultural production and diet. How exactly did commercialization of agriculture in general, and rice in particular, affect the life world of the colonized subject? Scholars are prone to discuss the decline of subsistence crops, like rice, from the economic angle of production. However, the significance of rice emerged from the fact that it was a subsistence crop and subsistence symbolized a pre-colonial pristine “tradition” of self-sustenance.

Rice-experimentations in British Bengal tell us one part of the colonial narrative wherein cultural imagination of the subject population became enmeshed in the whirlpool of colonial capital. For the British, rice experimentations in Bengal had a strategic value; it opened up markets in Europe. These experimentations slowly petered out as the commercial significance of rice dwindled in comparison to cash crops, like jute, and rice began to be exported from South East Asia to feed the population of Bengal. This is corroborated by the *Report of the Bengal paddy & Rice Enquiry Committee* in 1940.

Although paddy is by far the most important food crop grown in Bengal and accounts for the bulk of agricultural production in this province, its economic predominance in its social life is masked by the peculiar position of jute as the cash crop of Bengal.²⁰

This report further stated that dealings in marketable surplus of paddy hardly exerted as much influence on the monetary transactions of the cultivator as those in jute.²¹ The reason behind this is stated to be the declining demand for Indian rice in Europe and the consequent loss of markets. The report prescribed import of high quality seeds. Colonial methods and practices were also offered as solutions for securing a high yield of the

²⁰ *Report of the Bengal Paddy & Rice Enquiry Committee, vol. I* (Bengal, 1940) pp.11-14.

²¹ Ibid.

paddy crop and the defects and drawbacks in the system of paddy in India was blamed for the low yield. These solutions, however, failed to explain why Bengal which produced innumerable varieties of rice, needed to fall back on colonial modes of production to increase its yield. One can get this information from W.W. Hunter. In the twenty-four *pargannahs*, for example, one could find two principal varieties of rice, *aus* or spring rice and *aman* or winter rice. At least thirty varieties of *aus* were produced in this district alone. These were:

1. *Kalia jamira*
2. *Surja Mani*,
3. *Tupua Khali*
4. *Kersai*
5. *Kali payanji*
6. *Hariheba*
7. *Begunbichi*
8. *Sitahar*
9. *Khubui*
10. *Banshphul*
11. *Gangajali*,
12. *Parang*
13. *Beni bachal*
14. *Phepari*
15. *Here Kalia*
16. *Sultan jeta*
17. *Pana jhure*
18. *Ais bere*
19. *Ais Mani*
20. *Ghisal*,
21. *Dulsal*,
22. *Piprasal*,

23. *Karimsal*
24. *Benaphuli*
25. *Kalandi*
26. *Matisal*
27. *Lakshmiparijat*
28. *Bhatna*
29. *Maliagur*
30. *Maslot*.²²

The above list is an indicator of the capability of indigenous cultivators to grow at least thirty varieties of rice from a single type of rice, a fact often ignored by the colonial state. Santoshnath Seth, who wrote an extensive text on rice in Bengal, also provided an elaborate discussion of varieties of rice produced in Bengal.²³

The loss of markets was not a sufficient explanation for the decline in the production of rice. Seth tells us from the report of the Agricultural Department itself that the world produced 12 million tons of rice in 1923. India produced half the quantity of this rice. Burma and Siam (Thailand) produced half of what India produced. However, it was still Burma that supplied rice to Bengal, especially during famines.²⁴ Seth found two reasons behind it. First, India exported one third of what it produced to Europe and America. Secondly, the British and the Marwaris, the trading group from Rajasthan, had started speculating on Burma rice. Seth explained that these groups kept receiving information about the rice from the wholesalers in Burma through telegraph and immediately raised the price and sold it in Calcutta. It was in their interest that Burma rice continued to be imported into Bengal. Thus gradually Bengal was sucked into the

²² W.W. Hunter. *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Districts of the Twenty-four Parganas and Sunderbans*. vol. I (London, 1875) pp.134-143.

²³ Mahajan Shree Santoshnath Seth "Sahitharatna". *Bange Chaltatwa* (Kolkata .1332 B.S.) [c.1925].

²⁴ Ibid. pp.365-366.

cobweb of global capital. Even her export to the world underwent constant fluctuations.

The following table shows enormous fluctuations in the export trade in husked and unhusked rice.

Rice in the Husk (or paddy) & Rice not in the Husk²⁵

	1878-79		1879-80		1880-81		1882-83	
	Cwt.(cwt=50.80 kilograms)	Rs.	Cwt.	Rs.	Cwt.	Rs.	Cwt.	Rs.(\$1=Rs.49)
Paddy								
To Ceylon	9,616	26,475	1,437	2,670	6,527	10,220	10,795	14,920
To Other Countries	263	879	70	226	181	320	726	1,065
Total	9,879	27,354	1,507	2,896	6,708	10,540	11,521	15,935
Rice Husked								
To UK	456,153	25,89,490	705,056	36,08,568	1,311,825	45,08,571	1,406,572	42,50,706
To Cape of Good Hope	96,842	6,79,220	53,763	3,64,642	105,283	5,37,923	68,250	3,05,477
To Mauritius	1,069,230	55,06,828	604,176	30,64,047	742,432	29,27,104	558,812	16,76,204
To Reunion	259,089	13,49,134	186,535	9,71,886	107,128	1,85,332	430,007	13,71,369
To S.	380,281	21,19,694	339,126	16,96,814	378,874	13,25,172	375,077	11,17,264

²⁵ Collector of Sea-Customs, Calcutta. *Introduction to the Annual Accounts of the Sea-Borne Trade And Navigation of the Bengal Presidency and of its Chief Port and each of its Subordinate ports for the Official Year 1882-83*. Bengal Revenue Proceedings, Miscellaneous (Calcutta, 1884) p. xxxi.

America								
To W. Indies	237,240	13,02,127	220,431	11,24,278	216,709	7,76,198	299,584	9,60,447
To Aden	50,585	2,69,332	97,824	4,67,434	244,424	7,87,803	115,276	3,36,455
To Arabia	451,154	23,41,128	547,540	24,25,261	744,307	23,70,517	503,255	14,06,689
To Persia	26,514	1,36,326	56,838	2,45,325	53,607	1,26,377	21,064	57,537
To Ceylon	2,345,364	1,22,68,254	886,327	45,80,748	1,289,735	43,88,822	1,527,414	41,15,444
To China	3,432	22,230	913	5,798	1,298	5,880	51,295	1,76,387
To Java	-----	-----	-----	-----	1,033	2,820	-----	-----
To Maldives	47,534	2,03,258	26,951	1,00,465	62,502	1,69,168	42,015	1,17,083
To Straits Settlements	46,017	2,55,138	23,025	1,18,247	130,642	3,73,941	126,234	3,77,045
To Australia	89,144	6,97,274	39,705	2,63,609	83,133	4,79,042	70,036	3,47,855
To Other Countries	142,465	7,88,769	42,873	2,18,648	175,876	6,89,757	1,012,666	25,95,174
Total	5,701,035	3,05,28,202	3,831,083	1,92,55,170	5,948,208	2,09,54,427	6,601,497	1,92,11,136

We can see in this table that the export of paddy increased by 1,642 cwt between 1878 and 1883. However, there was a decline in terms of price almost by Rs.11, 419. We also see constant fluctuations in the quantity of rice exported. While 9,879 cwt rice was exported in 1878-79, it was reduced to 1,507 cwt the next year. In terms of husked rice, 5,701,035 cwt rice was exported in total in the year 1878-79. This quantity increased by 900, 462 cwt by the year 1883. Price of rice also increased from Rs. 1,92,55,170 to Rs. 2,09, 54,427. But then again the price of rice dropped to Rs.1, 92, 11,136, despite an increase in export.

While Chaudhuri, Sen, and Chatterjee have analyzed the fluctuations in the rice market as a result of turbulence in the international market, they do not really deal with the cultural implications of global capital. I intend to read the profiteering practices of the colonial state along with the cultural rhetoric that formed it: the introduction of a so-called rational agriculture in the colony that in reality served as a laboratory for various experiments of the state.¹ Without its colonies, the British Empire's experiments with production would not be possible. It was a learning experience for the British as they came to realize, that their knowledge of climate, topography, and vegetation of their colonies was still incomplete. But, it was also in this context that they formulated their versions of a "rational" agriculture. Carolina rice experimentations in colonial Bengal demonstrate these new findings of the British Empire.

¹ Although other indigenous groups like the Marwaris had a share in these profiteering practices, the discourse of a "rational" agriculture that emerged was formulated by the colonial state for a critique of the population of Bengal.

Carolina rice experimentations in colonial Bengal: “Rational” and “modern?”

Rice was introduced in South Carolina in the 1690s, and by the 1720s it became the region’s dominant export.² Between 1690 and 1720, South Carolina rice became established in the world market because exogenous factors caused serious shortfalls in the supply of basic foodstuffs to Western Europe.³ Carolina rice export to Europe increased over a hundredfold between c.1700s to the 1770s.⁴ Between 1740 and 1760, Carolina rice became a major supplier in the European rice market⁵. Thus Carolina rice was integrated into the Atlantic economy through colonialism.

Peter Cocklanis argues that by the first half of the 19th century, the American Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars impeded the flow of American rice to Europe. At around the same time, regional harvest failures as well as industrialization, urbanization, commercialization, and population growth resulted in an increase in European demand for foodstuffs and industrial crops, including rice.⁶ South Carolina no longer remained the principal supplier for the Western markets, because it faced intense competition from Bengal, Java, Lower Burma, Siam and Indochina.⁷ Cocklanis’ argument is of course more about the decline of the American rice in relation with rice from Bengal. When he talks about rice from Bengal, what he has in mind is the innumerable variety of local rice grown in Bengal, which started occupying the principal Western markets in the first half of the 19th century. However, he does not take into account that the Carolina rice experiments in Bengal began from the 1860s with the intention of importing Carolina rice

² R.C. Nash. “South Carolina and the Atlantic Economy in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” *Economic History Review*. vol.xlv,no.4,(1992):677-702. p.679.

³ *Ibid.*p.687.

⁴ *Ibid.*p.680.

⁵ *Ibid.*p.688.

⁶ Peter A. Cocklanis. “Distant Thunder: The Creation of a World Market in Rice and the Transformations It Wrought.” *The American Historical Review*. vol.98, no.4, (October 1993):1050-1078.

⁷ *Ibid.*

from India to Europe. Import of Carolina rice by the British from India to Europe can also mean the supremacy of the British as colonizers who could bring in “rational” agriculture to its colony. The cultivation of Carolina rice was a symbol of that “rational” agriculture. It was, in fact, colonialism that connected this rice to colonial India as a way of inaugurating a “modern” mode of agriculture.

The success of colonialism lay in the power of the colonial capital that could interweave Carolina rice from Africa to America to India. However, within this grand narrative, there are little histories which fracture the narrative of the grand history of the empire. The colonial state did not implant “rational” and “modern” agriculture in the soils of the colony. It was, in fact, the experience of the colonizer in the colony that helped in a discursive formulation of a “rational” and “modern” agriculture by the imperialists. Judith Carney, for instance, challenges the conventional interpretation of rice history in the Americas that assigns Europeans the role of adapting a crop of Asian origin to New World conditions. According to Carney, it was the transfer of an entire cultural system from Africa to the Americas, as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, that assisted the development of rice culture in the Americas, especially Carolina.⁸ Rice figured crucially among the seeds that accompanied the African slaves to the Americas, and the slaves planted the crop wherever there was a congenial social and environmental condition. In adapting this staple, slaves drew upon a sophisticated knowledge system that informed cultivating and processing methods. Carney argues that contrary to the conventional knowledge, rice cultivation was known in West Africa long before the coming of the

⁸ Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001).

European traders.⁹ This indigenous African expertise mediated the diffusion of rice cultivation to the Americas, and offered a means to negotiate the terms of labor in conditions of slavery.¹⁰ In a way, then, the colonized who were shipped from Africa to South Carolina in order to work as slaves in the rice plantations, made possible the cultivation of Carolina rice that fed Europe.

Carney's work enriches our understanding of colonial modernity. In case of Carolina rice experimentations, we have to keep in mind these narratives that make the story of modernity complex and demonstrate its connections with colonialism. Such a story about Carolina rice in the context of Bengal helps us to reconceptualize modernity. The Director of Agriculture, Bengal, summed up in a note that although Carolina rice was supposed to have originated in Madagascar, the origin of this paddy could be traced to Bengal, from where a cargo ship carrying paddy to America was wrecked in the Indian Ocean. The Director stated that a consignment of a bag full of paddy was saved from the wreck and then carried to Madagascar. Carolina rice had its origins from this bag of paddy.¹¹ In other words, this rice already grew in Bengal. Whether this is a true story or not is questionable. However, this narrative turns the story of the origins of Carolina rice on its head. The entire story of the Carolina rice cultivation in Bengal problematizes colonial notions of a "modern" and "rational" agriculture. Apparently based on notions of "modern technology," "rational" agriculture was more about a supremacist agenda. Thus the British became the carrier of a "rational" agriculture, while the colonized "lagged" behind.

⁹ Ibid, pp.27-36.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Government of Bengal Department of Agriculture and Industries, Report of the Bengal Paddy and Rice Enquiry Committee. vol.II* (Calcutta, 1940) pp.50-54.

In 1866, the Government of India recommended Carolina rice cultivation in Bengal arguing that it was immune from being affected by bad weather. In July 1868, the Agricultural & Horticultural Society printed and forwarded copies of a pamphlet on the experimental cultivation of Carolina paddy in Bengal to the Board of Revenue. This pamphlet was distributed to the District Commissioners. The Cantonment Magistrate of DumDum reported that he had put about two and half seers of each kind of acclimatized and Carolina paddy into seed-beds, and when about a foot high, the young plants were transplanted five or six in a bunch. Although all germinated freely, a small quantity of seeds were carried away by birds. In Hooghly, the Collector attributed failures in experiments to the quality of the seed itself and to the lateness of the season. In Howrah too the seeds were received too late to be cultivated.¹²

On the basis of observation of the above experiments, the Lieutenant Governor stated that the failure of the experiment in several cases was due to “the lateness of the supply of seed.” He along with the Board of Revenue advised that these experiments had to be repeated and requested a fresh stock of seed to be supplied early.¹³ However, even four years after the experiments began, the colonial state failed to make it successful. One can grasp better the causes of the failures in the experimentation from the analyses of the colonial officials themselves in 1874.

Persistent failures in Carolina rice experiments in India necessitated an inquiry by the colonial officials. They communicated with the Commissioner of Agriculture at

¹² From T.B. Lane, Esq., Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, in the General Department *Proceedings of Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department* (No. 1602c, dated Fort William, the 10th April 1869) pp.18-80.

¹³ From H.S. Beadon, esq., Officiating Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department. *Proceedings of Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department*. (No.1664, dated Fort William, 28th April 1869).

Washington, who forwarded samples of rice seed sent from India to two gentlemen, Robert Habershams and James R Sparkman in the southern states of the United States of America.¹⁴ These two men opined that the seeds of Carolina rice sent from India were of inferior quality than the rice produced in the United States. The reason behind its deterioration was deterioration of grain under what they called a “foreign culture.” What they implied by this statement was that even grains of the best quality deteriorated under a change of climate.¹⁵

By 1874, it was clear that the experiments were failures. However, the colonial discourse could not remain confined to explaining failures of the experiments in terms of natural decline. A mere explanation of the failures in terms of the lateness of seed or inclement weather conditions implied that the colonial officials were inadequately informed about the colony, and thus their control of the colony could never be complete. What was required was a discourse of a so-called “rational” agriculture. Scapegoats were found right away. The colonial state blamed the colonized subject because he had neither a theoretical nor a practical knowledge to make such an experiment successful.¹⁶ This attitude summarizes what may be termed the theoretical background of the introduction of Carolina rice in India. Eugene Schrotthy, a British journalist stated succinctly that agriculture as practiced in Europe had always been considered a noble art. Consequently, the improvements effected in Europe in the mode of cultivation had been great, and in

¹⁴ From Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for India, To The Government of India. *Proceedings of Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II-Agriculture*. no. 63(Revenue)(dated India Office, London, 23 December, 1875).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Memorandum by Offg. Collector of 24 Pargunnahs [Colln 6-14; No.346]. Alipore, 16 April 1875. *Proceedings of Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II-Agriculture, Head. No. 2- Produce and Cultivation*. (Calcutta, May 1875).

keeping with the general advance of education and civilization.¹⁷ According to Scrotthy, in eastern countries agriculture did not progress from what it had been two or three thousand years ago. The Carolina rice-plant was essentially the same as that cultivated in India, but European energy subjected it to such a careful cultivation in the rich soil of America, that the result was the production of a grain which excelled in its nutritive and other qualities the best Patna rice.¹⁸ He attributed the failures to the ignorance of Indian officials and recommended American methods of cultivation to make it successful.¹⁹ Scrotthy's statements epitomized the colonial state's perception of the colonized subject. While Scrotthy championed European agriculture on the basis of reason and progress, the twin pillars of enlightenment, his arguments showed that he was not prepared to admit that the colony possessed these two qualities. The colonial state tried to introduce modern agriculture in the colony on the ground that the colony nurtured a backward agriculture. The discourse on the backwardness of the colony served to endorse the idea of a better form of agriculture that was a product of European brilliance.

Arguments on the backward agriculture of the colony, however, could not hide the fact that Carolina paddy could hardly be called the best quality rice. Everywhere seeds contained a huge quantity of husk and rubbish. While in Hooghly the amount was small, in Howrah it amounted to 20% of the seed, in Mymensingh one third of the seed and in Fureedpore, in eastern Bengal, a substantial portion of the seed was mere husk. In all, 25% of the entire quantity consisted of husk and rubbish.²⁰ However, the colonial

¹⁷ Eugene S. Schrotthy, O.C.U.G. *The Principles of Rational Agriculture Applied to India and its Staple Products* (Bombay, 1876) p.3.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp.190-192.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ From R. Knight. Esq. Asst. Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department, To- The Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture & Commerce (No.3540,

government decided not to pay any heed to the reasons behind the failures in Carolina rice experimentations in Bengal. Attention now was fully turned to Madras Presidency. The experiment was not worth a sacrifice altogether because Carolina rice commanded almost three times the price of Patna rice in the European markets. Even the Madras experiments, it seems, did not succeed for very long. Analysts found the reason behind its failure in grain-processing. A certain Robertson observed in his report, “It is possible that the very high price that Carolina rice imported from America commands in England is due chiefly to the very superior way in which it is prepared for the market.”²¹ In Madras, the husk was hardly removed and there was no attempt to remove the dark-colored surface that was found beneath it. This was because grain-processing was performed by means of a pestle and a mortar and a bamboo sieve in Madras instead of the elaborate steam machinery employed in America.²²

It would seem from the above discussion that the Carolina rice experimentation in Bengal, in particular, and in India in general, was largely a failure. This failure provokes several questions. One can never put one’s finger on a single and over arching reason behind the failures in the experimentation. There are so many. These experiments are significant because they lay bare the crux of the colonial state’s agricultural policies. Colonial discourse of a “rational” agriculture was based on cultural stereotyping. The operation of the colonial state within a specific power structure defined what would be a “modern” agriculture in the colony. The crude logic of colonial capital lay behind the so-called philanthropic interests. It was definitely not for feeding the colonized subjects, but

Calcutta 9 December 1874[Colln.6-141]). *Proceedings of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department* (Calcutta, May 1875).

²¹ L. Leotard. *Memorandum Regarding Introduction of Carolina Rice into India* (Calcutta, 1880) p.73.

²² Ibid.

for feeding the metropole that the Carolina rice was introduced in India. India served as a laboratory for colonial experimentations with diet.

Introduction of “new” food: Improvement and aesthetics

Since many of the experiments with “new” food crops often failed, scholars tend to understate their history. However, we need to look beyond these failures. Why did the experiments take place at all? Was it simply for the purpose of profit making? I argue that behind these new experiments with agricultural production there lay a much broader discourse of colonial understanding of agriculture. An urge for “improvement” and “rationalization” accompanied the drive for profit. Since so-called methods of improved cultivation could not increase the food-productivity of land, agricultural policies were couched in a cultural language. Ultimately these experiments did leave a mark on the diet of the population, even if not to a great extent. To understand how exactly a modern cuisine was taking birth, we need to read a materialist history of food crops along with their cultural significance.

The question of a “rational” agriculture and “improvement” was conjoined with the question of aesthetics. How to bring the European gardening system to India? Many of the new food crops introduced in India were a direct result of the “Columbian exchange” and some of them came from Europe itself. These crops were chiefly introduced by the Portuguese traders in the 17th century. They brought in a number of crops with them, amongst which the most extraordinary was the introduction of potato which was a later introduction.²³ Tomato, okra and the ubiquitous chili pepper also came

²³ Irfan Habib. “Mughal India.” in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib eds. *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol.1:c.1200-c.1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p.218.

around this time.²⁴ Amongst the fruits from the new world, most notable example is that of the pineapple. Grown in the beginning in the Portuguese possessions on the western coast, by the end of the 16th century, it became common enough in areas in the eastern parts of India like in Bengal. Papaya and cashew nut were also introduced by the Portuguese in India, but these took time to spread.²⁵ This was in fact true about potatoes, tomatoes, and okra. Although introduced by the 16th century, these vegetables never became a common item of diet until the 19th century when the British colonial state took the initiative to spread them on a much larger scale. The introduction of exotic vegetables by the colonial state had two purposes. One was to bring “new” (modern) food to the subject population as a symbol of progress. The other was to recreate a sense of belonging for the colonizer in the colony.

Colonial experiments in Bengal obviously did not remain confined to rice. Transforming the palette of the colonized was also an agenda of the colonial state. Thus the “emasculated rice-eating” Bengali population needed substitution of alternative food items for rice. Of course, the chief emphasis was laid on the cultivation of wheat in Bengal which was a rare phenomenon so far. But wheat was also accompanied by the desires of the colonial state to bring about radical changes in the food habits of the subject population by bringing in what might be called “foreign” food. Wheat was grown in other parts of India, especially in the northern and western parts of India. However, it was generally not consumed in Bengal. The colonial state argued that wheat would be advantageous in situations of scarcity. No explanation was given why the state would not take more initiative to ensure a steady supply of rice. A cultural cause lay behind this

²⁴ Irfan Habib. *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*. Revised edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.53. first pub. 1963.

²⁵ Ibid.pp.54-55.

economic factor. The British colonial state considered the “rice-eating” Bengalis to be weak and emasculated compared to the wheat-eating population of northern India and consequently encouraged them to consume wheat. Along with wheat, manioc was also suggested as a substitute for rice.

One official broached the option of manioc as an alternative for rice in the year 1874. He argued that it did not make sense to cultivate rice in Bengal since it was dependent on rain.²⁶ In case of drought, rice could not be relied on. He suggested the introduction of manioc or cassava, “the root of which is of same nature as rice, as delicious as the potato and keeps fresh under ground for years, indifferent to great changes of heat or cold.”²⁷ After this the advantages of manioc were explained in greater detail. “It is got easily, seeing it is a large branchy shrub, and numerous knots, or leafy marks on the branches are each a new plant. In cutting the branches to plant, slips are made about three inches long, and include two or three of these knots, and yet each plant will form say twenty to sixty September slips, and therefore as many new plants.” The explanation goes further:

Planting is very simple and may be done in any soil, but a soft or sandy soil suits best, the tuberous root developing easier where there is little bind in the soil. Once surface cleaned with a broad hoe, slight matches, two or three inches deep, to be made a yard or two apart, and cuttings laid in and lightly covered. If the soil is deep or sandy, it may be raised into little heaps or ridges, and the slips are then placed in the same way. Planting can be done during the whole year; but the best time is when the cold season is ending, when leaves have fallen and when it is ripe.

Soon the pretty, fine, partite leaves show above ground, and all the further cultivation needed is to weed or hoe mound it (pulling the earth against the plant) twice or thrice a month when plants will have flowered, and roots will be ready to eat. But they are larger and more mealy when two months old, and keep growing for two years longer. ---

²⁶ Letter From-R.M. Gunning, Esq., To- The Right Hon’ble The Earl of Derry, & c., &c., &c. Palmaras Estaco da Estrada Pedro II, 13 September, 1874. *Proceeding of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II- Agriculture, Head No. 2-Produce and Cultivation*. [File 17-1-2] (Calcutta, March, 1875).

²⁷ Ibid.p.37.

The great object should be to have it spread rapidly over different districts as a good root to be used as potato, but afterwards its other uses may be availed of. The peeled root is grated on a common grater by a hand-wheel, or by one driven by machinery, into a soft pulp, and this, after the water is pressed out, heated in copper pans, is the farina of universal use. From this can be made tapioca and a nice starch known here as “palvilho,” and in England as “Brazilian arrowroot.” Farina is dry and used alone, or with many dishes. The rationale in it necessitates and stimulates saliva, and thus assists digestion. Made into a paste with boiling water, it is used with fish or fried in little cakes. It keeps in bags for a long time without souring, and so can be carried from one district to another in the usual way of commerce.²⁸

This long description served two purposes. First, the colonial language of command could not be just constricted within a disciplinary regime. It was not that easy to simply order an experiment to be done. This difficulty in introducing an experiment often resulted from the reluctance of the cultivators to co-operate with colonial experimentations. The cultivators were often persuaded by the native landlords who explained the benefits of a particular cultivation to them. Hence, advantages of manioc needed such a lengthy explanation. Second, this passage demonstrated the desire to extend the scope of colonial capital. The colonial state’s intent to introduce manioc in Bengal was much inspired by the enormous success of manioc in Brazil. But what is most striking in the passage is the mention of manioc in the form of arrowroot in Britain. Arrowroot, a modern food in the metropole, traveled from Brazil to Britain and had the potential to be introduced in India. However, herein lay a mistake. This mistake was the lapse in colonial knowledge-system that was unable to grasp the entire information about the colony. It was soon figured out that manioc or cassava could not be grown in the soils of Bengal and rice proved to be a much more potent crop at least in Gangetic Bengal.

²⁸ Ibid.

A letter from an official of the Royal Botanical Garden began thus: “--- manioc is not much appreciated in India by natives.”²⁹ It was also stated in the same letter that manioc also relied on a good supply of water like rice.³⁰ Hence, it could not be a good substitute for rice. But, what was more interesting was another letter which stated that manioc was already grown in some parts of India and hence not needed to be imported from Brazil.³¹ A similarity can be found in this context with British experimentation with Cinchona in the Nilgiri Hills in southern India, in Kavita Philip’s work. Kavita Philip demonstrates that the transplantation of cinchona saplings from the Andean mountains to the Nilgiri Hills brought the local knowledge of a subsistence economy into the global arena of free enterprise.³² The cinchona plant was brought from Peru, nurtured in the Kew Garden in Britain, and then planted in the Nilgiri Hills. Although scholars have argued that the British experiments with cinchona could never compete with the Dutch experiments with the same plant, Philip thinks otherwise. According to Philip, cinchona experimentations had a symbolic success because the British made it look like a sign of “progress.” They turned a commodity which was not being used in the jungles of South America to a commodity of great use.³³ In this process, local knowledge of the Native Americans about the medicinal use of cinchona was totally obliterated.³⁴ As already stated, these experiments were part of the colonial discourse on a “modern and improved

²⁹ Letter From- Surgeon G. King, M.B., Sup.dent, Royal Botanical Garden, To- R. Knight, Esq., Asst. Secretary to Government of Bengal. Proceeding No. 146 (Howrah; 4 March, 1875)pp.38-39. *Proceeding of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II- Agriculture, Head No. 2- Produce and Cultivation.* (Calcutta, March, 1875).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Letter From- G. Hamilton, Esq., Under-Secretary of State for India, To- Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. (India Office, London: 11 November, 1874) p.38. *Proceeding of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II- Agriculture, Head No. 2- Produce and Cultivation.* [File.17-1-2] (Calcutta, March 1875).

³² Kavita Philip, *Civilizing Natures: Race, Resources, and Modernity in Colonial South India* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

³³ Ibid, 171-195.

³⁴ Ibid.

rational” agriculture in the colony. They wove two narratives, one of the free market, as Philip argues, and the other was that of replicating the European gardening system in India, for refashioning their own habitat. Manioc experiments tell us a similar narrative whereby a locally grown crop was given a transnational color by the colonial state.

Like manioc, the British colonial state tried to introduce potato on a much larger scale than the Portuguese had done in India. Potato had kept its lower class label in England throughout the 18th and 19th centuries because of its cheapness and ease of preparation.³⁵ As Larry Zuckerman documents, potato, a sturdy vegetable was accepted by the Irish in the 17th century as a safeguard against famine. The English were much responsible for making the Irish accept this food, which was detested in England as a “food of the poor.”³⁶ This attitude motivated the English to bring this experiment to India as well. A constant search for substitutes for rice led the colonial state to concentrate on the cultivation of potatoes and peas.³⁷ Those who already sowed potato were asked to instruct others to sow it too.³⁸ In general, potatoes were grown by the British in the hills from where they came to Calcutta. The colonial state then sent these potatoes to various other districts in Bengal. Soon however, a debate occurred whether potato should be cultivated in the form of a seed or as a crop. Whereas one official, J. Stalkkart argued that it was much easier to send the seed to districts instead of the crop³⁹, G. King,

³⁵ Larry Zuckerman. *The Potato: How the Humble Spud Rescued the Western World*. (Boston & London: Faber & Faber, 1998) p.260.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Letter From- J. Stalkkart, Esq., To- His Excellency Lord Northbrook, Viceroy and Governor-General of India. (Hope Town: 31 October, 1873). *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Scarcity and Relief*. [File 15-1]. (Calcutta, 1873).

³⁸ Ibid.p.647.

³⁹ Ibid.

superintendent of the Botanical Gardens, called the sowing of seeds “nonsense.”⁴⁰ He, in fact, argued that potato was not a very certain crop and a great area of land needed to be covered with the seeds. Hence, instead of sowing the seeds, potatoes needed to be planted out.⁴¹

Similar suggestions were put forward for the introduction of carrots, barley, and peas⁴². However, no one figured out how to make people’s palette accustomed to these new crops. Ultimately, it was found out that crops, like cucumbers and pumpkins, which were already sown in Bengal, proved to be most beneficial in times of scarcity. It was a gross under estimation of what grew in the colony that led the colonial state to introduce new food-crops. These new crops which were not too useful in times of scarcity, however, could not hide the fact that new vegetables and fruits were pouring into the markets of Bengal. The British colonial state in India went on trying to convince the masses to cultivate these new vegetables. Way back in 1831, missionaries in Sreerampore apprised the government of the need to alleviate the lot of the cultivators. In their view, these people had hardly any knowledge of cultivation and they needed to be encouraged to grow new food crops. These missionaries suggested that the government bring in new food crops from abroad to India.⁴³ Alan Octavian Hume, the founder of the Indian National Congress, also argued several years later, that more initiative should have been

⁴⁰ Demi-Official Letter From- G. King, Esq., Sup.dt, Botanical Gardens, To- The Offg. Secretary to the Government of Bengal. (Botanical Gardens: 20 November 1873). *Proceedings of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Scarcity and Relief* [File 15-2]. (Calcutta, 1873).p.649.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Letter From- J. Stalkartt, Esq., To- His Excellency Lord Northbrook, Viceroy and Governor-General of India. (Hope Town: 31 October, 1873). *Proceedings of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Scarcity and Relief* [File 15-1]. (Calcutta, 1873).p.647, Letter From- Col. E.T. Dacton, C.S.I., Commissioner of Chota nagpre, To- Col. E.A. Rowlatt, Dy Commissioner, Maunbhoom. *Proceedings of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department*, Proceeding No. 2487 [File 15-4/5]. (Calcutta, March 1874).

⁴³ *Hindusthaner Khetra o Baganer Krishisamajer Kritakarmer Bibaran Pustak*. Anon. (Sreerampore, 1831) p.10.

taken by the government to improve agricultural production in India.⁴⁴ The definition of improvement remained vague and undefined.

Improvement also brought with it the question of aesthetics. It was not enough to grow radishes, pumpkins, eggplants, arums, and cucumber. They needed to be accompanied by what would look colorful and beautiful, like strawberries and peaches. Hume's view was echoed in an argument by another author in *Calcutta Review* in 1869. It began thus: "Considering the length of time that the English have been masters of India, they can hardly be congratulated on the extent or success of their efforts, either in making themselves acquainted with the vegetable productions of so noble a possession, or in utilizing and adding to them."⁴⁵ He put an emphasis on "rational & scientific" modes of agriculture and gardening as a form of art. He also advised on how to turn agriculture into pure botany. Scientific discourse thus became conflated with cultural stereotyping. Modern agriculture was seen as the marker that made the British colonial state superior to the colonized subject. The author accused the Indian gardener of ignorance of practices such as rotation of crops and change of seeds. The concern of the author, it seems, was more with what the British had to endure on their breakfast-table like "flavour less melons and half-swelled grapes" and "odoriferous mangoes and guavas," than with what could actually improve the diet of the masses. The way fruits were produced was also criticized by the author as unscientific. The area that fruits were grown in was described by him as "deep, damp, four sided spaces," in which emaciated country vegetables were grown in an irregular pattern rather than what the author considered to be a proper space, that is in squares. That the author was more concerned about the diet of the British in

⁴⁴ A.O. Hume. *Agricultural Reform in India*. (London, 1879) pp.20-25.

⁴⁵ Anon. "Indian Economic Botany and Gardening." *The Calcutta Review*. vol. 49(Calcutta, 1869):187-205.

India, and not the masses, can be figured out from his frequent mention of the “*mali*” or the gardener who worked in the garden and not the peasant or the cultivator who worked in the fields.⁴⁶

This desire to recreate a home like situation in the colony made “difference” the crux of colonial discourse- “beautiful” vs. “mundane”. This attitude was also nurtured by the Sreerampore missionaries who otherwise took genuine interest in such matters like printing and publication. Way back in 1822, they encouraged people to grow plums, cherries, apricots, nectarines, strawberries, raspberries and gooseberries in the Bengal Presidency. In return, the cultivators were promised a gold coin or hundred rupees, which was valued highly in those days.⁴⁷ It was decided that individual Britishers would distribute seeds to the gardeners who would then sow them. It was also stated by the missionaries that those who could grow good peas, cauliflowers, potatoes, artichokes, and strawberries would be awarded fifty rupees.⁴⁸ However, even in 1827, members of Agricultural Society were thoroughly dissatisfied with the strawberries produced and no rewards were given.⁴⁹ However, within a year a number of native gardeners succeeded in growing several “exotic” vegetables. Lord Amherst, the Governor-General of India, gave out awards to those men in an award ceremony in Townhall.⁵⁰ The list below includes the names of the gardeners awarded and the crops they grew:

Nabakishore	Khidirpur	6/ bigha	cauliflower
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⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Hindusthaner Khetra* (Sreerampore, 20 March 1822) p.225.

⁴⁸ Ibid. (9 June 1826) p.236.

⁴⁹ Ibid. (16 April, 1827) p.244.

⁵⁰ Ibid. (16 June 1828).

Judhisthir	do	4/ bigha	cauliflower, spinach, and carrot
Tinkari	Muchikhola	4/bigha	turnip, spinach, and peas
Joseph	do	14/bigha	Cauliflower and potato
Gangaram	Sonai	3/ bigha	cauliflower and turnip
Ramchandra	do	do	potato
Kunchil	Muchikhola	2/bigha	potato and cauliflower
Iswar	Madhuli	3/bigha	potato and Chinese potato
Jaynarayan	Kedup	2/bigha	broccoli and cauliflower
Ramchand	Josli	3/bigha	potato
Biswanath	Shyambajar	2/bigha	capsicum
Lakshminarayan	Jaruli	3/bigha	potato and spinach
Ramchand	Nimta	3/bigha	peas and potato
Chidam	Gannia	1/bigha	turnip
Kalachand	Rampur	4/bigha	cauliflower and broccoli

Gour	do	2/bigha	broccoli and cauliflower
Badar	Chandannagar	do	potato
Gopidhar	Akra	1/bigha	French bean
Shree	Muchikhola	4/bigha	turnip and bean
Ramchand	Gobra	3/bigha	peas and potato
Kalu	Alipur	2/bigha	peas and turnip
Kartik	---		carrots and peas
Banamali	Akhra	1/bigha	French bean
Chhidam	Jarulia	3/bigha	carrots
Neelu	Sonai	4/bigha	French bean and spinach
Madan	Bardhitola	3/bigha	potato
Kunchil	Alipur	2/bigha	peas and broccoli
Swarup	Tengra	---	potato

⁵¹ Ibid. pp.265-66.

This lengthy list of gardeners needs to be seen to understand the extent to which the colonial state was interested in introducing new food crops in the colony. The above list shows how these experiments were carried out not just in Calcutta, but in several other places in Gangetic Bengal. These experiments were given a “scientific and rational” basis by the Agri-Horticultural Society of India around the 1860s. The experiments that were carried out by peasants and cultivators themselves began to be institutionalized in a much more systematic manner. The nurseries of the Horticultural Gardens connected the rest of the world with the colony. In July 1859, the Society received a small assortment of seeds from North America and West Indies for experimental cultivation in its nursery garden.⁵² These seeds included the “finest Jamaican Gynep” which was considered to be much tastier than the leechie, upon which it was grafted, Sapodilla, a well-known West Indian fruit, Devereux grapes from Alabama and American wild fruit “Persimmon” amongst others.⁵³ The results of these experiments were mixed. It was reported for instance, in the Horti-Floricultural exhibition held in the Town Hall on the 31st March, 1859, that the asparagus and the artichokes cultivated were not up to the standard required.⁵⁴ The new variety of American long pod beans, on the other hand, grew in large quantities and was of excellent quality. Celery too had fine specimens, although it grew in small quantity.

A similar experiment was also carried out with cocoa. Cocoa was another food through which the colonial power tried to connect the “new world” with India. The tropical climate of Latin America was imagined to be like the tropical climate of India

⁵² Proceedings, Wednesday, 13 July, 1859. *Journal of the Agricultural & Horticultural Society of India*. ed. by The Committee of Papers. Vol.xi; part II (Calcutta, July 1859 - December 1860).

⁵³ Ibid.pp.Lii-Liv.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp.xxx-xxxii.

and “different” from the climate of the metropole. It was described thus: “The cheap common beverage of the people in Central America, called “chocolate,” is obtained from the seed of the cocoa plant, “Theobroma Cacao,” which grows freely in the hottest climate of the country, between the tropics, at an elevation ranging from 50 to 3,000 feet above the sea level, and one kind found even at the higher altitude in favorable situations.”⁵⁵ It was suggested that the cocoa plant be grown in the hilly places in India.⁵⁶ However, the experiment was carried out in the Botanical Gardens, close to Calcutta, which was on the Gangetic plains and could hardly be called a hilly area. Naturally, the plants died.⁵⁷ These recurrent failures of new experiments in the colony were thus indicative of the loopholes in colonial knowledge-system and their mode of “rational” agriculture.

Responses to colonial political economy: Critique and appropriation

The responses to colonial experiments with the new food crops are multilayered. They can neither be described as an unconditional acceptance nor as a total rejection. The Bengali Hindu middle-class adapted these new food-crops in accordance with their own interests. In their reception of new fruits and vegetables they were often unorthodox. But when these experiments directly interfered with their staple diet, they resorted to a cultural critique of the colonial political economy.

The cultural perception of the Bengali middle-class revolved around rice. Paul Greenough rightly observes that in the cultural perception of the Bengali population,

⁵⁵ Proceeding No. 1. Letter From- Capt. BeBourbel, R.E. To-The Under Sec. of State for India. dated the 11th August, 1869. *Proceeding of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, Land Revenue Branch.* (Calcutta, February 1870) pp.1-5.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Proceeding No. 23. Sub. Report from the Supdt. Of the Botanic Gardens re. the failure of the experimental cultivation of cocoa plant. Letter From- Suptd. Botanic Gardens. To- The Secretary of the Government of Bengal. (24 February 1870). *Proceeding of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, Land Revenue Branch* (Calcutta, March 1870).

prosperity refers to the possession of stocks of paddy or paddy-wealth that enables one to feed another person.⁵⁸ Rice formed the staple of a Bengali diet and other food, like vegetables, pulses, or fish, were accompaniments rather than a main dish. Hence any interference with rice meant the disruption of a life-world. Some of course made a critique of the administrative policies of the government for this disruption. However, this often melted into a romanticization of the past, the pre-colonial, and what was imagined as a pure and unadulterated village life, which nursed subsistence agriculture. What this romanticization camouflaged was the murky side of this mythical past as well as the present. This critique also needs to be situated contextually. Objections to cultivate *Tetka* and *Chali* rice are pointers to this argument.

In the year 1875, the British administration in Bengal tried to expand the cultivation of *Tetka* and *Chali* rice in Bengal. This rice was grown only in portions of Midnapore district. However, even here this rice was not much valued on account of its small outturn and costs of cultivation.⁵⁹ The motive behind the introduction of these varieties of rice was the substitution of *Tetka* and *Chali* for *amun* paddy, which grew in hundreds of variety. The colonial government tried to justify their motives by arguing that this substitution would ultimately benefit the cultivators.⁶⁰ However, inhabitants of those villages where these new forms of rice were to be introduced objected to this because they were already happy with the *amun* crop they cultivated. The colonial

⁵⁸ Paul R. Greenough. *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) p.25.

⁵⁹ Letter From- Baboo Joykishen Mookerjee, To- Assistant Secretary to the Government of Bengal (Ooterpara, 11 February, 1875) [Colln.6-12], p.31. *Proceeding of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II- Agriculture, Head No. 2-Produce and Cultivation* (Calcutta, February 1875).

⁶⁰ Letter From-W.R. Larmince, Esq. Off. Collector of Bankoora, To- The Commissioner of Burdwan Division. Proceeding No. 1623 (Burdwan, 3 february 1875). P.36. *Proceeding of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department. Branch II- Agriculture, Head No. 2-Produce and Cultivation* (Calcutta, March 1875).

government interpreted this attitude as ignorance rebuking the villagers as short-sighted.⁶¹

Still, experimental cultivation of *Tetka* and *Chali* rice began in *pergunnah Mahesarah* in the Bankura district in western Bengal.⁶² The work of distribution was entrusted to the Deputy Collector, Jagatbandhu Khan. Khan's responsibility included explaining to people the advantages of *Tetka* and *Chali* rice, the mode of cultivation to be adopted, and the nature of the soil on which this crop was to be grown. Two ninety-nine *maunds* and thirty-eight *seers* (32 ounces) of seed were advanced to two thirty seven persons of sixty-three villages. The area to be sown with seed was one thousand one ninety-nine *beegahs* (1 *beegah*=0.33 acres=0.13 hectares) and ten *cottahs* (1 *beegah*=20 *cottahs*). Apart from this, eight *maunds* of seed were given to Joykrishna Mukherjee, of Uttarpara in Hooghly.⁶⁴ Even though satisfactory in the beginning, by the end of 1875, the experiment proved to be a failure. Hardly twenty-one *maunds* were produced from two *maunds* of seed grown on eight *beegahs* of land.⁶⁵

It was not that *Tetka* and *Chali* were not grown in Bengal at all. However, the quantity cultivated was really small. It could by no means surpass the volume of rice already cultivated in Bengal. Objections of the cultivators to grow a form of rice which could hardly compare to the rice they already grew needs to be juxtaposed with the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Letter From- Sir W.J. Herschell, Bart; Off. Commissioner of Burdwan Division, To-The Off. Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department. Proceeding No.132 (Burdwan, 30 July 1875). p.53. *Proceeding of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department. Branch II, Agriculture, Head No.2- Produce and Cultivation* (Calcutta, August 1875).

⁶³ Ibid. pp.265-66.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Letter From- C.T. Buckland, Esq., Commissioner of Burdwan Division, To- Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department. Proceeding No. 249 (Burdwan, 16 December 1875).pp.154-155. *Proceeding of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Financial Department, Branch II- Agriculture, Head No.2- Produce and Cultivation* (Calcutta, December 1875).

imaginary world of the Bengali middle-class. The latter took recourse to romanticizing this lost world of the peasants. Peasants came to represent subsistence agriculture for the middle-class. However, soon cultivators themselves took a backseat and an “imaginary” peasant world of abundance was created.

The steady decline of rice as a subsistence food crop under pressure from jute was embedded in this imaginary world of abundance. Here it becomes very difficult to separate the cultural critique from the political economic one. Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay, who wrote a number of tracts on agricultural production under colonial rule in Bengal, categorically stated in around 1915 that only those crops were being cultivated which had the potential of being exported and sold at a high price in the foreign markets. This was the reason why the cultivators were forced to grow jute instead of rice.⁶⁶ Mukhopadhyay further wrote that since jute was not a food-crop, jute cultivation inevitably resulted in a decline in the production of rice. He was extremely critical of the cultivation of jute on the soils that were used for rice production.⁶⁷ Mukhopadhyay’s critique was definitely from a political economic angle. But he was also aware of the emotive angle. He narrated a brief account to explicate how the phenomenon of commercialization of rice had affected the life-world of ordinary people. A landlord, Mukhopadhyay wrote, once invited his subjects for lunch and offered them pieces of jute to eat. He told his subjects, “How can I offer you anything other than what you grow in my land to eat? Since you have abandoned rice for jute, you cannot expect to eat anything

⁶⁶ Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay. *Daridrer Krandan*. (Baharampur, 1322 BS (c.1915) pp.133-139.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

other than jute.” The subjects apologized and began cultivating rice again.⁶⁸ The commercialization of rice thus implied an intrusion into the life-world of the colonized.

One tract summarizing the causes of famine and poverty in Bengal put it thus: “A Bengali’s life revolves around rice. Therefore rice is the staple food of the Bengali race.”⁶⁹ For this author, famine, in other words, implied the scarcity of rice. This mourning for rice was also evident in journalist Panchkari Bandopadhyay’s writings in 1322 B.S. (1915). Bandopadhyay blamed the decline of subsistence agriculture for the scarcity of rice in colonial Bengal.⁷⁰ What needs to be observed here is that rice became a generic name for food; not just food, rice also began to signify a whole imagined life-style which was lost under British rule. The names of *Annapurna* and *Lakshmi*, the rice-giving deities were mentioned again and again in this context. *Annapurna* became a synonym for plenty and the present i.e. colonial rule became a synonym for dearth. Paul Greenough demonstrates that *Lakshmi* was portrayed as a compassionate mother who took pity upon poor and suffering persons by giving them subsistence in the mythology of Bengal.⁷¹

Greenough also maintains that according to the Bengalis cooked rice is the best form of nourishment.⁷² He endorses Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas’ view that cooked rice is a symbol of the bodily substance which a family, as the co-sharers of the body of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Radhikanath Bandopadhyay. *Durbhikkha o Daridrata. Karon Anusandhan ebong Nibaraner Upay*. (Calcutta, 1896/1897).

⁷⁰ Panchkari Bandopadhyay. *Panchkari Bandopadhyayer Rachanabali*. Vol 2. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das eds. (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1358 BS (c.1951).

⁷¹ Paul R. Greenough. *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) p.23.

⁷² Ibid.p.19.

the living “master” of the family, has in common.⁷³ Although the master does not cook rice, Greenough argues, he is the dispenser of rice, the giver of subsistence. It is by possessing the paddy, a symbol of abundance that a man becomes a master.⁷⁴

While Greenough’s argument about the cultural world of the Bengalis is partly true, it has to be contextualized. Greenough often assumes that this cultural perception made the famine (in this case he is discussing the famine of 1943-44) complicated for there was a contradiction between the imagination and the inherent reality of the Bengalis. However, it was the politico-economic situation under colonial governance that shaped this cultural world of the Bengalis. The Bengali Hindu middle-class constructed a discourse of abundance that had its basis in the economic context of colonial Bengal. Increasing commercialization of rice, which was originally a subsistence crop, and the loss of rice fields due to the cultivation of cash crops, dealt a huge blow to the images of self-sustenance upon which the middle-class drew. This was evident in a lecture published in the newspaper *Mashik Basumati* in 1922.

The Bengalis were quite happy before the advent of British rule. Barn full of paddy, cows in the cowsheds, fish in one’s own pond, and spinning wheels in every house-the Bengalis never suffered from scarcity of rice and clothes. After that one could see a dearth of rice in the country of *Annapurna*(the rice-giving deity).⁷⁵

Although the above quote did not make a direct critique of the colonial rule, it is quite apparent that the author drew a sharp distinction between the pre-colonial and colonial times. Pre-British times were symbolized by abundance, while the colonial period was

⁷³ Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas. *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) cited in Greenough. *Prosperity*. pp.18-19.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pp.19-25.

⁷⁵ Ratanmani Chattopadhyay “Anna-Samasya o Bangalir Nischestata.” A summary of the lecture delivered on the occasion of Bhabanipur Brahmo Samaj Bhadrotsav. *Mashik Basumati*. year 1, vol.2, No.5, (Kolkata, Falgun 1329 B.S.[c.February/March 1922]):550-559.

held responsible for scarcity. It is in this context, that political economy became intertwined with cultural perceptions. An onslaught on food crops was translated onto the palette; colonial rule represented a disruption of the most basic aspect of life: diet.

An analysis of the Bengali Hindu middle-class' romanticization of rice, however, warrants a much more nuanced reading of the affective politics of the middle-class. Romanticization was also accompanied by a desire to stay away from a discourse that could perpetually bind them to subjection. A desire to move away from the label of "rice-eater" led people like Baneswar Singha to urge Bengali peasants to grow crops, like pulses and potatoes, like the peasants in northern India, instead of rice.⁷⁶ It can be easily understood that Singha's arguments followed from the colonial distinction between the "rice-eating" Bengalis and the "wheat-eating" Punjabis. However, the line of argument that Singha drew on can hardly be called affective. He made a critique of the cultivation of rice in Bengal on the ground that rice had lesser chances of survival than wheat and pulses in cases of scarcity.⁷⁷

This romanticization of the past needs to be read along with the acceptance of the present. At least some of the middle-class welcomed the change in their diet that followed the introduction of new fruits and vegetables in Bengal. Sometimes, of course, these new fruits and vegetables were not received because they were "foreign" food. But, many a times they seemed like a welcome change to the diet of at least the middle-class. Who can think about a winter meal in contemporary Calcutta without cauliflowers and cabbages? The middle-class Bengali men began to take an initiative in growing these fruits and vegetables. Umesh Chandra Sen, for instance, wrote:

⁷⁶ Baneswar Singha. *Durbhikkha Nibaraner Upay*. (Srihatta, 1326 BS [c.1919]).

⁷⁷ Ibid.pp.1-7.

One needs to sow “foreign” seeds in order to produce admirable fruits and vegetables.--- W. Chu grew a watermelon in the gardens of Toms Lane in Calcutta, the size of this watermelon was much bigger than the watermelons of this country. Many rich people in Calcutta have grown gigantic sugarcane. Therefore, these plants are not produced from seeds of this country.⁷⁸

Sen’s book had a detailed instruction for growing turnip, beet, broccoli, arrowroot, artichoke, celery, lettuce, leek, and squash.⁷⁹

It might seem that Sen was all too elated by the introduction of new fruits and vegetables by the British colonial state in India. However, Sen gave it a different twist. Of course, seeds for the new vegetables came from abroad and were sold by different nurseries in and around Calcutta. But the novelty lay not with the seeds, but with the climate of the colony. As Sen wrote, “Our water and soil are so good that they can nurture any plants whatsoever.”⁸⁰ It was this climate which made new vegetables and fruits taste so good. Sen, and many others like him, contradicted the view of the colonial state that tropical climate was not suitable for the production of new crops like Carolina rice. It should also be mentioned in this context that apart from forty varieties of “fresh American seeds,” like cabbages and cauliflowers, nurseries, like N.G. Chatterjee’s Pikeparrah Nursery (established in 1869) or the Dum-dum nursery, institutionalized and promoted sowing of vegetables that already existed in pre-colonial Bengal. These were vegetables like *chichinga* (snake gourd), *sags* (green leafy vegetables), *palla shasha* (an indigenous form of cucumber), *lao* (gourd), *jhinga* (another country vegetable) and the like.⁸¹ Thus it was neither an involuntary acceptance nor a complete disregard for existing

⁷⁸ Umeshchandra Sen. *Krishi-Chandrika*. Ist & 2nd part. (Serampore, 1875). P.63.

⁷⁹ Ibid. pp.69-118.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.63.

⁸¹ Advertisement in *The Indian Mirror* (Calcutta, May 12 1897, May 18 1897).

fruits and vegetables, but a synthesis of both, that ultimately led to the construction of a “Bengali” cuisine. This adaptation took place at many levels.

It was stated in the *First Annual Report of the Agricultural Department of Bengal* in 1886 that bone meal produced excellent results when used as manure on rice and other crops, and was used even by the upper castes.

Bone-meal was distributed among selected *talookdars* in *Burdwan*, and was used as manure on rice, and other crops, with beneficial results. Brahmins are now glad to take it in their clothes, with their own hands, though perfectly aware of what it is they are taking. The pundits have declared that there is no harm in their doing so.⁸²

The use of animal bones or skins in food would have been considered a taboo by the upper-caste Hindu Bengalis even 30 years back. In the year 1918, Baneswar Singha, who wrote quite a few tracts on agricultural production, also made a case for the use of bone-dust as manure.⁸³ This was a radical change in the mode of production. Bone-meal was used not only for new vegetables, like mangold, sugar-beet, turnip, and wheat, which were not native to Bengal,⁸⁴ but also for rice which marked a physical barrier between the upper caste Bengalis and the lower castes. Boiled rice could be accepted only from someone who belonged to the same *jati* or caste⁸⁵. One would not touch or eat rice cooked by a person belonging to the lower castes. However, it will be too simplistic to argue that social hierarchies withered away. Using bone-meal for rice cultivation was definitely a radical change. However, social stratifications remained.

Peasants who mostly belonged to the lower castes now bore the brunt of the middle-class. They were rebuked for ignoring the cultivation of “exotic” vegetables. In

⁸² *First Annual Report of the Director of the Agricultural Department, Bengal*. (Calcutta, 1886).p.23.

⁸³ Baneswar Singha. *Krishi-Prabandha*. (Srihatta, 1918).p.119.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

⁸⁵ Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas. *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

fact, cultivators were now blamed for conservatism. Haladhar Guha who wrote quite a few tracts on agriculture, called the cultivators lazy and orthodox as they did not try out new food crops.⁸⁶ However, Irfan Habib maintains in his essay on Mughal India that not only did the Indian peasant grow innumerable crops, s/he was also prepared to accept new crops. The rapid spread of crops, introduced first by the Portuguese and later by the British, was made possible by the peasants.⁸⁷ Subsistence agriculture became a theme of the pre-colonial which was romanticized by the middle-class. Subodhkinkar Nanda Majumdar was astonished that the responsibility for a sacred work like agriculture could be taken by the “trivial, illiterate peasants.”⁸⁸ Social hierarchies were being defined differently. This new rhetoric was part of a hegemonic project of the Bengali Hindu middle-class by which they portrayed themselves as the true modern, willing to try out new things. Jaminiranjan Majumdar who gave detailed instruction on potato cultivation, blamed the peasants for insufficient cultivation of potato.⁸⁹

Although several people wrote instruction manuals on the cultivation of “exotic” crops, it has to be acknowledged, that until very recently, these fruits and vegetables were unavailable in the markets of Calcutta. Even when such fruits and vegetables were sold in the Calcutta market, it obviously meant that these foodstuffs were brought over from the hilly tracts of northern Bengal. In these hilly tracts, like Darjeeling and Kalimpong (often the summer residence of the British), peasants who were described as “illiterate and lazy” by people like Haladhar Guha and Subodhkinkar Nanda Majumdar grew those fruits which were being adopted gradually by the Bengali middle-class. Amongst the fruit trees

⁸⁶ Haladhar Guha. *Krishiniyamabali o Jamidari Mahajani Hisheb.* (Dhaka, 1875).p.3.

⁸⁷ Irfan Habib. “Mughal India.”pp.217-218.

⁸⁸ Subodh Kinkar Nanda Majumdar. “Krishi o Sar ‘Kopir Chash’.” Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihastha-Mangal.* year 3, no.9, (Poush 1336 B.S.[cJanuary/.December 1930]):290-294.

⁸⁹ Jaminiranjan Majumdar, *Alur Chash* (Kolikata, 1335BS [c.1929]).

grown by the cultivators in places like Kalimpong, Siliguri, and Kurseong, one could find oranges, Washington navel oranges, pears, pineapples, raspberries, pomegranates, plums, strawberries, and peaches. Amongst these fruit trees, the cultivation of orange and pineapple on these hills expanded on a tremendous scale. Every year at least thousands of such trees were planted all over the district.⁹⁰ Even in Gangetic Bengal, like in Nadia and Murshidabad, *goalas* (milkmen) regularly sowed Japanese millet.⁹¹

Thus in the realm of production a rhetoric of political economy got intertwined with another narrative of cultural imagination. It was required by capitalist modernity to imagine a pre-colonial past in order to make a critique of the colonial economy. At the same time, the middle-class also found a way to indigenize new realities of the colonial capital and the new enchantments that came along with modernity. But as mainstream nationalism reached its peak and the nation was just a few years away from achieving independence, one could see a perceptible change even in the critique of the middle-class. The harshness of colonial economic policies, the rise in prices, the famine of 1943-44, all made the middle-class aware of the futility of only a cultural critique. They were no longer merely satisfied with imagining a past of abundance.

While the colonial administration desperately struggled to keep its policies under control, occasional voices of dissent could bring them out. Such a voice of dissent came from Syed Mohammad Afzal, a member of the Paddy & Rice Enquiry Committee and Amulya Dhan Addy. Both of them were extremely sympathetic to the cause of the

⁹⁰ Report on the Agricultural Demonstration Works undertaken in the Government Estates of Kalimpong, Siliguri, Kurseong, and Sadar Subdivisions for the year 1929-30. *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture, Bengal for the year 1929-30*. Agriculture and Industries Department, Agriculture Branch (Calcutta, 1930) pp.158-163.

⁹¹ Appendix III, Annual Report of the Second Economic Botanist, Bengal, for the year 1929-30, *Agriculture and Industries Department, Agriculture Branch for the year ending 1929-30* (Calcutta, 1930) pp.52-54.

cultivator. Mohammad Afzal chastised the colonial state for importing Burma rice into Bengal. This import of Burma rice into Bengal made the supply of rice greater than the demand of the province which resulted in the inevitable fall in the price of rice.⁹² Afzal argued for a duty of import on paddy from Burma, which would consequently raise the price of the paddy produced by cultivators in Bengal and improve their economic condition. Afzal was definitely arguing for a focus more on the production of rice and less of a focus on the cultivation of jute. However, Afzal here was not romanticizing any “tradition” of abundance. He instead tried to find economic solutions for the cultivators and made a critique of capitalist modernity that had impoverished the peasants of Bengal.

Like Afzal, Amulya Dhan Addy, another government official, also criticized the government for its decision to fix a minimum price for rice and paddy. He argued that fixing a price for rice would have serious pitfalls for the export of rice from India to foreign countries. Addy endorsed Afzal’s view that the price of rice cultivated by peasants should be increased. He further maintained that although an increase in the price of rice would adversely affect the middle class Bengali population, it would benefit the majority of the population who survived on agricultural production.⁹³

Addy’s and Afzal’s points were soon being endorsed by several people who lashed out at the government for being insensitive to the economic conditions of the ordinary cultivators. They were not merely satisfied with a cultural self-fashioning. They were in fact keeping their fingers on the pulse of the colonial state in order to find out the root cause of the scarcity of food. The Bengal famine of 1943 brought out the organic

⁹² Minute of Dissent by Khan Sahib Syed Mohammed Afzal. M.L.A. & member, Paddy & Rice Committee of the Government of Bengal. *Paddy & Rice Enquiry Report* (Bengal, 1940) pp.101-102.

⁹³ Replies from Mr. Amulya Dhan Addy to questionnaire on paddy. *Paddy & Rice Enquiry Report, vol II.* (Bengal, 1940) pp.149-157.

reality of the colonial state. Hemendra Prasad Ghose, who was the editor of the newspaper, *Dainik Basumati*, figured out three reasons behind the famine. He argued that there was a gross failure on the part of the colonial administration in making positive changes in agriculture.⁹⁴ First of all, the British colonial state totally neglected irrigation. Second, no steps were taken to restore the fertility of the soil and third, serious encroachments were made by the colonial state on the land in which rice was grown earlier.⁹⁵ Apart from this, Ghose pointed out that the Secretary of State submitted unreliable reports on the famine to the House of Commons in Britain.⁹⁶

These authors made clear that the British Government could no longer boast of a “rational” mode of agriculture. Its visions of “progress” and “modernity”, if it ever existed, were empty sounds. The colonial state had finally lost its moral authority to rule. It was no longer the flag-bearer of “civilization,” but represented the ugly face of capitalism. Although even earlier people had made indirect critiques of colonial policies, now they made a much stronger critique of colonial political economy. While new food crops were already internalized into the diet of the Bengali middle-class, this class also became aware that the seduction of “modernity” did not necessarily benefit the cultivators.

⁹⁴ Hemendra Prasad Ghose. “The Bengal Famine.” *Calcutta Review* vol.93, (Calcutta, November 1944):42-47.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Aestheticizing labor? An affective discourse of cooking in Colonial Bengal

Introduction

In colonial Bengal the project of modernity endowed the act of cooking with enormous significance. The nature of cooking was transformed in ways that resulted in a much more pronounced gendering than before. While in pre-colonial India too women were largely responsible for cooking, this act was never defined within the specific parameters of gender roles. In several texts written in medieval Bengal, cooking was done by women but they were not specifically seen as inhabiting the domestic space. They also participated in buying and selling products in the markets.¹ In other texts, specifically in *Vaishnava* (a particular religious sect that was inspired by Chaitanya, a religious preacher) literature, men cooked for Chaitanya. Chaitanya's disciples cooked for him that symbolized a way of reaching directly to the preacher.² In 19th century Bengal, however, a discursive space was constructed wherein women were situated as loving cooks solely responsible for cooking. The business of cooking was caught up in a new rhetoric: a new façade of cooking became visible, the façade of an aesthetic act. Cooking came to be defined in affective terms, in the terms of art and educative principles.

I have focused on a spatial construction of “tradition” in this chapter. Through introducing a new curriculum on cooking in educational institutions, the Bengali middle-class valorized women's cooking as an object of love. They glorified each and every act

¹ Kabikankan Mukumdaram Chakrabarti. *Chandimangal*. Bijanbihari Bhattacharya ed. (Kolkata, 1966).

² Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami. *Madhya-Leela, 15sha Parichhed*. Sanjib Kumar Chauduri and Nagendra Kumar Roy eds. (Calcutta, 1956) pp.633-640.

of cooking as well as the kitchen space to make this idealization concrete. However, this aestheticization of women's cooking was couched in a language of gender and class. The affective politics of the respectable Bengali middle-class revolved around their scorn for manual labor, which was perceived in the practices of the hired cooks, and their constant aestheticization of women's cooking. My discussion of women's cooking vis-à-vis the appointment of male cooks in domestic households demonstrates how a "public" and a "private" space was created within the household. Although aestheticization situated women in the private sphere, the very association of the male cooks with the same private sphere problematized the notion of the private and the public. I also argue that the new cuisine blurred the public and the private divide in another aspect. Here I contest feminist theorization of women's cooking only in terms of "unpaid labor." I argue that in colonial Bengal women used the domestic site as a quasi-professional space to make themselves into agential subjects. Women exploited their expertise in cooking for their own purpose in the public sphere. Cooking thus brought a pleasurable experience for at least some women, which became evident from several cookbooks and recipe columns written by women themselves in women's journals. Print thus blurred the barriers between the public and the private. Creation of "hybrid" dishes with new ingredients as well as indigenous food stuff brought a sense of delight in the monotony of cooking quotidian dishes. In taking an active part in the preparatory stage of cuisine, women became active agents for indigenizing the pleasures of modernity.

In her work on the changing role of women in colonial Bengal, Meredith Borthwick argues how new techniques of education, culinary skills, and hygienic

trainings were created to hone the “traditional” skills of “new” woman.³ While Borthwick is right in demonstrating the contradictions between what was proscribed and the actual act, she takes both “tradition” and “modernity” for granted without problematizing them. Both “tradition” and “modernity” emerged simultaneously in colonial Bengal. “Tradition” itself was also “modern” in the sense that it was imagined and refashioned as a result of colonial modernity. Borthwick’s is one of the early social histories of changes in women’s role in colonial Bengal. However, while she takes note of the political changes along with the social changes, her narrative on the economic changes is somewhat vague. Taking a cue from her arguments on the culinary skills of “new” women, I have interwoven economic and cultural changes to write a culinary narrative. Since Borthwick’s work is on the overall change in women’s lives in colonial Bengal, she naturally does not delve into details about what were the specific social requirements that actually made cooking an exacting act. For this, the discourse that emerged on cooking needs to be read more carefully. The rhetoric on cooking aestheticized women’s cooking by comparing it with love and affection. But the process in which the act of cooking was aestheticized needs to be situated in its socio-economic context, especially with the changing economic scenario in Bengal. Two changes in the 19th century especially warrant our attention.

In the course of the 19th century, Calcutta emerged as the economic base of the British Empire. The new factories and industries that were emerging needed a large laboring population to work in it. This attracted a large number of people from Bihar and upper India to Calcutta in search of jobs in these new places. At the same time, there was

³Meredith Borthwick. *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

also a large floating population of servants, cooks, gardeners, sweepers, washer men, etcetera among whom Bengalis and Oriyas figured most prominently.⁴ The bulk of this working population in Calcutta had no natural link with the respectable Bengali society in Calcutta. As Rajat Kanta Ray argues, this so-called respectable society came to be divided into two groups of people, the propertied magnates who looked down upon the service class and the professional men who scorned manual labor and valued education as a source of earned income.⁵ Cultural politics of these two groups, especially the latter group, was defined by their imagination of the public and the private space.

While the industrial working class was outside the boundaries of the quotidian life of the Bengali middle-class society, the other laboring population who worked inside the middle-class houses could not be avoided. Domestic labor of people who formed the myriad categories of gardener, door keeper, sweeper, or washer men is beyond the scope of this project. I focus on professional male cooks vis-à-vis middle-class women who cooked for their family as the former was the only group of people who had direct access to one of the most “private” spaces in the home that is the kitchen, which was imagined to be a domain of the women of the household. Middle-class assumptions of who should cook revolved around the formation of a spatial discourse, which in its turn had broader implications for class and gender.

The other change was in the lives of middle-class Bengali women. It was almost considered natural that western educated Bengali middle-class men would need to converse with a wife who would also be educated to some extent. Thus the middle-class advocated female education with the thought that education would make women better

⁴Rajat Kanta Ray. *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).p.38.

⁵ Ibid.p. 39.

mothers and better wives and equip them better for housework. At first a few Bengali Hindu men objected to female education on the ground that many of the early schools were started by missionaries. But by the 1850s, Indian men themselves started organizing educational institutions for female education. While in 1863, there were 95 girls' schools with a total attendance of 2,500, by the year 1890, this number increased to 2,238 schools with more than 80,000 students.⁶ Partha Chatterjee argues that formal education became a requirement for the “new” woman and nationalist ideology called for women to achieve cultural refinement through modern education. However, it was also demanded that the “new” woman be different from the western woman.⁷ The question of a proper curriculum for women stirred the Bengali middle-class.

Cooking as a form of education: Changing requirements for “new” women

The middle-class in colonial Bengal was concerned that the “new” English educated women were not adept in the art of cooking. Therefore many wrote that cooking should be adopted as part of the curriculum in new schools. The *Utterparah Hitakari Sabha* included cooking in its list of subjects for study, and a cooking prize was awarded by the *Madhya Bangla Sammilani* in 1889.⁸ The *Mahakali Pathshala*, established on conservative Hindu principles in the year 1893, placed great emphasis on the learning of culinary skills. Even in the so-called modern educational institutions, like the Victoria College, cookery was included in the curriculum.⁹ Apart from the inclusion of culinary skills in schools and colleges, various domestic manuals and women's journals began

⁶ Ghulam Murshid. *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905* (Rajshahi: Rajshahi University Press, 1983) p.43.

⁷ Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp.128-129. first pub.1993.

⁸ *Indian Mirror*, Sunday Edition, 7 July 1878, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 4:3,296 (September 1889), described in Meredith Borthwick. *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*. pp.211-212.

⁹ Borthwick. *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal* pp.98-100.

publishing recipes for the benefit of “modern” women. Cookbooks, giving women detailed instruction for cooking, also began to be published from the late 19th century. However, as Meredith Borthwick argues, this extant literature was created more for widening the culinary skills of women rather than teaching them to cook from scratch.¹⁰ Borthwick further maintains that culinary skills never decreased. In fact, they became more exacting to suit different social requirements.

While Borthwick analyzes how culinary skills became an issue for discussions on educational curriculum, what needs to be mentioned here is that apart from being considered part of a discipline, cooking was being defined as educational in another way too. Education was given a cultural definition in the context of culinary skills. Instructions for cooking went beyond cookbooks and domestic manuals. It became the part of an overall education for women.¹¹ Priyanath Basu, for instance, drew up the following list of what women were supposed to know by way of their work in and around the kitchen:

What are women supposed to learn--- where to store rice and lentils, how to keep pickles so that one could find it easily, how to prepare pickles, chutney and fruit preserves according to season, how to begin cooking, how to make good food in jiffy and at a low cost, what should be cooked first and what later, how to cook *pulao* [a fancy rice dish], curry, *gourma* [a meat dish made with yogurt], chop, cutlet, lentils, vegetables, leafy vegetables, chutney, what are the right days to prepare which sweet, how to prepare juices from mango, papaya and the like, how to make food look good, how to serve food aesthetically, how to make barley, arrowroot to cure patients, how to make varieties of soup, etcetera.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid. pp.215-216.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Priyanath Basu. *Grihadharmma* (Kolkata, 1936) pp.161-163.

Chandranath Basu (1844-1910), a Hindu revivalist, instructed women on the need for a large and clean kitchen which would allow enough air and light.¹³ A clean kitchen became important as a result of a new focus on hygiene. For Dineshchandra Sen (1866-1939), a historian of Bengali literature, cleanliness was a matter of concern. He emphatically stated that a clean kitchen was essential for cooking.¹⁴ He reprimanded those women who had a habit of wiping their hands on their clothes after cooking. He instructed women to be aware of the needs of her family members. Women were asked to use proper spoons and ladles while serving food. Sen also urged women to see to it that rice and lentil were thoroughly cleaned before they were cooked.¹⁵ This attitude to cleanliness, hygiene, and organization in the kitchen, all associated with Victorian ideas of domesticity, were also reflected in periodicals like *Bamabodhini* and even in cookbooks like Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's *Pak-Pranali*.¹⁶ This emphasis on "new" aspects of cleanliness, hygiene, and order, however, did not necessarily focus on new techniques that had the potential of making one's life easy. For instance, these advisory tracts hardly mentioned the use of Icmic cooker, invented by Indumadhab Mullick in the early 20th century. Icmic cooker was a special type of cooker in which rice, pulses, and vegetables could all be cooked together and fast. This extremely convenient invention was not deemed necessary for women, since the middle-class considered women to have ample time for cooking for her loved ones. Hence rice needed to be cooked on slow fire

¹³ Chandranath Basu. *Garhyasthapath*. 2nd ed. (Kolkata, 1294 BS [c.1887]) pp.20-22.

¹⁴ Dinesh Chandra Sen. *Grihasree* (Kolkata: 1322 BS [c.1915]) pp. 84-85.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anon. "Grihasree Sampadan." *Bamabodhini*, (Kolkata: Aswin, 1290BS [c. September/October 1883]):89-93, Anon. "Ramanir Kartabya." *Bamabodhini* (Magh 1293[c. January/February c.1886]): 112-115, Anon. "Ramanir Kartabya." *Bamabodhini* (Phalgun 1293[c. February/March c.1886]) pp.115-116, Anon. "Ramanir Kartabya." *Bamabodhini* (Chaitra 1293[c. March/April c.1886]) :117-119, Bipradas Mukhopadhyay. *Pak-Pranali* (Kolkata, Gurudas Chattopdhyay & Sons., 1340 BS[c.1933]) first published (1885-1902) Cited in Pradip Kumar Basu "Adarsha Paribare Adarsha Randhanpranali." *Anushtup*, 32(1) (Kolkata, 1997):14-40.

for a long time and vegetables needed to be boiled thoroughly before it was cooked.¹⁷ Icmic cooker could at best be used by male bachelors. Women were considered natural cooks.

Although women were seen to be adept in cooking naturally, modernity and western education were often blamed for the growing decline in women's interest in cooking. The middle-class literati imagined and constructed a "Golden Age" of Bengal, when they argued all women knew how to cook. Uma Chakravarti convincingly argues that in the 19th century men tried to construct a Hindu-Aryan identity for them in order to contend with the loss of self-esteem with colonial conquest.¹⁸ The Aryan identity was relevant for all Hindus and especially for the Bengali men because of its association with vigor, conquest, and expansion. Since the latter group was often ridiculed by the colonial state as emasculate, hence the need arose for forging a new identity.¹⁹ This construction of a Hindu identity also involved the constitution of a powerful image of womanhood, which as Uma Chakravarti has argued, dynamized the image of a companion of the past into a force for the present and the future.²⁰ This imagined "Aryan" woman could also fight the colonial state along with the men folk in the public domain as long as she retained her "feminine" virtues.

Thus women of bygone days were compared with women in colonial Bengal to show how the latter had degenerated with their acquiring of modern English education. This rhetoric was a modern one. When middle-class Bengalis insisted upon the inclusion

¹⁷ Dineshchandra Sen. *Grihasree*. pp.84-85.

¹⁸ Uma Chakravarti. "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past." in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

¹⁹ Ibid.p.47.

²⁰ Ibid.p.53.

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, one cannot simply call this a “derivative” modernity. Unlike in Victorian England, where cookery was clearly a subject of women’s education, in colonial Bengal the discourse of cooking was gendered in a more complex way. Judith Walsh argues that the 19th century reformations of Hindu domestic ideas grew out of the interactions of a hegemonic, transnational, 19th century domestic discourse and indigenous domestic concerns and practices.²¹

Walsh juxtaposes Bengali domestic manuals along with Euro-American domestic manuals written in the 19th century. Unlike the Euro-American manuals which were written overwhelmingly by women, Bengali domestic manuals were written chiefly by men. Walsh still sees Bengali domestic manuals in the same light as Euro-American domestic manuals because she sees domestic space as a site which reveals women’s agency.²² In her review of Walsh’ book, Mrinalini Sinha argues that there is a difference between Bengali manuals and Euro-American manuals in the sense that Bengali men used the domestic space as a site to construct their own identity unlike Euro-American women who used domestic space to forge their identity.²³

Unlike Victorian England, where a clear cut demarcation was visible between the public and the private sphere, in colonial Bengal the demarcation was much more complex. Although women were situated in space of the family kitchen and had the responsibility of preparing food, the knowledge of cooking came primarily from men.

²¹ Judith E. Walsh. *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave them Advice* (Lanham, Boulder, New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

²² Ibid.

²³ Mrinalini Sinha. Review of Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave them Advice* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Judith E Walsh, *How to be the Goddess of Your Own Home: An Anthology of Bengali Domestic Manuals* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005). *Indian Economic and Social History Review*. 44:4 (2007): 547-551.

While women were not considered lesser beings so far as the art of cuisine was concerned, it was often lamented that they had left behind their natural knack in the matter, and hence needed the guidance of men- the principal architects of the project for the cultivation of “good taste.” 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 one could read scriptures.²⁴ Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, the famous journalist went on to write that a home which did not promote good cooking was not a good home as it neglected a part of sacred rites.²⁵ But, in giving detailed instructions for cooking, Priyanath Basu, or for that matter Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, crossed the line between the public and the private spheres. What was considered to be a woman’s domain was being traversed by the middle-class men who began to take a keen interest in the subject of cookery. But what is most significant is the fact that the expertise in cooking which women were supposed to gain often came from the male cooks who began to be employed at least in upper-middle class Bengali houses by the end of the 19th century.

Emergence of the male cook: A threat to the “private?”

In his *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, W.W. Hunter ,making a detailed survey of the nature of jobs in the different districts in Bengal²⁶, found that in the area around Calcutta, the number of cooks was as high as 5152, and the number of *masalchis* or

²⁴ Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay. *Paribarik Prabandha* (Hooghly, 1302 BS [c. 1895]) pp.138-141, Pratapchandra Majumdar. *Streecharitra* (Kolkata, 1936) 3rd ed. pp.138-141.

²⁵ Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay. *Paribarik Prabandha*. pp.189-197.

²⁶ W.W. Hunter. *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (London, 1875).

assistant cooks was 14.²⁷ In Nadia, the number of male cooks hired was 876 and in Jessore a somewhat smaller number of 77.²⁸ Everywhere the number of female cooks was much smaller than the number of male cooks and in Jessore no women were hired as cooks. In a short story written in the early 20th century, Sarachchandra Das, the author, stated that women domestic workers in a house were not allowed to enter the kitchen which was totally controlled by the Brahmin cooks.²⁹

The actual number of cooks being hired in Bengali middle-class homes is perhaps not that big till much later that is in the early 20th century. What is significant here is the symbolic weight that hired cooks carried within one's home. The hiring of cooks was a new phenomenon in the Bengali middle-class homes in the second half of the 19th century. These cooks generally would be males. Women would definitely be employed in domestic service, but more as aides in the kitchen rather than as cooks. Even in eating places like boarding- houses and some restaurants that were emerging at this period, cooking was a male profession. A large number of men who migrated from the villages to the city in search of work often took up cooking as a profession. The commercialization of agriculture resulted in a decline of peasant subsistence production, which necessitated a migration to the towns. 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.

This kind of gendering of culinary practices has long been a vexed question. Scholars like Jack Goody and Stephen Mennell associate it with a hierarchization of

²⁷ Hunter. *A Statistical Account of Bengal. Districts of the 24 Parganas and Sunderbans. vol. I* (London, 1875) p.49.

²⁸ Hunter. *A Statistical Account of Bengal. Nadiya and Jessore. vol. II* (London, 1875) p.39, pp.186-191.

²⁹ Sarachchandra Das. "Dine Dakati." in Ranjit Chattopadhyay & Siddharta Ghosh eds. *Goenda aar Goenda* (Kolkata: Ananda, 1399BS [c.1992]) first published 1338 BS [c.1931].

cuisine. In his comparative study of Europe and Asia with Africa, Goody demonstrates that the development of haute cuisine in Europe and Asia and simple cuisine in Africa can be associated with the gendered spaces of cooking in each of these cases.³⁰ In the case of Europe and Asia, Goody argues that a difference between high and low gets interpreted in terms of a difference between male and female. Here it was men who took female recipes of daily cooking and transformed them into the high cuisine of the court.³¹ In Africa, on the other hand, women normally cooked at the court of kings and the dishes they prepared were no different from the ones that they were cooking at home.³²

Stephen Mennell analyzes the reason behind the preponderance of male cooks in courtly cuisine in Europe. He argues that the employment of male cooks in cooking as a public profession has a legacy in courtly cuisine. This is because court as a social institution originated from military establishment.³³ Mennell maintains that men always served as cooks with modern armies, and their function in the court kitchens began as an extension of that role. After these men established a stronghold over courtly kitchens they also became responsible for the refinement of culinary art. This is more so because the court itself developed as the locus for the arts of consumption.³⁴ Subsequently, as the courtly cuisine developed into haute cuisine, social differences also emerged surrounding haute cuisine. The result is a social differentiation from the everyday food of the lower orders and from the women who cooked it.³⁵

³⁰ Jack Goody. *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³¹ Ibid.p.193.

³² Ibid.

³³ Stephen Mennell. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford, Uk, New York, U.S.A.: Basil Blackwell, 1985) p.201.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Goody's analysis of the development of simple cuisine in Africa and haute cuisine in Asia and Europe follows a unilinear trajectory. Goody's conjecture that culinary cultures of Asia and Europe are associated with the concept of hierarchical man is only partially true. Goody argues in his observation on "Indian" society that cuisine is mainly based on the idea of ritual purity in India. When placed in the context of colonial Bengal, the demarcation of culinary practice, and the construction of high and low, assumes a rather distinctive character. Both Goody's and Mennell's arguments on a gendered development of haute cuisine cannot be applied in this context. The idea of "better" cuisine that emerged in colonial Bengal did not include *haute* cuisine, and the male cooks cannot actually be placed on the higher rungs of this hierarchy. The Bengali middle-class believed that only women could produce a refined cuisine. A distinct image of women was created and linked to the creation of a "good" Hindu Bengali middle-class cuisine; and here the male cook took a back seat. The superiority of women's cooking was not simply predicated on their ability to maintain a ritual purity in the space of the kitchen, as Goody would argue, but more so upon their ability to infuse the act of cooking with love and affection, which the hired male cook never could. The lady who cooked in her own kitchen came to be seen as the exact opposite of the male cook, who essentially exchanged his labor for money.

In her dissertation on the gendered character of French culinary art, Jennifer Davis adds to Mennell's work by arguing that in early 19th century France, sentiment emerged as the central feature of the discourse on women's cooking. When women cooked well, it reflected their love for the diners rather than culinary skill or experience.³⁶

³⁶ Jennifer J. Davis. *Men of Taste: Gender and Authority in the French Culinary Trades, 1730-1830*. Unpublished Dissertation(Pennsylvania State University, 2004) pp.308-309.

On the other hand, Davis argues, for men to cook well, it was considered necessary to acquire literacy and a broad education on their part.³⁷ In the realm of cuisine, a distinct demarcation of the “public” and the “private” therefore emerged in 18th and 19th century France. But this spatial distinction again is not applicable in the case of colonial Bengal. In the domain of the “private,” women’s culinary practice symbolized love and affection, but when men cooked in similar situations it reflected nothing but manual labor. The men who cooked in middle-class homes could hardly be compared to those that were the creators of haute cuisine.

Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar have explored the issue of the “public” and the “private” spheres in the context of colonial Bengal. Tanika Sarkar argues that the domestic space symbolized by women, became the solace for middle-class Bengali men pulverized by the tyrannies of the outside world, where they were subjugated by the colonial patterns of administration. Also, being obliged to accept the changes in the public sphere, middle-class men were too keen to prevent those changes from seeping into their homes. As a result middle-class men considered the “domestic” space to be an autonomous and inviolable domain.³⁸ Tanika Sarkar maintains that 19th century nationalism identified this domestic space as a “Hindu way of life.” The Hindu home or the domestic sphere was one sphere, where improvement could be made through personal initiative taken by men.³⁹

Partha Chatterjee’s argument about the “public” and the “private” sphere is different from Sarkar’s. In the case of colonial Bengal, Chatterjee has argued that the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Tanika Sarkar. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington, Indiana polis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³⁹ Ibid.pp.36-37.

formation of the “public” and “private” spheres did not occur in the same way as in Europe. Rather, in colonial India, the colonized constructed the domains of the “material” and the “spiritual” as a way to mark themselves out from the colonizers. The “material” was defined as the locus of Western science, technology, and statecraft. Chatterjee argues that in the nationalist discourse, this domain was considered to be the source of superiority of the West.⁴⁰ The colonized needed to learn these strategies, deployed by the West in order to subjugate the East, to overcome Western dominance. But since a complete subjugation could also mean the loss of identity, nationalists imagined the “spiritual” sphere where the self-identity of the national culture was to be preserved.⁴¹ Chatterjee has argued that this material/spiritual distinction further coalesced into the ideology of the “outer” or the world and the “inner” or the home. The world or the material domain, where the colonized was humiliated, only reflected the outer self of the colonized. In this domain nationalists had no qualms in imitating the colonizer in order to win back their freedom. However, what was more important for the nationalists was the spiritual domain of family which epitomized the spirituality of the East.⁴² Chatterjee matches this new meaning of the home and the world dichotomy with the identification of social roles by gender. Women became the markers of this inner domain of the “spiritual.”⁴³

I draw on both Sarkar’s and Chatterjee’s theorization of the “public”/ “private” and the “material”/ “spiritual.” However, these spatial distinctions need to be juxtaposed and read together. While the formulation of the “material” and the “spiritual” is

⁴⁰ Partha Chatterjee. *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 120-121.

⁴³ Ibid.

immensely valuable, I argue that the ideas of “public”/ “private” cannot be obliterated altogether. Without taking into account the notions of the “public” and the “private,” the gendering of cooking cannot be explained further. While the rhetorical politics of the colonial middle class revolved around the discursive formulation of the “material” and the “spiritual,” the very materiality of food demanded the imagination of the “public” and the “private” spaces when it came to the matter of setting up a distinction between that which was “in good taste” and that which was not. The question of who cooks where addressed this distinction. “Public” cooking was a profession and was taken up by the male cooks, whereas in the “private,” cooking, as a labor of love was definitely women’s work. Even within the home or the domestic space itself this distinction was perceptible. For example, in her autobiography, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani(1872-1945), a political activist who played an important role in encouraging Bengali middle class youth to martial arts, made an interesting distinction between what she called the “public” kitchen and the “private” kitchen. The “public” kitchen was supervised by the hired cooks who cooked for the entire household, whereas the “private” kitchen was the place where women cooked for their husbands, the few items that they most liked.⁴⁴ The latter involved wifely affection and care, whereas the former was chiefly professional.

Male cooks mostly belonged to the upper most rank in the caste hierarchy. They would be Brahmins. One reason behind the hiring of the Brahmin cooks has been cited by Swapna Banerjee. Banerjee argues that the most significant distinction in the caste status of servants in colonial Bengal was in terms of *jalchal* and *ajalchal*: upper caste Hindus

⁴⁴ Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. *Jibaner Jharapata* (Kolkata: Rupa, 1975) pp.9-12.

could accept water from a *jalchal* and not from an *ajalchal*.⁴⁵ Whereas a servant belonging to an *ajalchal* caste would not have entry into the kitchen, Brahmins, who were *jalchal*, were in high demand as cooks.⁴⁶ The demand for Brahmin cooks increased to such an extent that sometimes other cooks faked their caste identity to get a job as a Brahmin cook. Male workers coming to eastern Bengal from Orissa called themselves Brahmins and hired themselves out as cooks. A man named Jagadanda who was the leader of Oriya palanquin bearers in Dhaka in eastern Bengal ran a cook-manufacturing factory with the help of a real Oriya Brahmin. In this factory non-Brahmin Oriyas were turned into Brahmin cooks. On an average hundred “fake *thakurs*” (Brahmin cooks) were manufactured every year in this factory.⁴⁷

What is however surprising is the scorn for the Brahmin cooks that emerged in the popular literature of the period. In his reminiscences, Panchkari Bandopadhyay, the renowned journalist wrote that a middle-class householder would never have hired a cook for his family kitchen in the “bygone days.” It was women who cooked and not the Brahmin cook.⁴⁸ Mahendranath Datta, the brother of the famous religious preacher Vivekananda, in his reminiscences pointed out how Brahmins never took up cooking at other people’s houses in what he considered the “bygone days.”⁴⁹ It was disrespectful for a Brahmin who belonged to a priestly caste to take up cooking at another’s home. Datta failed to understand the new demand for Brahmin cooks. He argued that in an earlier

⁴⁵ Swapna M. Banerjee. *Men, Women, and Domestics: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004) p.67.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Muhammad Waliullah. *Jug Bichitra*. Cited in Banerjee. *Men, Women, and Domestics*. pp.70-71.

⁴⁸ Panchkari Bandopadhyay. *Panchkari Bandopadhyayer Rachanabali*. vol.2. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das eds. (Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1358 BS [c.1951]) pp. 307-308.

⁴⁹ Mahendranath Datta. *Kolikatar Puratan Kahini o Pratha* (Kolkata: Mahendra Publishing Committee, 1st print 1973) p.102.

period there were cooks belonging to other castes who cooked as well as the Brahmins.⁵⁰ Datta narrated a popular account of how the Brahmin cook emerged. He wrote of how a specific group of people emerged just to spoil the feasts. These were a random group of people who, according to Datta, took delight in criticizing the food cooked in social feasts. Earlier, women cooked for the feasts. They were more demure and could not deal with these feast spoilers. Hence a stronger response to these feast spoilers was needed. This is how the Brahmin cooks emerged who could yell at the feast spoilers, albeit they did not cook well at all.⁵¹

The above passage pushes one further to think about what was happening in relation to the question of gender and the question of caste in colonial Bengal. If one were to believe Datta, then having an upper caste cook was not an absolute requirement in Bengal in his childhood. Why, then, this sudden preponderance of Brahmin cooks? A probable explanation for this would be a consciousness about their caste status among the Bengali middle-class. The formation of a colonial middle-class in Bengal cannot be fully grasped without a reference to the question of caste.⁵² It has been argued by scholars like S.N. Mukherjee that although “*bhadralok*” (the respectable society, chiefly 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.⁵³ Men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of living, and received a similar education would be considered a “*bhadralok*.”⁵⁴ While it is true that it was possible for men belonging to the lower castes

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.12.

⁵² The *bhadralok* would consist of both the aristocratic, landed elites as well as the middle-income intermediate strata.

⁵³ S.N. Mukherjee. *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

to climb up the social hierarchy 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. Having a Brahmin cook became a marker of middle-class status in several ways. First, caste became a mode of distancing the middle-class from its “other.” Second, having a Brahmin cook implied an effort to climb up the ladder of caste hierarchy for some lower caste groups who had become “*bhadralok*.” And then employing a Brahmin, a priestly caste, by a lower caste “*bhadralok*” could also be a symbol of power for the colonial middle-class.

Nonetheless, one needs to acknowledge that along side this consciousness of caste, there was also a perceptible change in the way caste hierarchy was viewed at least by some of the middle-class. The Brahmin cooks remained only a marker of status and for some households, like the upper class Tagore family, Brahmin cooks were employed for cooking quotidian dishes like rice and pulses. The responsibility for any meat preparation went to lower-caste cooks.⁵⁵ Many of the Bengali Hindu middle-class belonged to castes other than the Brahmins. Blind subscription to the food made by the Brahmin cook had the possibility of overshadowing the discourse of refinement and taste that the Bengali middle-class constructed. As part of this discourse of taste, the food cooked by the Brahmin cook was deemed to be of an inferior quality when compared to the food cooked by the women of the house.

⁵⁵ Pragyasundari Debi. *Amish o Niramish Ahar*. vol 1 (Kolkata: Ananda publishers, 2000, first published by Ananda in 1995. first published, 1907).p.58.

Referring to the proliferation of Brahmin cooks from Orissa in the Bengali household, Dinesh Chandra Sen thus expressed his utter disgust, indicating that the tendency of these cooks to pour excessive salt into the food made the food thoroughly unpalatable.⁵⁶ Sen's overt generalization of the Oriya Brahmin cooks was accompanied by his insistence that the women of the house should cook, and he made it very clear why women's cooking was so significant:

Grihini (mistress) is not the cook. She is in fact the mistress of the kitchen. She would supervise the cook, as she is acquainted with the likes and dislikes of each of her family members. Food constitutes the essence of one's life. Hence, its charge cannot be left to a paid cook. When *grihini* herself takes the charge of the kitchen, she resembles none other than the goddess *Annapurna* (*anna* meaning rice). She is affection personified, which makes the food she prepares, taste like nectar.⁵⁷

It was then love and affection that set apart women's cooking from those of hired male cooks. The lady of the house was different from the hired cooks because she did not cook for wage labor. She was the giver of food- the agent for imbuing culinary practice with the façade of affect and value. The names of *Annapurna* and *Lakshmi*, the rice-giving deities, are repeatedly mentioned in this context.

Aesthetitization of women's cooking: Politics of the middle-class in colonial Bengal

The aestheticization of women's cooking involved the constant valorizing of an act of physical labor, by both men and women. In her work, Dolores Hayden refers to the non-recognition of women's skill in the private sphere.⁵⁸ According to Hayden, while women may have gourmet kitchens, sewing rooms and so-called master bedrooms, her

⁵⁶ Dinesh Chandra Sen. *Grihasree* (Kolkata: 1322 BS [c.1915]) pp.84-85.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.4.

⁵⁸ Dolores Hayden. *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984).

role is one of service and not autonomy.⁵⁹ While Hayden is right about the non-recognition of women's labor, what she misses out is that it is actually the act of making women autonomous in the kitchen that leads to non-recognition of her skills. In colonial Bengal, it was the constant aestheticization of women's labor, which made them the mistress of the kitchen and not merely cooks, in the middle class discourse. Thus while one compared the vegetables chopped by her mother to a heap of jasmine flowers⁶⁰, another celebrated the kitchen as a temple.⁶¹ This aestheticization of women's cooking was a very careful one, which took care to see that women's domestic labor did not become an object of critique from the colonial state. It was aestheticized in a way that would present women as being the loving cook, and not a disgruntled individual, overburdened with fulfilling the constant needs of the family. Aestheticizing cooking enabled the middle-class Bengalis to present domestic labor in a much more palatable mold. Thus even Tagore who categorically stated in his poem, "*Narir Kartabya*" (Duty of Women), that man's pride in his faculty of reason, led him to overlook the extreme monotony of cooking for women⁶², took delight in recalling women's assemblies on the family terrace in the afternoon, where food preparation was one of the activities⁶³ In these reminiscences, the making of mango pickle became an artistic act.⁶⁴ These acts, which were described by Tagore as feminine, were also romanticized as being the last of those traits which connected the urban middle class to its rural origins.⁶⁵ This kind of

⁵⁹ Ibid.pp.65-66.

⁶⁰ Rani Chanda. *Amar Ma'r Baper Bari* (Kolkata: Viswabharati, 1977.Reprint, 1986) pp.6-7.

⁶¹ Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. *Jibaner Jharapata*.pp.9-12.

⁶² Rabindranath Tagore. "Narir Kartabya."(1346 BS [c.1939]). in Tagore. *Ravindra Rachanabali*. vol. 13 (Viswabharati, 1354 BS[c.1947], reprint 1365 BS[c.1958],1381 BS.[c.1974],1386 BS[c.1979]) pp.54-55.

⁶³ Tagore. Chhelebeli (1347 BS [c.1940]. in Tagore. *Ravindra Rachanabali*. vol. 16 (Viswabharati,1355 BS[c.1948], reprint 1365 B.S. [c.1958], 1377 B.S. [c.1970], 1384 B.S. [c.1977])pp.610.

⁶⁴ Ibid.pp.610-611.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

aestheticization of women's cooking is also available in his poem "*Nimantran*" (Invitation), where he wrote that a graceful hand (by which he implies a feminine touch) always made food a delightful affair.⁶⁶

In another memoir, Amritalal Basu (1853-1929), the dramatist and theatre activist, reminiscenced that women made temples of butter, shaped betel nuts in the form of flowers, and made garlands of chick peas. His contemporary Mahendranath Datta wrote about the artistic clay molds that women made in order to give floral shapes to *sandesh*, a sweet made from cottage cheese.⁶⁷ This aestheticization not only made domestic labor more presentable to women who were supposed to cook (indeed women also participated in the discourse), it also carried an element of validation so far as the male enunciators of this discourse were concerned. It aided the middle-class Bengali men's construction of themselves in relation to their other, the laboring classes. The aestheticization of women's labor in the kitchen- the most conspicuous form of physical work done in middle-class homes- had the impact of distancing physical labor in "respectable" society from the laborious toil of the rest of the population.

To buttress the projected element of affect in women's labor, the middle-class Bengalis commented on the inability of a hired cook to cook food to perfection.⁶⁸ Women were dissociated from any such association of cooking with profit. The hiring of cooks was also an indication of the growing professionalization of an elemental aspect of everyday life- the preparation of food and the feeding of the family. Perhaps, these male

⁶⁶ Tagore. "Nimantran." (Chandannagar, 1935). in Tagore. *Ravindra Rachanabali*. vol. 19 (Viswabharati, 1342 B.S. (c.1945), reprint 1363 BS[c.1956], 1375 BS[c.1975], 1976) pp.26-27.

⁶⁷ Amritalal Basu. *Amritalal Bosur Atmasmriti*. Arunkumar Mitra ed. (Kolkata: Sahityalok, 1982), Mahendranath Datta. *Kolikatar*. p.52.

⁶⁸ Kumudini Ray. "Hindu Narir Garhyastha Dharma: Bamaganer Rachana." *Bamabodhini* (Kartik 1301BS [c.October/November, 1894]). Republished in Bharati Ray ed. *Nari o Paribar: Bamabodhini Patrika (1270-1329 Bangabda)* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002) pp.176-179.

cooks symbolized those acts of labor which the Bengali Hindu middle-class men abhorred, and brought to the fore their own labor in the outside world. Sumit Sarkar elaborates this concern for professionalization in his writings. According to Sarkar, the middle-class Bengali Hindus, especially the middle and lower levels of the middle-class, were subject to a new discipline of work regulated by time which they were not used to in pre-colonial India.⁶⁹ Calcutta, which became the principal site for British Indian bureaucracy, mercantile enterprise and education in the late 19th century, Sarkar argues, also nurtured this new discipline of work. Regular hours of work all through the year seemed to the middle-class a departure from their laid back tempo of work in the villages. Thus the Bengali middle-class abhorred a person who worked for money in what was considered the most sacred space of middle-class life.⁷⁰ The aestheticization of the kitchen was thus an important part of the colonial middle-class's efforts to escape the tribulations of the outside world into a happy imaginary, and an imagined past, whereby the more agreeable aspects of life could be placed alongside the losses they had suffered under colonial rule.⁷¹

In her recent work, Swapna Banerjee argues that the formation of the colonial middle-class in Bengal cannot be grasped without analyzing the relationship of the middle-class with the domestic servants.⁷² Banerjee's work expands to include all categories of domestic servants, which range from gardeners, doorkeepers, sweepers to

⁶⁹Sumit Sarkar. *Writing Social History* (Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai, Mumbai: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷⁰ Ibid.p.309.

⁷¹ One might compare this aestheticization of labor by the Bengali middle class Hindus with Malthus's depiction of the English bourgeois home, where the domesticated housewife sublimated sexual instincts in order to create a cosy home for the male breadwinner who had to struggle for money in a hostile world outside. Cited in Maria Mies. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (London, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. USA: Zed Books Limited, 1986).

⁷² Swapna M. Banerjee. *Men, Women, and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

cooks and wet-nurses. However, she does not delve into analyzing the labor content of these domestic workers. It is the hired cook whose work was exactly the same as that of women. It is in this context that aestheticization becomes so essential. 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 considered “natural,” cooking. Hence association of cooking with aesthetics became so visible. Unlike each household, which had its own novelty in cuisine, the hired cooks implied a standardization of cooking. Mahendranth 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 ones 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 fresh *saree*. The food they served reminded one of *Annapurna* (deity giving rice). And now fake Brahmins cook for the feasts. Women of these days cannot stand the smoke exhausting from the kitchen. Thus culinary art which is the novelty of Bengal is fast disappearing.⁷⁴

This emphasis on novelty is inextricably linked with the question of authenticity. As Susan 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 method is used in crafting of these commodities, and hence

⁷³ MahendranDatta. *Kolikatar*. p. 12.

⁷⁴ Basantakumar Chaudhuri “Baje Kharach.” Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year 5, nos.2&3, (Kolikata, Jaisthya- Asharh 1338 BS [c.May/June-June/July1331]):30-35.

they call for 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 give them special value. Similarly in the case of women's cooking in colonial Bengal, what made it special was this imagined continuation of their cooking, which was different from what male cooks made. The latter's food as already stated smacked of standardized cooking made in return for money.

Aestheticization of women's cooking has another component that emphasizes the cultural content of women's work and robs it off its economic content. As Maria Mies propounds in her classic work, with capitalism the family came to be fixed as an arena of consumption and love, which was excluded from production.⁷⁶ The rhetoric of the colonial middle-class revolved around a cultural discourse about women's role in the domestic space vis-à-vis the male cooks. This rhetoric, however, is silent about the role of lower class women who took an equal part in the production process like their male counterparts.

It has long been argued by Marxist feminist scholars that capitalism posited a sharp distinction between "paid" work and "unpaid" work by taking work out of the family. The pre-capitalist family functioned as an integrated economic unit where there was not a sharp division between women's productive and reproductive labor. Women never stopped working, but with industrial capitalism their contribution to family lost its earlier economic significance. Their labor within the domestic sphere could not be

⁷⁵ Susan J. Terrio. "Crafting Chocolates in France." in James L. Watson & Melissal L. Caldwell eds. *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (Caldwell: Blackwell, 2005).

⁷⁶ Maria Mies. *Patriarchy and Accumulation*.

counted as real work as it was not “paid” work.⁷⁷ Undoubtedly, women’s labor in pre-capitalist economy was a back-breaking one since it combined both “public” and “private” work. However, in pre-capitalist economy women did have an opportunity to get remuneration from the kind of work they did.

To understand the nature of women’s work, an analysis of “domesticity,” or domestic work, and its distinction from so-called productive labor is needed. Idealization of family and domesticity was perhaps most visible in Victorian England. This domesticity was a celebration of the bourgeois ideals of family wherein the middle-class “housewife” came to be located within the family. In a sharp contrast to an earlier family where women were involved in the process of production for the family, the chief role of women in Victorian England became providing emotional support for men who toiled in the new industrial public sphere.⁷⁸ However, even in Victorian England, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have convincingly demonstrated that the division between the public and the private often became blurred. They maintain that networks of familial and female support underpinned the rise of middle-class men to public prominence. The middle-class homes were built on the expropriation of working men and women’s labor, whether in the public world of the workplace or the private workplace of the home, which employed majority of the female workforce as servants well into the 20th century.⁷⁹

Feminist scholars address this gap between the ideology of domesticity and practice. The vast majority of working-class women were engaged in work either inside

⁷⁷ Heidi Hartmann. “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union.” in Lydia Sargent ed. *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), Margaret Benston. “The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation” (1969). in Ellen Malos ed. *The Politics of Housework* (London, New York: Allison & Busby, 1980), Peggy Morton. “Women’s Work is Never Done.” in Malos ed. *The Politics*.

⁷⁸ Catherine Hall. “The History of Housewife” (1973). in Malos ed. *The Politics*.

⁷⁹ Leonore Davidoff & Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750-1850* (London, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Hutchinson, 1987).

or outside the home. However, the middle-class defined the ideology of “domesticity” as a universal ideology and tried to impose this ideology on the working-class as well.⁸⁰ Hall delves into the reason behind the emergence of this new domesticity. The attempt to locate women in the home could act as a justification for defining her work outside home as secondary and more significantly low-paid and unskilled.⁸¹

The bourgeois ideology of Victorian England thus also became prevalent in the middle-class homes in colonial Bengal, and defined the new domestic ideal of the “housewife.” Scholars, like Samita Sen, have demonstrated that the idealization of domestic tasks stripped them off their labor content and subsequently robbed them off their economic value.⁸² Sen concentrates on the historical context of late colonial India to understand how women’s work came to be viewed in this manner. She argues that this idealization of “domesticity” only defined the middle-class woman as the “housewife.” Poor women always kept working in the production for the household, even more as men increasingly migrated from the villages to the cities. The vacant agricultural jobs thus had to be taken over by rural women. It was chiefly middle-class women who migrated to the cities with their men folk who became the “housewife.” The “housewife” in the city was disengaged from a range of activities integrally associated with domesticity in the village, like food processing, market gardening, livestock tending, and spinning. Instead, she became principally responsible for the supervision of a range of tasks related to immediate consumption within the middle-class household.⁸³

⁸⁰ Catherine Hall. “History,” Peggy Morton. “Women’s Work.” in Ellen Malos ed. *The Politics*.

⁸¹ Catherine Hall. “History.”

⁸² Samita Sen. *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸³ Ibid.

An understanding of domestic work, however, cannot be complete without going a little deeper into analyzing who the “housewife” was or what sort of home she was dwelling in. The concept of an ideal housewife had to be constructed, which entailed more than defining “domesticity” as a universalist ideology. It could not be denied that working-class women were engaged in physical labor, a labor that made their work visible and “public.” “Domesticity” had to be separated from “publicness.” The mark of separation worked towards separating the “housewife” from the working-class woman. This separation between the middle-class and the working-class women has been theorized by scholars like Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid who argue that this separation is also responsible for the gendering of space. For working-class women, their subsistence labor could be carried out in the private sphere of home but in that case the home could not be qualified as a private sphere. The paradox is that the definition of their labor as household work could make the “public” nature of their work invisible and therefore “unpaid.”⁸⁴ The need of the day was to create a “proper” woman who would be different from the ungente women of the newly emerging jute-mills⁸⁵ as also from the lower class women performing what the middle-class Bengalis considered to be an indiscreet popular culture.⁸⁶

A look into the productive role of the lower-class female population, especially in the context of colonial Bengal, is necessary to understand the rhetoric of cooking formulated by the middle-class, which emanated from colonial modernity. Very often, rice husking mainly performed by rural women was a means of supplementing the

⁸⁴ Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid. “Recasting Women: An Introduction.” in Sangari & Vaid eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

⁸⁵ Samita Sen. *Women and Labour*.

⁸⁶ Sumanta Banerjee. “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal.” in Sangari & Vaid eds. *Recasting Women*.

income from cultivation. In the Narra village of Sudder sub-division in the Bankoora district, a report stated that the female members of the house husked rice for the upper classes and were paid for in grain. Women also assisted men in the work of threshing rice.⁸⁷ In Dinajpore also, the income of an average cultivating family was supplemented by women who husked paddy. Apart from rice husking, women also wove gunny bags and weeded crops. Amongst the agricultural laborers in Dinajpore, women earned two rupees to eight rupees per month by husking grain for others, or by purchasing unhusked grain, and selling cleaned rice in the market, the earnings from which supplemented the earnings of the male members and enabled the family to live comfortably.⁸⁸ The same situation could also be seen in the Presidency Division.⁸⁹ This participation of the lower-class women in the process of production declined by the 20th century. In her classic work on the impact of “modernization” on women’s labor, Mukul Mukherjee demonstrates that the introduction of rice- mills led to a decline in rural women’s rice-husking jobs in early 20th century Bengal.⁹⁰ Mukherjee’s work documents how traditionally women had always participated and contributed to subsistence food production of the family. Their skills in husking rice offered them a command over what is considered the staple food of Bengal, rice.⁹¹ Nirmala Banerjee also documents the

⁸⁷ 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. The 16th April 1888. *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1888) pp.6-9.

⁸⁸ Letter From- E.E. Lewis, Esq., C.S., Commissioner of the Rajshahye Division, To- The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue (Agriculture) Department. Proceeding No. 109 M. dated, Rampore Beaulah, the 30 April, 1888. *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1888) pp.41-46.

⁸⁹ Letter From- A. Smith, Esq., Commissioner of the Presidency Division, To- The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department. Proceeding No.1 MA, dated Calcutta, 17 May 1888. *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal*, pp.1-30.

⁹⁰ Mukul Mukherjee. “Impact of Modernization on Women’s Occupations: A Case Study of the Rice-husking Industry of Bengal.” in J. Krishnamurty ed. *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (Delhi:Oxford University Press.,1989).

⁹¹ Ibid.

visibility of women's work prior to rationalization of production in the latter half of the 19th century. She argues that women not only worked for their own families, but also sold their products in the markets. Their functions included making dairy products, preservation and processing of grain and pulses, making puffed and flattened rice, rice pounding, flour grinding and the like.⁹² Mukherjee's and Banerjee's works on colonial Bengal have documented the effects of capitalist economy on women's labor.⁹³ It brings out how the pleasures of capitalism are enjoyed by a few making others its victim.

The gendered rhetoric of cooking denuded women's work of any substantial value by aestheticizing it. Thus even when women's role in subsistence production was referred to, it was cast in romantic terms. Women of the bygone days were praised because they grew their own vegetables for their families. But any sense of the market value of their productive role was completely erased in the contemporary discourse.⁹⁴ However, the middle-class injected economy into their cultural rhetoric in another way. They argued that if women cooked instead of delegating the task of cooking to servants it would be much more economical.⁹⁵ This would be beneficial for the the family budget and prevent wastage. In an essay in *Bamabodhini*, a women's journal, one woman stated the example

⁹² Nirmala Banerjee. "Working Women in Colonial Bengal." in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) p.284.

⁹³ In case of Sardinia, Carole Counihan has shown how in subsistence wheat and bread production, men and women depended on each other for assistance exchange of labor. This social interdependence declined with the concentration of wheat production on capital intensive farms and of bread production in a few bakeries. Carole M. Counihan. *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999) pp.25-42.

⁹⁴ Hemantabala Devi (b.1301 BS [c.1894]) *Hemantabala Devir Rachana-Sankalan*. Jasodhara Bagchi, Abhijit Sen eds.(Kolkata, 1992) p.235, Subodhkinkar Nanda Majumdar. "Krishi o Sar, 'Kopir Chash'." Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year 3, no.9, (Kolkata, Poush 1336 BS [c. December/January 1930]):290-294, Matilal Sengupta. "Palli Jibaner Ekta Abhigyata." Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year3, no10, (Kolkata, Poush 1336 BS [c.December1930]):316-318.

⁹⁵ Bulloram Mullick. "The Grihini or Materfamilia." in Bulloram Mullick. *Essays on the Hindu Family in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1882) pp.40-44, Basantakumar Chaudhuri. "Baje Kharach." Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year5, nos.2&3, (Kolkata, Jaisthya-Asharh 1338 BS [c.May/June-June/July 1331]):30-35.

of an “ideal Bengali woman” who saved her husband the cost of a sweetmeat maker by cooking everything herself.⁹⁶ Although not spelt out clearly, this economic association of women with cooking placed them ultimately in the same position as of a laborer. Just as a professional cook cooked for money, women’s cooking was supposed to save her husband and her family from expending on a cook. The motive that lay behind affection thus often had a material basis-of economic convenience.

Pleasures of capitalism: Rethinking feminist historiography

While capitalist modernity ushered in by colonialism often denuded women’s work of its economic content, in many ways capitalism created a new space for middle-class women. This space was created by the Bengali middle-class women themselves who began writing about food. Print-capitalism made possible publication of recipe books often written by women who took a serious and academic interest in cookery.

In the very important works of both Tanika Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee, women’s role in the public sphere, especially in the late 19th-early 20th century Bengal remains considerably under-played. Sarkar admits that in the late 1920s and the early 1930s colonial Bengal saw women getting actively involved in mainstream nationalist movement.⁹⁷ In urban Calcutta, women participated actively in Gandhian nationalist movements organized by the Indian National Congress; they courted arrests, occupied government buildings, and organized demonstrations. Sarkar has argued that deployment of women in certain types of agitation was a deliberate strategy of the Congress. This strategy was expected to reduce the intensity of police repression, especially when it

⁹⁶ Mankumari Basu. “Adarsha Bangaramani: Banga Mahilar Patra.” *Bamabodhini* (Kartik 1295 BS[c.October/November 1888]). Republished in Bharati Ray ed. *Nari o Paribar: Bamabodhini Patrika (1270-1329 Bangabda)* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002) pp.121-124.

⁹⁷ Tanika Sarkar. “Politics and Women in Bengal: The Conditions and Meanings of Participation.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*.21:1,(1984):91-101.

concerned respectable middle-class urban women.⁹⁸ Sarkar has argued that these public roles assumed by women were sanctioned only because the Gandhian movement was non-violent and participation in the Congress meant obedience to a particular authority similar to the one in the family. Even if the movements were militant, women's politicization was interpreted as a sacrifice. Thus Sarkar concludes that participation of women could only come from such traditional moorings.⁹⁹

Partha Chatterjee, on the other hand, acknowledges women's efforts in the construction of an independent identity, but maintains that women's voice could only be heard in the intimate domain of the nationalist middle-class, the "spiritual." Following this argument, the act of autobiography writing and reminiscing about the past gave women autonomy, but of a limited nature. Dipesh Chakrabarty's and Mary Elizabeth Hancock's arguments are more convincing in this respect. Chakrabarty has argued how writing in many cases gave women a chance to express their individuality, albeit couched in terms of a new patriarchy. Chakrabarty cites the example of a booklet named *Patibrata Dharma* (A Treatise on Female Chastity) written around 1870 by Dayamayi Dasi.¹⁰⁰ While written from a language that may resemble patriarchy, this text, as Chakrabarty has shown, could bring women out into the public sphere. In expressing her own personal desire and at the same time recording her joy in the acquisition of literacy, Dayamayi participated in the public sphere.

⁹⁸ Ibid.p.97.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Mary Hancock has also argued that domesticity itself could make home visible in public life.¹⁰¹ In her work on *Smarta* middle-class community in Southern India, Hancock has convincingly argued how modernity is indigenized at the local level. She has adumbrated how nationalist organizations controlled by elite *Smarta* women emphasized the political importance and visibility of the home in order to argue for women's right to education and suffrage. Nationalist women's espousal of home science gave credence to domesticity as a mode of "indigenizing" modernity by transforming quotidian activities like consumption, cooking, dress, and grooming.¹⁰²

Writing recipe books adds a different dimension to this much checkered historiography on the construction of space in colonial India. I argue that recipes were written from within a public/professional domain instead of a private/domestic one. This act of writing demonstrates a more dramatic act of women's agency that is neither reflected through early 20th century women's participation in nationalist struggles, nor through simply expressing her desire through autobiographies. The innumerable recipes that women produced cannot be explained away as being engendered by the hand of patriarchy. Writing as a mode of self-expression could take several forms. If through the writing of autobiographies women operated within the "spiritual" domain, in other senses women also crossed this domain. It is in this context that we need to reconceptualize the "public" and the "private." 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 men who also wrote recipes.

¹⁰¹ Mary Elizabeth Hancock. *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India* (Boulder, Colorado, Oxford, UK: Westview Press, 1999).

¹⁰² Ibid.p.61.

The number of discussions of recipes by women proliferated from the end of the 19th century. *Bamabodhini*, a periodical written exclusively for women, published recipes in some of its issues from the year 1884. *Mahila*, another women's journal, which began to be published from 1895 also took an initiative in publishing varieties of recipes. Scion of the Tagore family, and wife of Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the famous Assamese litterateur, Pragya Sundari Devi edited a journal called *Punya* from 1897 which also had a significant section on recipes. Some other women's periodicals, where such recipes were published, are *Paricharika* and *Antahpur*.¹⁰³ Most of these periodicals were monthly periodicals, some edited by middle-class Hindu women, like for instance Pragya Sundari Devi. Within this production of recipes, lay a pleasure of gastronomy. Women like Pragyasundari Devi engaged in writing about cooking almost as if it were a form of art. In that sense, her notions of gastronomic pleasure was no different from Brillat-Savarin, the famous French connoisseur of culinary art. Like her contemporary male recipe writers, Pragyasundari took a professional interest in writing recipes. Introductions to her books did not remain confined to instructions for keeping a well maintained household. In other words, she was not merely interested in elements and processes that went into the making of a particular recipe. Pragyasundari also took an academic interest in the history of gastronomy. One cannot just explain away these cookbooks and recipe columns as a mode of education for "new" women. Culinary education was definitely deemed necessary for a modern woman, allegedly not adept in her cooking skills. However, this body of writing also became infused with an almost academic dimension as vigorous debates on recipes and the like ensued in the pages of the journals mentioned above. A

¹⁰³ Sripantha. Introduction to *Pakrajeswar o Byanjan- Ratnakar*. in *Pakrajeswar o Byanjan- Ratnakar*. (Kolkata, 2004) pp.9-79.

debate between two women's journals about how to make guava jelly gave almost an academic dimension to cooking.¹⁰⁴

The debate on guava jelly was concerned with “authenticity” and the technicalities of making it. This debate took place between two periodicals *Punya* and *Antahpur* in the early 20th century. A bitter dispute erupted on whose recipe was more “authentic.” *Antahpur* first published a recipe for the making of guava jelly in a January 1901 issue of the journal. According to this recipe, the guavas first needed to be skinned and boiled for a while, then strained to get rid of the seeds. The guava pulp was then to be mixed with sugar, all the while constantly stirring. When the mixture thickened and it came to a room temperature, it could be bottled as guava jelly.¹⁰⁵ This recipe was criticized by *Punya* in its issue of the same month. The principal critique was that the recipe given in *Antahpur* was picked up from some other recipe book and not self-tried.¹⁰⁶ *Punya* came up with its version of guava jelly, which read as follows:

First put the saucepan on fire with 5 quarters of water. Heat it for about seven minutes and put the guavas in it. After three quarters (*Punya* actually uses the term “quarter” rather than the Bengali version of it) of the guava becomes boiled, take down the saucepan from stove. Cover it tightly with a cotton cloth. When the entire water is strained, separate the pulp. The pulp can be used for guava cheese. Mix sugar in the liquid and put it on the fire. Stir in lemon juice when it starts to boil. Mix in color after ten minutes. Take it off the fire after another ten minutes.¹⁰⁷

Given a sharp response by *Antahpur* in March, 1901, *Punya* came up with an even sharper critique. In this critique, *Punya* directly took up the question of authenticity. For

¹⁰⁴ Hemantakumati Chaudhuri ed. *Antahpur*. vol. iv, no.1,(Kolikata,January 1901) p.15, Pragyasundari Devi ed. *Punya*. year 3, vol.5, (Kolikata, January 1901) p.232, *Punya*. year 3, vol.7,(Kolikata, March 1901) pp.312-313, pp.321-325.

¹⁰⁵ Hemantakumati Chaudhuri ed. *Antahpur*. vol. 1v no.1,(Kolikata,January 1901) p.15.

¹⁰⁶ Pragyasundari Devi ed. *Punya*. year 3, vol.5, (Kolikata, January 1901) p.232.

¹⁰⁷ *Punya*. year 3, vol.7, (Kolikata, March 1901) pp.312-313.

Punya, *Antahpur*'s recipe was a new one. There was no role of innovation in this recipe. The only authentic guava jelly was the one that was sold in foreign labeled bottles in the shops, and *Punya* had followed that recipe. Hence the recipe for guava jelly in *Punya* was authentic.¹⁰⁸ According to *Punya*, there would have been no problem if *Antahpur* had used another term for its own recipe. Authentic guava jelly had a transparent red-glass like look. If the jelly was mixed with pulp, like it was suggested in *Antahpur*, it would not look so clear.¹⁰⁹

The debate on guava jelly that erupted in the pages of *Antahpur* and *Punya* was rather significant. The articulated concern here about authenticity and naming formed crucial components of the new rhetoric of gastronomy. It was an important indicator of how the discourse on cooking and good taste in food, originally enunciated by middle-class men, had been appropriated by women, who made a mark in the "public" domain in terms of their dedicated approach to culinary art. These women, who took an active interest in the art of food preparation, lead us to rethink the feminist understanding of the position of women under the new patriarchy. Pragyasundari, for instance, took delight not only in cooking but also in innovating and improvising new dishes. She wrote down each recipe that she made and later compiled them into recipe books. Her *Amish o Niramish Ahar*, vol.1 (Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian food) came out in 1900. Although labeled non-vegetarian, this volume as well as the second volume, contained vegetarian recipes only. In 1908 a third volume was published which had non-vegetarian recipes. All these volumes had several reprints. In 1914, she published an abridged version of the same

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. pp.321-325.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

work.¹¹⁰ Pragyasundari had a personal interest in the art of cuisine rather than an imposed one. She was encouraged by her father to learn cooking from the cooks in her childhood, but so were her brothers. Her father himself took an active interest in culinary art.

In another aspect, these cookbooks written by Pragyasundari and many of her contemporaries epitomized the domesticity of cooking. All these cookbooks were results of print capitalism. That these books were often reprinted and even reedited like Pragyasundari's book evince that apart from having an epicurean angle they also brought some remunerative benefits at least for middle-class and upper middle-class women. Most of these periodicals began to be published around the late 19th century and continued to be in print for a long period of time; it seems that they had substantial subscription. Thus subscription for domestic manuals or journals such as *Punya* or *Antahpur*, which contained innumerable recipes, brought remuneration as well. But then of course these pleasures of capitalist modernity remained confined to the upper echelons of society. For the vast majority of the population these pleasures remained distant. A middle class rhetoric about a constructed "Golden Age" could not contain it.

¹¹⁰ Introduction by Ira Ghosh. In Pragyasundaru Devi. *Amish o Niramish Ahar. vol. I, Niramish* (Kolkata, 1995)pp.9-11.

Chapter 3: Eating “modernity:” Changing dietary practices in colonial Bengal

Introduction

Changing eating patterns in colonial Bengal revolved around the issues of hybridity and authenticity. These issues operated at two levels. On one level, British food was appropriated within the fold of “traditional” cuisine to create a modern cuisine. In this context, some of the indigenous elites clamored for retaining the “authenticity” of food, while some of them welcomed new food. However, both these positions need to be problematized. Curry powder was accepted only as a “new” ingredient for cooking and was regarded by the Bengali cookbook writers to be a figment of the British imagination. On the other hand, both British and Bengali ingredients were combined to create a “hybrid” recipe; but proving the “hybrid” to be “authentic” became a primary concern. Thus hybridity and authenticity were merely flip sides of one coin. At another level, the Bengali Hindu middle-class imagined a romantic past of plenitude for themselves. This imagery created an organic history for the middle-class wherefrom the question of “authentic” cuisine emerged. At the same time, this middle-class also succumbed to pleasures of modernity and the hybrid cuisine that emanated from it.

Recent historiography on food challenges the question of authenticity in food. As a result, they emphasize the role of “curry” as a metaphor. Scholars such as Lizzie Collingham, Parama Roy and Uma Narayan have argued that gastronomical experience can shape an identity. In her discussion of the Indian Diaspora, Uma Narayan traces the question of authenticity to colonial India where “curry” was basically constructed as a

hodge-podge of Indian spices.¹ This imagined “Indian cuisine” traveled to Britain and gained popularity among the British there who claimed that the curry powder sold in Britain was much more authentic than the Indian version of “curry.”² However, for the colonial residents in India, a love for “curry” was not that easy, since they were concerned with keeping their racial purity intact in the colony. Narayan here is concerned with the hybridity of “curry”. In her opinion, the “curry” that is called “authentic” in Britain was after all a product of British imagination. This construction of authenticity, as Narayan argues, lingers into the post-colonial era, through the imaginings of the diasporic population as to what constitutes “authenticity.” At the same time, the non-diasporic population imagines certain types of food as stereotypically Indian and therefore “authentic.”³

Parama Roy is also concerned with the hybridity of food, but in a slightly different manner. In her work on the Indian Diaspora, and particularly, Madhur Jaffrey, the popular Indian-born British food writer, Roy dwells upon the question of the authenticity of food.⁴ Jaffrey, Roy argues, is most critical of the so-called Indianness of “curry.” In one of her books, Jaffrey ridiculed curry powder as a random mixture of spices that was made by an Indian chef for his colonial master when he left for England.⁵ While sneering at the curry powder as inauthentic, Jaffrey herself referred to some of the curry powders sold in Britain. In many of her recipes, she herself used curry powder for

¹ Uma Narayan. “Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity, and Indian Food.” in Uma Narayan . *Dislocating Cultures/ Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997)pp.161-219.

² Ibid. p.166.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Parama Roy. “Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora.” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*. vol. 10, no.2,(2002):.471-502.

⁵ Madhur Jaffrey, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* (New York, 1973, Rpt. New York, 1975)p.6, Quoted in Roy.pp.13-14.

what she considered to be authentic Indian recipes. This staying power of curry, according to Roy, unsettles its authenticity. Authenticity thus needs to be contextualized. It is a particular situation that leads to a demand for authenticity. Just the way a random curry powder became a metaphor for authentic Indian food in the colonial period, Roy argues, that for many Indian restaurants in the West in recent times, the so-called curry powder became an easy way to toss up “authentic” Indian food. “Authentic India” holds some archetypal images for the west. This image was constructed in part by the diasporic Indians for the West. The Indianness of “curry powder,” in Roy’s opinion, was what the Indian chef wanted the British to believe. Jaffrey plays a similar role in the post-colonial West, in Roy’s opinion.⁶

Both Narayan and Roy have enriched our understanding by problematizing the question of authenticity of food as well as of identity. Their concern, however, largely revolves around the Indian Diasporas. They do refer to the British experience of food in colonial India. However, these references remain relevant only in relation to the post-colonial experience of the Indian Diasporas in the West. Lizzy Collingham moves beyond “curry” (which has become almost a clichéd metaphor for its frequent usage even in academic discussions) and delves much deeper into the question of hybridity. She contests the idea of an “authentic” Indian food. In order to substantiate her argument, Collingham traces the history of food in India and the experience of the British in colonial India.⁷

According to Collingham, the first pan-Indian cuisine was the Anglo-Indian cuisine and not the cuisine that evolved with the Mughals. Collingham maintains that the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lizzy Collingham. *Curry: A Biography*. (London: Chatto and Winders, 2005).

culinary styles of many regions were not included in the Mughal repertoire and its spread was limited. It was Anglo-Indian cuisine that incorporated several components of Indian cuisine and combined them in a coherent repertoire. Anglo-Indian cuisine also helped to transport it to other parts of India.⁸ However, Collingham writes that albeit a pan-Indian cuisine, Anglo-Indian food cannot be called a national cuisine as the hybrid dishes that it produced was consumed only by the British in India.⁹ Indians did incorporate several new fruits and vegetables that the British brought to India, but never their style or techniques of cooking them.¹⁰

While Collingham demonstrates the fluidity of authenticity, she does not delve into the question why authenticity is significant at all. Narayan and Roy have definitely explored the issue of authenticity in a more explicit manner. They show that a hybrid item like the curry powder could become a sign of diasporic Indian “authenticity” and thus its politics. My treatment of the issues of authenticity and hybridity is slightly different from the existing historiography. I historicize the making of a Bengali cuisine to argue how the colonized returned the gaze to the colonizer. The power of indigenizing lies not just in showing how hybrid was authentic, but how hybrid and authentic could happily coexist. In this context neither the British cuisine nor the Bengali cuisine were either authentic or hybrid. I argue that it is not enough to critique claims for an authenticity. In order to understand how a “Bengali” cuisine emerged, a historicization of this process is required which would explain how these issues affected the colonized and the colonizer. To understand how these issues played a role in the quotidian practices of eating, a thorough reading of cookbooks is called for.

⁸ Ibid. p.118.

⁹ Ibid. pp.119-120.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.166.

What's in a name? Making of a “new” hybrid cuisine

A look at the evolution of the Bengali cookbooks is necessary in order to understand the kind of interest that the Bengali middle-class began to take in gastronomy. The first Bengali cookbook *Pakrajeswar* came out in 1831.¹¹ The next book that followed was *Byanjan-Ratnakar* in 1858.¹² In 1879 another book called *Pakprabandha* was published, which was written by an anonymous Bengali woman. However, the book that first became significant as a Bengali cookbook was written by Bipradas Mukhopadhyay (1842-1914). This was *Soukhin Khady –Pak* published in 1889. Later the two volumes of *Soukhin Khadya-Pak* were combined and published as *Pak Pranali*. Before this, Mukhopadhyay published a monthly periodical of recipes called *Pak Pranali* in 1883. The next significant Bengali cookbook that came out in 1907 was Pragya Sundari Devi's (1870-1950) *Amish o Niramish Ahar*.

Although they wrote in Bengali, the authors of *Pakrajeswar* and *Byanjan-Ratnakar* made it clear that they were not writing for the general Bengali population. These cookbooks were written under the patronage of the king of Burdwan (a district of Bengal). Authors of these two cookbooks claimed that their recipes were drawn from the Mughal period; they were definitely not writing a book of “Bengali” recipes.¹³ Recipes were mostly oriented towards non-vegetarian dishes, especially fowl and mutton. However, mutton recipes hardly contained any onion or garlic (frequently used in *Mughlai* cuisine). The author of *Pakrajeswar* clearly stated that since most people hardly

¹¹ Bisweshar Tarkalankar. *Pakrajeswar*. 2nd ed. (Kolkata, 1286 BS [1879 approx.]) *Pakrajeswar o Byanjan-Ratnakar*. Intro. by Shreepantha (Kolkata, 2004).

¹² *Byanjan-Ratnakar*, 1st ed. (Kolkata, 1858) *Pakrajeswar o Byanjan-Ratnakar*. Intro. by Shreepantha (Kolkata, 2004).

¹² *Pakrajeswar*. p.11

¹³ Ibid.

consumed onion he had refrained from listing it as an essential ingredient in the recipes.¹⁴ *Byanjan-Ratnakar* also did not include onion and garlic in its repertoire of recipes. It can be understood that the readers of *Pakrajeswar* were mostly Hindus who were not very accustomed to having garlic and onion in their food as yet. Another section contained recipes of wheat products, which were absent in later recipe books. *Pakprabandha*, which came out in 1879 and was later edited by Pyarimohan Kabibhushan, was quite different from the earlier two books in the sense that it incorporated garlic and onion in its recipes. It was in all probability written by a woman who did not want her name to be published.¹⁵ Increase in the uses of onion and garlic for recipes supposedly written for the Bengali middle-class Hindus, already began to show change in diet patterns among the middle-class in colonial Bengal.

The first most popular Bengali recipe book was Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's *Soukhin Khadya-Pak* which was published in 1889. As already stated, Mukhopadhyay published a monthly periodical of recipes called *Pak Pranali* in 1883. Later Mukhopadhyay compiled them into a single volume by the same name in 1304 BS (c.1887/88).¹⁶ A thorough discussion of both Mukhopadhyay's and Pragyasundari Devi's cookbooks is called for in order to understand how hybridity forms the crux of the development of the Bengali cuisine. Both Mukhopadhyay's and Pragyasundari's cookbooks are classic examples of the changing diet of the Bengalis. The vegetable recipes that Mukhopadhyay described were mostly made from vegetables already available in India. However, he did have recipes on cabbage and cauliflower which were new

¹⁴ *Pakrajeswar*. p.11

¹⁵ Pyarimohan Kabibhushan ed. *Pakprabandha* (Kolkata, 1934).

¹⁶ Bipradas Sharma. *Pak Pranali*. (Kolkata, 1313 BS [c.1906]. First pub. (Kolkata, 1304 BS [c.1887])).

vegetables. Since cabbage was a new vegetable, Mukhopadhyay deemed it necessary to first introduce cabbage to his readers.

Mukhopadhyay tried to make his readers aware of different categories of cabbage, like drumhead and sugar loop. One can also learn 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 became imperative since cabbage was a new vegetable.¹⁷ In the periodical, as well as the cookbook, so-called Bengali recipes happily co-existed with “new” recipes which ranged from British to Italian and to French cuisines. Recipes included Jewish fried fish, Italian mutton, Mutton French cutlet, English chop, 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* was a dish made of rice, lentil, 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).¹⁸ When the British came to India they came to thoroughly enjoy *Khichri/Khichuri*.¹⁹ Mukhopadhyay went one step further and gave an English flavor to an Indian dish. It was thus a constant process of hybridization where both the British elements as well as the “Indian” elements were present.

This play of nomenclature is perhaps most evident in both Mukhopadhyay’s and Pragyasundari’s use of the term “curry.” The term “curry”, which was often an English

¹⁷ Bipradas Mukhopadhyay. *Pak Pranali*. (Kolikata, 1883) pp.98-100.

¹⁸ Bipradas Sharma. *Pak Pranali*. (Kolikata, 1313 BS [c.1906]. First pub. (Kolikata, 1304 BS [c.1887]).

¹⁹ David Burton. *The Raj at Table: A Culinary History of the British in India* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993) pp.83-85, Collingham. *Curry*.p.119.

innovation for Indian recipe of a mixture of spices, found place in *Pak Pranali*. We get to know about recipes such as lamb curry, egg curry, prawn curry, and English rohu fish curry in Mukhopadhyay's cookbook. He liberally used onion and garlic in these recipes.²⁰ However, for Mukhopadhyay, curry had an entirely different definition, quite different from 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."²¹ When Mukhopadhyay gave 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 it within quotes. He wrote that the English did not use ground spices in their "curry" and invented something called the "Calcutta- curry-powder." "Calcutta-curry-powder" was made of a mixture of one tablespoon poppy seeds, one tablespoon turmeric powder, half teaspoon red chili powder, half tea spoon cumin, and one tea spoon salt²². Collingham has argued that curry was created for the British in India.²³ 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 connections with curry. Hence Mukhopadhyay connected curry to a different trajectory. Although Pragyasundari 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 hodge-podge of spices called curry powder.²⁴ Pragyasundari used different recipes for curry and these recipes were applied to

²⁰ Mukhopadhyay. *Pak Pranali*. pp.276-279.

²¹ Ibid. p.272.

²² Ibid. p.273.

²³ Collingham. *Curry*. p.118.

²⁴ Pragyasundari Debi. *Amish o Niramish Ahar*. vols 1 & 2 (Kolkata: Ananda publishers, 2000) first published by Ananda in 1995. first published, 1907.

quintessentially Bengali vegetables like *enchor* and *mocha* and fishes like *hilsa* and *parshe*.²⁵ She used different spices for each recipe of curry. Her play with name in this context again is noteworthy. She named one dish “*firingi* [Anglo-Indian] *curry*” even though she used *patol* [wax gourd], a vegetable native to Bengal, in this item.²⁶ Neither *firingi* nor *curry* can be called either British or Bengali, but hybrid. This hybridity was a product of colonial modernity, which coined the term *firingi* [Anglo-Indian, in this case implying those British who resided in India] as well as *curry*.

Although Mukhopadhyay claimed that “curry” did not originate in India and hence cannot exactly be called an “Indian” dish (here Mukhopadhyay equated India with Hindus), he was not necessarily writing under the pretense of making a so-called authentic and indigenous cuisine. Apart from a large number of Mughlai recipes (still without onion and garlic), Mukhopadhyay’s book had a number of recipes from other regions of India. He stated that yellow lentils grew better in northern India rather than in Bengal. Hence it tasted better, if cooked in a “Hindustani” (non-Bengali, specifically north Indian) way. In its recipe, Mukhopadhyay incorporated asaphoetida which was not used frequently in Bengali cuisine as yet.²⁷ Similarly he included recipes for Kashmiri lentils and Gujarati dishes in his cookbook. Nowhere in the book, did Mukhopadhyay have any pretense that he was venturing to construct a national cuisine. He never tried to find a connection between different categories of cuisine he had in his cookbook. He was clearly writing for sheer gastronomic pleasure.

²⁵ Pragyasundari. *Amish*, vol.1, p.336, vol.2. p.236, 245.

²⁶ *Amish*, vol.2, p.235.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp.118-119.

Kiranlekha Roy, whose book *Jalkhabar* came out in c.1924, showed similar tendencies in writing recipes.²⁸ Her recipes were very much like Mukhopadhyay's and Pragyasundari's, including recipes from other regions of India. 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 next to the Bengali script. If she wrote omelet in Bengali, it was always followed by the word omelet in English within parenthesis. These included a number of words: *Ice-cream, Ice-cream custard, cake cream, apple charlotte, apple jelly, apple mincemeat, potato mince, pie, Worcestershire sauce, egg snow, cottage pie, marmalade, pudding, trifle, cutlet, custard, Christmas cake, Christmas pudding, croquette, chocolate éclairs, grilled chicken, chicken hotpot, cheese fritters, jam tart, tapioca cream, fricassee*, and the like. Similarly when Ray used highly technical terms, such as crystallization, amorphous, and fermentation, she preferred to write it in English. Ray made a distinction between what was foreign and what was not by her emphasis on the use of language. However, she showed considerable courage in making so-called "traditional" recipes "foreign." Although Saratchandra Ray,²⁹ Kiranlekha's husband, professed in the introduction to her cookbook that the recipes for yogurt and "*sandesh*" given by Kiranlekha were authentic recipes from *Varendrabhumi* (northern Bengal), Kiranleka put vanilla and strawberry essences in these preparations.³⁰ What needs to be mentioned in this context is that "*sandesh*," something claimed as "authentic Bengali" by

²⁸ Kiranlekha Ray. *Jalkhabar*. Aruna Chattopadhyay ed. (Kolkata, 2000) first pub. 1331 BS (c.1924).

²⁹ Ray was a landlord of Dighapatia in northern Bengal. He was a member of Varendra cultural society who took an active interest in promoting the regional history of *Varendrabhumi* (Northern Bengal). He also encouraged Kiranlekha, his wife to write a food history of this region, *Varendra Randhan*.

³⁰ Kiranlekha Ray. *Jalkhabar*. p.65.

Ray, actually was made from *chhana* or cottage cheese that the Portuguese brought into Bengal.³¹

Binapani Mitra's book *Randhan Sanket* was published much later in 1955. In her introduction to the book, she claimed that she had written these recipes much earlier, and her children persuaded her to publish them in the form of a cookbook.³² Although the British had left India by then, they had left their legacy of curry behind. Even though she did not have a lengthy discussion on curry, like Mukhopadhyay did, it seems that Mitra did not consider curry itself to be "Indian." It needs to be mentioned that Mitra had curry recipes for fish like "*koi*" which was only found in Bengal.³³ However, Mitra's *koi* curry did not contain the curry powder that was used in Anglo-Indian cuisine. She simply used ground onion, ginger, turmeric, and clarified butter to make the *koi* curry. But she is quite indifferent to the "purity" of food just like what we saw in Kiranlekha Roy's instance. Mitra's book had recipes for such hybrid food like "*khirer* toffee" (thickened milk toffee).³⁴

Hybridity became a frequent occurrence in the recipes we find in most of the Bengali periodicals around this time. For example, a mutton chop recipe or a potato stew recipe contained ingredients like *ghee* or clarified butter, the latter mostly used for Hindu ritual practices³⁵, while the periodical *Paricharika* came with a recipe for muffin made of potato and *patol* (a very Indian vegetable).³⁶ The question arises whether the ingredients in the British recipes were also hybrid? Mitra often used items such as canned fruits,

³¹ K.T. Achaya. *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.132.

³² Binapani Mitra. *Randhan Sanket* (Kolkata, 1955).

³³ Ibid. pp.126-127.

³⁴ Ibid. p.246.

³⁵ Pragyasundari Devi ed. *Punya*. year 3, vol.8, (Kolkata, April 1902):49-51.

³⁶ Sucharu Devi ed. *Paricharika*. (Kolkata, April 1905): 268-269.

several types of essence, and gelatin for her recipes. Kiranlekha, however, taught techniques of preserving or canning fruits such as strawberries, apples, and peaches at home.³⁷ But she also used new utensils like cake mould, pie dish and patty pan.³⁸ The availability of different foreign foods had become so plentiful that it was easily possible for an upper middle-class family to afford them. But the consumption of the “foreign” also had the danger of adapting something which was alien, at least for some. This alien had to be localized by indigenizing the “foreign.”

As already discussed in the second chapter, so-called modern food preparations produced through an amalgamation of the “foreign” and the “indigenous” came to be called authentic through the creation of a particular Vedic tradition. Both Pragyasundari and Rwitendranath Tagore contributed to the making of this Vedic tradition. Pragyasundari’s cookbook never showed any concern for preserving the so-called authenticity of food. Similarly, Rwitendranath Tagore also made several interesting observations about the hybridity of nomenclature in his text, *Mudir Dokan*.³⁹ Rwitendranath Tagore quite easily accepted the hybridity of cuisine. However, two points need to be noted here. First, Tagore himself never mentioned the term hybridity; he preferred the term social interaction. Second, Tagore argued that this social interaction existed from ancient times. According to Tagore, “Just like the Europeans are adapting our rice these days, European food like chop, cutlets have become “*gharoa*” (quotidian) amongst us.”⁴⁰ What is significant is that hybridity overlapped with “authenticity” in this context.

³⁷ Ray.p.31.

³⁸ Ibid. pp.137-138.

³⁹ Rwitendranath Tagore. *Mudir Dokan*. (Kolikata, 1316 BS [c.1919]).

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 66.

Both Tagore and Pragyasundari were of the opinion that several European foods derived their names from Indian ones. And in that sense European food had always been hybrid. Tagore, in fact, had an elaborate argument on such nomenclature. For instance, Tagore argued that most European food, like pies and pancakes, derived their names from Sanskrit. --- *Pup* and pie belonged to the same genre of food. Since the Vedic “*pup*” had been converted into “*pua*” in Bengali, it is not totally improbable that “*pup*” was distorted to become pie in English. Tagore further argued that the term “pastry” derived from the Sanskrit word “*pishtak*.” For Tagore, the English always “fed on Indians.” He argued that even bread, which constituted one of the staples of the English, was not their own.⁴¹

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. Something which is “*bhrastra*,” that is something that can be fried in a pan is bread. At first Europeans were satisfied with the bread. --- These days they are fattened 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 terminology and knowledge from the gigantic store of knowledge in India.⁴²

Pragyasundari also stated that both the Bengali word “*bhaji*” and the English word “fry” originated from the Sanskrit etymon “*bhrij*” which meant cooking.⁴³

Thus, according to Tagore and Pragyasundari, whatever was “new” had its origins in the Aryan tradition. They argued that whatever modern India consumed as a concoction of “the East and the West” was actually a product of a Vedic “tradition.” In that sense European cuisine had always been hybrid. Aryan languages were transformed into Sanskrit during the Vedic period and had enormous influence on several modern

⁴¹ Ibid. pp.89-93.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 92-93.

⁴³ Pragyasundari, *Amish o Niramish*, vol.1, p.32.

civilizations.⁴⁴ Tagore's work was indebted in many senses to the works of British Orientalists, like Sir William Jones. Jones had grouped Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic, and Old Persian together calling them the descendant languages from proto Indo-European language.⁴⁵ Jones further added the idea that Sanskrit literature was a repository of the most ancient written records of Indo-European languages.⁴⁶ Tagore's arguments were of course conjectural and often verged on romanticizing Indian "tradition." Nonetheless, the chief point is that "new" and hybrid were becoming relevant with the progress of capitalism- the pleasures it spawned could not have been possible without colonial modernity.

The hybridization of cuisine was a two-way process, which affected the empire as well as the colony. For example, the recipe of mango marmalade given by Flora Annie Steel and G. Gardiner could not have been possible if the British had not encountered mango in India.⁴⁷ The role mango played in the life of the British in India can be understood from the advertisement preceding Mrs. John Gilpin's text.

FOR COUNTLESS AND TASTY DISHES

USE

ORIENTAL CANNERY Co'S

⁴⁴ Ibid.pp.43-44. It needs to be mentioned that this reference to "Aryan" tradition has been a fixation of cultural nationalism. Thus, the middle-class claimed on many occasions that whatever was labeled "modern" or even "western" such as women's education, women's volition in marriage had existed in ancient India.

⁴⁵ William Jones. *The Works of Sir William Jones*. 6 vols (1807). Ed. Anna Maria Jones. Cited in Thomas R. Trautmann. *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997) p.38.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ F.A. Steel & G.Gardiner. *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook: Giving the duties of mistress and servants the general management of the house and practical recipes for cooking in all its branches* (London: William Heinemann, 1902) p.344. first published 1898.

MANGO PULP

A delicious Indian Fruit Pulp of great food value and highest purity. The only perfect substitute for the fresh ripe Graft Mango to enjoy at any time or place.

If your grocer hasn't it ask him to get it for you.⁴⁸

Bengali cookbooks need to be read along side the English recipe books written for the British in colonial India. There was a definite change visible in the recipe books that came out after 1857. Scholars such as Collingham, Narayan, Susan Zlotnick, and David Burton have noted that the British became more conscious about preserving their British identity after 1857.⁴⁹ The cookbooks consequently began urging for a simpler British diet. Colonel Kinney-Herbert, writing under the pseudonym Wyvern, emphatically wrote:

Our dreams of to-day would indeed astonish our Anglo-Indian forefathers. With a taste for light wines, and a far more moderate indulgence in stimulating drinks, has been germinated a desire for delicate and artistic cookery. The molten curries and florid Oriental compositions of the olden time- so fearfully and wonderfully made –have been gradually banished from our dinner tables.⁵⁰

The revolt of 1857 led to the abolition of the rule of the East India Company and direct rule by the crown in India. Consequently what followed was an unprecedented degree of racialization of colonial politics. The British residents in India were now

⁴⁸ Advertisement by the Oriental Cannery Co. in Mrs. John Gilpin. *Pakwan-ki-kitab: Memsahib's Guide to Cookery in India* (Bombay, 1914).

⁴⁹ Collingham. *Curry*, Narayan. "Eating Cultures," David Burton. *The Raj at Table*, Susan Zlotnick. "Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. vol.16, no. 2/3, Gender, Nation, and Nationalisms, (1996):51-68.

⁵⁰ Wyvern. *Culinary Jottings for Madras*. (Madras, 1879; first ed. 1878) pp.1-2.

expected to keep their distance from the natives. Based on this phenomenon, most scholars have almost taken for granted that it was to avoid the earlier Indian ensemble of food (which the British began to consider too native and rich and spicy to be included on their table) that the British changed their diet after 1857. Nowhere is this change more visible than in Wyvern's *Culinary Jottings*. Wyvern asked his readers to concentrate on simple meals. He argued for a reformist cookery by which he implied a reformation of Anglo-Indian cooking. This reformist cookery meant to do away with even the use of curry powder in Anglo-Indian cooking. However, what was prescribed could not be called a typically English cuisine. In most of the menus suggested by Wyvern the majority of the dishes were of French origin.

Menu No. VII

For a party of six

Consomme a la Royale.
 Pomfret a la maitre d'hotel.
 Filets de pigeon a la Bordelaise.
 Cotelettes de mouton a la Mainteon.
 Fillet de bouef aux haricots verts.
 Canapes de becassines.
 CEufs aux topinambours.
 Tourte de cerises.
 Boudin glace aux confitures.
 Fromage, hors d'oeuvres.
 Dessert.⁵¹

Menu No. VIII

For a party of six.

Pot au feu.
 Filets de pomfret sauce aux capres.
 Pegeon en aspic, sauce ravigotte.
 Cotelettes de mouton, sauce soubise.
 Poularse braise a la jardiniere.
 Aubergines a l'Espagnole.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.220.

Beignets d'abricots.
 Puree de fraises glace.
 Fromage, hors d'oeuvres.
 Dessert.⁵²

Menu No.XVII

For a little home dinner

Potage au pauvre home.
 Darne de seer en papillote.
 Cotelettes de mouton au macedoine de legumes.Moringakai au gratin.
 Tartelettes d'amandes.
 Fromage, hors d'oeuvres.
 Café noir.⁵³

Thus reform had a very specific racial implication for Wyvern. The “spicy” native was being marked as an outcast. French cuisine, which had already become the haute cuisine of Europe, was also becoming the cuisine of the British Empire. Steel and Gardiner were quite critical of the ordinary Indian cook who, they argued, did not know how to cook anything other than steaks, chops, fried fish, and quails for breakfast. They wrote: “Tea made and poured out by a *Khidmatgar* at a side table, toast and butter coming in when the meal is half-finished, and the laying of the table for lunch while the breakfast eaters are still seated, combine to make new-comers open their eyes at Indian barbarities.”⁵⁴ Therefore it was the union of the British food and the so-called Indian style of entertainment that the authors were worried about. Distaste for their former enemies in India, however, did not keep the recipe book “pure” British. It included recipes from all over Europe such as Italian salads, German salads, Spanish salads, Russian salads etcetera. Indian food was in fact, contrasted not so much to British food but to what has

⁵² Ibid.p.225.

⁵³ Ibid. p.257.

⁵⁴ F.A. Steel & G.Gardiner. *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*. p.45.

been rightly regarded as “continental” food in Indian English. A small section on Indian dishes was included, but the authors never forgot to mention that most of the Indian dishes were extremely greasy and sweet and not suitable for the British palette. However, the focus on preserving identity needs to be problematized. Even those in favor of a more “respectful” English cuisine after 1857 could not do away with “Indian” food altogether.

From *The Indian Cookery Book*, published in 1869, it seems that so-called reformist endeavors of those who tried to erase whatever “Indianness” was left in British cuisine, were in vain. The author of this book who had stayed in India for thirty five years was not eager to do away with the kind of hybrid meals that prevailed before 1857.⁵⁵ In fact, as the name suggests, *The Indian Cookery Book* was basically a compilation of Indian recipes beginning from rice dishes like *khichri* and *pulao* to preserves like *kasundi*. There were in fact very few “pure” British recipes and hardly anything French.⁵⁶ If this book had recipes for Indian dishes, then Mrs. John Gilpin’s book had recipes that could actually be called “hybrid.” Gilpin, for instance, gave out recipes for curried beef slices and Italian *pulao*. Curried beef basically entailed a liberal use of curry powder.⁵⁷ In fact, Gilpin’s cookbook was full of recipes that mixed an indigenous ingredient with a non-indigenous one. Such items included curried macaroni, vegetable curry, and American *bhoota* (corn).⁵⁸

⁵⁵ A Thirty-Five Years Resident. *The Indian Cookery Book: A Practical Handbook to the Kitchen in India Containing Original and Approved Recipes in Every Department for Summer Beverages and Home-made Liqueurs: Medicinal and Other Recipes Together With a Variety of Things Worth Knowing* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, Rpt. 1931) first pub. 1869.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mrs. John Gilpin. *Pakwan-Ki-Kitab. Memsahib’s Guide to Cookery in India* (Bombay, 1914) p.52.

⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 56, 131, 168.

Colonial modernity thus entailed a two way process. While the Indians received new fruits and vegetables, the British also began to incorporate Indian ingredients in their cooking, even though they avoided Indian styles of cooking. Steel and Gardiner wrote:

Indian flour from many local mills, notable at Delhi and Bombay will be found quite equal to Snowflake American, and more than half as cheap again. Indian vermicelli or *semai* is no bad substitute for Italian, and *soojee* will take the place in all recipes of semolina. It is, in fact, the “florador” of English shops. Wheaten groats or *dulliya* make excellent porridge.”⁵⁹

This incorporation was a result of colonial modernity. The name changed, but the use remained the same. Collingham argues that the new cookbooks were specifically written for the British women in India who wanted to create a home environ in the colony. Thus the focus was more on cheese crumb croquettes, thick kidney soup, and Yorkshire pudding, rather than on curries and Indian *pulaos*.⁶⁰ However, Collingham admits that even after the take over of India by the British crown, and consequently attempts by the British in India to retain their identity by restraining themselves to a more somber English food, hybridity of cuisine could not be avoided. English women often did not know how to cook. Moreover Indian kitchens were not prepared for British cooking. As a result, they often had to depend on the *Bawarchis* (Indian Muslim cooks) who incorporated their own knowledge of cooking while making English food.⁶¹ The preservation of identity need not necessarily forego the pleasurable experience of curry. Making macaroni with curry powder could easily preserve a British identity while retaining pleasures of consumption. What also needs to be taken into account is that it was not often the case

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.12.

⁶⁰ Collingham.Curry. p.161.

⁶¹ Ibid.pp.160-161.

that the *Bawarchis* were responsible for the hybridization of Anglo-Indian cuisine. Collingham in this case argues that *Bawarchis* often had a problem in understanding what was asked of them. Hence they Indianized British cuisine.⁶² However, what needs to be noted here is that often the cookbooks written by the Anglo-Indian writers had an Urdu edition. Steele & Gardiner's book, *The Indian Cookery Book* and *Dainty Dishes for Indian Table* all had Urdu editions specifically written for the *Bawarchis*. Although *Bawarchis* were not always literate, it was expected that someone in the family who could speak Urdu would be able to explain recipes in Urdu to the *Bawarchis*. Thus the *Bawarchis* necessarily did not have a problem in understanding what was asked of them. When the Anglo-Indian writers wrote out the recipes they were reliving their experience as citizens of the empire, the experience of pleasures they could not totally erase from their memory.

Jennifer Brennan's memoir of India makes it clear that hybridity was a part of the British cuisine even in the 20th century.⁶³ In fact, it is the hybridity of the British cuisine in colonial India that Brennan takes delight in. Brennan was born in India in the year 1935. Her maternal great-grandfather had sailed from Britain to India where Brennan's father met her mother. Brennan admits that the lunch or "tiffin" that the British had in the 20th century was much lighter than in the previous century. This tiffin, for example, included spiced tomato soup with saffron cream, cool green almond and water cress soup and the like.⁶⁴ But, Brennan says that they went on having cucumber *raita* (yogurt dish), *tamatar bhujia* (a vegetarian dish made out of tomatoes), *machi kebab* (fish kebab), *saag*

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jennifer Brennan. *Curries and Bugles: A Memoir and a Cookbook of the British Raj* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1935).

⁶⁴ Ibid. pp.80-85.

ghosh(mutton with spinach), *aam murghi* (chicken with mangoes), *pathan* chicken pilaf, *dhal charchari*(a lentil dish), and *jhalfraizie* (an essentially Anglo-Indian dish) for lunch.⁶⁵ If, on the one hand, Brennan had cooked-ham and Scottish whisky marmalade, her breakfast platter also included *nimboo* curd (lemon yogurt) and *sooji* (semolina).⁶⁶ And her favorite memory was that of her grandmother churning butter from buffalo, which she would spread on *chapatis*(Indian wheat bread) and eat with marmalade for breakfast.⁶⁷ Having marmalade with chapatti could not have been possible without colonial modernity. Earlier, during the Mughal rule mildly flavored Persian *pilau* (rice) was combined with the spicy rice dishes of Hindustan to create *biryani*, the Mughal dish.⁶⁸ However, the creation of *biryani* was more a matter of synthesis than hybridization. In this case, two types of cuisine met to form a totally new dish. However, in colonial India the case was more of a hybridity rather than a synthesis whereby both cuisines retained their identity, but in a unique fashion. Hybridity of the new cuisine put both the Bengali and the British cuisine within the same analytical field: neither was in any sense “authentic.”

As already stated, Narayan argues that the British claimed the curry powders they sold in England to be “authentic.” However, the British in India also had their own definitions of “authenticity.” For them, “true” Indian food needed to be manufactured and cooked in India. Brennan for instance makes a distinction between the process of the preparation of Indian food and its consumption. Everyone could consume Indian food,

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp.85-117.

⁶⁶ Ibid. pp.72-75.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p.16.

⁶⁸ Collingham. *Curry*. p.27.

but preparing it needed the Indian expertise. Brennan writes at length about her disgust for the so-called Indian pickles and preserves sold in Britain.

Two other transmogrified concoctions polluted the tables of the British: bottled mango chutney and vinegary pickles of virulent yellow. The chutney was attributed mostly to the efforts of a Major Grey; the pickles were anonymous- a well-deserved fate. They were both probably concocted by a clever “box-wallah,” or English merchant, who knowing his countrymen’s penchant for pickles and preserves, cooked up the creations and commercialized them. Whatever their origin, they obscured the many delicious Indian chutneys, both cooked and uncooked, which subtly counterbalance and complement true Indian food. Well, at least these badly transplanted hybrids boosted the Indian spice trade. But sadly, by their insistence on instant, bottled nostalgia, the British Raj bedeviled the reputation of Indian food in the eyes of the rest of the world for a long time.⁶⁹

The only person who could cook “authentic” Indian meals, was an Indian named Abdul Karim, who was appointed the groom of the Chamber in 1887 and cooked for the monarch.⁷⁰

This short passage from Brennan’s book has two implications. First of all, one needed to be qualified to produce “authentic” Indian cuisine. Second, and perhaps the more significant point, is implicit in the passage, it is Brennan’s critique of capitalist modernity and the growing commercialization of commodities accompanying it. For Brennan, capitalist modernity robbed commodities of its aesthetic value. Hence it was possible for anyone, in this case, an English merchant, to churn out Indian pickles in a jiffy. Brennan here makes a critique of modernity at large. Commercialization and consequent standardization of commodities destroyed their intrinsic value.

Brennan of course has looked at the English experience of cuisine in India. However, there was a counter-part of this experience; the experience of the Indians.

⁶⁹ Brennan. *Curries and Bugles*. p.25

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Pleasures that became available to the entire world grew out of this experience. This experience was essentially hybrid. However, as the cuisine became more and more hybrid, attempts to claim an “authenticity” for it also grew- “traditional” British or “traditional” Bengali cuisine came to dominate the pages of cookbooks along side “new” recipes. The new Indian recipe books that were being written contained both British and Indian recipes. But, the authors always confirmed that both the British and the Indian cuisines were “authentic.” These recipes obviously did not remain limited to books. New eateries that sprang up in colonial Bengal and new feasts that became a predominant feature among the middle-class and the upper middle-class Hindus often served new food. This practice actually created the idea of food that was “traditional” and a debate ensued about the “old” and the “new.”

“Old” and “new” food: Reformulating the rhetoric of caste

Modernity had its seductions. Gastronomic pleasures reached their heights, both because of the slowly increasing number of hotels and restaurants and because of the new cookbooks that made it easier to have “exotic” cuisine at home. This newness came under critique. However, for those who partook of this new experience, and also for those who critiqued it, there was no denying the fact that the practice of modernity had become a quotidian affair.

We have seen how different provisions became available in the 19th century that made cooking European food easy. These provisions, like for example, biscuits or essences, were generally manufactured and sold by European companies like Huntley & Palmer. By the beginning of the 20th century, such foodstuff were being manufactured

and marketed by Indian companies from Delhi, Lucknow, Dumdum, and Calcutta.⁷¹ In the Indian Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition at Calcutta in 1906-07, chocolates made by Indian companies such as Soyaji Chocolate Manufacturing Company Ltd. from Baroda were exhibited. A variety of condensed milk and milk powder from Calcutta, Baidyabati, Munshiganj, Rajshahi and Bombay were also displayed at the exhibition.⁷² What is even more interesting was the fact that Messrs. Meyer Soetbeer & Co. of London displayed a kind of patent food which they prepared partly from Indian cereals.⁷³ Indian ingredients in British food were also becoming a reality with the kind of modernity ushered in by colonialism.

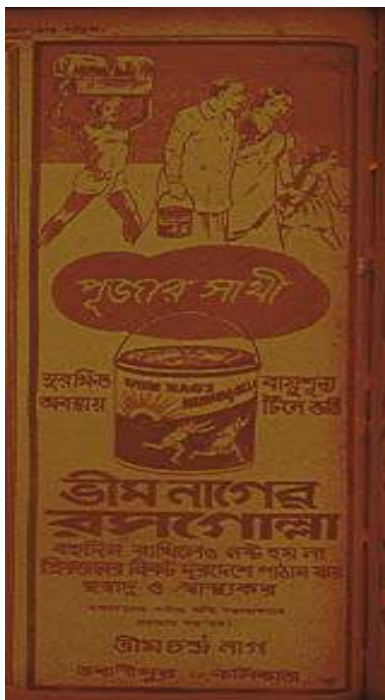


Figure 3-1. “Bhim Nager Rasogolla.” Advertisement in

Anandabazar Patrika (Kolkata, 1347 BS [c.1941])

Figure 3-1 is an advertisement for *rasogolla* [cottage cheese balls soaked in sugar syrup] made by the Bhim Nag confectioners of Bhawanipore, Calcutta. By the 1940s even Bengali entrepreneurs were investing in canned food and importing them. The

⁷¹ *A Report of the Indian Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition* (Calcutta, 1906-07).

⁷² *Ibid.* pp.24-26.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

advertisement clearly stated that canned *rasogolla* was kept in an airtight container and did not get spoiled even if kept for a long time. While *rasogolla* was praised for its taste, it was also mentioned in the advertisement that it was good for health. Labeling *rasogolla* as healthy was a way to appease those who objected to the consumption of sweetmeats sold in the market. This advertisement demonstrated how Bengali entrepreneurs were making use of the modern techniques of canning to market something they called intrinsically “Bengali.”

The Indian Industrial & Agricultural Exhibition demonstrated the straight fact that products never heard of before in India not only became available in the market, they had also started being manufactured in the country itself. But what is most significant is the fact that this exhibition showed changes in the dietary practices of the Indians. The number of Indian companies producing tea, coffee, and cocoa would not have risen to such a scale, had there not been a sufficient demand for the foodstuffs within the country itself. Consumption of these new foods also led to the emergence of places for such consumption.

For many of the Indians, consuming “new” food was not always possible within the domestic space. For them, the new hotels and the restaurants that sprang up in Calcutta from the 19th century had its attractions. These hotels formed a convenient locus for those who could easily gorge 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. The Spences’ hotel was one of the first hotels established in Calcutta in the 1830s. It later transformed into a limited company owned by both the British and the Indians in the 1860s. In 1841, a second hotel, named the Auckland hotel came up which later became the famous Great Eastern Hotel, where Bipin Chandra Pal, the nationalist, and his friends often visited. Bengalis had also started taking an active interest in the 1870s and 1880s and began the hotel business in European quarters. The

Sen Brothers, for instance, started the Esplanade hotel in 1874 and another the next year.⁷⁴ By the 1940s, several small eating places cropped up in Calcutta. These were tiny eateries, like “Basanta Cabin,” serving toast and boiled egg, and “Chachar Hotel,” all run by Bengalis. Two other small Bengali hotels called “Café-de-Monico” and “Bengal Restaurant” were established around 1936. Some other eateries called “*pice* hotel” (where a full meal was supposedly served for 1/16th of a rupee) or “*bhater* hotel” (rice hotels where daily meals were served) catering to people with small budgets, chiefly students, also emerged by the 1940s. These places served meals consisting of rice at a cheap price.⁷⁵ In Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay’s (1894-1950) acclaimed novel, *Adarsha Hindu Hotel* (Ideal Hindu Hotel), the hotel was primarily like a rice hotel where daily meals were served for daily wage earners and other office goers.⁷⁶ This hotel was situated near the railway station so that the travelers could easily come and eat at the hotel. Although not one of the high end hotels, this hotel was divided hierarchically into the first class and the second class.⁷⁷ While those who ate at the first class could get better quality food, like split green gram, those who ate at the second class could only aim for a combination of red gram and split black gram.⁷⁸ Often the latter’s lentil soup would be mixed with rice starch if the quantity became less than the number of heads who ate.⁷⁹ Bandopadhyay’s novel portrayed how these rice hotels functioned and held up the image of an ideal rice hotel where everyone would get to eat similar meals.

⁷⁴ B.V. Roy. “Calcutta, Old and New: Taverns and Hotels.” *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. vol. xlv, no. 3, (Calcutta, 14 December 1946) :45-46.

⁷⁵ Pratulchandra Gupta. *Alekhyā Darshan* (Kolkata, 1990) pp.30-43.

⁷⁶ Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay. “Adarsha Hindu Hotel.” In Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay *Upanayas Samagra*. vol.1 (Kolkata :Mitra o Ghosh,2005) first pub. 1940.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p.321

⁷⁸ Ibid. p.381.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p.321.

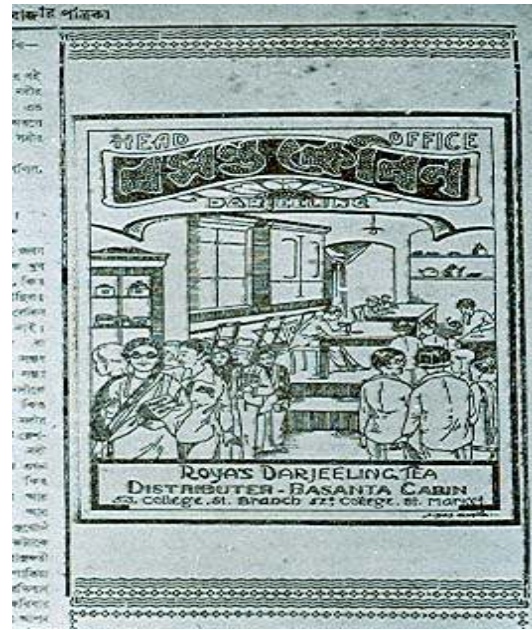


Figure 3-2. “Basanta Cabin.”

Advertisement in *Anandabazar*. (Kolkata, 1343 BS [c.1937])

Figure 3-2 shows an image of *Basanta Cabin*, a small eatery in Calcutta. Even such small eateries became distributors of tea which was becoming a craze almost cutting across classes.

What is surprising is that while there were many people willing to try out new experiments in food, when they traveled abroad (mostly to Britain) they generally restrained themselves from the consumption of British food. Collingham also notes in her book how Gandhi had enormous difficulty finding vegetarian food in London.⁸⁰ Like Gandhi, Behramji Malabari, an Indian tourist in London was also horrified by the carcasses of animals hanging from the shops.⁸¹ Bengali students necessarily were not strictly vegetarian. But many of them received a rude shock when they found out what they had as mutton chop back in Calcutta was quite different from the English mutton chop.⁸² Often Indian students landed up in the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian

⁸⁰Lizzy Collingham. *Curry*. pp.177-179.

⁸¹ Ibid.p.179.

⁸² Ibid.

Association) restaurant in London to have Indian food. The menu in the YMCA had something called a “Bengal khichuri.”⁸³ Even though one could not find food one liked in England, the change was perceptible. Hotels and restaurants started by Europeans in India often catered to local taste. There is no need to assume that there was something like a “pure” Indian taste. It was the British experience in India itself, where they encountered new ingredients that led to this hybrid cuisine. Similarly in Britain, some places like the YMCA came up with this hybrid food, though on a smaller scale. One could even get canned Indian vegetables in Britain to cater to the needs of the vegetarian students.⁸⁴

At one level, there was this perceptible change in everyday practice of eating. At another level, the abstract category of “tradition” was constructed in order to make a critique of these eating practices. Issues of caste constituted the core of this debate on “tradition” vs. “modern.” In a satirical essay, Bholanath Mukhopadhyay ridiculed the new middle class gentlemen who ate with various castes in the new restaurants.⁸⁵ Similar was the surprise of Durgacharan Ray who wrote a fictional travelogue.⁸⁶ Ray described in his travelogue how the gods who had come down from heaven to take a tour of the world were aghast at the way Hindu Bengali men were consuming food prepared by the Muslims, a food considered a threat to the caste status of the upper caste Hindus.⁸⁷ 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. However, these lambastings of public

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Nagendrachandra Mitra. “Englande niramish bhojan chole kina.” Ramananda Chattopadhyay ed. *Dasi*. vol. 4, no. 8, (Kolkata, August 1895):460-469.

⁸⁵ Bholanath Mukhopadhyay. *Apnar Mukh Apuni Dekho* (Kolkata: Pragyabharati, 1389 BS [c.1982]) first ed, 1863.

⁸⁶ Durgacharan Ray. *Debganer Martye Agaman*. (Kolkata: Deys Publishing, 1984).

⁸⁷ Ibid.p.258.

eateries actually made it clear that eating in restaurants had become a common phenomenon among at least some of the middle-class Bengalis.

New pleasures had a much broader social spread, even though 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 at the lower rung of the social ladder. That even the poorest took delight in having tea can be found in a number of Bengali novels of the period. Thus the pleasures in a sense cut across class and caste boundaries, which were loathed by a number of indigenous elites. *Ratarati* (Just in One Night), a short story written by Rajsekhar Basu (who wrote under non de plum Parashuram), the famous Bengali satirist demonstrated this point. In *Ratarati*, Charan Ghosh, a middle-class gentleman, came to a hotel named Anglo-Mughlai Café located somewhere in Calcutta with his friend Mr. Chatterjee in order to find his son Bantul.⁸⁸ Charan Ghosh was aghast by the smell of meat in the restaurant. However, the restaurant was full of young customers like Bantul who took delight in devouring items of food like French *Malpoa* (a Bengali sweet resembling pancake) made from chicken.⁸⁹ What really captured the imagination of the people was tea. In this context, endeavors of The Indian Tea Association to popularize tea were successful indeed.⁹⁰ In fact, as Lizzy Collingham argues, tea often improved intercommunal relations. It was considered to be free from the burden of purity associations and hence easier to share with the members of other castes.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Parashuram. "Ratarati" (1919-1920). Reprinted in Rajsekhar Basu. *Parashuram Galpasamagra*. Dipankar Basu ed. (Kolkata: M.C. Sarkar & Sons Pvt. Ltd., 1992) pp.226-242.

⁸⁹ Ibid.pp.228-229.

⁹⁰ Gautam Bhadra. *From an Imperial Product to a National Drink: The Culture of Tea Consumption in Modern India* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta in association with Tea Board India, 2005).

⁹¹ Lizzy Collingham. *Curry*.p.201.



Figure 4-3. “Anyone can have Indian tea which is the pride and pleasure of India.” Advertisement in *Jugantar* (Kolkata, 1939).

Figure 4-3 clearly illustrated how the advertisements tried to capture a mass population. This advertisement kept harping on the fact that five cups of Indian tea could be consumed for one paisa (penny), thus making it possible for a large number of people to consume it. In its appeal to such a broad spectrum of population, capitalism created a new social bonding through consumption of new food like tea.

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 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 one’s 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.⁹² This association of cooked food with rice is best exemplified in

⁹² Ronald B. Inden & Ralph W. Nicholas. *Kinship in Bengali Culture*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977).

Bipinchandra Pal's memoir. Pal narrated an incident in his hostel in Calcutta where an inmate refused to have rice cooked by his friends since he was a Brahmin and his friends were not. However, this person did not mind taking 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.⁹³ 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."⁹⁴ Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, in an essay on "traditional" feasts, discussed in detail 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.⁹⁵

"Purity" and "impurity" of food also depended on a spatial distinction. Definition of food changed in relation to the public and the private. Pal also wrote about how the public/private divide dominated the eating scene in Calcutta. Pal stayed in a hostel when he first came to Calcutta from Sylhet in eastern Bengal. Residents were not allowed to bring in food that could hurt Hindu feelings. However, loaves and biscuits had become quite common in Calcutta and there was no bar on bringing in these foods to the hostel. Residents could of course consume what they wanted outside the hostel.⁹⁶ Pal and his friends found new pleasures of gastronomy in the newly emerging hotels. Later Pal, forced to be on a vegetarian diet after his mother's death, followed it only at home. But as

⁹³ Bipin Chandra Pal. *Memories of My Life and Times. In the Days of My Youth (1857-84)*. (Calcutta, 1932) pp.180-225.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay. "Sekaler Bhoj." *Bangasri* (Kolkata, Jaistha 1341 BS [c.May 1934]). Republished as "Smritite Sekal: Amader Lok Amader Katha." *Aitihasik* vols.vii & viii. (Calcutta, 1998 & 1999):617-618. Compiled and edited by Prabir Kumar Mukhopadhyay.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

he tells us, his evening meals always consisted of boiled eggs and crabs that he relished in the public eateries.⁹⁷ There was thus a sharp distinction between what one consumed at home and what one ate 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 the home, had rigid rules for food, whereas at least some like the Tagores and other upper middle-class Hindus had started enjoying “new” food at their home. But generally speaking newly emerging hotels served as abodes of gastronomic pleasure. These eateries not only introduced new food, they also changed eating habits.

Amongst new eating patterns, the debate on the practice of meat-eating was perhaps most significant. In 1907, in a letter written to the Magistrate of Burdwan, it was clearly stated that there was an increase in the number of Hindus who consumed meat (goat and sheep, but not beef). Most of these people bought meat from the Muslim butchers.⁹⁸ Of course, the number of recipes for meat given in the new recipe books needed to have a practical implication. However, dietary practices were marked by enormous regional, caste, and gender differences.

A number of texts made a sharp critique of meat-eating on the ground that it was not a Hindu custom, and it did not exist in the “traditions” of India. The critique was directed most sharply at women who had begun to consume meat along with their men folk.⁹⁹ The disgust was even more because very often Muslim chefs cooked meat, and it

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Letter from- Rai Nalinaksha Basu Bahadur, Chairman, Burdwan Municipality, To- The Magistrate of Burdwan, No. 90, dated Burdwan, the 30th April, 1907). pp.7-15. *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch*, File [M 3-M/6] (Calcutta, August 1908).

⁹⁹ Anon. “Mangsha Randhan o Bhakshan.” *Mahila*. vol. 3, no.5, (Kolkata, December 1897): 100-110, Anon. “Banganaridiger Abastha.” *Mahila*. vol.12, no.4, (Kolkata, November 1906):88-93.

was served by the Khansama, who was also Muslim. The gendering of food was clearly perceptible. Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani wrote that women were not served meat at the feasts¹⁰⁰, and even in the house there would often be a clear cut rule for who ate what. In her autobiography, Sudha Mazumdar noted that her father and her mother lived in two separate worlds within the same house.¹⁰¹ Not only did Sudha's father have an English dining room, his diet consisted of English cuisine, according to an English diet book. Mazumdar's mother, on the other hand, had her own kitchen presided over by a Brahmin cook. She also had what Mazumdar called a "private" kitchen where she cooked for her children.¹⁰² Thus there was a clear gendering of the consumption of food.¹⁰³

The "tradition" constructed was often vaguely defined, but generally alluded to pre-colonial Bengal and sometimes traced back even to the Vedic period. Meat was defined as not being a staple of the country since beginning from the Aryans, "Indians" had fruits and vegetables. While there is substantial evidence of the consumption of meat in the Vedic period, medieval Bengal too never abstained from eating meat. We get such evidence of meat consumption from *Chandimangal* (written between 1594 and 1606), and *Annadamangal* (c.1752),¹⁰⁴ two late medieval and early modern *mangalkavyas*.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Saratkumari Chaudhurani. "Meye Joggi." first pub. *Bharati* (Kolkata, Bhadra, 1315 BS [c. August 1908]) Reprinted in Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das eds. *Saratkumari Chaudhurani Rachanabali*. (Kolkata, 1357 BS [c.1950.]) pp.210-214.

¹⁰¹ Sudha Mazumdar. *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*. ed. with an introduction by Geraldine Forbes (New York, London: An East Gate Book, H.E. Sharpe, Inc. Armonk, 1989).

¹⁰² Ibid. pp.3-11.

¹⁰³ Similar gendering can be seen in the context of drinking tea. Both Jyotirmayi Devi (1894-1988) and Giribala Devi (c.1900) narrated that tea would be served only to men and not women even within the home. Jyotirmayi Devi. *Jyotirmayi Devir Racahana- Sankalan*. Gourkishor Ghosh ed. (Kolkata, 1994) pp.475-477, Giribala Devi. *Raybari* (Kolkata, 1974) p.30.

¹⁰⁴ Kabikankan Mukumdaram Chakrabarti. *Chandimangal*. Bijanbihari Bhattacharya ed. (Kolkata, 1966), Bharatchandra Ray. *Annadamangal*. In Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das eds. *Bharatchandra Granthabali* (Kolkata, 1357 BS [c.1950]) first pub. 1350 BS (c.1943).

¹⁰⁵ *Mangalkabyas* refer to a large corpus of narrative poetry which was produced in Bengal during the 15th to 18th centuries and beyond it as well. The theme of a *Mangalkabya* focused on how the worship of a particular deity was established on earth. *Mangalkabyas* written in honor of the

Annadamangal even referred to venison meat, tortoise egg, and dried fish which were considered almost sacrilegious to the middle-class Bengalis in the 19th century.¹⁰⁶ Although it was considered a Hindu text, *Annadamangal* showed considerable Mughal influence on food. It had instances of Hindus having *samosa* (a fried patty like food), and *seekh* kebab (grilled kebab).¹⁰⁷ Panchkari Bandopadhyay, a journalist, also wrote that the consumption of goat meat and tortoise meat was quite common in the past. According to Bandopadhyay, caste taboos on food were much more flexible and it was with the advent of *Vaishnavism* that non-vegetarianism took a backseat in Bengal.¹⁰⁸

It was only in a romanticized “tradition” that purely vegetarian Indians existed. One needs to mention that this aversion to meat as well as certain food items, like dried fish, was not universally felt. There seems to be a regional barrier between one’s likes and dislikes. Caste came to define the difference between eastern and western Bengal. In a travelogue written on eastern Bengal in 1894, Iswarchandra Gupta expressed his utter dismay at the cuisine of *Barishal* and *Chattagram* when he found out that Brahmins not only ate in the houses of Kayasthas, and Vaidyas, but they also consumed goat, lamb, and tortoise.¹⁰⁹ According to Gupta, Chattagram was even more scandalous because most of the fish found in Chattagram did not have scales.¹¹⁰ This regional difference in eating

deities Manasa (the snake goddesses) and *Chandi* (originally the patron deity of forests and animals, later metamorphosed into the brahmanical *Durga*, the consort of Shiva) were composed through the later 15th century until the end of the 18th century and into the 19th century as well. These texts consisted of stories which were set to music and sung.

¹⁰⁶ *Annadamangal*. pp. 388-389.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁸ Panchkari Bandopadhyay. “Sekal aar Ekal.” *Prabahini* (27 *Asharh*, 1322 BS [c. June 1925]) Republished in Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das eds. *Panchkari Bandopadhyayer Rachanabali*. vol. 2 (Kolkata, 1358 BS [c. 1951]) pp.314-315.

¹⁰⁹ Iswar Gupta. “Bhramankari Bandhur Patra.” in Shantikumar Dasgupta & Haribandhu Mukhoti eds. *Iswar Gupta Rachanabali*. vol. 1 (Kolkata, 1381 BS [c. 1974]) pp. 240-241.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*. pp. 251-252. In Raghunandana, the renowned legist’s commentary on *Smriti* (a form of Hindu religious scripture), Bengali Hindus were not permitted to eat fish without scales even though they could have fish.

patterns between eastern and western Bengal became even more apparent in the autobiography of Bipin Chandra Pal, the famous nationalist. Pal clearly wrote that caste was a much more significant factor in Calcutta, that is, in western Bengal, rather than in eastern parts of Bengal. Brahmins ate at a Shudra's (lower caste) house in eastern Bengal, which was unthinkable in Calcutta.¹¹¹

These issues regarding the relationship between food taboos and caste can be understood most clearly in the case of new social feasts, which became a major irritant for those imagining this "tradition." New forms of caste rigidities emerged which were clearly visible in the critique of new feasts. Interestingly, Kedarnath Majumdar, 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 always did in the past.¹¹²

Although rice was the most significant food in the context of commensality, whatever was new came to be considered a caste taboo. Mahendranath Datta, brother of the famous religious preacher Vivekananda, wrote for instance:

My youngest uncle used to buy ice and brought it home covered with a blanket. This ice needed to be preserved with sawdust. That was a strange thing. Orthodox Hindus never consumed it. In our house, widows also abstained from it. We tried it out but in a sneaking manner. Maybe that's why we did not lose our caste so soon.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Bipinchandra Pal. *Sattar Batsar. Atmajibani*. (Kolkata, 2005) pp. 67-68. first pub. 1333 BS [c. 1926]).

¹¹² Kedarnath Majumdar. *Maymansingher Itihas* (Kolkata, 1906) pp.197-199.

¹¹³ Shree Mahendranath Datta. *Kolikatar Puratan Kahini o Pratha* (Kolkata: Mahendra Publishing Committee, 1973(first print)) p.31.

Thus whatever food was coming in from outside was considered suspect. This list also included vegetables, like cauliflower, cabbage, potato, and tea.¹¹⁴ We also get to know from Datta, as well as Amritlal Basu, that in earlier social feasts salt was not mixed in food.¹¹⁵ Datta argued that it was the modern English education that made men forego these earlier pleasures of life.¹¹⁶ That salt was also a marker of caste was quite apparent in a text written by Datta on Ramakrishna, the Bengali religious preacher. By then, Datta had abandoned many of his earlier romanticisms about caste. He narrated that in the presence of Ramakrishna, all castes ate together food that had salt in it.¹¹⁷ Earlier Brahmins would always be served before the Shudras.¹¹⁸ This image of earlier times that people, like Amritlal Basu or Mahendranath Dutta drew, was part of a modern discourse. While several middle-class Bengali writings bore evidence of this obsession with a romantic past, their definition of this past was different. For some, therefore, the past carried an aura of the Vedic four-fold system of caste. At the same time, many claimed that the caste structure in the past was less rigid than in modern times. Panchkari Bandopadhyay, as already stated, ridiculed too much obsession with caste. Prasannamayi Devi narrated in her memoir that various people, from Brahmins to peasants, did not mind partaking of food from their master, no matter what caste the latter belonged to.¹¹⁹ To argue that caste was hardly a factor in pre-colonial India would be too simplistic an argument. However, with colonial modernity, caste was being redefined. Sekhar

¹¹⁴ Chattopadhyay. "Smritite Sekal," Datta. *Kolikatar*.

¹¹⁵ Datta. *Kolikatar*. pp.70-72, Amritlal Basu. *Amritlal Basu Smriti o Atmasmriti*. Dr. Arunkumar Mitra ed. (Kolkata, 1982).p.162. first pub. *Mashik Basumati* (1330/31 BS [c.1923/24]).

¹¹⁶ Datta. *Kolikatar*.

¹¹⁷ Mahendranath Datta. *ShreeShree Ramakrishner Anudhyan*. Dhirendranath Basu ed. (Kolkata, 1386 BS [c.1979]) pp.66-67. first pub. 1350 BS (c. 1943).

¹¹⁸ Chattopadhyay. "Smritite Sekal."pp. 617-618.

¹¹⁹ Prasannamayi Devi. "Sekaler Katha." Hemantakumari Chaudhuri ed. *Antahpur*. vol. iv, no.5, (Kolkata, 1901) :107-110.

Bandopadhyay argues that the colonial ethnographers ignored the functional and normative aspects of caste and overstressed only its structural implications. To them, caste appeared to be a distinct structural entity, concrete and measurable, with definable characteristics.¹²⁰ According to Bandopadhyay, they overlooked the fact that these units were once tied to each other through an interdependent relationship. Of course, texts were redefining caste rules about eating, but only because these rules were falling apart in practice.

Although there was a difference in opinions in the discourse on caste roles 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 on simplicity. New social feasts epitomized the dominance of a money economy ushered in by capitalist modernity. It was possible for people from even the lowest rung of the social structure to spend money on organizing feasts. While it was the middle-class Bengali discourse that was critical of these new social feasts, these elaborate feasts were also organized by the Bengali middle-class.

Thus new feasts were blamed not only because they flouted caste rules, but also because many felt that these feasts were an excuse for squandering money. Also, these feasts encouraged food bought from the market whereas earlier women of the house used to cook for such feasts. According to some texts, westernization led to the degeneration of indigenous culture and a decline of principles.¹²¹ Rochona Majumdar convincingly demonstrates in her work that every aspect of the Bengali marriage ceremony assumed a

¹²⁰ Sekhar Bandopadhyay. *Caste, Politics, and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1990) p.23.

¹²¹ Basantakumar Chaudhuri. "Baje Kharach." *Grihasthamangal*. year 5, nos. 2 & 3, (Kolkata, Jaistha, Asharh 1338 BS [c. May, June 1931] :30-35, Kaviraj Indubhushan Sen. *Bangalir Khadya*. (Calcutta, 1928) p.69.

strictly ritualized, standard form with their attendant feasts and trousseaux from the late 19th century.¹²² Giving of lavish gifts was also accompanied by printing menu cards, not just for weddings, but also for other occasions such as engagement ceremony. Writing a menu card was a significant new feature. These menu cards provided the upper and the upper middle-classes an opportunity to exhibit their wealth through new modes of display. These menu cards were symptomatic not just of changes that were taking place in the realm of social feasts, but also of changes in the nature of food that was to be consumed.

A comparison of two menus will demonstrate the changes that occurred in the feasts. In the middle-class discourse, feasts in the villages generally did not contain non-vegetarian dishes. There would be fried bread, curd, sweets made from cottage cheese, thickened milk, and a couple of vegetables, like one made with pumpkin (without salt).¹²³ There was definitely a perceptible change in the feasts. A wedding menu card from urban Calcutta in 1925 showed an enormous array of food. The card was divided into different sections, like vegetarian, non-vegetarian (fish) & non-vegetarian (meat), finger food, pickles, fresh fruits, dried fruits, dessert and juices.¹²⁴ 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 vegetable made with fish head, a hodgepodge of fish, *bekti* [a type of fish] fry, shrimp with bottle

¹²² Rochona Majumdar. *Marriage, Modernity, And Sources of the Self: Bengali Women c.1870-1956*. Unpublished Dissertation (University of Chicago, 2003), Rochona Majumdar. *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹²³ Chattopadhyay. "Smritite Sekal." pp. 617-618, Datta. *Kolikatar*. pp.70-72, Amritalal Basu. *Amritalal Basur Smriti*. p.168.

¹²⁴ Wedding menu from the wedding of Pratima Devi & Kanailal Gangopadhyay. From Indubala Devi's album.

gourd, fish balls, prawn kebab, two other prawn preparations, roast carp, *hilsa* [a type of fish] made with yogurt, and four forms of meat preparations. Amongst fruits, there were oranges, apples, pineapples, mangoes, pears, guavas, papayas, Indian plums, cucumbers, and bananas.

One engagement menu even surpassed this wedding menu. In 1927, an engagement ceremony for a Indira Devi contained fried flour bread, fried leafy vegetables, fried pointed gourd, Bengal gram, vegetables made from banana blossom, cauliflower and peas curry, cottage cheese curry, rice made with cottage cheese, cucumber *raita* (an yogurt dish), ground raisin chutney and a chutney made from dried apricots and dates amongst the vegetarian items. Non-vegetarian food also had a long list, and unlike the former wedding menu, this menu had the dessert section divided into three sub sections, according to different categories of sweets. Even beverages had two sections: one was the juice section and the other section was called the “fancy water” section, which incorporated new beverages like soda water, lemonade, lime juice soda, and ice-cream soda.¹²⁵ Another engagement ceremony two years later, in 1929, incorporated peach pudding, pear pudding, pineapple pudding, and ice cream in its menu.¹²⁶

What became apparent from the above description of menus was the huge expenditure on food. Of course this expenditure was amongst a few upper and upper-middle class Bengalis, which incurred the wrath of those who were living in an imagined tradition. But the inescapability of capitalist modernity dominated these feasts, not only in their huge acceptance of new food items, but also in the new customs and features that

¹²⁵ Engagement menu from the engagement ceremony of Indita Devi. From Indubala Devi’s album.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

became associated with it. Menu cards also implied that even if the classes lower in rank to upper middle-classes were not always able to organize such elaborate feasts, at least they were partaking of the pleasures of consumption in these new feasts. Another custom which became obsolete with the coming of these new and much more elaborate feasts was that of “*sora bandha*” (taking left- over food). In fact, “*sora bandha*” was a major issue of discussion in many texts on the new feasts.

Saratkumari Chaudhurani welcomed the disappearance of “*sora bandha*” from new feasts as she described it as a vulgar ritual.¹²⁷ “*Sora bandha*” implied that guests could take whatever they could not eat and even more food back home with them. For Saratkumari, new feasts symbolized civilization and 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 blamed western civilization and consequent disaffection for one’s family. Second, he argued that new feasts had become so elaborate and expensive that it was no longer possible to sustain such a ritual.¹²⁸ 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?”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Saratkumari Chaudhurani. “Meye Joggir Bishreenkhala.” First pub. *Bharati* (Kolkata, Poush, 1316 BS[c.December 1908]) Reprinted in *Saratkumari Chaudhurani Rachanabali*. Intro. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das (Kolkata, 1357 BS [c.1950.]) pp.215-222.

¹²⁸ Chattopadhyay. “Smritite Sekal.” pp.617-618.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Those who could not partake of the pleasures of modernity thus imagined a romantic world, where they felt comfortable. 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 and salt, molasses. Then someone would have fruits, puffed rice or flattened rice. Some might ate 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 cake 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.¹³⁰

As the above passage demonstrates, food became demarcated between the “old” and the “new” food. They were further divided into public and private spaces as we have already seen. Bringing biscuits or cakes inside one’s home was still considered by some to be sacrilegious. These could be consumed only at public places. An ideal “tradition” existed in the village which was also dying out. What vexes one’s mind is the question whether this village community was ever homogeneous? The answer is definitely in the negative.

Myth of the self-sustaining village community

“Tradition” was imagined in terms of a peaceful, simple, village life. Villages were places where one could find fresh fruits and vegetables. There was a subtle critique of colonial economy in the romanticization of villages and of subsistence economy. Panchkari Bandopadhyay narrated with nostalgia 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 any one bought food from the market he used to be called

¹³⁰ Hemantabala Devi. Jasodhara Bagchi & Abhijit Sen eds. *Hemantabala Debir Rachanasankalan*. (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 1992).

“*lakshmichhara*” (one deserted by *Lakshmi* i.e. prosperity).¹³¹ This glorification of a subsistence economy was in a sense a critique of capitalist modernity, the increasing circulation of money and a growing market economy, which encouraged consumerism and new pleasures in its turn. Thus whatever could be bought came to be an object of annoyance for many.

What seemed like a self-sustaining village community was often an exaggeration. The “tradition” was insularly defined. The food of the past that the texts mentioned was an extremely upper caste Hindu food. The majority of the villagers were Muslim and lower castes like Haris, Bhowries, Dhangars, and Domes. Often, especially in times of scarcity, the lower castes survived on the consumption of snails, frogs, crabs, shrimps and even snakes.¹³² Only a few villagers could afford to have 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 so easy. They benefited neither from the “pure,” uncorrupted food imagined by people like Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, Panchkari Bandopadhyay, and Hemantabala Devi, nor from the new pleasures of gastronomy.

It was revealed in a survey on the Bengal Famine of 1943 that the day-laborers, 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

¹³¹ Panchkari Bandopadhyay. *Panchkari Bandopadhyayer Rachanabali*. p.308. Paul Greenough demonstrates that Lakshmi was portrayed as a compassionate mother who took pity upon the poor and suffering persons by giving them subsistence in the mythology of Bengal. Paul R. Greenough. *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) p.23.

¹³² Letter From-R.D. Hume, Esq., Offg. Collecior 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 & Relief*. (Calcutta, July 1874).

sweets. In many cases they produced these articles, but even under normal conditions their low average income forced them to sell these products in order to purchase rice.¹³³ An average diet of a lower class villager remained almost unchanged throughout our period. This diet consisted of very coarse rice and *dal* (lentils). Vegetables could be consumed, but only occasionally.¹³⁴ In a survey of a village in the Midnapore district of Bengal, Baboo Bisweshar Banerjee, the deputy collector found out that the ordinary villager could hardly afford two full meals of coarse rice. They chiefly ate tank plants for their subsistence.¹³⁵ Even if the cultivator or the artisan did not suffer from insufficiency of food, they never tasted the “new” pleasures which had started dominating the pages of the new cookbooks. For them, vegetables basically contained edible leaves, eggplants, pumpkins, and wild potatoes. The condition of the lower classes varied from one district to another. Irrespective of regional differences, one can argue that a twice a-day meal was something that the lower classes could afford only in ordinary times. But the situation was different in the times of scarcity.

During the times of scarcity, the decline in the standard 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 came to such a state, that Khsitishchandra Dasgupta

¹³³ Tarakchandra Das. *Bengal Famine (1943)* (Cacutta, 1949). p.2.

¹³⁴ Letter From- N.S. Alexander, Esq., Commisioner of the Burdwan Division. To- The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department. Proceeding No. 7RG, Dated Burdwan, the 16th April, 1888. *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1888) pp.9-18.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

reported, Zaher Sheikh, who earlier used to be the secretary of a local co-operative bank, survived on arum leaves.¹³⁶

The above description of the condition of the people in the villages dealt a rude blow to the romanticization of the village where a so-called “traditional” world might have existed. The dark and macabre side of colonial modernity reached its height with the Bengal Famine of 1943. In a survey on the destitutes in Calcutta, Tarakchandra Das, a lecturer in anthropology, described in detail the condition of those who had fallen victims to the famine. Das lashed out virulently at the Government relief centers in Calcutta. According to Das, the food distributed at many of these centers lacked in both quality and quantity. The Government’s insistence on the use of *bajra* (millet) in these relief centers wreaked havoc on the digestive system of the people. Already their digestive system, the author suggested, was weakened by the consumption of unwholesome food which was worsened by the consumption of *bajra*.¹³⁷ A passage from the survey revealed the horrors of colonial modernity.

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,

¹³⁶ Report by Khsitishchandra Dasgupta. In Satishchandra Dasgupta. *Sankat Tran-Samiti* (Kolikata, 1931) pp.13-17.

¹³⁷ Das. *Bengal Famine* pp.6-7. A similar situation could be seen during the scarcity of 1873 when the Government of Bengal, instead of paying more attention to the production of more food-crops almost forced people to consume rice imported from Burma. Although people complained against the consumption of Burma rice on the ground that it was unwholesome, the Government dismissed it as unfounded. The colonial state stated that the people of Orissa who died in 1866 after eating Burma rice were so reduced by starvation that they could not digest any food. However, the Government admitted that Burma rice actually harmed their digestive system more than ordinary Bengal rice could 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. Pro. No. 4031[File 14-5] Dated Calcutta. 18 December, 1873. *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Scarcity & Relief*. (Calcutta, December 1873) p.590.

etc. were welcome-food to these miserable remnants of humanity.¹³⁸

The policy of rationing adopted by the colonial state following the famine and inflation due to the Second World War dealt another blow to the life-world of middle-class Hindu Bengalis. The Government of India introduced the rationing of food in 1944 as a result of a coordinated food plan adopted by the government. Government's rationality behind the rationing of food grains was to prohibit the hoarding of food and to limit the consumption of food to what the state considered necessary.¹³⁹ The Food Grains Policy Committee also stated that no guarantee could be given regarding the natural diet of any community. This was necessitated by an acute shortage of certain food grains, chiefly rice.¹⁴⁰ Rationing of food grains, and especially rice, thus meant that even the middle-class Bengalis would have to do away with rice. Rice, which constituted the cultural world of the colonial middle-class in Bengal, was under threat and cultural critiques did not seem sufficient to deal with it.

New pleasures had broken down many caste taboos. The pain of the famine had a similar effect. This situation brought the very materiality of colonial modernity out into the open. 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.¹⁴¹ In Calcutta, Hindus received cooked food from the Muslims and vice versa.¹⁴² In Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay's novel *Ashani Sanket* (Sign of Thunder), also about the Bengal famine of 1943, even the priestly class was

¹³⁸ Das. *Bengal Famine*. p.8.

¹³⁹ *Report on the Progress of the Recommendation of the Food grains Policy Committee*, Budget Session, 1944.

¹⁴⁰ *Council of State Debates*, Monday, 8 November 1944. vol.II, no.I, (Delhi, 1944) p.33.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.9.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

ready to eat snails (eaten by the lower castes) when the famine struck them.¹⁴³ The cultural critique of capitalist modernity imagined and constructed a romantic past only in relation to the pleasures of modernity. However, when it came face to face with the pains of colonial modernity, a cultural critique fell flat.

¹⁴³ Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay. "Ashani Sanket." in Bibhutibhshan Bandopadhyay *Upanayas Samagra*. Vol.1 (Kolkata: Mitra o Ghosh, 2005) first pub. 1959.

Chapter 4: Constructing a “pure” body: The discourse on nutrition in colonial Bengal

Introduction:

Nutritive elements constituted a major component of the new cuisine that emerged in colonial Bengal. In the previous chapter, we saw that the Bengali Hindu middle-class created a discursive tradition in order to resist the pleasures of modernity. This resistance to the pleasures of modernity was often built upon a critique of the new pleasures from a nutritive angle. The changes in dietary patterns led directly to the question of a healthy body. The middle-class considered the gustatory pleasure as one of the chief sources behind the debilitation of the “Bengali” body. The first and foremost concern was with the formulation of an ideal type of diet. In order to rejuvenate the “Bengali” body, the cuisine that developed had to be scientifically defined. Thus the “Bengali” cuisine that emerged was built on a nutritive foundation. In this process, nutrition, which was apparently a modern scientific discipline, became confluent with a cultural discourse on the “body.” The middle class wanted this body to be “pure.” Although couched in a scientific language, purity often had a double meaning. Apart from denoting clean and hygienic food, “pure” also implied ritual purity. “Pure” food was something intrinsically Hindu and elite, uncontaminated by the lower classes. These concerns acted as the guiding principle behind the construction of a healthy body of the colonial modern. However, this construction of the body was more rhetorical than actual. The body was fractured; it was torn between the attempts to create a “pure” somatic

conception and the intake of the pleasures of capitalism that irked those who looked to a “tradition” in order to construct a healthy body.

In his work on modern Europe, John Coveney demonstrates that in the course of the 19th century, nutrition emerged as a science in which food was relieved of almost all of its aesthetic, sensual pleasures.¹ Nutrition, Coveney argues, was calculated and rationalized. The primary purpose of food became nourishment of the body on the basis of scientific reason. However, behind this “scientific” language was a moral motive, which was concerned with the making of a “moral” and “good” citizen. Thus, according to Coveney, nutrition became associated with choice of food with a moral overtone, the “right” and “proper” thing to eat.² This attitude can also be seen in the case of colonial Bengal. However, Coveney pays more attention to the development of nutrition as a discourse. I argue in this chapter that the debates on nutrition tried to erase food from its sensual pleasures precisely because the material conditions showed an opposite tendency. The purpose of a modern discourse on nutrition became to critique the modern practices of consumption. In this context, the body became crucial to this discourse.

Approaches to the body

Existing historiography provides a very rich account of the body as a site of politics. Most of these works have focused on the concept of masculinity or effeminess when discussing the body. Scholars like, John Rosselli, Mrinalini Sinha, and Indira Chowdhury argue that the colonial power structure constructed an image of an “effeminate” Bengali race, but the Bengali middle-class appropriated it and exploited it to their own advantage. Sinha elucidates the material background of the discourse of

¹ John Coveney, *Food, Morals, and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) first pub. 2000.

² Ibid, p.160.

“colonial masculinity.” Her focus is chiefly on the colonial political economy that gave rise to this discourse. The Bengali middle-class was driven out from the new economic sector by the second half of the 19th century. The European managing agency system came to dominate the new economic alignments in the second half of the 19th century. Even the local trade and business activities were in the hands of the Marwari traders. This was accompanied by a decline in the fortune for the rentier class due to an increase in population, land fragmentation, lack of agricultural improvement, new tenancy regulations as well as the peasant resistance movements of the last quarter of the 19th century. These events restricted the power of the Bengali landlords who had dominated land in the countryside since the Permanent Settlement of 1793.³ A grievance against the colonial state helped to formulate a Bengali Hindu-middle class discourse, hegemonic in its content. Through this discourse, the Bengali Hindu middle-class made a critique of the colonial state, at the same time marking their own hegemony over other social classes.⁴

John Rosselli and Indira Chowdhury have focused mostly on a cultural interpretation of how the Bengali Hindu middle-class appropriated this label of effeminacy.⁵ Whereas Rosselli’s argument revolves around how many Bengali intellectuals, like Bankimchandra, lashed out against the present Bengali way of life as a cause of emasculation, Chowdhury posits a more nuanced argument. According to Chowdhury, while it is true that the Bengalis acknowledged the fact of their effeteness and tried to counteract it with attempts to develop “western manliness,” colonial

³ Mrinalini Sinha. *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in Late 19th Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Rosselli. “The Self- Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal.” *Past and Present*. vol.86, no.1, (February 1980):121-148, Indira Chowdhury. *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi, New York: Oxford University Press,1998).

modernity made the situation different. Chowdhury cites the example of Vivekananda, the religious preacher, to demonstrate how Vivekananda emphasized physical strength, but with a combination of spirituality which made it different from western manliness.⁶

While scholars like Sinha, Rosselli, and Chowdhury have helped us to understand the politics of gender in colonial Bengal by focusing on the implications of the masculinity/effeminacy debate, they do not delve into a very significant aspect of this politics- the nutritive angle. Since their approaches to the body primarily concentrate on the gendered body, they do not pay considerable heed to the materiality of the body itself. I have tried to bring the focus back on the materiality of the body through a discussion on nutrition.

The politics of gender, which in its turn is closely tied with perceptions of the body, must be read alongside the politics of food. Unless one examines how a discourse on nutrition constructed the conceptions of a healthy “body,” one cannot understand the narrative of emasculation. In this context, it is necessary to allude to the political nature of diet, as David Arnold has done in his work.⁷ However, Arnold concentrates on showing dietary politics as a marker of colonial difference and of scientific authority co-existing with that of Indian deprivation and loss. I intend to go beyond the much-debated discourse of colonial difference by conceptualizing the body at a more basic level, that is, the sustainability of the body. I argue that the body, in this case a Hindu middle-class Bengali body, was discursively constituted through debates around nutrition as an organic entity that was capable of sensory enjoyment. This argument adds two points to the existing historiography on the gendered body. First of all, this focus on the body as an

⁶ Indira Chowdhury. *The Frail Hero* p.128.

⁷ David Arnold, “The ‘Discovery’ of Malnutrition and Diet in Colonial India.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*. vol.xxxi, no.1, (January-March 1994):1-26.

organic entity brings out how the politics of food and the politics of gender get conflated at a quotidian level. Second, I argue that the nutritive discourse on the emasculated “Bengali” body intersected with the concept of the “purity” of the body. In this sense, a gendered body imbricates with the question of class. An emasculated body, in order to be strong, needed to consume “pure” and hygienic food. But as already stated, this “pure” body also drew a distinction between the middle and the lower classes. To construct this ideal diet for a Hindu middle-class body, the scientific discourse of nutrition had to fall back on an imagined “tradition.”

Constructing “tradition”

The discourse on nutrition was primarily concerned with the constitution of an ideal diet for the Bengali body. In her recent article, Srirupa Prasad articulates that food constructed a middle-class Bengali identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁸ She argues that a “crisis” due to colonial subjugation made the middle-class Bengali men imagine and construct a past for themselves that was “pure” and uncontaminated. This crisis was simultaneously political, economic, and cultural. Apart from this, Prasad insists that when the Bengali middle-class migrated to Calcutta, they often missed their life in the villages that they had left behind. This feeling constituted a cultural crisis for them.⁹ This group, who mostly belonged to the upper caste Hindu echelon, was uncomfortable living with the lower castes and various other linguistic groups in their neighborhoods in Calcutta. For the Bengali middle-class, “pure” and nutritious food of the idyllic village life became scarce and adulterated in colonial Bengal. This was the cause of the suffering

⁸ Srirupa Prasad. “Crisis, Identity, and Social Distinction: Cultural Politics of Food, Taste, and Consumption in Late Colonial Bengal.” *Journal of Historical Sociology*. vol.19, no.3, (3 September 2006): 245-265.

⁹ Ibid.

of the Bengali middle-class, their deteriorating living standards and their poor health.¹⁰ Prasad maintains that they blamed new food for their ailments. However, in the process lower castes who were involved in the making of many such foods, like sweetmeat makers, came to be detested by the upper caste Hindu Bengalis.¹¹ Prasad's narrative on the construction of a "tradition" by the middle-class Bengalis in order to escape a cultural crisis in the present leaves out one important point. What needs to be emphasized is that this entire discourse on nutrition sprang from the discipline of nutrition, which was a product of colonial education. However, this "new" scientific discourse of nutrition allowed the Bengali Hindu middle-class to construct a romanticized tradition, seemingly a rejection of the modern.

The past indeed became a site of gastronomic pleasure. In this context, subsistence became associated with an imaginary past. For the Bengali middle-class, the past symbolized an abundance of milk and fish along with rice. They argued that these foods had made the Bengalis a valorous race in the past. They further believed that the colonial presence destroyed this abundance by systematically undermining the subsistence agriculture. A romantic landscape was etched as the cradle for food that had nurtured the people of the soil. Fish, for instance, came to be connected to the landscape of Bengal, its riverine tracts, and amphibious life. Nibaranchandra Chaudhuri, an official, working at the Bihar Agricultural Department, wrote in his tract of 1913: "All Bengalis, irrespective of being rich or poor could easily avail fish because of the abundance of rivers, ponds, canals, and various other water bodies."¹² Chaudhuri associated fish with

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nibaranchandra Chaudhuri. *Khadya Tattva- A Treatise on Food*. (Kolkata: The Indian Gardening Association, 1913) p.58.

courage and wisdom.¹³ Nikunjabehari Datta who wrote another tract in c.1925 on fish in the journal edited by the Gandhian nationalist Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay, advocated consumption of fish with rice. He argued that fish was a staple of the Bengalis, which had to accompany rice with every meal. He therefore lamented the steady decline of fish cultivation in colonial Bengal.¹⁴ The general saying was that fish and rice constituted the Bengali “body” and made it strong. What inevitably followed from this argument was the general contention that the abundance of nutritious food that the middle-class described had become scarce as well as expensive in the present of colonial Bengal. Hence, for the indigenous elites, it was the British who were responsible for the emasculation of the Bengali Hindu middle-class.

While the middle-class discourse in the late 19th century linked up the lack of appetite with the decline in subsistence agriculture, by the mid-20th century men became concerned with scarcity of food due to rise in prices. Everybody knew the stories of “*Adhmoni Kailas*” and “*Munke Raghu*” who could consume tons of food. Jatindramohan Datta(1895-1975), who wrote under nom de plume Jamdatta, and contributed to quite a few Bengali newspapers and journals such as *Jugantar*, *Shanibarar Chithi*, *Prabasi*, *Kathasahitya*, *Modern Review* and many others, actually published a couple of articles in 1951 on the legends of “*Adhmoni Kailas*” and “*Munke Raghu*.” Jamdatta wrote that “*Munke Raghu*” consumed a *mon/maund* (1 maund=82.3pounds=37.4 kilograms) of food after fasting for one day. People had seen “*Adhmoni Kailash*” eat half a *mon/maund* of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nikunjabehari Datta. “Banglay Matsyabhab” (Bhadra [c.August/September]) Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay ed. *Mashik Basumati Sahitya Mandir. year3. vol.1*, (Baisakh-Asharh1331 BS [c. April/May-June/July 1925]):660-666.

sweets, vegetables, fried bread anytime and anywhere.¹⁵ So being able to eat vast quantities of food was a sign of a robust constitution free from ailments like indigestion. Jamdatta also wrote about a few other men from late 19th century Bengal who could consume food to people's delight. One such person was "*Banrujye Mashai*" (Mr. Banerjee), who could eat sixty-four mangoes after a full meal of fried flour bread, fried eggplants, vegetables, lentil soup, yogurt, and sweetmeat. This was a sign of heroism, almost untainted by modern disciplinary regimes of the body. Another instance was that of Ramchandra Chattopadhyay who could consume an entire jackfruit or an entire *Hilsa* fish.¹⁶ Jamdatta believed that the enormous rise in prices since the Second World War was responsible for the lack of appetite in food. These narratives gave a kaleidoscopic form to the discourse of nutrition: in a sense these narratives employed a discourse of the modern to criticize a modern phenomenon.

Thus the discourse on nutrition began to calculate how much food the body should consume. Vivekananda, who preached the greatness of Hinduism while touring America and England, described the eating habits of the Bengalis as "wretched." He further argued that this eating habit made them physically weaker than other races.¹⁷ Both Prasad and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay have highlighted the reformist middle-class agenda through food. They argue that the middle-class Hindu Bengalis were interested in creating restraint through food by adopting "milder" flavors and by eating moderately.¹⁸

¹⁵ Jamdatta. "Sekele Katha." *Jugantar Samayiki* (May 20 1951):9-10

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mahendranath Datta, *London Swami Vivekananda*, vols. 2 & 3 (Kolkata, 1384 BS [c.1978]) pp.171-172. first pub. 1345 BS (c.1939).

¹⁸ Srirupa Prasad. "Crisis, Identity, and Social Distinction," Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay. "Between Elite Hysteria and Subaltern Carnavalesque: The Politics of Street-Food in the City of Calcutta." *South Asia Research*. vol. 24, no.1, (2004):37-50.

Undoubtedly the middle-class rhetoric was concerned about civilizing the palette.¹⁹ However, everyone was not concerned with eating in moderation. In fact, the inability to eat more became a concern for many and was linked to the colonial situation in Bengal. Rajnarayan Basu (1826-99) also lamented the inability of the Bengalis in his days to digest nutritious food. He said that students could eat rice thrice a day in those ancient days when learning took place in the village schools.²⁰ Men could digest even harder shells of coconut. However, people did not and could not eat nutritious food in the present times. Hence, their physical strength was declining.²¹ The past, albeit imaginary, came to stand in for good health, symbolized by the consumption of huge quantities of food. Most of the latter was homegrown and easily available. These strands within this discourse of nutrition thus converged on one point: the debilitating constitution of the Bengalis in colonial Bengal was due to the scarcity of “pure” food. To counter this weakening of the body, a Hindu past was required to reconstruct the Hindu middle-class body.

Milk and fish, which were in abundance in the past, were also considered by the middle-class to be pure in content. These became scarce as well as impure. Indubhushan Sen wrote:

Consumption of leafy vegetables, milk, rice and fish once made the Bengalis prosper physically and mentally. Today there has been a change in the situation, - pure milk has become scarce as well as exorbitantly priced - fish is eaten in a very small quantity in ordinary households.²²

¹⁹ One can draw comparisons here to Mikhail Bakhtin’s account of the taming of more public and celebratory nature of the consumption of food with the coming of the renaissance.

²⁰ Rajnarayan Basu. *Se Kal aar E Kal*. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das eds. (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1879) first pub. 1874.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kaviraj Indubhushan Sen. *Bangalir Khadya. A Handbook on the Principles of Bengali Dietetics*. (Kolkata, 1928).

What apparently seems like a cultural argument had a strong economic connotation. Nagendrachandra Dasgupta found in poverty the reason behind a decline in health. In c.1924, he wrote that nutritious elements such as fish, milk and *ghee* (clarified butter) have disappeared from the list of food for the Bengalis.²³ Two points need to be noted here. If nutritious food disappeared because of poverty, Dasgupta surely implied that Bengal had become much poorer because of the British. But what is also noteworthy in this context is that Nagendrachandra's chief concern was with the diet of the middle-class Bengalis and not those who would suffer most in times of scarcity, the lower classes of Bengal. This was then the politics of dietetics. In this politics, whatever was consumed in the past was considered to be grown by the Bengali middle-class as part of subsistence agriculture in their idyllic "pure" villages, which was lost as they migrated to the city. Food of the lower classes who worked in other's fields or for others' livelihood was left out of these memories. A past was imagined, which would provide the structure of a middle-class cuisine built on a strong nutritive foundation.

The purpose of this past was to show that Bengalis had been a valorous race in ancient times. Even those who were the direct products of those scientific disciplines that emerged from colonial education endorsed this view. Consider this argument of Chunilal Bose (1861-1930), a professor of chemistry in Calcutta Medical College, who took an active interest in scientific research. In his introductory remarks to one of his essays, Bose wrote, "The present Indian diet is defective and ill-balanced, and is directly responsible for the progressive deterioration of the physical health of the people,

²³ Nagendrachandra Dasgupta. "Bangalir Swasthyahani o Tahar Karon." Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay ed. *Mashik Basumati. year3, vol.1*, (Baisakh-Aswin1331 B.S [c. April/May-September/October1924]):550-555.

particularly of Bengal, and is directly affecting their moral and economic well being.”²⁴

To illustrate his arguments further, Bose cited the example of Col. McCurrison’s work. McCurrison, who was the Director of Nutritional Research, Pasteur Institute, argued, that the food taken by the people of Bengal, compared most unfavorably in its nutritive value, with that of the other provinces of India.²⁵

The Punjabi diet of whole-meal atta (wheat flour), pulses, vegetables and milk, with the addition of meat twice a week, constituted the best of all Indian diets. The Bengali diet, consisting chiefly of rice and nominally of pulses and other protein-containing elements was the worst so far as their nourishing value and vitamin contents were concerned, and it was not surprising that the people of Bengal should stand so low in the matter of their physical qualities, when compared with the other vigorous races of India.²⁶

Bose agreed with McCurrison, but he looked back to a “golden age” in Bengal, to argue that there was a time when the people of Bengal were not unaccustomed to military life, and they formed regiments which fought against the disciplined army of the Mughal Empire. This military prowess was made possible by an abundance of nourishing food in Bengal, which was unavailable in the present time.²⁷ Thus Bose contended that the problem lay not in the diet of the Bengalis. In other words, he urged the colonial medical practitioners to look into the reason behind the scarcity of nutritious food in Bengal.

The significance of rice increased in case of scarcities or famines. Srirupa Prasad rightly argues that rice became a cultural signifier at the interface of conceptions of nutrition and gastronomic tradition.²⁸ She further argues that rice became a symbol of

²⁴ Chuni Lal Bose. *Food* (Calcutta, 1930) pp.93-94.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Srirupa Prasad. “Crisis, Identity, and Social Distinction.” p.257.

indigenous taste as well as resistance to the colonization of taste. In this context, rice became even more significant since rice became the symbol of emasculated Bengalis as opposed to the “manly” wheat-eating races of northern India. Wheat was the staple food of a number of non-Bengali communities pejoratively labeled as Hindustanis, who supposedly ate wheat bread and lentils.²⁹

Thus a long debate ensued that primarily concerned the question whether rice made Bengalis weak as compared to the other races or not. Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, a regular contributor to journals like *Tattvabodhini*, *Bangadarshan*, *Bharati*, *Sahitya*, and *Prabasi*, explained that the view that the Bengalis constituted a weak race because they ate rice was an idea that the Bengali youth had inculcated with the gradual spread of English education.³⁰ Chattopadhyay argued that most of South-East as well as East Asia considered rice to be a staple food. He further took recourse to an apocryphal history that was not uncommon in nationalist historiography- “rice eating” Bengalis, according to him, once ruled from Kashmir to Simhala (modern Sri Lanka) because of their physical prowess. However, the British needed the Bengalis to serve their administrative purposes. Hence they managed to convince them through English education that they were sharp and intelligent, not like the martial races such as the Sikhs, the Marathas, the Punjabis or the Gurkhas. The latter, so this apocryphal account went, were much inferior when compared to the former in terms of intelligence.³¹ Chattopadhyay was able to put his finger on the pulse that throbbed with the sense of a

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay. “Amader Khadya o Swasthya.” *Prabasi* (Aswin 1361[c.September/October 1955]). Reprinted as Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay. “Smritite Sekal: Amder Lok Amader Katha.” Compiled and ed. by Prabir Kumar Mukhopadhyay in *Aitihasik*. vols. 7 & 8 (1998 & 1999):305-09.

³¹ Ibid.

loss. His text also alluded to the cultural making of emasculation rather than an actual one.

Many contested the argument that wheat-eating made the people of north India strong as opposed to the rice-eating Bengalis. In 1925, people, like Gyanendranath Saha, argued that it was the climate that decided what one should eat:

Pulses and wheat bread suited those of northern and north-western India, but it could not be a staple in Bengal; this is because pulses and wheat bread can be digested easily in the climate of northern and north-western India. But one cannot digest these in our land. Paddy is grown in large quantity in Bengal, and rice suits the climate of Bengal. Other food items like pulses, vegetables, fish, and milk can be nutritive only when they are taken with rice. There are many such foods which are much more nutritious and stronger than rice, but there is nothing which qualifies as mild, gentle, and nutritious at the same time.³²

Saha was, however, of the opinion that the mode of cooking rice in present times had lowered the nutritive quality of rice. He argued that taking starch out of rice made it less nutritive.³³ Otherwise, rice was the perfect staple for the Bengalis.

This rice/wheat debate became a mode of appropriation as well as a critique of colonial rule. While rice was becoming the marker of a “tradition,” this tradition was not always valorized as it has been argued by Prasad. While arguing that the Bengalis constituted a weak race in colonial Bengal, at least some advocated a change in diet. In order to construct an ideal Bengali Hindu middle-class body, the new “Bengali” cuisine was not opposed to inculcate other cuisines in its fold. Thus wheat which was considered to be the staple of non-Bengali population was not always looked down upon. It had

³² Gyanendranath Saha. *Bhater phen gala akartabya, tadjanya edeshbasigan hinabal o nirdhhan hoitechhe*. (Sreepur, 1301 BS [c.1925]) p.3.

³³ Ibid.

started being cultivated in Bengal and was often welcomed as an addition of nutrient to the Bengali diet.

Taranath Chaudhuri, a man affiliated with a Jain association, compared the Bengali Hindus with the Bihari Hindus and wrote in 1912 that the latter was stronger than the former because of their diet. Indubhushan Sen, a *kaviraj* (indigenous medical practitioner), writing in 1928, criticized the Bengalis for having parboiled rice. He argued that having wheat bread and lentils made upcountry men much stronger than the emasculated and feeble Bengalis.³⁴ Some argued that wheat contained better nutrients, like protein, when compared to rice. This was the reason why Hindustani men were stronger than the rice-eating Bengalis.³⁵ In *Bangamahila*, a domestic manual, there was a detailed analysis of why rice did not fare well as a food.³⁶ The author argued that rice was the most inferior of all crops. It was not just less nutritious, it tasted bland too. Therefore rice had to be accompanied by fish, meat, milk, curd, or lentils. Without these additional nutrients rice was hardly sufficient for physical well-being. The ritual of rice harvest also came under attack. The Bengalis observed rice harvest festivals after the harvesting of new rice. The author wrote that the celebration of new rice was unnecessary since new rice was even worse than old rice in terms of health. Wheat was the best crop. The north Indians were healthier than the Bengalis as they consumed wheat.³⁷ Similar

³⁴ Kaviraj Indubhushan Sen. *Bangalir Khadya: A Handbook on the Principles of Bengali Dietetics* (Arogya Niketan: Kolkata, 7th ed. 1369 BS [c.1961], first published, 1928).

³⁵ Nibaranchandra Chaudhuri. *Khadya Tattva*. (Kolkata: The Indian Gardening Association, 1913) p.10.

³⁶ Anon. "Swasthya Raksha." Bhubanmohan Sarkar ed. *Bangamahila*. vol.2, no.3, (Asharh 1283BS[c.June/July 1876]): 62-63.

³⁷ Ibid.

opinions were expressed in the health manual *Swasthya*.³⁸ Thus the regional boundaries were becoming blurred in a sense.

Along with the championing of a diet based on wheat, this discourse of nutrition praised the non-Bengalis for their vegetarian diet. The latter diet was labeled a *sattvik* diet. *Sattvik* comes from *sattva*. *Sattva*, which signifies purity and order, is read along with two other qualities, *rajas* meaning passion and dynamism and *tamas* signifying darkness. For an object or food to be *sāttvik*, it must be uncontaminated and should not spread evil or disease in the world. On the contrary, its presence must purify the surroundings. Thus when an individual consumes such a food, he must feel that he is eating pure food. The food should be healthy, nutritious and clean. It should also not weaken the power or equilibrium of the mind. This idea disallows food or objects obtained after killing or causing pain to a creature. This is because the object would then have its source in an evil act. It also excludes stale and pungent-smelling food. *Rajasik* diet is said to produce restlessness and *tamasic* foods are those which are harmful to one's mind or body.

Vegetarianism became an extremely complex symbol of contesting colonial ideas about emasculation in colonial Bengal. It became a mode of constructing a "tradition" tracing the past back to the Aryans. The Bengali branch of the Christian Vernacular Education Society brought out a text of satirical poems in the late 19th century. Conversion to Christianity on a large scale, a "modern" phenomenon, comfortably co-existed with a mythical Hindu "tradition." In one of the satirical poems in

³⁸ Anon. "Bhat o Ruti." Durgadas Gupta ed. *Swasthya*. vol.3, no. 7, (Kartik 1306 BS [c.November/December 1899]): 195-96.

this book, a Bengali young man who had returned from England requested his wife to become more westernized. His wife retorted:

You fancy that non-vegetarian races are strong.
The Aryans who once ruled the world,
Never had fowl curry.³⁹

There was less concern with an actual past rather than with an imagined “tradition.” In fact, in ancient medical treatises, like *Susrutasamhita* (written around 3rd or 4th century AD) and *Caracasamhita* (written in c. 3rd century BCE), meat was the first named in a series of nourishing agents and endowed with pharmaceutical properties.⁴⁰ Science in the Christian Vernacular Education text was being used to make up a “tradition,” whereby meat-eating was equated with the colonial modern and a source of several ailments.

Perhaps the most stark example of a cultural explanation of “science” was given in a small text called *Bharater Godhan Raksha* (*Protection of cows in India*), published by an agricultural organization in c.1887. This text quoted scriptures to argue against beef eating. However, the text also provided a presumably scientific explanation against beef-eating. The text quoted a British doctor thus: “Beef is perhaps the most nutritious of butcher’s meat, mutton claiming equality with it in this respect; but it certainly is not the most digestible, and must therefore be partaken of with considerable caution.”⁴¹ But the main purpose of this text was to create a “difference” of the Hindus not just with the British, but with the Muslims as well. Hindus became the generic name for all Indians who had from ancient days never consumed beef. The text went further:

³⁹ Anon. “Ami to Hobo na Bibi e Pran Thakite.” In Suryakumar Ghosh ed. *Abakashranjan* (Kolkata, 1878) pp.118-120.

⁴⁰ Cited in Francis Zimmerman. *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987) pp.213-214. first pub. 1982.

⁴¹ *Bharater Godhan Raksha* (Tahirpur, 1294 BS [c. 1887] p.29.

Cow is known for its milk and its flesh is not beneficial for health. Hence it is shameful to have beef instead of cow's milk. A couple of children are so monstrous that they take pleasure in biting off their mother's breast while being breast fed. There is no difference between such children and beef eating youth.⁴²

On this issue, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (1827-1894), who was an educationist as well as a journalist, refuted the view that the Indians became weak because they were vegetarians. Bhudeb denied a connection between vegetarianism and emasculation. However, in order to prove his point, he looked toward Europe rather than looking back to an imagined "tradition" for the Bengalis. He argued that the Spartans who did not consume meat fared best among the Greeks.⁴³ Nor did all Europeans consume flesh as much as the British did. To prove his thesis, Bhudeb argued that the French and the Germans constituted two very courageous races. Bhudeb further referred to the newly emerging vegetarianism amongst the British.⁴⁴ Thus Bhudeb actually tried to champion vegetarianism from an angle of modernity. Bhudeb's argument was that the simple reason why most of the Indians were vegetarians was because India grew vegetables on a large scale. However, the general opinion was that it was the tropical climate of the country that necessitated a vegetarian diet in India. In *Binapani*, another journal, an author gave an extensive opinion on this matter in c.1894/95:

Both European and Indian physicians hold the climate responsible for their difference in food habits. Food that suited a cold climate did not suit a warm climate. --- Our scriptures have proved that vegetables and fruits are much more beneficial than the consumption of flesh in our

⁴² Ibid.pp.36-37.

⁴³ Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay.*Samajik Prabandha*. With an introduction and exegesis by Jahnavikumar Chakrabarty(ed.) (Kolkata:Paschimanga Rajya Pustak Parshad,1981)pp.43-45.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

country. There is hardly any individual who follow their own diet in this country and still be healthy.⁴⁵

New medical colleges started in colonial India from the early 19th century now came under attack. This discourse was critical of those doctors who received colonial education and were described interestingly as unscientific. Aswinikumar Biswas, writing in c. 1935, called the diet that these doctors prescribed as unscientific.⁴⁶ He argued that newly educated Bengali doctors prescribed milk, chicken broth, bread, barley, and arrowroot to Bengalis whose digestive system was more accustomed to rice. Biswas opined that food, like meat and bread, suited cold climates and not tropical climates like India.⁴⁷ Science was receiving a whole new definition. Western science was thoroughly criticized but the opposite was not necessarily labeled “indigenous” science. It was, on the contrary, perceived as a “modern” science. The climate theory was often endorsed by the British too. Basically the argument revolved around whether a “Bengali” body required a non-vegetarian diet at all or was it “masculine” the way it was.

Since the middle-class Bengali Hindu men were constantly ridiculed for their debilitated constitution, a different “masculine” figure had to be found in order to counteract these allegations. This “masculine” figure became that of the poorer men, especially the figure of the villager. The general argument became that poorer men had more nutritious meals than the middle-class for the simple fact that they were poor. The former ate nutritious food such as unhusked rice, fresh vegetables, whole lentil, beaten rice, jaggery, radishes and coconut and not machine-milled rice, flour, spicy vegetables,

⁴⁵ Benodebihari Chattopadhyay. “Bangalir Durbbalatar Karon Ki?” *Binapani*. vol. 1, no.7, (*Jaisthya* 1301[c. May/June 1894]):147-153.

⁴⁶ Aswinikumar Biswas. *Ahare Arogya* (Kolikata, 1341 B.S. [c.1935]) 2nd Part. *Rogarogyakar*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.pp.106-07.

and sweetmeats from the shops.⁴⁸ In reality, a meal for a poor family in the villages probably would consist of a small quantity of rice with lentils. Fresh vegetables for poor village families chiefly consisted of *kochu* (arum) that can hardly be called nutritious.⁴⁹ In fact, in a survey in Midnapore district, Bisweshar Banerjee, the Deputy Collector reported that even two full meals of coarse rice were a luxury for an average family in a typical village. Their ordinary condiment was salt and *kalmi*, a tank plant. They ate fish and lentils once a week for dinner.⁵⁰ This meal could hardly be called a wholesome or nutritious food as the Bengali middle-class would like one to believe. If this meal contained vegetarian fare, instead of a non-vegetarian one, it was simply because the lower classes could not afford a non-vegetarian meal.

The Bengali middle-class romanticized this diet as “pure,” “traditional,” and uncontaminated by newness. Apart from signifying a simple meal, this diet also came to stand for homegrown and homemade nutritious food. The home also carried nostalgia of the rural as opposed to the “new” food served in the public eateries of urban Calcutta. The “pure” food of the domestic space was juxtaposed with the “impure” and “new” food served in hotels and restaurants. The middle class stated that the “new” food engendered all kinds of diseases not perceived earlier. The “old” and the “new” food became divided through a line of division drawn by science. Chunilal Basu wrote:

It was a universal practice at one time, with the old and the young in every Bengali household, to take, as the first thing in the morning, a handful of wetted and softened grams,

⁴⁸ Anon. “Banglar Aharjya Samasya.” Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year 3, no.6, (Aswin 1336[c.September/October 1930]).

⁴⁹ Memorandum by W.V.G. Taylor, Esq., Magistrate of Pabna. No. 1109, dated Pabna 30th June 1874. *Proceedings of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department* (Calcutta, July 1874) p.43.

⁵⁰ Letter From- N.S. Alexander, Esq., Commissioner of the Burdwan Division, To-The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department. No. 7RG dated Burdwan, the 16th April 1888. *Report of the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1888) pp.9-18.

either with salt and ginger or with brown sugar (*goor*). --- The practice should be revived, and sprouting grams should be our daily food in the morning, preferably with brown sugar, which contains vitamin, whereas white sugar contains none. The re-establishment of this practice will, to some extent, make up the deficiency in protein and vitamin in our present-day Bengali diet.⁵¹

The language that Basu used here was one that he borrowed from the medical terminology he had acquired through his colonial education. But he gave it a different twist when he championed “traditional” food consumed in the villages with the “new” food consumed in colonial Calcutta. Srishchandra Goswami, who wrote a tract on the health of the Bengali students in c.1930, found the reason for the emasculation of the Bengali youth in the “new” food which he argued lacked protein.⁵² He wrote:

We have begun to consume tea and biscuits in place of milk and yogurt- we are eating fried food and fruits- we have learnt to eat *luchi* and *kachuri* (deep fried round shaped flour bread) fried in lard instead of puffed rice and sweets made from coconut. As a result people are suffering from diabetes and dyspepsia. Swami Vivekananda (eminent religious preacher and reformer) has quite justifiably argued that bread is poison. Do not touch it. Yogurt is really good. Throw away fried food and sweetmeats sold in the shops. Fried food is poison. There is nothing in flour. Wheat flour is more nutritious. One should not consume too much spice. Elites of Calcutta wear glasses, eat sweetmeats, ride cars, and die from diabetes.---Imitating Calcutta, places like Dhaka, Bikrampur, Birbhum, and Bankura have banished whole black lentil, poppy seed paste, and puffed rice from their diet to become civilized. They have started consuming fried food and sweetmeats sold in the shops. This is the result of being urban.⁵³

A number of authors took the responsibility for apprising the Bengali middle-class of what constituted nutritious food and of the means to escape diseases like acidity

⁵¹ Chunilal Basu. *Food*. (Calcutta, 1930) p.107.

⁵² Srishchandra Goswami. “Bangali Chhatroder Swasthya Gelo Je.” Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year 4, no. 1, (Baisakh 1337[c. April/May 1930]):1-5.

⁵³ Ibid.

and dyspepsia. Dr. Sundarimohan Das (1857-1950), who had joined the medical department of the Calcutta Corporation in 1890 and was one of the founder members of the National Medical College, drew up a long list of such food. These included food such as lentils, broad beans, eggplant, turnip, cabbage, onion, leafy vegetables, puffed rice with coconut, beaten rice, yogurt, cucumber, papaya, guava, blackberry and homemade food.⁵⁴ In c.1931, another contributor to the same journal wrote, “Earlier when one ate puffed rice, beaten rice, jaggery made from cane for snack, nobody heard of “dyspepsia.” Even today many villagers who eat such food instead of food sold in the market are healthy and strong; they have not heard of “dyspepsia.”⁵⁵ Food became pure on its account of being of the past, an imaginary “Golden Age,” produce of a subsistence economy.

“Pure” and “adulterated”

The arguments on nutrition became inextricably conjoined with arguments on “pure” food in the past and “adulterated” food in the present. Pure had a double meaning. On the one hand, purity represented a critique of the colonial administration and forced the latter to impose stricter policies in relation to adulteration. On the other hand, pure also signified untouched, which could imply the British as well as those unnamed people ranging from cultivators to cooks and sweetmeatmakers whose food the middle-class was obliged to consume in the colonial present. The present signified “new” and “foreign” for the Bengali middle-class. These two meanings together constituted the discourse of

⁵⁴ Dr. Sundarimohan Das. “Sulabh Khadya.” *Bangalakshmi*. year 6, no.4, (Phalgun 1337 BS[c.February/March 1931]):283-86. Reprinted in Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year 4, no.12, (Chaitra 1337[c.March/April 1931.]) :326-329.

⁵⁵ Basantakumar Chaudhuri. “Baje Kharach.” Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*. year5, no.12, (Jaisthya, Asharh 1338 [c.1931 May/June, June/July]) :30-35.

nutrition in colonial Bengal. The colonial state's economic policies had to take these cultural meanings into account when dealing with the question of adulteration.

It was *ghee* (clarified butter), a milk product, which sparked off most of the debates around “pure” and “impure.” The Ghee Bill was passed into operation in October 1886. Later on the Act was incorporated with the Municipal Act in section 364 of Act II, 1888, prohibiting the sale of adulterated food.⁵⁶ Why *ghee* became the kernel of the controversy over adulteration has been explained by Anne Hardgrove in her work. Hardgrove argues that the adulteration of food products took on a new cultural status under the British.⁵⁷ This was especially so in the case of *ghee* or clarified butter since *ghee* had a ritual purity for the Hindus. Scientific tests made visible the intrinsic qualities of *ghee* and exposed any adulterants. This modern method, according to Hardgrove, introduced a new rhetoric of “purity” and “impurity” of commodities.⁵⁸ A better way to search for techniques to detect adulteration of *ghee* became the concern of the day after the Calcutta Municipal Act forbade the adulteration of edibles in the early 20th century.⁵⁹ Hardgrove maintains that the Bengali middle-class blamed the Marwari merchants (who migrated from Rajasthan to Bengal even before the coming of the British to Bengal) for evading the technicalities of anti-adulteration law and selling substandard grades of *ghee*.⁶⁰ For the Bengali middle-class Hindus, Marwaris were deemed as the outsiders who had captured local trade and business. The main point of concern for the upper caste

⁵⁶ In the sections 272 and 273 of the 14th chapter of the Indian Penal Code, there were some substantial sections of what kind of punishment would be meted out to those who adulterated food. It stated thus: “Whoever sells, or offers, or exposes for sale, as food or drink, any which has been rendered or has become noxious, or is in, a state unfit for food or drink, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to six months, or with fine which may extend to 1000 rupees, or with both.”

⁵⁷ Anne Hardgrove. *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta* (New Delhi, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp.127-180.

⁵⁸ Ibid.p.168.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.170.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Hindu Bengalis, in Hardgrove's opinion, was around the ritual purity of *ghee*. Babu Surendra Nath Ray, for example, said that *ghee* was being adulterated with animal fat thus making it unfit for use in Hindu religious ceremonies.⁶¹

Hardgrove provides us with a very significant insight on the concept of "pure" and "impure." In the new rhetoric of nutrition, "pure" and "impure" had a significant religious connotation. Hardgrove argues that regional boundaries were also drawn along the lines of "purity" and "impurity." However, since Hardgrove's work is on the Marwari community in Calcutta, she does not delve into other aspects of this debate on adulteration. The definition of adulteration itself became problematic. What constituted "pure" and "adulterated" became a matter of debate. From clearly scientific and economic definitions, the debate took a cultural turn. The end result was a class/caste angle added to the concept of hygiene, albeit couched in a modern language of science. On the issue of the definition of adulteration one can notice a split between the opinion of the British and the middle-class. The debate began immediately after the Ghee Bill was passed.

"Purity" was not just a concern of the Bengali Hindu middle-class. The colonial state itself split on the definition of adulteration and purity. Adulteration as a phenomenon was not unknown to the British. In late 19th-century England, the adulteration of foodstuff reached an appalling height. One need to look at the way food was adulterated to understand its magnitude. Beer, wine, coffee, tea, bread, pickles, spices, confectionery, and milk were routinely adulterated. Wine was extended by adding spoiled cider to it; beer was adulterated with *locculus indicus*, liquor ice, salts of steel, or molasses. Blackthorn leaves replaced tea leaves, cheese came to be dyed with red lead,

⁶¹ Ibid.p.168.

bread was made whiter by alum and sometimes even arsenic, and candy was colored with poisonous salts of copper and lead. Cheap, spoiled butter could be washed with milk and then sold after being sweetened with sugar. Cocoa was extended with brick dust as was cayenne pepper. Black pepper was mixed with sand, and white mustard powder could be more flour and turmeric than actual mustard.⁶² The British Government passed the Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs Act in 1878 as a mode of preventing adulteration.⁶³

Although they had already experienced adulteration back home in England, cultural conceptions of the colonized subject compelled the colonial state to go deep into the meanings of adulteration that they encountered in the colony. Apart from a nutritive angle, the issue of adulteration had a ritualistic tenor, which was different from what the British had encountered back home. When the colonized defined adulteration it was couched in the language of “difference.” Sir P.C. Ray (1861-1944), who laid the foundation of Indian Chemical Industry and founded the Bengal Chemical & Pharmaceutical Works in 1892, for instance, referred to this confusion of the colonial state and argued that the composition of milk, and of butter made from it, depended on the breed, climate, and the method of feeding the cows, the period of lactation, and so on. He said that the standard for genuine butter, as generally accepted in England could not be always accepted as a safe guide in this country.⁶⁴ What was becoming clear was the Government’s confusion regarding the definition of adulteration. In fact the definition was deliberately kept vague by the state. W.J. Simpson, a health officer made a critique

⁶² Andrea Broomfield. *Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History* (West Port, Connecticut, London: Praeger publishers, 2007) p.117-118.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ P.C. Ray. “On the Chemical Examination of Certain Indian Food Stuffs, Part I, Fats and Oils.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. vol.lxiii, partII, Natural Science, no.1*, (1894):59-80.

of the Ghee Bill on the ground that as a result of the bill small vendors had to give up the sale of *ghee* and larger vendors could simply escape by paying a fine.⁶⁵ The state took a defensive stand and stated that the government was not concerned with those purchasers who were content to buy adulterated *ghee* (but not injurious to health). In such cases there was no need to destroy the vendor's entire stock. The state suggested that unadulterated *ghee* should be labeled pure *ghee*, which would resolve the matters in hand.⁶⁶ Simpson objected to labeling *ghee* as "pure" because he argued that just as no one called butter "pure" butter, it was superfluous to ask for "pure" *ghee*. The term *ghee* was a special name and it only referred to an article which was pure.⁶⁷ The government, however, dismissed Simpson's ideas.⁶⁸ The state was not too sure about how to comprehend the matter of "purity" since it had a scientific as well as a cultural meaning. The efforts that needed to be taken to figure out whether *ghee* was pure or not, was both time consuming

⁶⁵ Letter From-W.J. Simpson, Esq., Health Officer, to the Corporation, Calcutta. To- The Chairman of the Corporation of the Town of Calcutta (Dated Calcutta, the 10th July 1890.) Pro.3299. *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, August 1890).

⁶⁶ Letter From-C.J. Lyall, Esq., C.I.E., Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, To- The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Municipal Department. Proceeding No. 91. (Dated Simla, the 3rd September 1890) *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, September 1890) p.119.

⁶⁵ Letter From-W.J. Simpson, Esq., Health Officer, to the Corporation, Calcutta. To- The Chairman of the Corporation of the Town of Calcutta. (Dated Calcutta, the 8th October 1890.) Pro.4681. *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, October 1890) p.171.

⁶⁶ Letter From-C.J. Lyall, Esq., C.I.E., Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, To- The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Department (Dated Calcutta, the 1st December 1890). *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, December 1890) p.321.

⁶⁷ Notes and Orders by H.C. Woodman, Dated 19.7.1902.p.6. *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, August 1902).

⁶⁸ Letter From- Dr. J. Nield Cook, D.P.H. Health Officer (on leave), To-The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Local and Municipal Department (through the Chairman of the Corporation of Calcutta). Proceeding Nos. 477-78B. (Dated London, E.C., the 20th June 1902). *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, August 1902).

as well as expensive according to the state. The policies of the colonial state did not permit such a lengthy affair.

The Bengali Hindu middle-class discourse of nutrition revolved around a cultural definition of adulteration. The colonial state added an economic angle to the definition of adulteration. Thus there was a definite split between people regarding the definition of adulteration. The Calcutta Ghee Case in the early 20th century made this point even more clear. Satya Prakash Koch, a dealer in *ghee*, was prosecuted before the Municipal Magistrate of Calcutta for selling adulterated *ghee*. He was convicted mainly on the evidence of Dr. Dutt, who was the analyst of the Corporation. Major Bedford, the Government Chemical Examiner, however, found the *ghee* to be pure and gave evidence to the contrary. This case was then referred to the Council of the Society of Public Analysts in London. In his letter to the Corporation of Calcutta, Dr. J.N. Cook, health officer of the Council, categorically stated that there was no yardstick by which one could detect the adulteration of *ghee*. Dr. Cook recommended setting up new commissions for judging what pure *ghee* was. This job, he argued, would cost around half a *lakh* (Rs.100,000) of rupees.⁶⁹ The colonial Government quickly dissolved the case by declaring Dutt to be in the right. However, it was also stated that analyzing *ghee* was extremely difficult and the Corporation needed to be careful in case of future prosecutions. Although this decision was taken on the recommendations of the Council of the Society of Public Analysts, Dr. Cook's idea of a new commission was rejected.⁷⁰ The report stated: "I do not think that the Government is called upon to spend half a lakh in deciding on a standard of *ghee*."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Notes and Orders by E.W. Collin (Dated 22.7.1902) P.6. *Proceedings of the Hon'ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Department, Municipal Branch* (Calcutta, August 1902).

In the Calcutta Ghee Case, for example, the colonial state realized that detecting adulteration needed more attention, as per Cook's recommendations. Hence the state took a hasty decision and vindicated Dr. Dutt's analysis of the *ghee* as spurious. Declaring a sample of *ghee* made by a native dealer adulterated was much more convenient than setting up sophisticated institutions to detect adulteration. If the Government had endorsed what Dr. Bedford had argued, and if anybody became sick after having the *ghee*, things would become much more complicated. Finally, Cook's ideas, if implemented, were going to cost the state half a *lakh*. The state thought it was not worth spending that amount of money on detecting the standard of *ghee*. Hence a quick decision to declare a sample of *ghee* as spurious saved time, energy, and most significantly money. There was however constant pressure from the middle-class to change colonial policies regarding adulteration.

Consider the opinion of M.P. Gandhi, Secretary of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta. Gandhi severely criticized the suggestion of the Punjab Government that vegetable products like *ghee* may be colored in such a way that they could not be mixed with or passed off as natural *ghee* without immediate detection.⁷¹ Gandhi argued that it was possible to color the substance in such a way that the coloring matter could be destroyed by the process of heating the substances to a high temperature, or by keeping the same at the store for a certain time. Gandhi represented the responses of the Indian Chamber of Commerce to the Government's plan of importing *Vanaspati*

⁷¹ Letter From- M.P. Gandhi, Esq., M.A., F.R.E.S., F.S.S., Secretary, Indian Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta, To- The Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Local Self-Government Department. Proceeding No. P.A 13-28. (Dated Calcutta, the 21st September, 1928). *Agricultural & Industries Department. Branch Agriculture. Local Self-Government (Public Health)*, (Calcutta, June 1930).pp.4-5.

ghee which was a *ghee*-like product. *Vanaspati*, however, was a vegetable product and not a dairy product.

Several points need to be taken note of in this debate. The new rhetoric of nutrition brought in several other new concepts in its wake. The Indian Chamber of Commerce, which was perhaps the largest institutional representation of the Indian business community, made a critique of *Vanaspati* that was more cultural than economic.

Gandhi said:

In the interest of the preservation of the interest of dairy farming and cattle breeding, and in the interest of the healthy development of the future generation of India, my committee would recommend that the imports of such vegetable products should be totally prohibited by legislation.⁷²

In case the import of vegetable products like *Vanaspati* was not prohibited, Gandhi threatened the government with the imposition of heavy duties on such products.⁷³ The British government imported *Vanaspati*, but was obliged to call it *ghee* (although it was a vegetable product). The rage against *Vanaspati* made them name it so. The arguments on “pure” *ghee* gave a new twist to the concept of adulteration compelling the Government to take an active interest in the matters of adulteration, and pay its attention to the inspection of food.

A branch of the Municipal Administration became concerned exclusively with the inspection of food and restaurants. A yearly statistics of “pure” and adulterated food was made open to the public. Special care was taken to see that food stuffs or vegetables that came to the Calcutta market from the surrounding areas were unadulterated. Arrangements were made, for example, with the Howrah Municipality for the

⁷² Ibid.p.5.

⁷³ Ibid.

employment of a Special Inspector. This inspector inspected all the principal trains at Howrah and examined the articles brought back for sale. A large quantity of food stuffs found to be adulterated were destroyed then and there before they could reach the markets of Calcutta.⁷⁴ In the year 1919, 3551 samples of foodstuffs were examined altogether. These included 1401 samples of *ghee* (clarified butter), 661 samples of milk, and 454 samples of mustard oil. Out of these, 129 samples of *ghee*, 232 samples of milk, and 106 samples of mustard oil were found to be adulterated. 1892 maunds of foodstuffs, 1365 bottles of aerated water, 5251 eggs, 40,640 tins of tinned provisions and 100 cases of tea were also destroyed during the same year on the charge of being adulterated.⁷⁵

As the government started dealing with the question of adulteration in a firm manner, food inspection of hotels and restaurants strengthened the middle-class Bengali Hindu's concern about the "purity" of food from a different angle. A large number of this middle-class was employed in the Municipal administration itself; they became quite vocal in their critique of hotels and restaurants. In this discourse, both scientific and cultural explanations of "pure" and "impure" were conjoined with the question of class.

Apart from its association with ritual purity, *ghee* also became a dividing line between the classes. Generally speaking all dairy products that were adulterated became a reason for the middle-class to blame the lower classes. The tracts written on this subject suggested "pure" milk for the Bengali Hindus. Aswini Biswas emphatically wrote: "Cow's milk is the purest diet for the Hindus."⁷⁶ Dairy became a concern for its association with the cow, which was considered sacred to the Hindus. But, of course, the defense of milk was made on the ground of nutrition. According to Kularanjan

⁷⁴ *Report of the Municipal Administration of Calcutta. vol. I, 1918-19.* (Calcutta, 1919) pp.22-23.

⁷⁵ *Report of the Municipal Administration of Calcutta. vol. I, 1919-20.* (Calcutta, 1920) pp.25-26.

⁷⁶ Biswas. *Ahare Arogya.* p.37.

Mukhopadhyay, milk constituted the best form of protein.⁷⁷ Mukhopadhyay analyzed the protein elements in milk to give what he considered was a scientific explanation of a proper diet. However, his comparison of milk with meat and the championing of the former was a reference to his celebration of vegetarianism.⁷⁸ The chemical analysis of food was a new phenomenon that was getting intertwined with cultural explanations. Tracts on clean milk became a regular feature in the health supplements of *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. P.C. Ray blamed the rentier classes for being apathetic to animal husbandry. He compared the Bengali rentiers with the English rentiers. The latter was praised for taking an active interest in the improvement of cattle.⁷⁹

In this middle-class discourse on nutrition, the culprit who was held for the deteriorating quality of milk was the lower class milkman or the *goala*, as the milkmen were known as in Bengal. Dr. Sundari Mohan Das, who became the Chairman of Calcutta Corporation's Health Committee in 1924, narrated a story that in his opinion made the *goalas* responsible for adulterating milk.⁸⁰ Das once traveled in a third class compartment of a train where he heard the conversation between a few milkmen. He was appalled to learn that these men had bribed the railway men to get into the train. More than the conversation, however, Das was aghast at the appearance of the *goalas*. He described the scene as "nauseating" and the milkmen as "dirty" and "reeking" with their "dirtiest possible cans emitting odor of decomposed milk."⁸¹ Thus in the new rhetoric of nutrition it was not just that the milk was unclean and impure. Milkmen also became

⁷⁷ Kularanjan Mukhopadhyay. *Khadyer Nababidhan*. ND pp.14-16.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Sir P.C. Ray. "Milk for Calcutta: A Scheme for a Model Dairy Farm." *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. 6th Anniversary. (Calcutta, 1930) pp.22-24, 28.

⁸⁰ Dr. Sundari Mohan Das. "More Milk and Cleaner Milk for Calcutta, What the New Corporation has Done." *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, vol.v, no.1, (Calcutta, November 20 1926-May 14 1927) pp.29-35

⁸¹ Ibid.

enmeshed in this discourse of a commodity. Unhygienic, dirty and impure became inextricably intertwined.

According to Das, these *goalas* were extremely unscrupulous aside from being dirty. They squeezed as much milk as possible from the cow-keeper. The cow-keepers did not know how to feed their cows properly so as to get an increased supply of milk. As a result, the calf starved and died. Das recommended setting up Co-operative milk societies and dispensing with the *goalas*.⁸² He, in fact, started a scheme of cooperative milk supply himself. P.C. Ray went a step further and argued that it was the up-country milkmen who migrated to Calcutta from places like the United Province and Bihar, who were responsible for adulterating milk. Bengali milkmen were much better when compared to the former.⁸³ While describing the milk purchased from the milkmen, Chunilal Basu, the chemist, clearly stated that mixing water in milk was typical of the *goala* caste.⁸⁴ This new rhetoric continued even after independence when Asoke K. Dutt asked for punishments to be inflicted on milkmen in 1949.⁸⁵

Sweetmeat makers were another source of wrath for the Bengali middle-class Hindus. *The Report of the Municipal Administration of Calcutta* stated that after the Calcutta Municipal Act of 1917 forbade adulteration of edibles, there was a general improvement in the quality of *ghee* sold for public consumption, especially in the wholesale and big retail shops. However the *ghee* used in the sweetmeat shops was of an inferior variety.⁸⁶ *Mairas* or the sweetmeat makers who generally belonged to the lower castes thus became an object of disgust for the middle-class. Even in the 1860s, several

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ray. "Milk for Calcutta."

⁸⁴ Chunilal Basu. *Khadya* (Kolikata, 1924) p.255. first published 1910.

⁸⁵ Ashoke K. Dutt. "Milk." *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. vol. xlix, no. 9 (Calcutta, January 1949).

⁸⁶ *Report of the Municipal Administration of Calcutta*. vol. I of 1919-20 (Calcutta, 1920) pp.25-26.

complaints were made to the government against the *mairas*. The class agenda of the middle-class became clear from the vitriolic accusations made by Tran nath Chatterjee in 1863. “Our confectioners being chiefly men from the lower grades of our community and devoid of all education have hardly consciences in them, and so look more to their own interests than the health and lives of their buyers.”⁸⁷ Ramesh Chandra Ray, a doctor writing in c.1929, accused the *mairas* for being dirty and unhygienic. He almost linked this accusation with the blame that the *mairas* were responsible for adulteration.⁸⁸ People, like Dr. S.N. De, the chief analyst of the Calcutta Corporation, and Dr. J.P. Chaudhuri, district health officer of the Calcutta Corporation, also made similar observations in 1930 and as late as in 1941.⁸⁹

This critique of the sweetmeat shops as well as the sweetmeat makers was expanded to include within its fold the critique of the restaurants too. The same Ramesh Chandra Ray wrote another tract on the restaurants that were gradually emerging in Calcutta. By the 1920s, these restaurants had become a ubiquitous presence in Calcutta. Ray was concerned about the unhygienic atmosphere and the unhealthy food of the restaurants. However, he made a cultural analysis in the process bringing in class into the folds of nutrition.⁹⁰ It seems from his tract that for Ray restaurants implied small and low eateries and not the British-established new and extremely sophisticated large restaurants.

⁸⁷ Letter From- Baboo Tran nath Chatterjee, To- The Hon’ble A. Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal. Proceeding No. 328. (Dated the 4th June 1863). *Proceedings of the Hon’ble The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Judicial Department* (Calcutta, June 1863) p.211.

⁸⁸ Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray. “Khabarer Janmakatha.” Aswinikumar Chattopadhyay ed. *Grihasthamangal*, year 3, no.1, (Baisakh 1336[c. 1929 April/May 1929]):192-195.

⁸⁹ Dr. S.N. De. “Eating Houses in Calcutta.” Amal Home ed. (on leave). Ramesh Chandra Ray acting ed. *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette. 8th Anniversary Number* (Calcutta, November 26 1930) pp.31-33, Dr. J.P. Chaudhuri. “Eating Houses in Calcutta.” Amal Home ed. *Calcutta Municipal Gazette, 12th Health Number* (Calcutta, 26 April 1941) pp. 145, 162.

⁹⁰ Ramesh Chandra Ray. “Restaurants: Mend or End them!” *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette. v.11. Health Supplement*. (Calcutta, 29th March 1930) pp.18-19.

The latter was hardly frequented by the Bengali Hindu middle-class. Upper-class Bengali Hindus sometimes visited these clubs and restaurants, but not the middle-middle or the lower middle-classes. This is the reason why Ray considered the students to be the most important patronizers 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."⁹¹ There could be a "gentleman proprietor," but in Ray's opinion, he was deceived by his personnel who cooked and served at the restaurants.⁹²

Ray made a lengthy analysis of the adulteration of food by the lower-class staff in the restaurants. He described that curry was made from stale meat and the left over cutlets were converted into potato chops. Veal was passed off as lean mutton and lard was used in several restaurants in place of *ghee*. There was an even more detailed description of the adulteration of sweetmeats. Ray claimed that the Co-operative Milk Union sold tons of skimmed milk at cheap rate in the afternoon and this went to sweetmeat shops for the manufacture of cottage cheese and curd. Tons of thickened milk was thus imported daily into Calcutta for the manufacture of rice pudding. Ray tells us that thickened milk was made from skimmed milk and represented unwanted protein. They deteriorated during storage and transit. As a result the sweetmeats that were made from the thickened milk were also spoilt.⁹³ Such views on sweetmeat makers could also be made in the case of milkmen, like P.C. Ray did. He exclaimed that Bengali sweetmeat makers were at least

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

better than non- Bengali sweetmeat makers because the latter used “vegetable” products like *Vanaspati*, which was mixed with lard.⁹⁴



Figure 4-1. “*Dalda Vanaspati*.” Advertisement in *Prabasi* (Kolkata, 1939).

Figure 1 showed a male figure advising women on the advantages of *Vanaspati*. Two points need to be noted in this image. First of all this advertisement stated that *Vanaspati* was free of lard and not touched by hand. Second, it was also stated in the advertisement that any one who could find any kind of adulterants in the *Vanaspati* would be rewarded 100 rupees. Thus what was becoming clear was the concern about “purity” even in the advertisements. A product to be sold in India needed to be unadulterated, adulteration in this context implying lard.

While “impure” was equated with the labor of the lower classes, the diet of the lower classes was also being romanticized. In this respect, rice followed dairy products as another commodity for great concern. The critique of rice was more a critique of

⁹⁴ Ray. “Khabarer.” pp.192-195.

modernity itself. In the narrative of the Bengali Hindu middle-class, impure rice was a product of modern machines introduced in colonial Bengal. Santoshnath Seth, the author of *Bange Chaltatva*, made a critical analysis of machine-husked rice in c.1926.⁹⁵ He said that most of the markets in Bengal were flooded with the rice husking mills.⁹⁶ The question naturally arises why people took recourse to this rice if according to Seth it had less nutritive qualities than hand-pound rice. Seth answered that it was because of its glossy quality that the machine-husked rice became so popular. Machines husked and cleaned rice better and thus made it look whiter than the rice husked by hand or *dhenkis*. Thus the refined rice attracted more buyers.⁹⁷

Seth's opinion resonated in Gandhian activist Satishchandra Dasgupta's (b.1881) voice. His endorsement of the "traditional" *dhenki* (an indigenous rice-husking machine chiefly used in village homes) was steeped in a modern language of nutrition.⁹⁸ Dasgupta argued that *dhenki*-husked rice contained vitamin B, while this was absent in modern machine-husked rice.⁹⁹ It was a critique of modernity in a very modern language. Thus it was the rhetoric that was modern in its essence. Aswinikumar Biswas, who wrote a couple of prescriptive tracts on physical-well being in c.1935 used the terms "table rice" and "coolie rice" to signify machine-milled rice and *dhenki*-husked rice respectively.¹⁰⁰ This terminology was often used by the British to distinguish between what they and the indigenous elites ate from the rice that the lower classes ate. Biswas argued that the middle-class was drawn to the sparkling white rice. This "table rice," according to

⁹⁵ Mahajan Shree Santoshnath Seth "Sahityaratna." *Bange Chaltatva* (Kolkata, 1332 B.S. [c.1926]).

⁹⁶ Ibid. pp.375-77.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Satishchandra Dasgupta. *Chauler Katha*. Introduction by P.C. Ray (Calcutta, 1936).

⁹⁹ Ibid.p.9.

¹⁰⁰ Aswinikumar Biswas. *Ahare Arogya*. (Kolkata, 1341 B.S. [c.1935]).

Biswas, was responsible for all their ailments. The coarse, red rice that the lower classes ate was called the “cooly rice.” This was the unhusked rice made from *dhenki*. This rice was much more nutritive than the machine-husked rice in Biswas’ opinion.¹⁰¹ Biswas appropriated this terminology from the British, but one could not miss a sense of ridicule in his tone. He treated this marker of difference between the two rice as superficial. Biswas was trying to cross the class boundaries when he spoke for the “cooly rice,” and it was obvious that even though he used the new terminology, he was superseding it. However, when it concerned touch, it became essential to keep the middle-class body at a safe distance from the lower classes. Thus what the lower classes ate could be consumed at home. But when there was a bodily contact of the lower classes or the lower castes with food, it became “impure.”

However, just like an overwhelming population flocked to the hotels and the restaurants, the majority of the population was consuming husked-rice despite all protests against it. In this context, the whiteness of rice became a signifier of the new rhetoric of nutrition. Modern machines, as the above authors said, cleaned and thus removed the outer skin of rice. As a result the machine-husked rice glistened. White and clean became equivalent. Since a large number of people in Bengal consumed rice, rice mills became a convenient substitute for the *dhenki*. The new machines aestheticized a commodity. There, of course, existed a criticism of the new-husked rice and the romanticization of the *dhenki*-husked rice. It would be too simplistic to argue that the majority of the population who consumed the machine-husked rice was oblivious of this critique of machine-husked rice. However, for those who consumed machine-milled rice, white glistening rice became a marker of their status.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.pp.10-13

Thus this new rhetoric imbricated with the question of class. The rhetoric was molded in a “scientific language of nutrition.” However, this language could not hide the fact that “pure” and “hygienic” had a social connotation. It was only the lower castes, like the milkmen or the lower class cooks and waiters in the new small eateries, who bore the wrath of the middle-class as unhygienic. Nonetheless, the fact that many flocked to these eateries, for instance, the students, proved that eating out was becoming an experience of a new found pleasure and it was this pleasure that became another source of critique for the new rhetoric of nutrition.

Drinking pleasure: Tea and modernity

A matter of anguish among these authors was that pleasure was becoming more significant than physical well being. People went to any extent to satiate their palette. We have seen in the last chapter how new food was critiqued by some of the middle-class who were falling back on an imagined tradition to escape the new. However, many of the new food were being prescribed for their medicinal qualities which ultimately led to their acceptance by the Bengali Hindu middle-class. A few examples bear this point. Basantakumar Chaudhuri complained that feeding biscuits to children had become a sign of civilization.¹⁰² The result was diarrhea and mood swings. He narrated an incident when a *kaviraj* (indigenous medical practitioner) substituted beaten rice for biscuits for a kid. The mother was shocked and exclaimed: “What is the *kaviraj* saying? How can my son have beaten rice? It is only eaten by the lower classes.”¹⁰³

Perhaps the most virulent criticism was made against a new food or rather a drink which became the most popular amongst all new pleasures of life. This was tea. Tea

¹⁰² Basantakumar Chaudhuri. “Baje Kharach.”pp.30-35.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

became a symbol of a change in the nutritive elements of “Bengali” cuisine. Tea, when introduced as a hot beverage, soon became immensely popular with the middle class. Both Basantakumar Chaudhuri and P.C. Ray asked people to refrain from drinking tea as it caused dyspepsia.¹⁰⁴ However, it is undeniable that tea was becoming a reality in many homes. In fact, most of the people considered tea to be drunk during illness. Mahendranath Datta, brother of Narendranath Datta aka Vivekananda, the famous religious preacher, wrote that his aunt was given tea as a medicinal beverage after child delivery.¹⁰⁵ Jatindramohan Datta also wrote that most of the middle class Bengali houses kept tea for medicinal purpose in the old days.¹⁰⁶ It was the latter view that the advertisement industry took notice of. One of the advertisements of International Tea Market Expansion Board evoked such sentiments thus:

Chhelemeyeder Swasthyer Dayitwa Apnari (You alone are responsible for the well-being of your children /your children’s health depends on you)

---- A perfect homemaker always tries to make children aware of exercise, food and drink. They know that craving for tea is good for their children’s health. They are becoming healthier by drinking this pure and delightful drink. This habit is going to benefit them once they become old.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Basantakumar Chaudhuri. “Baje Kharach,” P.C. Ray. *Anna Samasyay Bangalir Parajoy o Tahar Pratikar*. (Kolkata, 1936) pp.207-212.

¹⁰⁵ Mahendranath Datta, *Kolikatar Puraton Kahini o Pratha*. (Kolkata, 1978) first pub. 1975.

¹⁰⁶ Jamdatta. “Kayekti Sekele Galpa.” *Sunday Jugantar (Samayiki)* (30 Asharh 1358 BS [15 June/July 1951]): 9-11.

¹⁰⁷ Advertisement of tea by ITMEB: *Chhelemeyeder Swasthyer Dayitta Apnari* (Kartick, 1343 BS [c.November/December 1937]).



Figure 4-2. “A Healthy Beverage and the Product of a Prosperous Nation.” Advertisement in *Anandabazar Patrika*, (Kolkata, 1343 BS [c.1937])

This growing belief that many of the new food had medicinal qualities led even the most orthodox people to gradually accept them. Vivekananda’s dismissal of bread in *Nabaprabha* (*Phalgun* 1307 BS [c.February/March 1900]) was ridiculed in the domestic manual *Punya*, edited by Pragyasundari Devi, a scion of the Tagores (noted for their early embracing of the *Brahmo* religion). The latter argued that there was not any evidence for such an assumption.¹⁰⁸ Bipin Chandra Pal, the radical nationalist was severely admonished by his father for having lemonade when he was a kid. However, his father made Pal drink lemonade when the latter had diarrhea. When asked, Pal’s father said that medicine was like food that had been blessed by God.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ “Mashik Sahitya Samalochana.” Pragyasundari Debi ed. *Punya* (Kolkata, *Chaitra* 1307 BS [c.March/April 1900]): 321-325.

¹⁰⁹ Bipinchandra Pal. *Sattar Batsar: Atmajibani* (Kolkata, 2005) pp.57-61. first pub. *Magh* 1333 BS-*Baisakh* 1335 [c.January/February1926-April/May 1927]

The rhetoric of nutrition unfolded a series of debates around dietetics. Of course, one of the significant strands in these debates concerned a “pure” tradition uncontaminated by ‘modernity.’ However, the very discourse itself was modern which discussed “tradition” in a modern “scientific” and “medical” language in order to construct a “pure” body. As already stated, the effort to build a well- nourished body was cultural in its content. Nourished meant having “pure” food. “Pure” also implied a certain distance from the “impure,” the latter quality was easily associated with the lower classes and the lower castes. But what is to be noted is a constant adaptation in the process. The Bengali “body” that was born from this discourse of nutrition was that of the colonial modern, fraught with a tension between indigenizing a modern science of nutrition and accepting new forms of nutritive elements in the “Bengali” cuisine.

Conclusion and afterthought

I have argued in this dissertation that the self-fashioning of the colonial Bengali middle-class was articulated through the material culture of food. 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. This rhetoric of taste marked out the “Bengaliness” of the cuisine that was articulated within the parameter of such binaries as “tradition” and “modern.” The Bengali Hindu middle-class took care to see that this cuisine was not commodified and remained domestic, the domestic space symbolizing “tradition.” The colonial Bengali middle-class was able to indigenize new parameters of culinary acts that they experienced as a result of colonial modernity. The peasantry and the working class remained objects of a cultural discourse on “tradition.” On the one hand, their cuisine was romanticized and became a symbol of a prosperous past; on the other hand, the middle-class Bengali Hindus constantly defined their cuisine as opposed to the former. At the same time, the middle-class was also behind their British counterparts in the economic sphere. Their life-world revolved around these distances that marked them off as the middle-class. The middleness of this class also arose from its distance from the Hindu Bengali elites, the upper rank in the indigenous social hierarchy.

In my dissertation, I have delved into the world-view of the middle-rank in this indigenous social hierarchy. This middle-class hardly visited the fancy high-end restaurants of the British in India or even the clubs set up by them. In fact, many a times, these places barred the “natives” from entering their premises. Instead this middle-class, as well as the class below them, frequented several hotels and small restaurants set up by

the Indian entrepreneurs. The response of the Bengali Hindu middle-class to new gastronomic possibilities was double-faceted. On the one hand, there was a distinct enthusiasm for the pleasures of modernity. On the other, there was an agonized awareness that this newness in cultural life had been brought about by a political dispensation that was fundamentally alien, racist and exploitative. This double-faceted response contextualized the articulation of a discursive project, a set of values, prejudices and tastes that I have called the “rhetoric of cuisine” of the Bengali Hindu middle-class. The notion of a Bengali middle-class was associated with this discursive project. The “rhetoric of Bengali cuisine” made sure that this middle-class did not simply become just a part of the national middle-class and retained the essence of the material culture of Bengal.

The “rhetoric of cuisine” was an aesthetic choice that was imbricated in the upper caste and patriarchal agenda of the middle-class social reform. My dissertation has investigated how this rhetoric made possible certain social practices, including the imagination of the act of cooking as a classic feminine act and the domestic kitchen as a sacred space. In these acts of imagination, there were important elements of continuity from the pre-colonial times, especially evidenced in the reinstitution of caste-based norms of gastronomy. Thus, the deployment of the “rhetoric of cuisine” was at the same time anti-colonial yet capitalist, cosmopolitan yet gendered and caste-based.

Arjun Appadurai argues in his essay on cookbooks in contemporary India that it was only after independence that food overcame its moral and medical overtones and led to the emergence of a national cuisine.¹ Appadurai explicates that new (by which he

¹ Arjun Appadurai. “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol.30 (1988):3-24.

means post-colonial) cookbooks were a result of the spread of the print media and the cultural rise of the new middle-classes. These middle-classes, and especially their wives who traveled all over India and culled the idea of different regional cuisines, helped to form a national cuisine.² This middle-class was nationally linked by their tastes in magazines, clothing, film, and music, and by their interpersonal networks in many cities.³ The exchange of recipes which cut across regional barriers reflected an emerging culinary cosmopolitanism in the cities and towns of India.⁴ This cosmopolitanism, in Appadurai's opinion, signals the beginning of a gustatory approach towards food. My thesis contests Appadurai's contention that food emerged as an autonomous enterprise, free of its medical and moral overtones, only in independent India.

Undoubtedly, in the colonial era, food retained both its medical and moral overtones. However, a cuisine cannot emerge without a comprehensive discussion of all the elements that surrounds food. I have also shown in my thesis that even in colonial Bengal print fuelled the spread of several cookbooks written for gastronomic pleasure. These cookbooks, the small eateries that men visited, and an overall aesthetic interest in culinary art, all made food an autonomous enterprise even in colonial Bengal. In fact, it was through their experience with colonial modernity that the Bengali middle-class formulated their idea of taste in post-colonial India. Taste became a marker of standards of good and bad, acceptance of some things, rejection of some others and in Pierre Bourdieu's apt phrase "disgust for other tastes." Bourdieu's theorization of taste helps us in unfolding the elements that went into the making of "Bengali" cuisine. To understand the nature of taste as a sign of refinement, an aesthetic practice for the middle-class, I will

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.p.6.

⁴ Ibid.p.7.

look at two texts, one by Buddhadeb Bose, a well-known Bengali litterateur and the other by Gopal Halder who was associated with the Communist Party of India.

Taste, aesthetics and homing

Pierre Bourdieu defines taste as the practical affirmation of social differences.⁵ According to Bourdieu, one asserts his/her social position through aesthetic practices by which he means aestheticization of quotidian life.⁶ Here Bourdieu problematizes the idea of high aesthetics chiefly conceptualized by Emmanuel Kant. In a critique of Kant, Bourdieu denies the dichotomy between the “taste of sense” and the “taste of reflection.” In Bourdieu’s theorization of taste, there is no pleasure that can be called pure and that can become a symbol of refinement and moral purity without any social conditioning. Aesthetic consumption, in Bourdieu’s opinion, is always confluent with ordinary practices of consumption. Sublimated and refined taste always relies on negating what it considers to be coarse and vulgar taste.⁷ Refinement is defined by what Bourdieu has called the “habitus.” Habitus is nothing else but the social conditions of a particular class that makes that class. Taste is the sign of that habitus, which is basically a unitary set of preferences of the bourgeoisie.

The art of eating and dining remains one such area in which the bourgeoisie shows signs of restraint and an aesthetic judgment. Bourdieu argues that as one goes up the social ladder, the propensity to spend on fatty food like pasta, potatoes, beans and bacon decreases and the expenditure on wine, lean meat, fish, fruits and vegetables

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. pp.6-7.

increases.⁸ Bourgeois ways of eating, in Bourdieu's considered opinion, are marked by an affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic judgment. In their attempts to exercise restraint, the bourgeoisie tries to ignore the material reality of the act of eating that is the practice of the working class.⁹

Following Pierre Bourdieu, several scholars have demonstrated how taste and what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital" went into the making of a middle-class self. These scholars chiefly focus on the material practices of the middle-class to understand how a specifically culturally defined class-based discourse was formed that marked the middle-class off from other classes. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Karin Wurst argues that the upper middle-class in the late 18th-early 19th century Germany defined and marked themselves off from the subordinate classes through everyday pleasures.¹⁰ This middle-class reinterpreted luxury in terms of elegance and dissociated it from its earlier association with sin and unethical conduct.¹¹ Sheer opulence of wealth gave way to aesthetic presentations of objects like food and beverage for example.¹² Even though the modern middle-class indulged in luxury, their association with luxury was marked by self-restraint. Both Linda Young and Maxine Berg have argued that the objects of pleasure needed to reflect a sense of refinement and civility, a sign of genteel

⁸ Ibid.p.177.

⁹ Ibid.p.196, p.201.

¹⁰ Karin Wurst. *Fabricating Pleasure: Fashion, Entertainment, and Cultural Consumption in Germany, 1780-1830* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Ibid.p.82.

¹² Ibid.pp.75-76.

taste.¹³ Other scholars also argue that middle-class taste had to be aesthetic and refined and avoid any tawdry manifestation.¹⁴

In colonial India, the modern middle-class had a double task; it had to define itself as modern while keeping a distance from the so-called western modern. Second, the acts of consumption that defined this middle-class had to draw boundaries with other classes. In this sense, the discourse of taste that was produced through the understanding of cuisine in colonial Bengal was definitely characterized by what Bourdieu defines as the negation of other tastes. However, colonial conditions necessitated a different form of aestheticization, 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.

“Bengali” cuisine that emerged in colonial Bengal never assumed a public character as haute cuisine assumed in France. Those who frequented the fancy restaurants set up by the British in Bengal, were small in number. The middle-class was more likely to visit small eateries and hotels. Although many a times these hotels were given a so-called English name like Café-de-Monico, they were more likely to be owned by local people. “Bengali” cuisine was constituted together by food consumed by the Bengali Hindu middle-class in these small eateries, and the food they ate at home.

Foregoing chapters have shown that the entire process of the cultivation of vegetables, the act of cooking, eating at domestic and public places and the discourse of nutrition was part of a larger discourse on a Bengali Hindu middle-class conception of

¹³ Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century America, Australia, and Britain* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁴ Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1992).

cuisine. The middle-class conceptualized a modern cuisine from an imagined “tradition” as well as from the pleasures of modernity. Taste that went into the making of Bengali “cuisine” was indeed refined, refinement defined by what Bourdieu calls the “habitus” of the middle-class. The middle-class Bengali Hindu men’s aestheticization of women’s cooking also emerged from these aspirations of refinement. When they made critiques of the eateries, when they romanticized women’s cooking, and when they formulated a new discourse of nutrition, the Bengali Hindu middle-class was driven by an urge to define an entire world-view of cuisine, refined and restrained in its content.

This sense of a “refined taste” informed the Bengali middle-class discourse on cuisine. I have tried to show in my thesis that this Bengali Hindu middle-class was tenacious in its efforts to maintain a distance from the opulent upper-classes as well as the upper middle-classes. Barring a few indigenous elites like the Tagores, other subjects of this dissertation tried to define themselves as verging on moderation and refinement of taste. For them, “plenty” signified a “tradition” of self-subsistence and not a “modernity” of monetary economy. This class defined their world through aestheticizing their quotidian practices, which they claimed separated them from all the other classes. The discourse of cuisine that they formulated bore marks of this constant aestheticization.

Colonial conditions called for demarcations of various kinds within this cuisine: tradition and modernity; authentic and inauthentic; indigenous and foreign. The cuisine that emerged was definitely a product of colonial modernity, of its many demands and complexities. Like most of the other cuisines in the world, this cuisine could not separate itself totally from an aesthetic interest in gastronomy. However, unlike haute cuisine, “Bengali” cuisine never really found a market for itself until very recently. This lack of

commercialization of “Bengali” cuisine actually became a marker of its aesthetic superiority in the Bengali Hindu middle-class discourse. This discourse thus celebrated the material culture of a region, rather than that of a nation. However, Bengal itself became an eponym of the nation. The essence of this regional nationalism was found in its community of taste. We will look at two texts here in order to understand the aesthetic implications of Bengali cuisine.

In *Bhojan Shilpi Bangali* (Bengalee, the connoisseur of food), Buddhadeb Basu (1908-1974) wrote that the element that set apart “Bengali” cuisine from all other cuisines was its distinctive nature of domesticity.¹⁵ Although this characteristic disabled “Bengali” cuisine from being a part of world cuisine, according to Basu, this nature of “Bengali” cuisine saved it from the vulgarity of commercialization. “Bengali” cuisine had originated from home and familial affection.¹⁶ Basu’s account was replete with his aestheticization of “Bengali” cuisine. Basu, for instance, praised “Bengali” cuisine in its uniqueness of naming simple dishes in diverse ways.

Basu took delight in explaining that even subtle differences in the techniques of cooking made Bengalis name their dishes in different ways. Basu ridiculed the word “curry” saying that delicate Bengali dishes could not be clubbed together under this monochromatic umbrella called “curry.”¹⁷ However, Basu opined, that this distinctiveness did not narrow down Bengali culinary skills. Instead, Bengali cuisine had synthesized all other cuisines in its fold.¹⁸ Basu urged that, on the one hand, fruits and vegetables that the “foreigners” brought in were indigenized. On the other hand, “Bengali” cuisine, unlike

¹⁵ Buddhadeb Basu. *Bhojan Shilpi Bangali* (Kolkata: Bikalpa Prakashani, 2004) p.18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.p.10.

¹⁸ Ibid.p.13.

cuisines in other parts of India, wove Aryan and non-Aryan traditions of eating together. The result was the production of a liberal and well-thought out cuisine.¹⁹

In his appraisal of Bengali cuisine, Basu compared the former with European and Chinese cuisines. He argued that Chinese cuisine, which was so renowned for its variety, was devoid of dairy products as well as bitter dishes. European cuisine too did not include bitter dishes of food in their items for delicacies.²⁰ According to Basu, a Bengali kitchen assembled six flavors of ancient Indian treatise, bitter, hot, acidic, sweet, sour, and pungent along with non-vegetarian food items. Basu compared Bengali sweetmeat makers with those of Switzerland and techniques adopted by Bengalis to cook fish with that of the Fins.²¹

What is at stake in Basu's romanticization of Bengali cuisine? Basu's essays on food expressed a kind of nostalgia for a lost world and a desire to capture that world. As Damayanti Basu Singh, Buddhadeb Basu's daughter, stated succinctly in the preface to his book, Basu was driven by a nostalgic urge to document a history of Bengali cuisine.²² This nostalgia for the past arose when Basu's life-world was shaken by the Second World War and the partition of Bengal in 1947. Basu wrote that the ram-shackled world of the Bengali middle-class could not gather itself after it was partitioned between eastern and western parts of Bengal in 1947.²³

Lamentation for this lost world is best reflected in Basu's novel, *Golap Keno Kalo* (Why is the rose black) written around 1967.²⁴ Basu himself was from eastern parts

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.pp.13-14.

²² Damayanti Basu Singh. "Preface." In Buddhadeb Basu. *Bhojan Shilpi Bangali* (Kolkata: Bikalpa Prakashani, 2004) pp.i-iii.

²³ Ibid.pp.24.

²⁴ Buddhadeb Basu. *Golap Keno Kalo*(1967), excerpt in Buddhadeb Basu. *Bhojan Shilpi Bangali*.pp.34-35

of Bengal. Many of the refugees, who came to Calcutta after the partition of Bengal and inhabited refugee colonies, often came from well-to-do middle-class families in Dhaka. The protagonist of *Golap Keno Kalo* remembered the world that was left behind by the refugees. These refugees had to stay in squalor in Calcutta, sometimes two or three families huddled together. They could not afford to spend money on anything more than two courses a meal per day. The protagonist of *Golap* adumbrated what these refugees ate in their halcyon days in eastern Bengal before the partition of Bengal in 1947. A description of the consumption of food in pre-partition eastern Bengal did not just restrict itself to mere eating; it led one to the level of a gourmet:

The feast started with bitter gourd and crispy small fish with pulses, then appeared the jet black *koi* (a fish belonging to the genre of cat fish) who slept on a cauliflower pillow laid on a bed of oil that was a color of reddy red-so big that a large bowl could not contain it. Some other day a meal began and ended with *hilsa* (perhaps the most popular fish of the Bengalis)---Some day it could be the large *pabda* fragrant with cilantro, some other day it could be *magur* cooked with potato, garlic and onion.---Another day, one could have Kolu Miyan-r *Bakharkhani* (a type of bread consumed in eastern Bengal) which was of a well-rounded shape and it was light, crispy, and layered.---And last but not the least the vegetarian fare cooked by my grandmother-that was another world, inhabitants of that world were modest, they had strange names, and gourd skins and pumpkin seeds were also respected in that world. But what came out of these unadvertised sources is unimaginable even by the best chefs of Paris. My mothers and grandmothers could make a huge range of dishes with three or four ingredients and with hardly any paraphernalia; in this, they resembled those painters who conjured innumerable colors from just seven shades of rainbow.²⁵

The above paragraph was an indicator of the ram- shackled and dilapidated world of Bengal after 1947. The lamentation for what was lost continued in post-colonial

²⁵ Ibid.

Bengal. But what was apparent was this definition of taste, the claim to a refined palette in which the Bengali food connoisseur was no different from the French gourmand. It is keeping this sense of refined taste in mind, that Basu drew a picture of a kaleidoscopic world of food which did not merely represent a hearty meal, but also gave one an aesthetic flavor of the meal. Thus the meal was simple and yet refined. For Basu, the Bengali middle-class who inhabited this world was not a glutton but a gourmand. Since the Hindu Bengali middle-class was deprived of this pleasure after the partition of Bengal in 1947, Basu mourned the death of a fine art that was Bengali cuisine, which in his opinion constituted a major contribution of the Bengalis to the world.²⁶ Basu's text makes it amply clear that Bengali cuisine epitomizes Bengaliness. The idea of Bengal as a liberal, cosmopolitan, and yet familial, was born from this discourse on taste. In this idea, Bengal stood quite distinctively, complete in itself.

Taste was therefore translated into a life world and cuisine was the representation of this life world. Unlike Basu, who was more of a centrist in his class politics, Gopal Haldar's (1902-1993) approach to literature was from a leftist point of view. Haldar in fact spent considerable years of his life in prison for his political beliefs. Thus it does not come as a surprise when we see that Gopal Haldar's *Adda* (social gathering of friends) is a little different from Basu's text.²⁷ Haldar did not consider Bengali cuisine to be classic like Basu did. However, Haldar made a distinction between what was classic and what was original or the root of everything. This root spread itself into literature, fine art and the art of cuisine.²⁸ Although denying the role of classic in the development of Bengali cuisine, Haldar did believe that Bengali cuisine had not been able to completely

²⁶ Ibid. p.35.

²⁷ Gopal Haldar. *Adda* (Kolkata: Punthipatra, 2004).

²⁸ Ibid. p.49.

internalize the colonial cuisine into its fold.²⁹ Halдар, like Basu, attributed this lack of internalization to the rationing policies of the state and the consequent black marketeering following the Second World War, which continued even after India became independent. Here it seems that by internalization Halдар implied incapacity to digest. However, Halдар admitted that this semi-internalization of food, like cakes and ice creams, along with what Bengalis ate in ancient times constructed the “Bengali” cuisine. This reception of the “new” contributed to the “cosmopolitan” character of the Bengali cuisine.³⁰

Both Basu and Halдар wrote at a time when food habits of the Bengalis were affected by what may be called post-colonial economic complexities. On the one hand, the rationing policy of the imperial state continued from the colonial era. On the other hand, the black marketeering of food stocks prohibited the middle-class from buying food at a soaring price. The result was a curtailment of refineries in taste, a compromise with aesthetics. Basu and Halдар had this imagery in mind when they wrote about taste. Although they wrote from different perspectives, their writing had one point in common. They were defining Bengali cuisine as a liberal and cosmopolitan cuisine, which had the potential of incorporating all other flavors and indigenizing them. And it was the Bengali middle-class (read Hindu) who reframed this cuisine within a gastronomic paradigm.

Halдар chose a few people to demonstrate who a Bengali gourmand was. One of them was Rangin Halдар, a teacher, who specialized in training cooks in the fine art of cuisine. Whether Rangin Halдар had lentil soup or pudding, it had to be served in a proper manner, which Halдар consumed with immense patience and appreciation. Halдар

²⁹ Ibid.pp.50-51.

³⁰ Ibid.pp.56.

considered gastronomy to be an ethos of life and its decline to be a decline of art.³¹ Hirankumar Sanyal, a literary critic and a cultural activist, was another example that Gopal Haldar chose to reconfirm his point of a Bengali gourmand. To understand what art is, Hirankumar Sanyal urged one to look back to rural Bengal, the fresh *hilsa* fish from the river flowing in the village, the vegetables grown in the fields of villages, juice squeezed from date, jaggery, and sweets made from jaggery. However, Sanyal added to it by stating that the sense of art and aesthetics that a Bengali nurtured was not restricted to rural Bengal. He/she was equally enthusiastic about Firpo, Fluries, and Trinka (confectionaries and restaurants in Calcutta).³² Buddhadeb Basu's naming of the text itself was an indicator of the position of the gastronome. A gastronome, for Basu, was one who developed his taste with care, which was reflected throughout the book in his attitude to food.

These discussions of aesthetics and taste by two well known writers whose writings continued in the post-colonial era can be compared to Kant's concept of an aesthetic judgment. For Kant, aesthetic judgment is a judgment of taste. The determining ground of taste is subjective that is it is dependent on feelings for individual pleasure and pain. That is why a judgment of taste can never be based on logical reasoning.³³ However, Kant also argues that aesthetic judgment tries to make an appeal to universality. Although its basis is feeling, a judgment of taste asserts the existence of a correct answer on the availability of an object. Basu and Haldar wrote from this angle of individual feelings, their perspectives of pleasure and pain emanating from cuisine.

³¹ Ibid. pp.64-67

³² Ibid.p.68.

³³ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*, trans. with and introduction by J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1951), Douglas Burnham. *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

However, in their documentation and description of this cuisine they went beyond a culinary discussion. Their interest focused on the refinement of taste and had a universal claim for refined and cosmopolitan Bengali cuisine. These gastronomes were trying to carve a niche for Bengali cuisine in the larger discourse of nationalism, keeping its distance from all other cuisines that had been commodified. In doing so, these gastronomes also made it clear that the construction of a refined taste was after all a handiwork of the middle-class.

Claim for a refined and cosmopolitan Bengali cuisine arose from the complexities that the middle-class Bengali Hindus experienced because of colonialism. This aestheticization was not merely one of a gastronome, who was a connoisseur of French haute cuisine. This aestheticization was also a struggle for homing, or what Dipesh Chakrabarty has described as “at home in capitalist modernity.” Chakrabarty argues that an attempt to make capitalist modernity comfortable for oneself is an eternal process.³⁴ Chakrabarty focuses on the specific practice of *adda* (a form of social gathering where friends get together for long and informal conversations) in Calcutta to understand how one struggles to be at home in modernity. *Adda*, as it could be seen in the early 20th century, was gendered; it was a form of male social bonding. Chakrabarty argues that *adda* which defined the urban space of Calcutta in the first half of the 20th century gradually petered out in the last three decades of the 20th century. According to Chakrabarty, *adda* played a significant role in Bengali modernity and came to be labeled as “Bengali.” Bengalis invested *adda* with ideals of life, vitality, essence, and youth.³⁵ *Adda*, Chakrabarty explicates, is a site where several debates of modernity are played out

³⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) p.180.

³⁵ Ibid.p.213.

and yet it is a world that makes the middle-class be at home, it is the locus of the familiar. Therefore, the idea of *adda* evokes a sense of mourning in Bengali writings.³⁶

Similarly, the forms of sentiment that played in the writings of people like Basu and Haldar, or even in the thoughts of Rangin Haldar and Hiran Sanyal who were mentioned by Gopal Halder in his *Adda*, constantly remembered a world of delectables that was lost. But then they reconstructed this world through an aestheticization of what they had lost and what they continued to cherish. In this context, one can argue that a cuisine, unlike an *adda*, is gendered by inclusion instead of by exclusion. The discourse of food was not gendered in the sense that women in many senses were considered responsible for the refinement of taste for the middle-class. Buddhadeb Basu and Gopal Haldar treated gastronomy as an art where each and every component that created this art was reflected: the end product was judged and appreciated from a perspective of refined taste. Practices surrounding food were one of those quotidian and integral aspects of life that changed because of colonial modernity and yet retained its tag of “Bengaliness.”

It is this sense of taste that defines the Bengali Hindu middle-class and constructs its cuisine. In contemporary Bengal, very few restaurants serve what may be called “Bengali” cuisine, all of them making a claim for authenticity of the food they serve. These are high-end restaurants, mostly visited by the 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.

³⁶ Ibid.p.212.

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