



THE PLATE THAT TELLS A STORY: FOOD CULTURE OF BENGAL

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Abstract

The Bengali food tradition has been extensively recorded through various literary works and historical documents. This paper examines the multidimensional food culture of Bengal through its interrelated lenses and try to include not only ecological and climatic determinants, Ayurvedic logic of the traditional meal, foreign and global influences, but also its regional food identities, the traditions of tribal and ethnic communities such as Santhal, Rajbanshi, and Nepali-speaking peoples. It has tried to explore the food practices across life-cycle rituals of Bengalis such as *mukhe bhaat*, marriage, and *shraddha*, along with the ethic of hospitality and the cultural obligation to feed. In the later section, the paper also analyses contemporary transformations driven by globalisation, urbanisation, and digital food platforms, which disrupt seasonal rhythms, weaken domestic knowledge transmission, and standardise diverse traditions for commercial consumption. It further highlights internal tensions between Ayurvedic balance and cultural excess, and between hospitality and its health consequences. The paper tries to present a kind of comprehensive analytical model which treats Bengali food customs as a dynamic historical record and also combines environmental changes with Ayurvedic teachings, intercultural traditions and ethical dining customs and finally establishing the Bengali cuisine as an evolving and contested system shaped by power, memory, and cultural negotiation.

Keywords: *Food culture, culinary anthropology, Ayurvedic meal structure, tribal cuisine, Bengali hospitality, culinary archive, globalisation*

Introduction

For the Bengalis, food is just not a source of nutrition, but it actually allows us to analyse the region's environmental circumstances, historical events, socio-economic structures, religious practices and also the ability to combine multiple cultural traditions. Even the scholars of South Asian history and anthropology have informed us that the Bengali relationship with food exists as a highly developed cultural tradition which reflects itself through the eating practice that combines physical needs with universal beliefs and communal ties. The Bengal delta's waterway system established conditions for one of India's most diverse culinary traditions according to Achaya who studied Indian food history (Achaya, 1994). The land's natural features created the first chapter of this story which continued through Portuguese missionaries and Hakka immigrants who worked with the original ecological text. The cultural importance of Bengali food traditions exists both in historical research and throughout the extensive body of literature. From the sixteenth-century *Mangalkavya* poems which contain detailed descriptions of market scenes, cooking practices, and feast preparations to the novels of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, food has occupied a privileged place in Bengal's literary imagination. Bengal food culture stands apart from other culinary traditions because it contains both historical depth and various ways of preparing food. The culinary practices of this region extend back to ancient times and they base their methods on scientific principles which have been thoroughly researched. The system operates under three principles which define its existence as both pluralistic and all-encompassing and its status as a shared public resource. A culture that can accommodate the bitter medicinal logic of *shukto* alongside the festive extravagance of Kolkata biryani; that can honour the forest foods of the Santhal people and the steamed dumplings of the Nepali hills; that can make a sacred ritual of feeding the dying and the newly born - such a culture has something important to say about what food, at its deepest, really means. The universe of food offerings together with actual eating practices provides essential insights into society and its environmental links.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative interdisciplinary approach which combines three methods of research through textual analysis, historical research and thematic study. The study uses literary texts and historical documents and secondary food history

and anthropology research to analyze Bengali cuisine as a cultural framework. The main research method employs interpretive textual analysis which allows researchers to study literary works and cookbooks as cultural documents that show how people live and what they do and what rituals they perform. The research tracks the historical development of Bengali culinary traditions by using historical-comparative analysis to study different time periods and their relationship with outside influences and evolving political climates. The research uses thematic organization to analyze ecological factors and Ayurvedic practices and intercultural food traditions and community dining customs and the ceremonial value of rituals. The analysis depends on important research studies which include K. T. Achaya and Lizzie Collingham. The study does not include primary field research because its goal is to create a theoretical framework that explains Bengali food traditions. The study recognizes that its textual analysis approach depends on elite sources which will probably lead to an incomplete representation of lesser-known cooking methods.

Ecology and Climate: The Foundation for Bengalis' Appetite

Bengali cuisine depends on two fundamental elements which are ecology and climate. Bengal food culture developed from the natural environment which shaped the development of its food traditions. The Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna river systems form one of the world's most productive river deltas in Bengal which experiences annual monsoon floods and has highly fertile alluvial soil and is located near the Bay of Bengal (Lévi et al., 1993). The ecological conditions of the region created a situation where rice cultivation became essential for Bengali people who used rice as their main food item for thousands of years because it served as both their basic food and their cultural emblematic food which holds the same crucial value as bread in Mediterranean societies and maize in Mesoamerican societies. Achaya documents that Bengal's historical rice varieties of which hundreds were cultivated were adapted with remarkable precision to the delta's flooding patterns, with certain varieties able to survive submersion in deep water and others suited to rain-fed highland terraces (Achaya, 1994). The delta waterways offered an abundant supply of fish which enabled Bengali people to develop their iconic self-identity of machhe-bhate Bangali which means "fish and rice Bengali" because the phrase describes their eating habits and serves as a source of cultural pride (Sen, 2004). The Hilsa fish which migrates upstream from the Bay of Bengal during the monsoon to spawn became the ultimate Bengali fish which people awaited with a religious-like anticipation. The tropical monsoon climate also shaped preservation techniques and flavour preferences in ways that modern nutritional science has come to appreciate. Here in Bengal we find the use of mustard oil which is pungent and possessing and also documented as antimicrobial properties, served as both primary cooking medium and natural preservative in a climate where food spoilage was a perennial risk (Collingham, 2006). Not only this, each ingredient in the spice blend of *panch phoron* which is used as tempering (*tadka*) of many bengali cooking is a blend of mustard seed (*Brassica juncea*), fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), nigella (*Nigella sativa*), cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*), and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and these materials offer unique digestive and antimicrobial qualities which appropriate for a hot, humid environment (Wujastyk, 2003). Winter brought *notun gur* fresh date palm jaggery harvested before dawn from tapped palm trees and an entire class of *pithe* (rice cakes) made only in the cool months. Summer brought raw mango preparations and heat-reducing foods. The post-monsoon season brought the annual *Ilish* (Hilsa) harvest which is very famous between the Bengalis. As Collingham notes, the Hilsa's migratory patterns coincided with the Bengali festival season and embedded it deeply in cultural as well as ecological consciousness (Collingham, 2006).

The Scientific and Ayurvedic Logic of the Bengali Meal

The Bengali food culture shows its most impressive intellectual achievement through its traditional meal structure which follows established scientific and medical rules. The Bengali full-course meal presents a specific structure which demonstrates the Ayurvedic and empirical knowledge about digestion and physiological balance and bodily health that has been collected during two thousand years (Wujastyk, 2003). The Bengali cooking tradition has transmitted its recipes through the cooking routines of female cooks who knew how to prepare food according to their understanding of bodily needs and optimal consumption order.

A. Shukto: The Bitter Primer

The traditional Bengali full-course meal characteristically begins with *shukto*, a mildly bitter preparation that combines vegetables which include bitter melon (*korola*), drumstick, raw banana and potato into a delicate mustard and milk-based gravy that uses *panch phoron* and ginger for seasoning. The Ayurvedic system explains that bitter taste (*tikta rasa*) activates bile production and digestive enzyme secretion while it prepares the gastrointestinal system for subsequent oil-rich meals (Wujastyk, 2003).

The scientific understanding of nutrition today has found substantial confirmation for this traditional knowledge. The bitter melon (*Momordica charantia*) includes momordicin and charantin which show hypoglycaemic properties while they help with carbohydrate metabolism that is essential for people who consume a rice-based diet (Grover & Yadav, 2004). The drumstick (*Moringa oleifera*) in *shukto* contains iron and calcium and vitamins A and C. The ginger used in the preparation functions as a digestive stimulant while it acts as an anti-inflammatory treatment (Aggarwal et al., 2007). The Ayurvedic physician established theoretical principles which the Bengali cook followed as daily practice throughout the development of intimate home cooking traditions.

B. The Graduated Progression: From Light to Heavy

The Bengali meal starts with *shukto* and continues through its dining sequence which follows Ayurvedic food guidelines by showing the correct sequence for eating. Leafy greens (*saag*) and lentil soup (*dal*) provide plant-based protein and dietary fibre in easily digestible forms corresponding to the *laghu* (light) category in Ayurvedic classification (Wujastyk, 2003). Fish

preparations start with two types of fish which include either light steamed fish or mustard-marinated fish before two types of fried fish. The meal contains meat which brings stronger taste together with heavier weight in its final portion of savoury dishes that match the *guru* (heavy) section of the weight scale. The meal ends with sour chutney which helps digestion through saliva production the diners move to sweets (mishti) and finally traditional paan (betel leaf with slaked lime and areca nut). It is researched that the pharmacological uses of paan which contains two eugenol compounds from betel leaf that provide antibacterial effects and pain relief together with a hydroxychavicol antioxidant while areca nut contains arecoline that produces saliva and increases movement in the digestive system which works as a post-meal digestive (Toprani & Patel, 2013). The Bengali meal serves as a complete pharmacological treatment because it combines health benefits with a complete dining experience.

C. Turmeric and Mustard: The Chemistry of the Bengali Kitchen

Bengali food uses turmeric (*haldi*) because its presence in cooking shows traditional knowledge which modern scientists prove to be a medicinal herb. The primary bioactive compound of turmeric named curcumin exhibits documented capabilities to fight inflammation and oxidative damage and microbial infections and cancer development according to research conducted by Aggarwal and his colleagues (Aggarwal et al., 2007). The tropical climate which showed permanent existence of waterborne disease and food spoilage problems required people to use turmeric as an essential health solution which they developed through practical experience before scientists established the scientific basis of modern microbiology. The Bengali cooking process uses mustard as an oil and seed and paste to provide its culinary applications while the mustard plant contains allyl isothiocyanate which functions as an effective antimicrobial agent that protects against numerous foodborne diseases. The Bengali tradition of using raw mustard oil as a condiment with cooked dishes produces bioavailable allyl isothiocyanate which heat partially destroyed as a nutritional practice that existed long before modern science discovered it (Wujastyk, 2003).

Foreign Invasions and the Transformation of the Bengali Kitchen

Bengali cuisine underwent transformation through foreign invasions which introduced new cooking methods and ingredients to the region. The culinary traditions of Bengal developed through successive political invasions which brought new cooking methods and ingredients that locals integrated into their culinary practices through culinary hybridization which created a new Bengali culinary style (Collingham, 2006).

A. The Mughal Contribution

The sixteenth-century Mughal empire brought Persian and Central Asian cooking traditions to Bengal which had a diet that consisted mainly of fish and upper-caste Hindus who followed mostly vegetarian practices. The Bengali *polao* cooking tradition developed from the Mughal court practice of preparing rice dishes with meat and saffron and rose water and dried fruits according to Persian pilaf methods which established the foundation of a new biryani cooking style (Collingham, 2006). The Nawabi era in Murshidabad established a high-level combination between Mughal court cooking and local Bengali cooking methods. Wajid Ali Shah who served as the Nawab of Awadh brought his full cooking team when the British exiled him to Calcutta and this decision led to the creation of Kolkata *biryani* which became famous because it used potato and hard-boiled egg and used lighter spices that produced a more fragrant flavor than Lucknawi biryani (Ray, 2004). Kolkata biryani uses potato as its main ingredient because people believe this ingredient demonstrates how the dish obtained its noble status from a vegetable that belongs to the common people.

B. The Portuguese and the Revolution in Sweets

The Portuguese established their first trading posts in Hooghly and Chittagong during the sixteenth century which brought their culinary practices to Bengal as their most important culinary practice. The Portuguese dairy techniques brought *chhena* production to Bengal through a method that uses acid to curdle milk which existed in India before this period. The impact was revolutionary. Chhena introduced an entirely new method to create Bengali sweets which used reduced and condensed milk as their main ingredient. The Portuguese brought sugar to Bengal which enabled the community to create their traditional sweets that shaped their Bengali identity through their development of rasgolla sandesh chomchom *pandua* and *ledikeni*. The Portuguese who arrived in Bengal to obtain pepper and indigo ended up providing the region with its sweetest cultural heritage.

C. The British Colonial Kitchen

British colonial rule (1757-1947) brought European food ingredients and cooking methods together with bread (*pauruti*), biscuits and cakes and the practice of afternoon tea to Bengali households in the Calcutta middle class. The *kabiraji* cutlet is a corruption of "coverage cutlet," referring to the lacework of beaten egg encasing a fried meat patty and the *ledikeni*, a fried chhena sweet created in honour of Lady Canning during her 1858 Calcutta visit, both demonstrate the Bengali habit of absorbing colonial influence, domesticating it, and returning it transformed her into more Bengali than European in spirit (Collingham, 2006).

D. The Chinese Community: Culinary Creolisation in Tiretti Bazaar

The Hakka Chinese community that settled in Calcutta's Tiretti Bazaar district from the late eighteenth century contributed what has become one of Bengal's most remarkable culinary gifts to the wider world: the "Calcutta Chinese" or "Indian Chinese" cuisine which serves as a global culinary fusion that combines Hakka cooking methods and Indian spices with Bengali dining customs. Nandy shows that the creation of chilli chicken, Hakka noodles and Manchurian dishes started in this environment because it combined Chinese cooking techniques with local foods and Bengali people who preferred spicy and sour flavors (Nandy, 2001). The street food of India which people currently enjoy throughout the country started when immigrants created new dishes while Bengali people explored irresistible food at their most inventive moment.

The Geography of Taste: Places Known by What They Feed You

A distinctive feature of Bengal's food culture is the degree to which specific foods have become so synonymous with the places that produce them that the places are known and visited primarily for their culinary associations. The food identity of a location establishes its geographical footprint because people believe that a location's culinary flavors need protection just like its historical buildings and natural landscapes (Ray, 2004). The city of Bardhaman (Burdwan) exists as an unbreakable bond with *Mihidana* and *Sitabhog* which are traditional sweets made from fine-grained rice flour that the Government of India granted Geographical Indication (GI) certification. The name *Sitabhog* which means Sita's food originates from a mythological tradition which people used to prepare food for royal families. The town of Shaktigarh exists as a complete entity because its people use *Langcha* which is a layered chhena sweet that forces all travelers to stop in the town. The artisanal sweet-making tradition of Krishnanagar in Nadia district dates back to the Nawabi period while its *Sarpuria* and *Moa* sweets show how its confectioners create identical aesthetic designs to those used by clay-figurine sculptors (Sen, 2004). During Ramadan the Zakaria Street in Kolkata becomes one of the greatest food streets found in the subcontinent which offers visitors a continuous feast of biryani and haleem and kebabs and sweet firni that creates the most authentic representation of Bengal's Mughal culinary tradition. The Darjeeling Hills connect both Darjeeling tea and the Nepali hill community's traditional foods of *momo* and *thukpa* and *sel roti* which became part of everyday Bengali food culture (Nandy, 2001). The sweet tradition of Bishnupur in Bankura originates from its connection to Vaishnava temple culture which served *malpoa* and *chhena* to the deity and distributed it as prasad. The GI tags which Mihidana and Sitabhog received create official protection for Bengali culture because it shows that specific foods belong to their originating communities which need safeguarding. Ray demonstrates that geographical food identity in Bengal functions as more than economic protectionism because it expresses the cultural ties between land, people, and taste which include the belief that particular locations produce food with unique local flavors (Ray, 2004).

Tribal and Community Food Traditions: A Culture of Pluralism

People living in Bengal have established multiple indigenous and tribal and ethnic communities which sustain separate culinary customs that have existed peacefully with the Bengali food system. Bengal displays its culinary diversity through its two different cultural systems which keep their distinct traditions alive while their members share and learn from each other (Nandy, 2001).

A. The Santhal Community: Forest Ecology and the Table

The Santhal people are one of the largest tribal groups in eastern India and they mostly live in Jhargram, Birbhum, Purila and Bankura districts i.e. Western Bengal. Santhal food culture exists through forest ecosystems because people rely on seasonal food collection from their forest surroundings. Santhali cuisine uses rice as its main component while also incorporating various forest tubers and bamboo shoots and wild greens and mushrooms and locally fermented foods. The Santhal people produce handia as their preferred alcoholic beverage which they create from rice and particular tree bark and they serve it to their guests as a sign of affection during their festivals. Santhali preparations which include smoked fish (*sukna mach*) and fermented bamboo shoots and various forest products show the nutritional methods which indigenous people have developed through centuries of learning about how to prepare forest resources. The Santhali culinary practices have gradually moved into mainstream Bengali cooking in areas where Santhali people live because their culinary practices spread through contact without any cultural disagreements

B. The Rajbanshi Community: The North Bengal Kitchen

The northern Bengal Rajbanshi people who belong to the Koch-Rajbanshi community practice a culinary tradition that originates from the Koch kingdom of medieval times and develops through the unique environmental conditions of Terai and Dooars area. Their culinary offerings include special rice dishes, northern river fish and a complex set of rice cake recipes which they prepare during the Bishuwa festival. The Rajbanshi people use radhuni *Trachyspermum roxburghianum* as a spice which South Bengal chefs do not include in their dining traditions to create a unique cooking style which functions as a separate dialect within the Bengali culinary language. The linguistic metaphor functions effectively to demonstrate that Bengali regional dialects maintain mutual understanding yet display different characteristics while Bengali food presents regional dialects which share fundamental traits but maintain distinct local identities.

C. The Nepali Community and the Momo Phenomenon

The Darjeeling Hills and Dooars region's Nepali-speaking community introduced the momo which serves as the Bengalis' most widely accepted communal dish because it combines Tibetan and Nepali flavors into a steamed or pan-fried dumpling that contains vegetables and chicken or pork. Momo street vendors now sell their products on every street of Kolkata and Bengal because the dish gained popularity among people who follow the local street food customs that include phuchka and ghugni (Nandy, 2001). Bengali people who create their own versions of the momo dish use local spices and Bengal chutneys which include mustard-based dips and green chilli pastes to create a new dish that respects its original roots. The Bengali food pattern demonstrates its core elements through its process of studying and changing food which then becomes part of unique cultural expressions.

D. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities of Bengal

The Bagdi, Bauri, Munda, Oraon and Lodha peoples preserve food customs which showcase all of Bengal's environmental resources. The restricted foods which upper-caste Hindus permit include different fish species and aquatic animals and small animals and various forest resources. The post-independence era brought social integration which led to the acceptance of these foods into mainstream Bengali cooking traditions. The Bengali people developed a food cultural system which allows two

completely different food traditions to exist together because they view food as an artistic expression rather than a religious obligation. The Bengali food culture shows respect for forbidden practices through its ability to embrace smoked squirrel because this practice exists within its extensive culinary traditions. Through daily dining practices people demonstrate social generosity which creates a significant cultural impact.

Food Across the Life Cycle: Ritual, Occasion, and Sacred Meaning

Bengal food serves as the essential element which creates all significant events in life. The Bengali life cycle from birth to death uses specific foods which hold religious and social and emotional value to create its rituals and special events. The eating habits of Bengalis throughout their life stages show their cultural identity and religious beliefs.

A. The *mukhe bhaat* or *annaprasan*

It literally means "the placing of rice in the mouth" — is the ceremony marking a child's first introduction to solid food, typically at five to seven months. The ritual carries profound symbolic weight because it establishes the moment when a child shifts from breast milk dependency to eating shared meals which are customary in society (Fruzzetti, 1982). The rice which the child eats is prepared with ghee and sugar while the traditional custom requires the boy child to touch the head of a *rui* fish to his lips as his first taste of fish which he will eat throughout his life. The annaprasan feast which takes place during this ceremony serves as an important public gathering where the family displays their hospitality while the food quality and quantity serve as a demonstration of their respect for both their visitors and the special event (Fruzzetti, 1982).

A. The Wedding Feast (*Biye-r Bhooj*)

No Bengali institution is more thoroughly organised around food than the wedding. The Bengali wedding feast *biye-r bhooj* — is a cultural performance which showcases the different types and quantities of food offered to guests as a demonstration of social status and hospitality toward visitors. As Sen notes, a Bengali wedding was historically judged not by the elaborateness of ceremony but by the quality of its fish — particularly whether the *ilish* was of sufficient size and freshness (Sen, 2004). The traditional menu follows the Ayurvedic progression which Section 3 describes because it starts with bitter fried vegetables (*shukto*) and continues through dal and saag and multiple fish dishes until reaching mutton or chicken curry as the main dish and ending with chutney and papad and mishti doi and various sweets. The Ayurvedic system shows logical consistency when applied to everyday life and ceremonial practices because both aspects use the same architectural framework which grows bigger and more intricate

C. *Shraddha* Ceremony

Feeding the Dead and Honouring the Living The *shraddha* ceremony which Hindus perform to feed their deceased relatives occupies an essential position within Bengali food traditions. The *shraddha* feast functions as an ancestral offering because relatives and Brahmins feed simulated ancestors through their meal which supports the family's religious devotion and serves as a public meal for the community (Fruzzetti, 1982). The *shraddha* menu follows a religious standard which forbids onion and garlic because they contain rajasic properties that Ayurvedic medicine considers unsuitable for mourning while the menu allows only sattvic food. The *shraddha* feast demonstrates Bengal's ability to create excellent food through its restricted menu because it contains multiple vegetable dishes and various river fish recipes and exceptional desserts (Sen, 2004). The absence of onion and garlic, far from impoverishing the meal, seems to concentrate the cook's creativity.

D. Durga Puja and the Festival Table

The Durga Puja festival, which holds the highest significance in Bengal, serves as a communal dining experience that extends throughout its duration. The goddess receives a *bhog* which includes *khichuri* (rice and lentil) *labra* (mixed vegetables) *begun bhaja* (fried aubergine), *chatni* (chutney) and *payesh* (rice pudding) and devotees receive the meal afterward as *prasad*. The communal act of eating *bhog* from banana leaves on the ground, regardless of social position, has been described as one of Bengal's most democratic rituals (Datta, 2003).

The Ethics of Hospitality: Feeding as Cultural Obligation and Joy

The primary characteristic that separates Bengali food traditions from all other cultures lies in their practice of hospitality which requires people to serve food with joy and abundance to their guests. The Sanskrit ideal of *atithi devo bhava* ("the guest is God") finds its most elaborate practical expression in the Bengali household because people consider any failure to provide proper guest meals as an ethical violation which reflects poorly on their character and their household (Fruzzetti, 1982). The repeated insistence "*aro nao, aro nao*" ("take more, take more") functions as a social formula which people use to express their cultural belief that their complete satisfaction depends on their guest receiving enough food to eat. According to Nandy, the Bengali connection to food involves everything from cooking to watching others eat while they derive pleasure from their activities. He also described this relationship as inherently focused on other people which generates more happiness than self-consuming food (Nandy, 2001). The *shraddha* feast provides food to the ancestors while the *bhog* serves the deity and the *annaprasan* ceremony introduces new people to the world of food. In Bengal, hospitality is not limited to those present because it extends to all people who have died, all deities, and all future generations. Food serves as the connection point through which living people interact with both visible and invisible aspects of existence. Food hospitality serves as a social equalizer because hosts treat all guests with respect despite their financial limitations which authors of Bengali literature have portrayed consistently from Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's books in the 1800s to present-day Bengali stories (Sen, 2004).

Writings on Food: Literary and Historical Documentation

The food culture of Bengal presents complete cultural richness which is documented through its literary and historical sources. The culinary heritage of Bengal and its textual documentation both reach deep levels which enable researchers to study its culinary history through this region (Sen, 2004). The sixteenth-century *Chandi Mangal* of Mukundaram Chakravarti contains what are among the earliest detailed descriptions of Bengali market scenes, cooking processes, and feast preparations in the literary record. Chakravarti's market description of a prosperous merchant shows all his market products which include dozens of fish varieties and seasonal vegetables and spices and prepared foods. The historical document reveals exceptional value because it serves as both devotional poetry and historical document which provides food historians with an exact list of Bengali material culture from the sixteenth century (Chakrabarti, ca. 1556/1975). Rabindranath Tagore's letters and his autobiographical writings and his fiction works show his continuous interest in food through details which show his personal connection to food and the food customs of his culture. The Tagore family cookbook *Thakurbarir Ranna* shows the complete culinary traditions of Bengal's most famous intellectual family through its publication by Purnima Thakur because it functions as a primary source which shows the domestic dining customs of Bengali gentry during the nineteenth century (Datta, 2008). The novel *Pather Panchali* (1929) by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay uses food to establish its primary emotional theme because the novel demonstrates both food's existence and food's nonexistence. The family of Harihar exists in poverty because they experience two types of insufficient food which they desire yet cannot obtain and they share their meals with others despite their family limitations. The neighbor's tree plums and the fair's puffed rice create emotional effects that exceed the basic physical nature of these two simple objects (Bandyopadhyay, 1995). Bibhutibhushan presents food in his work to represent both physical spaces and social realities and emotional experiences. Pragyasundari *Devi's Amish O Niramish Ahar* (Meat and Vegetarian Food), published in the early twentieth century, represents one of the first systematic Bengali cookbooks and an invaluable documentary record of bourgeois Bengali culinary culture through its detailed recipes and occasion-specific preparations which reveal domestic life at the time. The broader *Mangalkavya* tradition, which includes both the *Annada Mangal* and the *Manasa Mangal*, considers food sharing to be one of the most sacred practices that humans can offer to their deities. According to this tradition, cooking for and feeding others functions as a domestic virtue which enables people to join the cosmic order because this practice ensures the divine system of life nourishment remains intact (Chakrabarti, ca. 1556/1975). The nineteenth-century poet Ishwar Gupta composed elegies for seasonal foods, which he presented through his emotional registration, similar to his experience of love and loss. The most typical Bengali behavior exists when a poet mourns the loss of seasonal jaggery because this practice represents their deepest cultural identity.

Beyond the Border: Food Imports and Global Connections

Bengal maintains culinary connections with overseas food traditions despite its agricultural production. The British Empire's busiest port Calcutta established Bengal as a significant international food trading hub which enabled the Bengali kitchen to acquire foreign ingredients that the local population embraced through inventive cooking methods (Lévi et al., 1993). Saffron, dry fruits, and aromatic spices from Persia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan entered Bengal through Mughal trade networks and became embedded in festive cooking particularly in *polao*, *payesh*, and wedding feast preparations. Achaya documents the routes through which Central Asian dried fruits entered Bengal via overland Silk Road trade and riverine networks connecting Bengal's hinterland to the broader subcontinental economy. The cashew nut (*Anacardium occidentale*) which first appeared in South America reached India when Portuguese explorers introduced it through Goa during the sixteenth century. Nowadays, people consider cashews essential to Bengali festive food because they exist in all wedding *polao* dishes and premium *sandesh* boxes (Collingham, 2006). Tea serves as the most important beverage for current Bengali social life because it comes from outside. Tea, which British businesses started growing in Darjeeling and Assam during the mid-nineteenth century, became a vital part of Bengali culture when people suddenly turned it from an imperial good into a democratic product. The *cha-er dokan* (tea stall) — dispensing small glasses of strong, sweet, milky tea — became a cornerstone of Bengali social geography, a space where class distinctions temporarily dissolve over a shared beverage (Collingham, 2006). The potato represents the most complete example of a food import which people completely accepted as their own. The potato originated in the Andes of South America and Portuguese traders brought it to India and British colonial rulers introduced it throughout Bengal.

Theoretical Framework: Food as Archive, Practice, and Cultural System

Bengali cuisine functions as a living archive because its culinary traditions preserve both ecological knowledge and historical facts and social practices which people learn through their daily life activities that people repeat throughout their lives. The archive exists as a complete system which controls how people create and arrange information and share it with others according to Michel Foucault's explanation which he presented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972). The Bengali kitchen functions as an archival institution which operates without physical boundaries or inventory systems or professional staff members because it systematically collects and keeps certain information while allowing other details to disappear. Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrates how people developed their cooking methods that actually helped them to create social and cultural meaning from natural ingredients (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1969). The technical aspect of this transformation process remains unchanging in the Bengali context. The traditional meal presentation begins with bitter *shukto* and proceeds through various savoury dishes until reaching the sweet final dish, which shows how cultural beliefs about purity and bodily balance and acceptable social behaviour extend beyond their nutritional value. The framework further engages with theories of practice and embodiment. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is the system of durable, transposable dispositions through which social

structures become internalised and expressed through repeated practice — offers a productive lens through which to understand how culinary knowledge operates in Bengal (Bourdieu, 1977). The Bengali child who learns to eat *shukto* before rice acquires not only as a dietary habit but also an entire Ayurvedic epistemology which is absorbed through practice, not pedagogy. The framework relies on scholarly research that shows how culinary practices spread across borders and how different cultures merge to create new traditions. Arjun Appadurai in his major essay about gastro-politics and South Asian recipe development informed that food practices serve as social media channels through which communities establish their identity and social order and their transformation. The dynamic Bengali cuisine system permits outside influences to enter while maintaining its essential identity characteristics. The framework includes an ethical component which examines how hospitality functions as a moral practice in different cultures. The productive lens of Marcel Mauss shows that feeding guests deities or ancestors functions as a symbolic exchange which creates social ties and required duties while showing essential cultural traditions (Mauss, 1966). The people of Bengal view their food-based hospitality relationship as a moral economy which allows them to judge others based on the amount they provide to guests.

The Bengali Culinary Archive as a Contested Field

The archive needs critical examination because its structure requires assessment to prevent creating a romanticized view about culinary traditions. The paper presents Bengali cuisine as a "living archive" yet every aspect of this archive needs acknowledgment because it operates as a biased system which protects certain culinary traditions while various aspects of those traditions receive different levels of importance based on class and caste division. The archive contains not only ecological and medical knowledge but also deeply embedded hierarchies of social power. The process depends on women who perform unpaid domestic work and lower-caste and tribal communities who pass down oral traditions which makes the process vulnerable to change while dominant cultural systems fail to recognize its true worth. The process which Appadurai describes as culinary codification creates cultural boundaries through the establishment of cookbooks and restaurants and literary works which treat food as an art form (Appadurai, 1988). The educated *bhadralok* class has historically maintained control over authentic Bengali cuisine because their culinary preferences received cultural validation through print media and urban centers and literary works, which resulted in the ongoing exclusion of tribal and lower-caste and regional indigenous food customs.

Coexistence and Hierarchy: The Limits of Culinary Pluralism

The social hierarchy of Bengali society which includes caste and class systems creates structured food rules that determine who can eat which foods in specific social situations. The food customs of Bengal people who belong to different caste groups create distinct culinary boundaries which have been studied extensively through research. The South Asian food system includes essential elements that enable people to establish and uphold caste-based social structures according to Arjun Appadurai who studied these systems. The traditional foods of tribal and lower-caste communities which include specific meat types and fermented foods and forest-based foods and all aquatic animals except the approved fish types face social rejection within the established boundaries of Bengali culinary heritage (specially because of Brahmanical beliefs) which accepts only selected components from these traditions. Culinary pluralism faces additional challenges because of class dynamics. The Bengali middle class used cultural identity formation to develop its identity because it selected elements from different cultures which it believed to be universal but used exclusionary practices in several cultural domains which included cooking and language and education and faith practices according to sources (Chatterjee, 1993). The ability of people to obtain particular ingredients has always depended on their financial resources which has created food culture divisions between elite and non-elite groups that culinary identity programs attempt to hide. Sources demonstrate that South Asian society uses cultural incorporation processes to adopt subordinate group customs while simultaneously eliminating their original cultural memory and social environment (Chakravarti, 1995). The mainstream Bengali culinary tradition adopts Santhal and Rajbanshi and Munda and other marginalized community foods, yet it fails to recognize their original communities and the traditional knowledge systems which formed their base.

Tensions Within the Culinary Culture: Excess, Modern Consumption, and Health Concerns

Bengali food culture presents a rich and diverse culinary tradition which evokes deep emotional connections; however its core elements contain underlying tensions and contradictions which need to be acknowledged. The Bengali gathering space of *adda* exists as a public space dedicated to social interaction and enjoyment which people use to suspend their work duties according to Dipesh Chakrabarty's research (Chakrabarty, 1993). The typical snack foods of Bengali *adda* consist of deep-fried *chop* and cutlet and *beguni* and various types of *telebhaja* which people make and eat because they prefer to spend time with others rather than focus on their health. When people eat oily foods on a daily basis in urban areas where they lead more inactive lives this creates eating habits that scientific studies connect to increased cases of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes which have developed in West Bengal according to study. On the other hand, the offering and acceptance of Bengali sweets (*mishti*) functions as both a dietary practice and a social ritual which expresses both love and respect and hospitality. According to Nandy the Bengali people maintain their food connection through their relationships with others because when hosts offer food they expect guests to accept it as a sign of love not as a choice between two dietary options (Nandy, 2001). Sweet consumption follows a social pattern where people treat rejection as offensive and they must accept treats to fulfill their social duty which leads to people eating excessively because they do not control their hunger or understand their dietary needs. Not only this, wedding, ritual and festival events require traditional meat and fish cooking methods which use significant amounts of mustard oil and clarified butter because these ingredients hold both cultural and historical importance yet their regular use leads to heart disease.

So, the situation presents a clear contradiction because the essential components of the Bengali kitchen serve as medicinal elements when people use them according to recommended quantities which include mustard oil's antimicrobial allyl isothiocyanate and ghee's butyric acid while cultural overuse of these elements leads to nutritional problems because people exceed the Ayurvedic standards of usage which the tradition first established. People now prefer to eat fast food which restaurants serve through digital delivery services instead of preparing home-cooked meals that follow seasonal patterns because they want quick meals that contain high calories and sodium and which lack the traditional Ayurvedic meal system. Parasecoli explains in his book 'Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture' that food has become a commodity which people use for entertainment purposes instead of nutritional value, which leads to changes in how people use food because they now consume food without understanding the cooking process that creates it (Parasecoli, 2008). Digital food delivery platforms now operate as the most noticeable modern change which Swiggy, Zomato and other platforms represent because they maintain strong market presence throughout Bengali urban areas. Winson describes that this system harms the way people learn to cook and practice their cultural food traditions. Bengali people now use commercial food products and choose ready-to-eat foods instead of traditional dishes which need multiple hours of home cooking and ancestral culinary skills (Winson, 2013). Counihan and Van Esterik explain that urban cooking time reduction leads to knowledge loss which culinary traditions used to pass on through generations (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

Also we find the decline of seasonal food patterns which represents a modern change which affects both cultural practices and dietary habits. The ecological cycles of wintertime *notun gur*, summer raw mango dishes and monsoon Hilsa fish have always determined the structure of traditional but now frozen materials are found because of the development of refrigeration technology together with advancements in cold-chain distribution systems and worldwide supply networks which has created conditions where most food products become accessible throughout the entire year which results in the loss of cultural significance that seasonal and natural environments used to give food. It is told that food supply industrialization has destroyed traditional local and seasonal eating knowledge systems because it created a consumption model based on nutrients which lacks cultural value (Pollan, 2008).

Contemporary Transformations: Globalisation, Modernity, and the Changing Bengali Plate

Globalization has created new aesthetic and nutritional standards which now determine Bengali food choices through their impact on traditional food customs. Social media platforms and health journalism and urban food culture have increased international dietary discourse which now creates Bengali urban consumers who want to eat traditional food but fear its oil content and carbohydrate load and its violation of common dietary practices which include low-carbohydrate and high-protein eating patterns. Richard demonstrates through his research that American dining customs produce two opposing dining practices which create a divide between their emotional connection to traditional food and their actual eating habits which follow different patterns (Richard Wilk, 2006). Restaurants and food tourism and media outlets use Bengali food identity for commercial purposes which leads to standardization because they transform a rich and diverse regional culinary heritage into common signature dishes that include *ilish bhapa* and *kosha mangsho* and *mishti doi* and *rasgolla* which have been altered to suit audience understanding instead of maintaining their original cultural significance. The developments show that the Bengali culinary archive exists as a historical designation which currently undergoes active transformation through economic and technological and cultural factors. Globalization together with modernity creates a pattern of transformation which does not follow a straightforward path because it generates new culinary traditions and mixed culinary techniques while jeopardizing the essential cultural knowledge which forms the basis of traditional practices. The Bengali food system functions as a dynamic field which experiences ongoing tension between its two opposing forces of preservation and transformation toward modernity.

Conclusion

Bengali food culture actually stands as South Asia's one of the most intricate and historically rich and socially important culinary tradition which emerged from the ecological environment of a major river delta and developed through Ayurvedic and scientific knowledge and foreign trade contact and regional culinary practices and the life cycle rituals of human existence and a cultural tradition of hospitality which views feeding others as a fundamental moral duty. The present study informs that the food practices of the Bengali people show their deep connection to delta environmental conditions which their Ayurvedic-based practices use to achieve balance and handle digestion. The cuisine has developed through various historical periods which brought together Mughal, Portuguese, British, Nepali, Chinese etc. cooking methods that now exist within its unique regional culinary identity. The creation of "authentic" Bengali cuisine depends on the power relations between different social groups who determine which people should be included or excluded from the culinary tradition. The culinary practices which belong to underrepresented groups enter mainstream culture without receiving proper acknowledgment, which demonstrates how cultural exchange between different groups operates in an unequal manner. The essence of Bengali cuisine exists beyond its fixed status as traditional heritage or its idealized portrayal as cultural emblem. Bengali cuisine cannot, finally, be reduced to a static heritage or a collection of recipes. The system functions as an ongoing process which allows knowledge to flow through different time periods and various social groups. The study defines Bengali food culture through food-based archives which exist in physical form and select specific items according to a system of hierarchical order while groups compete to control their content. The Bengali food culture embodies ecological intelligence and social history and medical reasoning and ritual meaning and human generosity which people express through their culinary tradition of serving mustard and rice to guests who must eat.

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