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Exploring Bengali Culinary Traditions: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Food Writing.

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Abstract

Food Studies has been a key component of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Western world since the 1980s, and it is now catching up in India. A detailed examination of recipes and other types of food writing can provide insights into ordinary culinary discussions as well as the formation of a cultural 'tradition' of taste. These gastropolitical insights may help us better comprehend the operation of subconscious hegemonic technologies and ordinary resistance to them. current readings of culinary writing may open new avenues of reading and theorising legacy.

Keywords*:* Food writing, recipes, cookbooks, Bengal, tradition, every day, embodiment, taste.

Introduction

Interdisciplinarity in academic courses and research is one of the most visible and likely liberating consequences of postcolonial Humanities [1]. Its presence is seen in the growing number of Interdisciplinary Humanities departments and postgraduate courses such as Urban Studies, Ecofeminism, Posthumanism, and Digital Humanities offered in colleges and universities worldwide. Food studies are one such multidisciplinary subject of study in the humanities [2]. Food studies, like gender studies and American studies, arose from the Area Studies tradition, which pioneered in bringing together "academics with diverse backgrounds, tools, and training" for interdisciplinary research (Black, 2013, p. 202) [3].

In the 1980s, American studies researchers like Warren Belasco and anthropologists like Sidney Mintz characterised the early phases of food studies, and by the late 1990s, speciality groups like feminist food studies were also created by Barbara Haber and Arlene Avakian [4]. culinary studies scholarship in India is still in its early stages, and attempts are being made to establish approaches that are appropriate for and sensitive to our culinary experiences [5].

Until recently, scholarly depictions of Indian food culture were restricted to works by Western anthropologists who tried to theorise Western modernity by examining non-western, 'primitive' groups' eating practises [6]. By reading, interpreting, and theorising food literature and practises from the land, Indian Food Studies strives to correct some of the assumptions and generalisations that such studies have perpetuated and contribute to a pluralistic discourse [7].

A cookbook, as a type of writing, is commonly believed to be a transcript of a cooking performance [8]. However, the purported practicality of recipes in cookbooks is frequently called into question. For example, Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's recipe for chhanar kalia instructs the chef to listen for a'gur gur' noise signifying the end of cooking [9]—an onomatopoeia that is neither a formal culinary phrase nor a commonly recognised sound for boiling. Variables like as utensil type, cooking medium temperature, and duration make it impossible to provide specific advice. Cookbooks are therefore much more than instruction guides for cooking [10].

According to Arjun Appadurai (1988), "[t]he existence of cookbooks presupposes not only some degree of literacy, but often an effort on the part of some variety of specialist to standardise the regime of the

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kitchen, transmit culinary lore, and publicise particular traditions guiding the journey of food from marketplace to kitchen to table" (p. 3) [11]. In this context, cookbooks may be seen as transmitting the framework that determines the 'cultural performance' of cooking and eating in a community [12]. Following a recipe becomes a ritualistic performance of repetition and, as a result, embodiment of standards established as significant within that community [13].

The Bengali Cookbook of the Nineteenth Century and Negotiations with European Tastes

Culinary traditions create a social, economic, and cultural 'class' through the purposeful inclusion and exclusion of recipes [14]. The ritualised repeating of a culinary history, which is both personal and collective, creates meaning within a binary frame of the self and the other. This tendency may be seen in the earliest Bengali cookbooks produced in the late nineteenth century, when works on food were progressively moving away from medicinal and mythical contexts and into the modern framework of middle-class domesticity [15]. Calcutta, being the capital of the then-British Indian empire, benefited directly from Western education and technology [16].

These cookbooks reflect the Bengali bhadralok identity of the time, which included knowledge of European culinary traditions in addition to common Bengali cookery. Bipradas Mukhopadhyay and his contemporaries such as Bhubanchandra Basak, Debendranath Mukhopadhyay, and Prajnasundari Debi were part of the contemporary Bengali bhadra samaj of Calcutta's developing city against the unsophisticated, uncivil, or abhadra culture of the suburbs [17]. At the time, the word abhadra was used to describe persons from rural areas outside of Calcutta who did not have access to a college degree or the English language [18].

This new cookbook design reflected the immediate and bigger changes that colonial Bengali society was experiencing at the time. The ingredient list with weights and the easy language of the culinary instructions were especially beneficial to the upcoming middle-classes in British Presidency [19]. The openness of the type and amount of components would allow the middle-class housekeeper to cook acceptable meals without the risk of waste, resulting in significant savings in pre-refrigerator days [20].

The ideal contemporary housewife, or grihini, was " skilled in both new and old ways of cooking" (Sengupta, 2010, p. 94) [21]. The domestic kitchen was a key aspect in the woman question of nationalism, and the bhadramahila was tasked with the great responsibility of balancing old, Bengali modes of culinary performance as well as appropriate European recipes to counteract the effects of colonial domination in the public sphere [22]. This became the new culinary 'custom' that the late-nineteenth-century colonial woman was burdened with.

Cookbooks from the Twentieth Century and Scientific Negotiations

A third sort of othering occurred around the mid-twentieth century, when scientific discourses about food became popular as a result of the late colonial inclusion of domestic science into school and college curricula. Ahar O Aharjyo by Pashupati Bhattacharya and Probeshika Grihostho Bigyan by Jogendra Moitra, both originally published in 1942, begin with analogies of the human body to a machine. Moitra says that the human body [23], like an engine, requires water, coal, and fire, while Bhattacharya compares the body to a motorgari or automobile, which requires indhan or gasoline to work. Descartes' influence can be seen in A Discourse on Method, where he writes, "for they will consider this body as a machine which, having been made by the hand of God, is incomparably better ordered and has in itself more amazing movements than any that can be created by men" (2001, p. 45). They focused listing food nutritional statistics above recipes. This harkened back to Western science's Cartesian dualism, in which food became only a material requirement for the physical body, and the rational Bengali man was moulded against the unscientific other [24].

Shukto, a bitter meal eaten at the start of a normal Bengali lunch, was commonly prepared with nalte pata or jute leaves. Mukhopadhyay gives the recipe for nalter shuktani in Pak Pranali and notes that it, like other forms of shuktani, must be prepared with pumpkin, mustard, and cumin paste (58). However, due to Bengal's division, this leaf has become scarce in West Bengali cuisine. When East Pakistan was

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separated from Bengal, the jute fields were relocated to the other side of the border, and Bengal not only suffered losses in the jute business, but also lost a long-held taste.

Personalised Memoirs, Novels, and Cookbooks for the Twenty-First Century

The artistic stylization of recipes is also a distinguishing aspect of twenty-first-century culinary literature such as food memoirs. Food memoirs, also known as foodoirs, have grown in popularity over the last two decades, combining the narrative form of life writing with a stylized cook-book type documenting of recipes. Food has burst in the cultural landscape in unprecedented ways in recent years, and there has been a huge shift in the way we document our encounters with food. Although the extent to which each culinary memoirs integrate recipes vary, the included ones are intimately related to the author's life experiences portrayed in the narrative section of the texts.

The current spike in customised mnemonic food tales must be seen in the context of socio-cultural shifts that have occurred over the previous two decades. On the surface, the strong localised promotion of traditions in novels like The Hour of the Goddess and The Namesake may appear to be a communal dispute. However, the globalised metropolitan realm is the true Other against which these narratives attempt to create their 'traditional' identities.

Conclusion

A taste tradition is accomplished via the repetition of past, real, or imagined eating practices and the need to establish a cultural 'home' in which one may claim origins. However, in the process of establishing a cultural heritage, one may occasionally falsify the past. An ancient television commercial for Dhara mustard oil is a good example of the fickleness of our cultural taste traditions. In it, a non-Bengali couple seeking for a new home is led into an old Bengali one. The louvred windows, pendulum wall clock, vintage piano, and rosewood furniture all serve as ethno-symbols for the past owners. They stumble discover a Rabindranath Tagore artwork that the wife does not recognise. Meanwhile, an elderly Bengali couple, irritated by their potential neighbours' Hindi discussions, decides to begin cooking bhaja in mustard oil. The noxious smells quickly waft out, driving the other pair away from the premises. It concludes with the firm promising additional pungency in its mustard oils and indicating a link between the oil and Bengaliness. The juxtaposition of Tagore and mustard oil as two cornerstones of Bengali culture is an odd concept, as mustard oil was never used in Bhadra Lok circle culinary ceremonies. Women from the Tagore family, such as Prajnasundari Debi and Purnima Thakur, virtually always use ghee as their favourite cooking medium. Mustard oil was "considered sacred" in mediaeval Bengal.

This example highlights how a tradition's factual correctness is subordinate to its uniting purpose. A taste tradition is formed by contingent, purposeful, communal, and personal efforts that may or may not correspond to a single type of truth. However, this is not to say that taste traditions are meaningless, but that a study of the evolution of food writing must be undertaken in an interdisciplinary manner, considering the various historical, cultural, social, economic, and linguistic aspects that leave their mark in our gastronomic transactions. Popular perceptions of culinary traditions as an unchanging, monolithic practise with an undefined genesis in the past must give way to a more nuanced view of traditions as a set of intrinsically heterogeneous practises. Power flows via the body politic, and the state's ever-changing hegemonic techniques give rise to a plethora of tactics that manage these changes by repeating 'classic' recipes. In this way, food writing illustrates the everyday struggles that a community has faced in order to maintain a sense of cultural coherence, a "tradition," despite clear heterogeneity and variance in its practise of taste. These books document not major revolutions or wars, but the millions of ordinary micro-tactics that individuals use to fight hegemonic powers.

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