

Bengali Cuisine in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni 's *Queen of Dreams* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a remarkable diasporic writer who settled in America. She is from Bengal, India. She honours her Indian roots through her writings. Food items of Bengal is an intrinsic part of the Bengal's indigenous culture. In her narrative, culinary elements hold a significant role. In her novels she gives enough references to the Bengali dishes which show her love for the flavours of Bengal. The presence of the authentic Bengal recipes is profusely seen in the corpus of her novels such as *Queen of Dreams* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*. She mentions specific dishes and ingredients to evoke the flavours, aromas and textures associated with Bengali cuisine.

Keywords: Bengali Cuisine, authentic dishes, memory, Bengali identity,

Bengal is a state which partly belongs to India and Bangladesh. It is situated in the Eastern region of India, and is surrounded by Assam on the East, Sikkim on the North, Bihar and Jharkhand on the West and Odisha on South – West. Bengali people have rendered great contribution to the Indian Literature especially to Indian English Literature. M.K. Naik in his book on history of Indian English Literature records that the early contributors of Indian novels are produced by Bengalis and Tamilians. Some of the famous writers of West Bengal are Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahasweta Devi, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and so on. The novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, though she settled in America are partly set in Bengal. The protagonists found in her novels are mostly the native people of Bengal who settled in America.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in order to create a Bengali atmosphere in her novels, has vividly presented the culture of the people, their traditions and cuisine. In her novels like *Queen of Dreams* and *Before We Visit The Goddess* she uses the typical recipes of the Bengalis to show the uniqueness and richness of the Bengali cuisine. Among the various cuisines of India, Bengal cuisine is one among them which holds a very ancient historical background. Bengal has seen various emperors, rulers and invaders. In the earlier days, the inhabitants of Bengal were Dravidians and Austronesians. After the Gupta's era, Aryans settled in Bengal. Bengal was also ruled by Mughal emperors for 500 years. Later it was colonized by British, Dutch, and French people for nearly two centuries. Its reflection can be witnessed in Bengali foodways. For example, Bengali chai is one of the mouthwatering recipes of Bengal which is influenced from western cuisine. In her novel *Queen of Dreams* the central character Rakhi owns an Indian Snack Shop in the name of *Chai House* in which she serves different varieties of teas.

Bengali food holds a special role in the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Being a Bengali herself she serves the recipes of delicious food items of Bengal in the novels. In *Queen of Dreams* as well as in *Before We Visit the Goddess* the central characters are the natives of Bengal. Though are shown as the settlers of America, the flashback scene in which they appear or while narrating their life history or in their dreams, they are found in Kolkata. In the narration of such scenes one can easily witness the author's use of the authentic food items of Kolkata in plenty. The stories beyond the food items fascinate Rakhi and her friends as well as the readers. Rakhi says, "My father makes a dramatic entry from the back room, too. Bearing aloft an emerald-green bowl of chutney, and impress them by reciting the history of various dishes. The rice pudding.....is what gods sent to King Dasharath's barren queen to make them fruitful" (189). Mrs. Gupta and Mr. Gupta in *Queen of Dreams* and Sabitri and Bela in *Before We Visit the Goddess* are the cooking maestros. With the depiction of these characters, she demonstrates the grandeur wealth of the Bengali cuisine. When Rakhi's *Chai House* faces a financial breakdown, she introduces Bengali dishes with the help of her father and her friends and renamed it as *Kurma House*. The items served in the shops are mostly Bengali snacks items. She notes: "He lists them on a sheet of paper: *pakora, singara, Sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana*" (165). The author also gives tips regarding their preparations. She describes:

I learned that to make *rasagollas* that would be soft and yet not fall apart when boiled in syrup, one had to knead two spoons of *sooji* into the *chhana* dough. And that half a cup of oil added into the *pakora* mix would prevent the spicy balls from soaking up more oil when deep-fried.....We made *dhakai* parotta, where the dough is cut and rolled in such a way that it forms thin, flaky layers that melt on

the tongue. The week before I left for college, he taught me his special recipe or *sandesh*, the milk sweet for which Calcutta is famous.....(170)

Bengali dishes are more than a food and they become a memory to most of the immigrant characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Mrs. Mehta in *Before We Visit the Goddess* shares her memories by giving an account of the food she ate in Kolkata. Tara narrates: “.....potato curry, *puris*, *jalebis* for dessert, countless thermos flasks full of tea, a goat for the grandmother, who had to have fresh milk” (66). The novelist alludes to the red sauce, vibrant curries, the spice mixture called *panchphoron* as they are considered the famous food items of Bengal. The novelists records, “She disdained American food and took pride in preparing, from scratch, spicy fish curry or potatoes seasoned with *panch phoron* and whole red chillies” (BWVTG 95). Like the people of Andhra and Maharashtra, Bengalis also pioneered in making *chutneys*. So, the author has flavoured her novels by sharing the recipes of their authentic *chutneys*. “The men bring in trays of steaming dishes. Tea, *pakor*as, a *chutney* to go with spicy balls, which, father inform us, ha has concocted out of spinach, onions and chickpea flour” (QD 160).

The cottage cheese that is called as *chhena* or *chhana* rules the Bengali cuisine and it can be witnessed in the novels too. It is noted as, “.....boil the milk that would then be curdled into the *chhana* from which many of their specialty sweets were made” (BWVTG 79). Sabtri wants to prepare a signature dish in name of her mother to popularize in Kolkata in which *Chhana* is an important ingredient. Yogesh Singh in his book titled, *A Culinary Tour of India* describes: “Bengali Cuisine is acknowledged worldwide for its subtle (yet sometimes fiery) but full-bodied flavours, its splendid confectionaries and mouthwatering resplendent desserts” (44). The cuisines of Bengal are famous for its sweet delicacies and they influence the peoples’ behaviors. The author

writes, “.....Sabtri having gone to Durga Sweets because, no matter how tense the situation, Bengalis had to have their desserts” (*BWVTG* 98). Different and unique variety of sweets are the treasure of Bengali cuisine. Some of them are *sandesh*, *jilebi*, *malpo*, *sitamisri*, *modak*, *rasamalai*, *gawja*, *rasgulla*, etc. Colleen Taylor Sen, food critic and anthropologist in his book *Feasts and Fasts; A History of Indian Food* writes about the authentic food of Bengal in which he gives special mention to *panchphoron*, *maacher jho*, *mishit doi*, *Sandesh*. And she notes about the Bengalis love for their sweets. She writes:

Bengalis are famous for their love of sweets. Income permitting, they eat sweets throughout the day; as dessert at the end of a meal; for afternoon tea; and as snacks. Sweets, especially Sandesh, are an essential component of Bengali hospitality. Most sweets are made of sugar and curds (chhana). (266)

The presence of these recipes is profusely seen in the corpus of her novels. In *Before We Visit the Goddess* specific dishes and ingredients are mentioned such as *mihidana*, *malupa*, *pitahy*, fish curry (hilsa fish in mustard sauce), *maacher jhol* (fish curry), *baingan bhaja* (fried eggplant), *rasgulla*, *kachuris* and more. These references evoke the flavours, aromas, and textures associated with Bengali cuisine. Throughout the novels the references to Bengali dishes, ingredients and culinary traditions create a cultural backdrop for the narrative. Both novels give a glimpse into the rich flavours of the Bengali cuisine.

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