

## **The Taste(s) of Bengal: A Culinary Journey from the Home(s) to the World as a Global Brand**

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### **Abstract**

The cuisine of every geographically demarcated region has a major contribution towards its cultural history, heritage and inheritance. It becomes a mark of identity for its dwellers as well as the signifiers of identification to the rest of the world. This area-specific cuisine and culinary arts foster community feelings and their transmission over generations form an integral part of oral culture. The state of Bengal is home to a plethora of rivers and is geographically blessed with conditions suitable for the cultivation of rice. Bengalis have chiefly been looked upon as people who love their fish and rice, as well as their snacks and always have a sweet tooth for the syrupy rosogolla. All of them have undoubtedly carved a permanent niche for themselves on the global food maps. On the other hand, they have also become the stereotypical yardsticks with which Bengaliness or Bangaliana is measured. This paper makes an endeavour to show the journey of Bengali cuisine and culinary practices from the private households to a global brand, which has carved a separate niche for itself in world cuisines.

**Keywords:** Bengali Cuisine, Identity, Culinary Journey, Global Brand.

The cultural history of any community remains incomplete without a mention of the cuisine patterns and the culinary practices. Not only do they enrich the cultural heritage, but also contribute richly to the identity formation of the community. Right from celebrating a baby's first acquaintance with solid food to the ritualistic offering of food to a departed soul, food plays a quintessential role in the life of a Bengali from birth to death, not to mention other celebrations and rituals within this mortal cycle. In his book *BangaleerKhawadawa*, Monisonkor Mukhopadhyay says that perhaps Bengalis constitute the only community for whom satisfying their taste buds is the be-all and end-all of life and they can sacrifice the last penny of their purse for the flavors of the tongue, wrist-deep in their platters.

Initially, the entire business of food in Bengali households was seen as an aesthetic act within the domestic space. Traditional Bengali recipes were prepared,

taking care to maintain their authenticity, both in terms of the methods of preparation as well as the ingredients. They were treated as sacred rites of the culinary arts, inherited from an oral heritage and hence no deviation from the established patterns were allowed. A full course Bengali meal would begin with *shukto* and conclude with *payesh*, with *dal*, *chorchori*, and non-vegetarian fare in the middle. The items would have to be arranged in a specific pattern, both for aesthetic presentation and also to savour all the flavours from sweet to sour, bitter to sharp in their proper order of succession. Variety is truly the spice of the Bengali platter!

Bengal has always been famous for its festivals and rituals; be it *Nabanna*, *Sankranti* or Durga Puja. Needless to say, all these festivities are related to food in a direct or an indirect manner. *Nabanna* is associated with the harvest of the ripe paddy which is brought indoors, the mention of the Sankranti brings into our minds the unmistakable aroma of *pithe*, and *payesh* (can be roughly translated as cakes made with rice and coconut and rice puddings) while Durga Puja, Bengal's most auspicious annual ritual of the year is incomplete without a great variety of feasting. All of these rituals and festivals were marked by collective feasting where the act of eating together served as signifiers of homogeneous identity and reinforced community feelings. Durga Puja being a more lavish event, comprising five days at a stretch involved the service of male cooks who were hired to prepare the commemorative feasts in exchange of money for their labors. In contrast, Sankranti was more of a homely occasion where the women folk of the house were entrusted with the solemn duties of the meals. Within the domestic space, cooking was viewed as an aesthetic gendered act, undertaken solely by the women only as labours of love, in strict accordance with the 19th century dictates. "While at home cooking was considered a feminine task, when translated into being a profession, it became a male job, marking a distinct demarcation in the realm of culinary practice" (Ray 122). In contrast to the woman of the house who was seen as Annapurna or Lakshmi which can be roughly translated as the goddess of the hearth, for whom the act of cooking involved immense affection and dedication, the hired male cook was only a labour who offered his services in exchange of money. So, Bengali cuisine had no exposure to the larger outside world unless it was a lavish occasion involving the community as a whole: rather it was restricted to the everyday four walls of the domestic world.

According to Niharranjan Roy, the Bengal consciousness of history and

identity has prioritized their provincial identities over a comprehensive identity in the original inhabitants of Bengal. Roy speaks about a lack of consciousness among the dwellers of Bengal as they identified themselves more with their specific regions like Rarhbhoomi, Varendrabhoomi, Pundra to name a few. Besides, the violence of the partition and consequent displacement led to a tussle between the original Hindu settlers and the migrants who were forced to settle in the suburbs of the city. These migrants carried the memories of their homeland with them and refused to accept the prevalent social, political and cultural views of the original settlers. Though fish and rice constituted the staple diet of both the warring clans, the methods of preparation and presentation were extremely divergent and each of the two groups proclaimed superiority over the other, often leading to verbal arguments concerning food and culinary practices. This sense of supremacy of identity politics, coupled with the pride taken in one's provincial identity was responsible for the lack of one uniform Bengali cuisine.

“The evolution of Bengali cuisine as a brand was central to the self-fashioning of the middle-class in colonial Bengal” (Ray 2). With the emergence of the middle class, Bengali cuisine borrowed from English culinary practices, and adapted and appropriated them to suit the Bengali palate resulting in a hybridization of Bengali cuisine. Stew and pudding came to exist peacefully beside *chorchori* and *payesh* prepared by following the British modes of cooking with indigenous Bengali ingredients. Prajnasundari Debi in her famous cookbook *Amish O Niramish Ahar* advocates the use of ghee or clarified butter in an essentially English pudding to Indianise it. Being a member of the JorasankoThakurbari, Debi had seen a Muslim *bawarchi* as well as an Oriya thakur at home and hence her cookbooks blend colonialism and cosmopolitanism at ease, east meets west without any hesitations while Debi concerns herself more with this hybridization and less with the authentication of the dishes. The availability of condensed milk essences in the Indian markets by the 20th century led to hybridization of cuisines and gradually these heterogeneous culinary practices gained the emblem of authenticity. The traditional culinary practices which had been transmitted through generations were appropriated with British ingredients to cater to the English palates as well as to provide a taste of modernity to the newly emerged middle class. In his *Our Food Their Food: A Historical Overview of the Bengali Platter*, Suvajit Halder points out the fact that these responses from the middle-class Bengalis towards the Indo-western concoctions help us to understand the contradictions between traditional orthodoxy and liberal

mindsets. “The educated ‘enlightened’ Bengali middle class not only imbibed the new taste of these items but very often used these items as emblems of liberation and freedom from caste barriers and traditional taboos” (Halder 12). So, food becomes emblematic of liberalism besides being an identity marker, making its presence felt in almost all spheres of the socio-cultural ethos.

Hence, it is from the 1840s that Spences, Firpo, Peliti, Skyroom all were opened for the purpose of serving as meeting places for Anglo Indians, where they could converse over ices and sherry-cobblers. Spences, the oldest hotel of Asia opened its doors in 1830 and Auckland hotel in 1841, which later became the Great Eastern. It also marked the emergence of Basonto Cabin and other public eateries along with Pice hotels which offered a wholesome meal at a considerable rate. Basonto Cabin and other small restaurants offered one a taste of chicken cutlet and fish fries and gradually, they became food paradises for the liberal minded and young middle class Bengali men who “could easily gorge into a chicken cutlet without being concerned about polluting their home” (Ray 56), as chicken was prohibited in the sanctimonious private and home space, but permitted in public hotels and restaurants. As Colleen Taylor Sen remarks: “The norms of social life and the complex dietary prescriptions of the various law codes discouraged dining out. For most households, the only exceptions were festivals, wedding dinners, caste feasts and temples” (277-278).

However, throughout the entire early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a dearth of restaurants which served essentially Bengali cuisine since people saw Bengali dishes as something that were to be cherished in the comforts of home, with an utter disregard for established table manners and it was useless to venture into public restaurants and pay for this familiar cuisine which had nothing exotic about it. It was Anjan Chatterjee, a son of the soil of Bengal who single-handedly changed this perception about Bengali cuisine; he was the first man who pointed out the acceptability and salability of Bengali cuisine to the world and established it as a brand. Mr Chatterjee, a student of the Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, Kolkata left his lucrative job of a media personnel in the advertising department of a reputed daily to set up the restaurant “Only Fish” in Mumbai in 1994. Being a true-blue Bengali at heart, he yearned for rice and fish in the commercial capital of India, and being dissatisfied with the options he received, he took it upon himself to satiate his taste buds as well introduce Mumbai to the essential Bengali platter. His success story, no less than a fairy tale, prompted him to turn to the other delicacies of Bengali cuisine, so far hidden from the other worlds. Shortly enough, “Oh! Calcutta” was born in

Mumbai along with “Mainland China,” the former presenting the unique dishes of Bengal in a restaurant which generated revenue for the owner and the latter catering to the people with a preference for Chinese cuisine.

The enormous success of both led to the opening of the first “Oh! Calcutta” restaurant in Mr Chatterjee’s hometown Calcutta. In almost a classic imitation of the David and Goliath legend, the son of the soil challenged the Oberois and the Tajs by daring to open a restaurant which served only Bengali cuisine right in the heart of Bengal and turned it into a success story within a short span of time.

It was a challenge for the man of Bengal himself to bring his fellow Bengalis to his restaurant and treat them to the delectable fare of their own soil, a cuisine which was familiar to them within the four walls of the private space and make them pay for their food as well. Mr Chatterjee’s passion for food and his endless research into every nook and corner of culinary history, philosophy and aesthetics brought about a major gastronomic revolution in the history of Bengali cuisine. Constant experimentation with Nawabi and Bengali cuisines led to the emergence of multiple innovative dishes with an intermingling of Nawabi ingredients with essentially Bengali ways of cooking and vice versa. Mr Chatterjee frisked and rummaged through the culinary heritage of the erstwhile colonial states of Britain, as well as France and Holland who had colonized Bengal earlier, to decipher methods of exoticizing the modest Bengali dishes (*gondhorajbhetki* is a striking example) which would bear the unmistakable stamp of Bengal, yet have a worldwide appeal. At present, there are branches of “Oh! Calcutta” throughout India as well as one in Bangladesh while Mr Chatterjee, who owns Speciality Restaurants Limited has become a name synonymous with speciality restaurants from Spanish to Chinese, Lebanese to Indian. It is Mr Anjan Chatterjee who ushered in a Renaissance in the history of restaurants serving Bengali cuisine and who remains the most influential person to inspire entrepreneurship dreams for the next generation who aspires to join the food industry. His latest venture is to set up “*Chourangi*,” a restaurant which would provide a taste of “Oh! Calcutta” in London.

Following in the footsteps of Anjan Chatterjee, several restaurants specializing in Bengali cuisine have surfaced in Bengal which have taken forward his legacy. Notable among them is Chef Joymalya Banerjee, a former executive chef at “Oh! Calcutta,” who started Joy’s “Deli,” a delivery service at Ballygaunge, which later on became “Bohemian,” his signature restaurant which

specializes in Bengali fusion food. Chef Banerjee took the existing traditional Bengali recipes and exoticised them with a twist of his individual talent. So continental hilsa and smoked bhetki are served with the more familiar *ilishbhapa* and *bhetkipaturi* where the east and the west meet on the same platter. These consistent innovations and constant experiments with both the ingredients and cooking processes have led to the growth of a worldwide Bengal brand. Several other restaurants like “*Kasturi*,” “*Solo Ana Bangali*,” “*Tero Parbon*,” “*Aheli*” have joined the bandwagon which provide the diners with a homely ambience both in their decors as well as in their choice of upholstery and crockery. While “Oh! Calcutta” has a hand-pulled rickshaw on its wall décor, a restaurant called “*Saptapadi*,” (the name of a novel by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay later made into a film starring the matinee idols Uttamkumar and Suchitra Sen) plays the songs of this movie while still photos from the movie adorns its walls. While “Bijoli Grill” uses banana leaves to serve their guests instead of dishes made from fibre, “Kewpie’s Kitchen” serves its diners on terracotta plates, which are an intrinsic part of Bengal’s architectural and cultural heritage. While “*Aheli*” brings back the forgotten zamindari dishes back on the platter with the waiters in traditional Bengali attire, “*Bhojohori Manna*” on the other hand introduced the thali system, which borrows its name from a popular Bengali film denoting a cook who travelled to many lands and acquired a unique culinary style. All these insightful uses of Bengali decor, songs, films and customs are intentionally used to create a familiar atmosphere and prioritize Bengaliness (Bangaliana to be precise and exact) over everything else. Not only in terms of the decor and adornment, but these restaurants often try to capture the cultural spirit by arranging special platters on auspicious occasions like Poila Boisakh, the beginning of the Bengali new year and *Jamai Shosthi*, a day celebrated by arranging a special feast for the son-in-law of the family. These initiatives soak in and celebrate the spirit of the Bengali existence, and also assist these restaurants to find a firm footing in the gastronomic maps of the city. All of them actively contribute to the journey of Bengali cuisine and culinary arts from grandmother’s private kitchens to global menus and its emergence as a successful brand which co-exists peacefully beside the Domino’s, KFCs and McDonald’s.

Besides Mr. Anjan Chatterjee’s single-handed efforts and his inspiration and determination for the others who followed suit to introduce the world to the sumptuous Bengali platter, it is also worthwhile to remember the initiatives taken by leading media houses to contribute to the same cause. It is the general perception that Bengalis are born with a sweet tooth and as Chitrita Banerji observes:

“Certainly, no other region in India has shown such passionate absorption in sweets and appreciation of subtlety or variety in their preparation” (introduction xxxi, 2005). Kolkata’s leading media house ABP group devised a unique strategy to introduce the world to Bengal’s plethora of sweets, apart from the renowned sugary, syrupy *rosogolla*. In 2011, it joined hands with the multinational giant Cadbury and the owners of the eminent sweet shops like “*Nokur*,” “*Bhim Chandra Nag*,” “*Balaram*” and “*Radharaman Mullick*,” to name a few; and a new breed of delicacy was born which was christened Cadbury Mishti Shera Shristi. It breathed in a new lease of life to the humble *sandesh* where it was once again a wedding of the western chocolate with the eastern *mishti*. It involved a fusion of culinary arts on both sides of the spectrum with the media advertising it amply in their leading newspaper and roping in actors and actresses of the Bengali film industry to campaign for the project actively in a clever marketing ploy. In the succeeding years, this concoction between the western chocolate and the eastern mishti revolved round the themes of ongoing national and international events, catering to the preferences of Bengal life, to garner more attention and ensure its success. For instance, in 2014, matching with the tempo of the soccer world cup as well as keeping in mind the Bengali fetish for football, Cadbury Mishti named the sweet delicacies in terms associated with the game of the moment like Brazilian Samba, Argentine Magic and Uruguan comeback. In 2019 it commemorated the hundred years of Bengali cinema and hence arranged for special screenings of iconic Bengali movies like *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Kabuliwala* and *Panther Panchali* while putting forth new choco-sandesh creations before the audience. Even in the present year, in the 9th edition of Cadbury Mishti Shera Shristi, tuning up with the festive spirit of Durga Puja, there was a war of the sweet chefs of Bengal with the theme “Gan Bhalobeshe Gaan” where the melody of music blended with the saccharine taste to bring forth tempting delicacies.

This wedding between Cadbury and *mishti* also transcended the barriers of space and identity with its growing success story. At first it involved only the renowned and iconic sweet shops of Kolkata as mentioned earlier; however, the stupendous success it received led to the inclusion of the sweet shops like “*Felu Modak*,” “*Rakshit Sweets*,” “*Surjya Kumar Modak*” from the districts which are marked by their proximity from Kolkata. As this venture gains a stronger foothold with the passing years, perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to think that one day it might be an all-Bengal affair, crossing all geographical demarcations of North and South. Besides, the success of the initiative led on to include the

traditional Bengali sweet shops as well as confectionaries like “Ganguram” and “Haldiram” who are not traditional inhabitants of Bengal, but call Bengal home now. This venture transcends the binary between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, where the single identity of being a dweller of Kolkata on the micro-level and of Bengal on the macro-level works as a drive to be at one with culinary innovations and experimentations carried out nationally and internationally. This partnership has benefitted both the multinational giant as well as the sweet owner’s franchise of Bengal to such an extent that now this Cadbury Mishti has become an annual affair with the ABP authorities striving to include more and more sweet makers as well as specialized chocolate chefs into this campaign to taste the sweetness of success.

No discussion of Bengali culinary culture can be complete without mentioning the Calcutta special biryani. Different from both its Lucknow and Hyderabad counterparts, the unique selling point of this Calcutta signature dish is the presence of the ubiquitous potato in this concoction of rice and chicken/mutton. However, biriyani as a dish, never originated in Bengal and was never intrinsic to the Bengali platter. Similar to onion and garlic which were considered taboo in the Bengali kitchen as they increased the libido and had Muslim associations, biriyani owes its emergence to the Islamic rule in Bengal. Previously, they were treated like heathens and prohibited within the sacred walls of the kitchen, but eventually became daily staples of everyday cooking with the Islamic rule. However, this was not a linear transformation at all, “especially in a society like Bengal, where inhaling the smell of prohibited food could lead to degradation in caste status or expulsion from the religious community” (Haldar 15). According to Ghulam Murshid, “it was the lower classes who initially adopted the new food culture brought by Islamic rulers. After that, through the high class converts to Islam, this culture spread among other classes of Bengal” and now onion and garlic (not to forget biriyani) have become an inseparable and almost indispensable ingredient of the non-vegetarian cuisine of Bengal validating Chitrita Banerji’s words: “With the passage of the centuries, Bengali cuisine has eagerly taken and absorbed exotic ingredients, and repeatedly been modified by external influences” (Murshid 491-2; Banerji xvii). Right from Royal to Shiraj, Arsalan to Aminia, Lazeez to Haji Saheb, Zeeshan to Nausijan, one is spoilt for choices if there is a sudden craving for biriyani. All of these heavyweight names have their ever-loyal customer bases who swear by their tastes while there is always a subterranean war among all of them to win the coveted crown of the authentic Calcutta biriyani. A true connoisseur would know the name of the shop just by a glance at

the biryani platter before him and only a spoonful of the manna set before him. All of them have their own unique contributions to carve a name for the Calcutta biryani on the food maps.

Just as Bengal is famous for its rice, fish and afternoon siesta, a Bengali's fetish for small tidbits along with their cup of tea, fondly referred to as "*chayersathe ta*," is of considerable significance as identity markers. Snacks like shingara, kochuri, fuluri have been constant companions on the Bengali tea table with a cup of smoking hot tea, irrespective of the reason or season. Apart from the above-mentioned items, street food consisting of chowmein, egg rolls and chicken rolls, cutlets and fish fries have been in perpetual service to quench the Bengali appetite, much before the advent of Sugar and Spice, Mio Amore and Kathleen. No discussion on the street food of Bengal can be complete without a mention of the ubiquitous *jhalmuri* and *phuchka* who are in a league of their own. In Bengal, every local park, every school, college or other institute, every marketplace or even public buildings like museums, cinema halls and bus stops will have its own area specific *phuchka* and *jhalmuri* seller with a steady group of loyal customers who swear by his offerings and is convinced that he is the best in the business. Both *jhalmuri* and *phuchka* are readily available, are immensely satisfactory to quench an after- lunch and before- dinner micro hunger and are immensely light on the pocket. Primarily for these reasons, they have achieved cult status on the street food map and are extremely popular across the barriers of class, gender and age. To provide these small tidbits with a suitable market and to cater to their ever increasing appeal among the teeming millions, street food festivals are organized to enable more and more people across the state to savor the taste of these pocket- friendly options to satisfy the cravings for small tidbits . The section called t2, which is a youth-centric tabloid of *The Telegraph*, a leading English daily from the house of ABP authorities once again, has often collaborated with names like Bijoli Grill (known for their *bhetkipaturi*), Mitra Café (famous for their prawn *kabiraji*) and Nizam's (synonymous with their chicken *kathi* kabab roll) to name a few, and advertised these festivals. The roaring success of these festivals has led to intelligent marketing and promotion of Bengal's sumptuous offerings and led to demand generation for more such festivals often centering around authentic Bengali auspicious occasions like *poilaboisakh* or Durga Puja and recorded huge footfalls which have set the cash registers ringing besides securing an assured place for the multiple street foods of Bengal, on the global platter.

Heritage as a resource and as an intangible process uses sites, objects and social practices to transmit ideas relating and pertaining to collective groups rather than individuals and is transmitted in the form of fashion, sartorial preferences and culinary tastes. The culinary journey of Bengal from the private spaces of the home to the global food maps marks the preservation of its long heritage as well as cultural identities. On the other hand, it revives long lost recipes from the pages of oblivion, and also serves as identity markers of Bengalinness. Since food is an integral part of the living experiences of an individual and also a strong identity marker; the journey of Bengali food, both within the familiar spaces of home as well as the extended global spaces helps to create homogeneous community feelings. It serves as an important signifier of cultural heritage which becomes integral in validating and asserting identities, besides upholding cultural heritage and fostering community feelings and introducing people across the globe to the tastes of Bengal

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