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## Bengali Delights and *Babu Culture*: A Study on Culinary Evolution in Bengal

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### Abstract

The paper concentrates on the intricate connection between Babu Culture and the Bengali food culture during the colonial and post-colonial era of Bengal, and how, conversely, the changing class formations, especially the colonial regime, influenced the eating style of the inhabitants of the territory. The Bengali cuisine, which literally was born at the elementary level of agriculture, was a revolution when the *Babus*, “the gentleman-class”, arrived and viewed food as an item of their culture and the ticket to cultural sophistication. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how colonial contacts converged to create new European tastes and local cuisines, resulting in the creation of a new culinary geography, which is neither new nor old. The paper is trying to capture the transformation of the food in Bengal as compared to *Babu Culture*.

The first aim of it is to recreate the evolution of *Babu Culture* in the ethnographic context of the Bengali cuisine. It also evaluates the socio-economic effects that the rule of colonialism had on the culinary practices in Bengal and the overall culinary identity of the place. Moreover, it explores how food is used in building class, identity, and modernity among the Bengali upper classes. Strengths of this work are the workplace, food within the confines of culture and power, and it also provides a significant insight into the topic.

The researcher assumes a qualitative approach and performs content and thematic analysis of the secondary data sources that include historical literature, culinary literature, colonial literature, and other visual sources. The plan is to explain the development of the culinary practices in Bengal, and to analyse the interaction between the socio-political history of Bengal, its culture, and the Bengali way of life that develops during the course of time.

**Keywords:** Bengali Cuisine, *Babu Culture*, Culinary history of Bengal

### Introduction:

Exploring and embracing the spirit of Bengali food is the ideal example of the study of issues of the intersection of identity, class, and power. Food making is a sociological and cultural (most importantly, historical) undertaking. The culinary art of Bengal is multifaceted and unique, having been influenced, contemplated, and modified by countless political and socio-cultural changes and transformations. The compilation of

recipes was a cultural art of cooking and its expression as a result of the socio-political development of Bengal. And post-ray period of gathering recipes is the most important political period where the food played the most significant role in the cultural integration and resistance against the imperial domination in terms of class consciousness (Ray, 2004). The *Babu* phenomenon, a highly civilized and comparatively wealthy inner-city Bengali that had developed during the epoch, demonstrated an ingenious use of bait and switch marketing and the food culture era (Chatterjee, 1993).

The *Babu* is a novel creation of pleasure and culture, who, in his leisure, has ironically triggered the metamorphosis of the food habits into the concept of elitism in modern times. The research topic is the complex relationship between Bengali cuisine and Bengali *Babu* Culture in the colonial and post-colonial age of Bengal. It evaluates the way in which the intersection of the relations of classes and colonial powers changed culinary practices and vice versa, how the culinary practices became a tool of cultural identity and social stratification. This study, after having researched history, literature, and culinary history, demonstrates how the Bengali cuisine has evolved through subsistence agrarian origins to a more cosmopolitan, class, and cultured Bengali cuisine as explained in (Banerji, 2010).

Although the author concentrated on Bengal and its class changes as well as changes introduced by the colonizers, the British colonization era was, in fact, different in terms of the class structure and the power relations that ruled the territory. During this period, the colonizers were more aloof in over-powering dominions and competed in the business minutiae of self. New constituents such as spices, methods of cooking, and utensils were introduced by the British, and these were noted by the French Bengal aristocrats as the benefits of globalization. They incorporated these constituents into their practices. This practice was not wholly domestic, nor was it entirely colonial (Sengupta 2016). The modernity constructed by the British, as evidenced by the British customs succumbing to the Bengal customs through daily practices and the newly made fusions of recipes, championed not only the unending evolving taste but also the multiplicity of colonial modernity.

A further aim is to assess the influence of restructuring the culinary identity of Bengal for *Babu* Culture. The novels and satire of the period describe *Babus* and the rest as 'the lower class and the colonial masters. There was a very 'decorating and formalized and even industrial' etiquette towards meals. Their culinary practices—characterized by elaborate meals, formal etiquette, and a willingness to adopt culinary experimentations—differentiate them from the rural masses and the colonial rulers (Datta, 2012). Cooking in the *Babu* household was a stage of practicing elegance, wealth, and leadership of culture. Nevertheless, such assimilation of the culinary modernity was not free of contradiction within itself. Although the *Babus* embraced foreign cooking styles at the same time, they also tried to preserve and promote some of the Bengali cuisines. This attempt at mediating between the convention and novelty generates a cultural identity that was both traditional and novel.

The final product is a peculiar image of a transition, of meeting and creation, the identity was an assortment of the old and the new, which was linking to become irreparably combined. The factors of cooking as a point of analysis will be included in the current research regarding social stratification and cultural ambitions. The elite Bengali kitchen transitioned to a social performance state. The food one ate, the process of cooking,

and the habits of eating all formed the indices of one's/social status in the hierarchy. Even the food type became a form of self-identification, either drawing a line of discordancy to colonial modernity or drawing the resurgence of native pride (Bhattacharya, 2020). This literary work attempts to demystify the social status and food habits of the Bengalis in colonial times. The culinary habits of *Babu* were not only a mirror of the social formations prevailing, but also a means of their production. This is why the *Babu* Culture has such a huge, practically unexplainable influence on the social and gastronomic self of the Bengalis. The *Babu* culture reveals the association of food with history.

## **II. Historical Background:**

Every practice of Bengali gastronomy is cultivated alongside the agriculture of the region. For far too long, Bengali cooking has been limited by the existing crops, as well as the availability of the other necessary components and preparation methods. Bengali cuisine has the identifiable staples of rice, lentils, seasonal vegetables, and, of course, fish, which are all cooked in mustard oil and flavoured with regional spices. The daily meals were intricately bound with the local customs, socio-cultural practices of the people, as well as the religious practices and beliefs, which helped the people to live in equilibrium with nature and practice communalism. On the other hand, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were characterized by the emergence of the English-educated middle class in colonial Calcutta (known as Kolkata today), referred to as the *Babu* culture. During that period, Calcutta was one of the centres of the British Empire. While the *Babus* floated between British higher society and the local aristocracy, they began assimilating British culture, including social mores, culinary practices, and clothing, as well as the entire way of life. As time went by, the British Raj embraced the act of eating out at restaurants and made it a social status symbol. A lot of innovation was made in the socio-economic and political geography of Bengal.

The administrative systems in Bengal by the British, as well as the newly established commerce and socio-cultural spheres, reorganized societal relationships and social hierarchy, which subsequently re-outlined the whole social set-up. The activities of colonization rose, and missionary education was modified to suit world trade. The social geography and local pride in colonized lands were redefined by these movements, as well as changing social relationships. These new social relations also encompassed new notions of food, with local staples being tied to the new ones as a symbol of change and status. This was the pride of the society, which was composed of Bengali and colonial modernity and tradition that was achieved through the blossoming of constructed relations.

This transformation was mirrored in Bengali kitchens, where fusion food cultures emerged. The influence of colonial power, global trade and missionary education shaped not only what people ate but also how they thought about food – as a marker of class, refinement and identity. These changes laid the foundation for a unique culinary landscape where traditional Bengali dishes coexisted and evolved alongside colonial imports, reflecting broader tensions between tradition and modernity.

## **III. Methodology:**

The old and the new cultural elements of Bengali food are in an intricate interweaving with the *Babu* Culture that was formed during the colonial era. This interweaving had a significant impact on the initial stage of the qualitative research methodology that used

secondary sources. The information and thematic analysis of this paper are historical collections, colonial records, memoirs, and literature that have explanatory graphics like paintings and advertising that relate to Bengali cuisine. This kind of analysis focuses on the socio-political and cultural practices and contexts that surround food, both during the colonial and post-colonial era, and tries to bring out the nuances that lie in between.

This study will concentrate on how food and social expression interrelate with the *Babus* as members of the urban middle class and the socio-cultural transformation they underwent as an act of demonstrating their class identity and defiance against the colonialists.

The study design of the provided research is constructed on the following questions:

1. What changes occurred in the food patterns of the colonized Bengalis with the advent of colonialism and with the changes in the socio-economic class structure?
2. In what ways did the so-called *Babu* Culture assist in the reconstruction of the culinary identity of Bengal?
3. In what ways was food an emblem of modernity, social status, and rebellion during the colonial and post-colonial periods?

Such an approach enables the study to be conducted with the elements of discourse analysis, cultural interpretation, and historical socio-structural analysis in relation to food and Bengali culture.

### **Specific Key Terms:**

#### **Bengali Cuisine:**

Bengali cuisine indicates the manifold food preparation traditions in the region of Bengal (which includes the Indian state of West Bengal and the Country of Bangladesh) because of its geography and cultural diversity, the region's main agricultural products of rice and fish, the mustard oil and *panch phoron* (five-spices blend) of Bengal, and its intricately prepared sweets. Bengal's cuisine is agricultural in essence. However, the colonization period's introduction of various distinct ingredients, new cooking methods, and changes in dining traditions transformed Bengal's cooking. Subsequently, the cuisine has focused on culture retention and transformation. This is true for the urban elite, among whom the daily meals featured the heaviest integration of European and Mughlai constituents.

#### **Babu Culture:**

*Babu* Culture began in the city of Calcutta during the time of Colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it encompasses a class of formally educated and anglicised Bengalis. *Babu* men in Bengal settled in the social service and settler-oriented English-speaking part of the outfit. *Babus* increased in public prominence, and, in an effort to show *Babooism*, made attempts to suggest high social status with their polite behaviour and sophisticated practices. Moreover, they created, shaped, and redefined elements of a new Bengali tradition, particularly through food and Western-based cuisines that promote nourishment and cultural identity.

#### **Culinary History of Bengal:**

The history of culinary Bengal revolves around the various cultural interactions the region experienced from the ancient Hindu civilization to the Mughal courts of the Indian sub-continent, then to Anglo-Indian cooking, and finally to the global fusion cooking of the

post-independence era. In Bengal's history, along with the social and political changes taking place, the thoroughly assimilated Chinese community of Kolkata, with their peculiar methods and prepared specialties, altered the gastronomic configuration of the Bengal delta. Coupled with changes in social structure, particularly caste, class, and gender relations, as well as the system of colonial domination, changes in caste colonial, class, and gender relations changes in techniques, the formation of dining societies, the publication of Bengali cookbooks, and the active discourse on "authentic" Bengali cuisine discourse on 'authentic' Bengali cuisine' lends to the transformation of social structure of Bengal.

#### **IV. Transformation of Bengal Cuisine and Colonial Impact:**

As Bengal underwent colonization, its culinary practices started to change. Food became a central ground of the intersection of tradition, power, and modernity. The first foreign food that Bengal experienced was that of the British. This was when a drastic shift was affected in the food habits of Bengal. Ingredients that include bread, potatoes, tomatoes, and cauliflower were introduced by missionary education, the colonial regime, and international market exchange, which were traditionally considered foreign and impure. Over time, these foods were a major component of Bengali food. The *Babus* of the urban upper middle classes were best exemplified in this change, and the fact that their colonial ambitions enabled them to absorb British lifestyle items indiscriminately, as evidenced by the consumption of Meat stews, Anglo-Indian cutlets, roast fowl, and bread pudding.

The process of cultural mixing occurred not only with the ingredients and the recipes but also with the consumption rituals. The tradition of etiquette in the Western style and the use of silverware in the developed mealtimes was the symbol of the high-status refinement in the household kitchen of *Babus*, the upper-class household (Bhattacharya, 2020). At the same time, the Bengali domestic manuals and cookbooks started to justify and report such practices as hybrid, which became a point of negotiation of cultures (Sengupta, 2016). These practices saw Bengali cuisine develop into a mix of the indigenous and colonial, maintaining the old customs and practices, and requiring the new ones. These fusions were a perfect example of colonialism, and yet more, another clever self-identified culture of the Bengalis as they redefined and reused. This influence is reflected in many of the common Bengali foods and dishes to this day, as they contain local as well as colonial influences.

#### **V. Culinary identity and class dynamics in Bengal:**

The significance of food as a part of Bengal caste differences and the manifestation of cultural identity and modernity is especially critical when it is considered through the prism of the colonial and post-colonial standpoints. To the Bengali elite and especially the *Babus*, food was no longer useful, but rather an expression of a fairly high level of social sophistication. Rapid social, economic, and cultural change was introduced with the British colonial rule over India. The modern society has made food a strong tool of stratification of social classes and modernity. The bourgeoisie was worried about the Western drugs of modernisation and civility. Not due to its newness, Bengal kitchens began to add meat stews, roasts, bread, cheese, and other imported exotic foods, which were linked to social mobility (Ray, 2004). Elite social activities transformed food into a form of performance in which the diversity and complexity of the food, as well as the process of serving and consumption, became markers of cultural capital.

The early Bengali cuisine was basic because it had its origins in agriculture and took various diversions. It took the *Babus* to introduce European cuisine to their traditional Bengali cuisine, only to see changes emerge henceforth. This was well reflected with its hybrid dishes, such as Bengali bread pudding, stew chicken, mutton cutlets, and the introduction of some Western spices in the traditional Bengali spices that were employed in the dishes. The combination of the Western and Bengali cuisines in the food that the *Babus* were serving was a result of their dual and conflicting position in the colonial society. Utsa Ray (2015) states that this is when cooking was feminized as well, specifically among the elite women who were required to learn the art of cooking European and Bengali food, which was complicated in nature. This revealed the multicentre pressures by then in the name of modernity: the women of Babu Households were not only expected to be the embodiments of the good ideals of Western femininity, but also to maintain the traditions of the Bengali cuisine in their homes. The era food, therefore, was not just a source of food, but a figurative expression of the internal contradiction of the colonial imposition and the local pride.

Food as a culturally mobile sign went beyond its main purpose as a source of sustenance to be a defensive gesture of local identity following the usurpation of foreign taste and the retaliated move of the foreign imposition. Food ways allowed the Bengali elite to thoroughly incorporate the colonial apparatus and this had a pragmatic equilibrium of modernity with tradition, and exhibitionism with a lot of self. The amalgamated cuisine practices played a very important part in the development of a modern Bengali cultural identity, which was closely connected with the colonial influences and resistance.

## **VI. Culinary Innovation, Colonial Influence and Cultural Negotiation:**

The *Babus*, in the case of colonial Bengal, in their effort to bargain their cultural identity following the colonial era, specifically discovered the application and consumption of food as a powerful instrument. Though local customs and traditions were practically always replaced, food was never the object of change or conflict. The application of food was required to be innovative, yet it was not only the application of foreign methods and or foreign ingredients; it was rather more of a self-expression and a cultural rejection. After the European food practices were introduced by the colonial forces, together with other foods, the *Babus* adapted them to adopt the regional cooking traditions and practices of the Bengali people. This accommodation of Western cuisine and traditions selectively into Bengali cuisine and other elements, as followed by the elite, was a way to attain a particular identity with the Western so-called modernity; the food in this case was a way of modernity and resistance at the same time.

The origin of the new hybrid cuisines at this time was also due to a more thorough cultural interaction and process whereby food became a performativity identity marker. The fact that the *Babus* could cook and enjoy both traditional Bengali food and the Anglo-Indian food was a symbol of their complex social status: the modernity and the elite status were acquired and at the same time, the Bengali culture was preserved. The fusion of the cultural elements was, especially, more visible in the social life where the meals became the social symbols of the collective Western refinement and the individual Bengali self-pride. Through the skimming of colonial cookbooks, textbooks, and even the interpretation of

literature and visual foods, this paper demonstrates the use of food as an expression and illustration of differences in classes, identity and even colonial modern desires.

## **VII. Analysis and Discussion:**

The development of Bengali food and the discourse of the same allow historians to comprehend some aspects of socio-political and sociocultural realignment and restructuring, during the colonization and after it, through the periodization as a consequential pre-text. These changes, as well as the fundamental ones in the world of food, are present in cookbooks and particularly in the cultural theory in Bengal, and provide breath-taking hints at how the civilization changed the cultural relics that were assimilated in the colonial era and beyond. The transformation of food during colonial times, and the point of attention, specifically, lies with a subtle distinction between local and colonial configurations of food in the ethno-cuisine realm. The hybridization between the ancient Bengal culinary canon and the immigrant food culture is twofold in nature since it is interwoven with the sociocultural contemporary accents. The elite group referred to the frame of colonialist, and were especially receptive to the ideologies of modernity, the *Babus* constituting, in their turn, local colonial signifiers.

Perhaps the most intriguing fact that was found during the analysis is the footprint in the socio-political change of the times. The food in the re-organization of the Bengal society was an allegorical representation of the division of classes and the power bargaining. The *Babus*, i.e., not only by picking up western culinary ways, rallied not only to modernize it but also to improve their social rank in the continually shifting colonial pecking order. Such an inter-relationship of modernity, cosmopolitanism and vertical social migration caused the *Babus* to be aligned in cross-flows with the lower classes, unlike them. This was also evident in the development of their 'dining' social practice, which, in its entirety, was designed to flaunt their high rank status in society, thinner and more refined, akin to European customs.

The data obtained in the historical and cultural method means that the food practices were linked with the power relations. Food in the context of the colonialism of Bengal was not just a survival mechanism. From the power relations and cultural frameworks, the interpretation of the data indicates how food colonialism was both integrated and resisted. The colonial powers attempted to enforce foreign dietary practices, while the Bengali elite attempted to absorb these practices to create a dissociated colonial culinary identity, a culinary identity that resisted complete colonialism and modernity. In such a manner, food enabled the Bengali elite to exercise power, saturated in the society of colonization, and controlled the identity of a contemporary society. The argument that Bengali cuisine was not solely influenced by colonialism, but engaged with, is fundamental. More than the colonial forces, Bengali cuisine engaged in the conversation. The practices of food demonstrate the spirit of the Bengali culture in addition to the class and power that food represents. In conclusion, the collection emphasizes the change in Bengali cuisine in relation to migration, change, and negotiation, while the food served was the focal point of the social, political, and cultural transformations.

## VIII. Conclusion

It is important to consider the way the food culture of the region has evolved, and possibly more importantly, it is being considered in the context of the region in the period of colonialism, post-colonialism, when the historical and cultural environment was changing, and with the current concerns of identity, globalization, and cultural preservation in mind. Food was a cultural bargaining tool for the Bengali elite. Food also began to acquire new components and began to have a local identity with the intrusion of the colonialists. This is what makes Bengali cuisine unique in its traditional Bengali ingredients and European way of cooking and a classic example of how traditions and cultural peculiarities are changed under the influence of the exogenous factor. Food is regarded as a cultural change and resistance tool and is a case Study, particularly at this period. In an era of global homogenization, preserving traditional cooking practices and methods is essential for the preservation of a culture's identity.

The example of colonialism in Bengal is a good way to understand how any society can still be active in the world and keep its identity and individuality. Food plays a contradictory role in this case; it either fits in with the culture or goes against it. This is rather strange and at the same time challenging. It is not just transformation and acculturation in Bengal; it is something complicated. This modern globalized society is unstoppable in its assimilation and convergence, and most affected are the colonies. Food hybridization processes that took place several years ago are still so integrated in our culture. Regarding the colonies, the culinary identity negotiation represented a form of cultural appropriation, sustainability and food sovereignty issues of the present. The practice of selective adaptation - maintaining part of the local practices and innovating has been proven to be important in the Bengali experience. Bargaining of power, status, and cultural pride of the colonizer and the colonized is witnessed in Bengali food hybridization. It proves, in the present, the changeability of cultural identity that has been created through interaction, adjustment, and opposition. Conversely, the Bengali culinary history has lessons of the past, how to address the complicated culinary facets of the present, and the future. This would assist in transforming food into a vehicle to convey the modern culture and a source of tradition.

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