



Performance of Gender in Bengali Culinary Culture and the emergence of a new nation as a ‘Thirdspace’

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Abstract

The paper seeks to trace the progress of food cultures in Bengal and the emergence of a culinary Thirdspace with respect to gender and nation formation. Food in middle – class Bengali homes has always been a gendered concept. Edward Soja while propounding the theory of the Thirdspace says that it is a space that is born out of the friction of binaries and grows to offer resistance to the Centre. He cites bell hooks’ argument about how the margin can be seen as a space of radical openness. Although Soja being an urban geographer limits the concept to architectural spaces, this paper seeks to explore the idea of Thirdspace with regards to the middle-class Bengali kitchen and the gendering of food that has resulted in the development of a culinary Thirdspace. Food mainly divided into masculine and feminine where the best piece of fish is reserved for the man can further be divided into food for the unmarried, the married and the widowed woman. In such a space however, the Indian man’s food was being called ‘effeminate’ by the British Raj. Hence a change of diet was being recommended for the building of the Indian youth. The paper seeks to trace the friction between these factions and how the Indian man became ‘effeminate’ while the woman whose diet was thoroughly neglected took upon herself the job of real nation building.

Keywords

Thirdspace nation, gender, food, health

Edward Soja says that ‘Third Space’, is “a space where all places are capable of being seen, from every angle, each standing clear; a space that is common to all of us, yet never able to be completely seen and understood...Everything comes together at third space” (Soja 56), a point that Homi Bhabha too makes in *Location of Culture*. It is a “meta –space in terms of its ability to transgress, to lead somewhere else, somewhere which does not have to fit into or be marginalised by already existing categories” (Harrington 238), a space “rebalanced on the trialectics of spatiality, historicity and sociality” (Harrington 238). This third space is a space where on the one hand there is fragmentation, on the other there is a sense of the whole; on the one hand there is isolation, on the other there is resistance, as bell hooks described it. “Third is not merely derivative of First and Second. It is a space of its own. Third is thus formed by the process of hybridization, which rather than simply adding a here to a there, gives rise to an elsewhere within here/there” (Trinh 18). A Thirdspace is a space that always emerges out of two binaries. Food emerged as a thirdspace from within many binaries; the binaries of more ‘masculine food’ and ‘feminine food’, the vegetarian and the non-vegetarian, Hindu and Muslim, Ghoti and Bangal. This essay will trace the emergence of another Thirdspace that developed out of the binaries between the man’s food and the woman’s food and the impact it had on the concept of nation formation in the budding years of the Indian struggle for independence.

Food and eating indeed has been a very essential part of the day to day performance of the common Bengali. It has always been associated with a certain set of societal norms and orders that are culture specific. Therefore, eating and the way one will eat has been a concern of central importance. The performance of eating was directly related to the general physical performance of the body of the Bengali. It would not be too much of a generalisation if this physical performance referred only to that of a Bengali man. Whenever food was taken into consideration, it was taken into account with reference to the health of the Bengali man, who’s failing health or physique was again related to the failures of the nation. The process of nation building was taken seriously with respect to the proverbial ‘Health is wealth’ and with the development of various ‘akhra’s and other institutions that secretly prepared the Bengali youth to fight foreign forces; a healthy diet became a part of the body’s performance in service of the nation. Post 1857, the functions that defined a man and a woman respectively, started to change, and did metamorphose into something quite different over the period of the nationalist struggle, and is still in the process of changing. The man in society, honoured as the thinking component, given the privilege of having a mind that worked in unison with an impressive protective body became a “site of the critique of the ravaging effects of colonial rule” (Sarkar 202). The male physique began to disintegrate and become a metaphor for a larger condition. “The term Bengali is a synonym for a creature afflicted with inflammation of the liver, enlargement of spleen, acidity or headache” (Sarkar 202). Or, “Bengal is ruined. There is not a single healthy man in it” (Sarkar 202). The Bengali man’s body came to be seen as completely scarred and maimed by colonial power.

In his Adharchandra Mukherji lectures on ‘Food’, Chunilal Bose says “A third reason for selecting *Food* as my particular subject is that our present Indian diet is defective and ill-balanced and is directly responsible for the progressive deterioration of

the physical health of the people, particularly of Bengal, and indirectly affecting their moral and economic wellbeing” (Bose 2-3). Throughout the lecture, Bose keeps referring to the masculine Bengali health and often uses the term ‘manly’. He seems almost oblivious of the female race except for making a reference about the pregnant woman and the nursing mother. “A rich supply of green vegetables to a carrying or a suckling mother is most beneficial both to herself and her child” (Bose 109). To Bose, the maintenance of the male body was necessary and this could be achieved by beginning with improving the food quality at the college hostels, he himself being associated with the hostel of the Calcutta Medical College. He talks of the influence of European food on the Bengali diet and its advantages and disadvantages. While he strongly recommends the cultivation of celery, lettuce and such other European vegetables, he does not quite approve of the introduction of biscuits and tea in the Bengali city diet or the blind faith in the meat consumption of the Europeans. The earlier practice of eating jaggery and sprouts for breakfast is something he prefers over a cup of tea and biscuits. However, he is dismissive of the Bengali superstitious prejudices against the eating of eggs and strongly recommends it. One must, however, keep in mind that the entire lecture is targeted at a male audience while ironically, Bengal, right at that time was seeing a revolution in the role of the feminine race. The working woman had just started to appear on the social periphery and the idle, jobless man was often replaced by the woman in the sphere of social duties. This could be noticed right from the time of the first Bengal famine in 1943. In that context if we study Bankimchandra’s *Anandamath*, we can see how the role of the woman starts to change. This change is far more pronounced after the Partition or at the time of the Partition much later. If we see the famous portrayal of Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, later, we can see the role reversal clearly. Therefore it is very interesting to note that while the man in the Bengali society is becoming weaker and falling prey to various diseases and while society is still concerned about the physical upliftment of this ‘fallen man’, the woman, even the ‘fallen woman’ starts supporting her family with whatever little contribution she can make, despite society’s complete ignorance about her needs, and deliberate carelessness about her diet. The definition of ability and its relationship with diet therefore is altered at this time. While on the one hand ability was directly associated with food consumption and the quality of living, the reversal of gender norms, led to a change in this perception of ability altogether.

There was a distinct sense of hierarchy in the consumption of food and what was considered ‘feminine’ food and ‘masculine’ food. The food and consumption practices of Bengal before the advent of the Company were quite different from what it turned out to be after it. The British Raj’s immediate perception of the Bengali feeding habit was that it was effeminate and hence it suited the native much better than their master. Charles Curtis, a surgeon attached to the naval hospital in Madras “regretted that majority of the Europeans injured themselves from a kind of false bravado and the exhibition of a generous contempt of what they reckon the luxurious and effeminate practices of the country” (Sengupta 83). Adam Burt another Calcutta surgeon echoed Curtis’ thoughts saying “the too liberal use of wine combines with the climate to render Europeans ill-qualified for digesting the great quantity of animal food which most of them continue to devour as freely as before they left their native country” (Sengupta 83). Naval surgeon

James Johnson prescribed “the slender and unirritating food of the Hindoo” (Sengupta 83). The Europeans however, continued to eat and drink in the tropical weather, as they used to do in their hometowns and much as they wanted this to portray their vigour and health and oftentimes even virility, it did them very little good health-wise. This association of a diet rich in meat and alcohol with maleness was not only a perception singular to the Raj but in due time it percolated down to the people they had come to rule. “By and large medical exhortations were lost on the British in Calcutta, who ate huge amounts of every sort of meat, including pork and beef, both roasted and curried. ‘We are very frequently told in England, you know, that the heat in Bengal, destroyed the appetite,’ wrote Eliza Fay in 1780, ‘I must own that I never saw any proof of that: on the contrary, I cannot help thinking that I saw an equal quantity of victuals consumed. We dine too at two o’ clock, in the very heat of the day...a soup, a roast fowl, curry and rice, a mutton pie, a four quarter of lamb, a rice pudding, tarts, very good cheese, fresh churned butter, fine bread, excellent Madeira” (Sengupta 84). The British people attributed their superiority of race to a better digestive system and most of the times, if they fell ill, they blamed the tropical weather rather than their food habits, which they were reluctant to change. The Governor Philip Francis wrote that he was “tormented by bile and obliged to live on mutton chop and water. The Devil is in the climate I think” (Sengupta 84).

With time “the body of the British official in India became an even more powerful signifier of ‘Britishness’, and diet and dress became, accordingly, cultural sites on which a sense of bodily difference between the British and their Indian subjects was maintained” (Sengupta 84). While it would have been undeniably wiser for the ‘foreigners’ to adapt to the existing food habits of Bengal, a complete reversal of food habits took place whereby, the Bengalis started adapting to the eating habits of the rulers. This was another way in which the Bengali man could exert his masculinity. It was thought more advisable to eat food introduced by the Europeans, as it became symbolic of power and control. The British counterparts associated the Bengali male body with effeminess and ‘effeminacy’ as Thomas Metcalf would put it, while Robert Orne, an eighteenth century historian remarked that this effeminacy was exacerbated by the Bengali staple diet of rice and starch “an easily digestible food, obtained with little labour and thus the only proper one for such an effeminate race. Even among such ‘generally lethargic’ people Bengalis were especially known for their feeble ‘effeminate ways’ and their slothful habits” (Sengupta 86-87). This however, was also the opinion of Chunilal Bose who condemned the Bengali habit of consuming rice often twice or more times daily. He however, more logically, being a Bengali himself attributed this to the poverty of the Bengalis rather than their natural fondness for easily digestible ‘soft’ food. Indeed he explains medically how rice was more difficult to digest than wheat and therefore how bread could be a more preferred diet for a healthy man. But, since Bengal produced great amounts of rice, it was cheaper and hence the staple of the class.

This led the ‘faint-hearted’ Bengali Babu to change his diet for the more European choice of food. On the one hand this had a degrading effect on the average Bengali health, on the other, one can notice how, the nationalist movement, had, as a part of its agenda, the motto of building the downtrodden Bengali health. Gandhi in his lectures is seen repeatedly to advise the nation on the importance of the preservation of health and

physique. However, even this nationalist concern about the health of the common Bengali, was not an equal concern for the Bengali man and woman. Power had its roots in the cause for such concern, and it was never thought, much less believed that the average Bengali woman could have any role to play in the major task of nation building or its upliftment. She was mostly thought to be confined in the world of domesticity. Therefore the recommendation to build a healthy body was meant for the nation builder Bengali man. Chunilal Bose, repeatedly mentions in his lectures the importance of the maintenance of the male body. He rises above the erstwhile conception of ‘purity’ of food and does talk of the daily consumption of eggs as a healthy habit. “There is an ill-founded prejudice against the use of eggs which should be got over” (Bose 109). Eggs were not allowed entry in Hindu homes as hens were raised mostly in Muslim families. But Bose disregards such ideas and advocates the consumption of eggs, but there is no mention of chicken in the lecture. On the contrary, Bose gives an elaborate list of dairy products that could replace the European meat including chicken and fowl, since they have staunch religious taboos associated with them. Although Buddhadev Bose in his essay, talks about even the Hindu consumption of beef, and how it has been recommended even in the ancient texts. “All we can guess on the basis of literary evidence is that the ancients were a meat-eating, wine-tipping people, inordinately fond of milk-products *and* beef-eaters as well. The Buddha himself did not impose a ceiling ban on flesh-eating; many of his followers (Bengalis?) ate fish habitually.... How and when both beef and pork came to be interdicted and the great schism between vegetarians and flesh-eaters arose on the Indian soil cannot be ascertained with any degree of precision; we do not even know whether these arose of religious or circumstantial pressure”¹. However, Chunilal Bose avoids such controversy. His list includes ‘milk, butter, *dahi*, *chhana*, *ghee*, cheese and condensed milk’. When he does talk about meat, he talks about ‘red meat’ and does not attempt to mention the goodness of any other kind of meat or its benefit. He is highly dissatisfied with European influence on the Bengali diet, and considers it as one of the worst diets in the Indian nation. “The result of the continued taking of such a poor and ill-balanced diet for a long time, especially in the growing period of one’s life, is retardation in one’s growth and development, disinclination for physical exercise, and any kind of active work, weakening of the power of endurance, lowering of vitality, loss of natural resisting power against infectious diseases, premature old age and generally an early grave. If you will look at the present health conditions of Bengal you will find that there is far more sickness and mortality prevailing among the people, both adults and children than it should be...The health and physique of the Bengalis were not so poor a few generations ago”(Bose 93-94) and here he refers to the Bengali men in the military services as exemplars of good health and dietary discipline and calls upon the “true son of Bengal”(Bose 94) to redeem this situation; to make the “country smile again with health

¹ Buddhadev Bose, *Bhojon Shilpi Bangali* (Kolkata: Vikalp, 2012). Translated by the author himself from the original Bengali *Bhojon-shilpi Bangali*. The translation has been published in the daily newspaper *The Hindusthan Standard* of Calcutta. The Bangla article, first titled "Bhojan-Bilasi Bangali" but later changed to "Bhojon-shilpi Bangali" appeared in 4 daily installments in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* of Calcutta, during January 1-4, 1971. Recently, in 2004, this has been published in book form by Vikalp, Kolkata.

and prosperity” (Bose 94). So, here again we see in the lecture of Chunilal Bose how he is addressing just the men and his lecture has an almost nationalist fervour in the way he tries to motivate his audience by calling upon the ‘Mother Bengal’ and inspire them to make the nation happy. He compares the Indian diet with the English and American diet with special reference to Chittenden, a European physiologist and concludes “that our Indian experience also does not support it” (Bose 94). He gives special emphasis on the improvement of food quality in the college hostels again with the view to improve the health of the youth who represented the future of the nation. (Bose 109) He also makes a direct comparison between the English breakfast and the Bengali one. “It was a universal practice at one time with the old and the young in every Bengali household to take as the first thing in the morning, a handful of wetted and softened grams either with salt and ginger, or with brown sugar (goor). That practice has practically been given up and a cup of tea with or without biscuits has taken its place. Needless to say that the change has not been for the better for the cup of tea does not act as a food but only as a stimulant and the biscuits contain no vitamin” (Bose 107). But unfortunately such advice mostly fell on deaf ears as far as the Bengali Middle-Class was concerned. The word ‘Middle-class’ is a complicated term and I am aware of the dangers of its frivolous usage. However, here, by ‘middle-class’ I would generally refer to the city bred class of Bengali people at that time. This also did not include the people living on the fringes of the flexible and fluid borders of the Calcutta that was then just taking shape. This refers to the people of Calcutta itself who were used to an urban life and represented the so-called ‘Bonedi’ class. Now the question that will immediately arise out of the contradiction engendered in my statement, is this, that the ‘Bonedi’ people were the elite class and not the ‘middle class’. However, it is my contention that here, I distinguish them as the ‘middle’ taking into account the midway they chose to follow in their current circumstances, and how they strove to find a middle-ground that balanced their traditional upbringing with their preference for the new found European culture, thus breeding a ‘Thirdspace’.

This class of people strove very hard to imbibe the Western habits of food consumption which inevitably led not only to a change in the food pattern, but also an outbreak of diseases that led to the generally distraught condition of the Bengali health. Ailments such as indigestion, dyspepsia, diarrhoea, etc became a common feature of the Bengali man. The bilious pot-bellied Bengali Babu was comically represented in characters such as Shibram’s Harshabardhan and Gobardhan or the famous Potoldangar Pyalaram from Narayan Gangopadhyay’s *Tenida*. ‘Food or culinary practices are a crucial indicator of the differences that middle class had with other classes, castes and communities. The changes in dietary patterns led directly to the issue of a healthy body. The middle-class considered gustatory pleasure as one of the chief sources behind the debilitation of the Bengali body. The first and foremost concern was with the formulation of an ideal type of diet. This discourse of an ideal diet was also conflated with discourse on “pure” food. Although couched in scientific language, purity often had double meaning. Apart from denoting clean and hygienic food, “pure” also implied ritual purity. “Pure” food was something intrinsically Hindu and elite, uncontaminated by lower classes. These concerns acted as the guiding principle behind the construction of a healthy body of the colonial modern. However, this construction of the body was more rhetorical

than actual. The body was fractured; it was torn between the attempt of creating a pure somatic conception and the intake of the pleasures of capitalism that irked those who looked to a “tradition’ in order to construct a healthy body” (Ray 19). However, this was again the Bengali ‘bhadralok’ class too and these afflictions mostly plagued the health of those who could afford to imitate the European eating habits and a strict demarcation was made between the ‘bhadralok’ and the ‘bhadramahila’. Calcutta at this point, as a newly built city, or a city that was still being built, among many other things, was divided into two classes: the ‘bhadralok’ and the rest. However, there was a further division in this, whereby there was a clear distinction between the functions of the man and the woman. Firstly, there was the ‘bhadralok’ class that thought the European eating habits as better and worth imitating, because this would lead them to achieve greater ‘masculinity’. This led to a gradual deterioration of their health on the contrary thus ‘feminising’ them. On the other hand, there was the ‘bhadramahila’ class, whose job it was to ensure they could cook the European culinary delicacies and this is well documented in their recipe books since their ‘bhadramahila’ status ensured that they were well educated. On the one hand the ‘bhadralok’ became the representative of consumption, while the ‘bhadramahila’ was expected to represent the ‘production’. Given, such expectations from this ‘bhadralok’ class, the builders of the nation advocated a change in the diet of the men, but never for once mentioned the diet of women. However, the man soon became mostly unfit for work, giving Bengalis the epithet of ‘pet-roga’ (those that suffered from digestive ailments) while the underfed, malnourished woman soon emerged as the breadwinner of the family, if not the eater of that same bread.

Thus, a Thirdspace was emerging as a form of resistance in terms of both culinary practices as gender roles. While health was being directly associated with the male body and the builders of the new nation and a new diet was being recommended for them that was a confluence of both Bengali and European diet regimes, the women, whose diet never bothered the nation-builders were taking upon themselves the role of breadwinning. Also while on the one hand the British masters were being emulated in the various culinary practices of colonial clubs in Calcutta, because they were more powerful and hence more masculine, a new strand of ‘desi diet’ was also being promulgated as the formula for ideal nation building. This breaking up of the traditional spaces of power hierarchy and gender is the most noticeable factor about the culinary practices of Bengal post- 1943 where on the one hand there is fragmentation on the other hand it is a fragmentation developing out of the urge to create a new whole, an independent nation.

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