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## Food culture of Bengal: Continuity and change

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### Abstract

Bengali food has an extensive reputation for its celebrated assortment of varieties. People of Bengal are very proud for their splendid tradition of food. Several cooking styles, ingredients, spices and motives are responsible for the diversities of food in Bengal. The objectives of the study is 1] to describe different trends in modern Bengali food culture with respect to socio – cultural context and 2] to explore relevant factors of Bengali food culture with the emergent focus in relation to cultural globalization. Analysis of data is done with tabular representations here. Sociologically it can be said that the differentiation in tastes and habits of taking food are closely linked with cultural diversity. In contemporary world of increasing globalization of culture, food habits turn to be Trans -national identity. In Bengal the co existence of global as well as indigenous food becomes the new stand. Thus focus area of the study can be related with sociology of food, sociology of culture with proper emphasis broadly on sociology of life style.

**Keywords:** Food, culture, Bengali, habit, diversity

### Introduction

Some basic needs are linked with the survival instinct of human individuals. Food should be considered as the most elementary one. Vivid observation revealed the evolutionary nature of the structure of food. Primarily hunting – gathering was the most effective process of getting food. After that animal became the basis of having food in pastoral economy. Subsequently agricultural society starts to subsist with new avenues of getting food with the help of nature. The rule and specificity about food depends on the nature of society as well as culture. Bengali food has an extensive reputation for its celebrated assortment of varieties. People of Bengal are very proud for their splendid tradition of food. Several cooking styles, ingredients, spices and motives are responsible for the diversities of food in Bengal. Historically Bengali food has been associated with the oily and spicy content which were recognized as harmful on the medical ground. But now the nature of food takes a new turn with the growing focus on health consciousness. Today Bengali food becomes smarter and ‘fitness’ oriented. Hence it can be accepted truth that food is an inseparable component of culture.

**Theoretical Linkage:** On the basis of Exchange theory it can be said that mutual interaction between different societies ultimately results in emergence of new cooking styles. As consequence of assimilation, absorption, acculturation and mutual exchange, marked transformation has been occurred in the periphery of food and cooking. The names like Margaret Mead, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Marvin Harris deserve attention in discussion of social aspect of food.

Ritzer pointed out in his theory of McDonaldization [As mentioned by A. Giddens in Sociology] that fast food restaurant represents contemporary paradigm of formal rationality. Four dimensions are associated with the features of fast food restaurants. These are efficiency, predictability, an emphasis on quantity rather than quality and substitution of nonhuman for human technologies. Interestingly, all the chains of McDonald’s restaurants have some inherent similarities in the sphere of layouts, the procedures of ordering, staff uniform, tables, packaging and service with smile. Language and interior décor may be different on the basis of local influence. By analyzing this approach Ritzer wants to say that society is moving towards highly standardized and regulated model. It is observed that now the taste of youth is almost same. Hence according to Ritzer McDonaldization is making social life more homogeneous, more rigid and less personal. In this age of globalization preparation of food is not limited to a particular territory, instead of those eating objects and eating patterns involve multiple stylizations crossing the national boundary.

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Wide spread café culture of Bengal can be linked with this aspect of McDonaldisation.

Another theoretical context can be linked with food culture of Bengal. In the situations of French bakeries small scale operations are encouraged in place of standardized mass production. The purpose is the production of fresh bread for local communities. French culture is linked with freshly baked goods. Hence the attempts to introduce mass production of bread were unsuccessful. Clegg [As mentioned by A. Giddens in Sociology] pointed out that cultural factor plays the more important role than rationalization and efficiency. De-differentiation is a characteristic feature of this kind of organization. De-differentiation as a concept means a trend away from narrowly specialized task towards the development of more diverse skills. This kind of post-modern organization can be visualized in the aspect of Bengali sweets. The theory of food consumption, changing habits and related issues were discussed by Counihan and Van Esterik [2008] [11] in the work of Food and Culture [As mentioned by Tasin S. Zaman in Food, Identity and Symbolic Metaphors in the Bengali South Asian Community]. The exploration of relationship between consumer and consumption with respect to 'taste' is analyzed by Morton [2004] [12] [As mentioned by Tasin S. Zaman in Food, Identity and Symbolic Metaphors in the Bengali South Asian Community] in the work of Cultures of taste. Pierre Bourdieu [As mentioned by Tasin S. Zaman in Food, Identity and Symbolic Metaphors in the Bengali South Asian Community] defines the significance of 'taste' as acquired behaviour in the production and maintenance of social class.

### Methodology

The study is mainly based on primary data for the opinion of food lovers. 100 people of different age group are selected as samples of this study. Purposive sampling method is applied here. Samples are selected on the basis of their knowledge about current trend of Bengali food. They are fully aware of regional, national and global food. Data are collected on the basis of the interview method. The respondents are residents of Kolkata. Secondary sources are used for the analytical purpose. The objectives of the study is 1] to describe different trends in modern Bengali food culture with respect to socio – cultural context and 2] to explore relevant factors of Bengali food culture with the emergent focus in relation to cultural globalization. Analysis of data is done with tabular representations here.

### Bengali food culture with respect to socio-cultural context

An older version of restaurant was developed in presidency towns like Calcutta, Madras and Bombay during colonial period particularly in the later half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. On the basis of socio- cultural fact, it can be revealed that this time period was parallel to the premature form of industrialization. Consequently a new class of workers was related with this emergence. They had to commute long distance for earning livelihood. With their changed version of lifestyle, their dependency was on external source of food like hotels, restaurants and so on. A clear categorization was indicated in the list of accessible food. One set was included snacks with western influence like cutlets, chops, cakes and so on. Other set integrated north Indian food like samosas, parathas, puris and similar items. These two components of

food were clubbed together as 'tiffin' at that period of time. The remarkable part was that in the list, there was marked absence of specific Bengali food (Like luchi, aalur dam). With passage of time Bengali specific food become able to take their place in the category of snacks. Similar food items like kochuri, gaja, nimki, chanachur, aalu kabli, fuchka and so on were by now very admired among the Bengalis. But food business of these types was not appropriately structured then. So, the chief impediment for such food – trade became unavailability of industrial network. Evidences showed that Swami Vivekananda was a fond of hotel made food then. Henceforth this was the tradition of old Kolkata. Amalgamation of global food in Bengali platter is not a new event. Historical data showed that Swami Vivekananda himself cooked several items in 1899 for Sister Nibedita and Sarala Debi Chawdhurani. Sister Nibedita gave the name of the event as 'geographical lunch' because it was assortment of 'American fish chowder', 'Norwegian fish ball', 'English boarding house hash', 'Kashmiri mixed pie' and 'Bengali rasogolla'.

First recognized Bengali restaurant was established in Calcutta in 1960 with the initiative of a cooperative of women. Then gradually famous restaurants like 'Oh Calcutta', 'Aheli', 'and Mainland China', 'Bhajahari manna', 'Kasturi' and so on became brand name of Bengali food culture. Tea, coffee and snacks related food stuffs are inexorably linked with College Street 'Coffee house'. This is not only an eating place but a platform of cultural emergence. The popular culture of coffee house takes a new turn with the famous food chains like KFC, CCD, BARISTA and similar places. Bengali became habituated with the café culture with several popular coffee shops in South as well as traditional North Kolkata. Bengali food culture is inseparably linked with Chinese food since the colonial period with extensive significance of 'china town'. The discussion on contemporary Bengali food will be incomplete without mentioning the existence of provincial food. The provision of South and North Indian dishes is connected to the heart of Bengali food lovers. Cultural globalization gives the access of global food like Italian dishes, continental menu and highly popular English dishes specially English breakfast. Bengali food delicacy incorporates the cultural specificity in street food also. Health conscious Bengali consumers are also fond of mouth watering dishes in the category of fast food.

### Relevant factors of Bengali food culture

To some researchers food is to some extent allied to leisure. The reflection can be seen in the works of Joanne Finkelstrin [As mentioned by Tasin S. Zaman in Food, Identity and Symbolic Metaphors in the Bengali South Asian Community]. She discussed the importance of food as a form of entertainment and a pursuit of pleasure in her essay 'Rich Food: McDonald's and Modern Life'. Even though, it should be kept in mind that developed countries can enjoy the opulence of food owing to their economic proficiency. On the contrary, developing countries like India are correlated with subsistence level in terms of food. Thus economy and food can be related to each other as socio – cultural attributes.

Now it is accepted that Bengali food culture has undergone thorough transformation due to several factors. The most significant trend is the spell of 'eating out'. Bengali home made food gradually becomes old fashioned and obsolete. Today people love to go here and there for family eating

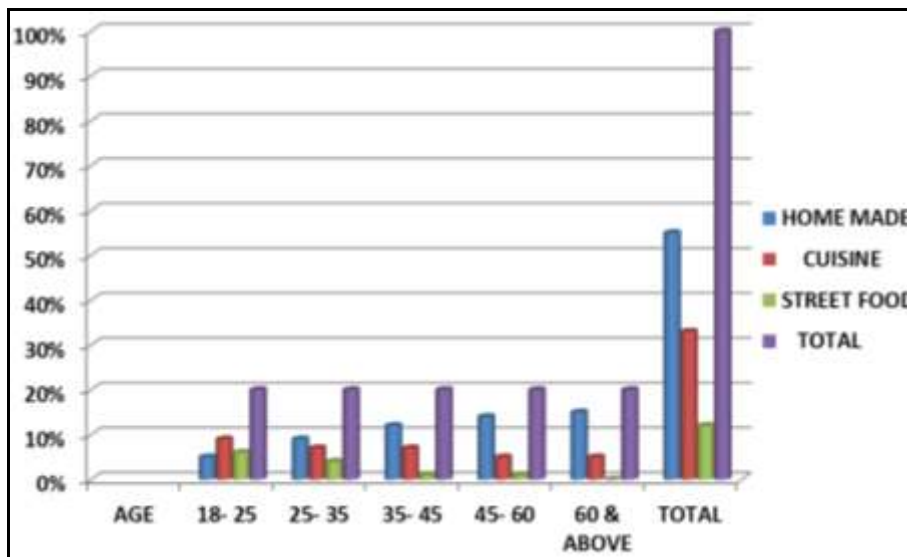
also. Even small occasions are arranged in eating place by prior booking of tables. Increasing importance of fast food becomes regular part of diet of mainly Bengali youth. Roll, Chowmin, Pizza, Pasta are getting immense popularity among them. Continental food and traditional Indian dishes are fighting neck to neck to take major share in the plate of Bengali food lovers. The situation has culminated with widespread focus of global consumerism. Each and every individual is now treated as consumer. In the aspect of food items this tendency is highly prevalent now. Various food

items are available in the market. People can select their favourite one from this wide range of food products. Factor of advertisement is mostly essential for the products of supermarket and the menu of restaurants. Companies related to this sector are highly interested to get the target consumer like any other product. According to Grunert there are six distinguished seller controlled types of marketing --- advertising, labels, in - store communication (displays, posters and others), publicity in mass media and sponsoring.

Tabular representation of data on preference of food on the basis of age

Food Age	Home made	cuisine	Street food	total
18- 25	5%	9%	6%	20%
25- 35	9%	7%	4%	20%
35- 45	12%	7%	1%	20%
45- 60	14%	5%	1%	20%
60 & Above	15%	5%	0%	20%
Total	55%	33%	12%	100%

Above data showed till now preference is centred on home made food.



The concept of self-awareness about food related matter has taken more importance now. Previously people eat whatever they like to eat. Today they become health conscious, so they apply their knowledge of calorie measurement in selecting food items. This is also true that especially young girls are very much anxious about beauty. Hence they are too much figure conscious. This attitude has direct relevance as well as connection in selecting food item for them. Indirect reflection of this attitude has been culminated by the emerging trend of new subculture. The focus is given to beauty oriented representation, not on proper nutrition in most of the cases. ‘Slim- trim’ look is the key demand of upcoming new generation. Gym going group are also going

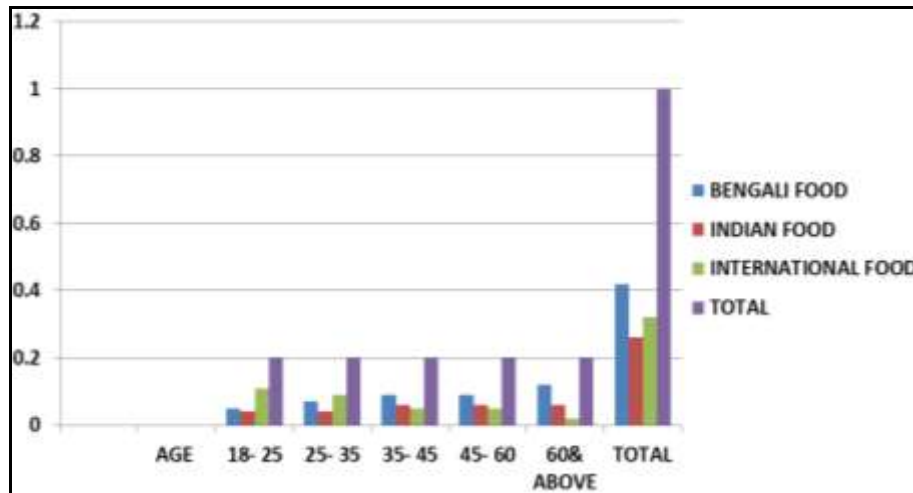
to dietitians for keeping themselves attractive.

If an analysis is made on nature of Bengali food, then it will be highly prominent that despite of immense diversity they are interested in all kinds of food from each and every corner of the world. Indians have borrowed heavily, unashamedly and openly from virtually every corner of the globe [Nandy: 2004] <sup>[8]</sup>. This fact is also true for Bengali trend of cooking. Bengali food as a whole is heterogeneous and exogenous on one hand; again these are prototypically authentic in their orientation on the other. The reason of this uniqueness lies in the style of intermingling of cooking objects in specific Bengali way.

Tabular representation of data on preference of food on the basis of age and geographical location

Food Age	Bengali food	Indian food	International food	Total
18- 25	5%	4%	11%	20%
25- 35	7%	4%	9%	20%
35- 45	9%	6%	5%	20%
45- 60	9%	6%	5%	20%
60& Above	12%	6%	2%	20%
Total	42%	26%	32%	100%

Above data showed that still there is a preference towards Bengali food.



Tabular representation of data on preference of food on the basis of age and geographical location

Growth of fast food market is related with processes of industrialization and urbanization. Urban life style can be viewed as an impetus for changing the value structure of Bengali food network. Dispersion from homemade food and inclination towards eating out frame of mind are consequence of urban mentality undoubtedly. These two processes jointly contribute to the shrinking of time for cooking. Hence packed food and tined item can easily take place in the list of Bengali food item. Serious changes in the food structure in Bengali are linked with family factor also. 'The older models of socialization are becoming recessive in urban, middle class India and preparation of food is becoming less of a matter of apprenticeship at home or daughters, daughters in law and younger women in the family and more a matter of cultivated taste and de-gendered expertise for many.' [Nandy: 2004] <sup>[8]</sup> The transition from joint to nuclear family is an important cause of change in food habits of the Bengali. Entry of women in the workplace has been regarded as the sole cause of emerging new food pattern in Bengali culture.

Now there is no one particular kind of Bengali food for the new age people of Bengal. There is a clear demarcation line between East Bengali food and West Bengali food. Cooking preparation has undergone several transformations since the period of partition of Bengal. The essence of change is centered on the unique blending of recipes of East and West Bengal. In the context of differentiating East and West Bengali food, it can be said that food from West Bengal is sweetish; from the East, robust, spicy and full of flavour.

New age advertisements focus on not nutrition but distraction regarding food materials. The example can be given by an advertisement of chocolate showing attractive young smiling girls with 'thori si petpuja' [A beat tummy worshipping]. There are four categories of food related programmes like traditional domestic instructional cooking, personality driven domestic cooking shows, food travel programmes and avant garde (This is a new genre of innovative food media). Most of the programmes focus primarily on fantasy material. Vibrant colours as well as attractive décor of kitchen become centers of attention to the audiences.

Indian society imposes certain rules and regulations regarding the acts of eating and drinking. Food and water are susceptible to the ritual of purity and pollution. The rules involve the matters like from whom he will take food and with whom he will eat. These two facts are related to the status of caste of the individual. Kitchen is a sensitive area

in this connection. Eating together is a sign of equality. So there should be conscious attempt to select eating partners. Left-over food on one's plate is tabooed to eat for all but leavings from the plate of one's father or husband is treated as holy for eating. The concept of pollution is not static; in some situation this can be removable. Certain agents of purification like fire, sun and Ganges water are available. Mandelbaum [1972] <sup>[6]</sup> pointed out that living cow related products are most commonly used for this purpose. Cow dung, mixed with water, is applied as general means for ritual cleansing. Interestingly it is observed that kaccha food [raw material like vegetable, fruit in holistic form] can be accepted from anyone and everyone. On the contrary, in case of pakka food [Cooked food] the situation is different. Cooked food can be accepted from a selected few on the basis of caste and ritual identity. It can be said that in the situation of accepting food and drinking water, there are still certain ritual complications in village India. Urban India is trying heart and soul to eradicate these kinds of restrictions. Urbanites are successful to some extent in their attempts to do so.

There is a clear distinction between everyday food and ceremonial food in Bengali culture. Ceremonial food is normally related to social occasions. Initially ceremonial food was truly Bengali in essence as well as in content but now fusion food takes the share of Bengali dish. In modern fast life food pattern has taken a completely new turn with 'ready to cook and easy to eat' policy. Thus entry of fast food revolutionizes entire territory of food. People are habituated with fast food (knowing evil effects) due to quick lifestyle.

Street food is an emblematic feature of Kolkata culture. According to Bhashkar Mukhopadhyay, 'the marginalized elements are reconfigured in a new category of anti-food-street food – consumed by marginal sections of the population. Anybody familiar with Calcutta's street culture would know the inevitability with which street food vendors crop up in every nook and corner in defiance of municipal law, petit bourgeois prejudices and the unanimous disapproval of parents, police and pedagogues.' Despite of negative attitudes of schools and guardians about the street food, people are hypnotized by the attraction of the food of this genre. Frequently people are involved in the unauthorized transaction of mouthwatering dishes like fuchka, alukabli, churan, pickles and so on. The range of street food is remarkably broad with jhalmuri, bhelpuri, telebhaja and even desi ice cream. Huge repertoire of street

food is actually the consequence of assimilation of food pattern of non-Bengalis, Marwaris, Gujaratis, Punjabis, Tamils and similar others. Chowmein, entirely Chinese preparation, turns to be a popular dish of Kolkata people. The history of street food culture mainly started from late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then some famous food items were bulbulbhaja, sarebotrishbhaja and so on. Bhashkar Mukhopadhyay thinks 'these were perhaps the predecessors of the present chanachurs and jhalmuries which are still consumed in plenty.' [Mukhopadhyay: 2004] <sup>[7]</sup>

Now there are a number of coffee shop chains like CCDs, Baristas, cake, pastry and patties centers like Monginis, Sugar-n- spice, Cathleen, Chocolate hut, Pizza hut and similar others. Restaurants have specific orientation in selecting their names. Some of them are innovative in names focusing on global orientation like Machan, Mainland China, Flotel and others. Few are in the path of preference of western names like 6<sup>th</sup> Ballygange place, Red Chilly, Marco Polo. Ethnic identity is prominent in case of Sanja chula, Ajad Hind Dhaba, Banana Leaf and groups of Bhujawala like Haldiram. Cuisines like Bhajahari Manna, Tero Parbon, Sholo Aana Bangali, Bhuter Raja Dilo Bar, Kasturi, Radhuni and so on highlight their Bengali-ness not only in eating items but in ambience also.

Though public eating places are maintaining their restrictions of caste and religions, a growing tendency of decreasing this rule is noticed now. Eating places are trying to transcend all kinds of distinctions imposed by society. Food stands in railway stations, dining cars of trains, clubs, and hostels are examples of places where interethnic and Trans-regional cultural trends become uphold. Educated middle class is constructing a new ideology and consumption pattern cutting across ethnic, regional and caste restriction. Modern India is emerging as a place of cultural assimilation in the matter of eating style. 'This spatially mobile class of professionals, along with their more stable class peers in the cities and towns of India, creates a small but important class of consumers characterized by its multiethnic, multicaste, polygot and westernized celebration is said to be complete unless there are a few dishes of fish served in it' [Reejhsinghani: 1975] <sup>[13]</sup> [As mentioned by Appadurai A. in How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India]

The image of Bengali food is linked with fish and rice principally. Sweets are also known as delicacy of Bengali culture. Each culture has its own specificity in eating habits like Bengal. Sociologically it can be said that the differentiation in tastes and habits of taking food are closely linked with cultural diversity. In contemporary world of increasing globalization of culture, food habits turn to be Trans-national identity. In Bengal the co-existence of global as well as indigenous food becomes the new stand. Thus focus area of the study can be related with sociology of food, sociology of culture with proper emphasis broadly on sociology of life style.

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