

HEB

From the Kitchen of Rabindranath Tagore: Tracing the Bengal Renaissance in the Evolution of Culinary Arts

CASS

Paushali Bhattacharya

M.A. 1st Year, Jadavpur University

“There is no love sincerer than the love of food.”

— George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*.

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Tagore family positioned itself at the helm of the renaissance in Bengal, a stance which was further affirmed by the assumption of the role of the mouthpiece of Bengali culture by Rabindranath Tagore. This paper discusses how the women of the Tagore household also played a significant role in that age of enlightenment: when the faint stirrings of feminist thought were barely discernible, Tagore women transformed the humble kitchen into a centre of aesthetics and innovation, exploring and documenting the traditional knowledge of the culinary arts and folk medicine within the liberal feminist framework of the Bengal Renaissance. The paper goes on to analyse how a close study of the culture of consumption in the Tagore household reveals the colonial influences that had seeped into the kitchen, as well as the semantics and semiotics of an exclusively feminine territory that was constantly devalued under patriarchal structures. The paper concludes with an observation on how food in Bengal continues to remain politically relevant and complimentary to a progressive outlook, even in the face of fierce opposition.

Keywords: Tagore, Bengal Renaissance, liberal feminism, food, liberalism

Introduction

Food has been an essential aspect of human experience since time immemorial, as it functions as an agent of mediation in the rapture between nature and culture, facilitating the dialectics of the opposing binaries. In the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, culinary operations may be perceived as “mediatory activities between heaven and earth, life and death, nature and society” (Lévi-Strauss, pp. 64-65). Applying Lévi-Strauss's paradigm of the 'culinary triangle' to Bengal in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the various ideological connotations deeply imbued within a culture of consumption become discernible in light of the social and political change that characterised the times.

The intellectual and cultural awakening that has been widely deemed as the 'Bengal Renaissance' is often traced back to the fervent endeavours of the Bengali intelligentsia and the European orientalist to reconcile the culture of the colonizer and the colonized, a venture in which the family of Dwarkanath Tagore played a key role. This paper seeks to explore how the ideals of liberal politics slowly pervaded the Bengali gastronomy through a careful examination of the gradual transformation of the culinary space in the Tagore household. Through the introduction of European norms within the traditional Indian lifestyle, the Tagores shaped their societal role as intermediaries between the East and the West,

which finally culminated into the genesis of the modern Indian man, with an appetite which was distinctly different from the generations that preceded him. As this process of self-fashioning of identity percolated into the substratum of domestic life, the culinary habits were also marked by a

Access this Article Online

<http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies>

Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



sharp departure from the traditional Indian processes of preparation and consumption of food.

The concept of identity vis-à-vis the renaissance has been often explored, as the impression of the “Renaissance Man” as the epitome of modernity and civilisation has been upheld and immortalized through popular discourse down the ages. Identity as a notion has been inextricably linked with the idea of the renaissance ever since the inception of the term: French historian Jules Michelet, who coined the term 'renaissance', defined it as “the discovery of the world and the discovery of man,” (Brotton, p. 16). The self-fashioning of identity during the Bengal renaissance created a schism in the Bengali society between the *Grihastha* and the *bhadralok*, as proposed by Dr. Rohan Deb Roy. Dr. Deb Roy, defines the *grihastha* as familial householders, mainly consisting of upper caste Hindus, while the *bhadralok* is described as a category which cut across caste and class boundaries, including wealthy entrepreneurs and landed gentry, as well as impoverished poets, teachers or journalists: people who shared a common vision of a modernized Bengal (Deb Roy, pp. 182-183). With an access to the colonial education system, the Bengali *bhadralok* fashioned an identity of his own by amalgamating the traditional modes of attire, code of conduct and culinary operations with a European way of life. With his investments in the zamindari estates in Bengal as well as in entrepreneurial ventures such as shipping, banking and insurance companies, Dwarkanath Tagore often experienced a life in close proximity with the beau monde of European society, as well as the reigning monarch of England – Queen Victoria: an association which placed him at the helm of the social reformation movement pioneered by the Bengali *bhadralok* class, and also radically transformed his culinary predilections.

As a family of devout Brahmin Vaishnavites, the consumption of non-vegetarian food as well as vegetarian food items imbued with tamasic qualities was forbidden at the Jorasanko residence of Dwarkanath Tagore, not unlike most of the Brahmin households of nineteenth century Bengal, who were strict adherents of the culinary codes dictated in the *Manusmriti*, which states:

“Garlic, scallions, onions, and mushrooms, and the things that grow from what is impure, are not to be eaten by twice born men... or meat that has not been consecrated... the milk of all wild animals of the wilderness except the buffalo, and all foods that have gone sour or fermented. But among foods that have gone sour or fermented, yogurt can be eaten, and all foods made with yogurt, as well as whatever is extracted from auspicious flowers, roots, and fruits.

Do not eat carnivorous birds or any birds that live in villages, or any whole-hoofed animals that have not been specially permitted;... You should not eat solitary or unknown wild animals or birds, nor any animals with five claws, not even those listed among the animals that may be eaten. They say that, among the animals with five claws, the porcupine, hedgehog, iguana, rhinoceros, tortoise, and hare may be eaten, as well as animals with one row of teeth, except for the camel.”

(Doniger, 5.5-14, pp. 17-18)

With his newly acquired taste for meat and alcohol, Dwarkanath Tagore purchased a house at no. 5, Belgatchia in Calcutta in 1823 for the exclusive purpose of entertaining his European guests as well as other Indian upper class men who enjoyed a similar ostentatious lifestyle. The Bakhtinesque saturnalia at the Belgatchia villa became the subject of satires and limericks, such as:

“In the garden at Belgaatchia, knives and forks rattle,
What do we know of the joys of *khana*?
It is known only to Tagore and Company.”

(Deb, p. 14)

On the other hand, the changing appetites of Dwarkanath Tagore alienated him from his wife Digambari Devi, who effectively severed all relationship with her husband. A woman deeply entrenched in her religious beliefs, Digambari

Devi withdrew within the *andarmahal* or inner chambers of her home, and passed away 1839. However, the winds of change entered the *andarmahal* of Jorasanko when Pragyasundari Devi directed her creativity towards oft-neglected domain of the kitchen.

Born in 1884, Pragyasundari Devi was one of the great-grandaughters of Dwarkanath Tagore, and niece to Rabindranath Tagore. As the granddaughter of Debendranath Tagore, who was one of the leaders of the BrahmoSamaj, Pragyasundari was provided with an English education, replete with lessons in music and painting, not unlike upper class girls in Europe. However, unlike other women who were acquainted with the ideals of enlightenment that were being disseminated in late nineteenth century Bengal, Pragyasundari chose the domain of the domestic to unleash her creative spirit, a traditionally feminine space that existed as a self-enclosed lacuna, far removed from patriarchal expectations. Her innovations in the kitchen were extensively recorded in her three volume work *Aamish O NiramishAahar*, which provides an unique perspective on the liberal feminist ideas that existed in a nascent state during the Bengal renaissance.

Aamish O NiramishAahar is one of the earliest texts in Bengali language that depicted the changing gender dynamics in colonial India. As the western neoclassical ideologies that were in vogue during the Bengal renaissance deepened the chasm that existed between the private and public spaces, it made provisions for a limited and controlled emancipation for women. The act of cooking in precolonial India did not have the stigma of being an exclusively feminine pursuit; yet, the colonial influence transformed the domain of the kitchen into an affective space, where women, as Julia Kristeva observes, become the “process” that maintain cohesion within the “structure” of the colonial state by becoming a receptacle for all that needs to be repressed in mainstream discourses (Rabine, pp. 41-49). Pragyasundari's choice of the culinary arts as the channel for her creative spirit becomes an interesting one, as it marks a sharp departure from the traditional tools of expression of feminist thought.

However, it is in the humble kitchen that Pragyasundari Devi curated an exhaustive repertoire of feminine knowledge, borrowing from age-old instructions inherited from her foremothers as well as her own experience and innovations. Her cookbook documented recipes for traditional Bengali dishes that were previously not recorded in a language that was distinctly different from the semiotics of renaissance Bengal, applying a vocabulary that was exclusively employed by women within the bounds of the domestic space. “Her recipes were mostly gleaned from rural Bengali life. The synonyms used in the Bengali kitchen were also typical of Bengali women's own language,” writes Chitra Deb, showing how terms like “*daagdeoa*”, which usually signifies marking becomes an expression denoting the act of cooking spices in ghee (Deb, p. 126). Focalized through Kristeva's theory of semiotics, Pragyasundari Devi's sharp departure from formalised Bengali prose is a step towards radical feminism, deepening the cleavage between the unconscious processes and conscious structure as she ekes out an exclusively feminine space within a language that posits the symbolic paternal in a position that supersedes the material maternal, thwarting its attempts to shape the other into an inferior replica of the superior model. In an era where the early stirrings of liberal feminist thought were barely discernible, Pragyasundari comes across as a woman ahead of her time, as she does not seek to accommodate the feminine processes within the masculine structure, but attempts to carve out a space for women to exist beyond the omnipresent patriarchy.

The dichotomy of the public and private spaces in colonial India became a crucial point of contention during the Bengal renaissance, as more and more educated women endeavoured to enter the domain of the *coinos* or the shared domain of the state and its various institutions. However, the popular opinions on the woman's position in the social structure expected the women to exist exclusively within the traditional spaces: in his essay titled *The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question*, Partha Chatterjee argues how “the home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world— and the woman its representation,” (Chatterjee, p. 196). However,

Pragyasundari's work clearly delineates how the colonial influence slowly permeated the 'sacred' space of the kitchen, as her culinary expertise extends consist of a large number of western dishes that were frequently served at the Tagore residence. The menu cards or *kramanikas* that were handed out to guests during the feasts, which was incidentally one of the practices introduced by Pragyasundari, often enlisted a number of popular European gastronomic specialties, such as asparagus sandwiches, cucumber sandwiches, bread croutons, blancmange etc. The menu cards also bear testament to the liberal politics pursued by the Tagores in the early twentieth century, as the inclusion of meats such as ham was quite unusual at a Bengali household in colonial India.

“Bengalis were never prolific eaters but they were gourmets,” writes Chitra Deb (Deb, p. 130), reflecting on the extensive yet carefully curated menu cards prepared by Pragyasundari Devi. However, the tales of legendary eaters with insatiable appetites were rife in late nineteenth century Bengal, as most of these celebrated gourmants were often subject of myths. One such account of a voracious eater may be traced to the accounts of Dr. AmulyaCharan Chattopadhyay, a physician in early twentieth century Calcutta, as he writes about *Adhmani* Kailash, who owed his title '*Adhmani*' to his remarkable ability to consume at least *half-maund* food, which is a rough equivalent of 18 kilograms in the metric system. Describing a rural feast, AmulyaCharan writes:

“After Adhmani Kailash had successfully eaten the gigantic volume of food that he had challenged he could, his naked belly bore traces of streams of curd flowing across his body in different directions. The sight of his gluttonous face smeared with parched rice and cur, the continuous hasty rhythm in which he was devouring the food, proved to be a sight unbearable to me... Having experienced how it felt like watching someone eat like a demon, I vowed never to sit down to eat in the same row with Kailash...”

(Deb Roy, pp. 180-181)

It was not until the Bengal renaissance that the concept of table manners had entered the Bengali household: in the Tagore household, not unlike the households of other Bengali *bhadraloks*, European etiquette was rigorously maintained during feasts, marking a sharp departure from the unrestricted consumption of food that was earlier aroused simultaneous feelings of awe and disgust. The gastronomical delights prepared in the kitchen of Pragyasundari Devi transformed those feasts into an epicurean's dream, as every dish was imbued with the creative touch of a culinary genius who sought fulfilment in the transitory aspects of everyday life.

The innovative spirit of Pragyasundari Devi also flowered in her preparations of traditional Bengali food, as she created new dishes out of old recipes by altering their ingredients: most of these new recipes were named after her near and dear ones, such as 'Dwarkanath Phirnipillau' or 'Surabhi Kheer', named after her deceased daughter. Adding her own creative touch to traditional European recipes, she would often come up with number of hybrid recipes born out of a fusion of European and Indian culinary operations. The hybridisation of Indian food is quite evident through the frequent use of the term “curry” in her books, which, as Utsa Ray points out, is quite ambiguous in its origin, denoting an India dish with an English name (Ray, p. 63). To the traditional European recipes like custard sauce, she would often add oriental spices such as nutmeg and clove, and would often top it off with a generous serving of *ghee*, thereby altering the European recipe to appease the Indian palate.

Besides being an excellent repository for traditional and non-traditional recipes, Pragyasundari's book was also a documentation of feminine knowledge, which ranged from advice on choosing the right ingredients to reducing the smoky flavor in a slightly charred dish. Her book also contained information regarding household remedies for children's ailments, diets for patients and hygiene in the kitchen – knowledge that was often devalued under the patriarchal system. In accordance with the early liberal feminist ideals of her time, Pragyasundari did not seek to establish herself as an expert on matters of health and wellness: she unobtrusively presented her opinions on diet and debility through a discourse that

would not challenge the existing patriarchal structures. Painfully aware of her limited access to non-affective spaces, she even shelved her plans of writing a book on domestic science. However, her culinary expertise was deeply appreciated by Rabindranath Tagore, who had also preserved a copy of *Aamish O NiramishAahar* in his library. Pragyasundari's talent and arduous labour elevated the humdrum and uneventful act of cooking to the stature of an art form, thereby becoming one of the foremothers of liberal feminism in India that sought for women's liberation within the patriarchal system.

The legacy of Pragyasundari Devi has been preserved in Bengali culture down the ages, not only in books such as Purnima Tagore's *Thakur BarirRanna*, but in the culinary operations of everyday life. Even in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Bengal remains a land of liberal culinary habits, where gastronomical delicacies are enjoyed irrespective of caste, religion or personal politics. One of the most potent torchbearers of Bengal's culinary lassiez-faire was a cramped processed meat shop in Free School Street, Kolkata, founded by a Hungarian trapeze artist. With an extensive customer base across the diaspora, Kalman Cold Storage was one of the most popular meat processing shops in Kolkata, where people often flocked for a variety of processed and unprocessed meat products, along with their exclusive products, such as the Hungarian sausages or the ox tongue. Besides an eclectic mix of customers which included Hindus, Indo-Chinese, Anglo-Indians, Muslims, Armenians, Judaists and Bengali Christians, Kalman Cold Storage was one of the very few meat shops that sold beef as well as pork, thereby catering to all customers, irrespective of the taboos that exist around certain meats.

However, on January 19th, 2019, Kalman Cold Storage was permanently shut down due to acute financial crisis. The culinary heritage of Bengal, on the other hand, continues to live among multitudes of Bengalis all over the world, inextricably intertwined with the legacy of the Tagores and their innumerable torchbearers, who have all contributed to a culture characterised by its legacy of liberal gastronomy.

References::

- Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*. trans. John and Doreen Weightmann. Pimlico, London, 1994
- Brotton, Jerry. *The Renaissance A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2005
- Basu, Srabani. "Dwarkanath Tagore was a True Friend of Queen Victoria", *AnandabazarPatrika*, 14 May, 2017. Accessed through <https://www.anandabazar.com/supplementary/rabibashoriyo/dwarkanath-tagore-was-a-true-friend-of-queen-victoria-1.612309>
- Deb Roy, Rohan. "Debility, Diet, Desire: Food in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Bengal Manuals", *The Writer's Feast: Food and the Cultures of Representation*, ed. Supriya Chaudhuri and Rimi B. Chatterjee. Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2011
- The Laws of Manu [Manusmrti]*. trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian Smith. Penguin UK, Harmondsworth, 1991
- Deb, Chitra. *Women of the Tagore Household*. trans. Smita Chowdhury and Sona Roy. Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2010
- Devi, Pragyasundari. *Aamish O NiramishAahar*. Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1995
- Rabine, Leslie W. "Julia Kristéva: Semiotics and Women." *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 12, 1977, pp. 41–49. JSTOR,
- Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question", *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. ed. Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid. Zubaan, New Delhi, 1989
- Ray, Utsa. *Culinary Culture in Colonial India*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Basu, Wriju. "An Old Meat Shop Shuts its Shutter", *AnandabazarPatrika*, 10 January, 2019. Accessed through <https://www.anandabazar.com/calcutta/an-old-meat-shop-kalman-cold-storage-shuts-its-stutter-1.929963>