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The Great Divide: Tracing How the Bangal-Ghoti Divide Extends to Gastronomic Differences

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Abstract:

The partition of Bengal in 1947 caused a massive Hindu migration from East Bengal to West Bengal. As a result, a new phase of communal categorization emerged within East Bengal Hindu refugee migrant (Bangal) and WB local Hindu (Ghoti) in Kolkata against the usual Hindu-Muslim communal rivalry in Bengal. While the origin of the expressions, ghoti and bangal, are in veteran journalist Sunanda K Datta-Ray's words "lost in the mists of obscurity", the bitter-sweet rivalry between the two communities, which began some 20 years before the second, violent Partition of Bengal, found its full play in post-1947 Calcutta on the Maidan greens, the Writers' Building, in matrimonial adverts, in sundry cultural minutiae, on trams and buses, the streets of teeming millions and most importantly in the Bengali kitchens. The antagonism mounted with each wave of impoverished East Bengali migrants to Calcutta in the 1960s and finally in the biggest surge of humanity to West Bengal following the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war. The ghoti-bangal divide, in the Bengali psyche, is unique in that it was a social expression of the perceived cultural superiority – or inferiority – of one group over another and vice versa. All this in the backdrop of the traumatic experience of Partition which, admittedly, cast its shadow over the way the wretched bangal refugees were perceived by the settled ghotis. Bangal-s and Ghoti-s differ on these 3 Fs-Football, Fish and Food. As the East Bengalis settled down in parts of South Calcutta, their bitter-sweet relationship with the ghotis soon entered the kitchen, signifying in large part a contest between the culinary delicacies of the two sides. The bangals mocked at the generous helping of sugar that the ghoti womenfolk would add to their culinary delights. The ghotis would scoff at the bangals for the revolting smell of *shutki* (sun dried fish) and ridicule the extra dash of ground red chilli in *kasha mangsho*. The objective of this paper is to trace the path of the much hyped Bangal-ghoti debate and observe how gastronomic differences play a major role in underlining this divide.

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There is an old proverb in Bengali that says- "Bangalir baro mashe tero parbon" which translates to "Bengalis celebrate thirteen festivals in twelve months." This proverb aptly underscores the abundance of festivals in West Bengal. One string connects these festivals together- food. The preparation and devouring of a sumptuous meal to a Bengali is nothing less than the performance of a ritual. It consists of a stupendous number of meticulously prepared dishes. It is said that like the French they not only spend a great deal of time thinking about food but also in its preparation and eating.

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The Bengali cuisine is an amalgamation of tastes from both West Bengal and East Bengal. However, storms have been raised over earthen tea cups as the two communities, the Bangal and the Ghoti attempted to establish their superiority

over the other. The objective of this paper is to trace the path of the much hyped Bangal-Ghoti debate and observe how gastronomic differences play a major role in underlining this divide.

As a result of the partition of Bengal in 1947, a massive Hindu population migrated from East Bengal (currently Bangladesh) to West Bengal. Thus, a new chapter of communal categorization emerged in East Bengal with the Hindu refugees or the “Bangals” on one side and the West Bengal local Hindus or the “Ghotis” on the other, especially in Kolkata against the already existing Hindu-Muslim communal rivalry in Bengal. The huge influx of refugees from West Bengal suffered a great owing to the practice of “othering” or discrimination that was inflicted upon them by their Bengali counterparts in West Bengal. The distinct linguistic and cultural attributes that the Ghotis possessed isolated them from the rest of the local Bengali population. Poverty was the inevitable outcome of this relocation and served as the greatest nuisance for the refugees and the locals alike. The migrants had left their jobs and their land behind while crossing the Radcliffe line. The traumatic episode of partition had evidently resulted the way the distressed Bangal refugees' miseries were completely disregarded by the settled Ghotis. The high number in which they flooded conceived new complications for the locals. The competition increased in the workplace as vacancy reduced and the State could not provide enough accommodation which created a dearth of living space. . The animosity amplified as each wave of impoverished East Bengali migrants flooded Calcutta in the 1960s and finally in the prime flow of people to West Bengal subsequent to the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war.

Moreover a rift was created between the two groups as a result of the colonial hangover that the West Bengal locals suffered from which eventually give rise to the “bhadralok” culture. This community wasn't entirely inclusive of the Bangals. The Ghotis considered them to be crass and uneducated and not fit to be deemed a "bhadralok" or gentleman. However, with time, dichotomy between the Bengal and Ghoti started disappearing and the refugees gradually secured a position for themselves in the new land. Presently, the divide remains limited to good humored debates between the two groups regarding the two issues that a Bengali has been known to be the most sensitive about- football and food.

The literal meanings of the words 'Ghoti' and 'Bangal' are interesting as they become important while tracing the two groups back to their roots. “Ghoti” means “pot” in Bengali. It is a utensil that is still commonly used by the local families of West Bengal at a regular basis to store water or to drink from it. “Bangal” as a term is rather etymologically derived. “Bang” indicates the boundary of the farming land where the farmer walks and “al” stands for rice in Bengali. Thus the Ghotis considered the Bangals to be the “ungentlemanly” farming class. However, these etymologies are somewhat obscure. In fact, the origins of these expressions are in the opinion of veteran journalist Sunanda K. Dutta Ray “lost in the mists of obscurity”. The tug-of-war between the two communities which had began approximately 20 years prior to the second partition of Bengal started in full swing in post-partition Calcutta on the green Maidan fields, the Writers' Building, in advertisements, among the cacophony of trams and buses, at tea stalls over endless cups of milk tea and most importantly in Bengali kitchens. In the scope of Bangals history, this Ghoti Bangal divide is unique as it is a social expression of a self proclaimed cultural superiority of one group over the other and vice versa. As the common saying goes, the Bangals and the Ghotis stand divided regarding their opinions on the three f's-football, fish and food. As the Bangals slowly but surely settled down in parts of Calcutta, their bittersweet relationship with the Ghotis soon entered the premises of the kitchen, instigating a contest of culinary mastery between the two sides.

When Vivek Vaid, a Delhi-based food connoisseur, created a Facebook post inquiring about the perfect Bengali thali his timeline was flooded with comments from the food loving community that suggested all possible combinations that would, in their opinion, make the perfect Bengali thali. Vaid reported that he was fascinated by the fact that half the dishes that they suggested were from West Bengal and the other from East Bengal or the present day Bangladesh. After partition, the Bangals arrived from the East with a distinctly different food habit, they brought along a number of recipes

that helped Bengali cuisine evolve over the years. These two communities were at loggerheads for over 50 years both at football fields and at dining tables. The Bangals jeered at the excessive amount of sugar that the Ghoti's added to their culinary preparations. The Ghotis, on the other hand, sneered at the appalling smell of *shutki* (sun dried fish) that the Bangals prepared and ridiculed their addition of that extra dash of ground red chili powder in their *kasha mangsho* (meat curry).

A regular Bengali meal usually follows a specific pattern and the sequence remains the same in either of the two communities. “A meal has rice and fish at the heart of it and ends with chutney, but the similarity ends there”, reported Supriyo Sen, food and beverage manager at Peerless Inn, in an interview with *The Telegraph*. Both Ghotis and Bangals flaunt their expertise in the kitchen as a badge of honor. Needless to say that either of them are immensely sensitive about their recipes. The cultural and taste of both these communities have played significant roles in molding the Bengali cuisine that we, at present, indulge in. The fact that neither caste nor religion had any role to play in the occurrence of this device is very interesting. It is entirely based on distinctive attributes and differences of choice. When it comes to food, the method of cooking the meal and the use of spices mix all the difference.

While serving Ghoti food, the smell of colonial influence becomes almost palpable in the air. Ghotis prefer lighter and more subtle tastes. “*Ghoti* food is influenced by the Colonial era and is quite regal in appearance”, observes Sushanta Gupta, master chef at 6 Ballygunge Place, a Bengali specialty restaurant in Kolkata. The ingredients used and the methods applied reflect the prosperity of the state and the “influence of an era gone by”. “The cooks who would prepare the meals ran the kitchen and the owners of the house had little to do with the ranna-ghar(kitchen). Whereas in East Bengal, the women of the house were in charge”, he explains. Modern Ghoti households still practice the same routine. “Even now, homemakers in West Bengal rely more on cooks. This can lead to the lack of a personal touch,” feels Supriyo.

The preparation of a Ghoti meal involves a fair amount of boiling and roasting along with frying. They prefer a considerable amount of sugar in most of the dishes. Bangals on the other hand prefer the tanginess that comes from the addition of whole or pureed tomatoes and the richness that it adds to the dish. Yoghurt is not commonly used in Bangal recipes. They regularly use more chilies in their food as well as a ground mustard paste known as *kasundi* which acts as a kind of sauce. They are more inclined towards spicier preparations and are known to use a great deal of *morich bata* (pepper paste) and *paanch phoron* (a mix of five kinds of spices) that add some extra heat. A complete Bengali meal usually begins with a bitter dish- a preparation that includes bitter gourd or Neem leaves. The *shukto* which is a sort of curry whose main ingredient is the bitter gourd is known to be a Ghoti specialty. Poppy seeds are one of the most widely used ingredients in both communities. It is a mild nutty spice sometimes also called khus-khus and is used in generous quantities in Bengali homes. It is sometimes made into a paste and cooked with vegetables to prepare dishes like *Alu Posto*, *Potol posto*, *Jhinge Posto* or grounded with other spices to make a deep fried patty that is devoured with hot rice.

The use of fried onion is a specialty in Bangal recipes. They also have unique ingredients in Bangladesh like taro, barun and fuji leaf that are used to add flavor. Taro gives a flavor of lemon grass, Fuji creates aroma of coriander, green chili, and lemon, and Barun infuses a flavor of ghee, green chili and lemon. The residents of Barisal especially prefer coconut in, almost, everything. Taro (an edible starchy root crop) is used vastly in Bangal dishes, and banana flower (mocha) and raw jackfruit are known to be popular among the Ghotis. Without bori (dried lentil dumpling) Ghoti cuisines will never be complete. The decorated goina bori is famous in Midnapore district. In *Macher Jhol*, a film by Pritam D. Gupta, we find the protagonist Dev D making Suraseni, his assistant in Kolkata, steal a jar full of bori from his maternal home to fulfill a challenge thrown by his sick mother. He was to cook her the perfect macher jhol and after a few attempts that failed to satisfy his mother he realised that only handmade boris could make the jhol perfect. The tradition of making

bori at home and laying them on the rooftop to dry in the sun is still very much alive in Bengal much like the tradition of making pickles.

The most important dish on the Bengali menu is always fish irrespective of the community consuming it. There is a fixation for fish in the Bengali community as a whole but the two groups are always at conflict due to their differing choice of fish. Koi, Pabda and tangra are favored by the Bangals while the ghotis fancy Rui (rohu) and pomfret. The love for fish is so high among the Bengali population that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the famous Bengali polymath, was known as Jessore Koi because of the size of his head. Ghotis prefer fresh-water fishes as opposed to the Bangals who relish in the taste of shukti or sun dried fish that sees its origin in Chittagong. Satarupa Sen, a linguist from Assam, says that the Bangals, especially those from Chittagong know everything about their sun dried, traditional, salt fermented fish, i.e. *shukti*. In West Bengal usually fried fish is preferred in curries while in Bangladesh they use raw fish in curries. Both the East and West specialize in their own traditional dishes but the fine nuances of the dishes that are hidden are left for one's taste buds to discover. While the ghotis do prefer a certain amount of sweetness in their dishes they also have a taste for the sour which they add even in their fish curries much to the horror of the Bangals. They are extremely fond of *maacher tauk* which is a gravied preparation of fish cooked in with tamarind. It is usually devoured after lunch. A *chachra* or *charchari* (vegetable medley) also varied across the border “mourola and puti maach way”.

This conflict regarding the preference of fish attains its peak when Ilish (Hilsa) is pitted against Chingri (prawn). Furthermore, the battle continues as to which river produces the better hilsa-Padma river or the Rupnarayan River too — each claiming their Ilish to be superior to the other. Since the two communities have always been divided in their preference of football teams, the sale of fish also depended on the victory of a specific team in football matches. Majority of Ghotis support the Mohun Bagan Athletic Club while the Bangals support the East Bengal Football Club. Amidst all these the dimly lit fish markets of Kolkata became prosperous. When mohunbagan won there would be a huge demand in the market for tiger prawns and when east Bengal won the sales of hilsa would go up. The east favouring the hilsa takes pride in cooking up dishes like *bhapa ilish* (hilsa cooked with mustard in steam), *Ilish macher Paturi* (hilsa marinated in mustard paste, wrapped in banana leaves parcel and slow cooked in steam). The main motive is to keep the fish soft while infusing the flavour of the mustard into it. The favorites in the West are traditional dishes such as *Amshotto Chingri*, *kankrar jhol* (crab stew) and *chingri macher malaicurry* (prawns cooked in coconut milk).

Sweets are as important a part of the Bengali cuisine as the fish is. These sweets can largely be divided into two groups- the dry sweets that are locally called sandesh and the wet sweets that are dipped soaked or glazed with hot sugar syrup. The unending plethora of sweet treats that West Bengal has to offer constitutes contributions from both the east and the west. Certain sweets like the famous sponge *roshogolla*, *mishit doi* (sweet curd), *ledikeni*, *langcha*, *jolbhora*, *jaynagarer moa*, *rashamali* to name a few are known to be born in West Bengal. Sweets like *Chhanar payesh*, *malpoas*, *Abar Khabo*, *Amriti*, *chomchom* and more on the other hand belong to East Bengal. However, the origin of these sweets hardly matter in the present day as sweet sellers like Ganguram, Gupta Brothers, Balaram Mullick and Radharaman mullick in Kolkata have successfully embarked on a journey of producing fusion sweets.

The cooking of the Tagore's household played a very significant role in influencing West Bengal's cuisines. Rabindranath's wife Mrinalini Devi came from Jessore and was recognized for her cooking. “Thakur Barir Ranna” (Foods from the Tagore Kitchen) was penned down by Purnima Tagore, daughter of Pramatha Choudhury and Nalini Devi. On the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, this book was published with an assortment of recipes listed in the book directly from the kitchen of Tagore home at Jorashako Thakurbari. These recipes were put together from a recipe book handed down to Purnima Tagore by her aunt, Indira Devi Choudhurani. Even though Indira Devi had neither stepped foot into a kitchen nor acquired the habit of cooking regularly, yet whenever she enjoyed a dish, she would

make sure to learn the recipe from the cook thoroughly and note it down in her notebook. Purnima Tagore even added some of her own recipes to the book. However, not all the recipes were specifically from Jorsanko Thakurbari, but from the Tagore kitchens in general. Rabindranath's wife Mrinalini Devi came from Jessore and was known for her cooking. The book has been separated into various segments for vegetarian dishes, fish dishes, eggs, meat, desserts, and pickles for the benefit of the readers. The recipes may not be entirely exciting to go through but the book is a fine read in itself.

The hardships of the refugees and the human tragedy of the Partition emerged as central concerns in the literature of the post-partition period. "Colony fiction", as Debjani Sengupta prefers to call the literature narrating the hardships of the refugees, emerged as a sub-genre of the Bengal Partition narratives from India. The trials and tribulations of the inhabitants of refugee colonies were expressed through these narratives. Bangla short stories discussed these issues. In Manik Bandyopadhyay's story "In a Place and in a Land", narrates the predicament of the East Bengalis like the protagonist Narahari who were not left with much of choice after 1947 but to migrate to West Bengal despite the fact that their cultural differences made them feel like a stranger there. After the Partition this nightmare of leaving one's place and migrating to the land of the strangers became a reality for many Bengalis. The struggle of these refugees was for an identity, for acceptance in their new land as well as a struggle within themselves to embrace the land of strangers as their own and survive the memories of their displaced land.

Numerous comedies sought to put up and diffuse the somewhat exaggerated Bangal -Ghoti tensions within comical settings. I would in this context like to quote from Bhaskar Sarkar's *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, "The conflict between the two groups was exploited to produce farcical situations that became occasions for conducting complex negotiations in a light vein. The most common strategy was to introduce a stereotypically Bangal character in the proceedings, to produce good-natured conflict and a few laughs. As with all stereotypical representations, the Bangals, as a minority was depicted as being different from the norm and turned into objects of ridicule on grounds of their accent, their deportment, their customs and their food habits."

In *Sharey Chuattar*, Kedar embodies the stereotypical character of a loud mouthed, crass and ultimately absurd bangal who seems forever famished. As soon as his friend returns from home after vacation, he hastens to see if he brought back homemade ghee; he frequently visits people who serve good quality tea; smelling freshly made dessert, he runs around looking for its source. Bhanu Bandyopadhyay who played Kedar was a real-life Bangal, who made an entire career out of his bangalness, on stage, screen, radio and comedy recordings. Bandyopadhyay also appeared in *Ora Thake Odhare (1954)*, a comedy, which could well be the most explicit comic depiction of the Ghoti Bangal rift. The film is exemplary in its refusal to project one group's cultural superiority over the other. Instead, it engages the quirks of both groups, allows a great deal of name-calling on both sides, and finally comes across as a strong plea for mutual understanding and co-existence. While the film is about the interactions of two families, one Ghoti, the other Bangal, that happened to be neighbors, the title - which translates as "they live on the other side" - really alienates the other Bangal across the new political border; it engages contemporary social sentiments, locating the comedy as a microcosm of a larger reality. If the narrative thrives on numerous confrontations arising from differences between the two families (expressed in observed bickering and ricocheting snubs involving education, upbringing, sophistication, and so on), it also stresses the commonalities; both families have similar material needs; they depend on each other in their daily life. There is significant intermingling of tastes, crossing of cultural boundaries; for instance, where is a Bangal head of the family keeps buying hilsa fish which is a decidedly Bangal culinary obsession, ghoti patriarch happens to crave Hilsa in hot mustard sauce which is a typical Bangal preparation.

The Bangal Ghoti rift has also been more recently in Bengali cinema. An entire sequence of Anik Dutta's *Bhooter Bhabishyat* is dedicated to a "choruibhati" or picnic that creates the premise of a quarrel between the ghost of Darpa

Narayan Chowdhury, a Ghoti zamindar, and that of Bhoothnath Bhaduri, a refugee from Bangladesh. When complimented by the Darpan Narayan for being “bhojon-roshik” (which roughly and inadequately translates to “food lover”) Bhoothnath points out that it is obvious since we was a resident of Dhaka, Bikrampur (East Bengal). He goes on to brag about “Ishilsh paturi” that his mother used to cook. With a meaningful pause, the zamindar replies, “Hilsa is good. But it pales in comparison to prawns.” This was enough to trigger the quarrel that the scene had been building up to. The zamindar calls bhoothnath an idiot when he declares that prawn are mere insects of the sea. Bhoothnath even mocks the zamindar by criticizing the Ghotis' excessive use of sugar in savory dishes. To Bhoothnath, insulting the hilsa is a an even graver offense than insulting him. The scene skillfully brings out the sensitiveness of the two communities is regarding the food of their favour and their urge to protect their honors.

While these two communities have contested against each other to establish their superiority in the kitchen and in other spaces, there has also been an almost unspoken sense of appreciation of each other's arts. The recipes from both kitchens have intermingled so seamlessly in places that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other anymore. I would like to cite a very personal instance in this case. My grandmother who turned ninety in 2017 keeps asserting her position as the best cook in the family having mastered the art from the best- her friends from “opar Bangla”. What had once been a divide for the marginalized group has now been reduced to a mere division of preferences that both communities look back with a tinge of nostalgia in their hearts.

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