

AKUI KAMALABALA WOMEN'S COLLEGE

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(Affiliated to Bankura University)

Vill.+ P.O.- Akui, P.S.- Indas, Dist.- Bankura, Pin-722201

Website: akuiwomenscollege.org • E-mail: akw.college@gmail.com • Ph-

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JITENDRA B. SHAH



L. D. INSTITUTE OF INDOLOGY
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Nandini Maity
16. 4. 2021
Co-ordinator
I.Q.A.C.
Akui Kamalabala Women's College
Akui, Bankura, W.B.

Per 16. 04. 2021
Principal
Akui Kamalabala Women's College
Akui, Bankura

FOOD CULTURE IN BENGAL: A STUDY OF GASTRONOMIC RIVALRY BETWEEN
'GHOI' AND 'BANGAL'

Dr Nandini Maitty Assistant Professor, Department of English, Akui Kamalabala Women's College.

Abstract

It was in 1947 that the much-dreaded partition of Bengal was finally materialized with the Partition of India resulting in the exodus of a huge number of Hindus from East Bengal to West Bengal giving rise to a communal resentment between East Bengal Hindu outcasts (*Bangal*) and West Bengal inhabitants (*Ghoi*). In the procedure of resettlement in Kolkata, the East Bengal refugee Hindu community started designing lifestyle patterns for their ethnic solidarity which were reflected in their perceptions of holding onto their lifestyle, culinary habits and other culture-specific practices since they were not being able to mingle and acclimatize themselves with the native Hindus of West Bengal. These incidents of Partition and its aftermath which traumatized both sides of Bengal for several decades lead to a kind of psychological animosity between the natives of West Bengal and the vast number of migrants which reflected through food, games and various other cultural agencies. With time the migrants from East Bengal dominated a major part of South Calcutta but their ambivalent relationship with the *Ghoi* community persisted since the times of Partition reflected through the rift between the food habits of 'this side' and 'that side'. The target of this paper is to emphasize on the much discussed and widely circulated *Bangal-Ghoi* antagonisms and observe how gastronomic contrasts between the two communities play a crucial role in perpetuating the long-drawn communal rift.

Keywords: Community, Ethnic identity, Gastronomy, Immigration, Partition

Introduction

For a long period of time, food has functioned as a trope for identifying racial, cultural and social differences in literary and visual culture of India and crisis like Partition, famine and colonial preoccupation have played significant roles in structuring food habits as a part of identity formation. It cannot be denied that food is a chief factor to an individual's ethnic identity as an individual's identity construction depends on social factors such as food choices which he incorporates in his everyday life. Discourses on food seem to disrupt written medium as a symbol of embodied existence, a visual and palpable mark of crossing the limits of language and proving that language is not always capable to represent life. Thus, emerged food-language as an offshoot of the many present cultural languages- as a signifier that is able to constitute culture outside written texts and to demonstrate that food can be considered as a functional site for representing ethnic and cultural differences. For example, the cultural differences on both sides of Bengal have for long been signified through vernacular languages and through unwritten symbols. A hypothetical discussion will encapsulate the representative culinary development of respective Bengali communities, viz. *Ghoi* of West Bengal and *Bangal* of East Bengal, and perpetuation of the 'shadow-lines' between *Ghoi-Bangal* communities pertaining to culinary delicacies. The Partition of Bengal is still fresh in the collective unconscious of the Bengali communities, manifested through the apparent social predominance - or subjugation - of one community over another in terms of food preferences. This study would explore the commodification of differences in culinary habits which in turn promotes the subtle differences in the paradigms of food consumption in East Bengal emigrants (*Bangal*) and West Bengal inhabitants (*Ghoi*). It has been observed time and again that whatever difference the other side of the Radcliffe line¹ inhabits is either eradicated or adopted via exchange that either resulted in displacement of the culinary habits through a process of decontextualizing history or a complete adoption resulting in nostalgic tribute to the shared history.

¹ The Radcliffe line was the border between India and Pakistan declared by Sir Cyril Radcliffe on 17th August 1947. For details refer to *The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52* by Joya Chatterji

Nandini Maitty
16.4.2021
Co-ordinator
I.Q.A.C.
Akui Kamalabala Women's College
Akui, Bankura, W.B.

16.04.2021
Principal
Akui Kamalabala Women's College
Akui, Bankura