

Domesticity and Gender Relations in the Late 19th Century Bengal: The Educated Men, the Bhadramahila and Their Kitchen

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Abstract

Gender is a social construct that has given birth to differences between people biologically as well as culturally. Differences and complexities between the masculine and feminine gender has reached every aspect of the society including domestic field. This in turn has sometimes created complex relations between the two genders and has been a turning point in the path of socio-cultural History. The paper tries to focus on the relationship between Bengali men and women during the late 19th century traversing over kitchen. This period is pertinent as the society was going through certain socio-cultural changes due to the influence of colonial authority. Men were found to rise up as urban educated middle class who showered their knowledge within the domestic household in the form of instructing the bhadramahila about her kitchen and domestic chores.

The paper further notices how this is the time when the masculine race is found dominating the feminine gender on the issue of kitchen which was a totally female-dominated area since ages. There were strict instructions through advertisements, articles and publications where men were seen trying to prove their superiority over the feminine race in the process of making them the ideal bhadramahila. My paper tries to inform that how women were expected to acquire the cultural refinement provided by modern education without ignoring her role in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, she was asked not to be as westernized as the English Memsahibs, but also not as unrefined as the lower-class indigenous woman. Women followed what men advised them.

Keywords- Gender, Kitchen, middle-class, culinary-culture, complexity, advertisements.

The influence of western education and the rise of the bhadralok class accelerated the growth of printing presses in Bengal, the young urban educated class took it as their responsibility to be concerned about the proper diet of the Bengali youth thus it was necessary to check and recheck the recipes and techniques that were followed by the mothers and wives. In this process, kitchen had to be remodelled, certain rules and regulations had to be maintained by the women to serve the best food to the families. The bhadraloks wanted to throw away the tag of being debilitated and thus revolution was needed in the kitchen. A lot of writings and articles were published in the journals and magazines and their various opinions related to what should be consumed and what not. To compete with the colonial rulers the educated men thought it necessary to educate their women and publish cookbooks as a guidance to them. During those days it was not always the typical cook books but had other instructions. Cook

books had a great influence over the culinary culture of Bengal. Cook books are an important source to understand the history, geography and availability of items based on which a particular cuisine is born at a particular area. For example, the cookbooks written by the women of Tagore household of Jorasanko tell us that how women were ahead of their time and took active part in cooking and writing recipes. This shows the signs of woman emancipation and we see a confluence of both indigenous and European cultures. One might wonder that how in general urban middle class women, who never or hardly stepped out of their houses could read out recipes and use them in their kitchen. It should be mentioned here that, by this time women had started to get preliminary education, women schools and institutions were opened for the training of women in home science. They were awarded for cooking skills.

All these initiatives were done to encourage women to cook good food. They were trained and propaganda was set that it was the duty of the wife to cook for her husband and not a cook. This was proclaimed as the urban men feared the probable inefficiency of the paid cooks to cook something that was healthy. As the paid cook was only concerned with the remuneration he got in exchange to his cooking, he might not be that careful while cooking a healthy meal, whereas the wife is always thought to have worried about the well-being of her family and she could not under any circumstances ignore her responsibility to keep her family safe and thus the sole responsibility of cooking an entire meal went into the hands of the women or the grihini. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century, saw culinary culture as part of *deshachar*, the rituals of a nation and thus food acted as a pivotal role in resisting the European influences.¹ In spite of it, the European influences were never totally evaded we see the birth of a kind of culinary culture that was loaded with colonial influences. It is evident from the fact that the Bengalis were strictly asked not to consume or restrict the consumption of rice irrespective of it being their staple food. These instructions were given by the indigenous educated men who were involved with experimentation and research. Thus, they themselves were knowingly or unknowingly indulging themselves in to European influences into their diet, thinking them to be the best for the Bengali body and mind. They were concerned more about their image as because the colonial masters were at constant asserting them as the weak ones so the indigenous men wanted to throw off the tag of debility and included certain items into the traditional Bengali diet and gave birth to an 'authentic' Bengali diet which they claimed to be very much Bengali. There came the tradition of cooking meals only by the women of the house and by this, the urban educated class wanted to believe the distinct Bengali identity.² So, the *andarmahal* or domestic household emerged as an important sphere that helped in nation-building. As the Bengali *jati* was reformed into a new hybrid class, with influences from outside. The food culture, the culinary arts and the dining processes signify to us how the Bengali society went through a transformation and that led to hybridism and revealed their new identity as a cosmopolitan class. The humiliation of being portrayed as debilitated was such that the educated men took it up as their duty to train the women of their household to be educated enough to read write and cook. Women education was needed otherwise their children would also suffer the same humiliation of being debilitated. Women were handed over the entire duty of the kitchen. The various cook books wrote and explained why the wives or women of the house should cook for their husbands and the family. In this respect, Prajnashundori Debi in her cook book *Amish o Niramish Ahar* complains that the Bengali women did not cook for their

family members. The presence of maids and servants in wealthy urban middle class household was not looked up as a good thing. Instead, the authors of the manuals asserted on the point that wives must cook for her family, it is her duty and no one can cook with such passion and dedication. The middle-class people always wanted to separate themselves from the mass, wanted to set an aristocratic and respectable image within in the society.³ This image consciousness was urging them to experiment and interfere into the kitchen. They did not want any other class enter into their periphery and wanted their family women to take the lead in the kitchen. The habit of eating food that was perceived by the other caste, had chances of destroying the class distinction of the middle class.⁴ So, the grihini is becoming the guardian of the kitchen as well as the national pride and honour. She was the typical grihini that was found in pre-colonial Bengal but the modern ideal grihini who had both qualities of the east and west. Along with this was associated the idea of cleanliness which was never before thought in particular. Hindu Bengali kitchen was conscious about preparing religious food but they never thought of the general kitchen conditions that was revolutionised during colonial period. Furthermore, Bengal had a variety of food habits. The culinary culture of Bengal varied from region to region and religion to religion. Like for example, the Ancient Hindus consumed a lot of meat, fish and wine. From Narayan Deb's *Manasamangal Kavya*, we get mention of the wedding of Behula there was 12 types preparation of fish and 5 varieties of meat that was each cooked differently and served to the guests.⁵ According to Ghanaram Chakravarti's *Dharmamangal* we can come to know that even the monks consumed meat.⁶ Again, we find that the rise of Vaishnavism saw the prominence of vegetarian diet and even the influential Bengali families restricted themselves from consuming non-vegetarian diet as they became followers of Vaishnavism.⁷ This is also the time when potato was not introduced in Bengal. in fact, chillies were nowhere to be found people ate chhui danta, a substitute of chillies, the meat was cooked without onion and garlic and meat was not restricted to mutton but other kinds of meat excluding chicken that was not yet known to them. The pulses were used by the Vaishnavas in their khechoranyo or simple kichuri which was conserved by the Vaishnavas together from one plate.⁸

It is not that the influence and import of different vegetables made the Bengali kitchen rich, the kitchen was rich since ancient times. Bharat Chandra Ray mentioned in his *Annadamangal* about the preparations of different food items that prevailed in medieval Bengal that is late 18th century. There is a specific part where Goddess Annapurna cooks different items, among them, 23 different preparations of vegetarian dishes are specified like ghanta, different types of fried spinach, thick soup of gram pulse, 'arahar dal', 'mug dal', 'mash kalai dal', 'barbati', 'batul', and 'matar dal', 'bada', 'badi', 'banana', radish, coconut fry, milk and 'dalna' prepared with 'thor', 'shuktoni', jackfruit seeds with sugar, bottle-gourd with 'til' and 'pithali', egg plant, and different dishes of pumpkin. From the non-vegetarian delicacy 'katla', fried chitol fish, koi, 'magur' and shol fish, boiled turtle egg (ganga fal) and the different variant of meat dishes like 'shikpora' (meat burnt in a skewer during the Mughal period that was known as kebab). Apart from these there were some unusual dishes that were mentioned like bamboo flower, and dalkachu and olkachu.⁹ The list of the such heterogeneous items tells us that Bengal was rich in its resources and the kitchen was always flooded with fish and vegetables. So, it was not that there was scarcity of food or that the Bengali women did not know recipes. There

were so many recipes, it can be understood that the women of the household were enough efficient in cooking. So, there was absolutely no such necessity to bring about new cook books but one must remember that since late 19th century, the middle class were conscious about their identity under the colonial rule and wanted their women as well as the kitchen to be revolutionized in a western way yet, keeping the basis of it as indigenous. There was still the presence of bharar ghor or store room, where ration was kept, separate rooms, ovens and utensils for religious rituals and the separate corner for the widow to cook.

Dinesh Chandra Sen stated in Grihashree that a clean kitchen was necessary for cooking. He rebuked women who wiped their hands and fingers on their sarees while doing household works. He advised them to use spoons while serving food. While picking up any item for serving one must avoid using hands as they might not be cleaned or soiled with oil or other food stuffs. There came the notion that while cooking meal, strict surveillance was needed to be done by the grihini of the house. The perfect example of an ideal kitchen was that where there was a well organised set up consisting of clean cooking area, well organised and hygienic storeroom or bharar ghor, appropriate utensils and crockeries, also correct arrangement of kitchen furniture. Sometimes, it was recommended to keep a dining hall or room and proper kitchen appliances.¹⁰ The kitchen had to be well ventilated and not congested, no one would suffocate there. All these were evident from the cook books, which was packed with immense information on how to remodel and restructure the kitchen, the possible arrangements were mentioned and guidelines were given that had to be maintained while in the kitchen. The cook books also often had descriptions regarding the nutritional value of certain ingredients and how the dish can be prepared. There were also references of recipes that needed less time to prepare yet was tasty.¹¹

It is important to note that cook books of the late 19th and the 20th centuries were like a guidebook to health where nutritional value indicates that the educated Bengali was interested in consuming nutrient rich diet. Since 1883, from the book of Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's Pak Pranali we can see how he added the cleaning and usage of cauliflower and cabbage, while they were foreign vegetables. If we give a careful look into the Amish and niramish ahar (1902) of Prajnashundari Debi, we will see that there was an utmost attempt to create an amalgamation of European and indigenous food. She tried to bind both the cultures through food. The recipes that were written here mostly contained curries and one pot meals, a wide range of unexpected vegetarian dishes, chicken preparation and desserts that were named after Bengali intellectuals and reformers. It is also interesting to find that the names of the dishes were a blend of both foreign and indigenous nature like firingi curry. Moreover, she was the first one to introduce the concept of menu cards which she referred to as kromoni. In this recipe book she also gave unusual names to the various dishes. Some had the names of the influential men of the society or names of the members of the Tagore family like Rammohan dolma pulao, Dwarakanath firnipulao and many more. Such names were given to attract the reader and create a sense that they were special dishes. She also gave information on which food to be consumed and prohibited during which particular month of the year. She included the various meat recipes and always suggested to alter the meat if one does not consume beef or chicken.¹² The same tendencies where we see in Rwitendranth Tagore Mudir Dokan (1919). There he mentioned this hybridity as a part of social interaction.

Moreover, even before penning down the cook books, the educated men took active part in supervising these and then they were composed and sent for printing. The Bengali traditional Kitchen quickly transformed into a modern kitchen, metal utensils were replaced with clay wares and there were changes in oven. There were readily available items and appliances in the market like bread, icmic cookers, steam cookers, pie moulds and many other. The changes could not transform the Bengali kitchen entirely. There was a strict difference between European and Bengali kitchen. As for instance, the Bengali kitchen always used Bonti and pire while chopping any vegetables or cutting fish. The women would necessarily sit on the pire (a wooden flat tool) and use the bonti (cutter). the bonti was the only sharp object with which raw materials of the kitchen were chopped. There was no use of knives and there was no concept of sitting down but to stand or countertops to cut vegetables. Bengali women could not move out from that this habit and this created cultural differences.¹³ Previously, utensils were made up of kansa, pitol and tamba (copper) now they got replaced with aluminium and steel. Light weight utensils were replacing the heavy weighted plates.

Thus, Culinary style of Bengal went through an evolutionary process and it had different characteristics. From the late 19th century onwards, there was a change in the scenario of the Kitchen. It was rooted to the indigenous food culture but was influenced by the Mughal cuisine and later on brought about a hybrid food culture which had both European and Asian influences. The rise of the bhadralok class was responsible for shaping the Bengali kitchen in a different way. The Bengali kitchen had the assimilative quality of accepting other culinary cultures. Due to the rise of the bhadralok class kitchen became a cite of experimentation. The urban educated men started to write about the essentials of the kitchen. How kitchen had to be kept clean, airy and well ventilated. They wanted to detach themselves from the others and appointing male cooks was seen in the form of disdain. It was not acceptable for them to find the male cooks to get access to the kitchen that was a very private sphere of the household, where mostly women settled. Probably, all were not able to transform themselves completely into westernized modern Bengali men and feared about losing their caste if other service men enter the kitchen. The urban men then carefully put the idea on the society that household women were the ideal people to take charge of the kitchen as they would look for love and it was their duty to cook and keep the household in order rather than be lazy and depend on servants. Moreover, there was no such security as to what food was served by the cooks, whether it was well cooked or not as the cooks were paid labours.

The lives of Bengali middle women thus changed. To complement their husbands, it became absolutely necessary for them to become western-educated Bengali women. But arrival of certain questions was seen like, what will a women do in the kitchen if she had achieved a B.A. Degree? will she be still washing plates and cooking food?¹⁴ In these situations though new attempts were accepted yet, old traditions had to be followed, women had to play the role of mother and wives otherwise the next generation So, a minimum of education was needed that would cultivate women into better mother and wives. The education of Bengali girls were confined to 'minimum' because the urban educated men were afraid that their women would transform into Indian memsahebs who kept themselves away from any household work. There were news that the educated urban middle class bhadramahila was interested in reading novels and did read the necessary books on child rearing, domestic medicine and religion.¹⁵ So,

writings were also seen where it was specified that women or memsahebs in England were not like the ones in India.¹⁶ They were decent, pious, educated as well as very attentive in their household works. Such as Charlotte Bronte.¹⁷ According to reports, by 1863, there were 95 schools and the number never deteriorated since then. There was progressiveness seen in case of the Muslim society also. The first significant institution was the Faizunessa girls' high school in Comilla. The Mahakali Pathshala was established in 1893. The curriculum of which included subjects like Sanskrit, Bengali, sewing and drawing alpanas, moral textbook and arithmetic and education based on puja rituals and related culinary skills.

The Mahakali Pathshala school had twenty-three branches in Bengal. the main branch in Calcutta started with thirty students initially and then the figure was increased by 1903¹⁸. It came to be understood by the parents that a basic minimum amount of education was necessary for the girls to acquire minimum education. The questions that were asked while selecting a bride had changed and it had become obvious that they were asked whether the girl was able to read and write a bit or not.¹⁹ Scholar Partha Chatterjee claims that formal education became necessary for women to achieve cultural refinement and that was to be brought through modern education. The women would not be exactly anglicised but aware of western cultures and culinary skills but hold on to traditional ties. there were several opinions and debates as to how the women educational institutions were running the curriculum system. As for instance, Bethune school was blamed for using westernized and not Hindu also there was the Victoria college which was inclined to Brahmos and anglicized bhadralok families. The college had a European headmistress and a boarding department.²⁰ R.C. Dutt's daughters were educated to a standard of E. A. in this college.²¹ From the works of Meredith Borthwick, it is seen that how women were trained in culinary skills and hygiene. She writes that the daughter of pandit Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, tells not to acknowledge memsahib type behaviour if the women have acquired real education. She further asserts that educated women was the one who could do her housework systematically which the uneducated women were incapable to do. So, God has appointed the women into the household work.²² She tried to say that women must feel blessed that they are working in the kitchen or household and they must not never stop their duty towards the house even if they have acquired education. Another significant thing that was seen was that the Brahmos wanted to bring up the concept of an ideal family life. Where husband and wife. But it was mostly adopted by wealthy families.²³ Though women were already skilled in it but new process and methods were taught to the women. There started specific curriculum for studying cooking skills and it was introduced in institutions like girls schools and colleges. In all probability, cookery skills had become important because middle class men wanted the amalgamation of European and indigenous food culture, at the same time they wanted the acculturation of a cosmopolitan culinary culture. the educated middle class had applied all possible means to glorify cooking as an act of art and continuously published and articles to signify that these kinds of recipes or cooking was essential for modern men. The modern women were asked to receive education but they hardly stepped out of their house to work like modern men. These training and education were given on the basis of reading recipes and articles and also nurturing the next generation with preliminary education and serving them proper food. Thus, men were no less involved in bringing about significant changes into Bengal's kitchen and culinary culture.

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