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 “Whoever sells, or offers, or exposes for sale, as food or drink, any which has been rendered or has become noxious, or is in, a state unfit for food or drink, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to six months, or with fine which may extend to 1000 rupees, or with both.”
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a certain distance from the “impure,” the latter quality easily associated with the lower classes and the lower castes. But what is to be noted is a constant adaptation in the process. The Bengali “body” that was born from this discourse of nutrition was that of the colonial modern, fraught with a tension between indigenizing a modern science of nutrition and accepting new forms of nutritive elements in the “Bengali” cuisine.

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people chose to drink tea when ill. Mahendranath Datta, brother of Narendranath Datta aka Vivekananda, wrote that his aunt was given tea as a medicinal beverage after child delivery.⁸⁸ Jatindramohan Datta also wrote that most of the middle class Bengali houses kept tea for medicinal purpose in the old days.⁸⁹ It was the latter view that the advertisement industry took notice of. One of the advertisements of International Tea Market Expansion Board said:

Chhelemeyeder Swasthyer Dayitwa Apnari (You alone are responsible for the wellbeing of your children /your children's health depends on you)

— A perfect homemaker always tries to make children aware of exercise, food and drink. They know that craving for tea is good for their children's health. They are becoming healthier by drinking this pure and delightful drink. This habit is going to benefit them once they become old.⁹⁰

This growing belief that many of the new food had medicinal qualities encouraged even the most orthodox people to gradually accept them. Vivekananda's dismissal of bread in *Nabaprabha* (*Phalgun* 1307 BS [c. February/March 1900]) was ridiculed in the domestic manual *Punya*, edited by Pragyasundari Devi, a scion of the Tagores. The latter argued that there was no evidence for such an assumption.⁹¹ Bipin Chandra Pal, the radical nationalist was severely admonished by his father for having lemonade when he was a kid. However, his father made Pal drink lemonade when the latter had diarrhea. When asked, Pal's father said that medicine was like food that had been blessed by God.⁹²

The rhetoric of nutrition unfolded a series of debates around dietetics. Of course, one of the significant strands in these debates concerned a "pure" tradition uncontaminated by 'modernity.' However, the very discourse itself was modern which discussed "tradition" in a modern "scientific" and "medical" language in order to construct a "pure" body. As already told, the effort to build a well-nourished body was cultural in its content. Nourished meant having "pure" food. "Pure" also implied

consumed rice, rice mills became a convenient substitute for the *dhenki*. The new machines aestheticized a commodity. There of course existed a criticism of the new husked rice as well and the romanticization of the *dhenki*-husked rice. It would be too simplistic to argue that the majority of the population who consumed the machine-husked rice was oblivious of this critique of machine-husked rice. However, for those who consumed machine-milled rice, white glistening rice became a marker of their status.

Thus this new rhetoric imbricated with the question of class. The rhetoric was moulded in a “scientific language of nutrition.” Nevertheless, this language could not hide the fact that “pure” and “hygienic” had a social connotation. It was only the lower castes, like the milkmen or the lower class cooks and waiters in the new small eateries, who bore the wrath of the middle-class as unhygienic. Nonetheless, the fact that many flocked to these eateries, for instance, the students, proved that eating out was becoming an experience of a new found pleasure and it was this pleasure which became another source of critique for the new rhetoric of nutrition.

Drinking pleasure: Tea and modernity

A matter of anguish among these authors was that pleasure was becoming more significant than physical wellbeing. People went to any extent to satiate their palette. Many of the new food were being prescribed for their medicinal qualities which ultimately led to their acceptance by the Bengali Hindu middle-class.

Perhaps the most virulent criticism was made against a new food or rather a drink which became the most popular amongst all new pleasures of life. This was tea. Tea became a symbol of change in the nutritive elements of “Bengali” cuisine. Tea, when introduced as a hot beverage soon became immensely popular with the middle class. Both Basantakumar Chaudhuri and P.C. Ray asked people to refrain from drinking tea as it caused dyspepsia.⁸⁷ However, it is undeniable that tea was becoming a common drink in many homes. In fact, most of the

restaurants, according to Ray were made dirty and unhygienic by their staff who in Ray's own words "are recruited from a class in which venereal is almost universal."⁸⁰ There could be a "gentleman proprietor," but in Ray's opinion, he was deceived by his personnel who cooked and served at the restaurants.⁸¹

While "impure" was equated with the labour of the lower classes, the diet of the lower classes was also being romanticized. In this respect, rice followed dairy products as another commodity of great concern. The critique of rice was more a critique of modernity itself. In the narrative of the Bengali Hindu middle class, impure rice was a product of modern machines introduced in colonial Bengal. Santoshnath Seth, the author of *Bange Chaltatva*, made a critical analysis of machine-husked rice in c.1926.⁸² He said that most of the markets in Bengal were flooded with the rice husking mills.⁸³ The question naturally arises why people took recourse to this rice if according to Seth it had less nutritive qualities than hand pound rice. Seth answered that it was because of its glossy quality that the machine-husked rice became so popular. Machines husked and cleaned rice better and thus made it look whiter than the rice husked by hand or *dhenkis*. Thus the refined rice attracted more buyers.⁸⁴

Seth's opinion was endorsed by the Gandhian activist Satishchandra Dasgupta (b.1881). His endorsement of the "traditional" *dhenki* (an indigenous rice husking machine chiefly used in village homes) was steeped in the modern language of nutrition.⁸⁵ Dasgupta argued that *dhenki*-husked rice contained vitamin 'B', while this was absent in modern machine-husked rice.⁸⁶ It was a critique of modernity in a modern language. However, just as an overwhelming population flocked to the hotels and restaurants, the majority of the population was also consuming husked-rice despite all protests against it. In this context, the whiteness of rice became a signifier of the new rhetoric of nutrition. Modern machines, as the above authors said, cleaned and thus removed the outer skin of rice. As a result the machine-husked rice glistened. White and clean became equivocal. Since a large number of people in Bengal

Sweetmeat makers were another source of wrath for the Bengali middle-class Hindus. *The Report of the Municipal Administration of Calcutta* stated that after the Calcutta Municipal Act of 1917 forbade adulteration of edibles, there was a general improvement in the quality of *ghee* sold for public consumption, especially in the wholesale and big retail shops. However the *ghee* used in the sweetmeat shops was of an inferior variety.⁷⁶ *Mairas* or the sweetmeat makers who generally belonged to the lower castes thus became an object of criticism for the middle class. Even in the 1860s several complaints were made to the government against the *mairas*. The class agenda of the middle-class became clear from the vitriolic accusations made by Trannath Chatterjee in 1863. "Our confectioners being chiefly men from the lower grades of our community and devoid of all education have hardly consciences in them, and so look more to their own interests than the health and lives of their buyers."⁷⁷ Ramesh Chandra Ray, a doctor writing in c.1929, accused the *mairas* for being dirty and unhygienic. He almost linked this accusation with the blame that the *mairas* were responsible for adulteration.⁷⁸

This critique of the sweetmeat shops as well as the sweetmeat makers was expanded to include within its fold the critique of the restaurants too. The same Ramesh Chandra Ray wrote another tract on the restaurants that were gradually emerging in Calcutta. By the 1920s these restaurants had become a ubiquitous sign in Calcutta. Ray was concerned about the unhygienic atmosphere and the unhealthy food of the restaurants. However, he made a cultural analysis in the process bringing in class into the folds of nutrition.⁷⁹ It seems from his tract, that for Ray, restaurants implied small and low eateries and not the new and extremely sophisticated large restaurants established by the British. The latter was hardly frequented by the Bengali Hindu middle class. Upper-class Bengali Hindus sometimes visited these clubs and restaurants, but not the middle middle or the lower middle classes. This is the reason why Ray considered the students to be the most important patronizers of the small and low grade restaurants. These

to animal husbandry. He compared the Bengali rentiers with the English rentiers. The latter was praised for taking an active interest in the improvement of cattle.⁶⁹

In this middle class discourse on nutrition, the culprit who was held responsible for the deteriorating quality of milk was the lower class milkman or the *goala* as he was known in Bengal. Dr. Sundari Mohan Das, who became the Chairman of Calcutta Corporation's Health Committee in 1924, narrated a story, which in his opinion made the *goalas* responsible for adulterating milk.⁷⁰ Das once traveled in a third class compartment of a train where he heard the conversation between a few milkmen. He was appalled to learn that these men had bribed the railway men to get into the train. More than the conversation, however, Das was aghast at the appearance of the *goalas*. He described the scene as "nauseating" and the milkmen as "dirty" and "reeking" with their "dirtiest possible cans emitting odor of decomposed milk."⁷¹ Thus in the new rhetoric of nutrition it was not just that the milk was unclean and impure. Milkmen also became enmeshed in this discourse of a commodity. Unhygienic, dirty and impure became inextricably intertwined.

According to Das, these *goalas* were extremely unscrupulous apart from being dirty. They squeezed as much milk as possible from the cow-keeper. The cow-keepers did not know how to feed their cows properly so as to get an increased supply of milk. As a result the calf starved and died. Das recommended setting up co-operative milk societies and dispensing with the *goalas*.⁷² He, in fact, started a scheme of cooperative milk supply himself. P.C. Ray went a step further and argued that it was the up-country milkmen who migrated to Calcutta from places like United Province and Bihar, who were responsible for adulterating milk. Bengali milkmen were much better when compared to the former.⁷³ While describing the milk purchased from the milkmen, Chunilal Basu, the chemist, clearly stated that mixing water in milk was typical of the *goala* caste.⁷⁴ This new rhetoric continued even after independence when Asoke K. Dutt asked for punishment to be inflicted on the milkmen in 1949.⁷⁵

of Calcutta.⁶⁴ In the year 1919, 3551 samples of foodstuffs were examined altogether. These included 1401 samples of *ghee* (clarified butter), 661 samples of milk, and 454 samples of mustard oil. Out of these, 129 samples of *ghee*, 232 samples of milk, and 106 samples of mustard oil were found to be adulterated. 1892 maunds of foodstuff, 1365 bottles of aerated water, 5251 eggs, 40,640 tinned provisions and 100 cases of tea were also destroyed during the same year on the charge of being adulterated.⁶⁵

As the government started dealing with the question of adulteration in a firm manner, food inspection of hotels and restaurants strengthened the middle-class Bengali Hindu's concern about the "purity" of food from a different angle. A large number of this middle-class was employed in the Municipal administration itself who became quite vocal in their critique of hotels and restaurants. In this discourse both scientific and cultural explanations of "pure" and "impure" were conjoined with the question of class.

Apart from its association with ritual purity, *ghee* also became a dividing line between the classes. Generally speaking all dairy products that were adulterated became a reason for the middle-class to blame the lower classes. The tracts written on this subject suggested "pure" milk for the Bengali Hindus. Aswini Biswas emphatically wrote: "Cow's milk is the purest diet for the Hindus."⁶⁶ Dairy became a concern for its association with the cow which was considered to be sacred by the Hindus. But, of course, the defense of milk was made on the ground of nutrition. According to Kularanjan Mukhopadhyay, milk constituted the best form of protein.⁶⁷ Mukhopadhyay analyzed the protein elements in milk to give what he considered was a scientific explanation of a proper diet. However, his comparison of milk with meat and the championing of the former was an allusion to his celebration of vegetarianism.⁶⁸ The chemical analysis of food was a new phenomenon which was getting intertwined with cultural explanations. Tracts on clean milk became a regular feature in the health supplements of *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. P.C. Ray blamed the rentier classes for being apathetic

the store for a certain time. Gandhi represented the responses of the Indian Chamber of Commerce to the Government's plan of importing *Vanaspati ghee* which was a *ghee*-like product. *Vanaspati*, however, was a vegetable product and not a dairy product.

Several points need to be taken note of in this debate. The new rhetoric of nutrition brought in several other new concepts in its wake. The Indian Chamber of Commerce which was perhaps the largest institutional representation of the Indian business community made a critique of *Vanaspati*, which was more cultural than economic. Gandhi said:

In the interest of the preservation of the interest of dairy farming and cattle breeding, and in the interest of the healthy development of the future generation of India, my committee would recommend that the imports of such vegetable products should be totally prohibited by legislation.⁶²

In case, the import of vegetable products like *Vanaspati* was not prohibited, Gandhi threatened the government with the imposition of heavy duties on such products.⁶³ The British government imported *Vanaspati* but was obliged to call it *ghee* (although it was a vegetable product). The rage against *Vanaspati* made them name it so. The arguments on "pure" *ghee* gave a new twist to the concept of adulteration compelling the Government to take an active interest in the matters of adulteration, and pay its attention to the inspection of food.

A branch of the Municipal Administration became concerned exclusively with the inspection of food and restaurants. A yearly statistics of "pure" and adulterated food was made open to the public. Special care was taken to see that foodstuffs that came to the Calcutta market from the surrounding areas or vegetables were unadulterated. Arrangements were made, for example, with the Howrah Municipality for the employment of a Special Inspector. This inspector inspected all the principal trains at Howrah and examined the articles brought back for sale. A large quantity of foodstuffs found to be adulterated were destroyed then and there before they could reach the markets

recommended setting up new commissions for judging what pure *ghee* was. This job, he argued, would cost around half a *lakh* (Rs.100, 000) of rupees.⁵⁹ The colonial Government quickly dissolved the case by calling Dutt right. However, it was also stated that analyzing *ghee* was extremely difficult and the Corporation needed to be utmost careful in case of future prosecutions. Although this decision was taken on the recommendations of the Council of the Society of Public Analysts, Dr. Cook's idea of a new commission was rejected.⁶⁰ The report stated: "I do not think that the Government is called upon to spend half a lakh in deciding on a standard of *ghee*." In the Calcutta Ghee Case, for example, the colonial state realized that detecting adulteration needed more attention, as per Cook's recommendations. Hence the state took a hasty decision and vindicated Dr. Dutt's analysis of the *ghee* as spurious. Declaring a sample of *ghee* made by a native dealer adulterated was much more convenient than setting up sophisticated institutions to detect adulteration. If the Government had endorsed what Dr. Bedford had argued, and if anybody became sick after having the *ghee*, things would become much more complicated. Finally, Cook's ideas, if implemented, were going to cost the state half a *lakh*. The state thought it was not worth spending that amount of money on detecting the standard of *ghee*. Hence a quick decision to declare a sample of *ghee* as spurious saved time, energy, and most significantly money. There was however constant pressure from the middle-class to change colonial policies regarding adulteration.

Consider the opinion of M.P. Gandhi, then Secretary of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta. Gandhi severely criticized the suggestion of the Punjab Government that vegetable products like *ghee* may be colored in such a way that they could not be mixed with or passed off as natural *ghee* without immediate detection.⁶¹ Gandhi argued that it was possible to color the substance in such a way that the coloring matter could be destroyed by the process of heating the substances to a high temperature, or by keeping the same at

was deliberately kept vague by the state. W.J. Simpson, a health officer, made a critique of the Ghee Bill on the ground that as a result of the bill small vendors had to give up the sale of *ghee* and larger vendors could simply escape by paying a fine.⁵⁵ The state took a defensive stand and stated that the government was not concerned with those purchasers who were content to buy adulterated *ghee* (but not injurious to health). In such cases there was no need to destroy the vendor's entire stock. State suggested that unadulterated *ghee* should be labeled pure *ghee* which would resolve the matters in hand.⁵⁶ Simpson objected to labeling *ghee* as "pure" because he argued that just as no one called butter "pure" butter, it was superfluous to ask for "pure" *ghee*. The term *ghee* was a special name and it only referred to an article which was pure.⁵⁷ The government, however, dismissed Simpson's ideas.⁵⁸ The state was not too sure about how to comprehend the matter of "purity" since it had a scientific as well as a cultural meaning. The efforts that needed to be taken to figure out whether *ghee* was pure or not, was both time as well as cost consuming, according to the state. The policies of the colonial state did not permit such a lengthy affair.

The Bengali Hindu middle-class discourse of nutrition revolved around a cultural definition of adulteration. The colonial state added an economic angle to this definition. Thus there was a definite split between people regarding the definition of adulteration. The Calcutta Ghee Case in the early 20th century made this point even more clear. Satya Prakash Koch, a dealer in *ghee*, was prosecuted before the Municipal Magistrate of Calcutta for selling adulterated *ghee*. He was convicted mainly on the evidence of Dr. Dutt, who was the analyst of the Corporation. Major Bedford, the Government Chemical Examiner, however, found the *ghee* to be pure and gave evidence on the contrary. This case was then referred to the Council of the Society of Public Analysts in London. In his letter to the Corporation of Calcutta, Dr. J.N. Cook, health officer of the Council, categorically stated that there was no yardstick by which one could detect the adulteration of *ghee*. Dr. Cook

of adulteration itself became problematic. What constituted “pure” and “adulterated” became a matter of debate. From clearly scientific and economic definitions, the debate took a cultural turn. The end result was a class/caste angle added to the concept of hygiene, albeit couched in a modern language of science. On the issue of the definition of adulteration one can notice a split between the opinion of the British and the middle-class. The debate began immediately after the Ghee Bill was passed.

“Purity” was not just a concern of the Bengali Hindu middle-class. The colonial state itself split on the definition of adulteration and purity. Adulteration as a phenomenon was not unknown to the British. In late 19th century England, the adulteration of foodstuff reached an appalling height. One needs to look at the way food was adulterated to understand its magnitude. Beer, wine, coffee, tea, bread, pickles, spices, confectionery, and milk were routinely adulterated.⁵² The British Government passed the Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs Act in 1878 as a mode of preventing adulteration.⁵³

Although they had already experienced adulteration back home in England, cultural conceptions of the colonized subject compelled the colonial state to go deep into the meanings of adulteration that they encountered in the colony. Apart from a nutritive angle, the issue of adulteration had a ritualistic tenor which was different from what the British had encountered back home. When the colonized defined adulteration it was couched in the language of “difference.” Sir P.C. Ray (1861-1944), who laid the foundation of Indian Chemical Industry and founded the Bengal Chemical & Pharmaceutical Works in 1892, for instance, referred to this confusion of the colonial state and argued that the composition of milk and of butter made from it depended on breed, climate, and the method of feeding the cows, the period of lactation, and so on. He said that the standard for genuine butter as generally accepted in England, could not be always accepted as a safe guide in this country.⁵⁴ What was becoming clear was the Government’s confusion regarding the definition of adulteration. In fact, the definition

of nutrition in colonial Bengal. The colonial state's economic policies had to take these cultural meanings into account when dealing with the question of adulteration.

It was *ghee* (clarified butter), a milk product, which sparked off most of the debates around "pure" and "impure." The Ghee Bill was passed into operation in October 1886. Later on the Act was incorporated into the Municipal Act in Section 364 of Act II, 1888, prohibiting the sale of adulterated food.⁴⁶ Why *ghee* became the kernel of the controversy over adulteration has been explained by Anne Hardgrove in her work. Hardgrove argues that the adulteration of food products took on a new cultural status under the British.⁴⁷ This was especially so in the case of *ghee* or clarified butter since *ghee* had a ritual purity for the Indians. Scientific tests made visible the intrinsic qualities of *ghee* and exposed any adulterants. This modern method, according to Hardgrove, introduced a new rhetoric of "purity" and "impurity" of commodities.⁴⁸ A better way to search for techniques to detect adulteration of *ghee* became the concern of the day after the Calcutta Municipal Act forbade the adulteration of edibles in the early 20th century.⁴⁹ Hardgrove maintains that the Bengali middle-class blamed the Marwari merchants for evading the technicalities of anti-adulteration law and selling substandard grades of *ghee*.⁵⁰ For the Bengali middle-class Hindus, Marwaris were deemed as the outsiders who had captured local trade and business. The main point of concern for the upper caste Hindu Bengalis, in Hardgrove's opinion, was around the ritual purity of *ghee*. Babu Surendra Nath Ray, for example, said that *ghee* was being adulterated with animal fat thus making it unfit for use in Hindu religious ceremonies.⁵¹

Hardgrove provides us with a significant insight on the concept of "pure" and "impure." In the new rhetoric of nutrition, "pure" and "impure" had a significant religious connotation. Hardgrove argues that regional boundaries were also drawn along the lines of "purity" and "impurity." However, since Hardgrove's work is on the Marwari community in Calcutta, she does not delve into other aspects of this debate on adulteration. The definition

more nutritious. One should not consume too much spice. Elites of Calcutta wear glasses, eat sweetmeats, ride cars, and die from diabetes.—Imitating Calcutta, places like Dhaka, Bikrampur, Birbhum, and Bankura have banished whole black lentil, ground poppy seeds, and puffed rice from their diet to become civilized. They have started consuming fried food and sweetmeats sold in the shops. This is the result of being urban.⁴³

A number of authors took the responsibility to apprise the Bengali middle class of what constituted nutritious food and of the means to combat diseases like acidity and dyspepsia. Dr. Sundarimohan Das (1857-1950) who had joined the medical department of the Calcutta Corporation in 1890 and was one of the founder members of the National Medical College drew up a long list of such food. These included food such as lentils, broad beans, eggplant, turnip, cabbage, onion, leafy vegetables, puffed rice with coconut, beaten rice, yogurt, cucumber, papaya, guava, blackberry and homemade food.⁴⁴ In c.1931, another contributor to the same journal wrote, “Earlier when one ate puffed rice, beaten rice, jaggery made from cane for snack, nobody heard of ‘dyspepsia.’ Even today many villagers who eat such food instead of food sold in the market are healthy and strong; they have not heard of “dyspepsia”.”⁴⁵ Food became pure because it belonged to the past, an imaginary “Golden Age,” produce of a subsistence economy.

“Pure” and “adulterated”

The arguments on nutrition became inextricably conjoined with arguments on “pure” food in the past and “adulterated” food in the present. Pure had a double meaning. On the one hand, purity represented a critique of colonial administration and forced the latter to impose stricter policies in relation to adulteration. On the other hand, pure also signified untouched, which could imply the British as well as those unnamed people ranging from cultivators to cooks and sweetmeat makers whose food the middle-class was obliged to consume in colonial Bengal. The present signified “new” and “foreign” for the Bengali middle-class. These two meanings together constituted the discourse

signifying a simple meal, this diet also came to stand in for homegrown and homemade nutritious food. The home also carried a nostalgia of the rural as opposed to the “new” food served in the public eateries of urban Calcutta. The “pure” food of the domestic space was juxtaposed with the “impure” and “new” food served in hotels and restaurants. The middle class stated that the “new” food engendered all kinds of diseases not perceived earlier. The “old” and the “new” food became divided through a line of division drawn by science. Chuni Lal Basu wrote for instance:

It was a universal practice at one time, with the old and the young in every Bengali household, to take, as the first thing in the morning, a handful of wetted and softened grams, either with salt and ginger or with brown sugar (*goor*). — The practice should be revived, and sprouting grams should be our daily food in the morning, preferably with brown sugar, which contains vitamin, whereas white sugar contains none. The re-establishment of this practice will, to some extent, make up the deficiency in protein and vitamin in our present-day Bengali diet.⁴¹

The language that Basu used here was one that he borrowed from the medical terminology he had acquired through his colonial education. But he gave it a different twist when he championed “traditional” food consumed in the villages in opposition to the “new” food consumed in colonial Calcutta. Srishchandra Goswami, who wrote a tract on the health of the Bengali students in c.1930, found the reason for the emasculation of the Bengali youth in the “new” food which he argued lacked protein.⁴² He wrote:

We have begun to consume tea and biscuits in place of milk and yogurt- we are eating fried food and fruits- we have learnt to eat *luchi* and *kachuri* (deep fried round shaped flour bread) fried in lard instead of puffed rice and sweets made from coconut. As a result people are suffering from diabetes and dyspepsia. Swami Vivekananda has quite justifiably argued that bread is poison. Do not touch it. Yogurt is really good. Throw away fried food and sweetmeats sold in the shops. Fried food is poison. There is nothing in flour. Wheat flour is

prescribed milk, chicken broth, bread, barley, and arrowroot to Bengalis whose digestive system was more accustomed to rice. Biswas opined that food, like meat and bread, suited cold climates and not tropical climates like India.³⁷ Science was thus receiving an entirely new definition. Western science was thoroughly criticized but the opposite was not necessarily labeled “indigenous” science. It was, on the contrary, perceived as a “modern” science. The climate theory was often endorsed by the British too. Basically the argument revolved around whether a “Bengali” body required a non-vegetarian diet at all or was it “masculine” the way it was.

Since the middle-class Bengali Hindu men were constantly ridiculed for their debilitated constitution, a different “masculine” figure had to be found in order to counteract these allegations. This “masculine” figure became that of the poorer man, especially the figure of the villager. The general argument stressed that poor men had more nutritious meals than the middle-class for the simple fact that they were poor. The former ate nutritious food such as unhusked rice, fresh vegetables, whole lentils, beaten rice, jaggery, radishes and coconut and not machine-milled rice, flour, spicy vegetables, and sweetmeats from the shops.³⁸ In reality, a meal for a poor family in the villages probably would consist of a small quantity of rice with lentils. Fresh vegetables for poor village families chiefly consisted of *kochu* (arum) that can hardly be called nutritious.³⁹ In fact, in a survey in Midnapore district, Bisweshar Banerjee, the Deputy Collector, reported that even two full meals of coarse rice were a luxury for an average family in a typical village. Their ordinary condiment was salt and *kalmi*, a tank plant. They ate fish and lentils once a week for dinner.⁴⁰ This meal could hardly be called a wholesome or nutritious food as the Bengali middle-class would like one to believe. If this meal contained vegetarian fare, instead of a non-vegetarian one, it was simply because the lower classes could not afford a non-vegetarian meal.

The Bengali middle-class romanticized this diet as “pure,” “traditional”, and uncontaminated by newness. Apart from

of butcher's meat, mutton claiming equality with it in this respect; but it certainly is not the most digestible, and must therefore be partaken of with considerable caution."³² But the main purpose of this text was to create a "difference" of the Hindus not just with the British but with the Muslims as well. Hindu became the generic name for all Indians who had from ancient days never consumed beef. The text went further:

Cow is known for its milk and its flesh is not beneficial for health. Hence it is shameful to have beef instead of cow's milk. A couple of children are so monstrous that they take pleasure in biting off their mother's breast while being breast fed. There is no difference between such children and beef eating youth.³³

On this issue, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (1827-1894), who was an educationist as well as a reputed journalist, refuted the view that the Indians became weak because they were vegetarians. Mukhopadhyay denied a connection between vegetarianism and emasculation. However, in order to prove his point, he looked toward Europe rather than looking back to an imagined "tradition" for the Bengalis. He argued that the Spartans who did not consume meat fared best among the Greeks.³⁴ Nor did all Europeans consume flesh as much as the British did. To prove his thesis, Mukhopadhyay argued that the French and the Germans constituted two very courageous races. He further referred to the newly emerging vegetarianism amongst the British.³⁵ Thus Mukhopadhyay actually tried to champion vegetarianism from an angle of modernity. His argument was that the simple reason why most of the Indians were vegetarians was because India grew vegetables on a large scale. However, the general opinion was that it was the tropical climate of the country that necessitated a vegetarian diet in India.

New medical colleges started in colonial India from the early 19th century now came under attack. This discourse was critical of those doctors who received colonial education and were described interestingly as unscientific. Aswinikumar Biswas, writing in c. 1935, labeled the diet these doctors prescribed as unscientific.³⁶ He argued that newly educated Bengali doctors

than old rice in terms of health. Wheat was the best crop. The north Indians were healthier than the Bengalis as they consumed wheat.²⁹

Along with the championing of a diet based on wheat, this discourse of nutrition praised the non-Bengalis for their vegetarian diet. The latter diet was labeled a *sattvik* diet. Vegetarianism became an extremely complex symbol of contesting colonial ideas about emasculation in colonial Bengal. It became a mode of constructing a “tradition” tracing the past back to the Aryans. The Bengali branch of the Christian Vernacular Education Society brought out a text of satirical poems in the late 19th century. Conversion to Christianity on a large scale, a so-called “modern” phenomenon, comfortably co-existed with a mythical Hindu “tradition.” In one of the satirical poems in this book, a Bengali young man who returned from England requested his wife to become more westernized. His wife retorted:

You fancy that non-vegetarian races are strong.
The Aryans who once ruled the world,
Never had fowl curry.³⁰

There was less concern with an actual past rather than with an imagined “tradition.” In fact, in ancient medical treatises like *Susrutasamhita* (written around 3rd or 4th century AD) and *Caracasamhita* (written in c. 3rd century BCE) meat was named first in a series of nourishing agents and endowed with pharmaceutical properties.³¹ Science in the Christian Vernacular Education Society text was then being used to make up a “tradition” whereby meat-eating was being equated with the colonial modern and as a source of several ailments.

Perhaps the most stark example of a cultural explanation of “science” was given in a small text called *Bharater Godhan Raksha (Protection of cows in India)* published by an agricultural organization in c.1887. This text quoted scriptures to argue against beef eating. However, the text also provided a presumably scientific explanation against beef-eating. The text quoted a British doctor thus: “Beef is perhaps the most nutritious

the climate of northern and north-western India. But one cannot digest these in our land. Paddy is grown in large quantity in Bengal, and rice suits the climate of Bengal. Other food items like pulses, vegetables, fish, and milk can be nutritive only when they are taken with rice. There are many such food which are much more nutritious and stronger than rice, but there is nothing which qualifies as mild, gentle, and nutritious at the same time.²⁶

This rice/wheat debate became a mode of appropriation as well as a critique of colonial rule. While rice was becoming the marker of a “tradition,” this tradition was not always valorized as it has been argued by Prasad. Moreover, while arguing that the Bengalis constituted a weak race in colonial Bengal, at least some advocated a change in diet. In order to construct an ideal middle-class body, the new “Bengali” cuisine was not opposed to inculcate other cuisines in its fold. Thus wheat which was considered to be the staple of non-Bengali population was not always looked down upon. It had started being cultivated in Bengal and was often welcomed as an addition of nutrient to the Bengali diet.

Taranath Chaudhuri, a man affiliated with a Jain association, compared the Bengali Hindus with the Bihari Hindus and wrote in 1912 that the latter were stronger than the former because of their diet. Indubhushan Sen, a *kaviraj* (indigenous medical practitioner), writing in 1928, criticized the Bengalis for having parboiled rice. He argued that having wheat bread and lentils made upcountry men much stronger than the emasculated and feeble Bengalis.²⁷ In *Bangamahila*, a domestic manual, there was a detailed analysis of why rice did not fare well as a food.²⁸ The author argued that rice was the most inferior of all crops. It was not just less nutritious, it tasted bland too. Therefore rice had to be accompanied by fish, meat, milk, curd, or lentils. Without these additional nutrients rice was hardly sufficient for physical well-being. The ritual of rice harvest also came under attack. The Bengalis observed rice harvest festivals after the harvesting of new rice. The author wrote that the celebration of new rice was unnecessary since new rice was even worse

symbol of indigenous taste as well as resistance to the colonization of taste. In this context, rice became even more significant since rice became the symbol of emasculated Bengalis as opposed to the “manly” wheat-eating races of northern India. Wheat was the staple food of a number of non-Bengali communities pejoratively labeled as Hindustanis, who supposedly ate wheat bread and lentils.²³

Thus a long debate ensued that primarily concerned the question whether rice made Bengalis weak as compared to the other races or not. Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, a regular contributor to journals like *Tattvabodhini*, *Bangadarshan*, *Bharati*, *Sahitya*, and *Prabasi*, stressed that the view that the Bengalis constituted a weak race because they ate rice was flawed. This was an idea that the Bengali youth had inculcated with the gradual spread of English education.²⁴ Chattopadhyay argued that most of South-East as well as East Asia considered rice to be a staple food. He further took recourse to an apocryphal history that was not uncommon in nationalist historiography—“rice eating” Bengalis, according to him, once ruled from Kashmir to Simhala (modern Sri Lanka) because of their physical prowess. However, the British needed the Bengalis to serve their administrative purpose. Hence they managed to convince them through English education that they were sharp and intelligent, not like the martial races such as the Sikhs, the Marathas, the Punjabis or the Gurkhas. The latter, so this apocryphal account went, were much inferior when compared to the former in terms of intelligence.²⁵ Chattopadhyay was able to keep his finger on the pulse that throbbed with the sense of a loss. His text also alluded to the cultural making of emasculation rather than an actual one.

Many contested the argument that wheat-eating made the people of north India strong as opposed to the rice-eating Bengalis. In 1925, people, like Gyanendranath Saha, argued that it was the climate that decided what one should eat:

Pulses and wheat bread suited those of northern and north-western India, but it could not be a staple in Bengal; this is because pulses and wheat bread can be digested easily in

colonial education endorsed this view. Consider this argument of Chunital Bose (1861-1930), a professor of chemistry in Calcutta Medical College, who took an active interest in scientific research. In his introductory remarks to one of his essays, Bose wrote, "The present Indian diet is defective and ill-balanced, and is directly responsible for the progressive deterioration of the physical health of the people, particularly of Bengal, and is directly affecting their moral and economic well being."¹⁸ To illustrate his arguments further, Bose cited the example of Col. McCurrison's work. McCurrison, who was the Director of Nutritional Research, Pasteur Institute, argued, that the food taken by the people of Bengal, compared most unfavorably in its nutritive value, with that of the other provinces of India.¹⁹

The Punjabi diet of whole-meal atta (wheat flour), pulses, vegetables and milk, with the addition of meat twice a week, constituted the best of all Indian diets. The Bengali diet, consisting chiefly of rice and nominally of pulses and other protein-containing elements was the worst so far as their nourishing value and vitamin contents were concerned, and it was not surprising that the people of Bengal should stand so low in the matter of their physical qualities, when compared with the other vigorous races of India.²⁰

Bose agreed with McCurrison, but he looked back to a "golden age" in Bengal, to argue that there was a time when the people of Bengal were not unaccustomed to military life, and they formed regiments which fought against the disciplined army of the Mughal Empire. This military prowess was made possible by an abundance of nourishing food in Bengal, which was unavailable in the present time.²¹ Thus Bose contended that the problem lay not in the diet of the Bengalis. In other words, he urged the colonial medical practitioners to look into the reason behind the scarcity of nutritious food in Bengal.

The significance of rice increased in case of scarcities or famines. Srirupa Prasad rightly argues that rice became a cultural signifier at the interface of conceptions of nutrition and gastronomic tradition.²² She further argues that rice became a

the inability of the Bengalis in his days to digest nutritious food. He said that students could eat rice thrice a day in those ancient days when learning took place in village schools.¹⁵ Men could even digest harder shells of coconut. However, people did not and could not eat nutritious food in the urban life in colonial Bengal. Hence, their physical strength was declining.¹⁶ The past, albeit imaginary, came to stand in for good health, symbolized by the consumption of huge quantities of food. Most of the latter was homegrown and easily available. These strands within this discourse of nutrition thus converged on one point: the debilitating constitution of the Bengalis in colonial Bengal due to the scarcity of “pure” food. To counter this weakening of the body, a Hindu past was required to reconstruct the middle-class body.

What apparently seems like a cultural argument had a strong economic connotation. Nagendrachandra Dasgupta found in poverty the reason for a decline in health. In c.1924 he wrote that nutritious elements such as fish, milk and *ghee* (clarified butter) have disappeared from the list of food for the Bengalis.¹⁷ Two points need to be noted here. If nutritious food disappeared because of poverty, Dasgupta surely implied that Bengal had become much poorer because of the British. But what is also noteworthy in this context is that Dasgupta’s chief concern was with the diet of the middle-class Bengalis and not those who would suffer most in times of scarcity, the lower classes of Bengal. This was then the politics of dietetics. In this politics, whatever was consumed in the past was considered to be grown by the Bengali middle-class as part of subsistence agriculture in their idyllic “pure” villages, which was lost as they migrated to the city. Food of the lower classes who worked in other’s fields or for others’ livelihood was left out of these memories. A past was imagined, which would provide the structure of a middle-class cuisine built on a strong nutritive foundation.

The purpose of this past was to show that Bengalis had been a valorous race in ancient times. Even those who were the direct products of those scientific disciplines that emerged from

Chithi, Prabasi, Kathasahitya and *Modern Review* published a couple of articles in 1951 on the legends of “*Adhmoni Kailas*” and “*Munke Raghu*.” Jamdatta wrote that “*Munke Raghu*” consumed a *mon/maund* (1 maund=82.3pounds=37.4 kilograms) of food after fasting for one day. People had seen “*AdhmoniKailash*” eating half a *mon/maund* of sweets, vegetables, fried flour bread anytime and anywhere.¹⁰ So being able to eat large quantities of food was a sign of a robust constitution free from ailments like indigestion. Jamdatta also wrote about a few other men from late 19th century Bengal who could consume to people’s delight. One such person was “*Banrujye Masha*” (Mr. Banerjee) who could eat sixty-four mangoes after a full meal of fried flour bread, fried eggplants, vegetables, lentil soup, yogurt, and sweetmeat. This was a sign of heroism, almost untainted by modern disciplinary regimes of the body. Another instance was that of Ramchandra Chattopadhyay who could consume an entire jackfruit or an entire *Hilsa* fish.¹¹ Jamdatta believed that the enormous rise in prices since the Second World War was responsible for the lack of appetite in food. These narratives gave a kaleidoscopic form to the discourse of nutrition: in a sense these narratives employed a discourse of the modern to criticize a modern phenomenon.

Thus the discourse on nutrition began to calculate how much food the body should consume. Vivekananda, who preached the greatness of Hinduism while touring America and England, described the eating habits of the Bengalis as “wretched.” He further argued that this eating habit made them physically weaker than other races.¹² Both Prasad and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay have highlighted the reformist middle-class agenda through food. They argue that the middle-class Hindu Bengalis were interested in creating restraint through food by adopting “milder” flavors and by eating moderately.¹³ Undoubtedly the middle-class rhetoric was concerned about civilizing the palette.¹⁴ However, everyone was not concerned with eating in moderation. In fact, the inability to eat more became a concern for many and was linked to the colonial situation in Bengal. Rajnarayan Basu (1826-99) also lamented

The past indeed became a site of gastronomic pleasure. In this context, subsistence became associated with an imaginary past. For the Bengali middle-class, the past symbolized an abundance of milk and fish along with rice. They argued that these foods had made the Bengalis a valorous race in the past. They further believed that the colonial presence destroyed this abundance by systematically undermining the subsistence agriculture. A romantic landscape was etched as the cradle for food that had nurtured the people of the soil. Fish, for instance, came to be connected to the landscape of Bengal, its riverine tracts, and amphibious life. Nibaranchandra Chaudhuri, an official, working at the Bihar Agricultural Department, wrote in his tract of 1913: "All Bengalis, irrespective of being rich or poor could easily avail fish because of the abundance of rivers, ponds, canals, and various other water bodies."⁷ Chaudhuri associated fish with courage and wisdom.⁸ Nikunjabehari Datta who wrote another tract in c.1925 on fish in the journal edited by the Gandhian nationalist Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay, advocated the consumption of fish with rice. He argued that fish was a staple of the Bengalis, which had to accompany rice with every meal. He therefore lamented the steady decline of fish cultivation in colonial Bengal.⁹ The general saying was that fish and rice constituted the Bengali "body" and made it strong. What inevitably followed from this argument was the general contention that the abundance of nutritious food that the middle class described had become scarce as well as expensive in colonial Bengal. Hence, for the indigenous elites, it was the British who were responsible for the emasculation of the Bengali Hindu middle class.

While the middle class discourse in the late 19th century linked up the lack of appetite with the decline in subsistence agriculture, by the mid-20th century men became concerned with scarcity of food due to rise in prices. Everybody knew the stories of "Adhmoni Kailas" and "Munke Raghu" who could consume tons of food. Jatindramohan Datta (1895-1975), who wrote under nom de plume Jamdatta, and who contributed to quite a few Bengali newspapers and journals such as *Jugantar*, *Shanibarer*

food. But as already stated this “pure” body also drew a distinction between the middle and the lower classes. To construct this ideal diet for a Hindu middle class body, the scientific discourse of nutrition had to fall back on an imagined “tradition.”

Constructing “tradition”

The discourse of nutrition was primarily concerned with the constitution of an ideal diet for the Bengali body. In her recent article, Srirupa Prasad articulates that food constructed a middle class Bengali identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³ She argues that a “crisis” due to colonial subjugation made the middle class Bengali men imagine and construct a past for themselves which was “pure” and uncontaminated. This crisis was simultaneously political, economic, and cultural. Apart from this, Prasad insists that when the Bengali middle class migrated to Calcutta, they often missed their life in the villages that they had left behind. This feeling constituted a cultural crisis for them.⁴ This group, who mostly belonged to the upper caste Hindu echelon, was uncomfortable living with the lower castes and various other linguistic groups in their neighborhoods in Calcutta. For the Bengali middle class, “pure” and nutritious food of the idyllic village life became scarce and adulterated in colonial Bengal. This was the cause of the suffering of the Bengali middle class, their deteriorating living standards and their poor health.⁵ Prasad maintains that they blamed the new food that came with colonial rule for their ailments. However, in the process lower castes who were involved in the making of many such foods, like sweetmeat makers, came to be detested by the upper caste Hindu Bengalis.⁶ Prasad’s narrative on the construction of a “tradition” by the middle class Bengalis in order to escape a cultural crisis in the present leaves out one important point. What needs to be emphasized is that this entire discourse on nutrition sprang from the discipline of nutrition which was a product of colonial education. However, this “new” scientific discourse of nutrition allowed the Bengali Hindu middle class to construct a romanticized tradition, which was seemingly a rejection of the modern.

Approaches to the body

Existing historiography on gender in colonial India provides a very rich account of the body as a site of politics. Most of these works have focused on the concept of masculinity or effeminess when discussing the body. Scholars like John Rosselli, Mrinalini Sinha and Indira Chowdhury argue that the colonial power structure constructed an image of an “effeminate” Bengali race, but the Bengali middle-class appropriated it and exploited it to their own advantage.¹ While scholars like Sinha, Rosselli, and Chowdhury have helped us understand the politics of gender in colonial Bengal by focusing on the implications of the masculinity/effeminacy debate, they do not delve into a significant aspect of this politics- the nutritive angle. Since their approaches to the body primarily concentrate on the gendered body, they do not pay considerable heed to the materiality of the body itself. I have tried to bring the focus back on the materiality of the body through a discussion of nutrition.

The politics of gender, which in its turn is closely tied with perceptions of the body, must be read alongside the politics of food. Unless one examines how a discourse on nutrition constructed the conceptions of a healthy “body,” one cannot understand the narrative of emasculation. In this context, it is necessary to allude to the political nature of diet as David Arnold has done in his work.² However, while Arnold merely concentrates on showing how the colonial state deployed dietary politics in order to maintain a politics of difference, I intend to go beyond the much-debated discourse of colonial difference by conceptualizing the body at a more basic level, that is, the sustainability of the body. This conceptualization adds two points to the existing historiography on the gendered body. First of all, this focus on the body as an organic entity brings out how the politics of food and the politics of gender get conflated at a quotidian level. Second, I argue that the nutritive discourse on the emasculated “Bengali” body intersected with the concept of the “purity” of the body. In this sense, a gendered body imbricates with the question of class. An emasculated body, in order to be strong, needed to consume “pure” and hygienic

Constructing a “pure” body: the discourse of nutrition in colonial Bengal

Utsa Ray*

Introduction

Nutritive elements constituted a major component of the new cuisine that emerged in colonial Bengal. The changes that took place in dietary patterns led directly to the question of a healthy body. The middle-class considered the gustatory pleasure as one of the chief sources behind the debilitation of the “Bengali” body. The first and foremost concern was with the formulation of an ideal type of diet. In order to rejuvenate the “Bengali” body, the middle-class claimed that the cuisine that developed had to be scientifically defined. Thus the “Bengali” cuisine that emerged was built on a nutritive foundation. In this process, a scientific rhetoric of nutrition, born out of colonial institutions became confluent with a cultural discourse on the “pure body.” Although couched in a scientific language, purity often had a double meaning. Apart from denoting clean and hygienic food, “pure” also implied ritual purity. “Pure” food was something intrinsically Hindu and elite, uncontaminated by the lower classes. These concerns acted as the guiding principle behind the construction of a healthy body of the colonial modern. However, this construction of the body was more rhetorical than actual. The body was fractured; it was torn between the attempts to create a “pure” somatic conception and the intake of the pleasures of capitalism that irked those who looked to a “tradition” in order to construct a healthy body.

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