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Between Curry and Cutlets: Culinary Imitation and Colonial Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta

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Abstract

The history of food in colonial Calcutta reveals how everyday culinary practices became entangled with questions of power, imitation, and cultural identity under colonial rule. In the eighteenth century, British settlers in India frequently adapted to local foodways, incorporating dishes such as curry and rice into their daily diets out of convenience and necessity. As colonial authority consolidated in the nineteenth century, however, the Anglo-Indian table became increasingly anglicised, and dining practices were reconfigured to assert racial and cultural distinction from the "native" population. Within this shifting culinary landscape, the Bengali *bhadralok* encountered Western food habits in complex and selective ways. While beef consumption remained a fiercely contested boundary, middle-class Bengalis gradually adopted European-influenced dishes, while carefully adapting them to existing caste and cultural sensibilities. Restaurants in Calcutta further enabled experimentation with new culinary practices beyond the constraints of the household. Rather than simple imitation, these developments reflected a process of negotiation in which Western forms were absorbed, modified, and domesticated, allowing Bengali cuisine to appear modern and cosmopolitan while retaining a recognisably local identity.

Keywords: Colonial Calcutta, Food culture, Cultural imitation, Bhadralok, Colonial modernity, Culinary Culture.

INTRODUCTION

In colonial Bengal, the question of what it meant to be "modern" was often negotiated not only through ideas and institutions, but through the intimate and visible practices of everyday life. In the nineteenth century, among the Western-educated Bengali elite, the adoption of European habits that ranged from modes of dress to patterns of dining, emerged as powerful marker of cultural self-fashioning. Consumption of foodstuffs that were once proscribed within the orthodox Hindu society such as beef and wine, came to signify not only a break from tradition but an assertion of affiliation with a perception of Western modernity; yet at times, the need to embrace European modernity was overarched by an uncritical imitation of a culture they did not fully comprehend, resulting in a serious in a serious disjuncture between aspiration and understanding.

Such practices, however, cannot be understood solely as instances of mimicry or cultural subordination. The colonial encounter produced a rather complex field of exchange where traffic of habits, tastes and even bodily disciplines moved in multiple directions. In the eighteenth century, British settlers in India adapted to the local conditions, often incorporating the native lifestyle in their daily lives, foodways being

one of them, out of necessity and convenience. Examples of "griffins," the newly arrived European settlers in India, consuming meals that they thought were representative of the general dietary habits of the country, often assuming a widespread consumption of rich, meat-heavy dishes, when in reality such food practices were far more varied and socially differentiated. However, by the early nineteenth century, one observes that the fluidity that the British administration adopted thus far gave way to a more rigid structure of separation as colonial anxieties around health, race and authority prompted a reassertion of cultural difference and distance.

This paper attempts to suggest that dining practices in colonial Calcutta functioned as a crucial site for the articulation and perhaps a contestation of modernity. By examining the reciprocal yet an asymmetrical process of cultural imitation and adaptation between the British and the Bengalis, the paper seeks to highlight how the domain of food is anything but mundane, rather it became quite central to the making and unmaking of cultural identities under empire.

Adapting to the Colony: British Encounters with Indian Foodways

Following the political consolidation of the East India Company in Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the nature of British presence in the region underwent a gradual transformation. The early merchant settlements gave way to a more entrenched administrative establishment, bringing Company officials into closer and more sustained contact with the local population. With the development of Calcutta into the principal urban centre of British power in eastern India, the interactions between Europeans and Indians began to move beyond the confines of trade and governance into the domain of social life. At the same time, the expansion of the Company in India also meant a rising concern of acclimatising to the new environment, or rather surviving the tropical climate, against which the colonial body was quite ill-equipped. As Mark Harrison notes, "Growing awareness of distinctions between tropical and temperate lands did not, however, lead Europeans to abandon all hope of adaptation to warm climates, or even of permanent settlement in tropical regions. Despite persistently high mortality among Europeans in India, there was considerable optimism in the late eighteenth century about the possibility of acclimatization" (Harrison, 1999). The high mortality of the newly arrived English to the Indian shores was attributed to the excessive indulgences of the Europeans in terms of diet. A medical treatise from 1792 noted that the Englishmen's indulgent and borderline intemperate dining habits that included a copious amount of beef and pork and wine was the primary reason of their untimely death (Niebuhr, 1792), and that the "orientals again live to a great age…because they… abstain from animal food and strong liquors, and eat their principal meal in the evening after sunset" (Niebuhr, 1792).

E. M. Collingham traces this excessive indulgence as a central tension in the making of the early nineteenth-century "nabob", an Anglo-Indian figure whose body was thought to have become "Indianized" through the adoption of local luxuries such as palanquins, shampooing massages, elaborate retinues of servants, and the habitual use of hookahs. These practices, she argues, helped sustain a lifestyle of aristocratic display within the conditions of tropical rule (Collingham, 2001). At the same time, surgeons of the East India Company, drawing on contemporary environmental theories of health, often advised Europeans to imitate certain aspects of Indian habits.

Echoing Niebuhr, the medical texts pointed to what they saw as the dietary moderation of Brahmins, vegetarian food, rice-based meals, and the practice of eating after sunset, as examples of habits that could help restore bodily balance and prevent the dangerous excess associated with heavy consumption of meat and alcohol (Johnson, 1815). Yet the nabobs rarely followed such advice. Instead, their social life was

often organised around lavish *burra khanas* (dinner feast) filled with beefsteaks, claret, and ale, sometimes accompanied by convivial gatherings in beefsteak clubs that reproduced the forms of elite sociability familiar in Britain (Collingham, 2001). This uneven process of adaptation produced a curious hybridity. While the adoption of certain Indian practices allowed the British to fashion their authority in what might be called an "Indian idiom," it also served to counter contemporary accusations that life in the East rendered Europeans effeminate. Extravagant dining therefore became one of the ways to reaffirm masculine authority. At the same time, however, such indulgent habits only deepened the health risks already associated with the tropical environment, as orientalist fascination with Indian luxury combined with the persistent excesses of European consumption (Collingham, 2001); especially regarding Bengal, the region was deemed to be a miasmatic marshland which accelerated the mortality rate of European residents. James Lind asserted that "…of all the English factories, the climate of Bengal proves the most fatal to Europeans…Here, as in all other places, sickness is more frequent and fatal" (Lind, 1815).

Yet this imitation of the East was not to last for long. With the growing circulation of medical writings that warned against the health risks of excessive consumption, concerns about the racial purity of the English also became increasingly prominent. In this climate, the mimicking of Indian habits was gradually equated with moral and physical degeneration. A prolonged residence in India was therefore believed to produce alarming consequences for the European body (Johnson, 1815). The process of Indianisation, which had once been regarded as a natural and even beneficial adaptation to the tropical environment, now came to be viewed with suspicion. Rather than serving as models to emulate, Indians were increasingly portrayed as cautionary examples – figures imagined as physically weakened and morally degraded, and as carriers of disease and degeneration and the acclimatisation to the Indian environment came at a cost of losing one's "Britishness," which prompted the Company to withdraw and minimise its interaction with the Indian population, as "there was an obvious tension between such views and the self-image of a self-consciously 'imperial race,' which increasingly sought to emphasise its difference from subject peoples" (Harrison, 1999).

This growing anxiety over the loss of British identity was accompanied by a broader transformation in the social character of the colonial community itself. The early generation of nabobs, who had been notorious for their wealth, ostentation, and easy adoption of Indian habits, from hookah smoking and loose tropical dress to the maintenance of Indian mistresses, gradually gave way to the new class of Anglo-Indian officials who sought to distance themselves from such associations. These later administrators, often described as *sahibs* and *memsahibs*, were shaped by the moral climate of Victorian Britain and by the rising influence of utilitarian and evangelical thought. They increasingly portrayed the British presence in India not as a commercial venture but as a civilising mission, one that required its representatives to embody disciplined and recognisably English standards of conduct. In this environment, an ideal colonial official was imagined as the upright product of Britain's educational culture, which instilled the ideas of self-reliance, authoritative, and visibly distinct from the people he governed. These anxieties about racial prestige also reshaped the rituals of the colonial table.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Anglo-Indians increasingly reserved dinners, which was now regarded as the most important meal of the day, for the performance of "proper" British dining. Dishes such as curry and rice, which had once been central to the everyday diet of Europeans in India, were gradually pushed to less formal contexts such as breakfast, luncheon, travel, or camp life (Collingham, 2006). Dinner, by contrast, was expected to replicate metropolitan standards as closely as possible, even when such practices seemed absurd in the tropical climate (Collingham, 2006). Anglo-Indian households

therefore continued to stage elaborate European dinners, complete with black evening dress and heavy dishes like roast beef and puddings, transforming the act of dining into a deliberate display of imperial identity and racial distinction.

Yet the reorganisation of the colonial table did not mean that European eating habits in India became lighter or more restrained. As observed, medical and household manuals frequently advised newcomers to adopt a more moderate, largely vegetable-based "Hindu" diet, moderate in meat and rich in fruits and boiled rice, in order to protect the English constitution in the tropics. In practice, however, many officials continued to eat heavily, moving from *chota hazri* and *bara hazri* through tiffin and dinner, each meal layered with chops, beef steaks, roasts, a side of curries, etc. A guidebook from 1882 lists the menu from an ordinary dinner, displaying not a change in form, but in content;

MENU I. FIRST COURSE. Soup. Green Peas (*Belatee mutter*). Small hump of beef (boiled). Vegetables Potato (*Aloo*) chips. Borecole. SECOND COURSE. Teal (*Sulee*) roasted. Mango-fool. Cheese straws. DESSERT. Any fruit in season. Coffee.

MENU II FIRST COURSE. Fish (*mutchlee*) Chilwars. (These are small fish not unlike our whitebait; they are fried on sticks, about a dozen or so on one stick, and should be fried a light brown colour. They are not taken off the sticks to serve, but sent up on them, and fresh green limes and very thin bread and butter brought to table with them). Small shoulder or leg of gram-fed mutton. Vegetables (*subjee*), potato balls, cauliflowers (*fool kobee*).

SECOND COURSE. Quails (butter). (Roasted they are best stuffed with green chillies, wrapped in vine leaves, and served with a good clear gravy and fresh green limes. Some people like bread sauce with them). Dates and Custard. Cheese Fondu. Dessert and Coffee.

MENU III. Vegetable marrow (*dill pussund*) soup. Curried mutton. (An Indian cook's idea of curry is very different from that of an English cook's). Boiled fowl and mushroom sauce. Mashed potatoes. Brinjals. Almond puffs. Cheese toast. Dessert. Coffee. (An Anglo-Indian, 1882).

It can be observed that what changed most visibly was the imagery of the table; by the later nineteenth century, the English meal became increasingly anglicised, organised along European culinary lines, with roast meats, sauces, and puddings at the centre and Indian dishes, curry and rice, chutneys, and pickles, relegated to side or breakfast positions, and curry, especially in a formal setting was deemed to be inappropriate for the English standard. This shift allowed the British to maintain their customary excess while framing their dining habits as markers of racial superiority and "Britishness," transforming the table from a site of Indian-style indulgence into a stage for the performance of imperial distinction. The difference between a casual dinner in dak-bungalows or camps and a dinner in a more official setting could be glanced in the following menu -

Gravy soup - Fillets of fish Parsley Sauce. Entrées - Breast Mutton Compôte. Joint - Mutton Chicken Pie. Second Course - Italian Eggs. Pudding - Lemon Custard Baked (Collingham, 2006).

However, even with a more European spread on the table, the British community did not, or rather could not entirely do away with Indian foodways. Writing of domestic life in India, Fanny Parkes observed that unlike in Britain, where slaughtered animals were hung for a few days to prepare it, and the cold climate aided in the process, meat spoiled rapidly in the tropical climate and could rarely be kept for more than twenty-four hours, resulting in considerable waste and underscoring the practical difficulties of sustaining European dietary habits in India (Parkes, 1850). This, consequentially, compelled the British to rely increasingly on local ingredients and staples, ensuring that the Anglo-Indian table remained materially dependent on Indian foodstuffs even as it aspired toward European refinement. As Collingham argues,

"British vegetables could only be grown during the cold season. During the hot weather, and in the more isolated areas, the British relied on Indian vegetables or expensive tins, and subsisted mainly on the Indian staples: mutton, fowl, and eggs…" (Collingham, 2001).

Another aspect of British dining in India in the nineteenth century was to anglicise Indian dishes to suit their palette perhaps. One of the simplest dishes to undergo this process was the Indian staple *khichdi*, made of rice, lentils and spices, was now to become *kedgeree*; and it was not merely the anglicisation of the name, the process of cooking it was reshaped as well, where the lentils were replaced by smoked fish (mostly haddock) and boiled eggs. The anglicisation of this poor man's staple in India went so far that it found itself on the breakfast table of the British aristocracy in the eighteenth century (Collingham, 2001). The evolution of *kedgeree* from *khichdi* offers a revealing example of this culinary negotiation. By replacing the lentils of the original dish with smoked fish and eggs, the British reshaped a humble Indian preparation to conform to European breakfast conventions. What emerged, then, was not a simple borrowing, but a distinctly Anglo-Indian dish that simultaneously acknowledged the local conditions and reaffirmed British dietary preferences.

This process of culinary modification was not limited to a few isolated dishes but gradually shaped a broader Anglo-Indian culinary repertoire. Colonial cookery books increasingly instructed *memsahibs* on how to reproduce, "under the special circumstances of the country" (Collingham, 2006), the dishes associated with polite society in Britain, offering recipes not for Indian curries but for croquettes, soups, puddings, and other staples of Victorian domestic cooking. Yet the effort to replicate metropolitan cuisine in India was rarely straightforward. British households relied largely on Indian cooks who had little familiarity with the taste or preparation of such dishes, while many *memsahibs* themselves possessed only a vague idea of how these meals were to be produced. As a result, British recipes were frequently interpreted through Indian techniques, ingredients, and kitchen practices. The outcome was a distinctive culinary hybrid in which familiar European dishes were subtly orientalised. Meat casseroles were enlivened with local spice mixtures, leftover mince was transformed into spiced cutlets, and roast meats were often prepared with Indian spices rather than the herbs typical of British kitchens (Collingham, 2006). Over time these adaptations produced what contemporaries increasingly recognised as a separate branch of Anglo-Indian cuisine, which was neither wholly British nor fully Indian, but a product of the colonial encounter itself.

This culinary hybridity can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry as a form of "partial presence" (Bhabha, 1994). Although *memsahibs'* cookbooks attempted to reproduce the dishes of metropolitan Britain such as croquettes, soups, puddings, and roasts, their preparation in colonial kitchens inevitably depended on Indian cooks who interpreted these recipes through local techniques and ingredients. The result was a series of dishes that were, in Bhabha's terms, "almost the same but not quite": casseroles enlivened with spice mixtures, leftover mince transformed into spiced cutlets, and roasts subtly orientalised. Rather than restoring a purely British cuisine, these adaptations produced a distinctly Anglo-Indian repertoire, revealing how the colonial table remained shaped by the very cultural influences it sought to contain. In this sense, mimicry operated in a subtly reversed direction: the colonizers themselves became caught within the process, as their attempts to reproduce metropolitan cuisine in India inevitably generated hybrid forms that could never remain wholly British.

Imitating the Table: Bengalis and the Politics of Western Food

While the Anglo-Indian table thus revealed a complex negotiation between imitation and adaptation, the

traffic of culinary influence in colonial India did not move in a single direction. If British residents had earlier reshaped Indian dishes to fit metropolitan tastes, the later nineteenth century witnessed a parallel phenomenon among sections of the Bengali middle class. In the urban spaces of colonial Bengal, particularly in Calcutta, European food habits began to acquire new social meanings, and the consumption of items such as beefsteaks, cutlets, and other forms of European food became associated with modernity, status, and cosmopolitan refinement. What had once been a marker of colonial authority at the European table was gradually reinterpreted within the social world of the Bengali *bhadralok*, where the adoption of certain Western food practices signalled participation in the cultural idiom of colonial modernity.

Unlike the lure of the East that had drawn many English residents to adopt elements of Indian life, the attraction of the West among colonised subjects was more deliberately produced. As the colonial contact deepened in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the need to assimilate Indians as subordinates into the British machinery became prudent education emerged as a more systematic instrument of influence. Particularly after 1835, the introduction of the policy outlined in the Macaulay Minute sought to cultivate a class of intermediaries who would serve the colonial administration while internalising British modes of thought and taste. Western education thus functioned not merely as instruction but as a broader process of socialisation, opening new avenues for self-fashioning among the Bengali middle class. Within this expanding cultural horizon, Western habits, including elements of European culinary culture, gradually acquired aspirational value, becoming associated with civility, refinement, and upward mobility.

A decisive moment in the transformation of culinary experimentation in Calcutta can be traced to the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817. Founded through the combined efforts of Bengali elites and European reformers, the institution emerged from the growing demand for Western education among the urban middle classes. Within its intellectual environment developed a distinctly radical current of thought that would later crystallise in the 1830s as the Young Bengal Movement, a group of students known for their outspoken critique of social and religious orthodoxy.

At the centre of this movement stood Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a poet and teacher of Portuguese-Indian-English descent whose liberal outlook and commitment to free inquiry left a deep impression on his students. Appointed to the faculty of Hindu College in 1826, Derozio encouraged young men, many of whom were drawn from elite Hindu families, to challenge inherited customs and question established authority. Among sections of these students, acts that directly violated orthodox Hindu norms came to be interpreted as gestures of intellectual and social emancipation. The public consumption of beef and alcohol, both strongly prohibited within traditional Hindu society, therefore acquired symbolic value as markers of defiance. Such practices generated considerable anxiety within conservative circles in Calcutta. What unsettled many contemporaries was not merely the abandonment of dietary taboos but the openly irreverent tone with which members of Young Bengal often criticised Hindu religious practices, rituals, and social conventions. In this way, the adoption of certain European habits, including the consumption of forbidden foods, became intertwined with broader assertions of radical modernity among a section of the city's emerging educated elite. Commentators such as Shibnath Shastri in his memoir of the social reformer Ramtanu Lahiri, who was also a student of Hindu College, lamented what he regarded as an unintended consequence of Derozio's influence on the young generation of Bengal. While acknowledging that Derozio's teachings encouraged intellectual liberalism, Shastri argued that they also fostered habits that many contemporaries considered morally troubling. Among these was the growing association of alcohol consumption and meat-eating, especially beef, often in public gatherings at Muslim eateries, with

ideas of modernity and moral courage. In his view, such practices spread rapidly among students and came to symbolise an exaggerated imitation of European habits, producing what he described as a harmful culture of excess (Shastri, 1907).

Social satirists like Kaliprasanna Sinha in *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* pointed towards the imitative tendencies of the Bengali *babus*. In one passage he remarked that "nowadays some city dwellers celebrate their birthdays with great pomp. Someone who steps into their sixtieth year in the lap of their seventies, on their birthday day, with gaslight gates, dance, and English feasts, they will spend the end of your life in revelry" (Sinha, 2008). Through such satire, Sinha mocked the urban *babu* for adopting only the outward trappings of English life, particularly in matters of eating and a handful of social customs, while remaining otherwise unchanged. His satire reveals how these gestures of Westernisation were widely perceived as selective and performative rather than transformative. Similarly, Rajnarayan Basu, commenting on the social condition of Bengali intelligentsia under the influence of westernisation, wrote "We are quite fond of imitation, and especially we have a tendency to imitate the ways of the *sahibs*. However, rarely do we pause to think whether such imitation suits our country or brings any tangible benefit to our society. Even the *sahibs* admit that their customs are ill-fitted to the conditions here" (Basu, 1874). In regard to consuming beef by westernised Bengalis, Basu argued that beef was unsuited to the people of the country and often defended on misguided grounds. He mocked the claim, popular among some members of the Young Bengal Movement, that regular beef consumption would make Bengalis physically stronger, recounting the case of a reformer who advocated eating large quantities of beef daily but was eventually forced to abandon the practice due to severe health problems. For Basu, such enthusiasm reflected an exaggerated imitation of European habits; he further observed that beef consumption remained limited among Bengalis and continued to be associated primarily with Europeans and Muslims, adding pessimistically that practices he regarded as harmful had by then become too entrenched to be easily eradicated (Basu, 1874).

The anxiety surrounding the imitation of Western customs, and specifically the consumption of beef, broadly stemmed from concerns about the erosion of racial and cultural boundaries within Bengali society. As observed thus far, the adoption of European habits by sections of the educated middle class appeared to threaten established notions of social and religious identity. In this sense, the unease surrounding the anglicisation of the Bengali *babu* mirrored, in an inverted form, earlier British anxieties about the loss of "Britishness" through excessive interaction with the colonised. While meat consumption itself was not entirely taboo within Hindu society, the question lay in the nature of the meat consumed. Beef, in particular, remained deeply charged with religious and social significance. Collingham notes that orthodox Brahmans would perform ritual ablutions after contact with Europeans who were considered ritually polluting because of their beef-eating habits, their employment of cooks from different castes, and their disregard for traditional rules of commensality (Collingham, 2006). Yet despite the intensity of such debates, the actual consumption of beef among Bengalis remained limited. Rather than becoming a widespread domestic practice, encounters with Western food were more often mediated through the expanding urban culture of colonial Calcutta, particularly through hotels, restaurants, and other public dining establishments where European dishes such as beefsteaks, cutlets, and roasts were served. It was within these emerging spaces of colonial sociability that Western dining habits gradually entered the everyday experience of the city's residents.

This gradual entry of Western dining habits into everyday life in colonial Calcutta unfolded alongside a broader reshaping of Bengali food culture, as the Bengali middle class negotiated how far, and in what

ways, it could imitate English customs without losing a sense of its own identity. Utsa Ray argues that while consuming beef remained a sharply contested boundary, the adoption of European-style meat dishes, particularly mutton curries, cutlets, and other "Anglo-Indian" preparations, became increasingly common among urban Bengali households, especially within *bhadralok* homes in Calcutta (Ray, 2012). These dishes were often described as "modern" and "scientific," echoing English medical and nutritional ideas that praised protein-rich diets for building stronger bodies. At the same time, they were carefully adapted to avoid beef and to remain compatible with caste-based rules of purity.

According to Jayanta Sengupta, western dining habits were not simply imitated but reworked into a distinctly Bengali idiom that signalled both physical strength and social respectability (Sengupta, 2010). Rice remained the staple of the Bengali diet, yet the ideal meal was increasingly portrayed as balanced and moderate, capable of incorporating some foreign ingredients and techniques without descending into the kind of "gastronomic excess" that Bengali writers associated with British official; as such, many Bengali culinary texts often mocked the "gastronomic excesses of gluttonous British officials" while simultaneously reimagining Bengali cuisine as more restrained, enlightened, and spiritually superior (Sengupta, 2010).

This tension between restraint and innovation reflected a wider cultural anxiety about being "too Western" on the one hand and "too backward" on the other. The dining table thus became a space where colonial modernity was negotiated – English influences were selectively absorbed and reshaped so that Bengali cuisine could appear cosmopolitan and modern while remaining recognisably Bengali. This selective adoption of Western foodways was perhaps most visible in the rapidly expanding world of hotels and restaurants in colonial Calcutta. In these establishments, the city's residents encountered European dishes not in their homes but in the mixed, commercial spaces of urban sociability. As Ray shows how young Bengali men, professionals, and students increasingly visited restaurants in order to taste foods that were not permitted within the strictly regulated menus of their caste-conscious households; in such places they sampled pies, puddings, breads, and various "Anglo-Indian" dishes that were often adapted to local tastes (Ray, 2012). One can argue that these establishments allowed the *bhadralok* to experiment with new forms of dining while maintaining a degree of cultural control. Eateries would adopt certain European formats, such as printed menus, table service, and fixed seating, but stripped them of the conspicuous masculinity and excess associated with English clubs and private dining rooms. By filtering European tastes through these semi-public spaces, Bengalis could engage with the appeal of English dining habits without fully adopting the rituals and hierarchies of the colonial elite.

In this context, the anxiety surrounding "anglicisation" did not disappear but instead took on new forms. Concerns about the loss of cultural boundaries continued to surround the imitation of English culinary customs, yet the middle-class was equally anxious about falling behind in an increasingly modern and industrialised world. As Ray asserts, these tensions shaped how Bengalis rethought their own food practices (Ray, 2012); similarly, Sengupta notes that while Bengali writers initially worried that rice-based diets might be physically weakening, they later rearticulated them as healthier and spiritually superior to the heavy meat-centred meals of Europeans (Sengupta, 2010). This resulted in a sort of double bind; while on one hand, the Bengalis were anxious about becoming too European, yet on the other hand, there was the anxiety regarding appearing too "old-fashioned." The dining table, whether in Calcutta homes or restaurants, became a subtle arena where these tensions were negotiated. Rice and fish continued to define Bengali cuisine, but they now appeared alongside mutton cutlets and European-style sweets, creating a carefully balanced diet that could be modern, hygienic, and unmistakably Bengali at the same time.

Conclusion

It can be asserted that the history of food in colonial Calcutta reveals that culinary practices are never merely matters of taste or sustenance, especially when two culturally distinct communities inhabit the same space within a relationship structured by colonial hierarchy and subordination; they were deeply implicated in the negotiation of power, identity, and cultural authority. British residents in India initially adapted to local foodways out of necessity, incorporating Indian dishes into their daily routines before later reasserting a more self-consciously "British" culinary order that demoted such influences to the margins of the table. Yet this effort to preserve imperial distinction did not prevent the traffic of culinary influence from moving in the opposite direction.

Among sections of the Bengali middle class, particularly the *bhadralok* of Calcutta, the consumption of European dishes, whether in the form of cutlets, mutton preparations, or occasional experiments with beef, became entangled with new aspirations toward modernity, education, and social mobility. At the same time, these culinary experiments provoked a considerable anxiety within Bengali society. Satirists and reformers alike criticised the unthinking imitation of Western habits, while orthodox opinion remained deeply uneasy about the erosion of dietary boundaries, especially those surrounding beef. As a result, Western food practices were rarely adopted wholesale; instead, they were selectively adapted and carefully reworked within the moral and social frameworks of Bengali life.

Inasmuch, it can be suggested that the dining table in colonial Calcutta became a subtle arena for what Pierre Bourdieu famously described as the politics of "taste." What one ate, and how one ate it, functioned as a marker of distinction through which the Bengali middle class articulated its position between colonial modernity and indigenous respectability. Rice and fish remained central, yet they increasingly coexisted with dishes shaped by European influence, producing a cuisine that was neither wholly traditional nor simply imitative. The Bengali table thus reveals how colonial modernity was negotiated in everyday life – through acts of selection, adaptation, and restraint that allowed Bengalis to appear modern and cosmopolitan while still preserving a recognisably Bengali culinary identity.

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