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## The Bengali Widow's Kitchen: Looking Back at an Obscure Legacy

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### Abstract

The history of the widows in Bengal and their contributions to the Bengali household has been well documented by researchers till date. The widows were confined mostly to the *andarmahal* and they were forced to follow a rigorous vegetarian diet with frequent fasting rituals. The prescribed diet was supposed to "cool their ardour" and thus help maintain their chastity. However, creative people as they were, their spirit could not be contained within the confines of the binding norms meant to oppress them. The Bengali kitchen has traditionally been an area where women of the household reign supreme. But, after these women were widowed, their powers over the kitchen were also curtailed. The widows are thereby made to face a gap due to the lack of kitchen duties, something they have done forever, and by taking away the right to eat the non-vegetarian dishes as well in the name of normative practices and widow's rites. These concepts posit an ontological dilemma that occurs in widows' lives, who, in turn, start creating magic with whatever vegetarian elements they are still entitled to and thus prepare enjoyable dishes that have indelibly contributed to Bengali cuisine. This paper shall trace the origins as well as display the contrapuntal nature of the vegetarian dishes which act as a locus of resistance for these widows during the colonial period.

**Keywords:** Bengali Cuisine, Systematic Deprivation, Widowhood, *Niramish*, Hunger.