



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 (Ranjan 2001, p. 4089). 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. They, in turn, started 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*.

Introduction

The Bengali widow community has been a particularly vulnerable section of the Indian population that has been historically subjected to systematic violence and deprivation. Being relegated to the fringes of a society that is run by patriarchal forces, the widows of Bengal have had their lives conditioned by certain stringent laws, among which is a compulsory adherence to a vegetarian life. While in the patriarchal society, the female members were considered secondary citizens, the widows of Bengal have been even more marginalized among the female members. This marginalization is substantiated through the politics with food and nutrition that the widows have been subjected to via the social custom of *niramish* (vegetarian) diet. In this paper, we will look at not only the systematic deprivation maintained through this custom of *niramish* diet, but more importantly how the widows have found ways to deal with this systematic deprivation.

A *niramish* meal is made up of vegetarian dishes and the non-vegetarian delights are known as *aamish*. When Bengalis are in the mood for a vegetarian meal, they set out *Shukto*, *Labra*, and a plethora of other dishes. The story behind these vegetarian dishes is the most intriguing part. The Bengali platter's delicious vegetarian fare has been credited by researchers

like H. Donner (in her essay “New Vegetarianism”) to the widows of Bengal (Donner 2008 p. 148). Vegetarianism as a strict practice developed much later in Bengali History. The pioneers in this regard were the widows of Bengal. Early marriage frequently led to early widowhood. These widows were not permitted to consume onion, garlic, or any non-vegetarian food due to the strict rules and regulations of Bengali culture. *Masoor dal* was outlawed as well. The widows had to make do with whatever was available around them because there were so many dietary restrictions. So, the discrimination regarding diet has been turned into an occasion for incredible creativity within the kitchen by the widows of Bengal.

The condition of the Bengali widows perfectly demonstrates Amartya Sen’s entitlement theory. Entitlement theory contradicts the conventional assumption that famines and starvation have been the consequence of food availability. Sen rather argues that famines are most often the consequence of human factors since famines are actually caused by the purchasing power of the ones needing food, as in the ‘entitlement to’ food, which is put under question by social conditions. In other words, Sen’s entitlement theory, a person’s ability to command food depends on not the existence of a stock but on “what she owns, what she earns, what is given to her free, and what is taken away from her” (Chen 2009, p. 221). In the case of the widows of Bengal, their starvation is caused not owing to the non-availability of food and non-vegetarian raw materials, but by religious customs that prevent this ‘entitlement to’ non-vegetarian food. Hence, the widows of Bengal had a constantly famished existence. And yet, although the condition of the widows has been featured in studies that addressed the general condition of women in traditional Bengali societies, studies focusing on the condition of the widows in particular and the complexity of their existence have been strikingly scarce. As Sen and Dreze note,

Despite their magnitude and significance, the deprivations of widows rarely feature in public debates, in the media, or even in social science research, except when in a small number of cases they take a sensational form, such as sati. (Dreze and Sen 1998, p. 172)

The current paper aims to rectify this academic blind spot by not just speaking of the victimhood of the widow community but also by appreciating the contributions of the widows to the Bengali cuisine and thereby to Bengali identity in general.

A study concerning the widow, however, should not commit the error of addressing the widow community as one homogeneous lot. Rather, in order to provide proper critical attention, we need to, first of all, take into account the heterogeneity within this collective. Not only does the condition of the widows differ considerably from that of unmarried as well as married female members of the society, but the nature of the widows’ existence would further differ from one individual to another in terms of factors like age, religion, social status, motherhood, economic conditions, education and others. So, a study must be wary of easy generalizations, and the present study has as a target, particularly, the Bengali Hindu widows in whose case the law of *niramish* diet has been particularly stringent. Having taken into consideration this wide variety within the population of widows in Bengal, Sen identifies five basic factors that have made the existence of widows in Bengal disadvantageous across religion, age and caste:

...strong norms of patrilocal residence, an important cause of the social isolation of many widows; strong traditions of patrilineal ownership of property, which limit the inheritance rights of widows and which modern legislation has only begun to challenge; limited freedom to remarry; and a gender division of labor and an ideal of female seclusion which in combination severely restrict employment opportunities for widows and other women. (Chen 2009, p. 227)

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Together, these factors contribute to limiting the availability of resources to the widows in Bengali society. Behind the *niramish* cuisines belonging to the widows of Bengal is a story of how the widows of Bengal overcame the systematic deprivation of nutrition by manufacturing the availability of food.

Cultural Stereotypes and the Reality inside Kitchens

Bengalis are commonly associated with eating fish, to the extent that it has become a stereotype. Fish, chicken, and mutton curries are some of the signature dishes of Bengali cuisine. The region's vibrant mutton curry also known as the *kosha mangsho*, reigns supreme in the Bengali palate. In addition, Bengali households consume a lot of meat-based dishes during celebrations and even everyday meals. The concept of forced vegetarianism that used to be mandated for the widows in Bengal had taken away this long-on-going tradition of meat eating from them.

The widows were seen as social outliers who did not belong in societies that have always stressed that a woman should ideally be with a man. While in traditional households the kitchen is regarded as a space within the *andarmahal* that is proper to the women in the family, widows lose the entitlement and right of operation within even that space. As such, they are entirely abject both spatially and socially. This in turn makes the widows of Bengal ready subjects for cultural stereotypes. Hence, the abject widows became the subject matter of cultural stereotypes that portray them as parasites living on morsels offered by the rest of society. In traditional fairy tales, widows have been depicted as evil and wicked due, in part, to this notion of being 'out of place,' which is shared by widows across time and space. The widows and their cooking utensils become objects of suspension for society, as they are imagined to be up to no good at some redundant corner of the household in which they make do. The association of widowhood and witchcraft is just one aspect of the convention of the vilification of the widow community that is a worldwide practice, and in Bengal, we do not see any exception in this matter.

In order to control these 'aloof' women and allow them to live 'independently' without upsetting the patriarchal status quo, discriminatory practices and restrictions are in place in many societies worldwide. Mohona Kanjilal's book *A Taste of Time: A Food History of Calcutta* discusses the hardships and atrocities that widows in Bengal faced, and the ways in which they "decided to make the best of the bad bargain" (Kanjilal 2021, p. 403). According to *A Calcutta Cookbook: A Treasury of Recipes from Pavement to Palace*, "In a secluded corner of the cookhouse, a widowed relative sits over her own stove. She has added delicate nuances to the rich vegetarian cornucopia of *Bangla Ranna*" (Gupta et. al. 2000, p. 37). This brings to light the predicament that widows faced for centuries.

This led to the idea of making use of everything, including roots, shoots, and stems. The widows came up with creative ways to use vegetable peels that were left over to make dishes that Bengalis still love to eat today. These include fried *lauer khosha bhaja* (bottle gourd) and *alur khosha bhaja*, a dish made from potato peels that have been fried with black jeera and red chillies. They devised a method for cooking *niramish* dishes that tasted like meat in order to restore the meaty flavours to their palates. Take the vegetarian egg curry known as *niramish deemer dalna*, which is typically served in the form of a boiled egg and is made with cottage cheese. The jackfruit curry, which tasted like *kosha mangsho*, was another delicious recipe from the widows' kitchens.

So, while the stereotypical image of the old widow as set in traditional folk narratives is often of a vilified old woman – an ungrateful parasite of the family that lives in its fringes and brews trouble from her marginal space—in actuality, the real face of the Bengali Hindu

widow was quite different. Whether old or young, they were the providers of the family who, with their resourceful dishes displayed not only culinary creativity but also an economic intelligence that was often lacking in the rest of the family. Although located at a part of the family—the kitchen—temperamentally, the widows occupied a different space which had its own ethos. The space of the widows was defined by the parameters set by the orthodox and patriarchal social and cultural conventions. But the way the widows made up a delicious kitchen within that space is representative of how the widows adapted and improvised upon the patriarchal parameters to make up the world more bearable and quite intriguing in itself.

The Cuisines and a Culture of Compulsive Vegetarianism

A look at a few recipes that have expansively contributed to the Bengali cuisine would serve to convey the eminent cultural influence of the Bengali widows. While the widows were compulsively made to embrace this alternate culture of a vegetarian lifestyle, the women have converted this culture into one rich and varied enough to merit admiration and even craving. *Alur Bati Chorchori* is a one-pot dish that attained a particular degree of popularity among not just widows but Bengalis in general. And yet, an account of the ingredients involved in this dish would appear deceptively plain for readers, as it involves potatoes cooked with salt, turmeric, green chillies and nigella seeds only.

Small but distinctive dishes like *Alur Bati Chorchori* are examples of dishes that prove the economy of these widows. *Thor Bhaja* is one of the popular vegetarian dishes of Bengali cuisine and is made with banana stems, *posto dana* or khus khus, yellow mustard, salt, turmeric and mustard oil (Bengal's Famous Widow Cuisine, 2022). In contemporary Bengal, such vegetarian dishes which were once conceived out of desperation are treasure troves for those individuals who voluntarily choose to pursue a vegetarian lifestyle. Most of these vegetarian dishes are supposed to be consumed along with rice, *atap* rice being the recommended variety of rice that the widows shall generally partake in.

Mochar Ghonto is another traditional delicacy of Bengali cuisine which is had in accompaniment with *atap* rice. *Mochar ghonto* is prepared using banana flower, potato, salt, turmeric, green chillies, mustard oil, sugar, and grated coconut. Banana trees have been a particularly resourceful source for many of these dishes as the different parts of the tree are edible by nature. *Kachkolar's Kofta* is literally translating to raw banana curry. This amazing dish is made without using onion and garlic and is the vegetarian's answer to non-veg kofta (Bengal's Famous Widow Cuisine, 2022). This dish is made by making balls of boiled unripe bananas, boiled potatoes and a little all-purpose flour and then fried to perfection. These balls are then immersed in a gravy made with grated coconut, salt, turmeric, sugar, green chillies and some vegetable oil.

Another plant that has similarly served to enrich and diversify the palate of vegetarians is jackfruit. In their search for nutritious and tasty food items that shall compensate for the absence of meat, *Echorer Dalna* has been used extensively by Bengali widows to satiate their meat cravings. It is nothing but a jackfruit curry made with some common spices and without onion and garlic (Bengal's Famous Widow Cuisine, 2022). This curry can be eaten with plain roti or even with steamed rice and tastes just like meat. Owing to the dish's similarity to the taste of some non-vegetarian meal, *enchor* has received the nickname of *gach patha*, which translates as 'the goat that hangs on trees'. As much as the inherent taste of jackfruit, however, it is the quality of the cooking arrangement made by the widows which have been able to evoke this equivalence with goat meat for which the dish has come to be well-known.

Another delicacy is the *Dhokar Dalna*, which is quite similar to *Bati Chorchori*, where *bori* is used instead of potatoes. *Bori* is a form of dried lentil dumpling. This particular dish has

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a curry made of gram flour without using onion and garlic along with common Bengali spices. Most of these dishes for which the credits originally go to the widows of Bengal have now become indelible parts of the mainstream Bengali supper table. *Alu Posto* is a classic dish of Bengali cuisine and is literally eaten every other day in many households. The taste of this dish relies on poppy seeds, green chillies and nigella seeds along with salt. *Labra Torkari* is another such prevalent dish. Popularly enjoyed with *Khichuri*, *Labra Torkari* is made with minimal spices such as cumin, turmeric, salt, coriander, nigella seeds and green chillies (Bengal's Famous Widow Cuisine, 2022). It's a classic side dish made without onion and garlic, and is also served for Pujor bhog (the offering during prayers). Hence, not only have the dishes found their way into the mainstream palate, but they have also become part of the religious atmosphere particular to the Bengali households. So, a testimony to the agency self-acquired by the widows is that the widows who are discriminated against based on Hindu customs were able to contribute so richly to the religious practices.

Given the rich inventiveness at display through these dishes, it is indeed difficult to imagine that the origin of these inventions actually lies in deprivation. And yet, the truth is that most of such works were conceived out of the relinquished bit of the resources that would survive the preparation of the main course. As Kanjilal notes, "[o]ne of the things that they did was to think of different ways of making use of the wasted parts of vegetables instead of throwing them away" (Kanjilal 2021, p. 403). For instance, the Bengali widows make *Begun Pora* by basically roasting brinjal with potatoes and tomatoes. Once roasted, all these vegetables are smashed together with salt, mustard oil and green chillies. The incorporation of ingredients with medicinal properties is another intriguing feature of some of these dishes by the widows. *Teto Shukto* is said to be a gut-cleansing recipe and thus a major reason for widows for including it in their diet. *Shukto* is a mix of vegetables with an emphasis on bitterness, a preparation where instead of hiding the bitterness it is the taste around which the dish evolves. However, when it is made for the widow, this vegetable curry is made with milk, bitter gourd and several vegetables.

Conclusion

Widows were seen as a threat uncontrolled by a man, and so the whole society took up the responsibility of controlling her. In order to defy this control, the widows found ways of self-expression through the kitchen, and thus the Bengali culture gained these dishes. This paper, thus, establishes from the above evidence the fact that the "alu posto" or "bati chochhori" the Bengalis feel so proud of has been the contribution of generations of hardworking widows, who were never really given any credit for their inventive faculties.

In their study on the food crisis in the Matabeleland South Province of Zimbabwe, Muzerengi, Khalema and Zivenge take up Sen's entitlement theory and come to note that the circumstances can be improved if, instead of the question of availability, the question of entitlement to food is addressed (Muzerengi et. al. 2021). They come to the conclusion that

For food security to be achieved, the view that communities are a system needs to be embraced by using a bottom up approach in developing a food security implementation model. (Muzerengi et. al. 2021)

Through the survey of the condition and the contributions of the widows of Bengal, the current paper forwards suggestions for the same approach. The widow community not only represents the marginal bottom of society that needs to be taken care of if food security within our society is to be achieved in its true form. But, also importantly, a bottom-up approach is recommended here in order to recognize the obscure legacy of these widows, and draw upon the knowledge and resources that this strata of the population has contributed to the rest of Bengali society. A

bottom-up approach shall instruct us about how entitlement here is truly manufactured, and thus provide a model of creativity and resourcefulness that can be of assistance to society in case of any future state of crisis.

In a world that has witnessed the crisis of resources erupting from a pandemic, perhaps we have now developed the proper appreciative perspective with which we can truly appreciate what the widows of Bengal had been achieving while living in a perpetual state of crisis. The set of cuisines inherited from the widows of Bengal adds a set of colours that are integral to Bengali culture, and the stories and forces behind the invention of those dishes provide us with important lessons regarding sustainability and ingenuity. The contrapuntal current of influence that the widows have exerted through their creations from the kitchen has thereby come to be accepted and naturalized within mainstream culture. But it is important to preserve the memory of the obscure legacy of these widows in order to remember their resistance and perseverance of these widows.

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Bio-note

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