



Introduction

In a short story written in early twentieth century, Charan Ghosh, a middle-class Bengali arrives at a restaurant named Anglo-Mughlai Café in Calcutta with his friend Mr Chatterjee, looking for his lost son, Bnatul.¹ As he enters the restaurant, Charan is aghast at the smell of meat that greets him. He is rather shocked, but he finds the restaurant to be full of young customers like Bnatul, who seem to be relishing exotic items like the '*Murgir French malpoa*' (a confection similar to pancake), made from chicken, with delight.²

This short passage is taken from *Ratarati* (Over the Night), a short story written by Rajshekhar Basu (who wrote under the nom de plume Parashuram), perhaps the best known Bengali satirist in early twentieth century. Though much exaggerated by Parashuram's characteristic humour, '*Ratarati*' in a sense encapsulates the change in middle-class taste in colonial Bengal. Charan Ghosh, like his friend Mr Chatterjee, is appalled by the drastic transformation in gastronomic habits of a sizable portion of the Bengali middle-class population. However, that the restaurant was pretty crowded is a pointer to the fact that many of these changes had come to stay. The story epitomises such changes as it ends with the possibility of Bnatul's marriage with Neri, a young girl who is also a connoisseur of European literature. Neri is a quintessential child of colonial modernity, who is equally adept at making cutlets as well as cooking *shaker ghonto* (green leaves finely chopped and cooked with or without vegetables, generally with some gravy).³ This hybridity of taste tells us the story of the construction of the colonial middle-class. The *Murgir French Malpoa*

¹ Parashuram, '*Ratarati*' (1929–1930). Reprinted in *Parashuram Galpasamagra*, ed. Dipankar Basu (Kolkata: M.C. Sarkar & Sons Pvt. Ltd., 1992), 226–242.

² *Ibid.*, 228–229.

³ *Ibid.*, 240–242.

evidences not just the fecundity of Parashuram's humour, but also demonstrates the changing culinary culture of the Bengali middle-class. In its symbolism of the use of an *indigenous* template to forge a *cosmopolitan* commodity the *Murgir French Malpoa* represents the larger story of the self-fashioning of the middle-class in colonial India.

This book utilises cuisine to understand the formation of the colonial middle-class. It demonstrates that the evolution of Bengali cuisine as a brand was central to the self-fashioning of the middle-class in colonial Bengal. Without doubt culinary practices underwent a sea change under the impact of colonialism. However, the colonial transformation quickened the emergence of a plethora of food practices that went on to constitute Bengali cuisine as a brand. In effect, Bengal as a cultural and special signifier crucially arbitrated the articulation of the colonial discourse of taste. However, unlike food cultures in other parts of the world, Bengali cuisine not only refused to become national and remained emphatically regional, it also kept its domestic identity intact. The Bengali cuisine that emerged in colonial Bengal never assumed the public character that *haute cuisine* did in France. Those who frequented the fancy restaurants set up by the British in Bengal were few in number. The middle-class was more likely to visit small eateries and hotels. Although many a times these hotels were given apparently "European names" like Café-de-Monico, they were more likely to be owned by local people. The quintessential Bengali cuisine constituted food consumed by the middle-class in these small eateries, and the food they ate at home. This lack of commercialisation of the Bengali cuisine actually became a marker of its aesthetic superiority, a cultural capital that went into the making of the Bengali middle-class. This middle-class was much more than a class of people who were made by turning over capital for profit.⁴ Rather, the accumulation of different forms of capital, which are described in Bourdieu's seminal work as social and cultural capital, had an overriding influence on the every day practices of the colonial middle-class.⁵ As Tithi Bhattacharya rightly argues in her book on class, education, and culture during the colonial period, prioritizing education and pedantry over money defined the shaping of the Bengali middle-class.⁶

⁴ Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle-Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660–1730* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

⁶ Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848–85)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

SELF-FASHIONING THE MIDDLE-CLASS

Assumption of power by the British Crown in 1857 entailed a systematic imperial intervention in political and socio-economic structure of the colony. Though the British State feigned distance from its subjects, it set up rigorous imperial intervention through bureaucratic modes of power. It was through dialogues and resistance to this new imperial intervention that the colonial middle-class formulated a new discourse of politics. The particular socio-economic context of colonial Bengal and the peculiar position of the Bengali middle-class within it produced this discourse.

In eastern India, racially discriminating administrative policies encouraged an exclusively European dominated economy of Calcutta and its hinterlands at least till the outbreak of the First World War. The result was a check to the growth of Indian enterprise. There was, however, no dearth of professionals and service groups, whose numbers continued to rise thanks to the needs of British commerce and the British administration.⁷ Rajat Kanta Ray has described this process of the decline of Bengali entrepreneurship and the rise of the professional Bengali elites as a two-tiered formation of the middle-class. The first stage in the formation of social groups in Calcutta contained the making of compradors attached to the officers of the East India Company, or private British traders. There were a few entrepreneurs who emerged from their ranks and made huge fortunes by speculative and commercial activities in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, as the industrial capitalism of Britain made further inroads into the economy of Bengal, the European business houses, which acquired local expertise themselves, no longer needed Bengali partnership. Bengalis were not taken in as partners in the new export-oriented manufacturing enterprises that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. This led to a collapse of the Bengali industrial enterprise and an increasing dependence of these families on income from land. Growing dependence on land, and adoption of the life style of the older landlords of Bengal turned the new rich families of Calcutta into landed notables within two or three generations. The second stage in the formation of the middle-class involved the making of an intermediate layer that populated the new apparatus of the colonial government after the rebellion of 1857. They were the products of Western education, which in its turn had transformed traditional groups of salaried literati into a set of English-educated professional class. However, soon

⁷ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

this group of people discovered that despite their qualifications, they would always remain marginalised in the administrative structure of the colonial state.

The grievances of both these groups constituted middle-class politics in colonial Bengal. According to Ray, British economic interest did not allow an overall development of the economy by Bengali entrepreneurs. Instead, the British capital twisted the economy into a colonial mold that impaired the organic connections between the literate and the rustic levels of the Bengali society.⁸ The urban professional Bengalis had no independent position in the economy, nor did they control the new productive forces that could be invested in their struggle for political power. This lack of a productive role, Ray argues, failed to connect the middle-class society of Calcutta with the working population of Bengal.⁹ Higher education in the English language, solely as a means of entry into a profession, remained confined to Bengali middle-class men. Their concentration in urban professions created the enormous distance of this group from the sphere of social production.¹⁰ The distortion of the economy of Bengal shaped the cultural refashioning of the middle-class. Thus their critique of colonial rule took a strange form that appropriated the colonial state's critique of them as their vantage point.

Scholars have long debated about the origins of the middle-class in colonial India. While traditional scholarship focused on the economic origins of this class, in recent years scholars have become increasingly interested in knowing how this class fashioned itself. Earlier scholars often treated the middle-class as a sociological category. One of the first major works in this field was B.B. Misra's classic book on the Indian middle-class.¹¹ Misra defined the Indian middle-class as a product of colonial education and the administrative structure introduced by the British colonial state in India. This middle-class has been described as mere 'compradors' by the Cambridge School historians.¹² The

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ibid., 29–35.

¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920–1947: The Land Question* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1984) 12–13.

¹¹ B.B. Misra, *The Indian Middle-Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1961). Reprint, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

¹² John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, and Anil Seal, eds., *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870 to 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

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attempt to label the middle-class as a status group¹³ has been critiqued by those who have seen the middle-class as a de facto social group.¹⁴ These approaches have been critiqued sharply for their tendency to treat the middle-class as a fully formed sociological category chiefly determined by economic factors. While acknowledging the role of colonial education in the creation of the colonial middle-class, scholars such as Partha Chattrejee and Dipesh Chakrabarty have focused on the creativity of indigenous responses to British rule. While they agree that several ideas related to bourgeois domesticity, privacy, and individuality, which created modern educated Indians, came from European modernity, they also argue that the colonial Indian middle-class had their own versions of modernity that made them different from the European middle-class and made them what they were.¹⁵

Recent scholars acknowledge that the politics of the Indian middle-class revolved around contesting colonial categories. However, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'cultural capital,' these scholars try to delve into the contradictory forces that mark the self-fashioning of the middle-class. Sanjay Joshi, for instance, asks us to look away from traditional sociological indicators of income and occupation in order to understand the middle-class.¹⁶ In his book on the colonial middle-class in North India, Joshi argues that being middle-class was a project of self-fashioning, which was accomplished through their public sphere politics and cultural entrepreneurship in colonial north India.¹⁷ In many ways, this form of self-fashioning of the middle-class was not necessarily peculiar to colonial conditions, as several scholars now tend

¹³ J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Berkeley & L.A.: University of California Press, 1968).

¹⁴ S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1993).

¹⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories (Winter 1992): 1–26; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle-Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

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to talk about the middle-class in a comparative and connective framework.¹⁸ These scholars contest ideas about alternative modernities claiming that an overt emphasis on local historical processes ultimately end up making the Western modernity appear global.¹⁹ They also critique such assumptions that the middle-class in the West originated in a local context completely severed from any transnational influence.²⁰

Colonial transformation of the relations of production contextualized the cultural articulation of a new set of values, prejudices, and tastes for the colonial middle-class, reflecting both regional and cosmopolitan flavours. This regional as well as cosmopolitan nature of Bengali cuisine emerged from myriad caste-based, communal, and gendered negotiations. In this sense, the making of a Bengali taste can be compared to Kajri Jain's theorization of Indian calendar art as an instance of 'vernacularizing capitalism' by which she implies adapting certain postulates of capitalist modernity to local circumstances.²¹ This book explores local contexts to analyse what I call the 'hierarchical cosmopolitanism' of middle-class taste. However, my book neither claims that the project of the self-fashioning of the middle-class was an instance of alternative modernity, nor does it argue that the locality of the Bengali middle-class helped in producing some sort of indigenism. The middle-class in colonial Bengal borrowed, adapted, and appropriated the pleasures of modernity and tweaked and subverted it to suit their project of self-fashioning. In this sense, the colonial Bengali middle-class is much similar to the modern Malay consumer who can easily retain their Malay and Islamic identity at the same time, responding positively to the expanding markets and modern demands of fashion.²²

¹⁸ A. Ricardo Lopez and Barbara Weinstein, eds., *The Making of the Middle-Class: Toward a Transnational History* with an afterword by Mrinalini Sinha (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ A. Ricardo Lopez and Barbara Weinstein, introduction to *The Making of the Middle-Class: Toward a Transnational History*. Edited by Lopez and Weinstein (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012): 10–11.

²⁰ John Smail, *The Origins of Middle-Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire 1660–1780* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994). For a critique of such self-contained emergence of the middle-class in the West, see Simon Gunn, "Between Modernity and Backwardness: The Case of the English Middle-Class," in Lopez and Weinstein eds. Op cit, 58–74.

²¹ Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economics of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

²² Johan Fischer, *Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008).

Encouraged by a growing trend in the history of consumption and the middle-class, a number of scholars have come together to delve deeper into what they consider the defining characteristic of a middle-class in present day India – consumption.²³ These scholars believe that even though there was an absence of a mass consumer society, consumption practices have played a strong role in the constitution of South Asian society, culture, and economy since the eighteenth century. The other category that these scholars purport to problematize is the category of the middle-class itself. They argue that there was not a single Indian middle-class, but ‘a varied set of actors characterised by anxieties that reflected often-straitened material circumstances, ambivalences steeped in their own contradictory strivings for new identities, and ethical conceptions that frowned upon the embrace of material goods.’²⁴ These scholars find that economic positions could never be a single analytical tool for defining the middle-class. Some people who described themselves as middle-class were quite wealthy, while others had limited access to resources making them resemble the upper ranks of the working class. Being middle-class implied embracing such patterns of consumption that would distinguish them from Indian princes and rural magnates on the one hand, and from workers, artisans, and villagers on the other. As Sumit Sarkar rightly observed, this middle-class distanced itself from what it considered luxury and corruption of the aristocracy as well as from the ways of those who soiled their hands with manual labour.²⁵

While agreeing that the middle-class is heterogeneous, this scholarship to link consumption with the construction of the middle-class has been taken to task by those who argue that middle-classness is manifested through every day practices and not consumption. Consumption of commodities juxtaposed with everyday practices of life is called upon in order to understand the hierarchical nature of the middle-class.²⁶ This work emphasises consumption of a new

²³ Douglas Haynes, Abigail McGowan, Tirthankar Roy, and Haruka Yanagisawa eds., *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁴ Douglas E. Haynes and Abigail McGowan “Introduction”, in Haynes, McGowan, Ray, and Yanagisawa eds., *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010): 1–25.

²⁵ Sumit Sarkar, “The City Imagined: Calcutta of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997): 159–185

²⁶ Henrike Donner and Geert De Neve, *Introduction to Being Middle-class in India: A way of life*, ed. Henrike Donner (London and New York: Routledge, 2011): 1–22.

culture of food by the middle-class in colonial Bengal, which was intertwined with their everyday gastronomic practice and which, in doing so, qualifies attempts to understand the middle-class simply as a discursive formation.²⁷ While I argue that rhetoric of taste became a cornerstone in the discursive formation of a middle-class Bengali cuisine, this discourse was embedded in the material culture of Bengal.

SITUATING BENGALI CUISINE

In order to understand how an alimentary culture became central to the self-fashioning of the Bengali middleclass, the history of the colonial middle-class in Bengal needs to be mapped out. One might ask the question why am I calling this cuisine a 'Bengali' cuisine? Was there not a 'Bengali' cuisine in ancient or medieval Bengal? In his *Bangalir Itihas (History of the Bengali people)* Niharranjan Ray has described the social structure of ancient Bengal as the history of the Bengali people.²⁸ His book draws our attention to the social and the material history of the Bengali people in ancient Bengal. However, people in ancient Bengal did not conceptualize themselves as part of a 'Bengali' nation. It was not until much later in the colonial period, that a certain consciousness of one's association specifically with the region of Bengal emerged. The Bengali Hindu middle-class who constituted their own ideas of identity, taste, and aesthetics through new forms of social institutions constructed this idea of the 'Bengali' nation.

A visible transformation in the material culture aided the self-fashioning of the middle-class. Refinement in food, education, music, literature, and deportment defined this middleclass. These everyday practices also embodied the essence of 'Bengaliness' for this middle-class. The rhetoric of cuisine is one of the fulcrums on which this idea of a regional nationalism rests. The colonial Bengali middle-class, however, did not try to find a place in the larger geography of the nation through this rhetoric of cuisine. In fact, the 'Bengali' cuisine had very specific contours. It assimilated different elements but never purported to become a national cuisine.

²⁷ Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle-Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

²⁸ Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parba* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1993 [1400 BS]): 696–697, first published in 1949 (1356 BS).

The endeavors of the middle-class in colonial Bengal entailed not only their critique and appropriation of a new gastronomic culture, but also celebration of their regional history and culture, and not necessarily that of the nation. However, Bengal itself became an eponym of the nation.²⁹ This book shows that even within the idea of Bengal, we find a subregional consciousness of history. There was not necessarily a contradiction between the exploration of the history of a smaller region within Bengal and the exploration of a broader history of Bengal. This history writing as a middle-class project aimed at infusing a sense of belonging in the region. One of the cookbooks examined here, Kiranlekha Ray's *Barendra-randhan*, exemplifies how a region's history was imagined to have existed in everyday life.³⁰ *Barendra-Randhan*, which is an account of the history of food in *Barendrabhumi* (northern Bengal) was a small part of a bigger project, promotion of the regional history of *Barendrabhumi*. Indeed in other parts of India, for instance in contemporary Maharashtra, there was a keen interest in subregional specialisations.³¹

This book is confined to colonial Bengal, specifically urban Bengal where major colonial institutions flourished. The reason for restricting this study to colonial Bengal is to understand why despite considerable incorporation of other elements into its fold, what we know today as Bengali cuisine is definitely not the national cuisine of India. Certain dishes clubbed together as North Indian food becomes the signifier for Indian food. Of course, it would be banal to argue that some sort of conspiracy was in place that promoted the culinary culture of one region and suppressed that of another. French *haute cuisine* as we know emerged from distancing itself from local cuisines, whereas in China and Italy certain regional cuisines became high cuisine.³² However, until almost the beginning of this millennium there was no effort on part of the Bengali entrepreneurs to project Bengali food as *haute cuisine*. Although now several gourmet restaurants boast of 'authentic' Bengali cuisine, this public face of Bengali cuisine was conspicuously absent even about thirty years back. This

²⁹ For a wonderful analysis of the relationship between regional cuisine and national cuisine see Raymond Grew, "Food and Global History," in *Food in Global History*, ed. Raymond Grew (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999).

³⁰ Kiranlekha Ray, *Barendra-randhan* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 1999 [1328 BS]), first published in 1928 BS [c.1921].

³¹ Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

³² Arjun Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (January 1988): 3–24.

regional focus, however, does not limit the scope of this study. Instead, the book's description of the project of self-fashioning of a middle-class through the lens of food holds true not only of other regions in India, but also in other settings where such self-fashioning of the middle-class is visible.

Arjun Appadurai observes rightly when he asserts that it was only after independence in a new urban India that a national cuisine emerged, fuelled by cookbooks.³³ These men of the middle-class, and especially their wives, who traveled all over India and culled the idea of different regional cuisines, helped to form a national cuisine. This middle-class was nationally linked by their tastes in magazines, clothing, film, and music, and by their interpersonal networks in many cities. The exchange of recipes by the middle-class women blended in to produce a national cuisine.³⁴ While it is true that a national cuisine emerged only in post-independence India, I find it doubtful that regional cuisines were blended together in order to produce this national cuisine. It was the cuisine of a particular region that came to be labeled 'Indian' cuisine.³⁵

Practices of food and imagination of the kitchen as the epicenter of domestic space have been described as central to a discourse of nationalism.³⁶ The discourse and debates on these practices and social spaces supposedly aided in conceptualizing an idealized Indian nation. More specifically, Bengali and Indian have been overlapped to argue that Bengali nationalism was just the flip side of Indian nationalism. I argue in this book that focusing extensively on nationalist ideals of middle-class rhetoric on cuisine tends to rob it of other factors that this cuisine entailed. Of course, there were anxieties about health or even intrusion into sacred space like kitchen, but simply slapping the label of nationalism on middle-class cuisine oversimplifies a broader discourse of taste. The middle-class' capacity to assimilate is beyond doubt. This assimilation also brought about a harsh critique of the new changes in gastronomic culture

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ For a discussion on how national cuisines are constructed by politicians, food marketers, and other food professionals, see Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, "Introduction", *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*, ed. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton (New York, London: Routledge, 2002).

³⁶ Jayanta Sengupta, "Nation on a Platter: The Culture and Politics of Food and Cuisine in Colonial Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 81–98; Rachel Berger, "Between Digestion and Desire: Genealogies of Food in Nationalist North India," *Modern Asian Studies*, First View Article, (May 2013): 1–22.