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Title: Review of “Culinary Culture in Colonial India” by Utsa Ray

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Culinary Culture in Colonial India Utsa Ray

Cambridge University Press, 2015. iii, 274 pp.

Culinary Culture in Colonial India is an attempt to understand the relationship between the urban middle class in colonial Bengal and its cuisine. Throughout the book, Ray demonstrates how cuisine became central to a Bengali middle class/upper caste consciousness during the period of British colonial rule from 1757 to 1947. Indian society in general and Bengali society in particular underwent major socio-cultural changes during this period. For instance, colonial rulers banned practices like *sati*. Although cuisine played a key role in the development of national identity in other places, Ray argues that the Bengali case is unique because it has remained emphatically regional. It was inherently domestic and spiritual in its nature, though this is not to say that Bengali cuisine in the Indian colonial period did not have flavors of cosmopolitanism.

The middle class adopted and tweaked features of the British colonial modernity to suit its needs. In the culinary sphere, for example, while people tended not to object to foreign snacks, fruits, and vegetables, they did resist policies that tried to interfere with dietary staples like rice. In fact, non-commercialization of Bengali cuisine became an indicator of its aesthetic superiority.

Ray's sources are mostly archival and include government documents, cookbooks and recipes, autobiographies, memoirs, articles written in newspapers, and Bengali language tracts in journals of the colonial period. By analyzing these archival materials, she argues that the growth of the Bengali middle class was heavily reliant on constructing a particular cuisine as their own. Ray uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework of the relationship between taste, class, and identity, and argues that the cultural formation of taste and its use to create distinctions among people applies to the colonial middle class in India.¹ Taste was not a style of individual choice; it was rather an expression of adherence to "middle class" values, characterized by self-control and restraint in Bengal. The "middle class" sought to maintain its distance from "lower" castes. For instance, in Bengal, they considered the *goalas* (milkmen) and *mairas* (confectioners) "dirty" and unhygienic because they dealt with cows to sell milk and make sweets (163). While Bourdieu focuses on class and its association with taste, Ray also adds the criterion of caste to this association. In Bengal, there was an overlap between caste and class. The "middle class" were mostly members from the

"upper" castes and the milkmen from "lower" castes.

Ray's book thus similarly illustrates that economic status cannot be the only criterion used to define the middle class. The rise of this distinct Bengali cuisine was embedded in the material culture of the region, that is, it grew in the climate of interaction with colonial culture and modernity. The book also brings together the local/regional with the global as Bengali cuisine emerged as a hybrid in the process. While attempts were made by authors of cookbooks and recipes to preserve traditional Bengali dishes, the same books also incorporated foreign dishes like cutlets and pastries. Some authors attempted to indigenize these new culinary experiences by giving them Bengali names. Another significant argument of Ray's book is its illustration that globalization is not a new phenomenon as it existed even in the colonial era. For instance, the Portuguese introduced the potato, tomato, papaya and cashew nut to India during the seventeenth century.

The middle class was very gendered. Women were seen as natural cooks who cooked with love and affection. As opposed to French haute cuisine, which was developed in the public sphere, the refinement of Bengali cuisine lay in its domesticity. The gendered nature of the middle class is also visible in terms of "trying out" the new food in restaurants or feasts. Women did not eat out in restaurants and were not served meat at feasts.

Of course, gender was not the only dimension that defined the colonial middle class; regional diversity within Bengal played a role in its fractured formation, too. The conflict between the Eastern and Western regions were reflected in their distinctive cooking styles and preference of food items. For example, the consumption of dried fish in the East is because of the scarcity of fresh fish in the area. Another significant characteristic of the middle class was their constant othering of "not so pure and refined tastes" and "foreign foods." These terms are extremely vague as "foreign food" included food made by Muslims and other castes. Thus, although the Bengali middle class was cosmopolitan in its incorporation of new foods, it also clung to tradition as evident in its opposition to "foreign" and "unrefined" foods.

Ray's arguments can be helpful for researchers of class and consumption across disciplines like sociology, social anthropology, history, and food studies. Its interdisciplinary nature combines historical analysis with theory and empirical examples, and Ray's easy to read language makes it useful for both students and scholars alike. While other works on the Indian middle class like that of Leela Fernandes and Jaffrelot and Van der Veer also look at the

relationship between middle class and consumption, Ray's focus on cuisine is her strength.² Choosing food as a specific form of consumption makes her work more situated and contextual.

Despite its strengths, the book is at times repetitive. For instance, the interconnections between caste, class, gender, and religion are referenced in every chapter but could have been explained more precisely. Also, a definition of what the author means by the "middle class" would have been helpful as the term middle class itself is contested. These limitations notwithstanding, Ray's originality lies in her historical analysis of the relationship between material culture, food, and middle class in colonial Bengal.

ENDNOTES

1. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle Class*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
2. Fernandes, Leela. *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006; Jaffrelot Christopher, and Peter van der Veer, eds. *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008.

biography | Rituparna Patgiri is a PhD (provisional) student from the department of Sociology of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Her MPhil thesis submitted to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems in JNU dealt with the social nature of food in India, especially amongst the Hindu community. She has completed both undergraduate and post-graduate studies in Sociology at the University of Delhi, New Delhi. She has worked with organizations like the North East Network, the Self-Employed Women's Association Bharat, and the Oxford Microfinance Initiative. She is interested in looking at issues of culture, gender, food, and society from a sociological perspective.