

UNVEILING BENGAL'S CULINARY CHARMS AND FESTIVALS THROUGH DIDAN'S LETTERS IN SANDEEPA DATTA MUKHERJEE'S THOSE DELICIOUS LETTERS

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Abstract :

Food and festivals are intimately connected as seen in the Bengali proverb “Baromasen Tero Porbon” which highlights thirteen festivals in twelve months. Feasting and preparing diverse delicacies are pivotal in celebrations, preserving cultural legacies.

Sandeepa Datta Mukherjee expertly weaves together recipes and narratives in her debut novel “*Those Delicious Letters*” offering a delightful exploration of Bengali culture and cuisine. Didan, a grandmother's letter received by Subhalaxmi Sen- Gupta overwhelmed her and she became captivated by the nostalgia and essence of a bygone era. From Boisakha to Chaitra every month of the Bengali calendar brings a letter from Didan, the grandmother, each containing a recipe brimming with flavours ideally suited for the season. In every letter food surpassed mere sustenance mirroring the prevailing culture of the era. From eating habits to festivals every aspect intricately entwined in to the fabric of the time. This historical context entwined with cuisine served as the backdrop for Subha and Didan.

Keywords: Food, Festivals, Feasting, Delicacies, Bengali Culture, Didan, Season, Letter, Calender

INTRODUCTION

Sandeepa Datta Mukherjee also known as Bong Mom, is the creative force behind the widely loved blog “Bong Mom's Cookbook”. Through her captivating tales and culinary delights, she had established herself as the ultimate online authority of Bengali cuisines. Her debut novel “*Those Delicious Letters*” seamlessly blends recipes with narratives offering a delightful exploration of Bengali culture and gastronomy. The cultural essence of Bengal is intricately intertwined with its diverse and vibrant culinary traditions, festivals, music and art stemming from the amalgamation of various religious and ethnic background of the region. Food and festivals are closely linked as evidenced by Bengali proverb “Baromasen tero parbon”, indicating thirteen festivals in twelve months. Feasting and preparing a wide array of delicacies play a central role in any celebration, serving as a means to preserve cultural legacies. Traditional foods and rituals associated with festivals serve as a carrier of tradition passed down from one generation to another.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of food as a cultural marker has evolved from early anthropological and ethnographic work, where food was examined within the context of customs and social structures, to a more nuanced understanding of its role in identity and power dynamics. Key figures like Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas highlighted food symbols and social

significance. In the 20th century, food studies have expanded to include topics such as memory, globalization and the politics of food, exploring how culinary practices reflect and shape broader cultural and societal changes.

The culinary traditions of Bengal, India are deeply intertwined with its rich cultural heritage and religious festivals. The region's festivals are not only religious or cultural celebrations but also gastronomic events where food plays a central role. This literature review explores the existing scholarship between food and festivals in Bengal, focusing on how these practices reflect and reinforce cultural identity, social structures and religious beliefs.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well known author and food historian who has extensively documented Bengali cuisine and its cultural significance. Her books such as *Bengali Cooking: Seasons and Festivals* offer insight in to how different seasons and festivals in Bengal are celebrated with specific foods, highlighting the deep connection between culture, religion and cuisine.

Srijan Garg in the article. *A Culinary Journey Through India: Must-Try Dishes and Food Festivals* gives an account of rich heritage of culinary traditions of India. It's a document on significant foods and flavors of east, west, north and south part of India. It also gives an account of food festivals in India to tingle the taste buds of reader.

In his book *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* Krishnendu Ray focuses on how Bengali food practices, including those related to festivals, are maintained and adapted within the Bengali diaspora in United States.

In book titled *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class*, Utsa Ray discusses the changing food practices in Bengal, particularly in urban settings and the impact of globalization on traditional festival foods

These titles provide glimpses in to the academic research and literature that explores the intricate bond of food and festivals.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Collect and document different food practices, recipes and culinary traditions to preserve and promote understanding of Bengali cultures and festivals.
2. Assess and analyse how food and festivals contributes to the formation, expression and preservation of cultural identity of Bengal.
3. To use the study of food as a tool to promote cross cultural understanding and appreciation
4. To explore symbolic meaning attached to various foods within different cultures

METHODOLOGY

For the present research the novel *Those Delicious letters* by Sandeepa Datta Mukherjee is undertaken. This is the primary source of investigation for this study. At the same time secondary sources as well as books on food and festivals of Bengal are explored for analyzing the topic. Current research being descriptive in nature, qualitative method is hereby adopted. Also 9th edition of MLA style is used for format style.

Subhalaxmi Sen-Gupta, a woman of forty found herself juggling household duties, marriage, children and managing her publication house. Her life took a new turn when she

received a letter from a Didan, a grandmother from Kolkata, India. Despite her grandmother having passed away long ago Subha initially considered it a postal service error and contemplated returning it. However her curiosity overwhelmed her, leading her to open the letters and become captivated by nostalgia and essence of a bygone era with each reading. Unveiling the contents of the letters also ignited a part of her heart that she had not visited for long time.

Didan's letters unveiled the pre independence society, offering glimpses in to its fragments of culture and tradition. Each letter depicted how food transcended mere sustenance, reflecting the prevailing cultural norms of that era. From consumption habits to cultural celebrations, wedding rituals and attire, every aspect was intricately woven in to the fabric of the time. This historical backdrop intertwined with cuisine formed the backdrop for the narrative of Subha and Didan.

From Boisakha to Chaitra every month of the Bengali calendar brings a letter from Didan, the grandmother. Each missive contains a recipe rich with flavours perfectly suited for the season. Didan's letters serve as portal in to the yesteryears offering glimpse of its traditions, landscapes, seasons, festivals and most notably its cuisine. The primary aim behind these letters was to preserve the art of culinary craftsmanship by imparting it to Subha.

In the inaugural letter Poila Boisakha, the Bengali New Year is joyously celebrated marked by children's performance on a makeshift stage adorned with their mother's sarees. It reminiscences about a time when feasting was customary for every occasion. "Fair white puffed Luchis with alur dum, misti pulao fragrant with hints of javetri and jaiphal, kosha mangsho that had cooked for hours and was soft and succulent". Kalobaisakhi the fearless storm carries the enticing aroma of hunger inducing hinger Kochuri and Aloor tarkari (curry).

"My mother used to say that Jaistha is the month of heat and hope. When the sun scorches the earth, shooting spears of fire, the only way to survive is to nurture hope for the monsoon". Legacy of a culture is also transmitted orally by mothers and grandmothers. Apart from relishing ripe mangoes and jackfruits, the month of Jaistha marks a notable occasion of Jamaishosthi or Aranyashosthi. It is a way to worship the goddess of fertility. Rituals of Aronya Shosthi involves making figurine of Shosthi thakurun (Goddess of fertility) with rice flour and then paint it with turmeric and bright water paint. Today also in North Kolkata there is a celebration to treat the son in law. A seven course meal was planned for Rajat, the prospective groom of Didan. The lunch kicked off with crispy fried spinach followed by chholar dal infused with tender coconut, then potol'r dolma where pointed gourds were stuffed with minced meat. Also the meal featured two varieties of fish: prawn malai curry and Aam Katla, combining green mangoes with Katla fish.

Following Jaistha, Asharh arrives to alleviate the sweating heat of June. In many Indian homes the monsoon season is welcomed with the tradition of enjoying tea and fritters. Didan's mother lovingly prepared fried Beguni (Brinjal) and pumpkin flower for the occasion. Additionally indulging in Khichuri topped with generous dollops of Ghee during the rainy season is a cherished tradition in most Bengali household.

Didan's letter for the month of Shraban describes "It is a month where rains bring Bengal alive with greenery but also a time when rivers run high and can get cruel and vindictive." Truth be told, in Bengali cooking Hilsa- the lord of fish along with mustard paste and nigella seeds are emblematic symbols. Silvery pieces of Hilsa are lovingly cooked with mustard paste showcasing the essence of cuisine. It is written in the letter "On the days my mother made a creamy yellow mustard coconut paste on the Shil Nora, the fresh pieces of the fish would be smeared with that paste wrapped in fresh Banana leaves from our garden and steamed in a pot of rice to make Bhapa Ilish". Fish roe, machher dim fried in mustard oil, macher tauk are recipes flavoured the rainy season of Bengali household.,

Ashwin, the month that encapsulates the essence of Bengali life, hosts Durga Puja, the grandest celebration in Bengal. Didan writes "Our neighbourhood Pujo Pandal has been blaring ' Mahisasur Mardini' since last week. In my time it was only heard live on radio early morning on Mahalaya". During Ashtami and Navami her mother used to prepare Bhog'r Pulao, a delightful dish made with rice, roasted cashews and plump raisins. Alongside the ghee studded misti pulao she used to prepare vegetable crispies accompanied by tomato date chutney and Payesh. In Bengal during Navami of Durga Puja non- vegetarian offerings are presented to Goddess. She would prepare Niramish Mangsho, a succulent mutton curry cooked without onion and garlic as an offering.

Aswin and Kartik are filled with a series of festivals one after another. Starting with Durga Puja and followed by Lokhi Pujo then Kali Pujo and Diwali. Shortly after these there is Bhai Phota for brothers. Didan's mother was preparing the finest recipes for her brothers to express her affection. Her recipes included softest rosogullas to triangular nimkis sprinkled with kalo jeera, dim'r devil where egg halves were enveloped with keema alongwith fried rice, doi maach, chingri bhape, chicken chaap.

Festivals, fair and music serve as symbols of identity for various ethnic groups contributing to Bengal's cultural richness. The vast expanses of green rice fields hold deep philosophical significance, embodying life's lesson. Farmers who tenderly care for their rice fields harvest their crops in Agrahayana and commemorate the Nabanna festivals. A delectable delicacy rice porridge made from the Nutan Anna or newly harvested rice is prepared as an offering to the goddess. "...The first harvest is offered to Goddess Lakshmi along with milk, gur (jaggery), pieces of sugarcane and is called Nabanna – Notun anna – new harvest."

The tradition of "Bori deoa" dates back to ancient times and is linked with the month of Agrahayan. This is a sacred ritual because to be consumed during festivals. It entails soaking of large quantity of lentils, grinding them in a Shil Nora, seasoning and whipping the mixture. Women traditionally use a saree to shape the lentil paste in to dumplings ensuring a peak at the center. During this season a standard dish is Kachupata chingri bhapa crafted with young taro leaves and tiny shrimps bursting with flavours of mustard and coconut paste. Another notable speciality is phulkobi diye Koi- Koi fish cooked with potatoes and cauliflower.

The month of Pousa is replenished with cold, colourful vegetables and fragrant Khajur Gur. Local market was bustling with a variety of vegetables including leafy greens, shiny green cabbage, ruby red beet root, slender orange carrot, flat snap peas, purple eggplant etc. The best part of Pousa was Khajur Gur- date palm sap which would be collected in the morning by

village folk. That sap was then boiled and thickened to make Khajur Gur- the nectar of the god, very tasty and flavourful.

Magh the tenth month of the year and final month of the winter is characterized by the observance of Saraswati Pujo. On this occasion Didan's mother used to cook Gota Sheddho which was set aside to be served on the following day on Sheetol Shosthi. On Sheetol Shosthi the kitchen took a rest while the Shil Nora was wrapped in a piece of cloth to be worshipped. Gota Sheddho, the special one pot dish comprised black urad(Gram) and five vegetables like small red potatoes, small eggplant, hyacinth beans, whole peas and baby spinach. This nutritious dish, a customary preparation in Bengali household serves as an immunity booster and is made before onset of spring to ward off seasonal illness.

The subsequent section of Didan' letter portrays Falgun as the magnificent resurgence of nature. The neem tree adorns itself with delicate copper red leaves reknown for their potent medicinal properties. These leaves are commonly used in culinary preparation such as bitter neem begun where they are sautéed in mustard oil along with brinjal.

In Didan's letter the depiction of the final month of the year Chaitra highlights the vibrant celebration of Chaitra Sankranti. This occasion holds significance comparable to Poila Boishakha in Bengali culture. Traditionally simple vegetarian food is prepared featuring five varieties of fries, dal and seasonal vegetables creating a distinctive Panchmishali. As a sweet treat Didan's mother used to prepare Sandesh with homemade chhana.

CONCLUSION

Food and festivals serve as a doorway to comprehend one's culture. Through captivating prose the novelist entices the reader in to Bengal's vibrant and delectable realm of culinary delights and celebrations. The excitement of festivities and the fragrant of silvery Hilsa fish, tempting mustard paste, hunger inducing hing'r kachuri and Khajur Gur create a profound cultural heritage. The use of local ingredients and regional cooking techniques during festivals highlights the diversity within Bengali cuisines. These practices often linked to regional identities and cultural pride. While major festivals like Durga Puja and Poila Boishakh are well documented, there are lesser known regional festivals and their associated food.

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