

IS THE BENGALI BECOMING VEGETARIAN ?

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Yes, for the first time in history the prospects of the most non veg people in India are perilously close to becoming vegetarian. A severe existentialist crisis is tormenting the fish and meat loving Bengali people — they became meat lovers with the same passion they had reserved earlier for fish — as a tragedy of epic proportions has visited everyone, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim. For those who go strictly by statistics, let us recall the most recent national survey undertaken by the Registrar General of Census of India, who declared that Bengalis top the chart in India when it comes to the consumption of non-vegetarian food with 98.55 percent. On the other end, in Rajasthan, only 25 percent touch non-vegetarian food. There are, of course, three other states that are uncomfortably close to Bengal, i.e, Andhra, Odisha and Kerala, where non-vegetarians are between 97 and 98 percent of the population — but as toppers and psephologists say, even half a percent means a lot.

Two months ago, lightning struck all of Bengal when some young men stumbled upon a racket that revealed how meat from carcasses of dead animals dumped at the municipal garbage yards were sliced and mixed with fresh meat. Many Bengalis have lost their night's sleep or have not stopped belching, as more terrible truths tumbled out. The media reported that these racketeers were not choosy and took the flesh off any dead animal that they come across — cats, dogs, pigs or cows. No one is coming forth to tell the utterly devastated Bengali with any clarity how long he may have been eating this horrid flesh and which are the places or restaurants that used this contaminated meat. Then, at least some who may never have partaken of this meat could visit temples or mosques to thank the Almighty, while those who may have eaten this horrid food could weep and seek His everlasting forgiveness. Hindus cannot think of gulping water from the Ganga to expatriate their sins, because by the time this river reaches southern Bengal it is more polluted than at, say, Benaras — despite solemn promises made to clean up this holy flow. Since every genuine Bengali is either a poet or a protester and the gifted ones are both, this 'dark night without end' has spawned some of the most crackly wit imaginable. One such rhyme, for instance, warns drivers to be careful because if perchance they run over cats or dogs, well, then they would have to eat their flesh. WhatsApp and other social media are now so stuffed with this genre of black humour that they have almost driven out systematic canards villainising minorities or extolling ultra-patriotism that were/are pumped in so professionally in the last few years.

Let us understand why non-vegetarianism is the only religion in Bengal. Bengali Brahmans laughed when other Indians appeared shocked, even two centuries ago, to see them gorging on meat and fish. This terribly intellectual class told their

critics to kindly look up the Brahmavaivartya and the Brihad-dharma Puranas— that made special dispensations for Bengali pundits to eat non-veg. It is an open secret that even at the holiest of Hindu pilgrimages in the Himalayas, strictly vegetarian of course, traders make astronomical profits by slyly selling boiled eggs Bengalis. These muffler-covered, monkey-cap tourists must have some tiny non-vegetarian food — every day. A Mukherjee or Chatterjee or Banerjee (many with little ‘energy’) will explain that it is this ‘feesss’ that has made them so sharp and that is why they led the Indian Renaissance. Frankly, the main reason for this obsession with fish is because it was, historically, the main source of protein in Bengal since the its moist climate was not suited to growing dal, that supplies protein to most Indians. Besides, fishes were abundant in its numerous rivers, ponds, tanks and lakes. We shall soon see how the obsession with fish was transferred to meat, in recent times, and there lies the tragedy.

This scandal has hit the sale of meat and devastated lakhs of people whose life depends on this business. Faith in public food has been shattered and only the brave now dare to order for chicken rolls at roadside stalls — by forcefully suppressing any vision of cats or dogs who may be impersonating. Tragically, very few can even look at their beloved cooked mutton without sheer horror — for it could very well be of any other long-dead animal, big or small. The prices of fish have naturally risen and so have eggs, and, what is vegetarianism is shattering Bengal’s holy non-vegetarian tradition. The same Bengali who could frustrate completely Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s valiant attempts to impose vegetarianism, some five hundred years ago is now being defeated by mere scamsters. Chaitanya’s Vaishnava movement did bring Bengal closer to the Indian mainstream, but also brought imported dal into the Bengali diet, first for rare (and temporary) vegetarians — as a substitute for fish protein — and then to all others. Since Bengalis decided emphatically to love both Krishna and fishes with equal ardour— the only Vaishnavas to do so — poor Chaitanya decided to relocate to Puri for ever. But the present crisis is so serious that even if all the criminals are now caught and every possible step taken, many Bengalis may still never be able to touch meat again, at least not outside their own homes.

But fish is different from meat and we need to find out when this Bengali fixation with meat gained ground. Actually, enterprising Bengali pundits like Jimutvahan, Bhabadeb Bhatta and Sarbananda — whose sacred texts are law — were flexible enough to accommodate both fish and meat, lest the native stock of Bengal leave the flock. From other textual records like the Puranas written in Bengal and from the medieval folk ballads called the *Mangal Kabyas*, we get a fair idea of the type of meat that the masses ate. These included ducks, goats (male, female), deer, pigeons, rabbits, iguana, turtles, small birds and even porcupines. Yuck! Today, even the die-hard meat eater cannot touch the meat of iguanas and porcupines any more. But, this is what the common man could eat — if ever they could afford or even catch them, which was not too common. We are not clear whether all of these birds and animals were eaten by the upper social groups of Hindus as well. At this point, it is more important remember that there were three types of flesh that were decisively

forbidden to Hindus of Bengal. The cows was obviously the first of them and ‘beef’ was converted into the deepest cultural trench that separated Hindus and Muslims in Bengal, as in the rest of India. Large numbers who were on the fringes of the Sanskritic pale continued to eat beef when available, but they did so quietly, without fanfare. Interestingly, Bengali zamindars scored extra brownie points when they sacrificed buffaloes before Durga and Kali — because their flesh could then be left to their musclemen from the marginal castes to feast on.

The other two banned meats were of the pig and the chicken, as both were considered unclean scavengers — who ate the dirty waste materials in villages. Muslims shared the horror of the pig but consumed chicken. Here again, marginalised Hindu castes did partake of pork, if they could get it. Chicken was, however, branded as a prohibited ‘Muslim food’ for most Bengali Hindus — till quite recently. We may recall that Turkish Muslims captured the throne of Bengal full two years before they seized Delhi and thus the Bengali Hindus had the longest spell under Islamic rulers. They took extra precautions not to get “polluted” by the ruling Muslims and food items like chicken, onions, garlic and some others were categorised as ‘Muslim food’ and were just not touched by the caste Hindus — for centuries.

But then, we must also remember that two of out every three Bengali speaker in the world is a Muslim. It is a fallacy that Muslims ate beef all the time. Very few Bengalis, Hindus or Muslims, could afford meat and even if they could — it required a lot of people to consume a big lamb and many more if a cow or buffalo was to be cut. Thus, in pre-modern, pre-urban Bengal (and India?), mutton or beef could be consumed rarely, only on really big religious or social events. Besides, there were no refrigerators and individual families could hardly procure or preserve small amounts of meat. Retail sales came mainly after urbanisation. But then, what were the ‘meat-safes’ that older generations in Bengal still remember with fond nostalgia? These were small almirahs that had wire meshes or nets on all four sides, that the middle class picked up from the Portuguese *firingis* and the Anglo-Indians. The latter may actually have stored cooked meat in them for a day or two, but most upper class Bengalis used naturally air-ventilated meat-safes to preserve cooked foods or sweet or dahi, for short periods. These items were safe from rats and insects as their four legs stood in small pots of water. The important point to note is the the economics of meat coupled with the problem of perishability — and the later break-up of the joint family — all led invariably to a preference for smaller animals or birds — if at all they could be caught or bought. This reminds of ducks, as its meat and eggs were most popular till the 1970s — before disappearing almost altogether from the Bengali home, along with ‘meat safes’.

We are, of course, not discussing the ‘England-returned Bengali *sahebs*’ who consumed chicken at least a hundred years before the traditional middle and other classes did. Tagore lampooned this class and its ‘airs’ with an oft-repeated poem, the verses of which run like this.

How long shall ye remain, O India,

*Confine thy meal to dal, rice and water?
There's so little to eat and drink here, so
Let's enjoy our Whiskey-Soda n Murgi-Mutton,
Begone, you pigtailed priest, go,
Come, o my bearded friend, good Mian.*

But why was this poor Mussalman Mian more in demand? The answer will also point out the period when the upper crust of Bengali Hindus broke their age-old taboo against Muslim meat-based dishes and onions, garlic, masala. The Portuguese had introduced chillis and potato in the 16th century while the British brought in tomato, beet, carrots, cauliflower, etc, in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Let us not forget that in the 1820s and 1830s, Derozio had taught his students from orthodox upper caste Hindu gentry who he taught in Hindu (later, Presidency) College to consider beef as a symbol of 'liberation'. Many students from the topmost castes and class followed him and revelled in shattering religious orthodoxy and superstition — to the undisguised horror of the Bhadrak class, especially their Brahmans. But the real meat revolution took place in Bengal three decades later when the zamindar class and the wealthier trading groups developed a fancy for the banned 'Muslim foods'. The trigger was the arrival of the Awadhi brigade who came Kolkata in 1858 as the retinue of Nawab Wajed Ali Shah, the defeated ruler of Lucknow. The latter could hardly afford to retain his army of Bawarchis and Khansamas who travelled with him from Lucknow and his courtiers and courtesans had to look elsewhere for selling pleasure. The rich and bored Bengali aristocracy was soon their main targets. This class had prospered by collaborating with the British ever since the Battle of Plassey of 1757. Many more became more wealthy after Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement of 1793, when these new zamindars 'bought up' the authority to collect land rents on behalf of the British. They made huge profits, by hook or by crook, and had money — but nowhere to spend. More relevant is the fact that they were quite tired of their bland 'Brahmanical food' that stopped them from tasting the exciting, colourful, aromatic and delicious dishes of the Firangis and Mussalmans. After all, the Nawabs of Awadh had perfected the epicurean tastes brought in by the Mughals and this long journey covered in its four centuries so many recipes — from Samarkand, Bukhara, Kabul, Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Faizabad and finally Lucknow.

How long could the Hindu upper classes remain immune to the heady scented waters, the ghungroos and dances performed under glittering chandeliers and the accompanying music and songs in the highest traditions of Hindustani classical gharanas? The zamindar class soon adopted the fine muslins and chikan dresses; the ittar perfumes, the sweet, scented paan, the jalsas and, of course, pigeon racing and kite flying contests. Bengali women and others traditional classes were uncomfortable with this transformation and took several decades to accept it, in parts. Slowly, however, hot and oily Mughlai flavours started influencing the simple rice and fish diet and the mutton from fat lambs and sheep replaced the insipid meat of small he-goats of Bengal. These dishes came cooked with lots of spices but had to be consumed outside the home. It took quite some time for even the wealthy to set up

‘Mughlai food kitchens’ in their own homes — that were kept at a safe distance from scornful Brahman cooks who despised the Bawarchi and Khansama. Finally, in the 20th century, Bengali women took over these kitchens and adopted their own half-way dishes like koshaa mangsho. Within a couple of decades, even simple middle class families started enjoying spicy mutton on Sundays. It may surprise many to learn that in many middle class weddings or feasts, the fare was kept strictly vegetarian till the middle of the 20th century or only fish was served. This is also the time, when English fish fries fought valiant battles with their mutton chops and Mughlai paranthas in the cafes and restaurants that came up everywhere. Of course, all of these new ‘foreign’ dishes came out with strong Bengali flavours, that, like their accents, could hardly be disguised.

But the prohibited bird was the last to enter the homes of the growing middle class quite recently — finally, in the 1970s-1980s or even later. It started with the fad for the omelet made from chicken eggs, that came with an irresistible aroma. Traditional eggs of ducks and turtles were also prized, but they lost out eventually. It is not a coincidence that during this period, there was a sudden proliferation of more hygienic poultries in Bengal that ensured that ‘clean’ broiler meat was available at affordable rates. But getting the chicken home was still a problem as centuries of tradition and prejudice needed to be overcome. It would, indeed, be a worthwhile exercise for social scientists to compile the numerous ingenious excuses that were cooked up by Bengali Hindus during these decades to bring this bird into his kitchen. There are so many stories how doctors prescribed chicken broth or meat for someone in the family for recovering his or her health. Presto! The younger generations refused to let this opportunity go and poultry chicken ruled the Bengali table. In any case, the food scarcity of the late 1960s had plagued Bengal and had devastated tradition. American wheat imported under the ‘PL-480 scheme’ forced protesting Bengalis to consume chapatis and reduce their rice intake. Bengal hardly ever produced more than a fraction of the mustard it required to sustain its insistence on only mustard oil for cooking, so this wall also breached during the years of food scarcity. Groundnut oil flooded the state as sacred traditions crumbled because the cereals and cooking mediums that the Ration Shops supplied dominated the diet — for almost every strata. The new Bengali was now open to experiments beyond his rice and fish — though the older generations stoutly resisted this sacrilege.

Non-traditional foods came in and by the eighties, the earlier-exotic ‘Chinese’ food found its proletarian counterpart through countless roadside ‘chow mein’ shops that gave office goers and students a quick, hot meal at reasonable rates. This is when ‘chilli chicken’ played a big role in bringing the bird on to the plates of more traditional and poorer folk. Strange: but the earlier traditional snacks just wilted away — as salaries and bonuses went up. In these same decades, middle class homes and kitchens of nuclear families were invaded by pressure cookers, gas ovens and fridges, that came along with mixers-grinders and packets of powdered spices. The whole character of Bengali cooking and eating was changed, much beyond wildest predictions. Coming straight to our present times, it was thus only a matter of time

that chicken and mutton would jostle with fish to satisfy the carnivores of the state. During the nineteen seventies, roll-stands were set up in large numbers on every crowded pavement and street crossing. The hunger for meat escalated as Bengali versions of Mughlai food were sold in every nook and corner and people did not have to go all the way to Muslim localities for these mutton-chicken dishes. No one, especially the passionate revolutionaries, ever bothered about the class of meat they ate, but the vast bulk of Bengali Hindus still view beef with dread or disgust, just as no God-fearing Muslim ever touches pork. Then, in the last 10-12 years, came the practice of selling hot Biryani straight from *handis* placed on footpaths in every middle class locality.

The relevant point is that this explosion in demand for chicken and mutton but despite occasional jokes, no one imagined even in their widest imagination that all types of dead animals would be mixed in. Bengal may have become more adventurous with food and lifestyle tastes, especially as it is no more a battle between 'haves' and 'have-nots' but between 'haves' and 'must haves'. Values and morals just do not bother this new 'lumpen bourgeoisie' that have seized power in Bengal — as in the rest of the country. What is worrying people is why this racket is not being exposed in its full dimensions and the guilty not exposed. A few names have come out but no one knows which shops or hotels accepted this foul meat — so that at least many could breathe sighs of relief. Obviously, such a racket could never flourish without the involvement of municipal officials and even elected representatives in some way. Who are these? One could actually say, a la Arnab, Bengal needs to know. This is not just a crime — it is a kick aimed at the big bellies of the most carnivorous people of this country. Many are suspecting a deep rooted conspiracy by the vegetarians — who were always jealous. But some say that Lord Chaitanya must be very, very amused.