

Fowl-cutlets and mutton *singāḍās*: Intercultural food and cuisine/s in Bengali detective fiction

Gautam Chakrabarti
Freie Universität Berlin

One of the less emphasised aspects of a relatively widely-studied phenomenon like the so-called – for right and wrong reasons – ‘Bengal Renaissance’ is that of the intercultural gastronomic spectrum it opened up. Bengali cuisine, though lacking the global commercial and marketing success of its ‘Punjabi’ and ‘South Indian’ counterparts – to isolate the two best-known portmanteau culinary brands of provincial Indian food – has enjoyed a steady, even zealous, appreciation and espousal within Bengali-speaking communities, both on the Indian Subcontinent and abroad. One need only visit one of the annual cultural jamborees or, as Bengalis like to call them, ‘get-togethers’ – such as the North American Bengali Conference¹ – to get a sense of the average diasporic Bengali-speaking expatriate’s attachment to and longing for ‘*āmāder khābār*’² (‘our food’). This attachment to a specific ‘traditional’ or home/ly cuisine is, of course, not something unique to Bengalis, as diasporic situations tend to fuse professional and personal needs and contingencies with a dietary and culinary irredentism, which is not unknown to those who seek to read or project their nostalgia for a lost or forsaken homeland into or onto the template of food and

1. It is quite indicative of the Bengali passion for food that the website of the 35th North American Bengali Conference (<http://www.nabc2015.org>), organised by the Tagore Society of Houston, Texas, has a link for ‘FOOD COUPONS’, as one of the two most prominent clickable links on the home-page. In fact, the NABC dinners have become the stuff of legends, with the organisers assuring that ‘[s]umptuous Bengali menu will be served. Both veg and non veg will be available’. Cf. <http://www.registration.nabc2015.org/foodcoupon/foodcouponregistration.html>, retrieved on 26th May, 2015. It is interesting that the Bengali character of the menu is emphasised as one of its essential recommendations.

2. This notion of ‘our (home/ly) food’, which is based on but not limited to the trope of domesticity that much of Bengali cuisine seems to revolve around, was cherished by none less than Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), India’s first globally-renowned and ‘modern’ cosmopolitan exponent of spiritual wisdom and Indic socio-religious practices. He is, once, reported to have quipped: ‘*Āmrā oder khābār khābo, āmāder moton kore?*’ (‘We will eat their food, in our own way!’). The present author came to know of this during a conversation with Swami Suparṇānanda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata.

cuisine. One needs only to browse through the lists of ‘ethnic’ and/or ‘alternative’ restaurants in the major cities of the world – including even those in the so-called global ‘South’ – and wonder at the availability of cuisines as varied as Armenian and Tibetan, Norwegian and Tamil, to appreciate the extent of diasporic patronage of the cuisine/s of the homelands involved, given that most of these niche-eateries were, at least initially, started by expatriates from the places concerned. However, with Bengali-speakers, it acquires an entirely new dimension – one even bordering on the paradigmatic – of privileging food that reminds one of or *is*, in certain cases, *from* home – that is to say from the State of West Bengal in India, or its next-door neighbour Bangladesh. This can assume various forms of social and cultural normativity and layered expressions of exclusivist commission and omission, which give one a sense of the negotiated and nuanced compromise that characterises homes that are away from Home. As a number of Euro-American writers of Bengali origin have shown in their novels and short stories, inter-continental migrations, which trigger and even necessitate intercultural encounters and adjustments, are not bereft of a lingering nostalgia for the smells and tastes of an often-fictive – at least, in part – socio-religious and cultural *Urheimat*.³ This leaves certain residual traces in the phenotypical constitution of hybrid spatio-temporal interstices that come together to form the polymorphic reality/ies of expatriate sensibilities. As Jhumpa Lahiri points out, in her short story ‘The Third and Final Continent’, this interstitial *mélange* can be, and more often than not *is*, simply a matter of random quotidian choices and juxtapositions and may involve ‘ma[king] yet more egg curry, and play[ing] Mukesh on a Grundig reel-to-reel, and soak[ing] (...) dirty dishes in the bathtub’ (Lahiri 1999, 174).

This may give one the impression that the by-products of trans-spatial dislocation, that is to say, intercultural ‘lifestyle choices’ – to use the phrase rather differently from the controversial manner in which the former Australian Prime Minister did⁴ – are solely, and even necessarily, a matter of contingency and unavoidability. Likewise, the limited availability of certain foods and other goods, substances, products, and raw materials – although ever lessening, due to the development of international trade and the ease with which culture-specific, even esoteric food and provisions are crossing borders – seems another societal-cultural constant. In reality, however, this need not be the case, as culinary and dietary border-crossing does often happen at the level of personal and idiosyncratic choice and predilection, which may or may not be conditioned

3. The linguistic term *Urheimat* refers to the theoretical existence of an originary homeland of a reconstructed proto-language.

4. Mr Tony Abbott, the former Australian Prime Minister, seems to believe – going by his public utterances on the matter – that Aboriginal communities and their ‘alternative’ ‘lifestyle choices’ are wasteful and a hindrance to the realisation of societal unity and harmony in his country. Cf. <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/10/remote-communities-are-lifestyle-choices-says-tony-abbott>, retrieved on 27th May, 2015.

by either spatial removal from one's homeland or spatio-temporal location and/or situation during one's formative years. Furthermore, such individual cosmopolitanism of dietary-culinary taste may also be a result of deeply ingrained and schooled appropriations of ideational and aspirational norms in terms of lifestyle and food-habits. In the case of the diasporic Bengali, such cultivation of eating-habits and culinary practices, which were Anglo-European in origin and had come to the Bengali-speaking world through colonial agency, was, in more ways than one, a part of the symbolic capital of Bengal's entry into colonial modernity. This could be seen in the light of what Samuel Moyn, in his insightful essay 'On the Nonglobalization of Ideas', calls 'the model of truncated universals and subaltern fulfilment' (Moyn 2013, 192), while discussing '[t]he history of human rights as a galvanizing idea [that] was, in the beginning and for a very long time, a history of *nonglobalization*, especially compared with their circulation and resonance now' (*ibid.*). Thus, one could argue that Anglo-European culinary universals, packaged in the allure of modernising Otherness and loaded with the promise of what Moyn calls the 'prior invocation [of 'rights in imperial spaces'] as a gift of civilization' (*ibid.*, 195) had reached colonial Bengal through divergent modes of access and dissemination and were truncated and modified by local actors in the quest for a kaleidoscopic intercultural cuisine that could address the tectonic paradigm shifts of the time.

In the early-colonial years, Calcutta was both a site of intercultural dynamism occasioned by the sudden juxtaposition of different cultural-ideological communities and also a geopolitical entity called into being by transcultural capital and enterprise – as represented by the world's first truly-global corporate behemoth, the British East India Company. This meant that in a period when the British administration was still seen as a necessary concomitant to modernity and the modernising process, Calcutta provided ample opportunity for its inhabitants to mediate their transition from a somewhat-liminal existence on the fringes of Hindustan to a suddenly-empowering situation as residents of a new transnational imperial capital, as it was destined to become by the end of the nineteenth century. As befitting their new-found status as residents of a global city that was roughly in the middle of East-West trade for a considerable amount of time and which traded with cities old and new, Calcuttans sought to broaden their culinary horizons. In this context, it is worth noting that, at the time, not everyone had such a positive opinion of what was occasionally considered a transgressive movement towards culinary experimentation and the consequent interstitial hybridity. Some critics of this culinary fraternisation with the British and other Europeans saw it as an ingratiating and debasing pattern of subservience and even surrender to the colonial masters. As Kaliprasanna Singha, in his uninhibited *Designs of the Barn-Owl*, writes, while discussing the

commotion and confusion in Calcutta during the Sepoy Mutiny,⁵ a number of Calcuttans ‘volunteered, due to the temptation of foreign dishes’ (Singha 2012 [1862], 96), in certain areas of Calcutta that were almost exclusively British-inhabited. Thus, there does seem to have been a section of public opinion that connected the support of or, at least, collaboration with the British, more to a fascination with foreign food than to any modernising imperative. This perception, ironically, even sarcastically exaggerated as it might have been, could, however, in an implicit manner, lead one to the assumption that the enthusiasm for intercultural cuisine might have had more to do with mere curiosity for the exotic than the spatio-temporal dynamism of early-colonial Calcutta’s societal contexts.

Despite the presence of critical and sceptical voices in their midst, it may definitely be said that the Bengali-speaking elites and subalterns, in their own ways, delighted in being considered ‘*khādyā-rasiks*’ (gourmets, connoisseurs of the *rasas* implicit in food, bordering on gluttony). They were capable of hybridising ‘*biletī*’ (<*vilāyati* = foreign, European) dishes to suit their epicurean – indeed even sybaritic – and/or eclectic tastes. This meant, to cite just one instance, that the mid-nineteenth-century English workers’ staple ‘fish and chips’ – itself a hybrid, dating back to the sixteenth century, fashioned from the original Iberian *pescados fritos* by the Marranos and first made into a commercial success, in 1860, by a certain ‘Joseph Malin, a Jewish immigrant newly arrived from Eastern Europe’ (Roden 1996, 113) – became the ‘fish-fry’, which is one of Bengal’s favourite heavy snacks. It was as true then as it is now that the Bengali passion for or, rather, obsession with food and the average expenditure on and consumption of different kinds of food-products, be they regular and easily available or exotic and rare, are unsurpassable in South Asia. Perhaps it was due to this Bengali propensity to dietary and culinary enthusiasm, even excess, that Calcutta, Bengal and, indeed, the entire Subcontinent were exposed to a number of the latest products and services in the food and beverages industry at the *same* time as they were being introduced to Anglo-European markets.

From the end of the eighteenth century to that of the nineteenth and onwards, ‘some of the best-selling new products of the period – Mellin’s and Lactogen’s baby foods, Keventer’s butter, Firpo’s bread, Nestle’s condensed

5. The so-called Sepoy Mutiny of 1857–8, which started off as a rebellion by various disgruntled Indian individuals and groups within the 19th Bengal Native Infantry (BNI) of the armies of the English East India Company, soon spread – aided, with considerable evidence of prior planning on their part, by networks of other British-Indian soldiers, dispossessed sub/caste-groups, religious orders, and elites, landlords, and princes – mainly through British-held North India. It resulted in the temporary restitution of the Mughal Emperor as a largely-symbolic figurehead under whom various groups and individuals coalesced against British ascendancy. Numerous professional and amateur Indian historians, beginning with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his book *The History of the War of Indian Independence* (1909), have called this India’s ‘First War of Independence’.

milk, the all-time health drink, Horlicks [as well-received now as it was then], Coca Cola and Morton Sweets' (Guha-Thakurta 2011, 33) were made available in Calcutta. Thereafter, they spread to the rest of India, in what can only have been recognition of a large demand for such 'global' food-products. Often, this demand was created by the deployment of modern mechanisms of advertising and even 'product placement',⁶ with some of the first and most well-known transnational advertising firms, such as D. J. Keymer, J. Walter Thomson (also known as JWT, the first really multinational agency) *et alii*, opening and maintaining their offices in Calcutta and Bombay in the first half of the twentieth century. As Gautam Bhadra shows, in his exhaustive and definitive archival research on the introduction and development of tea-consumption in South Asia, accessible in *From an Imperial Product to a National Drink: The Culture of Tea Consumption in Modern India*, 'the promotion of this new "national drink" invited some of the best graphic designs and advertising ideas of the time' (*ibid.*, 34). In fact, the manner in which tea, 'a lucrative item of the Euro-Asian trade of the British Agency houses from the 1840s' (*ibid.*, 33), journeyed from the quintessentially-colonial plantations of Eastern and North-Eastern India, to the drawing-rooms of 'a small circle of the British and anglicized elite' (*ibid.*) is a fascinating lesson in the power of product-placement and manipulation of public desires and demands. 'It took the concerted marketing campaigns of various Indian tea associations and committees to popularize tea drinking among a home public over the first decades of the 20th century' (*ibid.*). Thus, it may be safe to opine that, in both early- and late-colonial Bengal, dietary-culinary tastes were not simply a matter of personal predilection on the part of the average consumer but also the outcomes of the operation of both concerted campaigns for creating specific demands and subconscious aspirational drives in certain sections of society. This set the stage for a rather wide-ranging culinary hybridisation, which was celebrated by the figure of the fictional Bengali detective, her/himself a product of competing and coalescing hybridising agencies, and configured the composite nature of the modern Bengali palate.

It is instructive to recollect the names and descriptions of the various dishes, and especially but not only the snacks consumed by various fictional Bengali detectives, from the unassuming *telebhājā* (deep-fried flour-coated savouries, usually made from/with different vegetables, like aubergines, onions, potatoes, banana-flowers, *et cetera*) and *cānācur* (spicy combinations of different roasted/parched/fried chickpeas, pulses, lentils, nuts, puffed rice, *et cetera*) to the more upper-end *dimer devil cap* (egg devil) and fish-fry. It is apparently clear

6. The term 'product placement' has been institutionally defined by the European Commission as 'any form of audiovisual commercial communication consisting of the inclusion of or reference to a product, a service or the trade mark thereof so that it is featured within a programme, in return for payment or for similar consideration'; cf. http://ec.europa.eu/archives/information_society/avpolicy/reg/tvwf/advertising/product/index_en.htm, retrieved on 4th June, 2015.

that these are, almost self-evidently, rather mixed-up concoctions that could only be the products of an intra- and international ‘[f]ood globalization [that] draws our attention to diasporic identities, authenticity, food nostalgia, and power’ (Counihan–Van Esterik 2013, 7). The above-mentioned snacks are an example of how the globalisation of food can also take the form of a dietisation – if one may be allowed a neologism – in one part of the world, of substances and ingredients, which had previously – at least, in a particular manner – never been used or even heard of in another. Thus, the basic ‘cooked [= boiled] egg’ of Londonian provenance became the *devil cap* in Anglo-Indian cuisine – through, apparently, the diasporic food nostalgia mentioned above – from which it entered the domain of Bengal’s anglicised elites. It percolated, thence, to that of the upper-/middle-classes who saw a potential evening-snack in what had originally been intended as something more substantial. It is worth noting here that the Bengali fascination with snacking, both as a nutritive and social act, is quite well-represented in various Bengali detective-stories. In fact, serving Anglo-Indian snacks – the various ‘chops’ and ‘fries’ – to clients seems, more often than not, a way of prefiguring the ‘progressive’ template of the detective’s *modus operandi*. So much so that ‘the people of Calcutta turned their snacking into a fine art’ (Guha-Thakurta 2011, 34).

The glaring absence of ‘a distinctive restaurant cuisine of its own’ (*ibid.*) in Calcutta is, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta sees it, definitely a function of the proliferation of neighbourhood-based and ‘peer-reviewed’ snack-shops and confectioners’ establishments selling take-away products: in the land of the *telebhājā*, word-of-mouth is king! However, the diversified but focused and cost-effective manner in and virtuosity with which these ‘food adventurers [who, perhaps, even deserve to be seen as a dietary-culinary precariat] at home reproduce “cultural food colonialism” by seeking and cooking ethnic foods to satisfy their taste for the exotic other without actually encountering “real” others on their own terms’ (Counihan–Van Esterik 2013, 7) is a testament to the intercultural culinary enthusiasm of Calcutta’s food-culture. As Guha-Thakurta writes, while detailing the various *tapas*-like/quick-food options in Calcutta:

[f]ried food ranged from *telebhaja*, to *luchi*⁷ and *kachuri*,⁸ to the uniquely Calcutta versions of the chop and the cutlet. Allen’s on Grey Street, renowned for its prawn cutlet, Chacha’s on Cornwallis Street [renovated recently, after decades of dilapidation, as seen by the present author] whose invention was the ‘fowl cutlet’, Golbari at Shyambazar for its *kosha*

7. A deep-fried circular *pita*-like bread, which is made from wheat-flour and, usually, soft; its crunchier version is called *puri*. In one of the stories with Byomkesh Bakshi as the detective or, as he liked to be called, ‘truth-seeker’, one of the main characters, Debashish, is described as eating ‘puris [similar to *lucis*], potato curry and home-made sweets’ (Bandopadhyay 2006, 206).

8. A smaller and very crunchy variant of the *luci*, with a stuffing of gram/green-pea-paste or some other filling, as per taste.

mangsho,⁹ Basanta Cabin on College Street and Dilkhusa Cabin on Harrison Road became famous eating houses and an integral part of the ambience of these *paras* [neighbourhoods]. Calcutta also has its own tradition of Mughlai [Indo-Turko-Afghan hybrid] food, often traced to the chefs from Lucknow who accompanied the exiled Nawab Wajid Ali¹⁰ to Matia Burj. While Royal on Chitpur Road and Sabir in Chandni Chowk developed special recipes for their *biryani*¹¹ and *kababs*,¹² a Calcutta invention was *kabab* rolled in a *paratha*,¹³ first introduced by Nizam's behind New Market, that has now become a ubiquitous fast food in the city. (Guha-Thakurta 2011, 35)

One of the most significant culinary spheres in which this 'cultural food colonialism' was almost seamlessly introduced to the Bengali palate, especially in Calcutta, involved what Guha-Thakurta, echoing a widely-nurtured perception about Bengalis as a cultural community, calls '[t]he Bengali [s]weet [t]ooth' (*ibid.*, 32). The Bengali predilection for indulging, actually overly so, in various desserts and other sweet dishes is, according to the available evidence, no modern or even early-modern phenomenon. A number of medieval texts, such as the sixteenth-century *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, an almost-hagiographical compendium on the life of the famous Bengali Sanskrit scholar, logician, and societal-religious reformer Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu¹⁴ (1486–1534), testify to the existence of a rich and diversified array of sweet dishes and desserts in the food-culture of Bengal. However, there seems to be at least one crucial and a few other characteristic differences between sweet dishes and confectionaries in pre-colonial and British-era Bengal. 'The extensive descriptions of Bengali sweets found in the [*Caritāmṛta*] mention mainly milk and *kho[ā]* (thickened milk) as the ingredients in use, and it seems the extensive use of [*chānā*], like the city itself, was occasioned by colonial occupation' (*ibid.*). In fact, the extensive use of sweetened cottage cheese, which is what *chānā* actually corresponds

9. A thick, spicy and, actually, quite hot mutton curry, which has almost become *the* representative of Bengali meat-cooking.

10. Wajid Ali Shah was the last *Nawāb* (Imperial Governor) of the princely state of Oudh, who reigned from 13th February, 1847 to 11th February, 1856, before being forced by the British to abdicate in what was a bloodless campaign of intimidation.

11. A Mughlai dish of steamed and/or fried rice and meat, flavoured with an assortment of spices, nuts, raisins, and dried fruits.

12. Various kinds of roasted or grilled meat-dishes, Central Asian in origin, made from minced or skewered pieces of meat.

13. A variant of the *roṭī* (flatbread made out of wheat-flour and baked in/on a clay-oven), which is lightly fried with clarified butter.

14. Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu's understanding of *bhakti* (= religious devotion, as a yogic principle) and its capacity to lead a practitioner towards personal salvation and release from the cycle of birth and death was, and remains – even more so through its twentieth-century appropriation and espousal by the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) movement – one of the most evocative and popular ritual- and faith-oriented platforms of Bengali Hindu, especially Vaiṣṇava religiosity.

to, is a culinary trope that exemplifies and reifies colonial intercultural hybridity. This is so, at least, in the case of the colonial renewal, even re-configuration, in contemporaneous Calcutta, of the Bengali fascination with sweet dishes.

This led to the invention of two iconic – in the contemporary understanding of Bengali cuisine – desserts, the *sandesh* (sweetened soft cottage cheese pressed and rolled into various shapes, with, optionally, various fillings, colours, and/or nuts, raisins, pistachios, and other add-ons) and the *rasagollā* (spongy cottage cheese always shaped into balls, dipped in sugar-syrup, with a hollow or stuffed centre). Other staples of the Bengali sweet smorgasbord are the even more hybrid *ledikeni*, a variant of the North Indian *gulāb jāmun* (a ball of intensely deep-fried – to achieve its red ochre colour – cottage cheese boiled in sugar syrup). It is supposed to have been a hasty invention of the *mairās* (confectioners) of Calcutta to appeal to the taste-buds of Lady Canning – hence the rather strange name that seemingly has no Bengali or Indian roots – the wife of the post-1857 Viceroy and Governor-General of India. Here, it is worth remembering that the latter was derided by many British administrators and military officers of the time as ‘Clemency Canning’ because of his pardoning of a number of the rebel soldiers in what was, arguably, India’s first war of independence. Yet other famous specific ‘sweet items’ are the *nalēn guder sandesh* (with date molasses being the extra ingredient here) and the internationally-renowned *misti ‘doi* (sweetened yoghurt) – that ethereal silken-tasting substance in a clay jar found in every confectionary in the city’ (*ibid.*, 33). In fact, the term ‘sweet item’ is essential to the trade-jargon of the catering companies, one mainstay of the Bengali food-industry that caters to marriages and other socio-religious ceremonies, which revolve around a lot of almost compulsory and staggered feasting.

All this, one feels, may be sufficient to delineate a variegated portraiture of dietary habits and consumption-patterns of new, intercultural dishes that respond to both the changing demands of a rapidly-transforming society, which was still deeply tied to its civilisational ethos and cultural capital. In fact, this colonial palimpsest of varying degrees of transactional correspondence of Eurasian culinary tropes may even be prefigurative of the decidedly intercultural cuisine that is a staple of the Bengali-speaking intelligentsia, a class to which the Bengali detective manifestly belongs.

The fictional life-worlds of this rather transcultural and interstitial figure, especially as seen through those of his – all the leading protagonists being male – clients, were full of various kinds of Anglo-Indian and other intercultural dishes. This is true of almost all clients, ranging from those belonging to the Anglophone upper-middle-classes and elite – both Feluda’s¹⁵ and Jayanta-

15. Feluda, arguably the most loved fictional detective in South Asia, certainly in its Bengali-speaking areas, was created by Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), one of India’s best-known film-directors

Manik's¹⁶ clients included a number of *zamindārs* (holders of large tracts of agricultural land) and even *mahārajās* (rulers of the princely states), not to mention rich businesspeople and stiff-upper-lip administrators and judges – to office-clerks and wage-earners with no access to culturally-diversified products and services. “Thus, the (...) “chicken pies” (Roy 1953, 205) (...) of the *Sāhib-s* have their keen interest for many colonial-era Bengali sleuths, who seem to be, at the very least, deferential to their envisioning of the distant Occident in terms of what constituted modern civility’ (Chakrabarti 2012, 267).

Thus, by extension, one may also safely assume that Anglo-European cuisine had a privileged, if not even valorised, position in the pecking order of societal-cultural taste and the consumption of intercultural food that spanned the Eurasian spectrum, and became a marker of progressive and intellectual sociality. As Dipesh Chakrabarty astutely points out in his essay ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?’, while discussing a paragraph from the autobiography of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, ‘the desire to be “modern” screams out of every sentence’ (Chakrabarty 1992, 10) – in this context, every intercultural recipe – in almost every ‘bourgeois private’ (*ibid.*, 9) narrative of self-ascription. From this perspective, it is quite evident, [a]s Meredith Borthwick, Ghulam Murshid, and other scholars have shown, [that] the eighteenth-century European idea of “civilization” culminated, in early nineteenth-century India, in a full-blown imperialist critique of Indian/Hindu domestic life, which was now held to be inferior to what became mid-Victorian ideals of bourgeois democracy’.

Thus, when Kaliprasanna Singha dwells on the various *śakhs* (= fancies, whims based on prevalent fashions) that seem to have been current amongst the English-educated, moneyed, enthusiastic and, yet, leisure-obsessed ‘gentlemen’ of his time – the mid-nineteenth century – one gets a tentative sense of the tenuous coalescing of, in the words of H  l  ne Cixous, ‘the other side of the self’ (Cixous 1979, 408). These were the in/famous *b  bus*, leisured aristocrats who seem to have led a deeply and radically split existence between the demands of conforming to the self-critical – at best – and self-flagellating – certainly not at worst – criteria of Europhile and Europhone ‘modernity’ in public life and the maintenance of an interiorised traditionalist private sphere. It does appear that the occasional wild interculturality of Anglo-Indian cuisine and, even more so, the pathways through which it enters the Bengali-speaking household – even if not its most interiorised spaces – belie the very premises of the argument for the configuration of a new, hybrid taste in culinary matters.

and the recipient of an Honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement (1992) from Audrey Hepburn, one of his favourite Hollywood-actresses.

16. Jayanta and Manik are a detective-duo, in the manner of Holmes and Watson, who solve a number of mysteries using, in a Poirot-esque manner, “the little grey cells”; some of their best-known narratives are *C  bi   bam Khil* (‘Key and Bolt’) and *  kratti M  ti* (‘A Speck of Dirt’) (Roy 1953, 203-22) (Chakrabarti 2012, 266, n. 14).

There seems to be transgenic multivalence in this composite cuisine, but there is always the looming suggestion of an overarching imbalance of power in the terms of the exchange, occasioning what Homi Bhabha calls ‘that occult instability which presages powerful cultural changes’ (Bhabha 2006, 157). This instability, in the case of Bengali cuisine, seems to have had a second coming.

It should be noted that the ‘fowl-cutlet’, a typically-Calcuttan innovation consisting of a breaded or batter-fried chicken cutlet, without any strong spices, such as ginger, onion and garlic, is a dish that functions with such occult instability. It acts as an intercultural bridge between two separate concepts, that of roasted wildfowl – as coming from England – and the batter-coating that is so distinctly an Anglo-Indian colonial invention, straight from the *burra khana*s (lavish dinners on festive occasions, usually Christmas, that were common in colonial officialdom and other sections of Anglo-Indian ‘high society’) of the pages of William Makepeace Thackeray’s (1811–1863) novels. The mutton *singāḍā* is a representative example of what one may term twice-born interculturality. Originally, a non-vegetarian Central Asian dish, it has come to be a largely vegetarian one at least in West Bengal, if not in Bangladesh, although the mutton-filled variant seems to be preferred by many Bengali detectives and other fictional characters. It needs to be noted that this is not just an issue of personal taste and preference but also symptomatic of a broader pattern of the privileging of meat-eating amongst Bengali-speaking elites. Of course, this ought to be done in the *pucca śāhebi* (perfect western) style, with cutlets, chops, mutton, and not the lowly home-grown *pānthā* (Indian goat), and, of course, knives and forks.

As Utsa Ray has shown, while discussing the short story *Rātārāti* (‘Over the Night’, 1929–30) by Paraśurām, the Bengali writer of primarily social satire, colonial modernity and, especially, the transgenic intercultural grafts it had brought to Bengal had conjured into existence a ‘hybridity of taste [that] tells us the story of the construction of the colonial middle-class’ (Ray 2015, 1). Simultaneously, while underscoring the alienation-effect of this modernity and the deeply-subversive role it played with regard to the self-critique of early-colonial Bengali society, it should be useful to keep in mind the aspirational hierarchies occasioned by the operation of the colonial power-gradient. The latter triggered an occasionally-notional and, hence, almost comic predilection for crossover cuisine and dishes, like the *murgir French mālpōā* (an originally-sweet Bengali pancake stuffed with chicken, *à la française*) in Paraśurām’s story. Thus, it is quite self-evident that ‘the early-twentieth-century Indian, especially Bengali, intelligentsia – of which the figure of the detective is a part – remained an avid consumer of socio-cultural Anglophilia (...) [that] extended to the domains of popular culture [and] cuisine’ (Chakrabarti 2012, 256). The resultant openness to border-crossing and interstitial food and dietary-culinary practices was a subset of the broader scheme of cultivating oneself in the practice of Anglo-European societal-cultural choices and preferences. In the process, a culinary

hybrid that has managed to survive the rollback of Empire through continuous evolution and self-reconfiguration came into being.

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