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Culinary Communion: Decoding the Interplay of Rituals and Food in Chitrita Banerji's *The Hour of the Goddess*

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Abstract:

Culture in India is a rich tapestry of beliefs, behaviours, customs, traditions, and values that are manifested through music, dance, theatre, storytelling, and festivals, to name a few. These festivals and ceremonies are not just events but are marked by certain acts or series of acts called rituals. These rituals, performed with devotion and reverence, add spirituality to human life.

This study explores the world of rituals in Chitrita Banerji's *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food, and Ritual in Bengal* (2001), in which food plays a significant role as offerings to gods. It explores the Bengali culture through the culinary pathways with elaborate depictions of cooking utensils, kitchen tools and dining practices and women's role in food preparation during rituals in Bengali homes. Focusing on the socio-cultural aspect, the paper inspects the intricate relationship between food and rituals presented in the work and examine the negotiation of different culinary practices through foodscapes. The research methodology employed to study these aspects is an exploratory and textual analysis of the selected novel. The present study offers implications for a deeper comprehension of cultural heritage through culinary practices.

Keywords: Culture, Bengal, Offerings, Food culture, Traditions, Rituals, Foodscapes.

Introduction

Most of the ancient Indian philosophical traditions discuss the importance of food. In the quest for the truth or essence of existence, food is developed throughout the essence of Brahma. In Hinduism, it is a broader understanding that “*Annam ha vai Brahma*”, meaning food is a form of Brahma (Taittirīya Upanishad 2.1). This might be the reason why “*Anna dan*”, or food as a form of charity, is regarded as the ultimate gift that bestows unmatched piety and is given the greatest place. Food can be seen as a way of receiving the highest spiritual experience of God's love and human love. According to Corrie Norman (2012), food has facilitated peoples' relationships with their gods and with each other. Whether it was Brahmans who cooked the world into existence or Adam and Eve who were expelled from paradise due to an apple, food has always played an important role in religion. With customs of fasting and feasting in different religions, food occupies centre stage as a crucial performative part of belief. Food offerings are an important part of religious rituals and beliefs in many religions. The practice of offering food is a way to show gratitude, respect, and devotion to deities, ancestors or the divine. These offerings range from simple fruit and flowers to complex dishes that require hours of preparation. The purpose and significance of food offerings may vary depending on religion, culture, and occasion. However, they often serve as a way to establish a connection between the material and spiritual realms, to seek blessings or protection to honour the deceased, and are expressions of love and devotion.

Chitrita Banerji's *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food, and Ritual in Bengal* is one such food memoir that captures the intricate link between food and rituals of Bengal. The food memoir is the author's journey from childhood to womanhood in Kolkata, in which she highlights multiple issues keeping food in the main frame. From the comforting pleasures of her youth in Bengal to the exotic flavors of her journeys throughout India, Banerji utilizes food as a lens through which readers can chronicle the moments of devotion, love, longing, suffering and growth in her life. The eleven chapters in the text revolve around Bengali food and culture, with a focus on the role of food in religious rituals and offerings.

Food and Offerings

Food and rituals have always been interwoven in Indian culture. However small or basic the worship is, offerings are an unavoidable act. Chitrita mentions some of these intricate offerings in the second chapter of the text titled *Feeding the Gods*. She remembers how, on occasions like the birthday of Lord Krishna, women of the house would cook elaborate vegetarian meals, which were then offered to Krishna. A special offering of this day was the sweet fritters made from extracted pulp and juice of ripe *taal* (fruit of palm tree) mixed with ground coconut rice flour. The dishes are first offered to the Lord and then this blessed food, *prasad*, is distributed among the devotees. Remembering the festivity of Durga Puja, Chitrita mentions the richness of offerings made to the Goddess. The festivity would last for ten days and an array of dishes like *luchis* (deep fried puffed bread), *alur dam* (spicy potato curry), tamarind sauce, *chholar dal* (split peas curry), meat, rice pudding and others would be prepared and offered to the Goddess. In another instance, the text also refers to *paramano* (best rice or ultimate rice in Bengali and Sanskrit) as the favorite food of almost every God and Goddess. This sweet dish is made by cooking rice in milk. In Indian philosophy, rice and milk are believed to represent purity and prosperity when cooked together. They are considered to have sattvic qualities, promoting clarity of mind and well-being. This significance makes ‘paramano’ a vital part of Indian rituals and traditions, as well as a favorite dish of gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology. *Paramano*, thus, becomes a must in most of the sacred rituals.

Not only during festivals but offerings are part of everyday worship in many Hindu households. Every morning and evening Chitrita’s grandmother would offer a variety of seasonal fruits, *batashas*, sweets, raisins, and tulsi leaves to God. The ritualistic offering of food to the deity transforms the nature of the food. It elevates to the level of celestial and becomes a bridge that engulfs the chasm between the earthbound worshipper and the Divine. As Khare (1992) explores in classical Hindu thought, food is the universe in both its physical and moral manifestations. It is believed to be the primary connection between humans and gods. Wirzba, in *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (2011), too, believes that food is one of God’s fundamental and enduring ways of showing divine love and care. Offering food to Gods ensures the divine presence in them and eating the food with the feeling of presence of the divine affirms the earthly manifestation of God’s eternal love. As Banerji also mentions that “by preparing and offering food, the earthbound worshipper can bridge the gulf between mortality and divinity”

(04). The ritualistic offerings are part of a larger cultural and religious framework in which food itself becomes a medium to communicate with the divine. The act of offering symbolizes a devotee's selflessness and surrender to God.

Both God and humans co-produce food, with humans using their technology and labor to create the necessary conditions while gods create sufficient conditions by supplying rain and a favorable natural setting. This cooperation is assured by men offering food to the Gods and consuming their leftovers in the form of *prasadam/prasad*. Arjun Appadurai (1981) also observes that the clothes that the deities wear, the water that they drink or use, and most importantly, the food that they are believed to have consumed are concrete manifestations of honor. The food that is offered to the Divine, referred to as *naivedya* and *Prasad*, is the returned or partially eaten food that is returned by God with their blessings. Only after the deity is fed, man can consume what is left because "Human desire and saliva destroy the purity of the offering" (16). No matter how intense the temptation is, food for the gods cannot be touched or tasted beforehand. The offerings should be in pure form. Tasting the food before the offering is thought to corrupt its purity by introducing the taster's personal energies or saliva (Srinivas 40). Since Divinity represents ultimate power, it should be given only the purest form of food. The practice also signifies the prioritization of God's acceptance before fulfilling one's desires. By offering food first to the deities, devotees express their devotion and acknowledge the importance of divine blessings in their lives.

When it comes to purity, among the offerings made to Gods, milk is considered to be the purest edible that belongs to the sattvic category. Unlike tamasic and rajasic food, it does not invoke worldly desires when consumed. This is the reason why this element is common in worship. Even the sages who had given up worldly pleasures and were in search of the Ultimate Truth survived on milk offered by local people. But the property of milk is such that the introduction of even a small element endangers its purity. Chitrita mentions two excerpts – first, a famous Bengali folktale of two brothers and another one, a tale from Mahabharata that hints at the fragile nature of milk. The Bengali folktale is about two young princes, *Sheet* (winter) and *Basanta* (spring), who separate from each other. *Basanta*, the younger brother, was raised by a holy man. He hears two parrots talking about the beautiful princess *Rupabati*. Anyone who would bring the marvelous gem from the head of the king of elephants would marry the princess. Hearing this, *Basanta* sets on the trail. After travelling for twelve years and thirteen days, he

reaches the kingdom of the elephants. He sees a great white mountain below which flows the river of milk. He climbs the mountain and witnesses a huge ocean of thick and rich milk in the midst of which notices the elephant king. On the head of this milky white elephant was a gem that was the brightest of all the jewels of the world when put together. Basanta quickly jumped into the ocean of milk, but the moment he touched the ocean's surface, it turned into a sandy desert. Here, the quest of Basanta for the marvelous gem on the head of the elephant king symbolizes the desire. Basanta symbolizes humans in general and this whole instance of turning the ocean of milk into sand shows how even abstract forms like desire and greed can destroy the purity of milk. Banerji narrates a similar lesson in the story from Mahabharata where "...the gods and demons got together to churn the ocean of milk in the hope of obtaining ambrosia which would make them immortal...the ocean of milk was transformed into the expanse of salt water that we mortals know today" (109).

Both incidents hint at the fragile nature of this life-giving fluid. As soon as a foreign element (even in abstract form) is added, it destroys the nature of milk. Even in Buddhism, milk has a special place. After gaining Nirvana, Buddha broke his fast by consuming milk-based products. The pure nature of this life-sustaining fluid makes it one of the best offerings for Gods.

Festivals like Makar Sankranti, Baisakhi, Lohri, Bihu, Wangala, Ka Pomblang Nongkrem, Nuakhai, Gudi Padwa, Onam, Pongal, Ugadi are some famous harvest festivals in which rituals of offering the harvest to the God is practised. In Bengal, Banerji's novel documents a similar harvest ritual to Ritu puja or Itu puja. In this ritual, five kinds of food grains are filled in an earthen pot with moist earth and a small pitcher filled with water is placed in the centre of the pot. The women of the house water the pot every Sunday for a month and pray to the Sun God. At the end of the month, the grains are harvested and rice pudding is prepared and offered to the god. Appadurai in *Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia* (1981) views food as a bond between God and Man. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that the God Indra is the God of rain. He sees man as the Bondsman who needs to serve the Lord, whom he considers the Master. To keep the Lord happy so that he can provide him with rain and he can grow crops, he needs to offer the food to God. The food offered is then consumed by Man, referred to as Prasad, a divine food. Thus, the first harvest is offered to the Gods and Goddesses so they can seek their blessings and have an impact of divinity on their food.

Chitrita Banerji, while exploring her childhood days in Kolkata, remembers the program of kirtans (devotional singing accompanied by musical instruments) organised in her grandparents' house. In Kirtan, people sang verses from the Middle Ages about Krishna and his earthly love, Radha, the milkmaid. With their eyes closed and their arms up, they danced to the rhythm as if offering themselves to the Almighty. She writes, "Hunting for batashas was the obligatory ritual which ended the evenings..." (13). The function ended with a playful ritual called *Harir loot* in which *batashas* were dashed in the air. People would drop to their knees and take as much of the holy loot as possible. Geertz (2010) views rituals as the kernel of religion. It unites the real and imagined worlds through a unique set of metaphorical forms. Here, the showering of batashas and the sweetness of it stands for blessings of the divine Krishna, one of the avatars of Lord Vishnu as mentioned in *Vishnupuran*. The loot symbolises the human intent to collect blessings as much as they can so that they can live a happy life. God is the giver and taker of life. He manages the whole universe and thus can take away the sorrows of life if one has his blessings.

Chitrita fondly remembers her grandmother often preaching her to worship Lord Krishna because the latter believed that worshipping Krishna is a way of knowing him and celebrating one's feeling of affection for him. One of the best ways to get close to the Lord is by offering food to him. This communion with the Lord through the culinary pathway is what Chitrita describes when she reports her grandmother saying, "Remember, you are the food, because the god who made you is also the food. And in order to live, you must love him every day with food" (18).

Whenever the author would sit with her grandmother after the evening worship, her grandmother would share religious philosophy, ancient myths, and tales with seven-year-old Chitrita. She would tell her God is the being, he is the consciousness and the joy. One must feed the God every day. Offering one's favourite food will make them taste even better. Food transgresses the boundary of mortality and divinity. The text gives reference to Upanishads, which describe the human soul liberated from mortality roaming around the universe and chanting joyously, "I am food, I am an eater of food" (15). This idea indicates the interconnectedness of existence in the food chain and the cyclical nature of life. It acknowledges that while humans consume food to sustain life, they are also food for other beings, either literally in the natural world or metaphorically at the end of life. Smith shares the idea that the

act of eating symbolises not merely the physical consumption of food but also the broader assimilation of experiences and knowledge (185). The cyclical theme of the eater becoming food and food becoming the eater reflects the idea of rebirth and the flow of energy within the universe. The chant, therefore, emphasises the role of food as both the sustainer of life and a symbol for the broader concept of life itself.

Mourning rituals and dietary restrictions

Food is an important element in many cultures and religions during death rituals. Chitrita remembers the day her father died. Through her memoir, she recollects that entire mourning period through food. After the death of her father, she experiences changes in food habits and living style of the family during the mourning period of thirteen days. All the family members had to live on one meal a day. The rice and vegetables were cooked with no oil in an earthen pot, and no other spices were added except sea salt. Only a touch of ghee was added to the pot to make the dish eatable. It was only after the third day of Shraddha, *Niyambhanga*, that things would start returning back to normal. She quotes: “On this day, members of the bereaved family invite all their relatives to lunch, and an elaborate meal is served, representing the transition between the austerity of mourning and normal life” (103).

Apart from festivals, marriages, or births, feasts are an essential part of death rituals in Indian culture. In Bengali culture, they call it *Niyambhanga*. On this day, various dishes are prepared, and all the relatives of the deceased family are invited to lunch. The feast brings people together and allows them to share their grief. This act of bonding through feasting also marks the transition from the severity of mourning to normal life.

Chitrita Banerji, through the delineation of food practices in Bengali households, reveals society’s attitude towards widows and their dietary practices. She critiques the socio-cultural practice in which, after the death of her husband, things change drastically for a widow. She is not allowed to enjoy the elaborate meal of *Niyambhanga*, and there are strict rituals that she has to follow for a lifetime. She has to fast, pray and prepare feasts for Brahmins multiple times in a year. However, she has to deny the pleasures of eating to avoid widowhood in her next birth. Amish foods (non-vegetarian food) are forbidden for the widows. Whenever the monsoon arrives on the first day of *Ambubachi* (a three-day period in the Bengali month of *Asharh*), they “...

were not allowed to eat some foods that had been prepared in advance; boiled rice was absolutely forbidden” (101). Widows have to survive on the stale food for three days during this period. The day before *Ambubachi* they would prepare enough *luchis* and vegetables for three days. Even the milk cannot be heated for them. Therefore, kheer was prepared. The touch of fire was forbidden for the widow's food. The reason behind these restrictions is the ancient belief of seeing the period of *ambubachi* as “nature's manifestation of menstruating femininity” (101). This was the period of earth's receptive fertility, and women without husbands abstained from happiness and so had to suffer more during these times. Also, widows needed to fast on every eleventh day of the new moon. During the fast, they were not allowed to ingest anything, not even water. They devote their lives entirely to the Divine and, through these strict rituals, try to climb the stairs of spirituality.

Deprivation like this symbolizes their renunciation of worldly desires and pleasures. Here, the broader patriarchal context comes into play. The societal value of a woman is often seen in relation to her husband. In *Gender, Caste and Labour* (1995), Uma Chakrabarti emphasizes the deep-seated patriarchal belief that a woman's social identity is established only when she becomes a wife and the death of her husband signifies the end of her social existence and identity. Rituals like abstaining widows from cooking during *ambubachi* or expecting them to fast regularly become tools for the patriarchal society to dominate the widows. However, there is another side to this mourning practice and proscription of certain foods. One of the reasons for restrictions on certain foods may be that certain foods rich in carbohydrates comfort us while others do not. Consuming food shared with or liked by the spouse may evoke memories of the past events and aggravate the pain of losing the partner; hence, it is not allowed to be consumed. These are some intricate ways our socio-cultural and religious practices shape our experiences and perceptions about life, death, mourning and community support.

Traversing memory and foodscapes

Through this memoir, Chitrita Banerji takes readers on a journey to different places like India, Bangladesh and America through foodscapes (places where one cooks food, eats, talks about food or derives some significance from food). She negotiates between food, festivals, and the culture of these places. Remembering her first Christmas in America, Chitrita observes that

“The joys of giving, receiving, merrymaking, and eating were off-limits to all but the inner circle” and that festivals and celebrations are private affairs in America (05). On the day of Christmas, the city streets in America are deserted and shops are closed. People exchange gifts and enjoy lavish meals inside their houses. The celebrations in America are limited to family and friends, unlike in India, where “festivities are about inclusion and community participation” (04). She gives an example of Durga Puja, which is celebrated in India. During this festival, people in her hometown wear colourful clothes and meet each other on the streets. They visit the *pandals* and accept the *Prashad*. Communal participation is a cornerstone of Indian festivals, fostering unity and social cohesion (Gold 2015). One of the key elements of festivals in India is communal feasting, where individuals come together to share food and experiences. Through these shared meals, people can converse, bond over cultural traditions and support one another.

After her marriage to a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh, Chitrita learned some interesting facts about Islamic culture and traditions. Unlike the culture she has grown up in, there is no “humanly definable shape” (64) of God in her in-laws’ house, and God is never given offerings of sweets and fruits. It is only during Bakr-id that food became part of their worship to honour the Old Testament story of Abraham’s willingness to offer his son as a sacrifice to the Lord. The cows and goats are bought and offered to God as *korbani* (sacrifice). The meat is then shared among friends, families and the poor. During Shab-e-Barat, a variety of *haluas*, made with pea flour, plain white flour, nuts, gluten, carrot, eggs and meat are prepared. Through these instances given in the text, one can observe that different religions have different traditions and rituals, which change according to people’s beliefs.

Festivals provide a platform for exchanging stories, memories, and knowledge, creating a rich tapestry of experiences that contribute to the community’s cultural heritage. The memoir portrays the differences in communal interaction during festivals between India, England, and Bangladesh, emphasizing their diverse approaches to celebrations. Festivities in India and Bangladesh highlight communal participation, spirituality, and food sharing, while those in America are depicted as more intimate and family-focused. These contrasting dynamics show how festivals meet each community's social and cultural needs based on their values and priorities.

Conclusion

The food memoir, *The Hour of the Goddess*, written by Chitrita Banerji, is a well-researched text that, apart from narrating the story of the author's life, traces the cultural, religious and spiritual significance of food in Indian society. In the text, Banerji describes her childhood through the skilled cuisines prepared in her grandmother's house, the daily food items made and the rich dishes prepared during festivals. The whole process is expressed in such a way that her entire childhood seems to be a story about Bengali food culture. The book delves into the culinary traditions of Bengal and how they are intrinsically linked to the religious and cultural practices of the region. The importance of offering food is beautifully elucidated in the text. The grandmother's culinary skills and her spirituality, which she practices through offerings made to God, are the major themes. Offerings are an essential element of any festivals or occasions in India. Offerings are such an important ritual that food is offered to the Gods and Goddesses even when a woman is praying to the Divine in her home. Since the food is believed to be eaten by the Lord, not anything and everything can be offered. The *satvic* foods are generally offered to them. As mentioned in the text, these include milk, *batashas*, *paramano*, seasonal fruits, sweets and raisins. The act of offering food is not merely a physical act but a spiritual one, signifying the transformation of the nature of the food into a sacred offering, later consumed in the form of *Prasad*. The tradition exemplifies the reciprocity between humans and the divine. By partaking in the *Prasad*, individuals affirm their acceptance of the divine blessings and establish a sense of communion with the divine.

Food transcends the boundary between mortality and divinity, embodying physical sustenance and spiritual connection. In the rituals and cultural practices of Indian society, the act of offering food to the Divine represents a bridge between the material and the divine, reinforcing the belief in the interconnectedness of earthly existence with the spiritual realm. By presenting food as a reverent offering to the Divine, individuals acknowledge the eternal cycle of sustenance and nourishment that emanates from the divine source. Offering food to the Divine symbolises selflessness and surrender to God. It represents the devotee's acknowledgement of the divine as the ultimate provider, and the act of offering becomes a gesture of gratitude and humility. Through this offering, individuals express their willingness to cooperate with the divine will and seek blessings for themselves and their loved ones.

The offering of food also serves as a poignant reminder of the cyclical nature of life. From the religious perspective, food symbolises the embodiment of divine creation and blessings. The offerings reflect the human acknowledgement of the divine as the ultimate source of sustenance and a cycle of giving and receiving that connects the physical with the spiritual. Furthermore, food represents the human life cycle itself. Just as seeds germinate, grow and yield new seeds and eventually die, humans too are born, mature, produce offspring, and die. This transformation of food from seed to plant to consumable item and back to the soil as compost mirrors human's own journey of growth, sustenance, and eventual return to the earth.

Food, as a sustainer of life, also embodies the transient nature of human existence. The act of offering food to the Divine represents a renunciation of worldly desires and pleasures, signifying the detachment from material attachments and the ephemeral nature of physical sustenance. By presenting nourishment to the Divine, individuals express their willingness to transcend the transient pleasures of the material world in pursuit of spiritual nourishment and fulfillment.

In conclusion, the significance of food in Indian culture extends beyond its tangible aspects. It encapsulates the cyclical nature of life, the interconnectedness of mortal existence with the divine, and the renunciation of worldly desires. By offering food and recognising its transformative power, individuals affirm their devotion and express their gratitude, fostering a profound bond with the Divine. This sacred practice underscores the richness of offerings and the spiritual significance of food, emphasising its pivotal role in uniting the human experience with the divine realm.

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