

WOMEN'S FOOD-WORLD THROUGH EXPLORATION OF SAADH IN THE MANGAL KAVYAS

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ABSTRACT

The *saadh* or *saadh-bhakshan* tracts in the Bengali Mangal Kavya literature from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries describe a pregnant women's platter on her *saadh* (pre-child birth ritual). In *saadh* ritual a woman, usually in a matured stage of her pregnancy, expresses the food cravings she feels. Her associates then go on to prepare a platter containing her desired food as well as other delicacies. The pregnant lady is indulged with the food and well wishes in the auspicious celebration of the impending child-birth. The *saadh* verses describe at various length the food and flavours women enjoy in pregnancy, the dishes they like to offer/feed themselves, the recipes they follow while cooking for a fellow woman, and the raw foods they share amongst themselves or collect from the surroundings for cooking. I intend to analyze how the popular character of Mangal Kavya as a literary genre entails the narrativization of a food-scape that particularly belongs to the women. I evaluate the culture of women's food in pre-modern Bengal by juxtaposing the *saadh* tracts with other narratives of food from the same texts that describe dishes prepared for the husbands and other males of the clan. This paper proposes a nuanced understanding of the Bengali food-culture by engaging with its pre-modern evolution and focusing on the gendered elements that were distinctly present in the cuisine that took shape during the medieval centuries.

Keywords: Women, food-culture, medieval Bengal

Introduction

Silence and underrepresentation are the difficulties we frequently confront while studying women's history. It is a researcher's task to locate the texts that speak of women's lives and identify the methodologies through which we may grasp segments of history from women's perspective. This task is especially challenging (and exciting) when the text itself is a parcel of normative representation of the patriarchal society. This paper explores the scopes to reconstruct women's food-world in medieval Bengal through a critical reading of the Mangal Kavya texts. The *saadh* or *saadh-bhakshan* tracts in the Bengali Mangal Kavya literature from the sixteenth

and seventeenth centuries describe a pregnant women's platter on her *saadh* (pre-child birth ritual). In *saadh* ritual a woman, usually in a matured stage of her pregnancy, expresses the food cravings she feels. Her associates then go on to prepare a platter containing her desired food as well as other delicacies. The pregnant lady is indulged with the food and well wishes in the auspicious celebration of the impending child-birth. The *saadh* verses describe at various length the food and flavours women enjoy in pregnancy, the dishes they like to offer/feed themselves, the recipes they follow while cooking for a fellow woman, and the raw foods they share amongst themselves or collect from the surroundings for cooking. I intend to analyze how the popular character of Mangal Kavya as a literary genre entails the narrativization of a food-scape that particularly belongs to the women. I evaluate the culture of women's food in pre-modern Bengal by juxtaposing the *saadh* tracts with other narratives of food from the same texts that describe dishes prepared for the husbands and other males of the clan. This paper proposes a nuanced understanding of the Bengali food-culture by engaging with its pre-modern evolution and focusing on the gendered elements that were distinctly present in the cuisine that took shape during the medieval centuries.

During the medieval centuries Bengali identity evolved through processes of cultural, linguistic, and geo-political consolidation (Eaton, 1993). Ancient Bengal was an assemblage of physical, political, and cultural sub-regions like Pundra, Gaur, Rarh, Sumbha, Vajra (Brahma), Tamralipti, Samatata, and Banga (Ray & Hood, 2013). The Bengali ethnicity was defined and re-defined through mutual intermingling of aboriginal population and earlier settlers with groups that migrated in phases and eventually settled in the land. The subregional cultural identity in Bengal is thus a compound product where the trends of adaptation are traceable throughout. Especially since the post-Gupta era, the Aryan- Brahmanical identity emerged as the socially dominant one but its cultural presence never became homogeneous—cultural diversification tapped on the impact of various social and religious forces including that of Jainism, Buddhism, Lokataya and Sahajiya sects, and later, of Islam. The mainstream cultural formulation often retained many of the earlier and peripheral forms of popular beliefs and practices within its layers. Both the evolution of the Mangal Kavyas as a popular literary genre and the imprints of material culture that they reflect to, including the references to food practices, are needed to be situated within this backdrop of socio-cultural adaptation.

Literature Review: Contextualizing the Mangal Kavyas

The Mangal Kavyas or Panchali Kavyas are ritualistic lyrical ballads written in vernacular Bengali between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. These are 'normative and didactic narratives' (Curley, 2008) meant to propagate worship of certain non-Puranic Gods and Goddesses. These songs were performed, usually for consecutive days, in front of an agglomerate local audience during the worship. The performance had a ritualistic-ameliorative purpose and

was considered an essential part of the worship. The compositions are mostly based on the contemporary oral tradition of mythical tales associated with the cults that had earlier, sometimes identifiable as archaic, roots. The oral and non-Puranic/ non-Brahmanical base of the Mangal Kavyas as well as their performative aspects render significant popular character to this genre of literature. The mundane, the everyday, and the households have been amply narrativized in these texts.

The three popular cults on which the Mangal Kavyas were extensively written are the cults of Manasa, Chandi, and Dharma. Sukumar Sen finds that the *Manasamangals* were the most widespread throughout Bengal; the *Chandimangals* were popular amongst a relatively upper section of the society; and the *Dharmamangals* had a limited prevalence within certain section of the community (Sen, 1991). The *Manasamangal* and *Chandimangal* texts are not only centred on female deities, Manasa and Chandi, respectively, the compositions moreover allow us glimpses into women's religious and household activities in medieval society. Women were the primary worshippers and many elements of the *vrata* tradition—i.e., ritualistic practices common amongst the Bengali women throughout ages—have been incorporated (and formalized). As Ratnabali Chatterjee's observation on the *Chandimangal* by Mukundaram goes, these poetry 'moved from an abstract to a historical narrative' in and through their depiction of women (Chatterjee, 2001). Most of the *Mansamangal* and *Chandimangal* texts contain illustrative *saadh* tracts that have been extensively used for the present study.

The entire Mangal Kavya literature is authored by male poets from the upper-caste background. Their engagement with the popular and non-Puranic deities may be understood as structured within the social dynamics of the day. The texts, while highlighting the popular beliefs and practices, including the elements from the women's domain of religiosity and household, in a sense act to formalize these non-elite segments within a frame of the dominant Brahmanical-patriarchal social structure. This is exemplified in the overt didactic and normative approach of the narrative. Characters like Khullana and Nidaya, two principal female characters from the *Chandimangal* texts, are presented as idealized versions of the conformist social roles ascribed to women—as wives and as bearer of the male heir. These are also the roles that place them specifically within the mundane life oriented to everyday and household activities. The *saadh tracts* are significant as representation of an essentially female experience, that of pregnancy food cravings. However, it would be interesting to note that the texts speak about the women who secured the most honorable social position in terms of the patriarchal parameter as legitimate wives of the male protagonists, and are going through an equally prestigious phase in their lives as being pregnant with the male child. My exposition of women's food-world is essentially grounded on these dynamics inscribed in the Mangal Kavya texts.

Saadh: The Desire

The tradition of pre-child birth ritual is present among many communities in the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The *saadh* ritual is still practiced by the present-day Bengali Hindus and the historical evolution of the ritual through ages would offer a provocative area for study. Here, however, I focus on the pre-modern features of *saadh*. The word *Saadh* may be translated as ‘desire’ or ‘wish’ in English. Indeed, in the medieval context the *saadh* ceremony begins with the pregnant lady expressing her desire for certain foods as the Mangal Kavya verses demonstrate. In Kavikankan Mukunda’s *Chandimangal* (sixteenth century text from Rarh) Khullana, the wife of merchant Dhanapati, is quite explicit on her food-cravings when she is pregnant with their son Srimanta— “*Garver dekhiya bhar Mone boro laage dor Khudha trishna naahi ekmaas/ Aapnar jay mon Jadi pai se benjan/ Tabe khai dui chaari graas*” [Gestation makes me anxious and I have lost my appetite for the past month/ I think I can eat a little only if I get the food of my cravings](Chakravarty & Sen, 1975, p. 215). In Dvija Ramdev’s *Abhayamangal* (a mid-seventeenth century text from Chittagong), similarly, Khulana, when in her matured stage of pregnancy, reveals her food-cravings to the elder co-wife Lahana: “Khulana says, Didi, what can I say/ I always crave for the choice food only” (Ramadeva & Das, 1957, p. 289).

In Ayurveda diet of the pregnant lady was believed to have direct implication in health of foetus (Weiss-Amer, n.d.). Traditional medicinal texts contain detailed prescription on pregnancy food—both the food to eat and those to be avoided. A comparative study of medicinal texts with the *saadh*-tracts might be useful for understanding the relation between scripture and practice, however, that is beyond the purview of the present study. What I find most significant about the *saadh* tracts is that these narratives, and the ritual, prioritize what the woman herself prefers to eat. *Saadh*, clearly, is not the prescription food, but an acknowledgment and celebration of a woman’s altered taste preference while experiencing gestation. In addition, it indicates that the connection between the woman’s bodily experience and her food is well-recognized in the food-practices in medieval Bengal.

The following sections explore the food-practices with reference to taste, flavour, recipe and ingredient proclivities specific to the pregnant women.

Shaak: The Quintessential Greens

Shaak—the green leafy edible parts from the creeper-climber plants and shrubs that are widely devoured in Bengal—is the most essential item in a *saadh* platter. We get consistent and repeated mention of *shaak* as a choice food the pregnant woman expresses cravings for. The preparation of *saadh* always starts with collection of *shaak*. The minute attention the Mangal Kavya texts

pay in narrating the event confirms that it was an essential and elaborate part of the *saadh* ritual. The depiction of *Dua*, the maid, merrily roaming around the neighborhoods with her *chubri* (wicker basket/bowl) to gather the plants is recurrent in the texts. A wide variety of plant names are mentioned, a few examples of which may be presented. In Mukundaram's *Chandimangal* we get the following assortments: 'natya raanga', 'paat', 'palanga', 'naalita', 'palta', 'bon-pui', 'hincha', 'kalmi', 'danikala', 'mahuri', 'solpa', 'dhonya', 'khirpai', 'bet', 'pui', 'punka', 'knaachra', 'kaankuri', 'karela', and 'laau-dogaa' (Chakravarty & Sen, 1975, pp. 215–216). Dvija Madhav lists: 'kalam', 'bastuk', 'langa', 'aalbaash', 'putikaa', 'ban-saachi', 'telakuchi', 'kaakmachhi', 'rangima-geema', 'matar', 'palanga', 'patua', 'chuo', 'ghuna', 'chhola', 'shoirshop', 'dunaa', 'gaangsaicha', and 'marisaa' (Ramadeva & Das, 1957, pp. 289–290).

Shaak had a ritualistic significance in the cultural perception of food, as is implied in the concept of 'choudda-shaak'—fourteen-plants—which is traditionally included in many ritualistic meals. *Chiranjeeva Banaushadhi*, a present-day Bengali Ayurveda text, mentions health benefits of *choudda-shaak*. That the traditional medicinal wisdom was innate in the food-world of medieval women can be conjectured from the reference to *Choudda-shaak* in Bijaya Gupta's *Manasamangal* (Gupta & Biswas, 2009, p. 230). The terms *saadh* and *shaak* are not only closely associated but almost interchangeable in usage in many Mangal Kavya narratives. "As soon as Lahana catches upon her co-wife's gesture (of food cravings--*saadh*)/ she sends the maid for collection of *shaak*" (Ramadeva & Das, 1957, p. 289). The phrase "*saadher shaak*" manifests the same (Gupta & Biswas, 2009, p. 18).

The assortment of plants for preparation of *shaak* include products from the household patches, the nearby fields (as leaves of some field crops including lentils and oilseeds are edible), as well as from the surrounding wild plants. Remarkably, none of them are market products. Both Mukundaram and Dvija Madhav describe how the maid visits ladies from the various caste and occupational groups living in the locality to gather *shaak*. She also wears a colourful saree or takes a decorative *chubri*, probably to mark the inauguration of the *saadh* ceremony (Chakravarty & Sen, 1975, p. 215). A habitual zone of reciprocity must have been vibrant in women's food practices. The bonding women share amongst themselves and the intimate relationship they have with the surroundings—the habitat—are manifested through food and ritual. These are some indicative features of a feminine food-scape in medieval Bengal.

The Sour, the Pungent, and the Fermented

A careful reading of the menu and recipes mentioned in the *saadh* verses, particularly in the two *Chandimangal* texts by Mukundaram and Dvija Madhava, indicate certain taste and flavour preferences. In the entire platter, sour foods are predominant. Tart fruits like *Paaka chholonga* (ripen Citrus fruit), *Kaamranga* (star fruit), *badari* (Indian jujube), *kul* (jujube), *aamsi* (dried

green mango chips) are some fruits that Khulana desires in the texts by Dvija Madhava and Mukundaram (Chakravarty & Sen, 1975, p. 215; Madhava & Bhattacharya, 1965, pp. 232–233). There are recipe suggestions to make the dishes sour as well. “*jadi kichhu pai such/ aamre musurer suup*” [I’ll be glad to get red lentil soup with raw mango added to it]; “*sholuk matser pona/ gota kasandi-gota jam mardi dibe tathi*” [add copiously mustard-mango sauce and tart black berries while cooking a river-murrel]. Use of *Katu-toila* (sesame oil) is preferred over *ghee* (clarified butter) to bring out the pungent tastes.

Subregional variations from eastern, northern and western parts of Bengal are identifiable from a comparison of the trends of taste and flavour mentioned in the texts belonging to each of these regions. Yet, some generalizations can be reached, especially if we contrast the *saadh* platter with the meal prepared for the male members of the family. The rich assortment of flavour and recipes mentioned in the *saadh* tracts are primarily associated with the domain of women. Women are not only the producer of these dishes, but they themselves are the consumers. Narratives of Khullana cooking for Dhanapati, and of Sanaka for Chaand Banik highlight much elaborate arrangements, both in terms of ingredients and preparation, that must be fitting for an affluent Bengali household of the time. In contrast, *saadh* foods, though not a compromise in terms of taste, are based on relatively ordinary items. Rather, enhancement of flavour using regular ingredients is a focus. In the *saadh* narrative of Ketakadas Khemamamda’s *Manasamangal*, the boost in flavour comes from *paanta-amaani* (fermented rice) and use of semi dried earthen pot to infuse the earthy flavour from clay to the preparation: “*pnaat-khola ruchi paaia heno bujhi/ praan tare dei daak/ paanta amaani paile ekhani/ sukhetee ahaar kari*” [I crave with my heart for the flavour of earthen pot/ if I get a pot of fermented rice, I’ll be so glad to eat] (Ksemananda & Bhattacharya, 1961, p. 15). Such food and flavours, as reflected from their mention in the description of the meagre meal of the poor forest dweller couple Kalketu-Fullara (Chakravarty & Sen, 1975, pp. 45–46), are in fact part of culinary practices of the marginal communities. The cultural boundaries are rather blurred, at least to an extent, when it comes to the food-world of the women.

Conclusion

The *saadh*-tracts describe the foods women in Medieval Bengal devoured during their pregnancy. The narratives show how women articulated religiosity, medicinal knowledge and bodily experience through the food they consumed. The combined culinary expression gave shape to certain feminine flavour and taste. They form part of a women’s food-scape that had distinct presence in the medieval culinary world. I postulate that it is the mundane and the everyday that characterize the women-centric food, the purview of which crosses social boundaries.

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