

## In Search Of Proper Diet For Kids: Concerns Regarding Children's Food As Reflected In Bengali Periodicals Of The Early Twentieth Century

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### **Abstract:**

*In colonial Bengal, the physical well being of the children became one very significant issue especially in the early twentieth century. Healthy children signified the healthy future of the society and children's health was dependent to a large extent on a healthy and nutritious diet. Therefore, concerns regarding children's food became one of the dominant anxieties among the Bengali Hindu middle class of the early twentieth century as reflected in the periodical literature of the period. The present paper will bring out the ways in which these concerns regarding the children's food became part of the broader perception of anxiety among the Bengali middle class. It will investigate how advices regarding nutritious meal for kids, right meal timing, proper school-tiffin, appropriate quantity of food, as well as the debate on traditional milk versus new patent foods occupied a significant portion of health related arguments in the Bengali periodical literature of the concerned period.*

**Keywords:** Food, Colonial Bengal, Middle Class, Children, Twentieth Century, Periodicals

“The temple like human body breaks down prematurely if the base of it is built with faulty ingredients. Similarly parental aloofness to the health of their children or unnecessary indulgence is a serious offence as the children are the future hope and dependence of the home, society and nation.<sup>1</sup>”

This passage quoted above is representative of a vast corpus of Bengali literature with arguments on the significance of children's food in the context of early twentieth century Bengal. “How to feed a child properly” - had become a major concern among the Bengali Hindu middle class since the late nineteenth century and the number of health guides, domestic manuals and periodical articles with issues like child health and ideal food for children increased rapidly especially in the early twentieth century. This paper investigates various aspects of the escalating concerns among the Bengali Hindu middle class regarding their children's food as reflected in the Bengali periodical literature of the early twentieth century. Children, in this article, will include both the infants, dependant on milk-diet as well as the school going kids who were getting acquainted with a new world of meal with the coming of the new school-tiffin concept. As the children were regarded as the base of the nation, their health and nutrition became very serious issues with the emerging spirit of nationalism of the colonial period. The authors of the periodical articles considered it as one major responsibility to provide appropriate advices and suggestions regarding how a Bengali child could get the “best possible diet” which could build them as healthy citizens of a nation. Therefore, “ideal

meal for the kids”, “nutritious diet”, “normal diet”- all these became very commonly used terms in the early twentieth century periodical literature.

Print language became the means of self-expression and critical exchange among this educated urban middle class.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Bengali Hindu middle class's concerns and anxieties were reflected through the pages of the printed texts among which periodicals occupied a very significant position. This paper will consult the Bengali periodicals like *Swasthya Samachar*, *Swasthya*, *Grihastha*, *Grihasthamangal*, *Prabashi*, *Bharatbarsha*, *Chikitsha Sammilani* and *Masik Basumati* to bring out the anxieties regarding child health and prescriptions regarding children's food. Most of the periodicals were published from Calcutta. The authors of the articles as well as the targeted readers of these periodicals were mostly the educated urban middle class of colonial Bengal.

The foremost emotion expressed in the pages of Bengali periodicals was that of distress, suffering and loss. Suffering or loss was portrayed as constraints created by an urban way of life over which the middle class had no control. As argued by Srirupa Prasad, ‘crisis’ became a visible narrative trope in the popular press by early twentieth century<sup>3</sup>. And this notion of crisis or ‘Duhsamay’ appeared both as a real and a perceived phenomenon. These periodicals were reflections of, how late colonial Calcutta embodied deterioration of the body and mind alike<sup>4</sup>. Through the writings of these periodicals, there came out a tension regarding ill health; a kind of ill-health which was not there in the ‘golden’ past and it was a certain product of colonial

urbanization. Anxieties about the physical welfare became great concerns with the broader perception of crisis to such an extent that crisis became synonymous with the poor health of the middle class Bengali. And these anxieties of the ailing or diseased body of the middle class were closely connected with the concerns regarding children's health as children were the future of the society. So, the arguments regarding children's health in general, and children's food in particular became one major issue in the periodical literature of early twentieth century Bengal.

#### **Artificial Baby-foods and Bengali middle class anxiety**

The term "artificial baby food" was not much familiar in colonial Bengal until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. With the turn of the century, the artificial baby food gradually paved its way into the colonial market and advertisements of various baby foods such as Lactogen natural milk-food, Allenbury's foods, Mellin's foods, Cow and Gate milk-food, Glaxo vitamin milk-food, Vita-Milk baby food<sup>5</sup> were becoming familiar day by day to the Bengali middle class households, especially in the urban areas like Calcutta. With this growing market of artificial baby foods, there arose a debate among the Bengali intelligentsia, medical practitioners as well as litterateurs, regarding the major question whether these new artificial baby foods could be a good substitute for the breast-milk or not. Although medical practitioners like Chunilal Bose supported the newly found baby foods<sup>6</sup> but the general tone in the periodical literature was not very supportive or positive towards the new baby food and canned milk foods.

An anonymous author wrote in *Swasthya Samachar* in 1920,

"Almost all doctors are unanimous at the point that mother's breast milk is the best food for infants. If the child is deprived of this food then he or she will surely face premature death or premature ageing. In this country, mothers always feel happiness and pride in breast-feeding. But, unfortunately there is an increasing trend of using artificial milk-foods in cities. The artificial milk-food is very harmful for the infants. These contain higher proportion of sugar and lesser amount of protein, fat and vitamin."<sup>7</sup>

Similar tone of rejection or negation towards the artificial baby foods was visible in most of the other periodical articles on the same kinds of issues. Bengali medical practitioners' articles are very much germane to this argument.

Doctor Basanta Kumar Chaudhuri, a Bengali doctor of the early twentieth century, regarded the breast milk as the only "normal food" (*swabhabik khadya* in Bengali)<sup>8</sup> while criticising the other milk foods. Dr. Chaudhuri blamed the doctors for making the artificial milk food more popular. According to him, the tendency of using artificial baby foods was more popular among the poorer section of the middle class who wanted to prove themselves as 'educated', 'modern' and 'civilised' by using those artificial milk-foods<sup>9</sup>. In another article, Dr. Chaudhuri advised the Bengali middle class to avoid this practice of using artificial milk

foods and even discussed in detail the process of breast feeding<sup>10</sup>. Dr. Jahnabi Charan Dasgupta, another medical practitioner of colonial Bengal, although supported the temporary use of such patent milk foods in his article, yet he vehemently negated the use of such patent foods as substitute of mother's breast milk<sup>11</sup>.

It is visible from the above arguments that an anxiety was prevalent among the Bengali middle class society regarding the increasing use of patent baby foods or artificial milk-foods in place of breast milk and the authors through the pages of the Bengali periodicals constantly tried to champion the traditional breast milk by elaborating the negative impacts of artificial milk's long term use. Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, who was an LMS (Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery), did not confine his arguments only in criticising the new baby foods; rather he moved further to search reasons behind the increasing dependence on the artificial milk foods. He blamed the pollution and artificial life style of the cities for the reduction in lactation which according to him was compelling the women of Bengali middle class society to depend on "other" milk foods<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, doctors' ignorance about the pros and cons of the milk foods and the lucrative advertisements of the new baby foods were also held as responsible for its escalating market in early twentieth century Bengal.

In this way, the Bengali periodical literature while critiquing the newly introduced artificial baby foods as infant's food enmeshed their arguments with the broader tensions about the urban life as a whole, new role of educated women in society, new ways of advertising in the consumer culture as well as lack of knowledge of the urban population.

#### **Search of 'pure' food for the kids**

Bengali household manuals, health guides and periodical literature repetitively complained against the unavailability of pure foodstuff in the colonial context. Adulteration of food items were extensively discussed in the press of Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Bengal Municipal Act of 1884 had tried to prevent food adulteration, but it had its limitations. Bengal Food Adulteration Act was passed in the year 1919. But the problem of adulteration could not be abolished. In 1927 an article was published in *Masik Basumati* with the title "Bhejal Bish" (Poison of Adulteration) which mentioned that "It is observed by studying the health report of Calcutta, 1925, that the rate of adulteration is increasing to a great extent; simultaneously diseases like indigestion, beriberi, are also growing in the city"<sup>13</sup>. It became a very familiar concern among the middle class how to get 'pure' food in the colonial present. Purity in this connection had a double meaning as argued by Utsa Ray. Ray argued that

"On the one hand, purity represented a critique of the colonial administration and forced the latter to impose stricter policies in relation to the adulteration of food. On the other hand, pure also signified untouched, which could imply the British as well as those unnamed people ranging from cultivators to cooks and sweet makers

whose food the middle class was obliged to consume in the colonial present.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, when Bengali middle class tried to feed their kids with a “pure” meal, they wanted the meal to be free from adulteration, contamination as well as free from the touch of those people, who they perceived as “others” along the lines of caste, class or religion.

In most of the periodicals and health guides pure cow or goat milk was deemed as the most essential item of diet for the children of one to six years of age<sup>15</sup>. Complaints about the dearth of pure cow or goat milk were very common in urban areas; in most cases the ignorance of the educated middle class in this matter and the unscrupulous habits of the milkmen (*Goala* in Bengali) were blamed for the increasing rate of adulterated milk in cities like Calcutta<sup>16</sup>. Milk testing methods were also highlighted in the pages of periodicals; Bengali middle class was increasingly being informed of the use of equipments like Lactometer to test the purity of milk<sup>17</sup>. Adulterated milk was held to be responsible for various diseases as typhoid, cholera, stomach pain etcetera among the children, for which the authors of periodical articles advised the Bengalis to be well aware of the purity and impurity of milk. Moreover, the families were strictly advised to abstain from feeding their kids with the food items available in sweetmeat shops or roadside stalls<sup>18</sup> prepared from the adulterated *ghee* (clarified butter) or impure oil. Thus, it is glanced from the periodical literature of the early twentieth century Bengal, that a Bengali middle class was anxious to feed the children with pure foodstuff to build a healthy future generation.

#### Nutrition in children's everyday meal

An article published in the Health and Hygiene section of the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette* in 1941 mentioned that “The young growing child must under all conditions be given, apart from the correct quantity of albumen, fat and sugar, all the necessary mineral salts, vitamins and several other necessary nutritive ingredients”<sup>19</sup>. The Bengali middle class concern about the child health essentially got associated with the scientific discourse on nutrition. This discourse on nutrition began to highlight what should be consumed by a Bengali child and in what quantity. Nibaran Chandra Bhattacharya who was the Senior Professor of Physiology at Presidency College of Colonial Calcutta, warned the Bengali middle class readers about the “unbalanced diet” of the school going children, the inappropriate school tiffin, and the deficiency of vitamin B and C in Bengali children's meal<sup>20</sup>.

While describing a nutritious meal for the Bengali kids, Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray advised the school going children to regularly eat enough lentil and pulses and not to consume huge amount of rice and flour. The daily meal of the school students should also contain a little bit of fresh and pure butter and at least 1seer milk<sup>21</sup>. In another article, Dr. Ray prescribed the daily consumption of a fresh fruit, some vegetables, fish or egg yolk, and the starch of rice for the

children of 1 to 6 years of age<sup>22</sup>. The appropriate diet with a balanced proportion of nutrition was held as essential to keep the children healthy, physically and mentally strong, and energetic.

Another tension was also becoming predominant regarding the food practices of the boarding house or hostels attached with schools. With the spread of western education, came a new trend of sending children to city based schools where the kids had to stay in boarding houses or hostels. In such cases, they were compelled to consume meals arranged by the boarding authority. The major concern was that this rising trend was not only depriving the kids from the “lovingly served meals” of home but also depriving them of proper amount of nutrition. The boarding authority was constantly blamed by the Bengali medical practitioners and health-article authors for not taking proper care for the improvement of the students' health leading to the deterioration in the health condition. In an article entitled “Chhatrodiger Sharirik Swasthya” (Physical health of the students) published in 1916, it was argued that the students staying at boarding houses should be provided with tasty but nutritious foods<sup>23</sup>. In this way, nutrition oriented concerns were constantly addressed in the Bengali periodicals of colonial period.

#### School Tiffin

“School Tiffin” was a new concept with which the colonial Bengali middle class was gradually becoming acquainted. With the spread of western education in colonial Bengal, a disciplined school timing and routine emerged which was quite different from the indigenous education system. Students in the new schools had to stay for a longer time period in which they were in most cases not allowed to visit their home for the meal or snacks. Therefore, school tiffin concept appeared where the school students had to consume some food in a short tiffin break; that food was either brought from home or provided by the school authority or purchased at the school gate.

Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, the famous Bengali chemist and educator, wrote in *Khadya Bignyan*, a text of 1936,

“In some schools of Calcutta, a new arrangement of providing tiffin from school has started functioning. Although in most of the Calcutta schools the children of the upper class families are fed with hot milk, bread and sweets which are sent to them through the servants during tiffin time. This is very good, but such lucky guys are very few in number. In most of the district schools no such tiffin arrangement is available. Some staff of the schools sometimes sells stale food of shops, which does no good at all. Students of the middle class families in most cases are not provided with money to buy any tiffin. It can be easily guessed what a harmful consequence this staying with empty stomach for 8 or 9 hours in a growing age can bring.”<sup>24</sup>

The similar tone of concern and worry about school tiffin was echoed by various other authors who published articles in periodicals of late colonial Bengal. It was mentioned in the article "Chatrodiger Sharirik Swathya" that the Government should realise its responsibility to keep strict vigilance on the issue how students in school hours could receive pure healthy foods<sup>25</sup>. Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray also advised the students not to be in empty stomach in their tiffin-time<sup>26</sup>. These periodical articles also urged that the students should not be allowed to eat sweets from outside shops or snacks of public eateries; rather they should be encouraged to eat puffed rice, or fruits in the tiffin hours. Although the Bengali middle class authors of these periodical articles tried to prescribe an "ideal" food habit for the school going kids, but in practice the lived experience of the middle class kids in the early twentieth century constantly nuanced and even transformed the imaginary of the 'ideal' meal. Therefore, their school tiffin did not and could not remain confined within the "healthy" foods; they, in reality, got attracted towards street foods and sweetmeat shops sometimes to taste the pleasure of those foods and sometimes because of the unavailability of "healthy" food items during the tiffin hours.

#### Concluding remarks

"The health and happiness of the future life almost entirely depend on the childhood. A person can lead a healthy, disease-free, happy life in future if he can consume nutritious food, breathe fresh air, and live at a healthy place in his childhood."<sup>27</sup>

These lines are from an article entitled "Shishur Khadya" published in the periodical *Swasthya Samachar* in 1920. It shows what kind of significance was accorded to the development of a child in colonial Bengal as children were held as the base of a nation. Therefore, healthy children signified healthy future of the society. For the proper physical and mental growth of the children, an appropriate diet was very necessary. This necessity of an ideal diet for the kids was felt by the Bengali intelligentsia and their anxious prescriptions of healthy nutritious meal for the children found expression in the pages of the Bengali periodicals of the late colonial era. The first four decades of the twentieth century saw a great escalation in the article writing on the issue of child food and there arose a wave of anxiety regarding the matter that the Bengali children were not getting proper diet which was responsible for deterioration in health. The periodical literature encompassed writings on the importance of breast-feeding, criticisms of the artificial baby foods of the colonial market, arguments on maintaining proper meal timing, significance of correct quantity of food and necessity of 'pure', 'healthy', and nutritious diet for the kids. Bengali parents especially the Bengali middle class mothers were given advices through these writings; sometimes it even included words and prescriptions of European medical practitioners. Thus, an image of an ideal meal for the kids was created through the pages of the periodical literature as well as domestic

manuals and health guides of the period, although in practice it was not always possible to maintain this ideal food practice.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bigyan Chandra Ghosh, *Ahaar*, (Calcutta, 1942), 402
- <sup>2</sup> Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778-1905* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51.
- <sup>3</sup> Srirupa Prasad, "Crisis, Identity and Social Distinction: Cultural Politics of Food, Taste and Consumption in Late Colonial Bengal.", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 19, no. 3 (September 2006) : 246-265, 252
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Advertisements of various baby-foods were found in newspapers and periodicals like *The Statesman*, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Desh* and *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*.
- <sup>6</sup> Dr. Chunilal Bose, *Khadya*, (Calcutta, 1910), 323-328
- <sup>7</sup> Anonymous, "Shishur Khadya", *Swasthya Samachar* 9, No. 4. (1920), 89-90
- <sup>8</sup> Dr. Basanta Kumar Chaudhuri, "Shishur Krittim Khadya", *Swasthya Samachar* 14, no. 8, (1925), 255
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid
- <sup>10</sup> Dr. Basanta Kumar Chaudhuri, "Shishukhadya", *Swasthya Samachar* 14, No. 1, (1920), 17
- <sup>11</sup> Dr. Jahnabi Charan Dasgupta, "Patent Food", *Swasthya* 10, no. 1, (1931)
- <sup>12</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, "Kochi Cheleder Khabar", *Swasthya Samachar* 8, (1919), 204-205
- <sup>13</sup> Anonymous, "Bhejal Bish", *Masik Basumati*, (1927)
- <sup>14</sup> Utsa Ray, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle Class* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 161
- <sup>15</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, "Cheleder Khabar", *Mashik Basumati*, (1928); Kaviraj Indubhushan Sen, *Bangalir Khadya*, (Calcutta 1928), 84
- <sup>16</sup> Dr. Sundari Mohan Das, . "More Milk and Cleaner Milk for Calcutta, What the New Corporation has Done.", *The*

*Calcutta Municipal Gazette* 5, no. 1, (1926-1927): 29-35;  
Kaviraj Indubhusan Sen, *Bangalir Khadya*, 85

<sup>17</sup> Bimalangshu Prakas Ray, "Dugdha Porikksha",  
*Grihasthamangal* 10, no. 11, (1936), 340-342

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, "Cheleder Khabar", *Mashik Basumati*, (1928)

<sup>19</sup> Remorf, "Important Aspects of Child Nutrition", *The Calcutta Municipal Gazette*, (24<sup>th</sup> May, 1941), 7

<sup>20</sup> Nibaran Chandra Bhattacharya, *Bangali r Khadya o Pusti*, (Calcutta, 1935)

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, "Bangali r Uchit Ahaar",  
*Grihasthamangal* 10, no 4, (1936), 103

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, "Cheleder Khabar", *Mashik Basumati*, (1928)

<sup>23</sup> Ramaprasad Chattopadhyay, "Chhatrodiger Sharirik Swasthya", *Swasthya Samachar* 5, No. 12, (1916), 361

<sup>24</sup> Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, *Khadya Bignyan*, (Calcutta, 1936), 207

<sup>25</sup> Ramaprasad Chattopadhyay, "Chhatrodiger Sharirik Swasthya", *Swasthya Samachar* 5, No. 12, (1916), 361

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray, "Cheleder Khabar", *Mashik Basumati*, (1928)

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, "Shishur Khadya", *Swasthya Samachar*, (1920), 89

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