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## Food habits of Rarh Bengal: A Historical Study of Bankura

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### ABSTRACT

Food habits serve as an important lens through which the historical relationship between human societies and their environment can be understood. In the case of Rarh Bengal, particularly Bankura district, culinary traditions reflect a long and complex interaction between ecological constraints, agrarian structures, tribal cultural practices, and historical disruptions such as famine and political change. Located at the transitional zone between the Gangetic plains and the Chota Nagpur plateau, Bankura is characterized by laterite soil, undulating terrain, and irregular rainfall. These environmental factors have historically shaped the region's agricultural practices and dietary patterns in ways that distinguish it from the more fertile and water-rich areas of eastern Bengal. This study traces the evolution of food habits in Bankura from the Chalcolithic period to the present, drawing upon archaeological findings, colonial records, ethnographic accounts, and regional histories. It argues that rice has remained the central dietary staple for over three millennia, supported by pulses, oilseeds, millets, and forest produce. Tribal communities such as the Santhals and Bhumij have contributed significantly to the region's culinary diversity, particularly through fermentation practices and meat-based diets. The experience of recurrent famines fostered a culture of food preservation and adaptability, exemplified by the widespread consumption of puffed rice (muri). Furthermore, the study explores the role of food in ritual and social practices, demonstrating how culinary traditions reinforce cultural



identity even in the face of economic change. While modern agricultural and economic transformations have altered dietary patterns, traditional food practices continue to persist in modified forms. The food history of Bankura thus reveals a broader narrative of resilience, adaptation, and continuity within regional Indian society.

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## 1. Introduction: Region, Ecology, and Historical Context

Rarh Bengal represents a historically and culturally distinct region within eastern India. Extending across present-day Bankura, Birbhum, and Purulia districts, it forms a transitional ecological zone between the fertile Gangetic delta and the forested uplands of the Chota Nagpur plateau. Unlike eastern Bengal, which benefited from abundant water resources and fertile alluvial soil, Rarh Bengal has historically been characterized by laterite soil, undulating topography, and seasonal water scarcity. These geographical features have not only determined the region's agricultural potential but have also profoundly shaped the daily lives, subsistence strategies, and cultural practices of its inhabitants over centuries.

Bankura district lies at the center of this region and provides a representative case for studying the relationship between ecology and food habits. The district's agricultural system has long been dependent on monsoon rainfall, with limited irrigation facilities. This ecological constraint has influenced not only crop patterns but also dietary practices, including the choice of staple grains, methods of food preservation, and the reliance on forest resources during lean seasons. As Niharranjan Ray has argued, Rarh Bengal developed as a distinct cultural zone shaped by its unique environmental conditions (Ray 1949, p. 45). Food habits in this region must therefore be analyzed within a broader framework that includes ecological factors, socio-economic structures, and historical processes such as state formation, market integration, and colonial intervention. By focusing on Bankura, this study seeks to illuminate how ordinary people have negotiated the challenges of their environment through the everyday act of eating.

## 2. Archaeological Evidence and the Origins of Diet

The earliest evidence of food habits in Bankura comes from archaeological excavations at Pakhanna, identified with ancient Pushkarana. These excavations have yielded plant remains that provide valuable insights into early agricultural practices and dietary preferences during the Chalcolithic period. The recovery of charred grains, seeds, and other botanical material has allowed researchers to reconstruct the subsistence economy of the region's earliest farming communities. Ruby Ghosh and her colleagues have identified rice (*Oryza sativa*), black gram (*Vigna mungo*), and mustard (*Brassica campestris*) as the



primary crops cultivated in the region between approximately 3320±400 and 2080±80 years before present (Ghosh et al. 2006, pp. 632–635). This evidence indicates that a mixed agricultural system combining cereals, pulses, and oilseeds existed in Bankura from an early period, suggesting a degree of nutritional awareness and dietary planning.

Rice, in particular, emerged as the dominant staple, a position it continues to hold today. The presence of pulses suggests a nutritionally balanced diet, while mustard indicates the use of oil and spices in cooking. Moreover, the archaeological record implies that the inhabitants of ancient Pushkarana were not merely subsistence farmers but also engaged in some form of surplus production and exchange. Environmental data from the same study suggest a transition from a humid, forested landscape to a relatively drier environment (Ghosh et al. 2006, p. 638). This shift would have required adjustments in agricultural practices, leading to the diversification of crops and dietary habits over time. Such adaptability foreshadows the resilience that would become a hallmark of Bankura's food culture in later centuries.

### 3. Tribal Food Systems and Cultural Interactions

Before the full integration of the region into Brahmanical society, Bankura was inhabited by various tribal communities, including the Santhals, Bhumij, and Mundas. These communities developed food systems that were closely adapted to the forest environment, relying on hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and small-scale settled agriculture. Their dietary practices were not merely a matter of subsistence but were embedded in social structures, seasonal cycles, and spiritual beliefs. Herbert Risley's ethnographic work provides detailed information on the dietary practices of these groups. He notes that their diet consisted of rice, forest produce, and meat, reflecting a mixed subsistence economy (Risley 1891, p. 245). Forest produce included roots, tubers, leafy vegetables, wild fruits, mushrooms, and honey, all of which supplemented cultivated grains and provided essential micronutrients.

One of the most distinctive aspects of tribal food culture is the use of fermentation. The preparation of rice beer (handia) is a common practice among the Santhals. This not only enhances the nutritional value of food by increasing bioavailability of certain nutrients but also allows for its preservation, extending the usability of harvested grain over longer periods. Fermentation also played a social role, as handia was consumed during communal festivals, agricultural rituals, and life-cycle ceremonies. Kunal Chakrabarti observes that Rarh Bengal remained only partially Aryanised for a long period, allowing tribal traditions to coexist with Brahmanical practices (Chakrabarti 2001, p. 78). This interaction resulted in a diverse and dynamic food culture, wherein certain tribal foods and preparation methods were adopted by non-tribal



rural populations, while Brahmanical dietary norms gradually influenced tribal communities in varying degrees. The resulting culinary synthesis remains visible in Bankura's rural food practices today.

#### **4. Agrarian Economy and Food Production**

The agrarian economy of Bankura has historically been dominated by rice cultivation. According to the Bengal District Gazetteers: Bankura, rice accounted for nearly 88 percent of cultivated land in the early twentieth century (O'Malley 1908, p. 56). This overwhelming preference for rice was not merely a matter of cultural choice but was also shaped by the region's ecology, as rice, particularly upland varieties, could be grown in the laterite soil with adequate rainfall. However, this heavy dependence on rice made the region vulnerable to climatic fluctuations. The Gazetteer notes that the district was prone to famine due to its reliance on a single crop (p. 58). A delayed monsoon, a dry spell during the growing season, or an untimely flood could devastate the harvest and plunge the population into scarcity.

Millets such as jowar and bajra played an important role as drought-resistant crops. Though they occupied a smaller proportion of cultivated area compared to rice, they were strategically important in drier pockets and during years of poor rainfall. Sanghamitra Saha highlights their importance in sustaining rural populations during periods of scarcity (Saha 2008, p. 112). Millets could be stored for longer periods and required less intensive management than rice, making them a reliable fallback. The lack of irrigation infrastructure further compounded these challenges. Although efforts were made to construct canals and reservoirs under both pre-colonial and colonial administrations, these were often insufficient to ensure stable agricultural production. As a result, the agrarian economy of Bankura remained precarious, and food habits evolved partly as a response to this uncertainty.

#### **5. Muri and the Culture of Resilience**

Muri (puffed rice) is one of the most important elements of Bankura's food culture. Its significance lies in its practicality: it is lightweight, easy to store, requires no cooking, and can be eaten immediately with minimal preparation. Muri is made by heating rice grains under pressure, causing them to expand. The process, while requiring some skill, can be done with relatively simple equipment and is well suited to rural households. Because muri does not spoil quickly, it became an ideal food for travelers, agricultural laborers working in distant fields, and families during times of food shortage. Amit Bhattacharya describes muri as a symbol of regional identity, reflecting both cultural pride and ecological adaptation (Bhattacharya 2005, p. 89). The widespread consumption of muri demonstrates how food practices can



evolve in response to environmental challenges, turning a simple grain into a versatile and resilient dietary staple.

Beyond its practical utility, muri acquired cultural meanings over time. It is offered as prasad in certain temples, distributed during community feasts, and consumed during festivals. The Muri Mela of Kenjakura further highlights the cultural importance of this food. This event brings together communities to celebrate a shared culinary tradition, with muri prepared, sold, and consumed in various forms, often accompanied by local spices, vegetables, or chutneys. Such fairs not only preserve traditional food practices but also reinforce social bonds and local identity. In a region marked by periodic hardship, muri stands as a testament to the ingenuity and resilience of Bankura's people.

## 6. Food and Ritual Practices

Food plays a central role in the ritual life of Bankura. Religious offerings, festival meals, and caste-based commensality rules all involve food as a marker of identity, devotion, and social standing. The Mrinmoyee Temple represents one of the oldest traditions of Durga worship in Bengal. Here, specific food offerings are prepared according to ancient prescriptions, and the distribution of prasad is an integral part of the ritual. Maniklal Sinha notes that the temple preserves ancient ritual practices associated with the Malla rulers (Sinha 1967, p. 134). These include the preparation of khichdi, sweets, and other items that are first offered to the deity and then shared among devotees, thereby sacralizing the act of eating.

Festivals such as Bhadu Puja also feature distinctive food offerings, including large jalebis. Bhadu is a harvest festival celebrated primarily by women in the region, and the food associated with it reflects the agricultural cycle and the hopes for prosperity. Similarly, during Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, and Kali Puja, specific dishes are prepared that vary by caste, locality, and family tradition. These practices highlight the role of food in reinforcing social and cultural identity. They also demonstrate continuity, as many of the dishes prepared during festivals today have their origins in pre-colonial or even ancient culinary traditions. By studying ritual food, historians can trace the persistence of ingredients, cooking methods, and symbolic associations across centuries.

## 7. Famine and Food Memory

The history of Bankura is marked by recurring famines, which have had a profound impact on food habits. Unlike episodic food shortages in other regions, famine in Bankura was a recurrent structural reality, stemming from ecological vulnerability, poor infrastructure, and colonial revenue policies. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 resulted in widespread devastation and long-term economic decline.



Population loss, land abandonment, and the breakdown of rural credit systems made recovery difficult. W.W. Hunter records that large areas of cultivated land reverted to forest due to depopulation (Hunter 1875, p. 221). Those who survived often altered their eating habits permanently, incorporating wild plants, roots, and even tree bark into their diet.

The famine of 1865–66 further exposed the vulnerability of the agrarian system. By this time, colonial policies had intensified commercial cropping and increased the tax burden on peasants, leaving little margin for survival in bad years. Rajat Datta notes that during such crises, rural populations relied on alternative food sources such as millets and forest produce (Datta 2000, p. 167). These experiences have shaped a culture of resilience and adaptation, including the habit of storing food grains, diversifying crops, and maintaining knowledge of edible wild plants. Famine memory was transmitted orally through songs, proverbs, and family stories, reinforcing the importance of frugality and preparedness. In this sense, the food habits of Bankura are not merely a response to ecology but also a living archive of historical suffering and survival.

## 8. Colonial Economy and Changing Food Patterns

The colonial period introduced significant changes to the agrarian economy of Bankura. Revenue policies, commercialization of agriculture, and market integration altered traditional food systems. The Permanent Settlement of 1793, imposed by the British East India Company, created a new class of zamindars who were primarily interested in maximizing revenue collection. This often led to increased extraction from peasants, reducing their ability to maintain diverse crop rotations or store surplus grain. Tapan Raychaudhuri notes that the commercialization of agriculture led to shifts in crop patterns and food consumption (Raychaudhuri 1969, p. 65). Cash crops such as oilseeds and, later, certain industrial crops began to replace subsistence crops in some areas, affecting food availability for rural families.

At the same time, colonial administrative records such as gazetteers provide valuable information on food habits and agricultural practices. These documents, though produced from an outsider's perspective and often colored by colonial biases, contain detailed observations about what people ate, how they cooked, and how food was distributed across different social groups. They also document the impact of new infrastructures, such as railways, which facilitated the movement of grain into and out of the district. In some cases, this improved food security; in others, it allowed grain to be exported even during local shortages, worsening famine conditions. The colonial period thus brought both new opportunities and new vulnerabilities, reshaping Bankura's food system in ways whose effects are still visible.



## 9. Modern Transformations and Continuity

In the modern period, technological and economic developments have transformed food habits in Bankura. The introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice during the Green Revolution has increased production but has also led to the decline of traditional crop varieties. Indigenous rice cultivars, which were often more resilient to drought and pests, have been replaced by a small number of high-yielding strains requiring chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Similarly, millets and pulses, once important components of the regional diet, have been marginalized as rice and wheat have come to dominate public distribution systems and market supply. Nitish Sengupta observes that these changes reflect broader socio-economic transformations in Bengal (Sengupta 2011, p. 213). Market integration has increased the availability of processed foods, altering dietary patterns, especially among younger generations and in urbanizing areas.

However, traditional practices continue to persist. The consumption of rice, dal, and vegetables remains central to the diet in most rural households. Foods such as muri retain their cultural significance, not only as a practical food but also as a marker of regional identity. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in reviving millets and other traditional grains, driven by health concerns and a renewed appreciation for indigenous knowledge. Government schemes and non-governmental organizations have promoted the cultivation of drought-resistant millets as a climate adaptation strategy. Thus, while modernization has brought undeniable change, it has not erased the deep historical continuity of Bankura's food culture. Rather, that culture continues to evolve, blending old and new in response to contemporary challenges.

## 10. Conclusion

The food habits of Bankura provide a rich and complex narrative of human adaptation to environmental and historical challenges. From the archaeological evidence of early agriculture at Pakhanna to the transformations of the modern era, the region's culinary traditions reflect resilience, continuity, and change. Rice has remained the central staple, but the importance of millets, pulses, forest produce, and preserved foods highlights the ingenuity of local communities in coping with an unpredictable environment. Tribal traditions, particularly those of the Santhals and Bhumij, have enriched the region's food culture through fermentation, meat preparation, and the use of wild plants. The experience of famine, far from being a mere historical disaster, has left a lasting imprint on food memory and practice, fostering habits of preservation and adaptability.



Ritual and festival foods demonstrate how culinary practices reinforce social bonds and cultural identity, even as colonial and post-colonial economic changes have reshaped production and consumption patterns. The persistence of muri as both a practical food and a cultural symbol exemplifies the region's ability to transform constraint into creativity. Moreover, the recent revival of interest in millets suggests that traditional foods can find new relevance in addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change and nutritional deficiency. The study of food habits in Bankura thus offers valuable insights into the broader processes of ecological adaptation, cultural interaction, and historical continuity in India. It reminds us that the simplest acts of eating and cooking are deeply embedded in history and that understanding those acts can illuminate the larger story of human survival and ingenuity.

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