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ARTICLE

Contextualizing the Socio-Economic Dimensions of *Panta Bhat*: Tracing Its Culinary Heritage in Bengali Literary Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

In the fabric of socio-economic dynamics, *Panta Bhat* (Fermented Rice) is considered a traditional food item among the rural communities of Eastern India, especially in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, known by different names such as *Panta Bhat*, *Pakhala*, and *Basi*, respectively. With the rising awareness of food safety and environmental sustainability, it serves as a testament to sustainable eating practices by reducing food waste. It is prepared by soaking the leftover rice in water overnight and is often served in the morning with salt, onions, green chilies, mashed potatoes, and sometimes fried fish. The paper intends to highlight the socio-economic dimensions of this traditional food item with reference to Bengal and Bengali literature belonging to different genres, especially *Mangal-Kavyas*, Bengali Children's Literature, Proverbs, and Memoirs. The study aims to trace its historical background and development from its earliest literary evidence to its role in present-day society by looking into its long historical trajectory. The study will explore how its consumption became the identifying marker of a particular societal position, economic strata, cultural practice, and gender norms. Moreover, the article demarcates how modernization brought changes in the consumption pattern of *Panta Bhat* and how it is becoming more mainstream and appreciated in diverse socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: Food; *Panta Bhat*; Socio-Economic Aspects; Cultural Practices; Sustainability; Modernization

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 1 September 2025 | Revised: 2 November 2025 | Accepted: 11 November 2025 | Published Online: 18 November 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v5i2.669>

CITATION

Jana, S., Mandal, A., 2025. Contextualizing the Socio-Economic Dimensions of *Panta Bhat*: Tracing Its Culinary Heritage in Bengali Literary Landscapes. *Cultural Arts Research and Development*. 5(2): 185–196. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v5i2.669>

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1. Introduction

Cuisine holds enormous potential in the context of India's rich and vibrant culinary heritage of traditional food^[1]. In the present society, food often represents a cultural battleground—where Indigenous, traditional food practices are erased or devalued in favour of Western, commodified food systems. The unique domesticity of 'Bengali cuisine' sets it apart from all other cuisines. By keeping Bengali food apart from other commodified cuisines, these gastronomes attempted to establish a place for it in the broader nationalist discourse. It will be argued that the appropriation and inclusion of various ingredients led to the hybridization of 'Bengali cuisine'^[2]. The argument for sophisticated Bengali food must be understood in light of colonial Bengal's evolving material culture. Bengali food was portrayed as a great art that was nearing extinction in the discourse of taste that arose from the variety of literary works^[2]. Traditional culinary cultures are inherently tied to their local environments^[3]. Food customs reflect facets of social relationships and identity and are shaped by social structures and history^[4]. In addition to dominating popular reels, traditional cuisines offer a platform for examining the connection between culture and food.

The rich culinary tradition of Bengali food is well-known for its taste and aesthetic pleasure. It is quite interesting to note that there is a Bengali food that doesn't need to be cooked and is naturally beneficial to metabolism and health, particularly when eaten in the hot summer seasons. *Panta Bhat*, also called *Pakhala* in Orissa and *Basi* in Chhattisgarh, is a traditional cuisine that is noted for its distinct flavour and health advantages^[5]. *Panta Bhat* can be read as an assertion of cultural identity, a reclaiming of indigenous foodways that have been marginalized and devalued by both colonial and postcolonial powers. At its core, *Panta Bhat* is a food of necessity, not luxury. A dish made from fermented rice soaked in water; *Panta Bhat* is the antithesis of the extravagant, processed foods that dominate globalized culinary markets. *Pakhala*, an *Odia* (related to Orissa) dish made from cooked rice soaking in fresh or fermented water, is one such instance of a gastronomic legacy. Food no longer serves as a basic need to sate hunger in a post-capitalist society; it transcends that^[6].

Panta Bhat is often dismissed as 'peasant food,' something 'unrefined,' in contrast to the more glamorous, luxuri-

ous foods consumed by elites. In this way, it is emblematic of the ways in which food can become a marker of social stratification, with those at the top of the social ladder enjoying a diet of excess and those at the bottom relegated to foods that are both necessary and functional. *Pakhala*, a hearty dish that has been satisfying stomachs and hearts since ancient times, appears somewhere in the middle of availability, accessibility, and sustainability^[6]. In Orissa, *Pakhala* is of various types, based on its preparation, such as *Sugandhi Pakhala* (made using soaking cooked rice and spices including ginger, cumin, lemon leaves, and salt), *Dahi Pakhala* (combined with curd and spices), and *Basi Pakhala* (it is fermented for seven or eight hours in a chilly environment), etc.^[7]. The practice of eating *Panta Bhat* in West Bengal tops the list. Since there is a plentiful supply of fish and potatoes in the state, *Panta Bhat*'s side dishes include mashed potatoes, fish fries, and various accompaniments. It is called *Poita Bhat* in Assam and is also served with raw onions, fish fries, and mashed potatoes. *Pakhala* also exists in the southern region of India, such as *Pazhaya* in Tamil Nadu, *Pazhan Kanji* (fermented drink) in Kerala, and *Chaddanam* in Andhra Pradesh (**Figure 1**). *Pakhala* transcends its national borders as countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand have their own variations of fermented rice (**Figure 2**)^[7]. *Panta Bhat* has rich nutritious value. *Lactobacillus*, which is found in the water *Torani* (liquid part of this food item) in *Pakhala*, has anti-inflammatory, immune-boosting, and infection-fighting qualities. In addition to its water content, *Pakhala*'s hydrating properties make it especially beneficial in the summer (**Figure 3**)^[7].

2. Discussion

The paper under discussion highlights a fascinating narrative of *Panta Bhat* from the perspective of Bengali literature by extending its significance far beyond its basic nutritional value. The study comprehensively examines the historicity of *Panta Bhat* and its significance as a socio-economic signifier within the fabric of class, culture, and gender dynamics within the Bengali literature in general and Bengali society in particular. By analysing its evidence in Medieval Bengali religious texts, memoirs, proverbs, and children's literature, it evolves from a mere rural food item to its modern appearance as a celebrated food item and a marker

of culinary heritage across India and beyond. The recurrent use of this food in literary context marks its significance in the spatial context of Bengal. The paper, through the literary evidence, starting from *Mangal Kavyas* (religious texts) to Memoirs and rhymes (secular literature), sheds light on how a humble food, *Panta Bhat*, has been occupying a prominent role in the Bengali kitchen as a ‘comfort food’ irrespective of caste, gender, and age. *Bengalees* (people of Bengal) are very fond of using proverbs in their colloquial language. The use of the metaphor of *Panta Bhat* in many proverbs proves its importance and popularity since time immemorial. By drawing literary instances, the present paper intends to show how the literary creations of Bengal are closely relatable to the actual life of Bengal, from the grassroots level to the elite households. It unveils a deeper understanding of food culture and its association with identity construction in the broader aspects of food studies and cultural sociology. It delves deep into the gastronomic exploration of this food item by intertwining food with social standing, cultural values, and cultural memory. The transition from a food of lower status to a celebrated one explicates societal changes and growing appreciation for traditional culinary practices in the advent of modernization.



Figure 1. Indian States Associated with the Consumption of *Panta Bhat*.

Source: <https://www.mapchart.net/india.html>.



Figure 2. Countries Associated with the Consumption of *Panta Bhat*.

Source: <https://www.mapchart.net/asia.html>.



Figure 3. *Panta Bhat* in its traditional sense.

Source: <https://recipes.timesofindia.com/recipes/panta-bhaat/rs95396522.cms>.

3. Historical Background of *Panta Bhat*

The historical background of fermented foods can be traced back to 7000–8000 BC in the areas of the Indus Valley. The residual evidence from the clay pots discovered at Harappan Civilization sites bears testimony to the preparation of fermented foods and drinks^[8]. Fermentation technology seemed to begin simultaneously with settled agriculture during the Neolithic period. The earliest literary evidence of fermentation in the Indian sub-continent can be traced back to the Rig Vedic period (c. 1500 BC). During the post-Vedic period (600 BC–100 CE), a large number of products were for fermentation. Rice and barley were the most common cereals to be fermented. However, historical evidence shows

the fermentation process was limited to alcohol brewing. The post-Vedic period ushered in the employment of fermented products in medicinal, therapeutic, and chemical practices^[8]. Though the history of *Panta Bhat* dates back to 2000 years, historians could associate this food item with the festivities during the Mughal period. According to Golam Rabbani, during the Mughal rule, the members of social and cultural organizations used to organize open programs where the tradition was to eat *Panta Bhat* irrespective of class or caste^[9].

4. Representation of *Panta Bhat* in Bengali Literature

As a daily consuming habit, *Panta Bhat* became part and parcel of Bengali cultural practices. Therefore, Bengali literature is replete with references to *Panta Bhat* in different contexts. Various genres of Bengali literature describe *Panta Bhat* in social, economic, and religious contexts. The essay is going to shed light on these different contexts of consuming *Panta Bhat* through Bengali literature, which is still academically unexplored.

4.1. Mangal Kavyas

One of the earliest references to *Panta Bhat* in the Bengali literary genre can be traced to *Mangal Kavyas*. *Mangal Kavya* is a genre of Bengali narrative poems written approximately between the 13th and 18th centuries. The literal meaning of *Mangal Kavya* is ‘well-being,’ well-being by God’s grace. Though these narrative poems portray the supernatural greatness of indigenous or popular deities, they reflect contemporary Bengal’s socio-economic scenario and daily life^[10]. The three majors *Mangal Kavyas* portray the greatness of *Chandi* (“originally the patron deity of forests and animals, later metamorphosed into the Brahmanical *Durga*, the consort of *Shiva*”)^[11]. *Manasa* (the serpent goddess), and *Dharma Thakur*, the native divinities of Bengal, through the narratives of *Chandi Mangal*, *Manasa Mangal*, and *Dharma Mangal*, respectively. It is important to analyze these literary texts as significant historical sources in the context of the socio-cultural history of Bengal, as the power struggle through which these divinities acquired a hold on earth symbolizes the struggle of common people to exist in society^[11].

Chandi Mangal

The story of *Chandi Mangal* is about the goddess *Chandi*, who wants to establish her cult worship in a patriarchal society. Mukundaram Chakrabarty’s version is one of the most popular versions. In the first section of the story, the goddess, *Chandi*, empowers a lower-caste hunter, Kalketu, to spread her worship on earth. The second part of the story revolves around the life of a rich merchant, Dhanapati, and his two wives, Lahana and Khullana. The misfortunes faced by Khullana in her domestic life and Dhanapati in his commercial life were resolved by the grace of *Devi Chandi*. As a result, they introduced and promoted the cult worship of the goddess *Chandi*. *Chandi Mangal* gives literary examples of making *Panta Bhat* with leftover rice as a common culinary practice in Bengali households—“*Baasi Panta Bhat chhilo sora dui-tin /taha khaiya Lahana katailo din*” (the leftover *Panta Bhat* was kept in two-three earthen pots, Lahana had that for lunch)^[12]. In the narrative of *Chandi Mangal*, we can see the consumption of *Panta Bhat* in two contexts. First, in the context of a poverty-stricken family’s diet, and second, in the context of pregnant women’s cravings.

The reference to Kalketu, the poor indigenous hunter, comes in. In the poem, Kalketu is mentioned as often not being able to sell his catch by the end of the day because the meat is not consumed on a daily basis. Also, every season brings different types of adversity for hunting and selling meat. As a result, they need to deal with their hunger with the bare minimum. *Panta-Bhat* probably made its entry into their diet at this point^[13]. Phullara expressed their distress to goddess *Chandi* by showing the hole in the ground used for having *Amani* (sour rice water) that remains all year round. Their poverty hit so hard that they had to mortgage their stone bowl. Phullara was telling this pitiful *Baromasya* (description of the activities of individuals throughout the months of the year) to the goddess—“*Dukkho koro obodhan, Dukkho koro obodhan/ Amani khabar gorto dyakho bidyoman*” (please save us from this distress, see, the hole in the ground for having fermented rice water is permanent)^[14]. The context of *Amani* comes again when it describes the eating scene of hunger-driven Kalketu—“*Mochoriya gonf duti bandhilen ghare/ ek swase tin hari amani ujure*” (twisted his mustache, tied it properly, and swallowed three pots of *Amani*)^[14]. The poet says that Kalketu swallowed three pots of *Amani* (sour rice water) without getting his breath back,

followed by four pots of rice-made gruel and six containers of *dal* (lentil)^[15]. The situation of Kalketu and Phullara is depicted as the general condition of the marginal hunter community.

Food is our basic necessity. Depending on the person's age, season, and temperament, the human body demands a certain type of food. The corpus of *Mangal Kavya* provides a large place for the cravings of pregnant women. Mukundarama Chakravarti proposes two examples in this context—one is of Nidaya, the wife of the hunter, Dharmaketu, and mother of Kalketu, and another one is of Khullana, the wife of the rich merchant, Dhanapati. Food cravings may be caused by a deficiency of nutrients. The hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy may play a role here^[16]. In Dharmaketu's story, the pregnant wife, Nidaya, asks her husband for different types of food she craves, including fermented rice. Pregnant women crave fermented foods for various reasons, which include health benefits and the capacity of sour foods for nausea relief. That is why we can see Nidaya saying—"Haridra-ranjita kanji, udar puriya bhunji, pran pai paile paka taal" (she wants to eat *Kanji* to her full stomach, and she will be satisfied if she gets ripe palm)^[14].

The *Kavya* lyrically explains that also—"Panch mase Nidayar na roche odon/ Chhoy mase kaji koronjay mon" (rice does not taste good to Nidaya in her fifth month of pregnancy; in the sixth month, the heart asks for *Kanji*)^[14]. When it comes to the description of Khullana's *Sadha* (elaborate treat for a mother-to-be) ceremony, the societal differences between the lower-caste hunter community and the wealthy merchant community are reflected in the food items on the menu. In the absence of the husband, Lahana asked her co-wife what she wanted for her *Sadha*. Along with other items, one thing that Khullana asked about was common with Nidaya, the "*Haridra-ranjita Kanji*" (*Kanji* mixed with turmeric)^[14]. Since rice is the main food in the Bengali household, it can be expected that they made rice *Kanji* to suit the pregnant woman's taste.

Manasa Mangal

The story of *Manasa Mangal* begins with the story of the prosperous merchant Chand Sadagar, a devotee of *Shiva* who refused to worship *Manasa*. *Manasa*'s strong aspiration to convert Chand to her worship led her to destroy Chand's

ships and his six sons. Finally, Behula, the new bride of Lakhinder, the seventh or the youngest son of Chand Sadagar and his wife Sanoka, challenged *Manasa* to regain her husband's life. *Manasa*'s revengeful attitude toward Chand's family and Behula's struggle ultimately convinced Chand to worship *Manasa*, and subsequently, her worship became popular amongst people. Similarly, in the 9th stanza of *Manasa Mangal*, by Ketakadas Kshemananda, named "*Sanokar Garbha*" (the womb of Sanoka), the wife of the merchant, Sanoka, desires *Panta Bhat* and the *Amani* (Sour rice water) during her fifth month of pregnancy. She desires to have a *Sadha* ceremony—"Kotek dibos moner manos sadh khawaiibe more" (for a long time, I wish to be fed the feast of *Sadha*). She craves sweet dishes like *pitha* (indigenous cake), *payes* (sweet rice with milk), *Panta Amani* and sweet curd as well—"Pistok payos khaite suros/ ghrite somboriya shaak, Panta, Amani paile ekhoni/ Sukhete ahar kori, Kimba misto tokro/ tahete pai sorgo" (the indigenous cake, sweet rice with milk are tasty to eat with clarified butter and vegetable/ if I get *panta-amani* I can consume with peace or else, sweet curd, it will be heavenly for me)^[17]. "*Nakhindarer Katha*," a section of "*Manasa Bhasan*," mentions *Pora meen* (burnt fish) with *Panta Bhat*. There is a craving for Sanoka—"Panto je odon tahe pora meen paile bhojon kori" (the rice which is over-night soaked and fermented, along with burnt fish, is desirable to eat)^[18].

The *Mangal Kavyas* reflect the poets' connection to their place of origin, and it is evident that this will also reflect the region's diet. Mukundaram Chakrabarty (composer of *Chandi Mangal*) belongs to the Burdwan district of West Bengal (India), and Ketakadas Kshemananda (composer of *Manasa Mangal*) belongs to the Hooghly district of West Bengal. Geographically, both of the districts are part of the *Rarh* region (geographical region of eastern India comprising the western part of West Bengal and the eastern parts of Jharkhand and Bihar states). The climate of the *Rarh* region of Bengal is very dry (**Figure 4**). During summer, the heat wave and the dryness become unbearable. In this climatic situation, it is important to consume food scientifically. *Panta Bhat* acts as a shield against this extreme heat, especially for people who need to work in fields. Because of its water content, *Panta Bhat* helps protect it from dehydration, thus preventing sunstroke^[19].

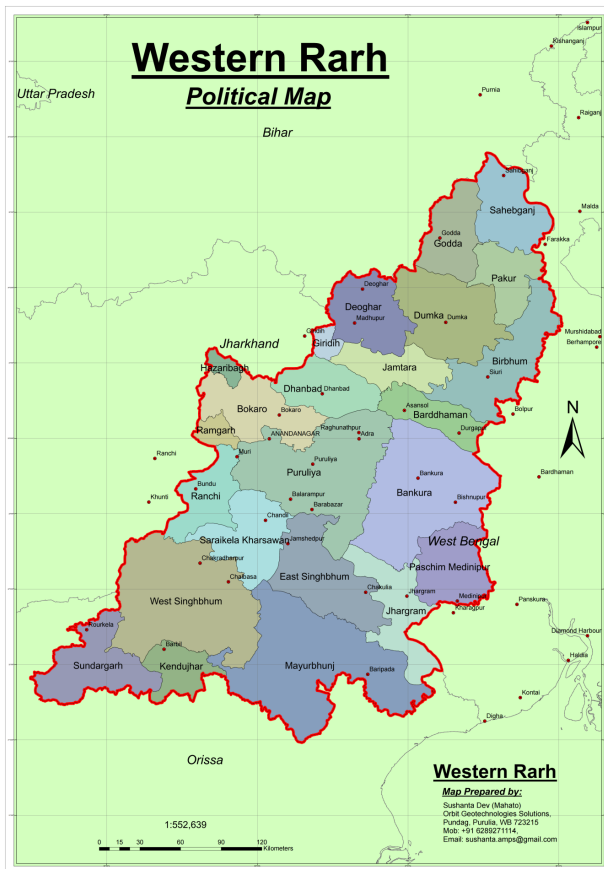


Figure 4. Districts of the *Rarh* region of Eastern India.

Source: <https://proutglobe.org/2021/04/rarh-1/>.

4.2. Ballad

Another important literary creation of Bengal is Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Maimansingha Gitika* (1923), a narrative ballad collection. It is considered to be a treasure trove of Bengali folklore and oral traditions. This collection, which has ten *Paalagaan* (a kind of Bengali folk song) and is popular in contemporary undivided Bengal (present-day Netrakona, East Mymensingh, Bangladesh), offers glimpses into the rich literary traditions of Bengal. *Gitika* (folk song) is the soul of Bengali culture, society, and literary heritage. *Maimansingha Gitika* encompasses a diverse range of narratives, including love stories, adventure stories, historical accounts, etc., thus reflecting the realities of the time—"The collection is a valuable source of information for scholars studying the region's history and culture and for literary scholars interested in the development of Bengali literature"^[20]. As a result, it abounds with references to the culinary practices of rural Bengal. Fray Sebastien Manrique, a Portuguese missionary and traveller,

reported in the 17th century from his visit to Bengal that the daily meal was rice, and if there was nothing to add to it, they took salt and were satisfied^[21]. In "*Molua Pala*," the fact has been lyrically represented where the male protagonist, Binod, is seen to have *Panta Bhat* with nothing but raw chili—"Ghore achhilo pani—Bhat/ baira dilo may. Kancha lonka diye Binod kichhu kichhu khay" (the water-soaked rice was there at home; Binod eats that with green chili)^[22]. In this *Paala* (scene), we see Binod's family suffering from abject poverty due to floods and famine. It becomes difficult for them to gather two handfuls of rice. Binod sets off to a foreign land to find a good source of income. The cultural practice of a Bengali household never allowed anyone to leave the house with an empty stomach, but unfortunately, there was nothing but leftover water-soaked rice or *Panta Bhat* at home, which Binod's mother served to her son.

4.3. Children's Literature

The introduction of children's literature in Bengal was followed by a colonial attempt to inculcate colonial hierarchies between the colonizer and the colonized. The nationalist politics took up this sphere of children's literature as a zone of influence by legitimizing the native 'imaginative literature,' which was dug up from oblivion. During the *Swadeshi Movement* (1905), anti-colonial politics posed a counter-narrative to colonial modernity through the revival of Indigenous folklore and literature. Upendrakishore Raychaudhury, the famous Bengali playwright, artist, and musician, came up with his short story collection "*Tuntuni'r Boi*" ("*Tuntuni's Book*"). One of the famous stories from this anthology is "*Panta Burir Golpo*," the story of an old lady who eats *Panta Bhat*. The storyline is like that—there is an old lady in a village who used to stay alone. She loved to eat *Panta Bhat*, but every night, one thief would come and eat the *Panta Bhat* that she used to keep for soaking overnight. The lady decided to go to the king to lodge a complaint, but she could not do that because of the king's absence. While she was going to meet the king, she met with *Shingi machh* (fish with hard and sharp bones), *Bel* fruit (wood apple), cow dung, and a knife, respectively. All of them told her to take them while returning. The old lady did the same and placed them in different places in her house according to their suggestion. In this way, the old lady punished the thief with the help of those personified objects. Two things are to be noted

here. Firstly, the colonial economy's industrialization created a huge economic imbalance between the urban and rural areas. The rural poor were becoming poorer. Poverty hit so hard that even the *Panta Bhat* used to get stolen. The second aspect is opened up here in allegorical form—the absence of the king signifies the futility of colonial administration and justice that did not bother about the issues of the poor. Apparently, *Panta-Bhat* is a very minimal food, but here, this food is a person's identity (as the old lady and the story is named after the food), viz-a-vis the tradition of Bengal.

4.4. Chhara (Rhymes)

An important and remarkable Bengali literary genre is *Chhara*, or rhymes. The varied and rich collection of *Chhara*'s is part of the oral literary tradition of Bengal. According to Chitrita Banerji, “*Chhara*, even at their most fanciful or nonsensical, conjure up a faithful picture of an agrarian society where life was ritualized, expectations well defined, the roles of men, women, and children unquestioned, and economic status often indicated by the food eaten every day”^[23]. The rhymes portray this image of socio-economic imbalance. The rhymes use the image of food to depict the topography, weather, climate, the relation between family members, indoor and outdoor activities, and, most importantly, gender roles. Banerji opines, “It is not hard to imagine that women who were in charge of the kitchen were also the creators of these rhymes that so reflect their own concerns”^[23]. This oral literary tradition started to be documented in the late 19th and early 20th century in a systematic way. Among the rescuers of *Chhara*, at the initial stage, Poet Rabindranath Tagore and his nephew, artist Abanindranath Tagore, made great efforts. Apart from recollecting the local rhymes, Tagore took one step more to promote this wonderful literary genre by composing “*Sahaja Path*,” an illustrated Bengali language learning book. The two editions of this book teach the basics of the Bengali language in an artistic way. The first edition introduces the Bengali alphabet in the form of couplets and rhymes. The second edition deals with the usage of words in sentences.

In the context of this essay, the Sixth Chapter, or the “*Sashtha Path*,” will be taken into consideration. The chapter narrates a trip to a nearby waterfall named Ushri on a rainy day. The small narrative depicts the whole plan of the trip, like how many people are going, why they are going,

the precautionary measures they should take if rain comes, the food items they will take for the short outing, etc. The last couple of lines talk about their servant, Kanta, who will accompany them. Tagore mentions, “*Amader Kanto chakor sikhro kichhu khey nik. Taar khabar agroho dekhine. Se bhorer belay Panta Bhat khey beriyechhe. Tar bon Khan-tomoni take khaiye dile*” (the narrator asks everyone to wait for Kanta to have his meal, but Kanta is not willing to have anything because he has gone out to work after having *Panta Bhat* early in the morning. His sister fed him)^[24]. It is interesting to note that social identification through food remains the same even after a hundred years. The servant who belongs to the lower echelon of society is naturally expected to have his meal before going on a trip because the social norms would not accept him sharing the same food with his masters. That is why he has filled his stomach with such energetic food, which will help reduce hunger for a longer time throughout the trip.

Tagore's artistic sense was mirrored in his taste buds as well. His literary reproductions are replete with different types of food items. He had a refined taste in food, whether it was something simple or elaborate. At a very early age, he wrote a poem on his breakfast—“*Amsotto dudhe pheli, tahate kodoli doli, sondesh makhiya diya tate, hapus-hapus sobdho, charidin nistobdho, pipilika kandiya jay pate*” (mixing mango-jelly with milk and adding banana will create a delicious treat. When combined with *sondesh* (a Bengali sweet), this dish will be so tasty that the only sound you hear will be the enjoyment of eating it. Not even the ants will get a trace of food on the plate)^[25]. In contrast to this elaborate breakfast, he craved simple *Panta Bhat* from his sister-in-law. In his memoir, *Jiban Smriti (My Reminiscences)* (1912), Tagore recalled that when he used to come back from school, his sister-in-law kept the food ready, which he considered as *Prosad* (consecrated food of God) of his *Bouthakuron*'s (sister-in-law) own hand. It was nothing but *Panta Bhat*. The best combination with *Panta Bhat* for him was with “*Chingri machher chochchori*” (shrimp) and a little bit of chili^[26]. It is important to note that the introduction of *Panta Bhat* to the Tagore family was at the hands of Kadambari Devi (the sister-in-law to Rabindranath), who came from a middle-class family. She was appalled to see the amount of rice thrown away daily in Tagore's house. She made young brothers realize that the thrown-away rice could feed a fam-

ily of five for a month^[27]. This is how a humble food item entered an elite household.

Similar social imagery has been reflected in other popular Bengali *Chhara* and proverbs. The authors of these *Chhara* are unknown, but they were recited by the mothers and grandmothers to calm their little ones in the house. For example—“*Panta khey shanto hoye kapor diye gaa-e/ goru chorate pachon haate rakhal chhele jay*” (the cowboy is calmed down after having *Panta Bhat*, he is now going to graze the cows). This gives a typical picture of rural Bengal, where a cowboy’s hunger and energy to graze the cattle can be satisfied with the very minimal *Panta Bhat*, which will stay for a longer time. In a cowboy’s household, serving *Gorom Bhat* or freshly cooked warm rice was not very common because it was a sign of abundance and well-being. Most South Asian foods, especially from the Bengal Delta (the largest delta in the world), are crop-based; thus, they are meant for the peasantry^[28].

4.5. Proverb

The Bengali proverbs use *Panta Bhat* in different contexts that sometimes reflect a humble class orientation; sometimes, it carries the idea of strength and ability, and a few proverbs reflect an independent meaning. “*Panta Bhat-e nun jote na, begun poray ghee*” (there is no salt to add to *Panta*; it is absurd to ask for clarified butter in brinjal), “*Nun ante Panta phuray*” (the *Panta* gets finished to bring salt, which means extreme poverty), “*Mote maa randhe na, tay abar topto ar panto*” (mother does not even cook, no point of choosing between warm rice or *Panta*), “*Maga Bhat, tar abar basi ar panta*” (the rice is itself begged from someone, no point of asking whether it is overnight rice or *Panta*). These proverbs are used to define economic hardships where someone finds difficulty in getting the bare minimum things for sustenance^[29]. The Proverbs like “*Panta Bhat’er jol, tin purisher bol*” (the sour water of *Panta Bhat* is the strength of three generations), “*Bandir kaame josh nai, Panta Bhat khas nai*” (there is no zeal in maid’s work, she might not have *Panta Bhat*) are used to promote the consumption of *Panta Bhat* as an energy food^[29]. “*Panta Bhat-e ghee nosto, baaper bari jhi nosto*” (as the clarified butter gets spoiled in cold fermented rice, the daughter also gets spoiled in her nuptial home), “*Kiser bitor ki, Panta Bhat-e ghee*” (clarified butter in fermented rice, to explain something is mismatch-

ing), “*Ki kotha bolbo soi, Panta Bhate tok doi*” (what to say, my friend, it is like curd is added to *Panta Bhat*) These proverbs used *Panta Bhat* as a metaphor to express different kinds of moods and situations^[29].

4.6. Novel

Manik Bandyopadhyay, a pioneering figure in the realm of Bengali literature, in his novel *Boatman of the Padma* (2012), delineates quite beautifully the simplicity and resilience of rural life through the description of *Panta Bhat*. Lower-class fishermen like Ganesh and Kuber rely primarily on *Panta Bhat* as a staple meal, a simple yet sustaining food that reflects their socio-economic reality and deep connection to livelihood, as Bandyopadhyay says, “He (Ganesh) has come after eating two servings of *Panta* at home, like Kubera’s food”^[30]. In critiquing the juxtaposition of *Panta Bhat* and Kubera’s feast, the sentence speaks not only about the cultural, ecological, and social inequalities but also the literary traditions that interrogate food, class, and the valorisation of labour. It forces us to reflect on the cultural hierarchies that dictate which foods are worthy of reverence and which are relegated to the margins, and it calls for a deeper appreciation of the resilience and memory embedded in traditional food practices. By positioning *Panta* within a larger critique of consumerism and ecological sustainability, the sentence calls for reevaluating food practices tied to nature and local knowledge. In this critique, *Panta Bhat* transcends its humble nature and becomes a symbol of ecological resistance and cultural preservation. The fisherman, who consumes it in preparation for his labour, is nourishing his body and upholding an ecological and cultural tradition that has survived despite the forces of modernity and globalization. The comparison of *Panta* to Kubera’s food thus becomes an act of resistance—a way of speaking back to a dominant cultural order that devalues the food and labour of the oppressed, yet through this simple meal, a claim to dignity and cultural memory is made.

5. Ritualization of *Panta Bhat*

Bengal’s traditional (especially rural) life is rich in ritual and aestheticism. Bengalis have used food with complex symbolic meanings on both religious and secular occasions^[23]. In this cultural mindset, food is not only something

to be consumed to survive but also an aesthetic purpose that enriches social customs. These rural social customs are mostly based on the agrarian structure of the economy and society. In Bengali rural and traditional urban households, many domestic rituals and ceremonies are based on food. *Puja* (worship) is incomplete without the offering of *bhog* (food offered to the deity). The staple food, rice, has immense significance and acts as the main item offered to the deity^[23]. Bengal's pure essence of spirituality can be found in the *Bratokothas* (a Hindu religious devotional practice). Ketaka Kshemananda, in his poem, prescribed to observe this *Brato* (vow), which includes the offering of *Panta Bhat* or fermented rice—"Panta odon diya pujibek toma, Ashwine Ananta puja, chitte nahi seema" (you will be worshipped in the month of 'Ashwin, (Bengali month)' with the offering of fermented rice with our wholehearted devotion)^[31]. The type of offering signifies the socio-economic background of the devotees. The offering of *Panta Bhat* to the deity symbolizes the food habits of the lower echelon of Bengal's society. The ritual of offering *Pakhala* to Lord Jagannath as a *Prasad* (consecrated food) is an essential component of Orissa's culture and tradition. *Sugandhi* (flavoured) *Pakhala* is offered to Lord Jagannath every evening during *Sandhya Dhupa* (Evening Puja). *Dahi* (curd) *Pakhala* is served as *Prasad* at several Orissa temples, where it is combined with curd and spices^[7].

Technology in the form of digitalization has helped to globalize *Pakhala* culture, and the celebration of this specific meal began with the idea of *Pakhala Divas* (Day), which is held annually on March 20 across Orissa^[7]. In this context, we can also mention the *Nabanna* festival, which celebrates the reaping of paddy in winter. If we talk about *Panta Bhat*, various rituals will come into discussion, for example, *Manasa puja*, *Shital Sashti puja* (the next day of *Vasant Panchami* or *Saraswati puja*), *Arandhan* or *Ranna Puja*, etc. In most Bengali households, *Arandhan* or *Rannapuja* (cooking festival) is observed from the Bengali month 'Bhadra' (August–September) onwards. It is a ritual of worshipping *unan* (earthen cooking oven). Rice is cooked, and a one-pot meal is left overnight at room temperature and consumed cold the following day—observed as *Shital Shashti* with *Panta Bhat*, a dash of salt, and a splash of mustard oil (Figure 5)^[32]. The ritual of offering *Shital* (cold) *bhog*, *Panta Bhat*, accompanied by *khesari dal*, *kochu saag* (taro stem), lentil fritters,

fish, and an elephant apple chutney, all prepared a day in advance for the deity *Durga*, is still followed by some households in Bengal^[32]. From the 20th century onwards, urban Bengalis, especially from Bangladesh, celebrate the Bengali New Year, *Pohela Boishakh* (1st day and 1st month of the Bengali calendar) with pomp and grandeur (Figure 6). *Pohela Boishakh* becomes a marker of their national and cultural identity. This festival of the New Year remains incomplete without *Panta Bhat*. *Bangladeshis* (people of Bangladesh) at home or abroad celebrate this day with *Panta Bhat*, *Ilish* (Hilsa Fish), and different types of *Bhorta* (mashed items). Figure 6 shows mashed items like mashed potatoes, *Sutki* (dry fish) etc.



Figure 5. Arandhan or Ranna Puja.

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/1MVaehiVNMT7QvfUA>.



Figure 6. Pohela Baishakh.

Source: <https://zuranaazrecipe.com/?p=4801>.

6. Modernization and the Changing Pattern of *Panta Bhat*

In the face of globalization, modern India is interested in reclaiming regionally specific heritage dishes in order to use cuisine to express nationalism. With the aid of food blogs, food groups, cooking workshops, culinary discussion platforms, and observing days named after traditional domestic foods, the presence of social media is causing the aspect to take a dramatic turn. Since its inception, this dish has gained popularity and is now served at upscale restaurants and five-star hotels around the country^[7]. Previously known as ‘Poor Man’s Food,’ *Panta Bhat* has effectively transformed its reputation and secured a unique spot on the menus of five-star hotels throughout the state and abroad. By linking new food product brands to a perceived local or regional culinary provenance, it could be seen as “an attractive strategy to interest the urban consumer in new food product brands”^[7]. This simple dish, apparently of lower strata, grabbed global attention when *Panta Bhat*, prepared by the contestant Kishwar Chowdhury, became the winning dish of MasterChef Australia 2021 (Figure 7). It started entering restaurants with a posh outlook. Many Kolkata-based restaurants serve *Panta Bhat* with the same side dishes used regularly, but with a touch of aristocracy^[33].



Figure 7. *Panta Bhat* and its global recognition.

Source: <https://kitchenofdebjani.com/2021/07/panta-bhat/>.

Due to rising demand for traditional cuisines and knowledge of the health advantages of fermented foods, many restaurants, especially in South India, are including them on their summer menus^[34]. The popularity of this dish can be inferred from the 2014 incident at Pabna University of Science and Technology (Bangladesh), where students de-

manded that “*Panta Bhat* and fried hilsa” be added to their breakfast menu. Today, restaurants also serve it under brand names like ‘Most Favourite’ and ‘Special Dish.’ It is sold as a local favorite in states like Orissa, West Bengal, Goa, and Assam^[7]. The song “*Aanki Chali, Baanki Chali*” from the Hindi movie “*Namkeen*,” in which Sharmila Tagore and Shabana Azmi are seen pounding grains and singing “*Panta Bhaatey Tatka Begun Pora*,” (*Panta Bhat* with fresh roasted brinjal) may have been the *Panta Bhat*’s biggest claim to fame before it appeared as ‘Smoked Rice Water’ on MasterChef Australia^[33].

7. Conclusions

In a globalized world where food has been industrialized, commodified, and stripped of its cultural roots, *Panta Bhat* is a reminder of what has been lost in the pursuit of modernity. Its simplicity offers a counter-narrative to the industrialized food systems that have become the hallmark of modern society. Particularly in rural areas where food waste is a significant issue, it may be highly beneficial in promoting food security. In addition to being a culinary custom, *Panta Bhat* has become a symbol of social stratification, economic struggle, and cultural identity that captures Bengal’s socio-economic reality, especially in light of globalization and changing food preferences. Over the decades, *Panta Bhat* evolved from a food of necessity to the most popular cultural delicacy that captures the changing pattern of consuming *Panta Bhat* in Bengali society in general and in other parts of the world in particular. Bengal’s intricate relationship between food, class, and cultural memory can well be apprehended by examining its literary records that depict *Panta Bhat* in its truest sense. The practice of preparing and consuming *Panta Bhat* contributes to the larger context of sustainable food systems by reducing food waste in relation to resource optimization and economic sustainability. Irrespective of caste, class, religion, and societal stratification, it is a food that transcends socio-economic boundaries during the time of cultural festivities.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the

manuscript.

Funding

The authors did not receive any funding for the research.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not Applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The study does not create and generate data for sharing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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