FOOD, FESTIVAL AND BENGALI MIGRANTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN LUCKNOW CITY

ARVIND KUMAR GUPTA

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the cultural practices of Bengali migrants in Lucknow, India, with a focus on the roles of food, festivals, and identity preservation. Through a descriptive and exploratory research design, drawing from interviews with 47 respondents across various localities, the research highlights how food and festivals act as essential components of cultural identity and social cohesion. Bengali cuisine, with its rich variety of flavours and dishes, serves as a bridge to the migrants' homeland, fostering a sense of continuity and connection amidst cultural adaptation. Iconic dishes such as roshogolla, shorshe ilish, and mutton kosha symbolize not only sustenance but also heritage and community belonging.

Festivals, particularly Durga Puja, emerge as significant cultural anchors, reinforcing shared values and fostering collective effervescence in Emile Durkheim's sense. These celebrations act as platforms for cultural reproduction, bringing together the Bengali migrants and local communities in a shared sociocultural space. The proliferation of Bengali restaurants and culinary adaptations to Lucknow's foodscape illustrates the interplay of globalization and urbanization, where regional identities thrive within a broader cultural framework.

Using Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the study analyzes how food and festivals embody status, identity, and social integration. It also delves into challenges faced by migrants, including language barriers, economic disparities, and the dilution of cultural practices among younger generations. Despite these obstacles, Bengali migrants exhibit resilience, adapting to their new environment while maintaining their cultural essence through rituals, communal gatherings, and culinary practices. This research offers a nuanced understanding

of the adaptive strategies and cultural resilience of the Bengali diaspora in Lucknow.

Keywords: Cultural Capital, Festival, Food, Migration.

Introduction

The 8th ruler of Lucknow (1827–1837), Nasir-ud-Din Haidar, invited Bengali scholars to Lucknow's Tara Wali Kothi for astronomical studies. This historic building, now home to the main branch of the State Bank of India (SBI), is located next to K.D. Singh Babu Stadium in Lucknow. This event marked the early arrival of Bengali migrants to the city, who were drawn to Lucknow for their distinctive skills and expertise (Chatterjee, 1997; Bandopadhyay, 2005).

Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, is renowned for its rich and diverse cultural heritage, shaped by the influence of multiple dynasties and communities (Ali, 2004). Over time, Bengali settlers have established a 'Mini Bengal' within the city, where they have preserved their traditions and identity through cultural reproduction within families. Festivals and food are central to this cultural preservation (Mukherjee, 2010).

Bengalis in Lucknow are widely recognized for their unique skills and contributions. When they migrated to the city, they brought not only their belongings but also their distinct cultural practices, food habits, and lifestyle. For Bengali migrants, food transcends mere sustenance; it is a profound symbol of cultural identity (Sen, 2001).

Food serves as a bridge connecting Bengali migrants to their ancestral roots, acting as a medium for cultural exchange and a central element of family and community life (Roy, 2013). This research explores the complex relationship between food, family, and festivals among Bengali migrants in Lucknow. It highlights the sociocultural dimensions of their culinary practices and festive traditions, emphasizing their role in maintaining cultural cohesion (Dasgupta, 2017).

The study also examines how Bengalis in Lucknow perceive the significance of festivals and food in their objective, subjective, and social lifeworlds. It investigates whether these elements are pivotal sources of their cultural capital and how they contribute to the construction and reinforcement of their cultural identity in Lucknow (Bourdieu, 1986; Ghosh, 2015).

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and exploratory research design to examine the cultural practices of Bengali migrants in Lucknow. The study is focused on specific localities in Lucknow where the Bengali community is predominantly settled, including Model House, Sundar Bagh, Nirala Nagar, and Sahara City.

Due to the lack of official government data regarding the precise number of Bengalis residing in Lucknow, the study's population remains unspecified.

A total of 47 respondents were selected through snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that leverages referrals within the community to identify additional participants. This approach was particularly advantageous for accessing members of this relatively dispersed community, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of their cultural practices.

Food as a Cultural Marker

Food reflects the essence of Bengali culture. Bengali cuisine, renowned for its diverse flavors and dishes, constitutes a vital part of the identity of its people. Iconic dishes such as *Rosogolla*, fish curry, *Bhapa Shondesh*, and *Mochar Chop* exemplify Bengal's culinary richness and cultural heritage. Migrants carry these food traditions with them, aiming to preserve their cultural identity in unfamiliar environments.

As Devi (1986) suggests, food systems are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural nexus, symbolizing social relationships and ideological realities. This perspective is particularly relevant to Bengali migrants, for whom food serves as both a medium of cultural continuity and a means of expressing their identity. Similarly, Douglas (1972) argues that food is a form of communication, reflecting the norms, values, and social structures of a community.

Insights from respondents further reinforce these ideas. Maneesha, one of the participants in this study, emphasized that eating outside is not merely about sustenance but also about socialization, learning, and exploration. This illustrates how food acts as a tool for cultural exchange and interaction, fostering deeper connections with one's surroundings and the broader community. As Appadurai (1988) notes, food practices are essential to understanding the dynamics of cultural adaptation and exchange among migrant communities.

Naidu (2014) underscores the role of food in preserving a migrant's sense of identity and ensuring cultural continuity across generations. For Bengali migrants, food transcends its functional role, becoming a powerful symbol of belonging and a bridge between their past and present. It facilitates the transmission of cultural values within families while fostering a shared sense of identity within their communities.

Like Percentage of Food Dishes Consume by Bengali Migrants

Food Dishes	**Like percentage by Bengali Migrants**

Fish Chop	89%
Rice	73%
Mutton Kosha	71%
Roshogolla	91%
Bhapa Shondesh	83%
Chollar Daal	67%

Table 1.1

Bengali Cuisine in Lucknow

While adapting to Lucknow's culinary culture, Bengali migrants strive to maintain their traditional food practices. Local stores, such as Sundar Bagh's Bengali Bazaar, provide authentic ingredients like mustard oil, *posto* (poppy seeds), and fish varieties such as rohu and hilsa—essential for Bengali cooking. Respondents shared that these ingredients are vital for recreating traditional dishes, ensuring a sense of familiarity and comfort in an unfamiliar setting. The phenomenon of the growing number of Bengali cuisine restaurants in Lucknow can be analyzed through sociological food theory, particularly using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the sociology of globalization (Appadurai, 1988). This trend also aligns with the work of Barth (1969), who discusses how food practices can serve as a boundary marker for cultural identity within migrant communities.

Cultural Capital and Identity Formation

Bourdieu's (1986) theory emphasizes how food functions as cultural capital, symbolizing both identity and social status. The proliferation of Bengali restaurants in Lucknow highlights the presence and influence of the Bengali diaspora in the city. As migrants from Bengal settle in Lucknow, they bring their culinary traditions, which serve as markers of their cultural identity. This process is reflective of the "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1986), where food practices become ingrained and transmitted as part of a collective cultural memory. Bengali food, therefore, not only preserves heritage but also introduces it to the local population, fostering cross-cultural exchange and creating a shared culinary space. This contributes to the development of a 'Mini Bengal' as an identity hub in Lucknow (Giddens, 1991).

Globalization and Food as a Cultural Commodity

Globalization has made it easier for regional cuisines to transcend geographical boundaries (Appadurai, 1988). Bengali food culture's growing presence in Lucknow demonstrates how food can become a cultural commodity, connecting diverse communities. Restaurants offering signature dishes such as *shorshe ilish* (mustard hilsa) or *rosogolla* (a sweet delicacy) function as cultural ambassadors, introducing Bengali food to the local population and promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of Bengal's culinary traditions. This aligns with Ritzer's (1993) concept of the "McDonaldization" of culture, where regional cuisines are commodified and spread globally, thus altering their traditional significance while still maintaining cultural elements.

Urbanization and Culinary Diversity

As cities like Lucknow urbanize, they become melting pots of different cultures. The increasing presence of Bengali cuisine signifies the city's openness to cultural diversity. This trend underscores the role of food in urban sociological dynamics, where restaurants become spaces for cultural negotiation, integration, and expression (Douglas, 1972). Furthermore, Sassen (2001) argues that the globalization of urban centers contributes to the growth of transnational food networks, allowing for greater access to diverse food practices and enhancing cosmopolitan identities within cities.

The growing number of Bengali cuisine restaurants in Lucknow reflects how food can bridge regional identities, promote cultural diversity, and foster a sense of belonging. It demonstrates how food practices serve as markers of cultural identity, offering both a link to the past and a way to adapt in new environments. This shift reflects broader sociological trends of cultural negotiation and integration within the urban landscape, as food continues to shape and transform the sociocultural fabric of cities like Lucknow.

List of Bengali Cuisine Restaurants in Lucknow

Bengali Restaurants	**Details**
Taste of Bengal	Located in Gomti Nagar, this restaurant is known for dishes like Macher Jhol, Alu Bhaja, and Egg Curry. It offers great recommendations and is praised for its authentic Bengali flavors.

TT's Jhol Jhaal	Situated in Indira Nagar, TT's Jhol Jhaal serves authentic Bengali cuisine, including Chhola'r Daal, Mughlai Paratha, and Dhokaar Daalna. The cozy ambiance makes it a popular choice among locals.
Petuks Kitchen	Located in Vibhuti Khand, Gomti Nagar, Petuks Kitchen is known for its Fish Kalia, Chicken Kasa, and Kashmiri Pulav, providing a homely Bengali dining experience.
Bengal Bhog	Based in Mohanlalganj, Bengal Bhog offers a range of Bengali snacks and traditional dishes, catering to those seeking authentic flavors.
Bangali Chasska	Situated in Indira Nagar, Bangali Chasska serves a variety of Bengali and Indian dishes, known for its flavorful preparations.

Flavours Of Kolkata	Located in Gomti Nagar, this restaurant brings the taste of Kolkata to Lucknow, offering a range of Bengali and Indian cuisines.
Tript Aahar	Found in Indira Nagar, Tript Aahar offers a variety of Bengali dishes at affordable prices, making it a go-to spot for many.
Bengal Bites	Found in Gomati Nagar Arjunganj, Bengal Bites specializes in Indian and Bengali dishes, providing a diverse menu for patrons.

Table 1.2

Festivals as a Cultural Anchor

Festivals are a cornerstone of Bengali culture, playing a pivotal role in sustaining cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and enabling social integration. From a sociological perspective, festivals act as social rituals that bind communities and offer a platform for cultural expression. As Durkheim (1912) notes, festivals are moments of collective effervescence, where communities come together to celebrate shared beliefs, values, and social solidarity. In the case of Bengali festivals in Lucknow, these celebrations are not only about religious observances but also about the reassertion of cultural identity and the maintenance of social ties within the diaspora.

Durga Puja and Community Identity

Drawing from Émile Durkheim's theory of collective effervescence, festivals like Durga Puja serve as moments of heightened social energy, bringing individuals together to celebrate shared beliefs and traditions (Durkheim, 1912). The elaborate pandals, food stalls, and rituals reflect devotion while also symbolizing the community's pride in showcasing its cultural heritage. The competitive spirit among pandals highlights the performative aspect of these festivals, where communities assert their identity through both gastronomic offerings and artistic displays (Goffman, 1959). Bengali cuisine, with iconic dishes like *Aloo Posto*, *Shukto*, and *Mutton Kosha*, becomes a significant vehicle for expressing this identity, while also fostering a sense of belonging and community pride.

Bhog Stall at Durga Puja Pandal



Picture 1.1

"Baro Mase Tero Parbon" and Cultural Continuity

The Bengali proverb "Baro Mase Tero Parbon" (Thirteen festivals in twelve months) encapsulates the community's deep-rooted connection with festivals, emphasizing their cyclical nature in preserving culture. As Barth (1969) argues, festivals are not just markers of cultural practice but also key moments of cultural transmission. Festivals like *Poila Baishakh*, *Kali Puja*, and *Navanna* act as rituals of renewal and continuity, bridging the gap between past and present. They provide opportunities for the Bengali diaspora in Lucknow to reconnect with their heritage, ensuring cultural transmission across generations. This continuity serves as a mechanism for social reproduction, preserving cultural values while adapting to new environments (Bourdieu, 1986).

Institutions as Cultural Anchors

The Bengali Club and Young Men's Association, established in 1892, exemplify the role of institutional spaces in sustaining cultural practices within migrant communities. According to Giddens (1991), such organizations function as "cultural anchors," providing a platform for the community to maintain its distinct identity while also adapting to the host society. These institutions serve as crucial sites for the organization of festivals and other cultural events, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity within the Bengali diaspora in Lucknow. The Bengali Club, for example, organizes cultural events like drama performances, dance recitals, and food festivals, reinforcing the Bengali community's presence and cultural heritage in the city.

Food as a Symbol of Festival Dynamics

Festival sociology highlights the symbolic importance of food as a unifying force during communal events. Food acts as a medium of cultural exchange and solidarity, facilitating social interaction and the transmission of traditions (Mintz, 1985). During festivals like Durga Puja, food stalls featuring authentic Bengali dishes serve as spaces for social interaction, where both Bengalis and non-Bengalis partake in the cultural celebrations, promoting integration and mutual appreciation. Dishes like *Rasgolla*, *Loochi*, and *Cholar Dal* become symbolic representations of Bengali cultural expression, reinforcing cultural identity while fostering cross-cultural communication. This dynamic aligns with Appadurai's (1990) concept of food as a cultural commodity that not only sustains the community but also enhances cultural visibility in a globalized setting.

People having Bhog at Durga Puja Pandal



Picture 1.2

Durga Puja in Lucknow: Cultural Pluralism and Collective Representation

Durga Puja in Lucknow exemplifies cultural pluralism, where multiple communities engage in cross-cultural exchanges, celebrating their respective identities within a shared urban space. As Cohen (1985) suggests, cultural pluralism allows for the coexistence of diverse cultural traditions within a larger societal framework, enriching the social fabric. In the case of Durga Puja, cultural performances, art exhibitions, and food fairs create avenues for dialogue and mutual respect between the Bengali diaspora and the broader Lucknow community. This intercultural exchange underscores the sociological principle that cultural diversity is not only tolerated but celebrated in urban environments, where different traditions can coexist and learn from one another.

Durkheim's (1912) theory of collective representation further enriches this analysis, as Durga Puja acts as a collective expression of Bengali identity and shared values. The festival's rituals, including prayers, cultural programs, and food offerings, reflect broader societal themes like unity, inclusivity, and collective solidarity. The fusion of traditional practices with modern elements during the festival demonstrates the dynamic nature of collective representation, preserving heritage while adapting to contemporary contexts (Giddens, 1991).

Migration and Food: A Medium of Identity

Migration, as noted by Sassen (2001), involves the negotiation of cultural identity in a new social environment. For Bengali migrants in Lucknow, food plays a crucial role in maintaining connections to their homeland. The absence of familiar food can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, and loss of cultural belonging. Reeti Roy, a respondent, captures this sentiment when she says, "Bengali ka har cheez me sath me meetha hona chahiye" ("Every Bengali dish must have something sweet"). This statement illustrates the deep emotional connection between food and cultural identity, highlighting food as a symbol of both home and heritage.

The concept of "gastrodiplomacy" (Han, 2019) also emerges in the Bengali community's food practices. Bengali migrants use food as a diplomatic tool to build relationships and foster goodwill with the broader Lucknow community. Sweets like *Rosogolla* and *Mishti Doi* act as cultural ambassadors, bridging social divides and promoting cultural integration.

Acculturation and Intercultural Exchange

The process of acculturation is central to understanding the cultural dynamics between Bengali migrants and the local Lucknowi population. Acculturation, as described by Berry (1997), involves a two-way interaction where both groups influence each other without losing their distinct identities. In the case of Bengali migrants in Lucknow, this mutual exchange enriches the cultural landscape, as both Bengali and Lucknowi traditions adapt to one another. Respondents shared how Bengali families often cook traditional dishes at home

but also embrace local cuisine when dining out. This blending reflects the fluid nature of cultural identity in an urban, multicultural setting, as people incorporate elements of other cultures into their own practices while preserving their heritage.

Rituals, Practices, and Language

Bengalis in Lucknow engage in various rituals that blend local customs with their own. This phenomenon reflects the process of Sanskritization, as described by Srinivas (1952), where lower caste communities or migrants adopt practices from higher castes to enhance their social mobility. During festivals like *Kali Puja* and *Diwali*, many Bengalis incorporate elements of Lucknowi traditions, such as performing *Lakshmi* and *Ganesh Puja* alongside their own rituals. Despite these adaptations, traditional Bengali practices, like offering hibiscus flowers and preparing *Khichdi* as prasad, remain integral to their cultural expression.

Language, too, plays a vital role in cultural transmission and identity maintenance. Many Bengali families in Lucknow emphasize teaching their children Bengali at home to preserve linguistic heritage, even though the dominant languages in the city are Hindi and English. This linguistic preservation aligns with Fishman's (1991) theory of language maintenance, which highlights the importance of intergenerational language transmission in safeguarding cultural identity.

Community Gatherings and Social Stereotypes

Community gatherings during festivals offer opportunities for cultural reinforcement and social cohesion. Respondents shared how potluck meals during *Durga Puja* and *Poila Baishakh* foster a sense of camaraderie and cultural continuity. These gatherings promote intergenerational learning, ensuring that traditional culinary practices and rituals are passed down. However, the Bengali community in Lucknow still faces challenges in overcoming social stereotypes, particularly the association with black magic, which persists in popular culture. Respondents, like Aparna Mitra and Rupali Mukherjee, emphasized the need to counter such misconceptions through cultural education and awareness, reaffirming the richness of Bengali culture and its focus on intellectual, artistic, and spiritual pursuits.

A Bengali family preparing food together at Durga Puja Pandal



Picture 1.3

Challenges Faced by Migrants

While the Bengali community has integrated into Lucknow's socio-cultural fabric, challenges remain, particularly in terms of language, economic integration, and the preservation of cultural identity. Economic opportunities often limit Bengali migrants to certain sectors, such as education, the arts, and private enterprises, which may not always offer the same financial security as other professions. The younger generation's increasing assimilation into Lucknow's mainstream culture presents a concern regarding the preservation of traditional practices and language. As respondents noted, maintaining a balance between cultural preservation and social integration is a delicate process, requiring concerted efforts from the community to retain their heritage while adapting to their new environment.

Conclusion

The sociological analysis of Bengali migrants in Lucknow reveals a profound interconnection between food, family, and festivals, all of which contribute to the preservation and expression of their cultural identity. These elements transcend mere tradition; they are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community, serving as mechanisms for cultural continuity in the face of migration. According to Giddens (1991), such practices represent what he calls "institutional reflexivity," where individuals engage in social practices that reflect and reinforce both their personal identity and broader cultural values. For Bengali migrants, food is not simply a means of sustenance but a marker of cultural belonging that links them to their roots in Bengal while simultaneously fostering new relationships and a sense of community in their adopted city of Lucknow.

Food, as a cultural tool, embodies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (1986), where traditional culinary practices serve as markers of social

distinction and cultural identity. The migration of these practices to Lucknow exemplifies how food can be a tool for both the transmission and transformation of cultural heritage, as Bengali migrants adapt their cuisine while preserving key elements of their cultural repertoire. Through food, they communicate their identity to the wider Lucknow community, facilitating cultural exchange and social integration. The growing popularity of Bengali cuisine in Lucknow's restaurants, particularly during festivals, signifies a broader process of cultural visibility and recognition. It also highlights how food, as a form of cultural commodity, can bridge social divides and foster mutual understanding between migrant and local communities (Appadurai, 1990).

Festivals, on the other hand, provide a space for collective effervescence, a concept introduced by Émile Durkheim (1912), where shared rituals and practices create intense moments of social unity. The celebration of festivals like Durga Puja or Poila Baishakh enables Bengali migrants to reaffirm their cultural heritage while engaging with the broader Lucknow community. As Durkheim suggested, these communal gatherings act as a powerful tool for social cohesion, reaffirming collective beliefs, values, and identities. In the context of Lucknow, the Bengali diaspora's active participation in such festivals not only preserves cultural practices but also contributes to the cultural pluralism of the city, enriching its social fabric and creating an environment of cross-cultural exchange. This process of negotiation between old and new practices illustrates what Mary Douglas (1966) terms "boundary work," where cultures define, reinforce, and sometimes blend their social boundaries through rituals and shared practices.

Furthermore, the role of institutions like the Bengali Club or Young Men's Association speaks to the idea of "social capital" (Putnam, 2000), where community networks facilitate the exchange of resources, support, and knowledge. These institutions are not only venues for cultural preservation but also serve as social hubs that enable the Bengali community to navigate the complexities of migration, offering spaces for solidarity and collective action in a city that is home to diverse communities. They provide critical platforms for organizing cultural events and reinforcing cultural practices, particularly during festivals, thereby maintaining a sense of continuity and cohesion within the diaspora.

The adaptation of Bengali food and customs within the broader cultural context of Lucknow exemplifies a process of acculturation that is both adaptive and transformative. As migrants incorporate elements of local culture into their own practices—such as blending Bengali and Lucknowi culinary traditions—they create a hybrid cultural identity that allows for both the retention of traditional values and the negotiation of new ones. This fusion, as described by sociologists like Berry (1997), reflects the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural exchange in contemporary migration. The ability to both preserve and adapt cultural

practices is a testament to the resilience of the Bengali community, highlighting their agency in shaping their identity within a new socio-cultural landscape.

In conclusion, the food, family, and festivals of Bengali migrants in Lucknow offer an insightful lens into the processes of cultural adaptation, preservation, and integration. By examining these sociocultural practices, this research underscores the importance of cultural continuity and transformation in the lives of migrants, providing a nuanced understanding of how cultural identities are both maintained and reshaped in response to new social environments. The resilience and adaptability of the Bengali diaspora in Lucknow reflect broader sociological themes of identity formation, social cohesion, and cultural negotiation in the context of globalization and urbanization. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how food and festivals serve as vital components of cultural expression, shaping the migration experience and enriching the multicultural mosaic of cities like Lucknow.

For Bengali migrants in Lucknow, food, family, and festivals are deeply interwoven, forming the core of their cultural identity. Food not only satisfies hunger but also symbolizes heritage, fosters social connections, and acts as a medium for cultural exchange. Festivals provide a platform for expressing and preserving traditions, ensuring that Bengali culture thrives in a new environment. By examining these aspects, this research sheds light on the resilient and adaptive nature of Bengali migrants, offering a nuanced understanding of their sociocultural experiences in Lucknow.

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Bio Profile of the Author

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Agra College, Agra