



# Pice Hotels of Kolkata: Torchbearers of authentic home-style Bengali food.

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**Abstract:** Bengali cuisine takes a distinct pride in keeping its identity authentic in spite of the various outside influences. The colonial rule definitely brought about a drastic transformation in the eating habits of the Bengali population. This change in the discourse of Bengali cuisine definitely did not go well with a portion of the natives. It was this need to protect the sanctity and authenticity of Bengali cuisine that led to the emergence of many traditional eateries in Kolkata. These eateries known as the Pice Hotels or the 'bhaater' (rice) hotels were very instrumental in providing traditional Bengali food to the migrants specially from East Bengal (currently Bangladesh) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper describes in detail the monumental role of the pice hotels in providing the traditional, home-style Bengali food to the people at a time when the entire market was proliferated with foreign products and their resultant cuisine. The sustainability of the pice hotels has been brought out in this paper in detail. The paper delves into the working of the pice hotels and points out that these indigenous hotels have till date kept the rules unchanged. In the current scenario where many multispecialty cuisines and restaurants have made their presence in market, these pice hotels have sustained due to the quality of food being provided and also the fact that it caters to the hunger of vast majority of the population out in the market area for daily work. These pice hotels have carried forward a legacy in this cosmopolitan market and has also provided its patrons a space where 'a true Bengali' feels a sense of belonging in terms of food. The pice hotels can rightly be called as the torchbearers of authentic Bengali cuisine.

**Index Terms – pice hotel, cosmopolitan, authentic, Bengali cuisine.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kolkata or erstwhile Calcutta is boastful of not only its grand colonial architecture, rich cultural heritage and unique character, but also of its abundant culinary culture. The huge influx of varied communities and their accompanying cultures have today rendered Kolkata its distinct identity of being a cosmopolitan city. In Kolkata one can see a sizable proliferation of varied cuisine ranging from North Indian, South Indian, Chinese, Mughlai, Continental, Thai, Tibetan and Anglo- Indian too. With the expansion of the British paramountcy, the culinary practices of the locals underwent a drastic change. The transition in taste can be owed to the inflow of various kinds of commodities. One of the first items to be introduced into the Indian food market were potato, chili pepper, okra, tomato, cabbage, cauliflower, bread, cheese, jelly and biscuits. However, none of these items were accepted and were neither consumed in initial days. It was over a period of time with the efforts of the British administrators that these items came to be used in Bengali daily life. And it was this drastic transformation in the gastronomic habits, which was quite appalled by sizable Bengali population. Bengali cuisine unlike the other food cultures of the world has kept its domestic identity intact. It has emphatically tried to preserve its identity regional. The quintessential Bengali cuisine comprised of the authentic home-style food. It was this authenticity of Bengali food and taste which gave the cuisine its unique aesthetic superiority. Interestingly Bengali cuisine never became widely commercialized and has till date been able to keep its tag of 'Bengaliness' intact. However, the impact of colonial rule cannot be outright down played. As Bengal was the first colonial settlement, most of the experiments were initiated by the British here. Thus, it can rightly be pointed out that Bengal served as a laboratory for the British to try new reordering. The adaptation of the new food crops which was popularly known as the 'Columbian Exchange' was bound to impact the discourse on taste of the 'Bengali' cuisine. As a result of this transition there arose issues of authenticity of Bengali food among some sections of the population. This section of the Bengali society had put forwards efforts to retain the authenticity of Bengali cuisine within cosmopolitanism. In this search of authenticity within hybridity and cosmopolitanism, the pice hotels or the 'bhaater' hotels assume prime importance.

## II. PICE HOTELS

Around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, several eating places had cropped up in Kolkata and its vicinity. One of these eateries were the pice hotels where a full meal was supposedly served for 1/16<sup>th</sup> of a rupee. These eateries were also known as the 'bhaater' hotel i.e. rice hotels where daily meals comprising of rice, daal and other delicacies were served. The pice hotels derive their name from the Hindi word 'paisa' – which is the lowest denomination of the Indian rupee. The pice hotels catered to the needs of people with small budget chiefly the migrants who came in search of job opportunities from East Bengal (currently known as Bangladesh) by providing wholesome, home-style meals to the bustling working population in Kolkata. The pice hotels not just satiated the hunger of the

migrants but also provided them with sustenance and a space to belong to which was symbolic of home away from home. The food served here was along the lines of the ones prepared at home, thus pointing out the domesticity of the Bengali food served at these pice hotels.

Pice hotels are run according to certain rules and regulations. First rule being that the price and menu change daily depending on what is available in the market that morning. Second in order to keep the overhead costs low and to avoid waste, everything down to the last lemon wedge is also individually priced. Third, tables have to be shared without any hassle. Fourth, it is always advisable to tip the waiter generously in order to get a better size of fish on the next visit. Quite notable to mention is the fact that in such a bustling metropolis with a cosmopolitan character, pice hotels give us a peek into a unique legacy of culture, lifestyle and of course food. In the present-day trend of consumption of exotic ingredients and new culinary styles as well as 'fusion' cuisine, these pice hotels are providing the quintessential comfort food which still has been successful in holding the reigns in the Bengali patron's heart. The legacy which these pice hotels have been maintaining is of providing fresh, homely food served in an age-old style which has remained intact since the British era. The food and the ambience reflect the aptness of referring these pice hotels as the torchbearers of authentic Bengali food.

- ***Torchbearers of traditional Bengali cuisine:***

These eateries are quite simple and provide wholesome meals. The food prepared in these pice hotels are strictly traditional and also comforting too. As pointed out earlier, there is lack of formal menu. The menu varies with the availability of fish and vegetables in the market due to weather and seasonal fluctuations. Pice hotels are particularly famous for the astounding range of dishes that they serve for lunch and dinner. A typical satisfying meal at a pice hotel will comprise of steaming plate of rice, 'daal', be it the 'sona moog' or 'masur' or the heavenly 'maccher matha diye daal' (fish head with lentils), 'jhuri aloo bhaja' (matchstick size deep-fried potato wedges), a seasonal vegetable dish and a choice of chicken, fish or mutton.

One of the famous pice hotels *Hotel Siddheswari Ashram* which was established in 1928 by Khudiram Sarkar is particularly famous for its special 'Kobiraji Jhol' which is basically a healthy fish curry preparation with raw banana, potato, papaya and very little oil. Another pice hotel which further goes back to date is the *Tarun Niketan Hotel* which was established in 1915 by Eshan Chandra Deb and is particularly famous for its meat and fish dishes especially 'hansher dim' (duck egg) and mutton egg. A notable thing about the Tarun Niketan Hotel is that most of the food is prepared in traditional way without onion and garlic, barring the non-vegetarian items. While the above two are particularly known for their non-vegetarian dishes, *Swadhin Bharat Hindu Hotel* is one such establishment known particularly for its impressive variety of vegetarian dishes. This pice hotel was established in 1927 by Manabendra Panda and it showcases around 28 types of vegetarian dishes. However, the meat and fish dishes are also equally satisfying for the patrons. The place takes the pride of making fish curries with rare fishes like 'magur maach', 'koi maach' etc. Particularly worth trying dishes are the 'chitol maccher mutha' (fish balls cooked in spicy tomato onion gravy) and 'maccher dimer bora' (fish egg fritters). A pice hotel which from days gone by has been the hub of students and intellectuals is the *Jagannath Ashram Hotel*. Established by Gobordhan Palui, this place prides itself on its untouched authentic menu which has remained just the same without any change. This place from the yester years till date has been the hub of renowned authors and many prominent intellectuals.

It can well be noted that Bengali cuisine is one such cuisine which can boast of providing an elaborate range of dishes. Bengali meals are also eaten in courses, starting with rice served with 'shukto' which is a bitter vegetable curry, followed by lentil curry and definitely the variety of fritters, which is next followed by fish and meat, and finally a sweet chutney to cleanse the palette. Its quite evitable that the course moves from lighter to heavier, from smaller to bigger preparations and from bitter to sweet. And it can well be concluded that the pice hotels have very much kept the sanctity and purity of the courses without any outside influence. And particularly important fact that these places not only serve non-vegetarian delicacies but also vegetarian dishes like 'postor bora' (mouthwatering crunchy poppy seeds paste fritters), 'dhokar dalna' (lentil fritters in spicy curry) and other delicious seasonal vegetables like 'anchorer dalna' (green jackfruit curry) etc. It can well be noted that that for such a long period of time the pice hotels have been keeping up with changing demands of the modern society and simultaneously keeping the legacy intact of providing traditional Bengali food.

- ***Maintaining the aesthetic Bengali ambience:***

The pice hotels are unpretentious eating houses as they are totally motivated by the purpose of providing the best food to their patrons along with the feeling of belongingness. In the past the patrons had to sit on the straw mats laid on the floor, though now tables and chairs have definitely taken up that space. Also, at the entrance of each hotel a list of all food items and their prices are neatly written on a blackboard which the waiters can rattle off from their memory. Tables are usually shared which shows how these pice hotels functioned and held up the image of an ideal rice hotel where everyone would get to eat similar meals. Thus, it can well be stated that the element which set apart Bengali cuisine from all other cuisine was its distinct nature of providing familiarity. It was this character of the Bengali cuisine which restrained it from becoming too commercialized. It can well be noted that Bengali cuisine always exhibited a unique familial affection.

### III. CONCLUSION

However, Bengali cuisine is slowly and gradually coming out of the home kitchens. Many new high-end Bengali restaurants like Bhojohori Manna, 6 Ballygunge Place, Saptapadi etc. have started making their presence in the market. Thus, this points to how Bengali cuisine is increasingly spreading its wings from the domestic kitchen to the new emerging restaurants. These new restaurants are also providing pleasures of authentic home-cooked Bengali meal. The new restaurants strongly claim about the authenticity of the food they serve. However, in spite of the rapid emergence of these hotels, the significance of the pice hotels still remains intact. Though most pice hotels have been unable to keep up with the rising food prices and the changing demands of the modern city, they have still managed to remain afloat due to the quality of food being maintained. Definitely the crowd has thinned over the years and there are issues with regard to digital food delivery platforms. Despite the various issues these remaining pice hotels have been resolute. Many of the owners of these pice hotels wish to carry forward the legacy and continue to remain the torchbearers of providing authentic Bengali cuisine.

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