Crossing the Border and Tasting the Nation: the Indian Experience in Chitrita Banerji's *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the evocation of nation in Chitrita Banerjee's recent food travelogue *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine* (2007). It looks at how a diasporic writer like Chitrita judges her Indianness through the lens of "culinary citizenship." Her gastronomic quest for culinary purity induces her to judge Indian food culture by its geographic location and by its ability to assimilate outside influences and regenerate into newer forms. The dynamics of Indian food ways reflects a greater socio-cultural ethos of modern India basking in the glory of a newfound economic mobility. In this new world order the authenticity of the Indian food becomes for Chitrita a mark of the nation's cultural resilience and strength.

[**Keywords**: Food, diaspora, India, culture]

Most reviewers of Chitrita Banerji's latest food travelogue *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine* (2007) have praised the book for its eloquent use of scholarship, autobiography and travel narrative to evoke India and its culinary traditions (Muthalaly 2008, Sengoopta 2008). In the book her evocation of the nation occurs at different levels through her memories, journeys, her physical experience of taste, her familiarity with the Indian traditions and her enthusiasm to look for authentic Indian food wherever she goes. Like all other travelogues mobility is a major element in her work. Her mobility is enabled by a number of factors including her diasporic identity, her financial security and her intellectual ability to observe food and the social rituals associated with it. Chitrita, it should be noted here, is an Indian expatriate living in the United States of America since her university days. She has an MA in English from Harvard University and has written radiantly about her experience of Indian food in accounts like *Bengali Cooking: Seasons and Festivals* (1997)*, The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal* (2007). Besides being a food writer she is also known for translating Satyajit Ray's Feluda stories into English. Her diasporic identity readily frames some of the tendencies in her travelogue: like her search for authentic Indian food, her nostalgic remembrances, and her obsession with an imaginary land bound by the black lines of an atlas map. This article intents to see how her search for pure Indian food in her latest travelogue generates metaphors and narrative methods that help her to find a democratic nation which houses variety and diversity.

For diasporic writers like Chitrita imagining a peaceful and democratic India is part of an intellectual and imaginary habit – a habit that reconnects them albeit imaginatively with their mother (father) land. Chitrita's passion for Indian food and food ways then becomes linked to an intellectual and cultural habit to produce what Anita Mannur refers to as "culinary citizenship" - "a form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to

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claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food" (2007: 13). Mannur writes that such evocation of cultural citizenship produces narratives loaded with multiple cultural significations affiliated to class and sexuality (13). The writers show a certain level of critical awareness of their position as privileged diasporic citizens looking for cultural purity and authentic experiences:

Note to the Reader

> This book is based on several trips I made to India between 2003 and 2006. My journeys there did not follow a linear chronological or geographical sequence; nor did I set out to write a comprehensive chronicle of the cuisines of India. My selection of destinations (some of which I visited more than once) and cuisines was based on what seemed to promise the most interesting revelations. My objective was to see how much authenticity in food and cookery could possibly survive in the changing, young-old, immigrant nation that is India. (Banerjee 2007: xi)

Chitrita's search for authentic culinary experience, her physical presence away from and close to the nation she is writing about, her very act of exercising individual choice over the selection of destinations within her nation, and her recognition of the cultural dynamism of modern India immediately create a fictional democratic home space in the mind of the readers. In this nation citizens can roam around freely and choose to eat whatever they want. Here a living tradition is competing with modernity even at culinary level. Her search for culinary authenticity becomes a desirable norm which should be examined for its durability in globalised world. Vijay Mishra has written that Indian diaspora always tries to recreate a fictional homeland for themselves in purist terms of religion, modernity or ethnicity (1995: 449). Culinary purity is another such criteria that enable writers like Chitrita to examine her citizenship by looking at India through the lens of her food practices. As to the extent to which Chitrita's personal experience of the nation and her ethnic identity are involved could be guessed from her first chapter which deals with Bengali food. She looks at how fish is part of Bengali food and culture by recollecting her experience of eating fish in her youth in Kolkata, her cultural shock at finding sea fish as the only available fish in England and her description of the use of fish as a decorative item in Bengali weddings (2007: 5-8). This already provides a structure to her inner journey as a diasporic Indian citizen. She nostalgically remembers her past, arrives in a linear way to her trauma of leaving the country and later turns back with a newfound zeal to "learn" about her country. The expository paragraph of the first chapter provides another classic example of this journey:

> BENGALIS LOVE FISH. Mention Bengali food to anyone in India and the first image it evokes is that of fish and rice. The second image is that of sweets made from chhana (fresh cottage cheese). Geography is responsible for the first, an accident of history for the second. Although a wedding invitation started me on this Indian culinary odyssey, the history of Bengali sweets had been intriguing enough for me to have made an earlier exploratory trip to a destination hundreds of miles from my native region. (2007: 5)

Geographical authenticity becomes the most important trope in Chitrita's narrative. Be it fish in Bengal or biriyani in Hyderabad, she must taste it by physically being at the "authentic" place where it belongs. Once this geographical location is negotiated with Chitrita tests the culture around the food through the lens of the changing world. She is concerned over the different ways the authentic food is adapting, assimilating and at times

regenerating to newer cultural and culinary forms. Therefore while writing about Hilsa, an exquisitely tasty estuarine fish, she not only remembers her joyful days of eating hilsa together along with other family members but also the partition of Bengal and the Bengali pride over hilsa as a cultural symbol in post-independent India (2007: 19 – 21). This essay will trace the narrative strategies and structural devices Chitrita uses to establish the authenticity of her culinary experience followed by the strategies of assimilation and regeneration she uses to judge that experience according to contemporary socio-political standards. As already stated Chitrita would first locate the food in a map and then go about tasting its resilience in today's world.

Authentic Food and Nation

Broadly there are two ways of understanding the concept of nation. Firstly, and traditionally nation can be understood as a "territorial community of nativity" (Grosby 2005: 7) where the population is linked by different degrees of kinship, bonding and cultural uniformity. Here ethnicity, memory, history, heritage and tradition play crucial role in generating an idea of the self. This is a social understanding of nation as an integrating force. Secondly there is the subaltern understanding of nation where nation is considered an imposing state apparatus trying to discipline and control its subjects through various means. The second understanding of the nation draws heavily from Foucauldian notions of modernity and state apparatuses in order to analyze governance and national ideology.

Chitrita, however, understands the nation quiet clearly through the first perspective. She observes the cultural rituals associated with Indian food systems to appreciate the prosperity of a nation rich in culinary traditions. Here Kashmiri kebabs share space with South Indian thalis forming an imaginary culinary boundary for India. For an immigrant like Chitrita, who returns to her motherland as a food traveller, India is geography of tastes, food and the cultural kinship associated with food:

> Surrounded by a diversity of cultures and languages and cuisines, it glows for me like a fine gem in a setting of precious metals. Focussing on the gem in my mind, I magnify each of its many facets – the shared meals, the rituals I have performed or watched being performed, the festivities that marked the year, the significant events of my life, the relationships that bound me to them. The distant past, personal, cultural and physical, manifests itself in the observed map, as does the more recent remembrance of my travels. Together, they speak to me about a country that has an incomparable genius for assimilation and regeneration, an ideal immigrant nation, just like the country I have now adopted as my own. I had set out on a search for authenticity in food, but I have ended up as a witness to endless synthesis. (Banerji 2007: 311 – 312)

Chitrita's gastronomic journey produces a nation which tolerates differences and nurtures its people. It is a peaceful land of cultural interchange where the rhythm of life seems eternal. This sort of evocation of nation through food – culinary nationalism, or national discourse on gastronomy – is a fairly old practice and several writers have worked on the connection between food, patriotism and national integration (Crofts 2010, Ferguson 2010, Goldstein 1995). Anita Mannur's recent essay on the culinary writings of South Asian diaspora in the U S analyzes the use of nostalgia and memory in the construction of discourse on culinary nationalism (2007: 11 – 31). Arjun Appadurai's classic essay on Indian cookbooks of the 1980s uncovers the links between class, identity of Indian women and the structural devices

like certain widespread assumptions regarding Indian food in organizing a national cuisine (1988 : 3 - 24). Some of the structural devices Appadurai mentions in his essay also appear in Chitrita's book. One of the commonest structural devices suggested by Appadurai is the merging of the ethnic cuisine with the national. Here, diverse ethnic peculiarities and regional specialties serve as metonyms for the larger nation (18-19). Chitrita's exploration of Bengali, Goan, Kashmiri, Hyderabadi or Gujarati food create an illusion of a spatially diverse India as much as it situates these individual cuisines in the large jigsaw puzzle of a nation. Ethnic and regional stereotypes explain as well as integrate the differences between myriad parts of this puzzle:

> The Indian South carries an aura of distinctive identity, culture and mythology, comparable in its specificity to that of the American South. If you draw a line west to east, halfway down the Indian landmass, you'll be left with a triangular wedge to the south, like a slice of pie…The territorial pie includes the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, and, through the centuries, its borders have merged, extended and contracted under different ruling powers. Fabled labels identify the cuisines that have developed here under a blazing sun, washed by the waters of two oceans, nursed by rushing rivers and contoured by hills and rocky plateaus – Coondapuri, Malabar, Chettinad. (Banerji 2007: 71)

Appadurai points to some other structural devices like the encyclopedic approach and a classification principle to systematize a national cuisine. Indian cuisine under the encyclopedic approach becomes the theme under which all other parts: Bengali, Gujarati or Punjabi fall into place (1988: 19). Chitrita's exposition on South India and its distinctive cuisine as quoted above reflects the encyclopedic approach as the south becomes a chunk of cultural landmass cut off for observation from the greater nation. Moreover the implicit assumption of linkage between different parts of a nation is suggested through the publication of the book *Eating India* itself, with fourteen chapters devoted to fourteen different parts and cultures of India. A major theme combining these different parts is Chitrita's journey. She explains the aim of her journey in her note to the reader: "My objective was to see how much authenticity in food and cookery could possibly survive in the changing, young-old, immigrant nation that is India (2007: xi)." After eating her way through the country she realizes that authenticity is an illusion she has been after since everywhere in the present day India there is the dynamism of synthesis and regeneration (311). With colonialism and globalization India has started to adapt and reinvent her food like putting chicken tikka masala topping on pizza (324) or adopting a typical South Indian dosa as a pan-Indian fast food (72).

Assimilation and Regeneration

For Chitrita assimilation and regeneration are two subthemes of the grand theme of authenticity itself. By assimilation she means the fusion of different culinary traditions and regeneration is both the dynamics of foodways and the new found interest in various varieties of food. These two subthemes produce in their turn three structural devices: firstly they enable Chitrita to rework the culinary stereotypes, secondly they are the framework which explains the intensity of gastronomic fusion and thirdly they occasion commentary on the vanishing foodways of India.

Culinary stereotypes are connected to the identity of the ethnic other (Appadurai 1988: 18). In India such stereotypes are as common as our main food grain rice. So the south

Indian dishes are considered extremely syrupy and sizzling, north India is known for wheat, dal and Mughlai preparations, Bengalis for fishes and sweets, Keralites for using coconut everywhere, Hyderabad and Lucknow for biriyani and meat preparations and Bombay for bada pao. Different stereotypes under one head "Indian cuisine" already demonstrate the elements of fusion and assimilation at work in forming a national culture. Chitrita explores these stereotypes, often deconstructs them or explains the cultural dynamism which lies underneath such bland standardization. Bengalis, Chitrita shows, do not simply gorge fishes like Neanderthal savages but they use fishes as specific part of a large menu. Fish preparations are important knowledge that passes on from one generation of women to another. Moreover fishes are there in Bengali art and literature, and are an integral part of marriage ritual. Consuming a highly priced and extremely tasty fish like hilsa can become a method of family bonding (2007: 5 – 20).

If this cultural dynamism complicates the stereotype of fishy Bengalis then the second structural strategy of exploring gastronomic fusion complicates the idea of space and food. The intimacy between food and space is obvious since we need a place to consume our meals. Often food becomes generic to the place of its origin or where it is best produced. Take for example the Muslim cuisine of Hyderabad which is generally thought of consisting basically biriyani and meat preparations. Chitrita wanders in Hyderabad finding all sorts of food from Hindu, British, Muslim to ice creams, bakery and even wonderful vegetable curries like veppudu and eggplant curry. She observes that it is in Hyderabad that the age old Mughlai dish kulfi has given way to the modern day ice cream under the influence of the British by mixing the traditions of east – India and Iran and the west – Europe and partly America (2007: 172 – 173). She finds such mixing of culinary traditions going on in a far larger scale in a cosmopolitan city like Bombay, which "Like New York … is a city where local, national and international cuisines are forever fusing into something different (233)." Here seafood is cooked in different ways and dabbawallahs maintain an impeccable record of delivering homemade food to officers without delay (235).

In Bombay Chitrita looks for the cuisine of a dwindling community: the East Indians who are the descendants of the oldest inhabitants of Bombay converted to Catholicism by the Portuguese. She informs that some gifted chefs are trying to revive the cuisine of this community (236). Her search for vanishing cuisines becomes the third structural device to explore the theme of assimilation and regeneration. The few Jews who live in Cochin still continue to preserve their ancient traditions of eating and preparing food. Her writing attempts to record the almost extinct foodways of the Jews. What she says about the cuisine of the East Indians of Bombay is true for the Jews too: "Its authenticity can only be preserved if people are motivated to study the community's history and present it to the world" (236). Regenerating knowledge about food becomes a process of connecting a lost tradition to the current of globalization. What Chitrita implies is that the gastronomic tradition of the Cochin Jews should be presented to the world as all the other Indian cuisines are being presented to the world. Her account of Indian cuisines itself exists as a document for presenting India to a globalized world.

As a personal journey, Chitrita Banerjee's travelogue reproduces some of the common diasporic anxieties about space, motherland and citizenship. Chitrita however produces a finely chiseled model of culinary exploration both by consuming the food and by writing about it as ways of connecting to the nation itself. In doing so she has observed that modern day India with mobility at various sectors shows remarkable patterns of assimilation

and regeneration. This paper has shown that Chritrita has used three major structural devices to evoke an India of peace and tolerance where different traditions merge without nullifying each other. These three devices also are ways to connect oneself to one's lost nation. Food, food ways and cultural practices finally become complex ways of developing a culinary citizenship which would both accept change and yet respect the unchanging tradition of eating an ethnically authentic cuisine.

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