

Women: The Harbinger of Food Production and the Debility of Self

Poulomi Saha

State Aided College Teacher

Department of English

Garhbeta College, Paschim Medinipur

West Bengal, India

Abstract

How the lamentable condition of women in male-flavoured Society becomes one of the consuming and burning issues. Living in the same Century, same society men and women are treated differently in each and every step especially in rural Bengal. My paper will evaluate the complex relationship between women and food. They are the soul- harbinger and enact the role of catalytic in food production but till now women have not acquired their deservable dignity. From the seed of agricultural land to the dining table of the house - every step is women-oriented but in the decision-making process men relish the authoritative boss-like attitude. The term "ladies first" doesn't make any sense when it comes to food. This paper will expose an exquisite truth of how womanhood becomes a kind of compulsion of impurity rather than glorification of motherhood. How women can play an exigent role in aggregate improvement of their own is the subject of my discussion.

Keywords: Empowerment, Food Production, Gender-Biasness, Self- identity, Women.

Introduction

" Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity" - Jonethan Safran Goer rightly says as since many decades women are struggling to ensure their identity in society. They play the most vital role in food production as " Food is the most primitive form of comfort" (said by Sheila Graham) and especially the rural women are the key agents for the upliftment of a developing state like West Bengal. The main challenge is to establish self identity, economic Prosperity and eradication of poverty. The present paper will elaborate the role of women in household works, economic issues, food production and ultimately food security. Food production and gender issues are interlinked as most of the existing ongoing matters can be categorised as " gendered" from the light of feminist consciousness. How women sincerely were

rather are working in the agricultural lands, tea gardens, manufacturing companies should be a matter of discussion. They only want to create their own identity and to earn some money so that they can make themselves able to help their families. Though women should be tagged as the original food producers, the people fail to empathize with the contribution of them as the exponent of food production. The main motive of this paper is to determine the gender biases in the system of producing food items. This present study will explore the current socio-economic status as well as the conventional boundaries in the above mentioned Procedure.

Agricultural production is the most significant source of livelihood for the majority of west Bengal's inhabitants. Most peasants of Bengal are the villege women and undoubtedly most young girls are the future agriculturalists. They acquire the knowledge and skills of farming from their elder generation and make the most praiseworthy contribution in the process of making food chains. Mainly the tribal women continue to be the pioneer of food production. On the other hand gender discrimination is inter-associated with the agricultural works and food production. How? Well, women are predominantly engaged in the formation of food but men finally decide when and what to plant on the farm and take the conclusive Authorization. As women do the laborious work in the field and men distribute the food in the market, that's why people fail to overlook the work that women do. Not only that , the lands are also officially in the names of the men. Ultimately, the original cultivators remain concealed as farmers in spite of the heartfelt deliberation to their families. The rustic women of our Bengal need formal education from agricultural higher studies centres and if they get such an opportunity to take some training, then not only the state but also the country would be at the highest peak in the agricultural world. Therefore farming can harmonise the gender discrimination to some extent.

India is in the second position after China in tea production. Tea is produced in the northern district of West Bengal like Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar and most of the villages of Assam are enriched by the tea gardens. Here, the tea gardens are regarded as the icon of Assam. West Bengal has more than 285 tea gardens, employing 350,000 permanent and casual employees. Interestingly in most of the areas, tea plucking is only performed by women, while men are associated with other works. People say, the reason behind this is perhaps women are more nimble-fingered and can take better care of the easily breakable and inestimable leaves.

There are various terms and conditions applied for the labours of tea gardens. They are divided into two categories- one is temporary and another one is permanent. Temporary workers can work in a tea garden only for 180 days and they are appointed in the very month of may whereas a permanent worker has to reside inside the tea estate and at the beginning she has to work more than 50 days without being absent a single day. They stay away from their family members for at least eight hours per day for plucking the leaves from the plants. But unfortunately plantation labour is one of the insignificant and lowest paid services as they get maximum 130 rupees per day as a little remuneration by doing eight hours' strenuous activity. Thus they remain marginalized even after such hard work.

One more important thing is that, there is a provision in which manner the tea pluckers can collect the leaves of the tea gardens, i.e., two leaves and a bud, and for such an organised work, the owner of the tea estate demands for some efficient labours and somehow the designation 'skilled labourer' is masculine whereas the women tea pluckers are entitled as 'unskilled' or 'less skilled labourers'.

Not only the economic anxiety, but women also deal with various uncertain circumstances as they must have to be alert of snakes, elephants, leopards etc. while working in the gardens.

Unfortunately, after such laborious work, i.e. The leaves they pluck are sold by men or the owner of the tea estate at an expensive rate. The undercurrent of gender discrimination, silently, here is as visible as in the colonial period between master and slave. It is quite similar as women do the job of an event manager and plan for a grand programme, decorate the place, prepare the food, serve the food on the table but ultimately the food and occasion are celebrated by men.

Pitha (there is no similar word in English) is a Bengali word that refers to a type of cake made out of rice flour, milk etc. It is an essential symbol of Bengali culture and heritage. Among women it has been an ancient tradition to prepare varieties of Pitha when the surroundings of Bengal is mesmerized by the smell of khajur rosh- a homely scenario of a rural Bengal. Pitha is prepared by female members of the family as it is a time-taking process. They make various types of Pitha in Nabanna(harvest festival) and it's impossible to discover a family where they don't prepare any Pitha in Makarsangkranti or Pous Parbon. But now it is not bound to one particular day. Pitha utsab (locally known as Pitha Mela) is a traditional food festival frequently organised in West Bengal. The festival was delighted to have Patishapta, dudh Puli, Puli Pitha, Easke Pitha, Chandra, Gokul, Beni Pitha etc. In urban areas, it is sold by the maker as the busy city-dwellers do not have enough time to make Pitha. Thus women are able to get the chance to earn some money and make their own identity.

Moa is a popular seasonal Bengali delicacy made out of jaggery, cardamom, ghee, khoya, cashew nut and khoi. Moa has its roots in Jaynagar city of south 24 pargana district in West Bengal. It is prepared at home by women and they used to sell it in the local market (locally known as hath). There are over 260 sweetmeat shops especially for Moa around Jaynagar City. Jaggery, the dominating ingredient of Moa, is a product of winter. When the air of rural Bengal is covered with the aroma of jaggery (locally known as Nalen gur) no self-respecting Bengali could deny the craze of it. Women, in that particular area, are always busy for researching and developing the idea how they can enhance the taste of this most demanding items but somehow the demand of the dish has decreased in recent years because all over West Bengal, particularly Kolkata, is producing large amount of Moa using cheaper ingredients which are flavoured with chemicals. Moa is not only a mere sweet which promotes to develop the entire system of the food chain but it also leads women to establish a sense of self-recognition and encourages to raise the voice of the voiceless.

What do foreigners and non-Bengalis think about Bengalis' food habits? They used to say Bengalis are known for their 'macher jhol' and 'Rasgulla'. Yes, no doubt, most of the Bengalis have a special fascination for various preparations made out of fish which are rich in proteins. In the complete food supply chain from production to distribution women are in all aspects as in some areas fish business is the main source of income. 40% women, especially in the districts like South 24 pargana, North 24 pargana, Malda, Purba Medinipur, Nadia, Hooghly, Howrah etc are involved in wider diversity of fishery production. The actual fishing activities- collection of fishes, gathering, processing, marketing and at last allocation- everything is done by women. They catch the fishes from rivers, ponds and even from seas, after that they are involved in drying, salting and frying the fishes in making different types of delicious dishes. In that sector women make a big contribution not only in small-scale fisheries but also in big trader communities. Unfortunately their contributions are not acknowledged and they remain as the invisible part in the fish supply sector. They are not in the part of making fishery management plans or not in decision-making processes though they are involved in the entire chain of fish business. The Fishery Department under Government of West Bengal as well as various NGOs, Self Help Groups organise some development programmes to increase the opportunities for women in the fish business industry. The main aims of such training are to enhance employment opportunities among women in rural Bengal, to train and empower them in the fishery sectors, to provide modern infrastructure for effective fisheries management and to apply modern tools of research. Women are very closely involved in fisheries but atlast one question remains in our mind- why are they so poorly recognised nationally?

In most of the districts of West Bengal, mainly in the tribal areas like Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, Malda, Purba Medinipur moreover every family has at least one domestic animal in their house. The reader may fall in a dilemma, how those domestic animals can be related to food production and gender issues. But if we minutely evaluate the whole situation then it will be very clear to say that to take care of those animals is always gendered and they are directly associated with the food production. women solely take care of them like a mother does for her children, as they remain in the house and men always engage themselves at the outside work and feel ashamed to do household because of their male ego hurts. Women make food for them, clean their resting place.

Animals like cows, goats, buffalo, hen, duck, pig etc are the supreme donors as they give us so many things without expecting anything in return. Animals like ox, cow are a part of agricultural production as they play vital and significant roles in farming. The cow is regarded as the Mistress of God(locally known as Bhagabati) in Hindu mythology. Women, from cows, take milk which is rich in protein, from milk they make ghee, sweets and also various packed foods like cheese, butter etc. It's urine is essential for ayurvedic medicines. Ducks and hens have many economic uses as their meats, eggs etc. Village girls sell those eggs in their local market. Dried buffalo meat is famous for one of the delicious foods among tribal

communities throughout the winter. Goats are very common in rural localities as they are used for fiber as well as milk and meat. Women go to the field to collect grass, green leaves to feed them. Pig meat is known as pork. A huge number of popular packaged foods like maggi, noodles, biscuits etc contain animal fat, that too, interestingly pig fat. The whole procedure is done by them.

So unfortunately the domestication system is women-centric and they are the original food producers as they help to increase the primary source of food production. But a question arises here, how much respect and dignity do they get for this purpose? The answer will be simply no. Why? Because society refuses to accept their endless contribution to nourish and nurture those creatures. The mother figure thus is neglected by the patriarchal power and hence gender segregation mind set up takes birth and continues in other aspects also.

Indians are born and brought up with an undeniable myth that women like to have sour foodstuff rather than sweet or salty one especially when she is in her pregnancy period. In west bengal, not only in rural areas but also in urban areas various types of pickles and chutneys are common things that they would like to have in their kitchens. Pickles making is a kind of female oriented food processing at home. Village girls make some traditional, delicious pickles made of mango, orange, tamarind, and lemon whereas the women in urban areas are continuously researching and developing the recipes of pickles. Various Self Help Groups organise training for making such homemade, organise, healthy and tasty pickles. Not only the pickles but also women learn from them the methods of preparing fruit jams and jellies. They collect the fruit, make the pickles, put it into the jar, label it after packaging and distribute those at the market. These SHG encourage them to create sustainable employment by helping to sell the pickles in handicraft fairs, food fairs, shopping malls etc. Now-a-days the pickle making becomes a source of income as well as one of the women empowering projects.

Pickle making is basically a feminine concept but in such a producing system a misguided taboo related to menstruation is very common, not only in West Bengal but in every corner of India, as they are instructed not to touch the jars of the pickles when they have their periods. Some critics say, in older age, women during periods didn't maintain any hygiene as they had no scope to use sanitary napkins, tampons, menstrual cups etc. On the other hand, pickles are made once a year after maintaining all the hygienic conditions, thus the touch of women can spoil the whole pickles. But things have changed gradually, now girls are more concerned about their menstruation and take all kinds of protection to maintain proper hygiene. But the typical concept is still existing. The original maker is therefore discarded for menstruation which should be honoured as the epitome of motherhood.

A peddler, often called a hawker, is someone who is a traveling salesperson. Female peddlers are very common in the local trains of West Bengal especially in the route of Eastern Railway and South- Eastern Railway. Women easily sell food items in trains and buses as food vending is

unorganised and informal in nature. In many families, the base of the economy is dependent on those female hawkers. They used to prepare the packed food at night and sell those items in running trains and also send these in urban areas or snacks factories. From some common ingredients they used to prepare very tasty and delicious packed foodstuffs. From salty to sweet, from sour to spicy- in everything they are well trained and habituated. Some food items are lassi, masala puffed rice, chana masala, bhelpuri, sweets, papad, chutneys, aloo chat etc. People always love to eat outside the home. Women start such types of food production with minimum investment. It is one of the unregistered and unrecorded businesses. They offer that quick service and ready-to-eat foodstuffs to the public at an affordable price. 60% females of the slum areas of West Bengal are engaged in this kind of food processing. The hawkers may be men or women, but behind the making procedure there is always a hand of a woman.

" Womanhood", the term can be cabalistic after the moment she starts to bleed, but sometimes womanhood becomes a burden as there are some strange restrictions. Consequently, the connection between food production and menstruation becomes paradoxical because of some common myths. Women, the soul of the kitchen, are banished from the kitchen during her periods. Among some of the orthodox Hindus some taboos in case of cooking process are still existing. In some of the non- bengalee communities a woman has to sit on the doorstep of their house and eat her food on a leaf- plate in a secluded corner of house. She is not allowed to take bath and not even talk to other family members. They became "untouchables" during these days. The food becomes impure, the sweets become inedible only if she touches. Surprisingly, some village communities in West Bengal do not allow women to enter into the betel leaf garden since she menstruates. Thus symbol of womanhood becomes a kind of compulsion of impurity rather than glorification of motherhood because of the pedantic ideological belief in the food producing system.

This paper will reveal the complex relationship between food and women. Women bear the major load in producing the food. But pathetically, they are unable to get their equitable dignity and respect for what they deserve neither in their house nor in outside home. They work harder than men in producing food but in case of the power of any decision making they are often subordinate to men. Women work to support and maintain their family but infinite services are not measured with the similar honor and appreciation as men's. No doubt in our country the primary leading role regarding economic issues is basically played by women. Females of the family remain more passive than males and he relishes the authoritative boss-like attitude at home and maintains their dominating nature in this way. 80-85% of hours of a day women spend for processing the food and other household works which are neglected but that must be focused to understand how women act to protect their family from financial complications. Not only that, they sincerely do each and every step unconditionally- from 'seed to food', from field to dining table. Isn't it? She works in agricultural lands, cooks food items for the entire family members, serves on the table, but she has no right to taste or to eat the food first, especially in rural areas. The so-called famous term " ladies first" becomes just a meaningless phrase and does not make

any sense when it comes to food. In case of eating, they believe she will be the last one to take food as if she has a bird-sized stomach. Not only that, Indian women are very much habituated with the rituals of fasting. Alice Paul's statement can be remembered in this regard, " Food simply isn't important to me". On some special days like Shivaratri, karwa chauth they spend the whole day without eating food and drinking a single drop of water for the sake of the longevity of their husbands or would-be husbands. This can lead her to serious health problems. Even at her wedding day, only the brides are expected to go for fasting, not the grooms. Frankly speaking in Hindu mythology, for men there is no such fasting ritual, not a single one.

Conclusion: The Concept of Third-Eye

Therefore food production is directly linked to women's food producing capacity. But unfortunately they are being denied their potentiality as the harbinger of food production. Only empowerment can inaugurate them as a socio-economically established sound people and the best result can be acquired when women will get suitable appreciation for their inhuman laborious works. They enact the role of catalytic in food production for the fulfillment of economical and to some extent social changes. Therefore women should widen and broaden the horizon of their knowledge and equip them with the potentialities which would assist them to fight with the burden and evil that hinder the amelioration of womanhood. They should fight within themselves so that they would become preponderant in front of the patriarchal society. Thereafter women will play an exigent role in the aggregate improvement of their own self, their family, community, state as well as motherland.

Works cited

1. Ember R. Carol and Ember Melvin; Encyclopaedia of Sex and Gender- Men and Women in the World's Culture; Springer Publication; December 31,2003.
2. Mills Anne Melinda; "Cooking with Love": Food, Gender and Power; Georgiana State University.
3. Pilcher Jane and Whelehan Imelda; Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies; SAGE Publications; 2004, New Delhi.
4. Sarkar Satyajit, Roy Priyanka, Chaudhari Anurag, Chaudhari Monoranjan; Socio-economic Status of Tea Garden Women Workers: A Case Study from Sub-Himalayan Regions of West Bengal, India; University of North Bengal; October, 2016.
5. Shiva Vandana; women and the Gendered Politics of Food; University of Arkansas Press, April 4, 2020.
6. Shoo Arthur Tiransia; Gender Division of Labour in Food Production and Decision Making Power and Impact on Household Food Security and Child Nutrition in Rural Tanzania; Universitas Osloensis; May, 2011

Author's Bio:

I am Poulomi Saha from a small village named Garhbeta of Paschim Medinipur district, West Bengal, India. After my graduation in English with Honours from Midnapore college(Affiliated to Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal) in 2013, I have taken my Master of Arts degree in English Literature in 2015 from Sidho- kanho- Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal. After that, again from Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal, I have completed the degree of Bachelor of Education in 2017. Presently I have been serving as State Aided College Teacher at Garhbeta college (Affiliated to Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal) in the department of English.