“How the Cheese Got There”: Exploring Cultural Construction of Bandel Cheese as a Commodity

Ayushi Banerjee, Sanmoy Das, Ayana Mukherjee

Department of Sociology

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to largely understand the inalienable association between goods and culture. An extensive body of literature on sociology of consumption focuses upon the intrinsic social relations and interactions which lead to the commodification of culture through material goods. Owing to this particular understanding, this research attempts to delve into the construction of Bandel Cheese, an indigenous product rooted in the colonial history of Bengal, into a commercialised marketable commodity in the present day. However, amidst preoccupations with the general processual model of commoditization and consumption practices what is often overlooked is the movement of commodities in and out of the commodity chain. It is exactly owing to this intervention that we wish to focus upon the specific shifts in the processes of production and exchange of Bandel Cheese before and after its entry into the modern circuits of market exchange. On one hand we aim to unfold the politics that links its cultural value with the transformation of its exchange relations, and on the other understand the life history of the commodity as it moves through different contexts, accumulating specific biographies.

Keywords: Bandel cheese, commodification, heritage, nostalgia

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From chhana to the cheese: A historical overview

Pre-colonial Bengal was often referred to as ‘Gour Banga’. According to Alexander Cunningham, the first director of the Indian Archeological Survey, the name came from guda or gur, the Bengali term for raw sugar, jaggery or molasses, for which the province was famous (Cunningham, 1882, p. 41). This was certainly indicative of the prominence of desserts in Bengal. Chitrita Banerji (2001), suggests that nowhere else in India does the confectioner work such magic by cutting milk with acid producing some of the finest chhana based concoctions. However, this preeminence of chhana in the eastern corner of the subcontinent dates back to a

historic yet forgotten moment of encounter between two groups. It began five hundred years ago, with the arrival of the Portuguese. But to realise the significance of this encounter, we must understand the long-held beliefs about the nature of milk in India. According to ancient Ayurveda, the body is dominated by elements such as sattva, raujas, and taumas. These elemental characteristics were also ascribed to different foods, and in this hierarchical universe milk is placed on the highest pedestal of purest of the edibles whose quality is sattva: 'nutritive, agreeable, conducive to serenity and spirituality' (Banerji, 2001: 108). Owing to these assumptive qualities sages and ascetics who had renounced all worldly ties subsisted on milk products with the belief that it would not induce any worldly desire or distractions in their minds. As a result milk and its products acquired a semi-scared quality. Additionally, associated with these semi-sacred qualities was a deep conviction about the fragility of milk whereby any invasive change to the nature of milk was a taboo. Historian K.T. Achaya (1994) discusses the Aryan taboo on cutting milk with acid. Interestingly, all the myths about young Krishna also revolve around milk, butter, ghee, but none around chhana. Even now most of the north Indian sweets are made of khoya or dried milk thickened by heating in a pan.

Till the 16th century, Bengalis could not be termed connoisseurs of sweets as they were satisfied with simple 'dudhchire' (milk and flattened rice), 'dudh-lau' (milk and gourd). A new impetus arrived with the Portuguese in the second half of the 17th century. They settled in localities such as Bandel, Chandannagar, Rajmahal (in present day Bangladesh) bordering river Hughli. Other than baking breads for the English or Dutch factories there were never enough of them to do all the work required to prepare their commodity-laden ships for the long journey to the European markets. Provisioning these ships was essential and they started training Bengalis to prepare the ships' victuals. In the meanwhile, they taught their native employees to make chhana by splitting milk with acid, collecting the curds and draining them to produce a soft, firm mass (Sen 2015). This not only lifted the Aryan taboo of deliberate milk curdling but also gave the traditional Bengali moira (sweetmaker) a new raw material to work with. In 'The Food of Spain and Portugal', Elisabeth Lambert Ortiz talks about the innumerable fresh cheeses, queijos frescos, made into little cakes about three inches in diameter. Remarkably similar to Ortiz's description, Dasgupta et al (1995) recounts the preparation of little cakes of fresh cheese by the Mog cooks held captive from the Chittagong valley by the Portuguese. This is what is referred to as Bandel cheese. A combination of historical records (Banerjee & Das, 1943) suggest that the Portuguese

introduced three types of cheese in Bengal: cottage cheese, Bandel cheese and Dhakai paneer. Usually for making Bandel cheese, semi-liquid chhana is drained in a steel bucket. Subsequently, smaller portions are poured into setting moulds covered with cloth pieces dipped in salt water to help preserve and lend sharpness to the taste. Within an hour or two, the maker brings out the semi-settled portions from the mould and keeps it for drying, before being smoked. Additionally, to smoke the cheese, it is placed in a furnace generated from burning cow dung. As per the current market rates the plain variety costs around 13-15 rupees and the smoked variety ranges from 16-20 rupees in the popular New Market shops of S. Panja and J. Johnson.

Objectives and Methodology

Igor Kopytoff (1986) points out that all commodities stand in relation to their unique life histories which are culturally regulated. However, amidst preoccupations with the general processual model of commoditization and consumption practices what is often overlooked is the commodities moving in and out of the commodity chain. In this context Wallerstein (1991) suggests that the study of the "commodity chain" of specific consumable goods or services is essential towards the understanding of the processes of the capitalist world economy we inhabit. It involves not only material producing an object but inscribing the object with particular cultural meanings which define its status as a commodity. Moreover, Lyon (2023) argues that value does not reside within the commodity itself, but in the social relationships that exist between the various stakeholders within a particular "commodity chain", and the social practices that define said relationships. Therefore, against the historical background presented in the preceding section, what we aim to do is to unfold the politics that links its cultural value with the transformation of its exchange relations, and on the other hand understand the life history of the commodity as it moves through different contexts, accumulating specific biographies. To sum up, the study will attempt to eventually answer the following questions –

- To what extent are lived experiences entwined with the commodification of Bandel cheese ?
- How is consumption reconstructed within the realms of neoliberalism ?
- What is the relation between the positionality of the actors in the commodity chain and cultural meanings they ascribe to Bandel cheese?

To answer these questions, we adopted an intensive, multi-sited ethnographic approach. Unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with multiple stakeholders in the commodity chain. The fields included the production centre at Chak Chand where we started with a reconnaissance to observe the village landscape and everyday life of the people. Subsequently it was followed by in-depth discussions and interviews with the producer and his family in order to understand the history and cultural meanings associated with Bandel cheese. Furthermore, we attempted to understand the translocation of Bandel cheese from Chak Chand to various retail stores, restaurants and consumer households in Kolkata. Additionally, we spoke with state actors who are actively advocating for securing a GI tag.

Marketing and Commodification

Mr Saurav Gupta, CEO of The Whole Hog Deli, has been in the forefront of rebranding and reintroducing Bandel Cheese in the market. The Whole Hog Deli founded in 2019, emerged as an attempt to revive the workings of the Kalman Cold Storage in Kolkata. After seven functional decades Kalman was forced to cease its workings. Years later Gupta and his venture came in as a means of revival. Their products now include a wide range of cold cuts and other food items, including chicken, pork, and more. In 2021, he also added Bandel Cheese. The primary impetus to shift the sale of Bandel Cheese online and through home delivery was the Covid-19 pandemic. Earlier as the availability was restricted only to the two New Market shops, the pandemic induced lockdown dealt a huge blow to the cheese maker Palash Ghosh and his family. In these circumstances, Gupta approached the family and started selling the cheese through home delivery. Owing to his in-laws house in Chinsurah (a few kilometres from Bandel Church), and his own background of being a student in Hooghly, Gupta got access to the historical regions where the cheese owes its origin. Even though he explored these places with no stone unturned, Bandel could not give him much information about the production and consumption of the cheese. Instead, archival works and documentations from varied books helped him develop a greater understanding. His efforts to know more about the cheese from the two shops in New Market were also not very fruitful. “Johnson was very secretive about who the supplier was,” said Mr. Gupta. He went on to give us an account of his continuing efforts to find a ‘missing link’ in the migration trail,

> I recently travelled to Chinsura to find the missing link in the migration trail of Bandel cheese. We know that initially the Portuguese brought the recipe to Bandel, there are ample documentations regarding that. However the shift in its production from Bandel took place more than 100 years ago. There were a few missing links that I believe I discovered. I would rather not disclose all of it as I plan to work more on it.

Besides being invested in the history and the archives of Bandel cheese, Mr. Gupta also shed light upon the exploitation that he feels Mr. Palash Ghoh and his family faced from the shops in New Market. He said, "They had a monopoly over the cheese. The cheese was being supplied to them for generations. The makers were made to feel that there was no alternative." Gupta believes that him entering this commodity chain altered a few crucial aspects. He goes on to say,

> Before there was any competition, the shops would give Rs 6 per piece for the plain variety and Rs 6.25 per piece for the smoked variety. However, after I entered the market, I asked Mr. Palash to ask for fairer prices. At the current moment the shops give approximately Rs 8 per piece for each block of cheese. I sell the plain variety at Rs 18 per piece to the consumer and the smoked is sold at Rs 20 per piece.

The difference between the prices is supposed to pose as evidence of how Mr. Gupta's venture is more profitable to the producer. It is not just an increased price that Gupta offers, there is an additional effort put into the branding and marketing of the product.

Kalman Applbaum (2000) moves a step forward from the theories of commoditization presented by both Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986). While Kopytoff (1986) considers there to be an 'built in force' that drives a commodity in an exchange system towards optimum commoditization, Appadurai (1986) has an universalistic approach. Appadurai believes that commoditization is a process which can occur at any social circumstances owing to the factor alone that a commodity engaged in an exchange system is bound to go through the process whatsoever. Applbaum (2000) attributes a specific focus to marketing techniques along with branding and advertising which have the potential to alter interaction of a commodity in a certain social setting. Applbaum goes on to quote Levitt (1983), who says, "The essence of competition…is differentiation: providing something different and providing it better than your

competitor…The search for meaningful distinction is a central part of the marketing effort" (p.128). This attempt to differentiate the commodity comes almost as a universal marketing strategy no doubt. Mr. Gupta makes sure that the colonial heritage associated with the cheese is highlighted every time it is talked about. More than the taste of the cheese or its importance in the culinary practices of Bengal (if any), the focus is attributed to the historical narrative surrounding it. Through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, he has been making efforts to educate the customers on the traditional heritage of Bandel cheese as an artisanal cheese of Bengal. Moreover, Applbaum (2000) theorises, "Marketers differentiate their product offering from that of their competitors principally by acting upon the meaning or identity of the product through branding and promotion" (p. 108). This identity that the marketer highlights comes out of a concentrated effort of the marketer and consumers to create a meaning out of the object. When Mr. Gupta took up this product as one of the items to be sold in his deli, he said, "I told Palash that you have to come to the forefront now. Otherwise people may think this is counterfeit." He re-focuses on how people not only need to know about the cheese but also who are the ones making it. Palash and his family thus add to the 'identity' that can be marketed. They represent not only the exclusivity of product, being currently the 'sole' producers of the commodity but also the promotion of their story add to the authenticity of the artisanal work over which the label of the cheese being an artisanal one very much depends. He shared with us how consistent efforts have been made to make the cheese popular through various conferences and demonstrations. Chefs like Sanjiv Kapur and Ranveer Brar have done their part in trying to popularise the cheese through demonstrations. Moreover, Gupta has initiated efforts to sell Bandel cheese under the Biswa Bangla project. The Biswa Bangla project came into existence in 2013, registered under the Department of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Textiles (MSME). It seeks to create a market for Bengal's traditional art, craft, cuisine and more. It rebrands them and relaunches them in the global market through its retails shops spread across major cities all over India (West Bengal Tourism, n.d.) Under Gupta, Bandel cheese has been taken up by the Biswa Bangla project as one of their products. Gupta said, " Around 70 pieces were ordered by them . Their packaging was very impressive. They gave a vintage design to the box and added a brief history on it for the consumers to read." This reinforces the importance of marketing strategies but also introduces the role of branding in this entire equation. Commodities sold under the Biswa Bangla Project, owing to its restructured marketing model have

transformed into a brand in itself with global acknowledgement. The carefully curated packaging with the vintage aesthetics and a peek into its heritage through the historical brief, adds to one of the most important branding agendas of 'constructing value'. In the words of Paul Wesley Ivey (1921, 155), "Value does not reside in merchandise, but in the minds of the customer. In other words. It is a mental concept. The function of [marketing] is to create value, to build up in the mind of the reader a high regard for the goods". This is not to say that the value of a commodity like Bandel cheese absolutely depends upon the constructed value thus put forward by both Mr. Gupta and through the efforts of Biswa Bangla. We instead, intend to focus on this shift of the cheese from being locally curated, sold in a couple of shops in New Market, with little to no efforts over advertising, into a curated packaged commodity whose sale now oriented towards renewed ideas of 'tradition', 'heritage' and 'nostalgia'. Drawing on this 'nostalgia', Mr. Gupta shared with us how he has received messages from people belonging to the Anglo-Indian community, who now reside all over the world.

> People have reached out to me from the Anglo Indian Community who now reside in New Zealand and other parts. They said how nostalgic they felt consuming it again for the taste remains the same as what they would eat in their childhood. One of them shared with me how Bandel cheese along with Bakarkhani roti was a staple of their anglo-indian household.

There is also an evident 'commoditization of heritage' that has facilitated the shift of the marketing model. Graham et al (2000, 17) have defined 'heritage' as, "that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, be they economic, cultural, political or social. They (ibid, 153) further argued that preservation and development are the two principal strategies in the management of heritage. According to Ullrich Kockel (2007) and his proposed distinction between 'heritage' and 'tradition', "The term 'tradition', literally, refers to cultural patterns, practices and objects that are 'handed on' across time and space, as a skills and knowledge resource to be appropriated by the contexts of other generations and places. 'Heritage', on the other hand, refers to cultural patterns, practices and objects that are either no longer handed down in everyday life (and therefore left to the curators) or used in ways significantly removed from their historical trajectory"(p.21). Contextualising this conception

across the case of Bandel cheese production, the tussle between heritage and tradition becomes more pronounced. The cheese seems to be at a certain position in its trajectory where it is still considered to be a skill handed down through generations and actively involved in the market, but its continuous transmission to the next generation is under threat. Gupta firmly believes that the revival of Bandel Cheese will not be just an economic win but also it is one of the only ways that the craft of making this particular cheese can be protected. That is where he focuses on the need of a GI tag that could secure a celebrated status for the cheese. He mentions the efforts of scholars from Jadavpur University who have attempted to replicate the cheese under artificial lab conditions. There are threats associated with the mass scale production of this commodity and that is the loss of its traditional recipe. The very nostalgia that the unchanged taste of Bandel cheese brings is evidence of its unchanged recipe. Gupta holds that in order to carry forward this tradition, the skill has to be protected and more importantly the interests of this particular family has to be safeguarded. "Intellectual property rights are the only way to do that", says Mr. Gupta. He has been working on securing a GI tag for the product along with a few professors of law from a renowned law university. He shared with us the challenges of attaining this tag for a commodity whose production-supply chain has been unregulated for the longest of times.

> We could trace six families in Arambagh who were the makers of the cheese. However, at the current moment only Palash and his family are continuing the work. Getting a GI tag needs an association, and that can only be created if all these families come together designating themselves as the sole cheese makers. To protect the rights of the family, this tag is very much needed. We have had online petitions as well. We have also been in contact with the local governing bodies for getting ample documentation.

GI tag not only opens the door for a better market, renewed demand, and assurance of conserving the 'tradition' and sense of 'heritage' associated with the commodity, but it is also a marker of the product's authenticity. This 'authenticity' however, raises doubts about the relation of food and cultural identity. Bandel cheese has been a colonial intervention, a food of the 'other'. This label of the 'other' has now become the very brand of indigeneity that the cheese is now marketed with. Moreover, the notion of authenticity tends to transcend the boundaries of consumption and enters the legal domains over the production as well. Mr. Gupta shared with us

how a major litigation was filed by a company that went on to the extent of forging signatures of both Mr. Gupta and Mr. Palash Ghosh, to accuse them of breaching a certain contract. The company, registered as one based in Delhi, filed for a breach of contract and accused both Gupta and Ghosh of violating a contract that gave rights to the said company for selling the cheese on their own terms. An amount of 35 lacs was asked by the plaintiff as compensation to the breach of contract. We decided to redact any detailed information for the sake of maintaining anonymity and the confidentiality of the case. However, Mr . Gupta in his interview had been quite vocal in voicing how the importance of Bandel cheese was beginning to be known so much so that by hook and by crook, there will be people trying to forge its authenticity and replicate through mass scale production. Thus, the commoditization of authenticity that started from the shops in New Market, who remained the sole sellers for decades before Mr. Gupta entered the market, transcended into a tussle of litigation and accusation in the court of law.

The preceding section demonstrates the political character of heritage production. The producer of heritage performs a "critical transformation process" which involves selection, interpretation and packaging of the past in particular ways, to service the goals of the producer (Graham et al 2000, 143). Gupta's marketing strategy, thus appropriates the past in selective ways to make an appealing product out of Bandel cheese. In the next section, we shall move from the production of a heritage commodity to the production of the cheese itself.

Disillusionment at Home – Delicacy for the World

A seemingly pristine and utopic village tucked in an otherwise unimportant locality bordering districts of Bankura, Hooghly and Bardhaman– Chakchand constitutes what Palash calls home. Amidst cracked, cow-dung smeared walls of a tiny mud house, a family of six dreams of a secured and respectable future revolving around the generational craft of cheese making. While Palash and his father slog their daylight hours in cheese making, his mother and wife spend the day tidying up a damaged storage infrastructure. Ranging from makeshift pipe moulds for cheese setting to a dampened wooden cupboard for storage, more than cheese making storage issues plague the family. The Ghosh family are the only known producers of Bandel cheese. The family business was initiated when Palash's father was nearly 12-13 years old. Before that the family worked for other people (Most probably one of the families who made the cheese) Palash's grandfather learned it from them. Palash devoted himself fully to the business in 2001

after his 10th exam. Since the pandemic, he has become the face of the business. The production process involves gruelling labour. Palash's working day starts early in the morning. The family owns no cows. Milk is procured from different families across the village. Palash's day starts early in the morning, when goes to collect milk. He returns by early afternoon. By late afternoon, the entire family sits for cheese making. It continues till the evening. The demand is highly seasonal. During the peak season in October-November, Palash needs to visit Kolkata every alternate day with the supply. During the slump season in the summer months, he may visit the city once every two weeks. At this point, let us attempt to understand how Palash situated himself in relation to the craft. His experiences shall be instructive in understanding the social relations within which the production process is embedded.

Palash expressed a deep sense of disillusionment with the craft. He saw no future in it. He did not want his son to pick up the craft. He wanted him to pursue higher education. If that did not materialise, he planned to employ him in some shop. He also pointed at us, and told his little daughter to study hard so that one day she can attend premier universities like us. The persistent economic hardships and the failure of expansion attempts to yield substantial increases in demand definitely contributes to this feeling. However, we argue that they are not enough to account for such a strong sense of dejection. Here we employ the framework of moral economy to understand the causes of such a sentiment. In this context moral economy is conceptualised as "particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices" through which "structural inequalities generated by particular forms of capital accumulation." are mediated (Palomera & Vetta, 2016). The concept of 'moral economy' was popularised by E.P. Thomson (1971) in his famous essay 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century'. He (ibid, 78) argued food riots in 18th century England must not be seen as a 'spasmodic' response to hunger by the unprivileged and poor but was instead 'informed by the belief that they were defending their 'traditional right to subsistence. Similarly in Palash's case, we propose that a chief reason behind Palash's sense of disillusionment is the breach of what he perceives to be his 'ethical rights' of autonomy and recognition in relation to craft. He lamented over his lack of control on the business. He said if he had the requisite capital to invest, he would have never needed any help. He remarked, "Without money there is no use of acumen. Today if I had money, I would have done it (expand the business) on my terms. I would not need to seek anybody's advice." Palash had very elaborate ideas about how to expand his business, but the

paucity of funds did not allow him to pursue them. He was keenly aware of the issues that stifled the enterprise's potential for expansion. He said the lack of a proper storage facility made the production process dependent on the vagaries of demand. Thus, he was left with a huge unsold stock during the slack period while he struggled to meet the demand during the peak season. He wished he could receive help to set up a separate room for production, storage and packaging of the cheese, which would be accessible only to him and his family members. It would have a huge freezer where he could stock up. Additionally, a dedicated space for production would make it easier for him to maintain certain standards of hygiene, which he is unable to meet under present circumstances. Palash was fed up with media personnel and researchers continuously coming to his place to document the craft, often without even seeking proper consent. However, this does not mean he shunned all kinds of public attention. For him, recognition did not lie in being featured in being featured on mass media. Rather he wanted to see his name, logo and contact details printed on the package of the product. The preceding discussion shows that the political and moral economy is closely intertwined. Thus, the economic and the non-economic reasons for his disillusionment with the craft do not have separate sources but constitute related facets of the specific configuration of relations of capitalist accumulation within which he is embedded. The articulation of resistance to the existing relations of production and distribution was quite open and direct in discussion we have had so far. However moral values can also be serviced to articulate resistance in a more subtle manner. Ghezzi (2003) in his ethnographic study of small family producers in Brianza brilliantly demonstrated how exploitation of being part of global supply chains is often articulated in sublimated forms, especially through the idiom of traditional values. For example, proprietors of industrial firms who were too poor to mechanise often said that the quality of their craftsmanship cannot be replaced by any machine. Palash expressed a very similar sentiment. He laughed about the attempts made by a group of food technology researchers at a reputed university in Kolkata, to recreate the cheese in a lab. He was invited to taste it. He joked that he simply lost his sense of taste for a few days after having it. He found the idea of making the cheese with a machine incredulous. Thus, the approach of moral economy enabled us to outline how experiences of marginalisation of being part of a certain configuration of capitalist relation is interpreted through particular fields of moral values. These moral values are also mobilised in the expression of resistance against the existing status quo.

At this point it is crucial to point out that the approach of moral economy does not single out only those moral values and norms from a particular context which are utilised to express opposition against the dominant powers and ideology. Moral economy also takes into account the values and norms that are used to legitimate domination (Hann, 2010). Let us use this observation to investigate the role of women's labour in the cheese making process. In the factory system of production, there exists a strict separation between the realm of production and reproduction. However, in case of household production those realms overlap. Within such a context organisation of labour relies on non-contractual relationships and affective ties. The claims over other people's work is made through the idiom of mutual responsibility or love which characterise a familial bond. Thus, a strict distinction between different regimes of value (the incommensurable domestic sphere and commensurable professional sphere) cannot be maintained:

> In the present conjuncture it might be useful to think about a regime of value constituted by both incommensurable and commensurable kinds of value, with personalised, affective, moral obligations and rational, contractual ones operating simultaneously. Reciprocity turns into social capital as an asset for accumulation. The moral economy arena is losing the sharp boundaries that seemed to differentiate a non- or pre-capitalist 'moral economy' based on reciprocity from the 'political economy' of capitalism based on free contractual exchange relations (Narotzky, 2015, p. 191)

With regards to our case, the role of women in the enterprise and the invisibilisation of their labour, demonstrate the importance of familial ties in organisation of labour relations in the family enterprise. Palash's wife and mother were not only the ones primarily responsible for household chores (reproductive labour) but also actively participated in the cheese making process. They also possessed all the skills associated with the craft. In 2023, Palash's son fell severely ill. He was admitted to a hospital in Kolkata for 24 days. During this period, Palash had to spend most of his time in the hospital. During this time, his wife took over all his responsibilities. However, when he described the cheese making process he spoke about it,

mostly in the first person, with some mentions of his father. The role of the women folk was just glossed over. Thus, asymmetrical gender relations within the family enable particular forms of capitalist accumulation through the erasure of women's labour. Such an erasure is legitimated by the prevailing patriarchal ethic of devaluing women's labour and taking it for granted.

We shall briefly consider the impact of commodification of culture on the producers in the final part of this section. Harvey (2001) has argued that capitalism has the potential to extract and appropriate surpluses from local cultural traditions no matter what their origin. Authentic expressions of unique cultural traditions are increasingly transformed into tradable commodities within a neoliberal capitalist regime.

> We are surrounded today by media saturated with images, visualisations and materialisations of others, other worlds and other times. These images actively market commodities which individuals can consume as affirmations of self, modern group identity and the present human condition. A proliferation of images and representations of both individuals as well as of autonomous social groups is readily available for consumption at the proverbial 'click of a mouse'. In this situation an evident trend is to utilise modern conceptions of the past as a commodified experience which can be mass-produced for consumption in the form of images in order to capitalise on modern emotive responses to the past (Russell, 2006, p. 8)

The process of commodification often transforms the production space of a cultural artefact itself into a spectacle to be consumed. Palash and his house today have faced the same fate. It represents a slice of Bengal's past, that the mass media is all too eager to serve up to its audience in the form of images. As mentioned earlier, Palash is fed up with media personnel continuously coming to document the craft. The extent to which his house has turned into a spectacle can be illustrated through a small incident. The District Magistrate (DM) was apathetic towards Palash's plight. She had not extended any help when Palash had applied for assistance from the state government. However, one day she showed up to his house unannounced in the middle of the day, with armed policemen. She had brought along a friend and asked Palash to demonstrate the

cheese making process. Therefore, it is clear that the process of commodification of culture often has terrible consequences for the producers of cultural artefacts. In this case, commodification did little to alleviate the economic woes of the family, but has subjected it to all kinds of unwanted attention. In the subsequent section, we shall explore how the process of commodification operates within the marketplace and structures consumption practices.

The case of consumption and the consumer educator

In the present decade the society widely recognises the inalienable association between goods and cultures. According to Douglas and Isherwood (1979: 59) goods render visibility and stabilise various categories of culture. An extensive body of literature generated around the sociology of consumption thus focuses upon the intrinsic social relations and interactions which lead to the commoditization of culture through material goods. These commodities are not only produced materially as things, but also culturally characterised as a thing of a certain kind. As a result the culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classify and reclassify it into culturally constituted categories. Thus, commoditization is a process of becoming rather than an all–or–none state of being. Moreover, value does not reside within the commodity itself, but in the social relationships that exist between various stakeholders in a particular "commodity chain", and the social practices that define the relationships. In this regard it is imperative to look at some consumer accounts and understand the nature of social relationships.

Rupa, a 50 year old boutique owner's affinal family residing in Kolkata's Bhowanipore have been consumers of Bandel cheese for the last three generations. The family was initiated into the flavours of this indigenous cheese variant by some Anglo Indian friends of an ancestor. Rupa's mother in law recalled from a couple of brunch invitations she attended in the Anglo households where the buffet almost always had a variety of breads with smoked Bandel cheese. It was combined with bread spreads or butter and savoured with tea or coffee. Over the years it found a place in the dining table of the family. Not only is it savoured as a breakfast delicacy but the women of the household have worked wonders with it in numerous vegetarian dishes. Additionally during our visit we found Rupa and her daughter Sneha experimenting in the kitchen on a sultry Saturday afternoon, designated as the vegetarian meal day of the week. They

were preparing chanar paturi using Bandel cheese. While guiding us through the recipe, Sneha, a 27 year old corporate, said 'I grew up eating Bandel cheese. It is a part of our regular diet and Saturday's mean either paneer, dhoka dalna (a curry with fried lentil cakes) or a quick and fulfilling Bandel cheese kofta curry. Before visiting college I had no idea that Bandel cheese was something so niche. When my classmates repeatedly mistook the kofta curry in my lunch box for paneer, was when I realised the exclusivity of the product. As someone who is a food enthusiast and passionate about cooking I enjoy experimenting. Today I am making chanar paturi, a breakthrough from the usual fish paturi.'

Another consumer family who are residents of an erstwhile aristocratic Bengali household in Alipore unlike the previous case, occasionally indulges in Bandel cheese since most of the younger members of the family dislike the salted nature of the savoury. In this context there was a lament in the narratives of the elderly who reminisced their childhood days of savouring the cheese. Tamal Dutta, a 70 year old retired central government employee said 'My father used to get Bandel cheese from New Market's J Johnson. During summer breaks when my cousins visited us, unsliced loaf bread and smoked bandel cheese was a staple breakfast. But these days I have almost forgotten what it tastes like. My grandchildren prefer the imported variety, synthetic cheese over the pure and indigenous. They are aversive to the salinity of the taste. But who will convince them about the importance of pure, local dairy products? Leave aside Bandel cheese, youngsters these days shy away from even drinking milk!' The interesting contrast in the two aforementioned cases is the role played by the present generation in advancing a specific dietary tradition of the family. While Sneha not only enjoys savouring Bandel cheese, she continues to experiment rendering it new flavours and textures, whereas Tamal Dutta's grandchildren's aversion to the taste has almost wiped away its presence from the dining table with mainstream market substitutes.

As an Anglo-Indian connection was predominant in both the accounts we attempted to locate a few people from the community through social media websites, inquiring about their familiarity with the cheese. We were overwhelmed by the range of positive responses and few of them also consented to be interviewed. Barb, who is currently residing in Ireland said, 'Bandel cheese was a staple for our morning breakfast. It was a small fresh cheese with a wonderful smoked flavour. They were freshly made and sold door to door every morning. We could also buy them at the New Market.' It was only through this one response that we were made aware of a time when the

cheese might have been sold more informally through a few mobile vendors. However, we were unable to locate other sources which could have confirmed it. Barb, fondly remembers her childhood surrounded by the food nostalgia of Bandel cheese. Not only was bread and cheese the household staple, but also her mother's choice whenever it came to packing school lunches. Jeremy, a 32 year old software developer currently residing in Goa shared during a candid moment how he consumed some that morning itself. 'Whenever we go back to Kolkata, we bring some home. We try to stock as long as it can be' he said gesturing towards the supposed longevity of the product. Dorothy, currently residing in Isleworth, also shared with us, 'I love it! Right now I have some in the fridge, which my daughter in law got during her last visit to India.' In addition, the shopkeepers of J Johnson also confirmed how people from around India and sometimes even abroad, order the cheese to be couriered to their respective places. This tells us how the commodity has always had a global reach, maybe not necessarily in the same calibre now desired by the entrepreneurs involved. While on one side it represents a sense of 'high status', an upper middle-class attempt to fit into a foreign culture, for some others, it is a memory of simpler times they were born into. Therefore, across all these consumer narratives, lie a thread of similarity whereby we can look at food consumption as that one area which is most likely to take people back into their past. It can be a valuable vector for nostalgia. According to a survey by the CREDOC on food behaviour and consumption, 85% of the respondent households think that their food pattern has an impact on their health as against 79% in 2000 and 75% in 1997 (September 2005, in Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). This reveals that modern food can be a source of deep anxiety whereby consumers do not trust what they eat. While packaged, stored food is more likely to arouse suspicion, traditional, artisanal food is considered safe – something that was evident in Tamal Dutta's lament over packaged cheese gathering dominance and Sneha's specificity of what constitutes fresh and pure Bandel cheese. Nostalgia, commonly regarded as yearning for yesterday can be defined as 'a bittersweet emotional reaction, that may be associated to reflection and experienced by an individual when external or internal stimuli take him back to an ideal past moment or event belonging or not to his living experience' (Divard et Robert–Demontrond, 1997 in Vignolles & Pichon, 2014: 6). In this context, mostly positive food nostalgia is not only linked to positive memories and to emotional reactions such as joy, happiness, comfort or peacefulness but to people who were a meaningful part of that past. This strengthens a feeling of belongingness to a social group and invigorates connectedness within the

group. Therefore, Bandel cheese was far more than a mere marketable commodity unlike a delicatessen or civil servant vigorously pushing for a greater profit margin or a GI tag. Consequently, 'the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions' (Kopytoff, 1986: 64).

While for some consumers Bandel cheese was nearly a family heirloom, for some it is a status marker through the niche wine and cheese tasting parties, reflecting tendencies of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) that refers to the consumption of certain commodities not for their immediate utility but to showcase their wealth or status. What started off as an encounter in a wine and cheese tasting event held in a mutual's house, soon turned into a choice of ingredients in various dishes for 50 year old French teacher Sumana. Living somewhat in the outskirts of Kolkata, she does not recall being exposed to this variety of cheese. Her assumption is that it is born out of the liberalisation economy of 1991. After we shared the history she reluctantly said, "I got to know of its existence about 10 years ago. Never heard of it before that." Just as Veblen's 'gentleman of leisure' did not consider consumption to add to their reputation but also as acts of demonstration in front of friends and competitors, Sumana and her friends interact with Bandel cheese in a similar setting and their parties mark a certain claim to a niche social status.

On one hand as consumers are instrumental to the commodity chain, we cannot overlook the role of the consumer educator in pulling people into the commodity sphere. One such instance was a chance encounter with a home chef and food columnist at the inauguration of a cafe. Not only was she fairly informed about the historical discourse of the cheese, as a food columnist known for her experimental dishes she had written at length about the nature, texture and ways of using it. Therefore, as consumer educators educate people about the virtues of any product, it alters transmutes culture from culture from being a set of shared expectations to a set of tangibles. Moreover, journalistic endeavours encash this knowledge repository to inform and educate consumers about an indigenous variant of cheese having fallen into realms of obscurity.

In the course of our fieldwork, we not only encountered a group of Bengali middle-class professionals as generational clients of this product but also chefs working in high end restaurants of Kolkata. For the longest time, the two shops in New Market, Kolkata have been

the sole supplier of Bandel cheese, and this is where it was discovered by the chef we spoke to. Born and brought up in the UK, his profession brought him to Kolkata in 2001. Since then he has been one of the connoisseurs who has introduced the product in restaurant chains. In our conversations, his intrigue towards the conservation and history of the cheese has been very evident. He goes on to suggest, "It is one of a kind. I have never seen a cheese like this, with two varied forms, soaked and dry. The Portuguese wanted the cheese to last long, so they covered it in salt and dried it out. This would make the cheese last for days and once soaked, it turns into soft, crumbly cheese perfect to use in varied dishes." According to him, while a dry variant works best with risotto, pasta and salads, the soaked can be used for curries. Our interview was followed by a demonstration in his kitchen where he prepared a few of his preferred dishes. He believes that the product can envision a future of itself, "as long as there are people who keep talking about it and continue to keep taking care of it". Also "Earlier we never mentioned the cheese in our menu, but if it has to survive I think it is important to spell it out." Such efforts to incorporate the cheese in their restaurant menu has successfully served the palate of the customers. According to Skeggs (2012), 'Class' is "always produced through associations with discourses of symbolic value and figures that condense moral value…". Previously Bourdieu (1984) had also stated that class is embodied capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) deeply influenced by one's access to resources and their subsequent social position. The influence of these forms of capital are manifested through our bodily dispositions, bodily movement, speech and actions. He considered 'taste' to be one of the aspects that is not only a mere personal preference but also an acquired form of cultural and symbolic capital. The said high end restaurants that chefs like our respondent works in, cater to this exact demography. For regular consumers, tasting a particular kind of food, is constricting a distinction between them and others around them. 'Taste' therefore not only becomes a marker of their constructed class but also becomes a weapon of distinction. Therefore, the commodification of this acquired 'taste' is what chefs like our respondent are taking part in.

Commodification of tradition: Calcutta Retro & Trincas

The traditional Bandel cheese recipes or the family tradition of consuming Bandel cheese for that matter is neither value neutral nor a simple reflection of the old ways of living. Rather it goes through active interpretation and manipulation to be considered traditional. As an efficient

strategy to establish a self-identity and generate tangible income through commodification, tradition guises itself as a product of modernity (Graburn, 1997). Subsequently, the cultural raw materials get plucked away from their particular contexts, and are appropriated within an alien exterior. Two distinct cases in point are an authentic Bengali restaurant tucked in a narrow south Kolkata bylane by the name Calcutta Retro and a pre-independence heritage eatery Trincas centrally located in the thriving restaurant hub of Park Street, Kolkata. The latter serves a breakfast buffet with a variety of cheeses like cheddar, parmesan, mozzarella, Kraft and smoked Bandel cheese along with artisanal loaves like ancient grain loaves and roasted Garlic and black pepper bread. On the other hand Calcutta Retro proudly proclaims a bestselling dish called Bandel cheese malakoff (a ball of fried cheese) under its vegetarian appetisers. As the chef described the intricacies of the recipe, we keenly observed the plating of the dish. Served in a thick *kashar thala* (bell metal plate) with julienne cut cabbage, carrot, beetroot salad alongside a tartare sauce usually paired with English fish and chips, and lastly to keep up to a traditional Bengali flavour a bowl of mango mustard dip. This hybridised plating replicates the reproduction of the culture in a system of objects, and it is within this schema of a capitalist culture that we seek to understand the marketer's raison d'etre to create value (profit) for the company and value (meaning) for the consumer. In a context where food operate as objects enabling and channelling cultural positionings we have to understand 'foods not only as placed cultural artefacts, but also as displaced, inhabiting many times and spaces which, far from being neatly bounded, bleed into and indeed mutually constitute each other' (Cook & Crang, 1996: 132-33). A culinary culture with particular emphasis on arts of cooking and presentation not only allow food ingredients to be locally and creatively reworked but involves a two fold commodity fetish. One, the commodity and its valuations are divorced from the consumers creating ignorances about the biographies and geographies of what they consume. For instance David Harvey talks about how we consume our meal without the slightest knowledge of the geography of production and myriad social relations embedded in the system (Harvey, 1990 in Cook & Crang, 1996: 135). Similarly, around a hundred of customers who frequent these eateries daily are unable to conceive the impressions of exploitation on the product and Bandel cheese put upon their table remains a remotely placed displaced and decontextualized entity. Two, the branding of the product is a significant fetishization strategy. Considering the ways in which Trincas and Calcutta Retro brand their Bandel cheese delicacies as exotic and exclusive, not only drive a

rationalisation of values, but the branded commodity perceived as a rational product is functional, efficient and trustworthy (Applbaum, 2000). It serves as the benchmark for genuine and fresh artisanal Bandel cheese indicative of a world that Western science has inspired us to trust. Therefore, to understand the commodification of tradition through food products and consumption it is important to pursue the tactics of intervention that develop themselves as working with the surface fetishisms of commodities rather than reaching behind surface veils to reveal the real material cultures. At this point it is crucial to point out that the status of Bandel cheese as an 'authentic' artisanal cheese remains somewhat tenuous, unless global policy regimes ratify the said status. With this insight in mind, we shall consider the project to secure a Geographical Identification (G.I.) tag for Bandel cheese, that has gained steam post the Covid 19 pandemic.

The Politics of G.I. and the Construction of the 'Place of Origin'

The project of securing a G.I. for Bandel Cheese has gained huge impetus in the last few years. The state government of West Bengal and the chief marketer of the product, Saurabh Gupta have been collaboratively striving towards the said objective since 2020. The motivations of these actors are quite understandable. The G.I. tag would provide legal legitimation to Bandel cheese as an 'authentic' cultural heritage of West Bengal. The tag would, thus allow the sellers/s to realise the full potential of the product in the global market for exotic food items. However, the limited knowledge about the historical trajectory of the product and the unique socio-cultural milieu within which the production process is embedded has posed significant challenges in securing the coveted label. In this chapter, we would examine these challenges and the responses they have elicited from the State, Gupta and the cohort of experts aiding them. Although, before undertaking the said enquiry, we propose to very briefly address a core theoretical question that confronts us; the question of value. More specifically, we aim to understand how a material object is transformed into an 'authentic' piece of cultural heritage.

The valuation of any object is socially constructed (Appadurai, 1986). The social determination of value of any piece of material cultural heritage must successfully resolve the question of authenticity. In other words, there must exist an established set of criteria within any given social context, that is employed to judge whether a material object authentically represents a particular

cultural tradition. For example, in his study on medieval relics, Geary, (1986, p. 177) demonstrated that in order for particular human remains to be considered valuable, "they had to undergo a social and cultural transition from being perceived as ordinary human remains to being venerated as the remains of a saint." There were clearly laid out social procedures through which such a transition occurred, like the examination of the tomb or reliquary or textual sources by the local bishop in public, solemn sessions or visions received by respected members of the local religious community. In medieval Europe, the relics were valuable in a religious and not monetary sense. Within a capitalist society, however, the monetary value of objects trumps all other kinds of value. However, just like any other form of value, monetary value is not innate, but a product of social construction:

> If commodity chains or circuits are articulations through which value is produced, value does not reside in the commodity itself but in the relationships between commodities, producers, sellers and consumers and the social practices through which these relationships take shape. This implies attention to the specific valuation practices and process through which commodities are produced and rendered as valuable (Lyon, 2023, p. 331).

In the case of pieces of commodified cultural heritage, a crucial part of the "valuation practices and process" consists of the social procedures that establish authenticity, and thereby make them commercially valuable. In the contemporary context, global policy regimes like G.I. establish the standards to adjudicate the claims of authenticity for cultural artefacts. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand the discursive framework of the G.I. policy regime to understand the specific challenges that are being faced to secure the tag for Bandel cheese.

The website of World Intellectual Property Organisation (n.d.) defines geographical indications in the following way:

> A geographical indication (GI) is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin. In order to function as a GI, a sign must identify a product as originating in a given place … In addition, the

qualities, characteristics or reputation of the product should be essentially due to the place of origin.

This definition captures the two salient characteristics of G.I. that set it apart from other global intellectual property standards like copyright, trademarks and so on. G.I. encompasses an entire geographical region and is a collective standard, which protects the proprietary rights of a group of producers in the said region. Now let us attempt to understand the historical evolution of the ideas which underpin the policy regime. The G.I. transforms a particular geographical space into the 'place of origin', thereby granting the status of 'original producers' only to those who inhabit that space. It makes 'original producers' the sole custodians of any given form of cultural heritage. This act of fixing cultural heritage to specific 'places of origin' fails to capture the complex historical trajectories of many cultural artefacts. The idea of heritage that such a policy regime embodies stems from colonial efforts to map and make sense of what was perceived to be the 'traditional crafts' of the colony. Kawlra (2014, p. 5) has argued that the "GI's invocation of the past as being rooted in the local" emanates from a Eurocentric ethic of place based ownership and affective belonging." Colonial scholarship constructed India as the unchanging traditional 'Other' in terms of which the image of the modern European self was fashioned (Ludden, 1993; Roosa, 1995; Washbrook, 1997). In this context, indigenous handicrafts came to be seen as emblems of India's traditionalism. The colonial authorities viewed them as products of an economically backward yet morally and aesthetically superior pre-industrial mode of production, one that had already disappeared in the West. Colonial administrators began to systematically map and document the "traditional crafts" of India, as part of their broader efforts to gather information about the resources of the colony's commercially exploitable resources. The colonial texts sought to impose order on the immense diversity of artisanal products and processes by recording according to rationalised, scientific schemes of classification and fixing specific products and their producers to particular geographical locations (Kawlra, 2014). Moreover, in order to preserve the supposed authenticity of traditional crafts, the colonial authorities disparaged all kinds of artistic innovations (McGowan, 2005). After Independence, the Indian state adopted this "cartographic paradigm of craft" (Kawlra, 2014, p. 8).

The preceding section, briefly explained the historical process of development of the G.I. policy regime in India. It is evident that the policy regime is based on a very specific notion of what constitutes cultural heritage. This kind of a narrow conceptualisation fails to account for the complex historical trajectories of many cultural artefacts. However, since the G.I. certification is essential to obtain legal protection of proprietary rights, producers (or other social actors claiming to act on their behalf like in the case of Bandel cheese) are forced to come up with inventive strategies to meet the policy requirements. Now we are adequately equipped to develop a contextual understanding of the challenges encountered in the G.I. application process for Bandel cheese and how the State and Gupta are trying to overcome them. To gain a more detailed picture of the issues at stake, we conducted an in-depth interview with Dr Pranab Lahiri, a professor at a reputed National Law University. Dr Lahiri was invited for consultation by the then District Magistrate of Hooghly in 2020. He met Gupta at that meeting. He has been associated with the project ever since. He also visited Palash's house subsequently, to study the production process. Dr Lahiri pointed out 3 main obstacles that they have encountered in the application process, which await resolution. The first issue he highlighted was the lack of historical documentation. He said, "There are many stories but a serious dearth of evidentiary documentation." The lack of textual sources on the history of the cheese is something even we encountered during the course of our research. At this point, it may be worth noting, that the process of tracing the historical trajectory of the cheese becomes even more tricky because all the visible links between it and the city of Bandel have been severed long back. We interviewed 10 residents of the city assembled through snowball sampling. None of them had even heard about the cheese. We also undertook a city tour, asked about it at old sweet shops, bakeries and with random people on the street. None except one person approached, knew about it and even she asked us to look for it at New Market in Kolkata. We also located two of the oldest houses in the city. These houses were built by Kartick Chandra Boral and Gouri Chandra Sen respectively. They were rich businessmen from the early colonial period. They are quite popular characters in Bengal, and we had heard stories about them while growing up. Today, these houses are still inhabited by descendants of these men. We visited them, but even here residents had no clue about what we were talking about. Now let us return to our conversation with Dr Lahiri. The second challenge pointed out by him relates to association formation. As pointed out earlier, The G.I. is a collective, and not an individual standard, which applies to an association of producers

in a particular geographical location. However, in this case the only producers of the product belong to one family, and needless to say, constituting an association out of a single family is a tough task. When asked about a potential solution to this problem, he simply said they are looking for a way to form an association with the existing family members. He seemed hesitant to spill out any further details. Dr Lahiri considered the third obstacle to be the "biggest". It was the shifting of the production process away from Bandel. He believed that the only solution to the problem was relocating the family and the production facility to a place near Bandel.

Therefore, it can be argued that the G.I. policy regime fails to adequately acknowledge cultural diversity. The monolithic conceptualisation of tradition, on which it is based, cannot hope to grasp biographies of certain cultural artefacts. Moreover, the desire to place cultural artefacts within a rigid classificatory schema, plucks them out of the distinct socio-historical context in which they are embedded. It also places the unrealistic demand on the present-day producers of these artefacts to authentically replicate a production process assumed to have existed in the remote past. The absurdity of such a demand becomes very apparent in the case of Bandel cheese, where the ancestors of today's producers never inhabited the past that their descendants are now expected to recreate. The State of West Bengal and Gupta are forced to reconstruct Bandel as the 'place of origin' to meet the demands of the policy regime. However, such a reconstruction may have painful consequences for Palash and his family who may be forced to relocate from their ancestral home to serve the narrative

Conclusion

The study was overall an attempt to understand the 'social life' of Bandel cheese. Beginning with the the idea that things can be said to possess a life history just like people and accumulate specific biographies as they move through different social contexts, uses and actors, we endeavoured to piece together a cultural biography and tried to explore how it interacts with the individual biographies of the social actors who make up the commodity chain. In the process we demonstrated that the relationship between things and social actors is dialectical. Things have no inherent meaning. They merely embody the meanings encoded on them by the social actors. However, things also impart meaning to the social context within which they are situated. Thus, the cultural life of Bandel cheese shapes and is in turn shaped by the individual lives of actors.

For example, Gupta's role in rescuing Bandel cheese from the realms of obscurity and securing global recognition for it, can hardly be overstated. At the same time, his involvement with the cheese has also transformed his life by allowing Whole Hog Deli a footing in the market for exotic food items in the city, and won him international renown. Moreover, the embodied meanings are often diverse and contradictory, contingent upon the unique location of social actors. For Gupta Bandel cheese represents a pathway to a better future, for Palash it is a source of disillusionment and marginalisation, for Tamal a family heirloom and tool for class performance for Sumana. All these meanings come together to impart Bandel cheese, its value. Furthermore, the process of commodification has blurred the lines between different regimes of value. For example the cultural value of Bandel cheese as a piece of heritage is actively emphasised by sellers like Gupta and the high end restaurants. In addition, the process of commodification has transformed its history into a highly politicised realm. Global policy regimes like the G.I. operate on a very restrictive notion of what constitutes heritages. It demands that histories of all cultural artefacts conform to these notions for them to gain the status of authenticity. The quest for G.I. has led the state and Gupta to construct a coherent historical narrative from the limited available evidence. More importantly, this project involves actively reconstructing the present-day social organisation of production so that it more 'authentically' reflects the constructed historical account.

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