Research Note

Exploring the Many Meanings of Bangladeshi Rice Culture

By: Israt Jahan Lipa

Abstract

In Bangladeshi food culture, rice is the leading staple. It is home food, festive food, or, in hard times, a food of survival. It is not merely that Bangladeshi people cultivate rice; their customs, rituals, and daily activities concerning rice serve as a thread that binds them together. Rice culture is a common inheritance. In this research note I explore Bangladeshis' long history of not only relying on rice to combat hunger but to celebrate, and to create home and community. Drawing on oral interviews as well as published materials, I consider how the conceptualization of rice as a "main staple" or the "only" food during hard times in Bangladeshi cuisine underlines changing classed notions of rice's place in contemporary foodways.

Keywords*:* Bangladeshi cuisine, rice culture, home food, rice and rituals

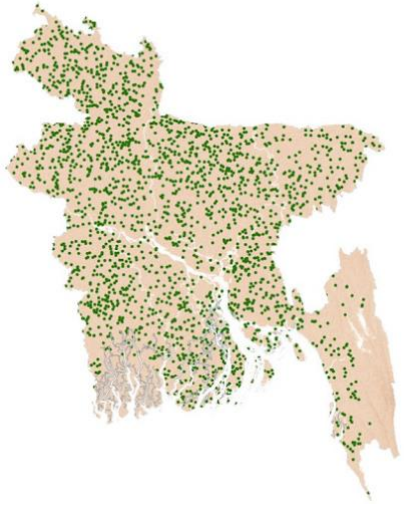
As the world's fourth leading producers of rice (Chi 2014: 51), Bangladeshi people not only cultivate rice, they share customs, rituals, and daily activities surrounding rice that bind them together. This rice culture is not monolithic, however, because while rice is the main ingredient of daily meals, particular varieties, tastes and textures are linked with different income levels and cultural groups. In this research note, I explore the central, but changing, place of rice in Bangladeshi culture. I consider its many meanings over time and space as a home food and a festive food and I reflect on the conceptualization of rice as Bangladesh's "main food," and primary staple during hard times. Here I draw on oral interviews that I conducted with ten members of my social bubble during the pandemic (my mother, mother-in-law, sisters, friends, neighbors, and three women who work as housekeepers for family and neighbors), as well as on published sources. The six women and four men I interviewed all live in urban settings; their ages range from twenty-eight to eighty-six years of age.

Rice Production in Bangladesh

Rice production and consumption is intricately connected to Bangladeshi history and culture. Because rice is cultivated in almost every region of the country, and people consider it their main staple, it has become the most iconic food of Bangladesh. The country's climate and landscape are so favorable to the cultivation of rice, it is hard to find any home where rice is not cooked and eaten. When I interviewed Abdullah, a forty-seven-year-old professional involved in rice production, on February 12, 2021 he underscored how this longstanding dietary dependence on rice has shaped the foodways of Bangladeshi people. Located on the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh consists of predominantly rich fertile flat land. Agriculture has always been important to the economy and it remains the largest employment sector, comprising about 42.7 percent of the workforce (Ray 2012: 711). Almost 40 percent of people living in rural areas of Bangladesh are directly engaged with growing rice and other agricultural production (Sengupta 2010: 83). As a result, rice is key to the national economy and its cultivation is responsible for nearly half (close to 48

percent) of rural employment which is also a major source of rice cultivation as well as the prime earning source for rural people. The rice sector contributes one-half of the agricultural GDP and one-sixth of the national income in Bangladesh (Sengupta 2010: 82). As the country's main crop, rice has a huge impact on employment, food security, and other economic and social forces. Each of the twenty-nine ethnic groups in the country has its own distinct ancestral history and cultural traditions but, significantly, rice is the main food across all groups, even if its preparation varies. Likewise, rice is central across all religious faiths; it is relied on by Muslims who make up the vast majority of the population (97 percent), just as it is by minority Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. Rice is the staple food of about 135 million people in Bangladesh; it accounts for about two-thirds of the total calorie supply, and about one-half of the total protein intake, of the average Bangladeshi (Ray et. al. 2016: 8).

The cultivation of rice in Bangladesh varies according to seasonal changes in the water supply. The largest harvest, *aman*, occurs in November and December and accounts for more than half of annual production. Some rice for the *aman* harvest is sown in the spring through the broadcast method. It matures during the summer rains and is harvested in the fall. A higher yielding method involves starting the seeds in special beds and transplanting during the summer monsoon. The second harvest, known as *aus,* is comprised of traditional strains but more often includes high-yielding, dwarf varieties. Rice for the *aus* harvest is sown in March or April, benefits from April and May rains, matures during the summer rain, and is harvested during the summer. Finally, with the increased use of irrigation, there has been a growing focus on another rice-growing season extending during the dry season from October to March. Where irrigation is feasible, it is normal for fields throughout Bangladesh to produce rice for two harvests annually. Between rice-growing seasons, farmers will do everything possible to prevent the land from lying fallow and will grow vegetables, peanuts, pulses, or oilseeds if water and fertilizer are available. Because rice is cultivated in every region of Bangladesh, most people who are engaged with farming produce it as a crop. This widespread cultivation is the foundation of Bangladeshi food culture.



Picture 1: Rice Cultivation Areas in Bangladesh (Photo from www.ricepedia.org)

Sharing a Bangladeshi Rice Culture

For many Bangladeshi people, especially in rural areas, a meal is not a meal without rice. Amounts vary, and preparation ranges from plain boiled to the festive dish of biriyani, but rice should be on the table. This is true not only at lunch or dinner but at breakfast as well. As the main home food of Bangladesh, rice is at the center of the country's food culture. I interviewed Amena on February 15, 2021, a fifty-three year-old full-time homemaker living in Cumilla, a city of approximately 300,000 situated in the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh. She explained:

> In many countries rice may be eaten as a food but the long tradition of eating rice as the main food really denotes the specialty of rice culture in Bangladesh. We have learnt it as home food since our childhood and we perceived this dietary tradition from our elders. I think, when the matter comes up on food, Bangladeshi people holds a special feeling and emotion towards rice. This emotion actually transmits from our ancestors and today we are practicing this and we will also be responsible to pass this tradition of rice culture to our next generation. Thus it becomes our home food and will remain so.

Amena highlights the transmission of rice culture across generations and how its long tradition in the foodways of Bangladesh extends from ordinary meals to holiday feasts. Its preparation and shared consumption reinforce reciprocal ties between networks of preparers, as well as relationships between those preparing and those being served. Here, many people, especially the economically disadvantaged, eat a platter made up of rice, curry or pulse for breakfast. While the better off have different food items like bread, milk, oats, cakes, and fruits on their breakfast table, the economically disadvantaged often rely on rice for their morning meal. It is the best alternative given limited resources. In the hardest of times, people resort to eating plain rice with only a green chili if they can't afford the ingredients for curry or any other food items. If there's nothing else, a small amount of rice will satisfy hunger. Sharior, a twenty-six year old who works for an international organization and lives in the capital city of Bangladesh stressed to me that as Bangladeshis, rice is our staple in good times and in bad times.

Everyone I interviewed echoed these many associations. They also highlighted rice's long and deep associations with Bangladeshi culture as they described rice as the national dish and talked about rice as "the" staple. They pointed out that when rice is spoken of in Bangladesh, most often people are referring to short white rice that is usually boiled and served on its own or topped with small pieces of fried shallots. Rice can be prepared in many distinctive ways, however, and regional dishes often contain a particular "exotic" ingredient that is produced locally. It is also served as part of festive culinary traditions—for example wedding parties—or as part of religious practices, such as at Eid festival or *Iftar* (food taken after fasting) celebrations during Ramadan. On February 27, 2021, I interviewed my grandmother, Nahar, who is eighty-five years old and has lived all her life in Cumilla. She reflected:

> I think because of the suitable environment and agricultural land our ancestors were much engaged with the cultivation of rice. When I was very young, we had lots of agricultural lands and my grandfather and father used

> to go to the land early in the morning and worked there till the evening. And in most of the lands rice was cultivated because people of Bangladesh can't think of a single meal without rice. Even those who were unable to arrange other foodstuffs because of their limited income, they tried utmost to arrange only rice to meet up their hunger. In our food culture, where the richest people would also feel incomplete if they don't find rice in their dining table there the poorest ones also struggle to arrange rice for their meal… Now-a-days rich people try to avoid rice [due to] concern[s about] their health, but they also consume a little amount of rice because people think that they can't survive without rice. Whatever food we take, our hunger doesn't meet up without rice.

My grandmother highlights the presence of rice in the everyday meals of a wide cross-section of Bangladeshi people and, as her comments suggest, it has a traditional place in national, regional, and local cuisines. In terms of ethnicity, rice carries the meaning of being Bangalee, for as Masumoto notes in *Gochisoo and Brown Rice Sushi*, "Like an additional flavor, meanings are carried with food" (1987: 117). Cultural elements, manifest not only physically but also passed on through knowledge, skill or ritual, are equally important to shaping living culture and people express a wide variety of identities through rice culture in different settings. These include gastronomic traditions along with other aspects of material culture like artistic performances, festivals, social practices, oral heritage, and craftsmanship. Rice is connected to many aspects of life for as Goodman writes, "Food is never just something to eat" (2002: 274).

The processes involved in preparing, serving, and sharing rice in the context of Bangladeshi cuisine might appear simple, but they often carry important social and cultural significance (Muthayya et. al. 2014: 12). Recipes and dietary practices of rice consumption transmit foodways from one generation to the next. For example, making and eating dishes made from rice as part of a celebration can solidify social bonds, and have helped to establish rice as part of the nation's identity and self-image (Paddock 2016: 1041). My own emotional connections to rice run deep. Growing up, it was a central part of my family's food culture; it nourished not only my body but my soul as well. It is a part of how I connected with my grandparents and it is the lens through which I learned about the environment and about the culture around me. I bonded with my mom and grandmothers as I learned how to make rice dishes. Just as rice is an integral part of me, I am a part of my food culture. As a folklorist, I now appreciate the ways in which food, local ingredients, and traditions can bring people together—even when nothing else seems possible.

As Michael Owen Jones (2007) points out in his analysis of food as symbolic of identity, not only particular foodstuffs, but also the procuring, preparing, and consuming of provisions can figure prominently in symbolic discourses that shape identity, values, and attitudes. Countrywide rice production and consumption has contributed to a Bengali cuisine that is decidedly South Asian, and the creation of rice as a symbol of Bangladeshi national identity and shared cultural values. As Jones also notes, people have multiple identities: ethnic, regional, gendered, or classed, and these identities are dynamic, subject to challenge and change throughout the life cycle. Therefore, eating practices reproduce as well as construct

identity; in addition, both identity and alimentary symbolism, not just taste or availability or cost, significantly affect food choice (Jones 2007: 137). In the socio-cultural setting of Bangladesh, rice is a great unifier that connects us across regional and ethnic cultures and generations. No matter the differences that separate them, most Bangladeshis have experienced the smell of rice cooking. It is a reminder of a shared food culture and the country's long tradition of eating rice as the main food that extends across class and caste boundaries. Bangladeshis share practices, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of rice.

From Hard Times to Good Times: Rice as Home and Festive Food

As the backbone of daily meals, rice is usually boiled and served with curry, vegetables, pulses and other foods, while when entertaining guests, more elaborate dishes like rice cake, rice pudding, *biriyani*, and *khichuri* are eaten. In Bangladesh it is usually still the women of the household who prepare food for their families, but across gender and caste almost every person knows how to cook rice. Its preparation is quite simple; boil the required amount of water, pour rice into the pot, and cook 25-30 minutes. After the extra water is drained off, the rice is ready to be served. In many homes, it is still considered part of a Bengali girl's education to learn how to cook rice properly, and those who can cook it to a perfect texture are highly appreciated. My Aunt Nasima, a forty-year-old homemaker who lives in Cumilla, stated on 15th February, 2021:

> Mostly women are responsible for handling the kitchen in Bangladeshi culture and that's why rice cooking is the first requirement for any girl which indicates that she is quite efficient in handling the kitchen. This kind of attitude is mostly practiced here just after the marriage of a girl when she first enters into her in-laws' house. Even on the second day after marriage, newlywed girls are asked to prepare anything with rice for her in-laws' family. She needs to prepare rice pudding or rice cake for her in-laws' family and serves it in their meal. It is believed here as a custom which signifies that the newly wed daughter-in-law of the house has started her kitchen work with rice made food because it's our home food, the integral part of our regular food culture. It's the symbolic food of our Bangladeshi cuisine.

In times of hardship, rice is not only part of the meal, it can be a meal in itself. Rice is considered the main means of combatting hunger among the most disadvantaged. During the hardest times, the only demand of Bangladeshi people is to have some rice to mitigate their suffering. Rahim, a forty-five-year-old rickshaw puller who moved to Cumilla from his village five years ago, commented on March 5, 2021:

> We all work to afford two handfuls of rice to satisfy our hunger. Other foods are supplementary dishes in our regular meals. In fact, in our daily meals we just want to consume rice as it's our main dish on our table. It's our struggle to consume rice in our everyday living.

Rice's links to food security surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the whole country was locked down, poverty stricken individuals and families faced the desperate situation of trying to survive. Without employment income, many were living in miserable conditions. In response, the government of Bangladesh, national and regional Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), and social welfare institutions worked together to distribute packets of rice to those in need. This was an extension of earlier aid efforts to combat natural disasters when cooked, and sometimes raw, rice was supplied to the people in need of food (Zabir et al. 2021: 17,19). The action reflected the belief that rice is the only means necessary to mitigate hunger in hard times. The distribution of rice calmed people's fears. As long as they could count on a minimum amount of rice, they knew that they would not go hungry. Shirin, a thirty-five-year-old woman who works as a housekeeper and lives in a low-income area of Cumilla, shared her experience of receiving rice during this COVID-19 pandemic on March 5, 2021:

> When the lockdown started, I was very worried about my family because I'm the only earning member of my family. My husband abandoned me two years ago and left me alone with my three kids. Since then, whatever I earn by working as a housekeeper is the only means for our survival. I work in five houses and with that money I support my family and bear the educational costs of my kids. But during lockdown I was forbidden to visit any houses and I lost my work. I recall I cried whole day thinking, "How will I feed my kids and what to do?" The whole month passed with the little amount of rice I had in my house and I also borrowed some from one of my sisters. I could give one meal to my kids and starved otherwise. It was a tough time indeed. After almost one and half months, a social welfare organization came to our slum and distributed packets containing ten kilograms of rice and three kilograms of potatoes. They distributed the rice packets and potatoes to every house in our neighborhood. It was really a good day for all of us. We are poor people and no one cares about us so this help was like a blessing for us. And during this pandemic, many poor people like us were helped by government, NGOs and different social welfare organizations. We passed our days like this for almost six months and then after the situation became a little more normal, I continued my work as a housekeeper. Now I can support my family with the money I get.

Shirin's experience is far from singular. In Bangladesh, many people live below the poverty line and some rely on begging as their only source of income. It is common for those better off to respond to the poorest by offering them rice, rather than money; the destitute may beg door to door to receive a small amount of rice from each house. Handing out money is rare; most often people in need beg for rice, and most often people with the means to help offer rice to them. Everyone I interviewed highlighted the importance of rice as the major food source for mitigating hunger, and even preventing starvation, during periods of personal and collective hardship. To have rice in the cupboard, is to have food and to be able to feed yourself and your family.

Rice has deep associations with hospitality. There are few, if any, festive occasions or celebrations in Bangladesh where rice is not served to guests. Rice is prepared in different ways to celebrate various rites of passage and festivals, but it is hard to imagine planning for a festive meal without including rice in some form. From a small, homely gathering to the largest feast, rice is the main ingredient for welcoming guests and is on the menu for occasions, such as wedding receptions, post-funeral rites, circumcision ceremonies, and other social events. Sometimes, depending on the host's financial circumstances, two or three forms of rice are served. In these cases, plain boiled rice might be accompanied by *polau*, a dish made from scented, thin, short grain rice, and *biriyani*, a dish of cooked rice mixed with beef or mutton. *Biriyani* is made from a high quality, long grain, scented rice, such as basmati, which is either cultivated in Bangladesh or imported from a neighboring country, like India or Pakistan. Along with Basmati rice, there are some other types of rice which are eaten and produced in Bangladesh like *mini-cut, chinigura, katarivog, nazir-shail, atop, BIRRI-atyash.* These are found in local markets varying in price and flavor, which can also be related to social status quo based on the price of the rice. Sharior is a twenty-six year-old who works for an international organization and lives in the capital city of Bangladesh. During an interview on February 19, 2021, he commented:

> Basmati rice is more costly than other types of rice in our market. So, occasionally, like while preparing *biriyani* or to serve special guests in our houses, we cook this rice. It cannot be afforded regularly by the middle class, lower middle class and poor people of our country. That's why generally during everyday meals plain rice is cooked in most of our houses and this special rice is kept for serving guests if possible. But for weddings and different social gatherings *biriyani* is the most popular form of rice as it is prepared with high quality rice and mutton or beef. In our Bangladeshi rice culture, *polau* and *biriyani* are festive foods. People love to occasionally enjoy these special forms of rice apart from their regular intake of rice. It actually adds an additional flavor to our rice culture which gives us happy feelings as food of celebration. So, in a word while rice is our home food… it is also our main menu during any festivals and celebrations.

Along with *biriyani* and *polau*, people in Bangladesh also enjoy *khichuri* at family gatherings and on weekends. *Khichuri* is a main dish prepared with boiled rice and pulse. Especially, during the rainy season *khichuri* is cooked with fried fish, especially fried Hilsha and beef curry. It is also served with different fried vegetables, mashed dried fish, and fried egg. On February 15, 2021, Nasima, a forty-year-old homemaker living in Cumilla, remarked:

> It is a particular pleasure to eat *khichuri* with fried fish when it is raining outside. This warm food is one way of enjoying the cool weather. This is commonly practiced in the houses of Bangladesh. We love to celebrate the rainy season, not daily, but occasionally by cooking *khichuri* and fried fish fry, fried brinjal and chutney. This food gives us a homely feeling…. Sometimes I also invite some of my cousins and relatives to enjoy this food together on a

> rainy day. It's a kind of family get together to celebrate the rainy season and this is commonly practiced especially in urban areas of Bangladesh.

Like Nasima, the people I interviewed described rice as the basis of home food in Bangladeshi cuisine as well as the key ingredient in dishes that mark celebration.

Picture 2: Biriyani: one of the most popular foods during festivals (Photo courtesy Sharior, 2021)

Rice is central to some celebrations that are intertwined with Bengali nationalism. For example, 'Pohela Boishakh,' the first day of Bengali New Year, celebrates the national identity of the Bangladeshi people and people all over the country mark the day with great festive spirit. In both urban and rural settings, people prepare rice and fish as a celebratory feast to welcome guests on this day. During the national festival, *pani vat* (watered rice) is eaten. Boiled rice is soaked in cold water and served with fried Hilsha, the national fish of Bangladesh. This special meal is eaten in homes, and, in the urban areas of Bangladesh, is served at hotels and restaurants or prepared by different cultural organizations as a fundraiser. It is common for people to gather outside to celebrate Bengali New Year and to enjoy this meal with members of their social group as part of the festivities. Different types of fried vegetables, pulse, and mashed potatoes, as well as dried fish, are eaten with the watered rice all over the country across religions and castes. Sheuly, a forty-four-year-old school teacher living in the capital city of Bangladesh, told me on February 19, 2021:

> Without *pani vat* (boiled rice soaked in cold water) and fried Hilsha, we can't think of celebrating *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali New Year). This meal is prepared in most of the houses of our country depending on the affluence of the people. We love to start this day by eating this meal as their breakfast and they also eat this meal when they visit others' houses, meet their cohorts and attend different cultural programs. Rice and fried fish fry [are]considered the main meal of this day and here people think that it represents their national identity. Historically, in the rural areas of Bangladesh…people signified this day as the beginning of the new harvest calendar. But nowadays this day is

> celebrated in a great festive mood in the urban areas of Bangladesh. Government offices, different cultural organizations, universities and other social organizations arrange diverse cultural programs, food fests and traditional games to help people enjoy the day. Overall, it's a day for all Bangladeshi people across the world because those living in abroad also celebrate this day within their houses. It's a… day for Bangladeshis and rice and fried Hilsha fish add another ethnic shared notion of Bengali cuisine to celebrate Bengali nationalism.

Rice and the Passage of Time

Rites of passage, signaling a person's move from one life stage to another, are associated with rice; rice is a constant companion for Bangladeshis on their life journey. For example, when parents first introduce their baby to solid foods, at around the age of six months, it is rice they turn to. In Bangladesh it is common for parents to mark this occasion by preparing rice pudding for the baby. They invite relatives to help feed the baby and to share their blessings.

Picture 3: Onno Prashon (Rice Ceremony)(Photo Courtesy Urmila Das, 2020)

Known as '*Onno Prashon*,' or rice ceremony, this day is celebrated with a festive mood and lots of guests who visit the house and bring gifts for the baby and the mother. On this significant day for both the baby and the parents, rice is given to the child. In Muslim households, the observance is simple; the parents invite close relatives, serve a special meal, and enjoy the day with family members. The ritual is both more elaborate and more popular among Hindu believers of Bangladesh, however. They perform a special veneration and engage in other ritual activities. In fact, as I learned from Hindu neighbors and friends during my childhood, in the Hindu religion rice is an integral part of veneration more generally. Especially when offering a meal to the gods, it is believed that rice should be present on the veneration platter along with vermillion, fruits, nuts, betel leaves and candles. Without rice, the veneration platter is incomplete.

I've also seen many times that both Muslim and Hindu believers in Bangladesh welcome a newlywed couple with a platter on which rice is the main ingredient. It is customary for

senior women in the family to prepare this platter with a small amount of rice, along with other ingredients like fruits and candles. One of them holds the dish in her hand, touches it to the heads of the newlywed couple, and welcomes them into the house. This custom marks the couple's first entry into the house after being married.

Just as rice helps mark stages in an individual's life, it is also important to calendar customs and festivals that help mark the passing of the year. In fact, there is a festival solely devoted to its harvest. During the late autumn period, newly harvested rice is cut down and in the rural areas of Bangladesh a festival is held to welcome the new rice into the home. This festival is called as '*Nobanno*' (the festival of welcoming newly harvested rice in the rural areas in the late autumn period). During that time, rural people of Bangladesh make different types of cakes, dried foods and puddings with rice and distribute these dishes within their family and social group. Often people living in urban areas return to visit their home villages to participate in this festival and nowadays in urban areas activities are organized by different cultural groups and organizations to celebrate the day. Thus, the whole country celebrates this festival centered on rice production and consumption. In Bangladesh, rice culture permutates all aspects of life; rice is used to celebrate religious holidays, community events, and family gatherings. In other words, rice is celebrated and respected as an essential part of what makes people Bangladeshi, and especially part of the Bangalee in ethnic group.

Class Distinctions

Sharing a rice culture brings people together but it can separate them, and rice can also be explored in terms of class distinctions within the socio-economic context of Bangladesh. As mentioned earlier, different categories of rice vary in terms of their economic value and social value. The highest price of rice per kilogram is 150 BDT (1.78 USD) while the lowest range is 30 BDT (0.36 USD). On March 7, 2021, Salam, a forty-five-year-old who works in a rice business, stated:

> The price of rice varies depending on their quality. Like the highest quality of rice is fragrant and good to eat as well as looks thin and white. On the contrary, the lower category rice is brown in color and thick in nature. The finest quality of rice demands the highest price range as it is polished very nicely during processing. It costs a lot to polish it in the rice mill to give it the best look and that's why its price is higher than others. Even the seed of this rice is higher in price than the other categories of rice seeds which are not as costly. Wealthy people generally buy the finest quality of rice whilst less well-off people struggle to manage the little amount of money they have to buy the lowest quality of rice. Because for them, rice is the only means of food to survive and it's their basic need to satisfy their hunger.

Although the nutritional content of rice varieties doesn't range widely, there are many different types of rice with many different qualities to suit different consumer preferences. As Salam suggested, quality factors relate to grain length, stickiness, aroma, texture, and flavor. All varieties of rice are processed post-harvest as either white or brown rice,

affecting flavor, texture and nutritive value. Milling of rice post-harvest leads to some grains being broken; a higher proportion of broken grains decreases the price since the quality is generally acknowledged to be lower. As explained in a review by Champagne: "Flavor is the impression perceived through the chemical senses from a product in the mouth" (2008: 448). According to Meilgaard et al. (2007), when defined in this manner, flavor includes aromatics and tastes. In line with the varying price range, the social value of rice consumption also varies. Just as on 5th March 2021 Rahim mentioned, those who eat rice ranging from 70-150 BDT are considered to be higher class than those who eat rice costing 30 BDT. It is common for Bangladeshi people to offer the best rice they can afford to guests. My interviews also revealed that in many middle- and lower-income houses, two categories of rice are kept: one for the family's regular consumption and the other for guests. Thus, the quality of one's rice reflects one's socioeconomic position.

More recently, rice consumption has been linked to class consciousness in new ways. In urban contexts, consuming large amounts of rice can sometimes be considered a lower economic practice. This is based on the popular assumption that lower-income people's diets contain higher amounts of rice than that of more affluent people because rice is the only food they can afford. Conversely, the thought is that those who are economically secure will consume less rice because they can buy other foods. People may limit their rice consumption because they worry about the health concerns of eating too much rice, or, alternatively, they may prefer to eat Western fast food rather than rice on a daily basis. Shairin, a twenty-four-year-old university student reflected on February 23, 2021:

> Now-a-days because of health consciousness and obesity, mostly urban people try to intake a limited amount of rice in their regular life. Maybe once in a day, especially during lunch. Along with this, the young girls also try to maintain their body figure by consuming less carbohydrates in their daily meals and that's why to maintain their diet chart. They don't allow higher amounts of rice on their daily platter. The younger generations love to eat rich fast food rather than plain rice but interestingly they love to eat *biriyani* and in urban areas there are many restaurants that serve readymade *biriyani*. Because *biriyani* is considered a food meant for rich people and to celebrate any occasions.

This results in some middle- and upper-income people restricting their rice consumption; they try to avoid consuming large amounts of rice. As Shairin notes, tied to this notion of rice consumption as an indicator of socioeconomic position is a growing concern among some segments of the population with maintaining a slender body. Thus, among the young and middle-aged, there are those who restrict their rice consumption because they believe that the consumption of a high amount of carbohydrates will lead to undesirable weight gain. Interestingly, this practice of restricting one's rice consumption is gendered and is more popular among females than males (Morgan 2013: 2). Because Bangladesh is a patriarchal country, the most highly valued female body shape is a slim one; to be female and beautiful is to be thin. Thus, along with other meanings of rice, the socio-cultural

implications of consumption and restriction need to be understood within larger national and international trends concerning class and gender.

Conclusions

Rice in Bangladesh is a symbol of humble beginnings and shared cultural experience; it conjures up images of locality, specialty, and distinction. Across Bangladesh, rice is transformed from a mundane everyday staple to a food that conveys national distinction. In the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh rice is tied to locality, place, and community, and has become a marker of nationhood. An integral part of Bangladeshi cuisine and a marker of national identity, rice holds a place of great significance in the regular meals of Bangladeshi families. It continues to uphold its historical importance both as regular home food and also as a food of celebrations. In a word, the meanings contained in the procurement, preparation, and serving of rice make it the primary foodways of Bangladeshi people across caste groups. It upholds the national identity of Bangladeshis both in hard times as the only means of mitigating hunger, and also as festive food during celebrations. Representing the local while embracing the national, rice is a quintessential element in its diverse functional and cultural aspects.

Notes:

The names used in this research note are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the respondents.

References Cited

Ashley, Bob, Ben Taylor, Joanne Hollows, and Steve Jones. 2004. *Food and Cultural Studies*. London; New York: Routledge.

Carolan, Michael. 2020. Ethical Eating as Experienced by Consumers and Producers: When Good Food Meets Good Farmers. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1–21.

Champagne, Elaine T. 2008. Rice Aroma and Flavor: A Literature Review. *Cereal Chemistry,* 85 (4): 445-454.

Chi, Janine. 2014. Consuming Rice, Branding the Nation*. American Sociological Association,* 13 (3): 50-55.

Goodman, David. 2002. Rethinking food production-consumption. *Sociologia Ruralis: Journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology*, 42 (4): 271–277.

Jones, Michael Owen. 2007. Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread-and-Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies. *Journal of American Folklore*, 120 (476): 129-177.

Leong-Salobir, Cecilia. 2011. *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire.* Routledge: New York.

Masumoto, David Mas. 1987. Gochisoo and Brown Rice Sushi*.* In *Country Voices: the Oral History of a Japanese American Family Farm Community*, 113-21. Del Rey, California.: Inaka Countryside Publications.

Meilgaard, M., G.V. Civille, and B.T. Carr. 2006. *Sensory Evaluation Techniques.* 4th ed. Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis.

Morgan, Kevin John. 2013. The rise of urban food planning*. International Planning Studies*, 18 (1): 1–4.

Muthayya, Sumithra, Jonathan Sugimoto, Scott Montgomery, and Glen Maberly. 2014. An Overview of Global Rice Production, Supply, Trade, and Consumption*. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1324: 7-14.

Paddock, Jessica. 2016. Positioning Food Cultures: 'Alternative' Food asf Distinctive Consumer Practice. *Sociology*, 50 (6): 1039–1055.

Ray, Mousumi, Kuntal Ghosh, Somnath Singh, and Chandra Keshab Mondal. 2016. Folk to Functional: An Explorative Overview of Rice-Based Fermented Foods and Beverages in India. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 3 (1): 5-18.

Ray, Utsa. 2012. Eating "Modernity": Changing Dietary Practices in Colonial Bengal. *Modern Asian Studies*, 46 (3): 703-729.

Sengupta, Jayanta. 2010. Nation on a Platter: The Culture and Politics of Food and Cuisine in Colonial Bengal. *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 (1): 81-89.

Thursby, Jacqueline S. 2008. *Foodways and Folklore: A Handbook*. Westport, CT : Greenwood Press.

Visser, Margaret. 1986. *Much Depends on Dinner.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Weidenfeld.

Warde, Alan. 1997. *Consumption, Food, and Taste.* Thousand Oaks, CA : SAGE Publications Ltd.

Zabir, Abdullah Al, Asif Mahmud, Md. Ariful Islam, Sabyasachi Chanda Antor, Farhana Yasman, and Aditya Dasgupta. 2021. COVID-19 and Food Supply in Bangladesh: A Review. *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics* 10 (1): 15-23.

Interviews

Amena. 2021. Interview with author. February 15.

Abdullah. 2021. Interview with author. February 12.

Nahar. 2021. Interview with author. February 27.

Nasima. 2021. Interview with author. February 15.

Rahim. 2021. Interview with author. March 05.

Salam. 2021. Interview with author. March 07.

Shairin. 2021. Interview with author. February 23.

Sharior. 2021. Interview with author. February 19.

Sheuly. 2021. Interview with author. February 19.

Shirin. 2021. Interview with author. March 05.