

## **Familiarity amidst the Unfamiliar: Situating 'Everyday Life' in the Practice of Package Tours**

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**Abstract:** *Tourism is an institutionalized form of temporary leisured mobility and a tourist is a person who temporarily moves away from home to experience change. Tourism is a modern practice premised upon the separation between everyday life and sites of touristic gaze as well as work and leisure. Touristic practices presuppose the suspension and reversal of everyday life. Travelling for leisure has its origin in the desacralization and secularization of nature facilitated by the Romantic Movement. The establishment of railways was the primary logistical factor behind the development of mass tourism in Europe and its colonies. Organized mass tourism grew in Europe as a result of rising income levels and standards of living, shortening of the work year along with legislation of paid holidays and rapid improvement in the means of transportation in the mid-twentieth century. Tourism in pre-independent India, contrarily, developed as a colonial project of institutionalizing and commercializing the traditional practice of pilgrimage. After independence, tourism started flourishing in the hands of private tour operators. Kundu Special, a leading Bengali tour operator, is believed to have pioneered the practice of conducting package tours in India. Based on my ethnographic research that took package tours conducted by Kundu Special as shifting anthropological fields, this paper analyses the practices constituting package tours that are designed to construct an "everyday" environment for Bengali tourists outside Bengal. It intends to highlight the way the institutional arrangements of package tours are designed to encapsulate tourists in a bubble of familiar environment to minimize their exposure to the strangeness of unfamiliar cultures. Quintessential Bengali food is a major component of the packages intended to facilitate unmediated transportation of Bangaliyana to distant locales. The tourists opting for package tours travel in groups comprising only Bengali co-travellers and are always accompanied by a team of managers, porters and cooks committed to making them feel at home*

*away from home. Secluded into a world of familiar language, culinary experience and culture created for them, these tourists fail to immerse themselves into the host cultures and have unmediated interactions with local people. Bound by native cultural traits and habits, these tourists, therefore, view the people, culture and sites through the protective walls of their environmental bubble. This paper intends to analyse how elements of everyday life that are believed to be antithetical to touristic practices lie at the heart of the practice of conducting package tours. Its primary rationale is to show how package tours juxtapose familiarity and novelty.*

**Keywords:** Tourism, everyday life, package tours, familiarity, strangeness, Bengali cuisine, tourists, cultural authenticity, environmental bubble.

### ***Introduction***

Everyday life is an assemblage of myriad activities individuals engage in as members of a society; it is invariably related to the immediate environment one is embedded in (Heller 1987: 6). The idea of commonality, David Inglis (2005: 2) proposed, is an indispensable characteristic of everyday life because it has a collective existence and it is shared by the totality of a community despite being unique to individuals. Everyday life is constantly being produced and reproduced by the activities of Individuals. Social reproduction of everyday life is incumbent upon the self-reproduction of individuals, one of the forms of which is the biological sustenance of the human body through the socially determined and universally invariant act of food consumption. Self-reproduction occurs in everyday life, not in higher spheres of society (Lefebvre 1971: 31). The aggregate of these reproduction mechanisms and Individual appropriation of objects, systems, and institutions through socialization facilitate social reproduction (Heller 1987).

This work situates everyday life in the context of organized tourism. It intends to explore the dynamics of the ambivalent relationship between everyday life and package tours as a distinctive touristic practice. Tourism, as defined by Dean MacCannel (1976), is a modern leisurely practice that involves suspension and reversal of the obligations of everyday life. According to John Urry (1990), the difference between the familiar environment of existence and the object of the tourist gaze forms the foundation of tourism. This essay, however, shows how organized package tours establish the contrived centrality of “everyday” in tourist places away from everyday reality. It addresses how practices surrounding food in

everyday life are appropriated in all-inclusive package tours to give tourists a sense of familiarity as they traverse through unfamiliar geographical and cultural territories. This essay takes “everyday life” as a discursive construct that is produced and reproduced through the practices constituting package tours. The particular tour operator that serves as a case for this work is Kundu Special, a leading tour operator in contemporary West Bengal. It is known for pioneering and popularizing the practice of conducting all-inclusive package tours characterized by the practice of serving “authentic” Bengali food on trips outside Bengal.

Food and foodways are important components of everyday life acting as material means through which identity is constructed and mediated (James et. al. 2010: 1-2). Consumption of food is as much about consuming nutrients, as it is about “gustatory experience” (Beardsworth 1997: 51). Despite being an intimate act, food consumption ties an individual to collectivities such as family and the wider society (Beardsworth 1997: 75). The social significance of food is historically and culturally universal (Scott 2009: 93). This paper intends to show how the establishments conducting package tours transport everydayness of existence to touristic sites through the appropriation of food consumption patterns commonly associated with Bengal. Based on the explorations drawn from the anthropological account of package tours, I seek to describe how Bengali cuisine is used as a mnemonic marker of everyday life for Bengali middle-class tourists.

### ***Methodology: Package Tours as Anthropological Sites***

This essay takes the practice of conducting package tours as the subject of its anthropological inquiry. Sara Pink (2012: 21) has asserted that an ethnographic study of practices cannot base itself on individuals as they engage in practices; it has to take practices as an analytical unit to understand how individual performances reinforce and intersect with discourse and sociality. An understanding of practices, Pink (2012: 31) has argued, can be captured by following subjects in movement. From a similar epistemological standpoint, this study conceptualizes the field in terms of shifting spatiality. Exploration of the operational aspects of tour packages necessitated conducting participant observation at the mobile spaces constituting the tours. I was particularly influenced by the way Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) interrogated the geographical fixedness of the idea of a field.<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my ethnographic account of two package tours conducted by Kundu Special in 2016 in which I participated

in the capacity of a researcher and as a tourist. Following Pink, (2012), this study acknowledges that the self and the trajectory of a researcher in a field are intertwined with the practice, people and things that construct the place.

The complexity of the field compels anthropologists to triangulate the stories from the field with those gathered from sources like archives, folklore, oral history, public discourse, and interviewing (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In a similar vein, this study is located at the intersection of history and anthropology because it traces the trajectory of package tours to historicize the incorporation of everyday food in its practices. For this purpose, this study has tapped into sources such as newspaper archives, oral history, journalistic articles, and travelogues. The anthropological account of the package tours of *Kundu Special* is supplemented with an analysis of the way practices that were introduced in a particular historical context get reproduced in the present.

### ***Familiarity and Strangeness in the Context of Tourism***

Tourism is a form of leisure mobility undertaken by a leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home to experience change (Smith (1977). John Urry (1990) considered the act of gaze as central to the understanding of tourism. The dialectic of novelty and insatiability, he opined, forms the foundation of tourism (Urry 1990). The interest in transcending the boundaries of one's natural setting and travelling to faraway sites for pleasure is a modern concept which originated in the West in the 19th century as a result of the change of parochial attitudes and the awareness of the existence of other societies (Cohen 1972). Historically, tourism as a cultural phenomenon grew as a result of the Romantic Movement which facilitated the development of a strong feeling of admiration for the natural world. The growth of recreational tourism in Europe was a direct corollary of the desacralization of nature and the discursive transformation of sublime natural landscapes into picturesque sources of visual entertainment (Urry 1990; Corbin 1992). Eric Cohen (1984) has pointed out that the sociological relevance of international tourism started being recognised only after the Second World War when leisure and tourism were made available for all social classes in the industrialised West. The factors determining this shift and enhancing the motivation to travel were increasing income level and standards of living, shortening of the work year along with legislation of

paid holidays and the revolutionary improvement in the means of transportation (Cohen 1984).

Marx ([1844]1959) analysed leisure within the context of the alienation of men from their conditions of existence under industrial capitalism. In a similar vein, Veblen ([1899]2005) defined the “leisure classes” as emerging out of capitalism that emphasized consumption as symbolizing prestige. Following Marx, Lefebvre (1991: 33) argued that the repetitive nature of capitalist work culture created the conditions that necessitated the existence of leisure as a temporary respite from work and the monotony of everyday life. Leisure is an alienated practice, and yet a constituent of modern social life (Lefebvre 1991). If work is the major component of everyday routine, leisure is an impermanent break from it (Rybczynski 1991: 51). Lefebvre (1991: 40) considered leisure to be an assemblage of “activities and passivities” that ‘contain within themselves their spontaneous critique of the everyday.’ It was suggested by MacCannel (1976), one of the early proponents of the sociology of tourism, that the study of tourism should be integrated into the sociology of leisure. The institutionalization of leisure was a result of the transformation of industrial society into its post-industrial counterpart when the concerns for personal freedom facilitated a turn away from the ideology of production to one of consumption (MacCannel 1976).

Tourism has been negatively defined by Dean MacCannel (1973) as passive recreation marked by the absence of the quest for knowing other cultures. Resisting the absolutist idea of a “tourist”, Eric Cohen (1979: 180) has proposed an inclusive theorization that accommodates differences in touristic experiences in terms of one’s relationship with their everyday life, the spiritual “centre” of one’s existence and the significance of tourism in the life of an individual. He has identified the degree of familiarity or strangeness sought by tourists as the differentiating factor in his phenomenological typology of touristic experiences. Tourism, when considered to be recreational, implies a temporary escape from the centre. The recreational tourist is characterized by their attachment to their centre (Cohen 1979: 181). Important for exploring the nature of experience facilitated by package tours is the concept of the “environmental bubble” that tourist establishments construct for creating a sanitized experience of novelty, without risks and uncertainties, for tourists. Eric Cohen’s (1972: 167) typology of tourist roles are based on the extent of a tourist’s exposure to the strangeness of host culture as opposed to the confinement within a “bubble” of home environment or “environmental bubble” made up of familiar cultural traits and habits. The tourists, according to Cohen (1972), experience the sites

and cultures of the host society without leaving the protective walls of their environmental bubble. In Cohen's continuum of probable combinations of novelty and familiarity, organized mass tourists opting for package tours with fixed itineraries are placed at one end where familiarity overpowers the unfamiliarity of distant cultural worlds. These tourists stay in the microenvironment of their everyday lives without having to establish an unmediated connection with the unfamiliar aspects of host societies. Organized tourism, for Cohen (1972: 169), is a mass industry that marketizes tour packages as standardized products in which all aspects are organized to minimize culture shock. In this paper, I aim to analyse how Kundu Special creates a bubble of familiarity for Bengali tourists primarily through its culinary culture.

### ***Travel and Tourism in Bengal: Historicizing Categories***

Situating "everyday life" in the context of organized tourism in India necessitates the historicization of the inclusion of "everyday" as a construct in its practice. The development of tourism in India did not follow from the desacralization of sites as it did in the West. It grew as a result of the commercialization of the age-old practice of pilgrimage. Scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm (1975), Tim Edensor (1998), and Prodosh Chowdhury (2012: 196) have documented how the railways acted as the catalyst for the development of commercial tourism across pilgrimage sites. The knowledge of the immense importance of pilgrimage in India prompted the British to establish rail routes between Calcutta and popular pilgrim centres in the north to generate profit and this resulted in the heavy flow of Bengali pilgrims to these sites from the latter half of 19th century (Chatterjee 1999; Chowdhury 2012). This period witnessed the proliferation of newspaper advertisements and guidebooks promoting the benefits of travelling by train. The railway companies started collaborating with corporate religious organisations to increase pilgrim traffic at sacred sites. Pandas or the pundits were the earliest known indigenous groups to introduce the practice of all-inclusive tour package tours at the pilgrim centres of the Gangetic plains of northern India (Chowdhury 2012: 202).

Colonialism and the Railways are also believed to have liberated people from their age-old custom of pilgrimage to holy places and instilled in them the quest to travel the entire nation (Chowdhury 2012). Kumkum Chatterjee (1999: 197) has documented the emergence of another discourse of travel since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, represented by the travel narratives produced

by the educated and newly modernised Bengali middle-class intelligentsia since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With their access to English education and the newly acquired historical and geographical consciousness of India, they attempted to invent a suitable history of India and take over the task of history writing from the colonisers (Chatterjee 1999: 200). If pilgrimage was the chief motive for travel in pre-modern times in India, then the nationalist period is characterised by travelling to discover India's nationhood as a historical-cultural entity. The nationalist mode of travel popularised by the travel narratives, however, was not representative of the wider section of the Indian population. The idea of leisure was absent in this discourse of travel as discovery. Despite the secularization of travel practices, the practice of leisurely travel did not gain popularity in India before the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Past and Present of the Package Tours of Kundu Special***

This work aims to document the range of practices inhabiting the anthropological sites of package tours that reconstruct an everyday experience for Bengali middle-class tourists. This is known to be the oldest and pioneering tour operator in West Bengal. On the website, it is claimed that this company was founded by the late Sripaticharan Kundu in 1933 (Kundu Special 2017). It is known for facilitating the entry of Bengali middle-class tourists to faraway touristic sites across India and abroad when the individualized idea of travel had not gained popularity among the wider population. The mode of travel forged by Kundu Special was located outside the discourse of travel that insisted on discovering the geography and history of the nation. Instead, they are distinguished for the practice of serving Bengali food during trips. As the core constituent of the tour packages, this used to be the primary talking point during my conversations with Mr. Soumitra Kundu, the present proprietor of the company and the employees of Kundu Special. The iconic status of Kundu Special in the tourism scenario and the primacy of "authentic Bengali food" in their package tours have also been written about in myriad travel narratives (Sanyal 1983; Majumder 2007; Basu 2011; Basu 2007; Chakraborty 2012). This discovery necessitated delving into the history of this practice of providing Bengali meals on their trips. In my attempt to reconstruct the historical trajectory of Kundu Special, I relied on oral narratives and accessed the old advertisements of tour packages in *Jugantor*, a leading Bengali daily, from 1937 to 1980. It is believed that the organization operating through three offices in the heart of Kolkata with 150 employees today started its journey in 1933 when Sripati Charan Kundu, Soumitra Kundu's grandfather,

organized a two-month long pilgrimage trip to the Chaar Dhama, the four most sacred religious sites in India. An entire train was booked for this tour consisting of approximately three hundred Bengali tourists, accompanied by managers, a washerman, four cooks, and a barber. Sripaticharan Kundu, a railway contractor in the early 1930s, used to cater food and drinks in trains at the stations between Ramrajatala and Puri. Difficulties faced on a pilgrimage he went on prompted him to start organizing pilgrimage trips with very large groups of pilgrims. The most distinct feature of these trips was the practice of cooking and serving Bengali-style meals inside train coaches. These compartments are often described as moving homes because of the environment of familiarity created within them. After independence, they started conducting trips with smaller groups in tourist coaches. Earlier, the tourist coaches used to be attached to trains running between pilgrim centres. Upon reaching a site, these coaches would be shunted into the side-tracks. Tourists would be taken to visit sites by a couple of employees and the rest would visit the local markets to buy ingredients for cooking. These train compartments functioned as mobile homes for groups of tourists on their month-long trips. From the advertisements of *Jugantor*, however, I gathered that back then the venture of Sripaticharan Kundu was advertised as *Kundubabur Teerthayatra Abhijan* (*Jugantor*, 20th September 1953). The name of the company was Kundu and Sons Pvt. Ltd. (*Jugantor*, January 11 and 18; February 8, 1959). The name of the company was changed from Kundu & sons Pvt. Ltd to Kundu Brothers & Co. in 1961 (*Jugantor*, April 2, 1961). The name Kundu Special first appeared in an advertisement on 3rd September 1961. Sripaticharan, according to Soumitra Kundu, fulfilled the dreams of myriad pilgrims to travel to the significant religious sites in India. I was made aware that meals used to be cooked inside the train compartments. Leisure was a late entrant to the precincts of tourism in India. This practice characterized their leisure trips as well. The old advertisements for tour packages that appeared in *Jugantor* every Sunday reveal the paradoxical co-existence of travel-as-recreation and travel-as-pilgrimage in the post-colonial tourism scenario, which, in turn, resist the characterization of modern tourism in terms of a transition from the traditional practice of pilgrimage to the modern practice of leisurely and exploratory travel.

The story of Kundu Special represents an important chapter in the social history of Bengal. Its use of railways, a modernising agent, to facilitate the traditional practice of pilgrimage symbolizes the ambivalence characterizing modernisation in India. The preservation of "traditional" culinary practices within the train compartments and at tourist sites to construct a quintessential

Bengali experience is the core of the tour packages of Kundu Special. Practices constituting Kundu Special's package tours facilitated the discursive production of cultural authenticity in tourism and established the dominant trend in organizing package tours in Bengal. During my visits to the offices of the companies that used to advertise their tours on *Jugantor* since independence, I discovered that most of them were founded either by family members who separated from the business or by the ex-managers of the company. The names that appeared regularly in *Jugantor* were Kundu Tirtha O Bhraman, Bharat-tirtha Darshan, Pathik Special, Janata Special, Ghosh Special, Bhattacharya Special, Bharat Tirtha Bhraman, Nandi Tirtha Special, Bannerjee Special, and Goutam Travels. Although the claim of Kundu Special as the pioneer of package tours is unsubstantiated, the advertisements of *Jugantor* stand as testimony to the predominance of Kundu Special in organizing trips around the year every year since the 1950s.

### ***The Centrality of Food in Package Tours***

The centrality of senses in the analysis of practice in everyday life is acknowledged by Sarah Pink (2012). Food and foodways evoke an emotive experience one associates with a home that one is away from temporarily or permanently. The multi-sensorial culinary experiences evoke a sense of familiarity, trigger memories of home, and reinforce one's embodied connection with home. Eating is a way of reliving and experiencing home in an unfamiliar environment. (Abdullah 2010: 157). It represents memories, histories and experiences, and thus it is a means through which identities are constructed and communities are imagined (Choo 2004: 206). In an attempt to analyse the practice of package, tours conducted by Kundu Special, this essay examines the way "everyday" experience is sought to be constructed through food. Our tastes and food choices are cultural instead of being purely psychological, or gustatory (Short 2002: 13). Food is an intimate act, but ties one to the collectivities of family and the wider society (Beardsworth 1997: 75). The relation between food habits and identity has been a subject of scholarly attention (Nippert 2008: 06; Scott 2002: 93). Pierre Bourdieu (1984) also considered taste preferences, including those of food, to be an expression of individual identity and status. The primacy of Bengali-style food in the package tours conducted by Kundu Special reinforces its importance in the construction of Bengali identity. The culture of serving food commonly eaten at home during trips is intended to evoke a sense of everyday reality for the middle-class Bengali clients of Kundu

Special. Consumption of food is a major way in which everyday life is produced and reproduced among Bengalis. Tour operators like Kundu Special capitalize on the symbolism associated with food.

The intent behind this anthropological inquiry is to document the range of culinary practices fostered by Kundu Special through which they construct a quintessentially Bengali everyday experience at the mobile sites of package tours. In an age of cosmopolitanization of tourism, the present proprietors of Kundu Special consider themselves to be the bearer of the legacy of unparalleled hospitality and the culture of serving “authentic” Bengali cuisine to its clients that was left behind by Sripaticharan Kundu. The popularity of Kundu Special is due to their appropriation and recreation of foodways Bengalis typically associate with home. Home-cooked meals and commensality have a ritualistic status and are considered to be the foundation of family life that strengthens the moral fabric of society (Short 2002). Food is but one of the components that make up our everyday life, but its centrality in everyday life is the reason why Kundu Special uses gustatory practices to evoke a sense of familiarity. The construction of an “environmental bubble,” therefore, happens primarily through the transportation of Bengali culinary culture to places outside Bengal. The stories from the field show that the tourists opting for the tour packages of Kundu Special inhabit the embodied idea of home experienced through familiar food, despite the spatial journey away from home.

I went on two trips with Kundu Special for my research. The first trip covered the prominent pilgrim centres of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The other trip I took was marketed solely as a leisure trip to Rajasthan and it included only one pilgrim centre, Pushkar. My initiation into the food culture of Kundu Special happened on the day of the beginning of our trip to Northern India. Upon reaching Howrah Railway Station two hours before the time of departure, as previously instructed by the managers of the tour, 40-odd tourists making up our group were handed lunch packets containing an elaborate Bengali spread. This could be read as their way of compensating for their inability to provide home-style meals in modern train compartments. Gone are the days when cooking was permitted inside train coaches. Reliance on pantry food during journeys has reduced their opportunity to foster dietary familiarity. Serving us Bengali-style dry snacks from Kolkata in the afternoons was their only opportunity to forge a familiar gustatory experience inside train compartments. Hotel accommodation was introduced only in the 1980s when the Railways imposed a ban on travelling with inflammable goods. Their mission of fostering familiarity during trips

remains unchanged despite the introduction of hotel accommodation. They follow a rigorous process of scouting hotels where cooking and serving meals would be allowed. Construction of an everyday environment through food is dependent on the process of selection of the hotels that would fit their criteria. In most hotels, they used to make arrangements for cooking in the attics. Only in Jodhpur and Jaipur, the hotel kitchens were allowed to be used. Artificially constructing a homely experience away from home required them to bring the paraphernalia necessary for cooking and serving the 'homely' meals. To this end, the employees of Kundu Special bear the unavoidable inconvenience caused by the mandate of carrying cookware, steel dinnerware and serveware, porcelain cups and saucers from Kolkata. Noteworthy is their efficiency in distributing work among themselves to ensure four square meals were served to the tourists every day. Cooking is usually done in the attic-like areas adjacent to the terraces of the hotels. They work with a wide network of suppliers of raw items like fish, meats and vegetables to bring Bengali food to our plate. Some employees are entrusted with the task of fetching groceries and raw items from the market, while the rest of them stay back to cook breakfast, lunch, afternoon snacks, and dinner. Due to the centrality of fish in Bengali cuisine, the symbolic significance of serving it in places where it is not commonly eaten was immense. The typical menu for lunch would always include staples such as rice, fish, lentils, and vegetables cooked in Bengali style. Dinner would usually consist of Bengali-style flatbreads served with different preparations of chicken or mutton followed by Bengali-style desserts. Afternoon snacks would range from familiar items like roasted flattened rice, puffed rice, fritters made with vegetables and Bengal gram flour to exogenous items like chicken cutlet, spring rolls, fish fingers, fish fry, spring rolls and noodles. The inclusion of these dishes is indicative of the change that our everyday food has undergone throughout intercultural exchanges owing to colonialism and globalization.<sup>3</sup> The selection of dishes typical of Bengali cuisine, hence, is an effort to create a sense of cultural authenticity at tourist sites where consumption of Bengali food becomes an act of performance of Bengali identity. In tour packages, spatial proximity to other cultures never results in the adoption of their food practices. Our experience with the culinary culture of a region was limited to tasting locally famous desserts served with our meals. Novelty, thus, was never allowed to overpower familiarity.

It wouldn't be an illegitimate claim to describe the trips of Kundu Special as food trips. There were times when serving meals at the stipulated time took precedence over sightseeing. The tour itineraries used to be planned with meal timings in mind. In Varanasi, Mathura, and Vrindavan our

sightseeing trips started after we were served lunch. In Rajasthan, we would be taken out for sightseeing right after our breakfast so that we could return to our hotels for lunch. Similarly, in Agra, the time reserved for sightseeing was shortened to serve lunch on time at the hotel. Even in times of unforeseen crises like train delays, no alternative arrangement for lunch would be made for accommodating sightseeing tours. However, the attractions left out of the sightseeing trips due to delays would be covered the next day.

Kundu Special never misses an opportunity to go the extra mile to foster familiarity amidst the unfamiliar. The practice of providing lunch at highway *dhabas* during the inter-district journeys by bus would serve as an excellent example. I experienced this during our journey from Agra to Mathura and from Mathura to Delhi by bus. Apart from the gas cylinders, everything else would be carried in the luggage compartments of the tourist buses. Noteworthy was the promptness of the staff in unpacking the cookware and utensils upon reaching the *dhabas* where they finished cooking the food that was partially cooked at the hotels by them before leaving. Only the rice would be freshly cooked at the *dhabas*. Even during these journeys steel tableware was not replaced by disposable ones. It goes on to reinstate the importance given to the promise of delivering an “authentic” everyday experience. They exhibited exemplary efficiency in systematically preparing and serving our meals at these eateries, washing dishes and arranging everything back before leaving. Having Bengali-style fish mustard curry at a North-Indian *dhaba* for me represents the speciality of Kundu Special. On our day trip to Dehradun and Musoorie as well, the staff started preparing our meals for lunch at 3 in the morning and it was served at an eatery near Kempty Falls.

While returning from Sahasra Dhara in Dehradun, we halted near a *dhaba* where noodles cooked at the hotel were heated up and served. The practice of serving snacks that are considered staples at Bengali homes instantiates their efforts to construct familiarity through food that is known for their everydayness. Worth mentioning are two instances that further prove the primacy of creating a familiar food experience on the trips with Kundu Special. Our sightseeing tour in Mathura ended at around 7:30 in the evening and while returning to our bus I noticed two staff coming out of a nearby park carrying a large kettle and a stove. The absence of any nearby *dhaba* did not deter them from serving the tea on time and hence they set up their stove in the nearby park to prepare our evening tea. Their commitment to provide service on time, against all odds, can be instantiated through another

experience. Our itinerary often used to be changed in response to unforeseen crises. In Varanasi, for example, BHU campus was the last attraction in our sightseeing trip that ended at 6 in the evening. As instructed by our tour leader, we assembled near the parking area outside BHU only to be greeted by a couple of staff ready to serve us piping hot fish balls on porcelain plates along with milk tea in porcelain cups. These were prepared by four staff at the hotel after they received a confirmation from the managers accompanying us. They calculated the time it would take us to reach the parking area so that they could reach there before us. It was known to them that some of them wouldn't return to the hotel and visit the ghat (riverbank) to watch the evening aarti (ritual offering to the holy river Ganges) instead. Hence, they wanted everyone to have their evening snack before that. This is the kind of service that represents the food culture of Kundu Special and this is exactly why it is popularly perceived as the flag-bearer of Bengali culinary heritage.

### ***Conclusion: Cuisine as a Marker of Bengali Middle-class Identity***

Everyday life seems largely preordained. Acknowledging the effects of specific socio-cultural forces on everyday life in modern times will denaturalize it (Inglis 2005: 51). George Simmel (1950) has argued that the everyday banalities reflect a larger socio-cultural order. Moreover, power relations and gender relations are produced and reproduced through consumption practices at home (DeVault 1991: 118). Similarly, Douglas (1975: 61) has argued that food embodies codes about 'hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries.' Everyday life, of which food is a component, is experienced differently by different people and the activities that make up their everyday life are incumbent upon their position in society (Inglis 2005: 3). Food choices also reflect the class-based values and differences in which we are socialized (Short 2002). The repetitive nature of everyday culinary experiences we are embedded in since childhood prevents us from seeing it in the larger socio-cultural context. Driven by our habits, we remain largely unaware of the statistical reality of our food-related practices (Berger 2018: 10).

The exclusionary nature of the touristic practice popularized by Kundu Special was revealed during my conversations with Soumitra Kundu. Their trips are designed exclusively for middle-class tourists. The middle class as a distinctive category occupied the central position in the discourse on consumption in the colonial era. Utsa Ray (2015: 158) has recognized the

importance of gastronomic practices in the construction of middle-class taste in Bengal. This essay takes this as the specific cultural force that facilitated the development of package tours characterized by the practice of serving Bengali food in the wake of colonialism. The hegemonic nature of practices associated with middle-class Bengalis came to be associated with the whole of Bengal. The industrial working class was outside the boundaries of the everyday life of the Bengali middle-class society (Ray 2015: 109). The centrality of practices surrounding food in the politics of taste of the colonial middle class is the reason why these practices occupied a central place in their criticisms of all other cuisines. The primacy of gustatory practices typical to Bengal in the tour packages since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus, has its roots in the middle-class politics of taste in Bengal. It can be argued that this practice stems from the broader idea of cultural authenticity that was supposedly under threat from the colonial culture. Their efforts to procure ingredients for cooking dishes that are not readily available outside Bengal prove that Kundu Special capitalises on the knowledge that food is a primary constituent of our identity as Bengalis and that it is also a marker of distinction from other communities.

As far as the practices that make up the package tours of Kundu Special are concerned, the preservation of cultural traits takes precedence over embracing novelty. Experiencing the other culture is mediated and is limited only to visual admiration for tourist attractions. Travelling in this discourse is not intended to generate a sense of cosmopolitanism. Touristic practices constituting package tours are rooted in habitual practices of everyday lives, of which food is the primary constituent. This reinforces the symbolic significance of the everyday in the lives of these tourists. The reconstruction of the everyday experience in touristic practices also in a way decentres and subverts it. In the scheme of tour packages, however, everyday life at home becomes something that can be reconstructed and replicated through the selective appropriation of its constituent practices. The idea of everyday and the contrived experience of everyday on package tours, for the Kundus, become marketable products. The ethos of Bengali cuisine is accentuated by Kundu Special to evoke a sense of unmediated transportation of Bangaliyana or Bengaliness in the tourists on their journey away from Bengal. The proverbial usage of the phrase “authentic Bengali cuisine” is of critical importance in this context.

Cuisine stands for the complex attitudes and tastes that are associated with cooking and eating within a particular social group (Mennell et. al. 1994: 194). The sociological definition of cuisine proposed by Sydney Mintz (1996)

transcends the dictionary definition of cuisine as a distinct style of preparing food. The existence of a cuisine is dependent not only on the regularity of its consumption, but the reproduction of popular opinions about it (Mintz 1996: 96). Particular food items acquire meaning only as constituents of a cuisine as a cultural construct. If culture is a system of the ideas, beliefs and values embodied in symbols and artefacts (Inglis 2005), then food is a powerful practice that embodies culture. People experience the world through the meanings imputed to things by their culture (Inglis 2005). Our food habits, thus, circumscribe our perceptions about the kinds of food that are not a part of our cuisine. Consumers of a cuisine, therefore, are also consuming meanings and symbols (Beardsworth 1997: 51). Complete indigeneity of cuisines is a myth. Scott (2002: 17) has invited us to acknowledge the indeterminacy of cuisines as they change, blend and interbreed continuously corresponding to shifts in values, beliefs and identity of a society and culture (2002: 17). Laura Shapiro (2004: 41) has also indicated the fluidity and artificiality of culinary traditions, foodways and cuisine. Similarly, Bengali cuisine cannot be termed as purely indigenous and 'authentic' despite its continuity from pre-modern times. Cuisines do not exist in pure form and are not immune from the influences of other cultures. Accounts of such instances can be found in Utsa Ray's (2015) historical account of the discursive construction of Bengali cuisine in colonial Bengal. The process of construction of Bengali cuisine involved the indigenization of emerging culinary practices and was enveloped in the hegemonic agenda of middle-class social reform in the wake of colonial modernity (Ray 2015). The cosmopolitanization of consumption without giving up the typicality of the label of *Bangaliyana* was the essence of this project. Hybridity is the essence of what is now known as the 'authentic' Bengali cuisine and by considering it a part of the cosmopolitanization of the colonial middle class, Ray (2015: 14) contested the assumption that entry of foreign foods into the kitchen of Bengal was a result of liberalization in the 1990s. The symbolic and gustatory significance of rice in Bengali cuisine, for example, is well known. Srirupa Prasad (2006) has described how rice became a symbol of resistance towards colonisation of taste and a means for the glorification of the tradition of indigenous food. The rice also came to be recognized as a symbol of emasculated Bengalis who were considered weaker than the masculine wheat-eating north Indians Ray (2015: 151). The radical change in the food habits of Bengalis brought about by the incorporation of wheat in Bengali cuisine to construct an ideal middle-class diet was a result of the emphasis that the colonial state laid on wheat cultivation which was deemed advantageous in times of food scarcity

(Ray 2015:40). Potato too was introduced in Bengal first by the Portuguese, and later by the British government (Ray 2015: 42). She has documented the history of indigenization of disparate elements. The idea of purity implied a critique of colonial culture which was believed to be potentially disruptive (Ray 2015: 161). The creation of modern Bengali cuisine, however, was based on selective appropriation of British food within the domain of traditional cuisine. Hybridity and authenticity were thus mutually constitutive. Although the middle class consciously rejected foreign domination in the realm of taste, they unconsciously succumbed to the “pleasures of modernity” and the resultant gastronomic hybridity (Ray 2015: 62). The discourse of taste and nutrition produced by the middle class, thus, represented the peculiarity of colonial modernity in Bengal.

The ambivalent relationship between tourism, an essentially modern phenomenon, and home as the centre of our everyday life can be analysed by drawing upon the dialectical co-existence of tradition and modernity in the social life of the colonial middle class. The tour packages of Kundu Special in the colonial period and post-independent period reinforced the rationale of preserving the sanctity of domesticity and the perceived “authenticity” of everyday food in settings that are forged by colonial modernity. Making use of trains and tourist coaches to conduct pilgrimage trips reinforces the ambivalent relationship between tradition and modernity that characterised Bengali middle-class subjectivity. Not only were the railways, an agent of modernity, being appropriated for facilitating the traditional practice of pilgrimage, but the practices constituting domesticity too were reproduced within the setting of tourist coaches. Embracing colonial institutions was permitted to the extent it did not threaten the purity of domesticity of which women were the conduits. The company is also credited for being an agent of the emancipation of women since many women and elderly widows have taken their tours (Chakraborty 2012). These women stepped into the outside world because of the safety promised by the protective environment created for them by Kundu Special. Tour packages, therefore, paradoxically reinforced the nationalist ideological framework which, according to Partha Chatterjee (1993), idealized the segregation of social spaces into the home as the spiritual centre of existence and the world as the material sphere based on gendered social roles. The influence of the colonizers was restricted to the material domain where the colonizers had superiority over the colonized. The inner domain of home epitomized the spiritual superiority of the East to the colonizers and therefore, needed to be preserved from foreign influence (Chatterjee 1993: 120-21). The travel practices associated with package tours did not erode the

boundaries between home and the world in the lives of these women. The creation of an everyday environment in the tourist coaches by Kundu Special was one of the many instances where the social lives of women as conduits of the spirituality of home were organized. The centrality of food in the formation of the everyday life and identity of Bengalis and the apathy of middle-class Bengalis towards culinary acculturation has to be understood about this ideological framework. The vehement critique of all other cultures is written into the production of this discourse around Bengali food. Touristic practices characterized by the efforts to reconstruct an everyday gustatory experience, therefore, can be argued to have originated from this discourse. Kundu Special's practices are designed to restrict the influence of the outside world on the everyday life of Bengalis, the supposedly purer inner domains of Bengali existence. This is sought to be achieved by surrounding the tourists in a bubble of familiarity, carefully constructed through the accentuation of gustatory elements typical to Bengali everyday experiences.

### *Notes*

1. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) conceptualized "field" as complex political and social locations with meanings imputed by power relations. See Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1997), 1-46.
2. 1955 was the year when the idea of leisure first appeared in the advertisement of a 15-day trip by Kundu Special that was designated as a Christmas Holiday Trip across India (*Jugantor*, November 27, December 4, December 11, 1955). A series of leisure trips to areas such as Nainital, Mussoorie, Shimla, Kulu, Manali, Rajasthan, Goa and Andaman started to be organized in the 1960s.
3. For a detailed discussion on the changes introduced to the food culture following the rise of the new middle class in the post-liberalisation period, see Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2006).

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