The Bengali Bonti

How big is the difference between sitting and standing? A cultural universe, when you examine posture in the context of food preparation. In the kitchens of the West, the cook stands at a table or counter and uses a knife. But mention a kitchen to a Bengali, or evoke a favorite dish, and more often than not an image will surface of a woman seated on the floor, cutting, chopping, or cooking. In the Indian subcontinent, especially in its eastern region of Bengal, this is the typical posture. For centuries, the Bengali cook and her assistant have remained firmly grounded on the kitchen floor, a tradition reflecting the paucity of furniture inside the house. A bed for both sleeping and sitting was usually the most important piece of furniture, but outside the bedroom people sat or rested on mats spread out on the floor, or on squares of carpet called asans. In the kitchen they often sat on small rectangular or square wooden platforms called pinris or jalchoukis, which raised them an inch or so above the floor.

From this closeness to the earth evolved the practice of sitting down both to prepare and to cook food. Enter the bonti, a protean cutting instrument on which generations of Bengali women have learned to peel, chop, dice, and shred. Despite the recent incursion of knives, peelers, graters, and other modern, Western-style kitchen utensils, the bonti is still alive and well in the rural and urban kitchens of Bengal.

A Bengali lexicon compiled by Jnanendramohan Das reveals that although the term bonti has been in the Bengali language for many years, it actually derives from the language of the ancient tribal inhabitants of the eastern regions of the subcontinent. Das traces the word bonti back to ancient Bengali narrative poems, such as Ghanaram Chakrabarti’s poem “Dharmamangal,” composed during the reign of Dharma Pala (775 to 810 A.D.), the second ruler of Bengal’s Pala Dynasty. In his definitive history of Bengal, Bangalir Itihash, the historian Nihar Ranjan Ray presents compelling evidence of the proto-Australoid peoples who settled Bengal long before the Aryans came to India and whose language, customs, and ritualistic beliefs still permeate the cultural life of Bengal. Ray also notes that Buddhist terracotta sculptures from the days of the Pala dynasty depict people using the bonti to cut and portion fish.

Basically, the bonti is nothing more than a curved blade rising out of a narrow, flat, wooden base. Sometimes the blade is mounted on a small iron tripod to increase its height. Its versatility comes from the many different types and sizes of both blade and base, as well as from the various uses to which it is put. The bonti’s uniqueness comes from the posture required to use it: one must either squat on one’s haunches or sit on the floor with one knee raised while the corresponding foot presses down on the base. As in other “floor-oriented” cultures, such as Japan, the people of Bengal were accustomed to squatting or sitting on the floor for indefinite periods of time. An 1832 volume by Mrs. S.C. Belnos, Twenty-four Plates Illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal, depicts a Bengali kitchen complete with utensils and a woman seated in front of a low stove, cooking. The author comments: “Their furniture consists of low beds, small stools, a chest or two, perhaps...
Interior of a native Hut.
an old-fashioned chair on which the master sits with his legs crossed under him, a Hookah of cocoanut [sic] shell on a brass stand...” Even today, in rural Bengal where many cottages are sparsely furnished, people—especially men—squat comfortably on porches or under large shade trees as they smoke and chat. Only after the European presence was well established later in the nineteenth century did the living room or dining room equipped with couches, chairs, and tables become part of the ordinary Bengali home.

The bonti also appears in Kalighat paintings, a body of indigenous works produced in the vicinity of the Kalighat Temple, built in 1829 on the banks of the river Hooghly (a branch of the Ganges) in Calcutta. As Calcutta grew under British rule, and its Bengali residents developed a semi-decadent “babu” culture, the Kalighat painters focused their attention on urban, rather than the canonic rural, life.

To use a knife of any size or shape, the cook must bear down with one hand on the item being cut, at the same time holding the food with the other hand to prevent it from slipping. But unlike the more familiar knife, the bonti uses horizontal, rather than vertical, force. The cook positions herself in front of the tool, one foot pressed firmly against the wooden base. She then uses both hands to slide the vegetable, fruit, fish, or meat against the curving blade that faces her. To those used to working with a knife, the delicacy with which the rigidly-positioned blade cuts seems miraculous: it peels the tiniest potato, trims the tendrils from string beans, splits the fleshy stems of plants, chops greens into minute particles for stir-frying, and even scales the largest fish.

In the days when most Bengalis lived in extended, multi-generational families, women had to make large meals every day. Usually the elderly grandmother or widowed aunt was responsible for cutting the vegetables, while the younger women took on the more arduous task of cooking over the hot stove. This ritual of cutting, called kutno kota, was almost as important as the daily rituals carried out for the household gods. Some of my fondest childhood memories involve sitting near my grandmother on the floor...
of the large central space in her Calcutta house as she peeled and sliced the vegetables for the day’s main afternoon meal. A grand array of shapes and colors surrounded her: purple and greenish-white eggplants; green-and-white striped patols (a favorite gourd-like vegetable); leafy greens of the noteshaak with their fleshy, rhubarb-like stems; yellow crescents of pumpkin; pale-skinned potatoes. During holidays and school vacations I always sat and watched my grandmother at the bonti…

She takes a long, purple eggplant and dexterously halves it against the blade, then starts cutting one of the halves into smaller pieces. I pick up the remaining half and inspect the white, seed-studded flesh. Something is moving. A worm, secretly embedded in the flesh, is now forced into the open. What kind of insect is it, I ask my grandmother, what kind of insect lives hidden inside the eggplant and what does it eat? She smiles at me, takes the eggplant from my hands and cuts off the infested portion. Then she embarks on a story from an ancient Hindu text about a king who lived inside a glass palace without any openings, to protect himself from the wrath of the snake king who had become his sworn enemy. But one day, when the king bit into a mango, a tiny worm came out from inside the flesh and within seconds was transformed into a huge serpent that stung him to death. I look at the still-crawling worm in the discarded bit of eggplant with new respect…

The woman at the bonti, however, is not always an elderly narrator. The young, nubile daughter of the family and the newly-married bride sitting at the bonti are also part of Bengali iconography. As she joyfully manipulates food against the versatile blade, the young woman epitomizes feminine abilities. When marriages were arranged in rural Bengal, the bridegroom’s family would come to look over the prospective bride, asking to see her kitchen skills and noting how well she could chop with the bonti. In the southern district of Barisal in Bangladesh, it was not enough for a prospective bride to chop just any vegetable. Her future in-laws often demanded that she sit at the bonti and cut a bunch of kolaishaak, the leafy greens of the legume khesari daal, whose fibrous leaves and stem have to be chopped very fine before stir-frying. The ideal bride had to be able to reduce the resistant bunch into minute particles of green. Yet handling the bonti well had another advantage in Barisal. The local women used their bontis to defend themselves and their homes against gangs of armed robbers who attacked prosperous homesteads when the men were away.

Bengali literature contains many references to another, less domestic aspect of the woman at the bonti. Recurring images portray her as young and demure, sitting with her head bent, concentrating on her hands as she moves the vegetable or fish toward the lethal blade. Often a married woman is pictured, her head modestly covered with the shoulder end of her sari, whose colorful border frames her face and hair. But the discreet posture and modest covering are a foil for a flirtatious element in extended family life, which offers virtually no privacy. Men—whether a husband or a romantic interest—can expect many eloquent, sidelong glances cast with surreptitious turns of the head as the woman goes about her domestic tasks with the bonti.

An extension of this mild titillation is found in Shobha, a fascinating album of photographs by Gurudas Chattopadhyay published around 1930. His photographs portray some of Calcutta’s best-known prostitutes and are obviously intended for erotic stimulation. But this is no collection of Playboy-like nudes. Instead, each woman has been photographed fully clothed and seated before a bonti! Here is a study in body language: the straight back, the bifurcated legs (one crossed, the other raised), the coy eyes pecking out from under the sari covering the head. To the Bengali viewer/vooyer of the time, the bonti, by enforcing this posture, created a uniquely erotic vision of the female figure, rich in implication and suggestiveness.

Despite its long history, it is probably inevitable that in the new global century the bonti will eventually vanish. The kitchens of Bengal are rapidly changing. Knives rather than bontis are becoming the cutting implements of choice. Tables and countertops are triumphing over the floor; chairs, tables, and couches are becoming as integral to the home as its doors and windows. Women no longer live in extended families, nor do their mornings consist of the leisurely ritual of kutno kota, when several women worked together, forming a sisterhood of the bonti. Now women are likely to work outside the home, which leaves little time for that kind of domestic fellowship. But for those of us who remember, the bonti will continue to be a potent symbol of multi-faceted femininity.