



# Pice Hotels of Kolkata: Plates of Tradition, Tables of Inclusion

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**Abstract**— This paper explores the socio-cultural and egalitarian significance of Pice Hotels in Kolkata, examining how they function as spaces of inclusion, tradition, and resistance in an increasingly stratified urban landscape. These humble, affordable eateries serve authentic Bengali cuisine to a diverse clientele including students, workers, office-goers, and migrants creating a communal dining experience that subtly challenges caste, class, and spatial hierarchies. The study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to understand how the culinary practices preserved in Pice Hotels from recipes to rituals represent forms of embodied and institutional cultural capital accessible to marginalized groups. These spaces allow for the preservation and performance of Bengali identity outside elite cultural circuits. Further, employing Henri Lefebvre's concept of lived space or "third space," the paper interprets Pice Hotels as more than physical eateries they are lived, social spaces where everyday interactions foster solidarity and shared cultural meaning. Here, boundaries between social groups blur, enabling a sense of dignity and belonging among patrons regardless of their socio-economic status. Using qualitative approach including participant observation and interviews, the research shows how Pice Hotels act as social levellers by democratizing access to food, space, and identity. Amidst threats of commercialization and gentrification, these spaces emerge as quiet resistors sustaining inclusion through culture and cuisine.



**Keywords**— Bengali cuisine, Cultural capital, Inclusion, Pice Hotels, Third space

## I. INTRODUCTION

Food is more than sustenance; it is culture, memory, identity, and power. In the bustling urbanscape of Kolkata, one of the most unique yet often overlooked sociological sites of food culture is the *Pice Hotel* a humble, traditional eatery where meals are served on banana leaves and priced affordably for the everyday citizen. Originating during colonial times to serve students, workers, and low-income migrants, Pice Hotels have retained their rustic simplicity while adapting to the changing socio-economic fabric of Bengal. This paper situates Pice Hotels within the broader sociology of food, class, and identity. It explores how these spaces not only preserve culinary heritage but also act as informal yet impactful levellers of class and caste differences. Here, people from various backgrounds students, laborers, artists, office-goers, even the occasional tourist come

together, often seated on the same wooden benches, sharing the same humble rice-and-fish platter. In this shared experience, the rigid social hierarchies that define much of urban India momentarily soften. Amidst a rapidly gentrifying culinary culture dominated by cafés, food chains, and influencer-driven gastronomy, Pice Hotels stand as spaces of authenticity, affordability, and inclusion. This research aims to unravel how these establishments function as both cultural archives and social bridges feeding not only the body but also fostering a sense of community and equality. Through participant observation, interviews, and qualitative approach, this paper offers a sociological reflection on the ways in which a simple Bengali meal becomes a powerful statement of belonging and resistance in the everyday life of Kolkata.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences and social meanings embedded within the culture of Pice Hotels in Kolkata. Participant Observation was conducted through extensive field visits that were conducted across various Pice Hotels in Kolkata to observe real-time interactions, customer diversity, spatial arrangements, and daily operational practices. This method allowed for an immersive understanding of how inclusion and tradition are enacted in everyday settings. In-depth interviews through semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, including hotel owners, staff members, and patrons. These conversations provided valuable insights into the social significance, cultural narratives, and economic constraints associated with the functioning of Pice Hotels. Document Analysis through archival records, newspaper articles, and historical documents were examined to trace the origin, evolution, and cultural relevance of Pice Hotels in the broader socio-historical context of Kolkata. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of a diverse range of establishments across different neighborhoods, clientele profiles, and socio-economic zones. All collected data was thematically analyzed to identify patterns related to social inclusion, cultural preservation, urban resistance, and identity formation.

## III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The sociology of food has increasingly explored how everyday eating spaces reflect broader dynamics of culture, class, and identity. Scholars like Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) have emphasized how food practices function as a form of cultural capital, reinforcing or challenging class distinctions through taste, access, and aesthetic values. Within the Indian context, food spaces often intersect with caste, class, and gender, making them critical arenas for both exclusion and inclusion (Appadurai, 1988).

Research on urban informality and foodscapes in Indian cities highlights how small-scale eateries not only serve economic functions but also act as sites of memory, resistance, and cultural continuity (Anjaria, 2016). In Kolkata, while the literature richly documents elite Bengali cuisine and colonial food histories, studies on Pice Hotels humble, traditional eateries serving affordable Bengali meals remain limited.

Theoretical contributions by Henri Lefebvre (1991) on the production of space provide a lens to analyze how such spaces operate as "lived" or third spaces, where social boundaries blur and new forms of community emerge. This paper builds on these frameworks to fill a critical gap in existing literature by focusing on Pice Hotels as

everyday egalitarian spaces that resist urban gentrification while sustaining culinary and cultural heritage.

Food is not merely a biological necessity but a powerful sociocultural symbol — a means through which class, caste, identity, and power are negotiated. The sociology of food, particularly through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, highlights how taste is socially conditioned and how food becomes a marker of distinction. In India, this dynamic takes on unique dimensions, as caste taboos, ritual purity, and access to food spaces influence who eats what, where, and with whom.

While scholars like Arjun Appadurai have examined food as a site of nation-building and identity in South Asia, and Amita Baviskar and Nita Kumar have studied everyday urban food practices, there is limited sociological focus on traditional low-cost eateries like Pice Hotels, which serve the working class, students, and marginalized communities. These spaces exist largely outside the domain of formal culinary history, yet they play a vital role in preserving authentic Bengali cuisine and fostering social inclusion.

To understand them spatially, Henri Lefebvre's theory of "lived space" or representational space offers a lens through which Pice Hotels can be seen as third spaces neither home nor fully commercial but sites where individuals from various strata sit together, sharing meals and moments of cultural intimacy.

Pice Hotels are characterized by their no-frills atmosphere, banana leaf serving, daily handwritten menus, and food charged per item.

- **Swadhin Bharat Hindu Hotel (College Street):** One of the oldest Pice Hotels, known for its *ilish macher jhol* (hilsa curry), *sorshe bata begun* (eggplant in mustard paste), and *bhuna chicken*. It attracts a mix of students, professors, and workers.
- **Jagatmata Hindu Hotel (Kalighat):** Famous for *shukto*, *lau chingri* (bottle gourd with shrimp), and *bhetki paturi* (fish wrapped in banana leaf and steamed). It has a strong religious and local clientele due to its proximity to Kalighat Temple.
- **Hotel Tarun Niketan:** A nearly 110-year-old institution tucked in a quiet lane off Rashbehari Avenue, serves a rotating spread of authentic Bengali dishes like duck-egg curry, kochu-bhaja, seasonal fish curries steeped in nostalgia and home-style tradition. Despite its age and humble setup, it remains a beloved egalitarian space.

where long-time patrons and new visitors alike gather over plates of heritage cuisine priced by the season, not by the status of the diner.

These establishments offer meals that go beyond nutrition. They evoke memory, ritual, and belonging. For many, dining in a Pice Hotel is not just affordable but also a way to stay connected with Bengali identity, especially in an urban space increasingly dominated by global fast food and elite restaurants.

Although underrepresented in academic literature, Pice Hotels are often discussed in food journalism and oral histories. **Swadhin Bharat Hindu Hotel** near College Street is a prime example of this egalitarian spirit. Its manager was quoted saying:

*“From students with ₹20 to professors with ₹200, everyone eats here. We serve the same food to all this is our way of showing equality.”* (Interview, 2025)

At **Jagatmata Hindu Hotel**, located near Kalighat, one server noted:

*“Here, rice is unlimited, but respect is also unlimited. No one leaves hungry, not even the poor.”* (Interview, 2025)

Pice Hotels like **Gopal Hindu Hotel** (near Sealdah) thrive on seasonal and plant-based items such as *lau chingri*, *mochar ghonto*, and *shutki machh*. In an interview, the owner reflected:

*“We don’t have a fixed menu. We cook what the season gives. It’s the kind of food our mothers made at home.”* (Interview, 2025)

Despite being traditional, these eateries evolve subtly. Some younger owners now post daily menus online, blending old-world charm with digital outreach, while still preserving their affordability and identity.

In contemporary urban contexts, food has also become a symbol of exclusion through upscale cafes and malls. However, as Anjaria (2016) observes, “informal urban foodscapes” remain critical to the everyday survival and dignity of marginalized groups. Pice Hotels, though modest in infrastructure, serve as quiet resistors to culinary gentrification, offering comfort, nostalgia, and identity often on a banana leaf.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings of the paper reveal the following results:

##### Social Composition and Inclusivity:

The field study revealed that Pice Hotels attract a diverse clientele cutting across class, caste, gender, and age.

Students, working-class laborers, middle-class office workers, and elderly locals often shared tables, indicating a unique social leveling rarely seen in other urban spaces. This supports the idea that Pice Hotels function as informal social arenas promoting inclusivity and shared identity.

##### Preservation of Culinary Tradition as Cultural Capital:

The persistence of traditional Bengali meals served on banana leaves emerged as a critical marker of cultural identity. Patrons expressed emotional attachment to the authentic flavors and the nostalgic experience, reflecting Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital where such culinary practices embody and transmit social identity.

##### Resistance to Gentrification and Commercialization:

In the face of Kolkata’s evolving food scene dominated by upscale cafes and chains, Pice Hotels resist culinary commodification by maintaining affordability and simplicity. This subtle resistance underscores the role of food culture as a site of contestation where marginalized groups assert their right to accessible cultural spaces.

##### Interaction and Habitus:

Daily interactions between customers and owners, the informal ordering process, and communal seating arrangements illustrate how habitus shapes social practice in these spaces. Patrons felt comfortable, indicating the creation of a ‘third space’ that blends familiarity with social equality.

##### Limitations and Challenges:

Despite their inclusive nature, some limitations exist, including gendered norms restricting women’s presence and occasional caste-based prejudices, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of social hierarchies even within seemingly egalitarian spaces.

In light of the socio-cultural significance and the vulnerable status of Pice Hotels in Kolkata, it is imperative for the Government of West Bengal to adopt a tailored legal and policy framework that not only preserves these culinary heritage spaces but also ensures their sustainable and inclusive functioning. The following recommendations aim to balance cultural preservation with regulatory facilitation, enabling Pice Hotels to thrive as accessible, dignified, and socially inclusive food spaces.

**Formal Recognition and Licensing Simplification:** Introduce a special category of simplified licensing and registration for Pice Hotels under the West Bengal Shops and Establishments Act, allowing easier formalization without heavy bureaucratic hurdles, to help small vendors operate legally and confidently.

### Heritage Food Outlet Protection Act:

Enact a state-level law to protect traditional food outlets like Pice Hotels as cultural heritage sites. This law can prevent forced evictions, arbitrary rent hikes, and unplanned demolitions threatening these establishments.

### Rent Control and Subsidies:

Implement rent control policies specifically for small food vendors and eateries in historic areas to safeguard Pice Hotels from displacement due to rising property costs, coupled with government subsidies or tax rebates.

### Health and Safety Regulation Adaptation:

Develop tailored health and safety regulations that acknowledge the traditional methods and scale of Pice Hotels, avoiding one-size-fits-all rules that could threaten their viability, while ensuring public hygiene standards.

### Gender Inclusivity Legal Measures:

Mandate safe workplace standards and gender inclusivity policies in food service spaces, backed by legal provisions for monitoring and penalizing harassment, thereby encouraging a safer environment for women patrons and workers.

### Social Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Enforcement:

Strengthen enforcement of anti-discrimination laws within public eateries, including caste- and class-based discrimination, through regular inspections and grievance redressal mechanisms.

### Promotion of Local Culinary Tourism:

Pass regulations incentivizing Pice Hotels' participation in local tourism initiatives, such as certification as 'Authentic Bengali Culinary Spaces,' enhancing their visibility and economic sustainability.

## V. CONCLUSION

Pice Hotels of Kolkata: Plates of Tradition and Tables of Inclusion reveals how these humble eateries are far more than affordable food outlets they are living cultural institutions, embodying the everyday ethos of Bengali identity and communal belonging. Through their preservation of traditional culinary practices and their informal yet deeply inclusive social structure, Pice Hotels act as social levellers, dissolving at least momentarily the entrenched boundaries of class, caste, and status in urban India. Their communal seating, accessible pricing, and intergenerational patronage foster a unique democratic space rarely found in other cityscapes.

Yet, these vibrant spaces stand at a critical juncture. Gentrification, rising real estate pressures, shifting consumption patterns, and regulatory indifference pose

severe threats to their continuity. Left unprotected, these establishments risk being displaced by homogenized commercial ventures, erasing a crucial layer of Kolkata's socio-cultural fabric.

This study therefore calls for immediate policy recognition and action. It urges the Government of West Bengal to formalize the cultural and social value of Pice Hotels through supportive legal frameworks, targeted subsidies, inclusive workplace regulations, and heritage preservation initiatives. Doing so is not just about saving eateries it is about preserving spaces of memory, identity, and everyday solidarity. Protecting Pice Hotels means safeguarding a tradition where food becomes a medium of inclusion, and Kolkata's history and humanity are served daily on banana leaves, with rice, salt, and respect.

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