

Food Matters: A Journey Through The Extraordinary Power of Food



English

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ABSTRACT

Food is related to all fields of life. This paper tries to view food from a different perspective and to make some interesting analysis. Food has achieved new dimensions in our present day life. Discussions on food have broken the four walls of kitchen and are connected to each and every aspect of society. This paper analyses the significance of food in culture, religion, gender, society and literature. It explains how food has achieved a significant position in society through its peculiar journey.

Culture is a terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific community. It may be contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root and helped to shape popular life. According to Stuart Hall, cultural studies is a discursive formation, a cluster of ideas, images, practices which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct, associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional life in society. Cultural studies examine the relations of culture and power which include gender, race, class, food habits, dress, colonisation etc. Food is a significant and basic element of every culture; it modifies culture and remains modified due to several aspects of society. A discussion on food is interdisciplinary. It is connected to cultural studies, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, literature and the like. Food is no more than a livelihood and a means of survival. It is the most visible omnipresence in every culture. It is related to hedonism, nutritionism and spirituality. Food defines culture and culture defines food. It provides different purposes in different cultures in different manner. In his famous work, *Food is Culture*, Massimo Montanari has stated that,

We only too readily associate the idea of food with the idea of nature. The linkage is, however, ambiguous and fundamentally inaccurate. The dominant values of the food system in human experience are, to be precise, are not defined in terms of 'naturalness', but result from and represent cultural processes depended upon the taming, transformation and reinterpretation of nature (Montanari,11)

According to Montanari food is culture when it is produced, when it is prepared and when it is eaten. Culture began when the raw got cooked. Raw Food and cooked food are different from each other. Food is the essential part of each and every substance in the universe including plants, animals, birds and human beings. Cooked food is related to cultural hierarchies. Claude Levi Strauss, speaking about nature and culture, divides food into raw, cooked and rotten. Cooking is a journey from nature to culture: from raw to cooked. Cooking is a cultural activity and cook is a cultural agent. In Roland Barth's view, food is structured like language. He considers food as sign; 'apple' as a food brings to our mind not only the picture of apple, but several images connected to it like apple garden, Apple juice, apple pie, apple in the bible etc. Thus the sign leads to several signifiers and signifieds. It is an ongoing process. Fast food centres like McDonalds, not only acts as a food sign but as a place of comfort, cleanliness, friendliness, hospitality which attract people. This is an example of changing food culture: a change from family food to fast food and from healthy life to unhealthy life.

Food and Religion

Food is a symbol of prosperity and nourishment. It provides spiritual significance when it is related to religion.

In Hindu religion, rice provides cultural and spiritual purpose. Harvest festivals, many rites and rituals, wedding ceremonies and even death ceremonies are associated with rice; annaprasam, vidyarambham, pongal etc. are examples. Hinduism considers human body as temple. According to Veerashevasidhantha of Karnataka, there are eight means to achieve spirituality named 'ashtavarna'. One of the important Varna among these is 'prasada'. Whatever we take in the name of God is prasada. In a wider sense, whatever we get from nature for survival is prasada. So nature, the food giver, helps us for spiritual development through prasada. In Hindu mythology food is God, 'annabrahma'. In Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says about three types of food: sathwik, rajasik and thamasik. Sathwik is complete vegetarian food and those who eat it will be calm, gentle and pious; rajasik includes hot spicy food with added ingredients which creates anger and other unwanted feelings and emotions in people; thamasik covers nonvegetarian items like dead, diseased meat, waste and deteriorated food which changes people into demons with evil behaviours.

In Christian religion and in western nations also, bread takes place of rice. Bread represents the body of Christ which reminds us of the last supper of Christ. In west, bread is shared by bride and groom as a part of wedding ceremony. There are many superstitions related to bread. Greek soldiers used to take a piece of bread from home to battlefield to ensure victory. It was customary for the western sailors to bring a bun on their journey to prevent shipwreck. English midwives would place a loaf of bread at the foot of a new mother's bed to prevent the woman and her child from evil spirits. In every religion, there are likes and dislikes for food. In India, Brahmins, Jains and many such castes are adamant vegetarians. Religious groups like Jews and Muslims dislike pork, but have no problem in eating beef. Giving food to poor named 'sakkath' is a holy activity for Muslims. Their strict fasting before Eid even avoiding water gives them opportunities to experience hunger and put themselves in the place of poor people. This is an aspect of humanity and creates bonding between even inter-religious groups.

Food, class and Resistance

Montanari in his work *Food is Culture* has significantly named a chapter *Tell Me How Much You Eat and I'll Tell You Who You Are* this means that there is crucial relationship between food, class and culture and they represent a society's as well as an individual's food consumption pattern and thereby one's identity. Food is used as a means of resistance from religious times itself. In the Gospel of John chapter no. 4, water becomes an agent of cultural exchange. Christ asks water from a Samaritan woman when she was drawing water from a well. Christ begins a social subversion with the help of water. In the well known poet of Kerala, Kumaranasan's famous poem *Chandalabikshuki*, the protagonist requests water from a woman who belongs

to the 'deteriorated' caste named 'chandala'. This creates a commotion in society and it becomes a call for revolution. There are many facts related with food which intensifies social discrimination.

In India, food was central to the concept of untouchability. The upper caste or the brahmanical society decided who would eat what and later it became a mark of pure and impure status. The brahmanistic culture is a parasitic culture living on Dalit's labour, while the dalits is one of the hard-working people whose lives are based on honesty, simplicity, frankness, songs, beats, drums, dance and drama, food feasting, festivals, thanksgiving, prayers and sacrifices. Their culture is agriculture. Poverty is an undefeatable challenge for dalits. They had to eat leftover food from the higher caste. They were not allowed to draw water from public well and had to wait for higher caste people to draw water for them. 'The stomach makes you clean shit; it even makes you eat shit' (Limbale, 23). For the filling of stomachs men become thieves and women become whores. Many dalit writers like Limbale has shared their own experiences in their writings. Dalit autobiographies are of immense popularity because of their raw experiences. Dalit literature points finger at a class who are blissfully unaware of such undercurrents and are always at the benefits of higher caste.

Absence of certain cultures on cook books can throw immense light on the politics of food. A project named, 'Isn't this plate Indian? Dalit Histories and Memories of Food' carried out by Krantihijyothi Savitribhai Phule Women's Studies Centre in Pune University emphasises that Dalit writings on food utters a slice of the pain of hunger and desperation of food to the ones who have never truly experienced hunger. It also shares the joys and aspirations associated with food. The cuisine culture and recipes proclaimed as 'Indian' are upper caste/class recipes. Dalit taste is absent in Bengali and Maratha cook books. Jootan (rotten food) or poisoned bread is a metaphor of dalit suffering. This is related to the problems of beef eating and politics. Beef eating is an intrinsic part of dalit food and has been a major source of protein for the community for ages. There was no choice of food for them and the social system forced the community to eat beef. In Maharashtra, 'chunchuni' is dried salted beef stored for an entire year and consumed when families have no money to buy vegetables and nothing else is available. 'Rakti' is made of coagulated chunks of cattle blood and no part of the animal was wasted. They have their own culinary tradition which never figured out in any cook books.

The upper castes prescribe food not only for them but for the lower castes also. In Manu's ritual scriptures, jootan is prescribed as the staple food of the untouchables. This meat is not only related to their survival but also matrimonial relations within the untouchable community. In Mahar caste parents would consider it be a fortune and a privilege to marry their daughter into a Mahar family with a greater share of such meat. It is clear that their cultural identity is permanently attached to this food. Political ideology is trying to alter this identity. This is a going back to hegemonic upper caste culture. The sweet named, 'sreekhand' is an upper caste food item and is an example to show how different castes are associated with different food. With this food, the upper caste tries to maintain dominance and continues humiliating those who do not get chance to taste it. The power relationship, mediated through the restriction of food, raises the fundamental question related to human dignity. The denial of food is justifiable when same type of food availability is ensured for all sections of society irrespective of class or caste. But this is not possible in the fi-

nancial situation of India. The dalits are exempted from the fast food habits of high class people. Food equality remains as a dream in India. There are many stories of exploitation based on food in the world. The history of African 'soul food' gives a clear picture of the plight of that community. Soul food is slave food. African slaves were given left over and undesirable cuts of meat from their masters. Soul food contains the waste or deteriorated parts of animals which they cook together, convert into a new item and that was the source of their nutrition

Recent political happenings in India on the basis of food have to be considered as a conscious attempt to create enmity among different sections of society. According to Kancha Ilaiah, the leading dalit political scientist, ban on beef in India is a cultural imposition on indigenous groups like dalits or tribals. This is an attempt to destroy their food culture, protein availability and food choice. Culture gets divided in the name of food. Political parties and religious associations with vested interests divide culture into those who eat beef and those who do not. They claim that non eating beef is Hindu culture, therefore Indian and eating beef is alien culture, Muslim and Christian. There are many vegetables like onion, which are considered as outcaste by upper caste community. When food becomes a metaphor of purity and impurity, situations become different. It attacks Indian culture of unity in diversity. In the history of India, refusal of food has been a symbol of protest since many years. Gandhiji's 'Nirahara Sathyagraha' has got world wide acceptance, which brought freedom to our nation and is practised by several people as a way of protest.

Food and Gender

Food is a vehicle of gender difference. From age old times, cooking is considered as an exclusive activity by women. Kitchen becomes their heaven/ hell. They spend their lives within the four walls of kitchen which is a 'no entry' world for men. A man who helps his wife in the kitchen is marked as inefficient by the society. Till recently, cooking was gender biased. But now a change can be seen with arrival of western educated chefs. Men are attracted towards cooking and the change is visible in television cookery shows. But the situation remains unchanged at home. These expert male cooks are not expected to do their job within their family where they become only 'men'. Gender becomes a problem when it comes to nutrition. Marginalization of women is detrimental when it comes to food access and has a direct impact on under nutrition rates. Not only poverty, but the attitude of society also becomes a reason for malnutrition among women. In many developing nations like India, parents spend more on male children than on female children whether in terms of monetary benefits, health or time allocated to each child. The so called 'angelic' house wives give their portion of food to the male members of the family.

Food is a powerful symbol of power and hunger is a symbol of powerlessness. Hunger means, one lacks the ability to satisfy one's basic needs. Men are the powerful group in society and women, the powerless suffer hunger than men. Lewins considers women as 'gate keepers' of food into the home which shows the dominance of women over food distribution. Women prepare and control food and they are agents of food offerings. Women can protest abandoning cooking which they do not prefer due to some etiquette. Men can exert power on women by refusing to provide food.

Food as Symbol

In many cultures, exchange of food is the most profound

way of making social connection. Food is an important agent of reciprocal exchanges. Different types of feasts like birthday parties or functions related with birth, marriage, anniversaries or rituals express commensality and communality. People eat together in a sociable tension free atmosphere. Food is common, at the same time personal. People belonging to different culture, nation, region, or community have varied experiences related to food. Food substances can be different both in quantity and quality and also because of the intervention of human beings (raw, cooked, rotted, fried, boiled etc.). It is impossible to read a work in literature (novels, dramas, shorts stories, or autobiographies) without powerful references food materials. Such references can be read along with the protagonists' mental situations; it may be happiness, sorrow, confusion, tension, love and the like.

In Indian English literatures, food is culture itself and it represents 'Indianans' itself, the post colonial theme of the novel. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* food acts as a metaphor. In the story named, *A Temporary Matter*, both happiness and unhappiness of marital life is expressed through the wife's (Shobha) interest and disinterest in cooking. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* food symbolizes class and caste differences. Roy's grandmother's homely enterprise, 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves' symbolising transgressing relations in human society, the lower castes' (Paraya, Pulaya) need for rice and other staple foods and how these people are identified as bad(smelled) according to the food they eat and 'boiled water for Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol' the foreigners and 'tap water for everybody else'(Roy, 46) are some instances from the novel. The foodscape in Anita Desai's *Fasting , Feasting* shows both the power and powerlessness of women under patriarchal society in the era of late capitalism. Manjula padmanbhan's famous play *Harvest* deals with the problems of food. In this futuristic drama food turns into other shapes (like tablets) to suit the advanced capitalist society. The well known Kerala writer, Benyamin's *Aadujeevitham* (translated as *Goat Days*) gives the memorable picture of Najeeb who falls into some unpredictable situations in Saudi Arabia where he realises the meaning and meaninglessness of life. The only food he eats there is 'kuboos', a type of dry Arabic bread, symbolises the dryness inside and outside his mind. The plight for a drop of water by Najeeb and his friends is a heart rending experience for the reader and it shows the helplessness of human beings who consider themselves as the roof and crown of everything in the world. In Anita Nair's latest work, *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* each letter symbolises each food item, for example, the letter, 'A' for *Arisi pappadam*, 'B' for *Badam*, 'C' for *Cheppankizhangu* and so on.

Food as a marker of cultural identity, tells us who we are, how we grew up, about our memories and the history we share. Cookery is a stage performance which includes performers (cooks) and audience (family members, neighbours or guests) who eats, loves it, appreciates or criticizes. The culinary historian and author Jessica Harris says that food traditions hold symbols and serves as a historical road map. Food is not a mere act of consumption but a model for a way society thinks of itself. It illuminates the behaviour of society. The extraordinary power of food brings people together, guides their attitudes and creates events.

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