

FOOD DIVISIONS AND COMPLEXITIES: RE-EXAMINING FOOD HABITS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Food and food culture in India has always been at the crossroad of identity formation. The present paper attempts to look at the many meanings and connotations that food and food culture carry when it comes to understanding it through the lenses of caste, class, gender and region. The Covid-19 pandemic gave prominence to hierarchies and divisions of food and food practices that always formed an inevitable part of our social system. Such division of food habits, that is food divided on the basis of caste, class, gender, region always existed. With the pandemic, the division only further multiplied. Certain questions immediately come in here. Is food no longer just a symbol of social and political control but that of life control? This is where the equation of food politics changes. Is food only responsible for shaping individual identity then or does it also affect the community identity? Are the visual images of food and their names, a narrative in itself, thereby trying to establish its hegemony over others? Do food and food habits give a sneak-peak into the meta and micro narratives of a particular culture? How can food hierarchy be further understood through the lens of region, gender, caste and class in the current scenario? The purpose of this research paper is twofold. It is in the first part of the paper that food and its complexities in India would be discussed from the Covid-19 Pandemic until now. In the second part of the paper, food divisions would be taken up in detail. It is to grapple with concerns such as these that the paper would try to re-examine food hierarchies in the present times.

Keywords: Food, Divisions, Caste, Class, Gender, Region.

1. INTRODUCTION

“...We thus primarily buy commodities (food) neither on account of their utility nor as a status symbols: we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to make our life pleasurable...”

(Slavoj Zizek, 2014)

The Covid-19 pandemic convinced us regarding certain postulates. During the entire period of lockdown, the ones restricting them to their household were those who had sufficient access to food and other essential supplies. Those who were out on the streets were the load bearers-- those who earned daily to make a living. Even when the lockdown was uplifted in India, very few had the means to hoard and control the supply of food chain. In the name of panic buying, it was quite evident that a certain section of the society had complete control over this means of survival. The cruel scenario of disparity in availability of food became starkly evident during these testing times. According to High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) committee reports, the rigidity in supply chain is pointed as:

Food environments have been deeply altered by the pandemic. Lockdown measures and supply chain disruptions outlined above have changed the context and thus the way people engage and interact with the food system to acquire, prepare and consume food. The closure of restaurants and food stalls meant people who relied on foods prepared outside the home for their meals suddenly found themselves preparing food at home. (HLPE, 2020, p.7)

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's famous quote "Tell me what you kind of food you eat and I will tell you what kind of man you are" (25) suits my argument in establishing our culinary habits as our identity markers. This translated quote from his book *The Physiology of Taste* refers to the identity formation through our food habits. During the first phase of the pandemic, equitable distribution of food was a day dream. Food was distributed but a full and sumptuous meal did not necessarily reach people. Food has always been a means of social control but with the pandemic, it became matter of life control. A lot of people and organizations came forward to offer a helping hand to the needy. This takes us to the next step involved in food distribution.

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The hoarding of food and the social and economic control over food also made a certain section of society supply food to the rest. Some did out of generosity, some out of kindness but some also exploited the situation. When the hoarder becomes the new provider, it changes the narrative in favor of the former. Such exploitation is now seen as a philanthropic act. Hence, control of food is now an ultimate function of it and unfortunately controlled by a few.

2. CLASSIFYING FOOD HABITS

It is also worth noticing that during this period of crisis, when the affluent were having immunity booster food, the working class was only worried about their next meal. They never looked as food compartmentalized into Proteins and Carbohydrates. Consuming food in a set ratio of its nutritional value was never their primary concern. This ongoing trend seems irrevocable. Classifying food in these categories creates another inherent hierarchy in the domain of food itself and this classification is here to stay, irrespective of the pandemic. This also changes the grounds on which we choose our food. Food choices now seem to be manufactured by these trends which in turn are shaped by the socio-politico-economic factors of the time. Pierre Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction* (1984), talks about how our food tastes are far from individual but have their basis in the social relationships between different groups, and in particular, social classes. Health related apps, social media, influencers all play a part in manufacturing the consent of the people. In a world where non-vegetarians are looked down upon by vegetarians who in turn are looked down upon by vegans, it is important to let each preference survive irrespective of getting influenced or judged by one another.

3. FOOD AND GENDER

To talk about food division is not a simple task. Food hierarchy exists in several forms along the axes of gender, region, class and caste. To begin with the first category, let us understand food hierarchy through the lens of gender discrimination. Women, like always, have been at the receiving end of any crisis. If lockdown was a time of food insecurity and food shortage, it was also a time of bombarding of new Youtube channels based on culinary skills, mostly posted by women. Several narratives around us revolve around the fact where women are constantly glorified as taste givers and nurturers, the ultimate provider of household meal. To add to that, TV advertisements too reiterate the same fact that cooking is a gendered activity. From Everest Masale to MTR Idli makers, a lot of these commercials glorify women as the 'natural' cook of the house. Such stereotyping is not new. In his critical essay, "Advertising, The Magic System", Raymond Williams argues that advertising has passed the frontier of the selling of goods and services and has become involved with the teaching of social and personal values, and is also entering rapidly into the world of politics. (Williams, 1980, p.84) The audio-visual medium of advertisements crosses all these limitations and therefore, the message gets coded, decoded and conventions are established very conveniently.

4. FOOD AND REGION

The second category in our list is hierarchy in food in relation to regional discrimination. Regional discrimination in food is also quite evident in everyday life. Even though the first impression of food has been that of something natural and universal but the political constituent of this category makes it to be regional in nature too. This regional division of food, where one place is the trademark of a particular variety of food needs a study. For instance, full meal such as Biryani is representative of big cities like Kolkata, Hyderabad, Lucknow. This kind of hierarchy is also maintained regionally. No small city is famous for its sumptuous meal. *Dhuska* from Bihar or *Litti Chokha* of Bihar & Jharkhand both are not equivalent of the same, thereby reducing the position of any such place in the food map of India. Thus, there is an inherent hierarchy first in the food itself and then among the regions to which they belong to. The internationally acclaimed food item is privileged more than the national and the local one. Such kind of food value and distribution of these delicacies eventually becomes a part of history passed from one generation to other. There is exclusion based on their regions even in terms of the food delicacy available and hence such representations via culinary, of these places are also based on such factors. This domain is extremely guarded of its exclusivity in

order to maintain its monopoly. Now, for any number of Kolkata Biryani shops in any other state, claiming to imitate their pioneer's recipe and taste but it does more good to the 'originals' than harm. The more the number of duplicate versions of such foods is available, the more popular the 'original' becomes. It adds to its popularity and reach and thus hierarchy gets maintained. Adding to the food complexity of India, we can say that rather than taking pride in the local, there is also an unnecessary rush to name their eating places after the places best known for that food item. For instance, Banarasi betel shops can be found even in town located farthest from Varanasi. Such screening adds to the business of food. Names such as Kathleen confectionary (famous for selling pastries in Kolkata) also play with the identity of the food. Kathleen is an Irish name, meaning Pure. Now it is wise to name a bakery as something pure to give an impression of pure, chaste cakes and pastries. One can easily notice that there is a deliberate attempt to highlight the very obvious. The unsuspected mind of the consumer buying from here is easily lured into believing it to be the best available snack shop in town.

Such kind of screening of food identity in a particular region does not stop here. On a global level, the same branding is used by these global chains of restaurants such as KFCs and McDonalds. With their bright red and yellow color theme, their primary audiences are both --young and old, male and female. Mc Donald's happy meals and happy meals toys are marketing gimmicks. Such exploitation of unsuspected consumers is happening on multiple levels. Bob Ashley and et al. talk about this cultural appropriation of McDonald here in India in his critical work, *Food and Cultural Studies* as, "A combination of advertisements which show customers how and what to order, children who teach adults what to do (such as clear up after themselves), and the physical structure of the outlet all work to make the experience 'spontaneous', self-governing and at one with the individual subject's free identity." (Bob Ashley, 2004, p.22)

McDonalds very own branding has established an immediate connect between the seller and the consumer. Their self-help model of serving is soon gaining momentum among the old and young. This brings us to the third category of hierarchy in food which is based on class discrimination. Class discrimination in food is another domain which creates a huge gap between the food preferences of the haves and the have-nots. It is often noticed that in the name of brand, overpriced food items easily get sold as it appeals as a lifestyle and not just as food. The kind of branding that food brands do, both in print and electronic media, is a very friendly presentation of the product. More than what consumers want, these brands create a need for the product through their narrative. These global food chains also customize their food items according to the taste and preference of a particular country. Such kind of market revolution, on such a huge scale, is hard to beat. The sudden shift to organic foods (even though they are packaged and bottled) is one such example. One can literally sell anything in the name of organic, such is the madness. There is an inadvertent shift from the local to global food along with the rise in price. The upper class is obsessed not with their own fresh produce of their local town, rather they are more concerned with certain food stuffs which are fetched from far off places. In the name of healthy lifestyle, these fancy foods attract us more. This increases the cost of production and reduces the importance of the local produce.

5. FOOD AND CLASS

Food occupies a central place in our culture but it varies with change in caste and class. The upper-class food habit is complex. It must be noted that they do not go out to fill their belly with anything available. They go out to dine for "jouissance" and not just to have a sumptuous meal. As a result, the minimum quantity of food at an overpriced rate does not make them blink their eye. Hence, the presentation, the visual image of the food, the quantity and the fancy name of the food-all of them matter in generating another category of food hierarchy based on class difference. Bob Ashley and et al. further express it as:

For most people who can afford to dine outside the home, the experience is generally articulated as a source of pleasure, often expressed in contrast to the drudgeries that we have shown regularly attend domestic responsibility. It is an initial premise of this chapter that eating out is a source of pleasure

and a favoured leisure pursuit for increasing numbers of people, and much of what follows will be concerned with exploring the pleasures and some of the complex meanings attaching to it... (Bob Ashley,2004, p.142)

However, in contrast to the eating habits of the upper class, the food habit of the working class is quite different. In summers, a full glass of *Sattu* (roasted gram flour, a staple food in Bihar and Jharkhand) would be sufficient. The meaning of food is entirely different when it is meant to suffice hunger. The way in which working class consumes food is that they are concerned with filling their stomach. Some have this *sattu* drink as their lunch for the whole summer. *Sattu* also protects them from the heat embers of the season, so it has nutritional and seasonal value both. So, as Ashley would argue, “Atmosphere is arguably as important in the promoting of restaurants as is the food itself. This is reflected in feedback cards in restaurants, where customers are asked to respond to a range of indicators very much wider than mere culinary ones.” (ibid,143) So, going to restaurants are a symbol of an evening well spent. They are, therefore, luxuriously designed with well-groomed staff.

Food division on the basis of class does not stop here. It goes up to the extent of impacting us globally and economically too. With global markets such as Amazon and Flipkart coming into the scene, the equation of the working class with their own produce has changed. The demand and supply now rest in the hands of multinational companies and are thrust upon the working class. From bamboo made hand fan to clay pots (*ghara* and *surahi*) to wood charcoal, Amazon sells it all. Even seeds and plants are sold by these global companies. So, in a way, working class is alienated from their own produce. The recent Farmers Protest, which started in November 2020, is against one such fear. They believe that big corporate houses shall dictate their terms of sale of their produce and hence they want withdrawal of any such laws which favors the same. The matter, of course, is more complex than this but it is equally true that the presence of global market can be felt around us.

6. FOOD AND CASTE

Textual representations of food in Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* and also Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* both bring us closer to the plight of the lower caste in terms of collecting food from their masters. These textual representations of food hierarchy take us to the last kind of food division in our mind- hierarchy in food and its distribution on the basis of Caste. Coming back to the above Dalit texts, there are major similarities, in the kinds of humiliations that they face while collecting food for themselves in both these texts. These hard-hitting texts reflect upon the caste discrimination prevalent in our society when it comes to sharing food and dining. On one hand, we have an image of fine dining restaurants with table etiquettes to the last bit. On the other hand, we have people struggling hard to find their next meal. The custom of sharing the leftover food with the workers of the house is an unapologetic practice in Indian households. The image has been caste, roles have been assigned. The right to first cooked plate of food is definitely not for them. The lower the perceived social status, the more convenient it becomes to make food availability difficult for them. This is one of the age-old practices of caste-oriented dangers of food politics.

7. POPULAR REPRESENTATIONS OF FOOD

Barbara Fray Waxman, in his research article “Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom”, writes:

Food memoirists also perform this auto-ethnographic role in reporting on their childhood food culture and on adult hood in the world of the food professional. In addition, informed by autobiography theory, I assume the great importance of memory in identity formation, as well as the constructed nature of memory, especially as represented textually. (Waxman, 2008, p.4)

Waxman lays emphasis on the importance of memory created by food. Such memory plays an important part in our own identity formation. At this point, it is important to remember that food narratives have the flexibility to easily get established by stories/ tales/memoirs built around them. From folklores to nursery rhymes to cartoon characters, food habits get inculcated in the young

minds right from their primary age. Even Chhota Bheem (the cartoon) eats *laddoos* for his superpower. From *Birbal ki Khichdi* to *Chanda Mama DurKe* to Johny Johny Yes Papa, we have a lot of stories and rhymes revolving around food narratives. If food serves as a symbol to judge the wisdom of Birbal in the tale, it reflects the innocence of Johny in the popular nursery rhyme. Even in other formats such as Indian movies, films like *Queen* (2014) and *Stanley Ka Dabba* (2011) show food in different light. Food in the climax of the former serves as a mode of empowerment, in the latter; it is a mode of escape and belonging. Thus, food identity is neither uniform nor unitary; it is rather a complex identity.

8. CONCLUSION

To summarize, food is not an individual entity, it is interlinked with region, caste, gender and class of all times. Things got worse especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and thereafter. The entire dynamics of food, food habits changed for a certain section of the society. The entire dichotomy of vegetarians versus non-vegetarians versus vegans requires another research paper. The entire discourse of hierarchy in food in terms of class, caste, gender remains intact whether one is a meat eater or not. The primary objective of this research paper is to look at the hierarchies in food practices during the present times. What we therefore conclude is that food is a politically constituted entity. Food in India is intricately linked to cultural identity and cultural validation as well. Every other fasting and festival calls for a certain kind of food that would dominate the table. This privileged position is enjoyed by very few, who have the power to select and dictate to the rest. So, in a way food is not just a representation of an individual but on different levels it also represents a community. *Sewai* in Eid, *gujiya* in Holi and cakes in Christmas are all responsible for framing the fabric of social system in India based on their religious parameters. What should be consumed and what must be consumed all work towards reestablishing food as a symbol of power which further percolates into other domains of our social system as well. Also, we have observed that food is no longer considered as wholesome and complete but rather categorized as Proteins, Fats, Carbohydrates etc. Gyms and protein shakes are a part of our lifestyle now. The image of a robust body is more appealing to us than a healthy one. Slavoj Zizek in “Fat-free Chocolate and Absolutely No Smoking: Why our Guilt about Consumption is all Consuming” puts the dichotomy of organic and inorganic products and talks about this “cultural experience” representing “healthy ecological lifestyle”. Zizek writes:

We buy a product – an organic apple, say – because it represents the image of a healthy lifestyle. As this example indicates, the very ecological protest against the ruthless capitalist exploitation of natural resources is already caught in the commodification of experiences: although ecology perceives itself as the protest against the virtualization of our daily lives and advocates a return to the direct experience of sensual material reality, ecology itself is branded as a new lifestyle. (Zizek, 2014)

To conclude, one must remember that the journey of mankind began with the biting of an apple. We need to understand that a fair share of apple for everybody is necessary. The apple should not be snatched, nor should it be forcefully fed. Let us acknowledge the different types of apples first and then let the eating of these apples be a matter of choice.

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