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Cooking Covertly: Examining Food Politics and Culinary Hierarchies in India

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Abstract

As humans, we all have different dietary preferences and are influenced/dissuaded by community/social standards in terms of what we eat and don't eat. The things we consider culinary taboos can differ depending on our cultural background and religious customs. A societal, religious, or legal ban on the intake of specific foods-food taboos, like other cultural phenomena, vary widely over the world. Food culture develops into a body of knowledge that enables people to select natural resources, prepare them for food, produce recipes, and relish them. When discussing the social features of food, it is assumed that food is a social phenomenon: what constitutes food and, thus, what can be eaten; how it is prepared, presented, and consumed; and so on reveal intricate relationships to class, caste, and gender. The paper aims to investigate how the hegemony creates hierarchical food structures and food strictures in order to maintain caste superiority and class identity. It also illustrates that food, in a caste-ridden society, may be used to oppress and enslave marginalised groups by denying them of food and stigmatising what they eat.

Keywords: food, culinary taboos, caste-ridden society etc

"If a man will not work, he shall not eat."
-2 Thessalonians 3:10 The Bible

Every country has its own food traditions, tastes, and constraints. Food has attracted critical attention from fields as diverse as social security, economics, basic human rights, sociology, and gastronomy over time as a cultural symbol and an essential mode of human subsistence. Food evolves into an ideological apparatus of socioeconomic and cultural empowerment/ disempowerment when it transcends the normative spheres of provisioning, sustenance, and support. Food is a sociocultural centre that is closely connected with the diverse activities and affiliations that form a community. The basic source and supply of food determined the early human civilizations, not just to satisfy immediate hunger, but also to secure future demands. Through acculturation, symbolic meanings of food became well-established when huntergatherer societies became settler societies. As a result, food began to take on implications beyond those of a mere body filler, embedding concepts such as cultural identity,

social hierarchy, and societal validation. Food thus becomes an intrinsic part of the discourses that generate diverse types of social organisation as a potent means of social control and enslavement of subaltern classes. As a result, food (possession and deprivation) plays a vital role in oppression, exploitation, and disenfranchisement. It is intricately linked with concerns of identity development as a cultural narrative, which are inextricably formed along the alignment of inclusion and exclusion.

India is a country that takes pride in its cultural diversity, particularly in terms of food. With globalization and corporate food servers, region specific foods like Tirunelveli Halwa, Manapparai Murukku, Hyderabad Biriyani, Thalaserry Biriyani, Kovilpatti peanut cakes are made available all over. Scholars of food studies reiterate that food is conspicuously related to cultural identity, and social validation and remains a powerful tool of social control and enslavement. In their path breaking work Food: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences, David Inglis, Debra Gimlin and Chris Thorpe, emphasize the significance of food in all processes of society, "From class structures to gender relations, from forms of community to questions of identity, from cultural nationalism to globalization of human affairs, from grand cosmological designs of religion to the most mundane micro level details of human existence, all such key social process and structures can be very usefully explored and analysed through the lens of food and cooking"(I-2)

If the lengthy quote is ambiguous, the Indian equivalent is simple: "Show me what you eat, how you eat, and with whom you eat, and I will tell you who you are." Food studies involve methods for exploring the historical, cultural, behavioural, biological, and socioeconomic determinants and consequences of food production and consumption. It also reveals the intricacy of a trivial day to day cultural material that affects and effects various social systems, where food is both the substance and the symbol through which class, race, ethnicity, and gender are socially fashioned. The foods that people choose to eat and the ways in which they prepare and share them, construct the identity of communities and individuals. When our mothers and grandmothers struggled to feed idlies to their grandchildren showing the moon on the sky -moon as the macro idly and idly as the micro moon, one can see how food may transform into stories with cultural and symbolic identity.

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Food, on the one hand, transcends the sociocultural milieu to designate us as compassionate and more human beings by presenting stories of generous persons serving food to the hungry and the starving and on the other hand it becomes a vehicle of cultural hegemony and social divide in the hegemonic discourses and meta narratives. "Whether it's Brahman cooking the universe into creation or Adam and Eve being chased out of paradise because of an apple," writes Norman Corrie, "food has allowed religious peoples to relate to their gods, each other, and the world." (Pilcher 409) Food takes centre stage as a crucial performative part of religion, with all religions having histories of required fasting and subsequent feasting.

Although the paper uses instances and historical occurrences from around the world to support certain points, the focus of this paper is regional rather than global. The natural ties between bodies and the food they eat are central to Indian customs. Indians traditionally believed that food habits have the potential to transfer the physiological and psychological traits to the human body. Traditional notions of Guna split food into three major categories: Satvik, Rajasik, and Tamasik, based on a hierarchically declining degree of purity. Milk and milkrelated items such as milk, butter, and ghee, as well as vegetables, make up Satvik diet for Brahmins. Onions and garlic, which have a pungent odour, are absolutely forbidden. Rajasik, the Kshatrias' cuisine, contains meat such as deer flesh. The Shudras and untouchables are supposed to eat Tamasik, the last in the hierarchically graded food system. Beef, pork, and other foods are only available to the upper castes. The hierarchical and inflexible stratification of society, as well as the profoundly ingrained caste system in its social institutions, are justified by food portrayals in literatures and cultural artefacts. There is pristine food and profane food in our system. In Hindu dietary systems, there are basically two sorts of foods: Pacca, which is food prepared with ghee, and Kachcha, which is food prepared with water. Only a person from one's own caste or a higher caste can serve kachcha cuisine. A Brahman, on the other hand, is permitted to take only Pacca food from a Shudra.

The objective of restricting untouchables' access to public wells and reserving wells for the upper castes has a strong link to protecting food purity. If milk is diluted with water from a public well, the untouchables should not pollute it. One must remember Dr. Ambedkar's historic march to Chavdar Tank in order for the 'untouchables' to demand their moral and legal right to utilise a public water source. "The Chawdar tank was the sole public tank from which an outsider could collect water," Dr. Ambedkar speaks of the importance of the Chavdar tank. The Untouchables, on the other hand, were not permitted to consume water from this tank. Dr. Ambedkar led a march of thousands of Mahars through main streets to the Chavdar tank on March 20, 1927, and consumed the water

from the tank, which became known as the Mahad Satyagraha.

The question of denial of food to marginalised groups and dining together with privileged caste groups is uniformly followed in all culinary cultures of/in India. In the hands of the socially powerful classes/castes, food becomes an apparatus of social control as it has the power to decide with whom one can eat and to deny a larger population its legitimate share. In Indian society the marginalized people's ability to consume an equal or equitable food share is always an unfulfilled dream. The 'patronizing' mind set of the feudalistic society stems from the ability to provide food. Food is the major source of power, which then spreads its tentacles to other variables in the social network. Food is a highly distinct component of Indian culture as a symbol of power, and it is in this context that 'control' becomes a function of being able to supply food. The sweet irony of India is that the nonproductive dominant caste group decides whether a productive working class should eat to live or starve to die.

The producers of paddy, the peasants, and the working class, for example, were forced to ask the landowners for a few more vessels of rice. The Keezhvenmani Massacre is the subject of Indira Parthasarathy's novel The River of Blood. On December 25, 1968, a landlord named Gopalakrishna Naidu threw 46 Dalit agricultural labourers inside a shack and set fire to them. The murders were the culmination of a labourers' campaign for improved salaries and working conditions. Children were among the victims, who were burned alive in their huts when an important landowner and his goons swooped down on the hamlet and set fire to their tenements. The victims belonged to the Dalit community and worked as farm labourers on the landlord's farms. One measure of paddy for one sack of grains reaped used to take a lot of effort and spine-breaking work. They trudged on, unconcerned about the exploitation. It was indeed the birth of the communist movement in Tamilnadu. A silenced and marginalised community learned about its rights and began to assert them. The landlords became worried when individuals who had put up with their quirky and dictatorial ways for so long began to pull on the leash. Wages, which were deemed 'charity' by the landed elite, became a slogan, and the oppressed began demanding it as a right. The persistent theme that began ringing through farms across the state was, "Why should we labour so hard for just one measure of paddy?" To suppress the voice of opposition, the response was unimaginably harsh, with bullets from country-made firearms, assault, and torture being used in large amounts.

The fabric of India's caste structure is constructed mostly around religious and ritualistic food sanctions. In India, communities are envisioned as ludicrous and typically understood as endogamous groups that practise

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inter-dining restrictions at the same time. With clear prohibitions on marriages and inter-dining, hierarchically graded social system formed around ideals of purity and defilement. Though the image of Kerala as an Appam and beef curry prevails outside the state, vegetarian feasts are dominantly served in Kerala. Eve after the interdining initiatives of Sagodaran Ayyappan and other social revolutionaries, Sadhya, the vegetarian dish, is served as a common food at all such inter eating occasions.

While food serves as a logo of cultural diversity and social unity, it also becomes a source of division and discrimination. Cannibalistic analogies are used to allude to non-vegetarian food behaviours as a result of the emergence of a breach between sacred and non-sacred foods. Food is practically geographically split between Hindu and Muslim regions of our geopolitical spaces. Biryani has recently been heavily demonised in speeches by prominent conservative politicians, and mentioned as if to imply that it has the capacity to affect elections. In southern states like Tamilnadu and Pondicherry, there is a saying that if you want to lure the voters, you need to provide them with an "oru nooru, oru choru, oru beeru."(Hundred rupees, Biriyani and a bottle of beer) Biryani, like all cuisine, must be understood as a "semiotic force" in and of itself, bearing distinct political implications (Appadurai, p.509). It might be claimed that because Biryani is associated with Islamic tradition and has non-Brahminical undertones, right wing politicians' constant references to Biryani in speeches strengthen a certain detestable culinary imagination.

The manner of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dichotomy is not as obvious in Tamilnadu as it is in other states due to the Dravidian ideological opposition to Brahmanic hegemony and vegetarian elitism. Pre-Dravidian regimes had discriminating hotels such as Chandra Vilas (Exclusive coffee shop for Brahmins), while post-Dravidian rule saw the mushrooming expansion of equally important non-vegetarian hotels in the names of intermediary castes such as Nadar mess/Thevar mess/Konar Kadai, and so on.

Traditionally, food was created for the working class at the working class's discretion. Vallalar Ramalinga Atikal used to sing whenever he saw the withered crops he withered. Ramalinga Vallalar, grieved by the sight of those who could not appease their hunger even after begging from one house after another started poor feeding in Vadalur in 1867. The practice of feeding the hungry continues till today. Hunger, according to Tiruvalluvar, never affects those who are accustomed to sharing their meals with others. Tamilnadu has a long history of valuing welcoming and accommodating cuisine culture. Tamilnadu, like the Vegetarian and Non-Vegetarian Gods dwelling next to next, has both vegetarian and nonvegetarian hotels juxtaposed in the same building. In many

circumstances, the kitchen will be shared between the two. The incorporation of egg in the noon meal schedule was one of the Dravidian movement's revolutionary acts. The rural economically poor, dalits and tribals, with children under the age of five, and pregnant and nursing mothers are the affected groups, as they can rarely afford to include grains and pulses in the said ratio in every meal. The Origins of the Midday Meal Program of Tamil Nadu is deeply rooted on welfare economics. M.G. Ramachandran sat on the floor with school pupils in Pappakurichi on September 15, 1982, for a meal. Jayalalithaa, the heroine of Annam Itta Kai, sat with 100 schoolgirls in Chennai at the same time. It was the beginning of the midday meal programme. It was the beginning of the midday meal programme. This was not a novel concept; the Justice Party tried it in Madras municipal schools in 1923, and K Kamaraj tried it in government schools in 1955. MGR made the idea widespread by charging 45 paise each pupil for a total of 6 million students. The concept quickly made its way into election manifestos, spawning the right to food movement and triggering public interest action before the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court was the driving force for the implementation of universal midday meals and the passage of the Food Security Act.

In Tamilnadu, writer Mathimaran discusses the class nature of food. He claims that the richer you are, the lighter and crispier the dosas will be, and the poorer you are, the thicker and harder the dosas will be. It is unrealistic to expect a poor woman returning from the fields exhausted to prepare lighter, crispier dosas for her hungry son because it is time-consuming and exhausting. The rich homemakers can cook crispy dosas for the son who won't eat more than three to four dosas at a time. Similarly, platform wagon shops would only sell hot idlies and thick dosas because they cater to the working class. Working-class individuals go to such stalls merely to satisfy their hunger, and they don't expect anything extraordinary in terms of taste or variety. The star hotels, on the other hand, have a long menu of sixteen varieties of dosas because the wealthy come to these establishments not only to eat but also to spend the time. This is the story of Idlies and Mini Idlies, which can be found in both sidewalk wagon shops and star hotels. This is the reason behind the process of duplication of high quality food products and the so-called original food doesn't seem to get affected by the duplication process. Iruttukadai Alwa, a 'high identity' product, can be duplicated but not equalised! The higher the value of the original, the more it is duplicated. The rosogulla conflict has been simmering for a while, but diplomatic moves like Odisha declaring July 17 as Rasagola Dibasa have reignited it.

Plant-based diets are becoming more popular, and there is a growing urge to eliminate all animal products, thanks to the West's influence. The argument for a vegan lifestyle is that the use of animals or the death of animals for whatever reason is unethical, and that markets should

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not benefit from the loss of life. However, putting this in an Indian context necessitates navigating how this is an opportunity for the vegetarian communities to focus this narrative on the meat-eating populations, who make up a marginalised minority in Indian society. Vegetarianism's insistence and coercion holds meat-eating people accountable for 'barbaric' habits and a lifestyle that has always been 'untouchable' to the upper castes. There are various aspects to this, including the hypocrisy inherent in the claim that meat consumption is unnatural and the belief that Indian food can be homogenised. Some sepoys claimed that one of the main triggers for the First War of 1857 was that the British army had coated the cartridges used for new guns with pork and beef fat, according to a rumour that spread across India. This infuriated both Hindus and Muslims, resulting in an uprising. Enforcing vegetarianism on, instance, Adivasi groups who have been eating meat for decades is inevitably casteist/classist. Take, for example, the states where mob lynchings have occurred in the highest numbers.

The upper-class dialogue explicitly targets indigenous food traditions: because food is so important to a community, non-vegetarian food and meat-eating activities are reduced to filth and dirt, otherwise declared taboo. This becomes a national identifier for a community: when its social activities are deemed repulsive or filthy, so is the group as a whole. India has never been a vegetarian nation. The belief that all ancient Hindus where vegetarians are a myth. The kings of ancient India ate meat whether they travelled north or south. In our epics, the gods did the same. Meat and chicken were not the only foods consumed by ancient Indian emperors. Tortoises, deer, peacocks, and other birds and animals were consumed. Even the elites who oppose non-vegetarian cuisine in the name of animal love in India eat beef cutlets in the United States.

The worrisome trend in food production and distribution is the disturbing shift from the cooperative control to the corporate control of food. Dr. Amartya Sen's Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation has helped people understand that food is important to freedom and that individuals can only live a life free of hunger and illness if they have enough food. Dalit communities are perpetually faced with the challenge of putting the next food on the table, as they struggle with fundamental requirements that are at the bottom of Maslow's scale. The genuine hardship of a manual scavenger or an untouchable could be traced by Sharan Kumar Limbale, who detailed the horrific experiences of untouchables in his Akkarmashi. Limbale describes the deplorable poverty in which the untouchables find themselves: "During the harvest when cattle grazed in the fields, they passed undigested grains of jowar in their dung. The grains were yellow and swollen. Santamai picked up such lumps of dung and on the way home washed the dung in the river water, collecting only the

clean grains. She then dried them in the sun. As they dried they shrank. I felt the grains should not be washed as washing shrank them back. We went home when the grains were dry. Then Santamai ground the jower grains into flour." Then she prepares a gruel of it and feeds her

Imayam's Beasts of Burden deals with the unseeable community called Puthirai vannan whose working hours would be from 30 clock to 50 clock in early morning, and they were not supposed to be seen by relatively upper class members during the daytime. Arokkyam and her spouse Savuri serve the Gounder's (landowner communities) as well as the dalit families. Arokkyam and Savuri only serve in the "colony" of dalit streets, with separate washer men for the upper castes. The members of Arokkvam's family are not permitted to enter the dalit homes. The dalit-washer men are not even treated the same as the other dalits. Their daily sustenance comes from a colony house, and they only pay for the leftovers, which they serve as emoluments in the form of grains, groceries, and clothing. Both of Arokkyam's sons wish to live in a free world, so Peter suggests to Arokkyam, "Why don't we go in for coolie work?" which would pay in daily cash wages. And he asks "why can't we cook at home every day?"(7). He inquired because the youngsters who were playing with him greeted him as "raachoru, raachoru" (evening left over food which was thrown at the washing men and his family by the families they serviced). Arokkyam and Savuri had to put in a lot of effort in order to eat at least twice a day. Even if they worked all day in the Gounder fields, they were only paid six to four kalam (a cylindrical vessel used to measure grains) of grains or millets, and in the evenings, Arokkyam, Peter, and Mary collected dirty clothes from the colony houses, for which the colony people paid some grains, food, millets, or leftovers, etc.

In K.A.Gunasekaran's The Scar, Gunasekaran earns money by weeding in farms throughout his school days. He went to the irrigation tank with his grandmother to catch snails and slugs for their supper. Snails, fish, and dried fish are common Dalit foods. A dalit can only seldom afford to eat a proper dinner. For breakfast, he and his siblings ate soaked tamarind seeds to stave off hunger. Separate tumblers for caste Hindus and Dalits, a socially repugnant practise, are still in use in several Madurai villages. Though the police have filed cases against the teashop owners for using the 'two-tumbler' method, none was convicted so far and the prevalence of this practice brings prejudice against Dalits to the fore. As a form of neo untouchability, the teashops have disposable cups for Dalits, and stainless steel tumblers for caste Hindus. Outsiders visiting the village face the same discrimination; if he is a relative of a caste Hindu, he will be served tea in a stainless steel tumbler or a glass tumbler. If it is known that the person has come to meet a Dalit, he will be served tea in a disposable cup. The class identity of tea and coffee

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has been a debatable one even today. Tea was once the drink of the state's working class, while coffee was considered a sophisticated brew for the upper middle class and aristocracy. "Coffee became the marker of the Brahmin middle-class," says Venkatachalapathy, in his book In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History.

In the last decade, organic food has gone a long way. Organic foods were once only available at specialized stores and health clinics, but now all departmental stores are stocked with organic products to suit rising consumer demand. Food organic has become a trend, with the belief that it provides benefits that non-organic eating does not. Sensing the health conscious consumers, the marketers are selling organic foods at an expensive price. Organic farmers do utilise chemicals, and despite their claims to be 'natural,' consumers are unaware of the quantum of fertilisers and pesticides used in an organic product. Individual's belief that organic foods taste better than non-organic foods is only psychological than scientific.

Food is inextricably tied to issues of entitlement, access, accumulation, ethics, and freedom. It is the most enfranchisement-based important resource for empowerment. Even natural and freely available resources such as wells, lakes, ponds, and streams, however, become weapons for perpetuating caste systems in the dystopian world of dalits though these inconsistencies are fading with the passage of time. Patriarchal food regulations give women a secondary standing in terms of food entitlements compared to men, and they inflect their food entitlements based on their connection with men. The classic example to prove the exploitative nature of Indian cuisine is the mushrooming clichéd title down south-Chettinad cuisine. The homemakers of commercial class in and around Karaikudi took pride in serving their husbands and the members of the family with varieties of food. They didn't realize that the more experimental and novel and variety the daily menu is, the more they are exploited. Women's consumption is regulated by normative cultural assumptions that draw parallels between femininity, selfdiscipline, and slimness.

Food marketing is mostly discreet. The social origins of things are hidden from the customer, according to Marx, because we purchase items in the marketplace. Their worth is unrelated to the skill and effort required to produce them. As a result, in order to be exchanged for capital, products must be stripped of their true worth. "The goal of advertising is to replenish the emptied commodity with meaning," Sut Jhally stated, if production relations drain things of their value. In the South Indian context, one can see the visible caste tag prefixed bakery placards and sign boards across southern states. But the humourour fact is that Iyengars no longer own all Iyengar bakeries. Thousands of Iyengar bakeries that exist on both of the sides of the highways are owned by non Iyengars and the

tag Iyengar has almost been used to claim a 'high quality' status.

The non-working class now controls the nature and forms of food, thanks to the rise of corporations. Obesity is a disease of non-productive groups, and the number of obese people continues to rise, especially in developed countries and among the affluent sections of the developing countries. The greatest threat today is that the nourishment of the productive classes is determined and decided by the physiology of the non-productive classes. With the easy availability and low cost of highly processed foods that have empty calories and zero nutritional value, obesity and overweight has become a corporate food target. It is an injustice when a non-producing class' menu is imposed on the productive class' menu. Working-class people demand more nutritious rustic cuisine than processed food, therefore the food culture developed for white-collar workers cannot be rendered universal. The paradox is that when we were hunting a country chicken from the neighbours fields and smoking and roasting it raw the elites called us barbarians and the same thing they are doing in star hotels and selling it as 'barbecue'. Global food companies' nexus with the non-working class consumers is a threat to food security and food sustenance. Art, literature, culture, and food happened to be the expressions of working class and now the patterns are destroyed, and the working class is alienated from the production of art, literature, cultural artefacts and even food menu. In this globalised scenario, the global companies tying up with the elite class to decide and design the food chart for the whole humanity are rather disturbing.

During the Corona shutdown, only sanitation workers were out on the streets, while the rest of the population was locked inside. Right from cleaning streets to collecting garbage and trash, emptying septic tanks, and managing bio wastes, sanitation workers have been performing their duties without adequate safety gear, such as sanitizers and masks. Sanitation workers are mostly found in slums or heavily populated informal settlements. In most cases, they don't have access to toilet facilities and must rely on public toilets or resort to open defecation. Because of their inherent resistance and immunity, as well as their indigenous food habits and eating practices, which mostly consisted of beef eating, they were the least affected.

Food is legally guaranteed under the right to survive since eating habits are an important element of India's secular fabric and pluralist food culture. A citizen's right to life includes the ability to choose what they eat. In India, food fascism has always existed—the type of food we eat is mostly dictated by religion and caste, rather than individual taste or preference. Beef is forbidden for Hindus, pork is forbidden for Muslims, all meats and egg are forbidden for Brahmins, and roots are forbidden for

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Jains. With a prohibition on cow slaughter in many parts of India, the vegetarian bias against meat eaters has reached new heights in the recent times. Food is not just a form of religion, but also a form of politics. It can't be done by forcing them to eat only vegetarian meals. People cannot be forced to change their eating habits in a secular democracy. Rather, one should expect, accept respect and celebrate the food preferences of others.

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