

Beyond Appetite; Food Inclusion in Socio-Political Contexts

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Abstract: From being the basic sustenance of life food has become one of the most important cultural markers in the history and the evolution of human civilization. Even though food, its preparation, its producers and its evolution has happened right alongside human history and development, the study of food as a cultural marker is not a very old or tired discipline. In fact food discourses are a relatively modern branch of study. In this paper I have tried to trace the various influences and collusions of food and food myths that have become deeply entrenched into various lifestyles throughout history till this very day, only changing patterns and interpretations. The paper highlights the corporeal influences of food associations on social and political movements; food has a much deeper and infinitely more powerful grip on our socio-political scenarios than appears on the surface.

Keywords: Commensality, Inter-communal dining, Gendering of food, Culinary Triangle, Sustainable nutrition.

“Reformers attempt to invent a better future by changing the unjust present. The paradox is that in attempting to move forward, they are often constrained by views, values, recipes, patterns and structures inherited from the past.”(Belasco, pg.179)

The most commonly quoted sentiment about food is that it brings people together. The role of food as a glue for social groups is one of its most important as well. Food as a social tool is a powerful factor. It has spearheaded social and political movements and acts as a link between people - those of the same social group living in different geographical regions, between diaspora all over the world, and bringing together of different social groups under a common cause. This chapter examines social movements and political statements in which food, its preparation, laws or incidents around it which precipitated notable changes in the fabric of a society.

Food is often seen as a metaphor of the collective self. In the essay ‘Anthropology Of Food’, R Kenji Tierney and Emiko Tierney discusses how food becomes a metaphor; first the food embodied in each individual serves as a metonym. Secondly, food as consumed historically in groups – this communal consumption renders food a metaphor of “we”- the social group and often of people as a whole.

“This double linkage-metaphor underscored by metonym- gives foods a powerful symbol for the collective self not only conceptually but also at the gut level. This visceral experience of eating together provided the foundations for a range of communities, from families and school groups to the “imagined communities” of modern nations.” (Tierney, pg5)

One of the biggest historic changes brought about by consumer preference is that of the medieval spice trade and the insatiable European demand for spices in the late Middle Ages. This trade and subsequent colonization changed the course of human history. Colonizers in Asia, Africa and the Americas brought their style of food and life into these countries while taking back nothing more than the material wealth of these places and thus altering the cultural fabric of these places forever. One of the most direct and visible results of the mixing of cultures in cuisine is that of the birth of fusion cuisine in these colonies. When the colonies started their struggles for independence, elements of food became important factors. It was the refusal of soldiers to taste animal fat-covered rifle cartridges which would be a violation of their religious beliefs that led to the First War of Indian Independence in 1857.

Another major milestone in the Indian freedom struggle was the Dandi March, also known as the Salt Satyagraha. It was an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in colonial India led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The march was a direct action campaign of tax resistance and nonviolent protest against the British salt monopoly. Gandhi made salt by evaporation of seawater at different places and gathered meetings. The choice of salt as focus point was ridiculed by most in the beginning; Gandhi justified it by saying that an item of daily use could resonate more with all classes of citizens than an abstract demand for greater political rights. The salt tax represented 8.2% of the British Raj tax revenue, and hurt the poorest Indians the most significantly. Thus salt, one of the most unassuming ingredients of daily life, united hundreds of people to face an injustice.

Gandhi’s civil disobedience also extended to voluntary fasting. Already a part of all major religions, fasting has been performed contextually as a symbol of both confirmation (to

religious beliefs) as well as protest (sacrificing sustenance in rebellion). Gandhi, along with many of his followers went on hunger strikes demanding the repeal and revocation of unjust British rules. He was repeatedly arrested for it as well. This method of nonviolent protest have inspired thousands of people across the world in a multitude of fights against injustice. In India today, hunger strikes and proclaimed fasts unto deaths are almost a daily occurrence. One of the most famous civil and political rights activists of contemporary India, Irom Sharmila began a hunger strike against the Armed Forces Act of 1958. It resulted in the Malom Massacre. She fasted for sixteen years while under forced nasogastric intubation and became an icon of public resistance.

Modes of protests that are the opposite of refraining from food have found its place in the part of social history. Public consumption of certain banned or prohibited foods as well as public inter-communal dining to assert fundamental human rights or to show solidarity to a group or a cause is often practiced. Indian culture definitely understands the importance of the commensality of food. Even while glorifying the sacredness of food and displaying the splendor of it, the fact that India has one of the biggest divide between the rich and the poor is often skimmed over. The stark difference between the food habits of the upper-caste, upper-class population and that of the Dalit, lower-caste demographic is staggering. A common factor found in almost all Dalit narratives, is the detailed description of the food they lived on. Bread made from ground millets plucked off of the digested remains of the fodder fed to the cattle of the upper caste, meat salvaged from carrion, dried and used for a long time, and watered-down soups made from scraps are a common description found in these stories. In fact, Om Prakash Valmiki, one of India's most famous Dalit writers titled his autobiographical novel *Joothan*. It is a reference to the leftovers from the upper-caste weddings or parties that the *dalit* would be "allowed" to partake from. B.R. Ambedkar, in his revolutionary speech talks about how a certain group of upper-caste Hindus filed an official complaint against the Balai community because a *dalit* family had served 'ghee', a "pure, sacred" food to be associated only with the upper-caste, at one of their weddings.

Arjun Dangle's anthology *Poisoned Bread* talks about the food that had to be salvaged by the dalit, the poisoned bread, as a metaphor for the toxic caste system. Much of the country even today does not have access to clean water and hygienic, nutritional food and many suffer from diseases that arise due to nutrition deficiency. This, while the other part of India celebrates the biggest and most wasteful weddings and lavish parties with huge amounts of food and beverages that often go wasted. The inequality between the two is incredibly hard to bridge.

In addition to the open casteism practiced even today in India, a subtle and hidden casteism also prevails. For example, the famed Aranmula boat race in Kerala is accompanied with a feast or *sadhya*. This feast is inevitably prepared by the upper-caste chefs traditionally associated with the royal family of Pamba. So are the meals connected with the most prestigious festivals and important events of the country and the state, such as that of the annual Kerala School Kalostavam. Most temple chefs are Brahmins and the traditions have no sign of giving in. Interestingly and disappointingly, women are not associated with large scale community cookouts such as this one or with the cooking of temple offerings or *annadanams*.

Commensality is institutionalized in many cultures beginning with family meals eaten together. “Eating from the same pan”, is the social anti-thesis of drinking alone. “Breaking bread together” is a common phrase used to signify communal dining or sharing food with friends or family. The idea of commensality is present in school dining rooms, community cookouts and barbeques and carnivals and fairs. Commensality is by definition the act of shared eating: but cooking is also an equally important communal experience that reinforces both social ties and hierarchies. An example of hierarchies imposed according to class in matters of food is the court cuisines of medieval Europe. Of which the spices were imported at great cost from Asia, the game meat exclusively reserved for the aristocracy. “The stratification of food symbolisms appears not just through different food items, caviar as opposed to tomatoes, but even within the same food item- organic, heirloom tomatoes and tasteless, industrial hothouse varieties.” (Tierney,pg6)

One of the most successful and revolutionary events involving the use of food is the inter-dining demonstrations brought about by social reformer Sree Narayana Guru. Sahodaran Ayyappan, a disciple of the guru decided to publicly organize inter-dining or mixed dining as a challenge against the caste system. Those assigned the lower caste or outcastes were not allowed to mix with the so called upper-castes, let alone dine together. Ayyappan was influenced by the French revolutionary ideals of equality and fraternity and under guru’s encouragement, organized this public shunning of the caste system. Narayana Guru, Chatammbi Swamikal and many other reformers were known to be inter-caste diners, but an event as initiated by Ayyappan had been unheard of. This disregard for evil practices disguised as “traditions” was an inspiration in the progressive momentum of the state.

Similar to the caste politics that exists in India, racial inequality has remained a constant in the history of American foodways through labor relations that produce it, the access to

healthy diet, and the status accorded to particular foods. The slave labor imported from Africa fed much of America through ages, while the workers got the extreme short end of the stick. Colonial patterns of bland British cooking were slowly replaced in contemporary times by equally bland corporate, mass-produced food. However, a large mass of anti-hegemonic population began to eat across barriers of race and ethnicity. The migration of southern sharecroppers to northern industrial jobs reached the zenith during World War II and with this the Soul Food was born. The nostalgia felt by the migrants, combined with the continued segregation made home-style cafes and cafeterias into havens of commensality in Harlem and Chicago. Closely associated with the formation and evolution of Black identity in America, and the Black Power movement of the sixties, the term “Soul food” refers to the “Soul” culture that was adopted by the African American resistance. Today, soul food has evolved from the catfish, collard greens and chitterlings, scraps given by white masters to the slaves to spruced up versions of cornbread, baked macaroni and cheese etc.

Protests like the inter-dining movement by SahodaranAyyappan and the evolution of soul food into a fundamental identity of black culture are equally important in asserting fundamental rights and equality, whether racial, ethnic or otherwise. These milestones are even more impressive and relevant today when faced with alarming totalitarian impositions on the basic rights and liberties of any citizen. The state itself seems to be coming up with undemocratic and medieval restrictions on food rights and thereby creating cultural diversities among people. It is imperative to proclaim the organic human fraternity and freedom of choice.

One of the more politicized angles of food and dining is the role played by women. Traditional roles of cooking were assigned to women in most cultures. The hunter-gatherer relationships filtered down and distorted throughout human history. One of the more recent areas of study is the gendering of food. And indeed, food is one of the disciplines where gender can be clearly distinguished. Across cultures and epochs, gender has played a key role in foodways. Claude Levi-Strauss was one of the first to identify the gendering hidden just under the surface. Through his culinary triangle, he explains how certain acts of cooking (meat) such as roasting over an open fire was considered masculine and certain others such as boiling or frying in a vessel was considered feminine. In certain Mexican festivities, the parts of cuisine cooked by men and women are different; the men handle the cooking of the meat while the women handle the sauces. In Indian cultural history too, can we find that women were always the cooks when it came to feeding families, but in mythologies and histories associated with food cooked publicly, or in reference to palace

cooks or professional cooks, it is always a male cook. In fact, the very idea of “Nalapachakam”, when referring to a brilliant chef, is an allusion to the king Nala, blessed by the goddess Hingula who was said to have a special skill in making any food taste divine. There is almost no mention of connections between women and food or food traditions in Indian historical or religious narratives other than maybe the kheer that King Dasarata’s wives consumed in the Ramayana.

The concept of food democracy provides a useful lens to train on the question of gender and food activism. For Tim Lang, food democracy is “the ability for all citizens to have secure access to culturally appropriate, sustainable, and healthy food.” (Lang, pg.145) In many cultures, women have not had the opportunities to let their voice be heard publically and have had to find creative outputs. Historians have found many instances where women have expressed protest or opinion to attain social influence or piety through extreme fasting, donations for charity etc. There have been many expeditions into finding food voices of women. One of them was Ramona Lee Perez’s use of “kitchen table ethnography” where she talked to Mexican and Mexican-American women as they prepared and consumed food with family and friends to gain insight into the “transnational and cross-border experiences” (pg 234) of these women.

Food is also linked intricately with people’s relationships to their bodies in different ways across cultures, ethnicities, and genders. In Western cultures, and by an influential extension, throughout the world, ideas about appropriate consumption and the body reproduce gender, race and ethnic hierarchy, often under the guise of promoting “healthy eating habits”, especially among young women. This has lead to a wide array of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, binge-eating disorders and avoidant or restrictive food intake disorder. Not surprisingly, statistics indicate that women are almost nine times more likely to be affected by eating disorders than men. There is definite and obvious evidence that women’s consumption is regulated by cultural values linking self-control and thinness with femininity, and hearty eating and body size with masculinity. There are also the cultural associations of certain foods like meat and alcohol with men and fruit and sweets with women. In fact, meat appears transculturally as a marker of masculinity. This association of men with meat goes hand in hand with patriarchal power, which links the dominance of humans over animals and with that of man over woman. Ironically, in some cultures, fatness is considered important and admirable, an indication of wealth, especially in those cultures that find surplus food rare.

The gendering of feeding and caring defines women in ways that confine and oppress them but also give them a channel for creating ties that bind. In fact, association of maternal

memories are intertwined with various foods, family meal traditions and religious family-specific customs, often linked to “secret recipes” passed down over the generations. However, this obligation to cook and feed others have been ambiguous sources of oppression, violence, power and also creativity for women. Men on the other hand have always had the choice to take or leave cooking; they are not expected to put their culinary expertise at the service of their families. This lack of reciprocity of feeding and caring upholds the hierarchy of the genders, both within and outside of the home. Oneway that women have managed to turn this traditional patriarchal assignment of making food into profitable business ventures is by small-scale entrepreneurship programs by marketing their homemade recipes. This model is followed all over the world, from farmer’s market stalls to backyard party kiosks to businesses that have blossomed into large scale production ventures. Pickles, jams and jellies, sauces, pies, cakes, cookies, snacks and canned imperishable and other condiments make the list of these items. In this regard, the women entrepreneur group of Kerala, the Kudumbasree, that employs over a million women, needs special mention.

Though traditionally more removed from cooking, men’s food voices are more frequent and louder than women’s. Men cooking assumes an air of importance or specialty as they are usually removed from the process. Studies show that women in general and South Asian women in particular more often than not had vitamin and mineral deficiencies. This is a result of the general dining trend that ensures that women partake in meals only after the rest of the family has eaten. This means that most protein and nutritious dishes including eggs, meat, fish and delicacies such as dessert is unavailable to the female member. It was also common to prefer to give meat and fish to male members over female members, even children. Food democracy seeks to replace customs and traditions such as these with equal accessibility.

Food reformers today seek to instill a third paradigm when it comes to choosing the food we eat- a sense of responsibility. The first two being taste and convenience, the former often forsaken for the latter. Warren Belasco refers to this highly moralized and political responsibility as the willingness to pay the full cost of one’s meal.

This extends beyond immediate market price of a product to what economists call the “externalities”, the wider, often unseen, long-range consequences of consuming it. These consequences may include the people who produce it, the acute and chronic health costs to consumers, and the impact on the resources available to future generations. (Bellasco, Warren)

Today, it is more important than ever to live sustainably. It is high time that everyone takes responsibility for the food eaten and the waste produced. For food activists, a morally clean plate does no harm. Bellasco says that “if we are what we eat” and more telling, what we don’t eat, then food becomes a medium through which to voice social identities and distinctions. Even when societies moralize about food by distinguishing them as original, unsullied and foreign, polluted, distinctions are not made on the basis of economic, ecological and social impact. One of the concerns voiced by modern food reformers is the poor quality of already existing, popular food: mass-produced, average, bland, artificial, adulterated and impersonal. The second major concern is the methods and means of production: large scale corporate farming, processing and manufacturing that is enormously damaging to the environment, exploitative of the workers and animals included in it etc.

One of the most intense controversies regarding food centre on genetic engineering. It goes beyond plant engineering; genetic engineering research and recombinant DNA technologies make the issue complicated. Especially in the case of ethics. Since most of the public’s only idea about genetic engineering comes from badly researched superhero story tropes, the technology does indeed appear daunting. In agriculture, products using recombinant DNA technology is termed as GMO or Genetically Modified Organisms. The doubts and controversies regarding these are about the technology and its ownership and use, such as, to what limit is the technology to be used? Who decides what technologies are acceptable? There are internationally set rules and regulations for genetic crop engineering; infact, there are GMO free zones and countries as a reaction to the seemingly overarching influence of technology in food production, which for many, is crossing a line from natural to unnatural. What is to be recognized however is that the potential of genetic engineering is not to be ignored; it needs to be pursued rigorously. Especially since it may prove a solution for global hunger and food scarcity problems or at least a beginning to the cause.

Today, large scale enabling of counter movements regarding food are happening. There is more integration and involvement of persons in food making. More and more people make the effort to find out the origins and disposal of their food. Many have turned to organic farming or at least small vegetable or herb gardens in their own backyards. Large scale grocery shopping is done via environment friendly outlets, opting for nutrition-rich, sustainable diet instead of cheap fast food options. Although vegetarianism has been around since time immemorial, newer demographics are transitioning to vegetarianism

today. Vegetarianism is a category of lifestyle with varied underlying motivations. Animal welfare concerns are the primary reasons for its adherents, followed by health considerations. A subcategory of ethical vegetarianism is feminist ethical vegetarianism which includes people who are concerned with not only animal welfare but with the systems of patriarchy promoted by the production of meat for food and its consumption.

Veganism in its present form is a more recent movement when compared to vegetarianism. Its originator Donald Watson says that “veganism starts with vegetarianism and carries it through its logical conclusion.” Veganism is predominantly taken as a stand against animal exploitation. There are debates about veganism to the effect of questioning its health benefits to whether it is evolutionarily appropriate to completely stop using all animals and animal products as foods. Scholars such as Roger Scruton have agreed that “advocating vegetarianism has become a new form of extremist religion among some adherents, and so instead we should attempt to reduce our meat consumption and to consume conscientiously.” (Scruton,pg.56) Thus, we must become more spiritually and morally aware of our food rather than just seeing it as fuel and focus on the fostering of relationships through a sharing of food and food habits, rather than trying to inhibit or eliminate certain food practices.

The intersection of food customs still occurs through immigration and international commerce and the slow but sure process of globalization. One of the most obvious areas where the ostentatious presence of food exists as a clear, distinct, cultural marker is diaspora studies. What could be a better example of hybrid culture and identity than food that is infused with racial memory and unruly assimilation of the foreign culture? Food is often the only thing that serves as a connection to the homeland and their roots for any diaspora, once language slowly, but mostly inevitably disappears as a link. The community not only continues to make sure that the delectable, edible part of their identity stays with them, but also adapt their cuisine to suit the geography and lifestyle of their new home, resulting in the creation of incredible fusion food. The expansion of Chinese, and Indian food in the U.S.A., the enormous popularity of Asian cuisine in Australia and that of Middle-eastern food in Europe all points to this fact. However, the sudden rise of global restaurant chains and food outlets like MacDonald’s and K.F.C. are the result of continued Westernization and capitalist-centered globalization. Which seems to be the direction that food as a whole is moving towards.

Even when the malnutrition and poverty issues of much of the world remains unsolved, food scientists are racing forward with agricultural and nutritional advancements, from

making food look and taste better, to developing new edible substances, replacement foods (such as meat replacements and mock-meats) to pills to sustain the feeling and physical satisfaction of an entire meal, which was actually a trope in Asimov's science fiction narratives. This definitely signifies how the future is undoubtedly here. And it demands a more careful and close study of the constantly evolving association of food and cultures. Fighting nature's replacement techniques and tests are being developed in connection biotechnology. Unfavourable agricultural conditions are being combated by creating strong varieties of seeds and plants and recreating ideal environments.

Tracing the evolution and digressions of the food narrative and various different mini-narratives shows us the continued need to study food and its cultural equations. Instead of weighing the differences, the need of the hour rests in finding common factors that point to the similarities in the evolution of cultural habits. The questions raised in connection with culinary culture, and in extension, culture as a whole, is no longer about religious associations or meta-narratives. Indeed, it is necessary to study these to understand the deeper cultural significance, but definitely not enough. The discussions are regarding ethical consumption of food and related awareness movements, the validity of Genetically Modified foods, food safety, sustainability and responsibility. Discourse on food should grow to include learning from examining and verifying the past, using present global scenarios to build solutions for now and planning for an accountable and sustainable future, all the while not losing hold of the personality and taste of food.

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