

HEB

Food and Dietary Habits: A Tool of Social Transformation

CASS

Deepak Kumar Giri & Daanish Gurung

University of Hyderabad

*Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

The mechanics of Power Discourse has always been polymorphic and takes upon different forms and symbolism to maintain and transform itself. The vicissitudes of Power Discourse is present in Social Hierarchies through specific symbolism which in time has crystallized itself. One such symbolism which has resulted in the formation and sustenance of these social hierarchies – Food and the dietary practices. The rise of extremist Hindu ideas in the recent past on the food habits and prohibition of certain food items has its backing in the religious texts as well as in Hindu codices. These works are the result of the change in society and its methods of social, political and cultural sustenance which in time came to be viewed as heterotopic to the reigning power discourse. In time, certain food habits came to identify certain communities and took the shape of symbolism. This symbolism of Food was both used as a privilege and also as a form of oppression depending upon the section of the society on which it was imposed. The laws which govern the people in the community are based on consensus and therefore are made keeping in mind the different practices and beliefs of the people such that it appropriates every aspect of the society which would aid in the efficient management of these communities.

The paper attempts towards an approach which is inquisitorial and based on the idea of Subjugated Knowledge to bring out the Psychohistorical implications of Food in society and how it has affected the realm of history. The paper puts on particular emphasis on food and dietary habits in the Early Indian society. Following up on the idea that the legacies of the past have survived in the present through certain practices which in time took the shape of Tradition, the paper explains the social conditions and hierarchies from the point of view the present food culture and how it has evolved out of the past.

The purpose of the paper is to synthesize an approach which would explain the social transformation in the society and present Food as a symbol as well as a tool for change in the society. The study would help in better understanding of society by looking at food and dietary habits as a tool of social and political changes and how it affects the mindsets of the people through certain justification laid out by the practices to ensure its survival.

Keywords: Power Discourse, Social Hierarchies, Subjugated Knowledge, privilege, oppression, transformation

Access this Article Online<http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies>

Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



Food and Dietary Habits: A tool of social transformation

The legacies of the past have survived in the contemporary world through the practices and ways of living which has been followed by people for generations. The everyday deeds of the ordinary people if taken as a source of history, are more close to the accurate and true picture of the society than any written records. These contemporary practices provide information about the mindsets, beliefs and practices of the people in the past which in the present day has taken the form of Tradition. The written records and archaeological evidence used in history are the products of the past which are in its outset affected and influenced by the Centre of Power. The records of the past have bearings of partialities mostly in favour of the Centre which presents a structuralist picture which limits the vision of the observer to see past the visible spectrum of knowledge. The study of practices of the contemporary societies with the idea in mind that the legacies of the past have survived in the present through certain practices which in time took the shape of Traditions, there is an insurrection of the Subjugated Knowledge (Foucault 81). The Subjugated Knowledge are those historical contents which have remained buried by the formal systems of power.

The study of practices and habits as Symbolism and source of history yields the Subjugated Knowledge of History and in by doing so, it reflects upon the actions and Psychohistorical reasons behind the phenomenon which in time changed the course of human history. The Symbolism is the product or the catalyst for the change and concretization of a larger structure known to History as Power Discourse. A study of the traditions of the present along with a comparative approach to the study of history which yields a traditional reconstruction of the past as done by the scholars, there is a possibility that the resulting work would present a less distorted image of history, if not true.

The mechanics of Power Discourse has always been polymorphic and takes upon different forms and symbolism to maintain and transform itself. The vicissitudes of Power Discourse is present in Social Hierarchies through specific symbolism which in time has crystallized itself. One such symbolism which resulted in the formation and sustenance of these social hierarchies is the Food and the dietary practices which have been followed by the societies.

The inception of ideas and moulding the mindset of the society as a whole is done through the display of various practices, plays and other tangible things which are the representation of the ideas which the authority wishes to convey. Now that an institution is established in the society which can affect the mindset of the people at large, there was a need for something which could embed the ideas in the mind of the people and mould them. This was done through Symbolism. Symbolism is the tool as well as a constant reminder of certain ideas to the people. This symbolism is also the constant reminder of the political authority as well as domination of the centre or a particular section of the community which can even be attributed to practices. This mechanics of symbolism can also be found in food habits and dietary practices of people. This phenomenon follows a generalized concept that associates food habits with certain communities. Not eating beef is a generalized concept of food habit identified amongst Hindus. This does not necessarily holds true and is prone to certain exceptions but the habit of abstaining from beef is something associated with Hindus and in time has become metonymic with Hinduism.

Food as a symbolism serves two important and contradictory functions in a society. It can either be used to divide the society into different lines and strengthen that heterogeneity or can be used to homogenize different elements into one structure. Even the abstention from certain food items in certain contexts can signal affiliation to a certain caste, gender distinctions and social status (Appadurai 495). Following up on the idea that legacies of the past manifest itself in present through Traditions, Food variations evidenced the social transformation and changes in society since Early India. Analysis of Yajnavalkya's statement on eating the flesh of cows in *Satapatha Brahmana* implies that there was a practice of beef eating in India and by his time there were regulations in play on consumption of beef (Sharma 132). This change in consumption of beef must have come from the central strata of society or something initiated by the state itself. Nevertheless, as the process of varna system crystallized itself in the later periods of Early India, Food was used as a tool

of segmentation in the society and those who ate the food forbidden by Brahmins were outcasted. This is evident from the fact that Chandalas were defined as those who sell meat and live outside the city (Fa-Hien 43).

Food became the medium of oppression and tool of segmentation in the society in Early India. Many communities were identified on the basis of their eating habits and the food they consumed. This consumption further led to the creation of identity which in time crystallized itself. By the end of the period of Early India, the word “pariahs” came in increasing usage and was used to denote the communities who ate food items which were forbidden by the ruling society (Watters 178).

Apart from segmentation which would create an identity for a group of people, food also acts as a reminder of the dominant class for those in the lowest of the social hierarchy. The word “Annadaata” or “provider” for the dominant class is an instance where food has metonymic characteristics. At the outset of the social hierarchy, the family structure, in the traditional Hindu society the practice of serving food is the reminder of the hierarchy between men and women. In a domestic environment, man is given first preference when the food is served. This prioritization is an instance which symbolises their position and concretizes hierarchy in the household.

Sometimes the metonymic representations of food for society do not emerge out of preference but by the availability of the type of food in the region. The availability of the type of food results in the compliance of society with that of nature. In Early India, there are instances where a community had to change its dietary habits according to the availability of food in the region. This accustomization did not affect much in a static society. However when the communities were on the move, their dietary habits moved along with them and their arrival into the region which would provide them with more culinary options, they resorted to their usual diet. Not familiar with the reason behind their eating habits and preference for certain food items, the other society made an image of the former community in such a manner that they were never formally acculturated in the society. Sanghadasaganj's *Brhat Kalpa Bhasya* states that in the Sindhu region the monks had to adjust according to the local conditions and non-vegetarian diets of the people in the region. This would indicate that the monks ate flesh more often, which was in contrast with the practice of abstention of flesh or animal food (Jain 167-168).

The contrast in the food habits gave rise to certain heterotopic elements which were observed in Food and culinary. The heterotopic elements were certain food items which were not preferred by the dominant society. It is evident that the machinery of Power Discourse has its tilt towards the dominant communities, it is certain that the food items which were not preferred by the “Centre” came to be viewed as forbidden. The consumption of these forbidden food items would result in a drop down in the social hierarchy for those who consumed and in time one's identity would be associated with the food one eats. The expansion of agriculture resulted in the change of the food habits of different communities and there was an increasing effort to find a substitution for the rituals performed in Early India. The traditional pastoralism was seen as primitive to the settled agricultural life and in time the food habits of this settled life became a marker of superiority.

The change in the food habits affected the life of the people as in the case of a shift from pastoralism to settled agriculture. There is a cyclical process of change when the variables taken into account are food, belief and social practices of the people. When searching for the reason behind the change in the food habits of people in Early India, the balance of probability tilts towards the idea that with the rise in settled agriculture and showcasing it as a marker of superiority and independence, the belief was created that in Otherworld, an animal would eat its eater. The theory of karma spun around the food habits and dietary practices of the people. The *Kausitaki Brahmana* states that a man was to be eaten by the animals in the next world which he devoured in this unless he adopts a certain ritual practice of special potency (Keith 410). This belief of karma has its backing in the acts and practices of the Brahmins, the “varna” which had the power to affect the thinking of the individuals in the society.

Vegetarianism developed as a Brahmanic ideal as a way to break the chain of the alimentary violence and affirmed that it is not necessary to kill in order to eat. This led to a new opposition between men where the attributes such as courage and fear, domination and servitude would no longer matter. Though the idea of domination and servitude lived in the form of pure and impure and a hierarchy of castes based on the food consumed. Abstention of meat became a criterion for purity (Zimmerman 1-2). The rigidity of the social hierarchy would not allow people from the lower division to take up the profession of farmers and peasants. These communities had to resort to the old way of food, the non-vegetarian diets and with the Brahmanical ideals firmly established in the society, the people who largely consumed the non-vegetarian diets came to be viewed as “lower” caste and sometimes not even from the recognised social division-an outcaste. The food and the dietary habits determined the position of the people in the society and through food, the division was so entrenched that when the food habits changed and even when the “upper” castes started consuming non-vegetarian food more often, the divisions remained the same.

Even the idea of surplus in agriculture has changed the food habits of the people. In the pastoralist society, the cattle are the most prominent marker of wealth which is mainly in the possession of those practising the kshatriya traditions. However, the rigidity of the social hierarchy made the flow of this marker towards another varna. The consumption of meat by the kshatriyas was more as compared to the other varnas and the introduction of surplus production in agriculture would ensure donations to the Brahmins whose profession did not produce anything or did not let them possess property like the Kshatriyas. It was necessary for the Brahmins, the highest of the social hierarchy to ensure that this surplus and flow of donation is maintained and in time one sees the rise of agriculture and vegetarianism. In *Rigveda*, there are indications to find substitutes for the sacrifice of the cattle. It states that a devout offering of cooked food is as good as a solemn sacrifice (Kane 775). It is also possible that the magnitude of the consumption of meat of cattle was lessened due to the technical assistance of the cattle in agriculture.

Hierarchies have always existed in the world with the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed being part of social structures. Such a binary has existed since the creation of social hierarchies in Early India, this power dynamics which has been established and solidified through various stages throughout history. Since Early India, there has been a clear identification of what kind of food was considered pure as well as how the food habits of different groups or castes would also come to identify their status as well as the idea of purity (Roy and Sinha 36). Thus, through this continuous process of establishment of hierarchy and the power structure of the society, food has become a symbol of privilege as well as a form of oppression. The idea of purity and untouchability established by the Brahmins through their culturally hegemonic rule in the society led to the identification of one's state or social background merely on the type of food they consume which resulted in a rigorous formulation of social ranks. The creation of these ranks or hierarchies has led to the establishment of the power structure. Caste became an important form of solidifying tool for such hierarchies and the idea of purity and pollution makes it possible for the dominant castes to dominate the lower classes.

But, through the experience of a certain individual in a community actually will give a form of understanding how caste was concretized in the society. A statement by Kancha Ilaiah reflects upon the idea.

While eating we were not supposed to touch each other. But later we could play together and drink together from the rivers and streams. If we had carried our midday food to the grazing fields we sometimes attempted to touch each other's food, but suddenly the rules that our parents had fixed would surface, we would speak insultingly of each other's castes, and revert to eating separately. Within moments, however, we were together again. (Ilaiah 12)

This, of course, is the experience of social structures of the kurumas, the caste in which the Ilaiah was born in, but the existence of caste itself means that the hierarchy which was established by the Brahmanical codes had permeated into their society. This is but one instance which shows how certain ideas of purity and pollution had been ingrained in the society.

The oppression can be seen in many forms and one of the ways in which it exists is that the Dalits are not allowed to eat with others during a festival or wedding. Inter-dining thus becomes a really important juncture where the food acts as a symbol of oppression as the presence of the lower caste and in this case, Dalits would pollute the food of the dominant caste and thus, through this kind of processes the dominant caste ensures the sustenance of social hierarchies. Ilaiah's experience do not explicitly talk about the idea of untouchability whereas it refers to this idea of purity and pollution in terms of coming in contact with food as well shows even among the lower caste groups the ideas have established themselves in such a way that even though Ilaiah mentions that they never worshipped Hindu gods but the cultural hegemony of the Brahmins is such that their ideas of purity had already seeped into that society.

The study of food habits and dietary practices as a tool of social transformation showcases the concretisation of caste prejudice and oppression, a vital process through which the dominant class have extended their control. The leaders of the country, post-independence have tried to remove caste which was identified as utmost evil but even in contemporary India these hierarchies exist and there are still instances of oppression which can be found. It's not just in food habits but in terms of various machinery, the government has established. Sukhdeo Thorat and Joel Lee, delve into the caste discrimination which happens in the Mid-day Meal Scheme (MMS) as well as in the Public Distribution System (PDS). This is important to look at as it shows how the Brahmanical notion of pollution and purity takes up a key role as a form of oppression.

Thorat and Lee observed through a documented study that in the states of Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, which has a low percentage of Dalit localities where the MMS is held. This implies that the Dalit students would now have to go to an environment where the dominant communities exist and face the brunt of a highly discriminate space to just avail the mid-day meal. This, in turn, gives the opportunity to the dominant caste to show their power over the Dalit children and restrict their movements in the village and to even just avail the mid-day meal the Dalit children have restricted access to the MMS which are in the dominant caste communities. Their survey also cracks down on how the social exclusion happens in these various states and how in states like Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, the hiring of Dalit cooks and Dalit organizers of MMS is considerably low, an example of this discrimination is when the students belonging from the dominant caste either go home in the middle of the day for food or either bring packed lunches from home, this action clearly point towards the social hierarchies as well as a form of reminder that the parents of dominant caste do not want the kids to eat food made by Dalit cooks this again reifies the idea of purity which had been established by the Brahmanical codices (Thorat and Lee 4198-4201).

The PDS system has the problem of favouring dominant caste people first and then the Dalits. Discrimination based on untouchability, this usually comes in the form where the goods are dropped by the dominant caste onto the hands of the Dalits, which clearly indicates to the idea of pollution through the touch of a lower caste. What this survey by Thorat and Lee indicates is that even in contemporary India these forms of discrimination related to food or sustenance exists and shows how the dominant caste reasserts its hegemony, though not in large numbers these discriminations in these two systems indicated that the legacies of the past which have practised the idea of untouchability and the idea of pollution, that practice is the base of the oppression which is faced by the lower caste communities.

The food habits and dietary practices of the present trace out its roots in the past. The society in which a certain practice relating to the food items emerged out of need took the shape of traditions over time which has seen its following even at the present. Through an intensive analysis of the kind of food which emerged at a particular period, a conjectural image of the social and economic life can be drawn. The machinery of Power Discourse makes use of symbolism to the extent that the traditions which are deleterious to the present times continue to be followed without questioning. Even the social hierarchies and duties of the people are made in reference to the food. The classes in the society are divided into eaters and food, and this results in an immutable hierarchical distinction between the classes. Manusmriti continuously

stresses this idea. The manifestation of Prajapati on Earth is in the form of a series of mouths. The priest is one mouth which eats the ruler. The ruler is one mouth with which he eats the commoners (Smith 187). This hierarchically circumscribes the lower by the upper in the alimentary terms - the idea that one is more than the one he eats and less than the one by whom he is eaten. This idea was applied more figuratively to the relationship of the class in the social world, the higher orders live on the lower.

References:

- Appadurai, Arjun. "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Aisa." *American Ethnologist* vol. 8, no. 3, Aug. 1981, pp. 494-511.
- Fa-Hien. "Conditions and customs of Central India." *Fa-Hien's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*. translated by James Legge. Oxford UP, 1886.
- Foucault, Michel. "Two Lectures." Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. edited by Colin Gordon. translated by Leo Marshall, et al. Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Ilaiah, Kancha. "Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative." *Occasional Papers on History and Society* vol. 3, no. 26, Nov. 1997, pp. 1-73.
- Jain, Jagdish Chandra. *Prakrit Narrative Literature: Origin and Growth*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1981.
- Kane, P.V. "Chapter XXII." *History of Dharmashastras Vol.II Part II*. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1941.
- Keith, A.B. "Part IV. The Spirits of the Dead." *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads Part II*. Harvard UP, 1925.
- Roy, D N and Shweta Sinha. "Aspects of Caste Organization In Northern India (C. 600 TO 323 B.C.)-A Reappraisal." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* vol. 55, 1994, pp. 35-38.
- Sharma, R.S. "Material Setting and Social Formations in the Indo-Gangetic Divide and Upper Gangetic Basin (.1000-500 BC)." *Material Culture & Social Formations in Ancient India*. Macmillan India Ltd., 2007.
- Smith, Brian K. "Eaters, Food, and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India: A Dietary Guide to a Revolution of Values." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 58, no. 2, 1990, pp. 177-205.
- Thorat, Sukhdeo and Joel Lee. "Caste Discrimination and Food Security Programmes." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 39, 24-30 Sept. 2005, pp. 4198-4201.
- Watters, Sam. "General Description of India." *On Yuan Chwang's travels in India 629-645 A.D.* edited by T.W. Rhys David and S.W. Bushell. Royal Asiatic Society, 1904.
- Zimmerman, Francis. *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.