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Understanding Taste in India: Social Systems to Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT
Food studies includes ideas on the environment, constructions of regional identity and culinary history. Pierre Bourdieu said "taste is the basis of all that one has—people and things—and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others." In the Indian context, his words find relevance in the way food and taste are hierarchized through the caste system. The Indian caste system was born out of the need to segregate beef and meat-eaters from vegetarians, leading to the classification of people as impure and pure based on their tastes. The caste system has, over the years, acted simultaneously as a creator and reinforcer of such taste hierarchies and culinary history evidences such dominant inscription. With time, however, social mobility has increased and, as Appadurai says in the landmark essay "How to Make a National Cuisine," the moral implications of food have shifted. Today, food tradition in India is being documented more than ever, with food blogs being as prolifically abundant as comments, reviews and recommendations of food destinations. These recipes and food experiences, situated in the digital space, have begun defining our interactions around food, opening new windows for Indian food studies as a whole. In exploring these shifts in understandings of taste from social systems to digital ones, we will explore changing trends in the documentation of food culture and its implications for community in India.

KEY WORDS
Caste, Cookbooks, India

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Food played a central role in the life and culture of Indians of all religious communities, social strata and geographical regions. P.V Kane, the great authority on Hindu law, observed that in the myriad dharmashastra texts, the rules regarding the subject of taking meals, bhojana, were second in importance only to those of marriage...food and its consumption have represented at once a medium of exchange and rank and a reflection of personal moral identity and social relationship.

-Frank F. Conlon, *Dining Out in Bombay*

THE MORALITY OF EATING

Food is inherently political. What we eat and how we do so is determined by the larger political, social and economic systems that surround us. What better place than India to find the meaning of this statement: a country where defining a national cuisine is nearly impossible due to the sheer variety of regional cuisines and ways of eating. Known for its food extremes, with scarcity and malnutrition on one hand, and its rich history of spices and treasured, expensive ingredients on the other, India represents a complex context for the study and understanding of food.

Owing to this very complexity, the politics of eating in India consists of multiple aspects, and includes moral, religious and spiritual connotations. It is not just about what you eat, it is also about what you don't eat, and when you choose not to eat. For Gandhi, for instance, fasting was a political act as well as one that he considered absolutely essential to his being (Slate, 2019). He saw it as a form of prayer, a means to disconnect from the material world to allow his body to rest. He saw it as a purification of the physical body and the soul- what we today refer to as a "detox" (ibid). At the same time, his fasts also garnered national attention and became a means of protest. When he encouraged Indians to fast for a day after the First World War and the British rule's denial to grant India home rule, the sheer numbers and commitment to the cause made the fast a mass strike. It was an act of defiance and a demonstration of the power of the people, in the most silent way possible. It was, as Nico Slate says, "a radical protest in a religious act" (Slate, 2019, p. 149). Thus, his choice not to eat, became at once a moral, spiritual and deeply political act.

This overlap of the political, spiritual, moral and social in food is visible in various food practices in India as well. In many ways, food is a site of intersection for all of these factors, making the act of eating one that is loaded with meaning. The food ethos in India is obviously a diverse one. However, most beliefs about food tend to find their origins in Aryan food practices (Achaya, 1994). The belief was that all food had some inherent qualities, beyond nutritional value. When consumed, these qualities would transfer from the food, into the eater. Spicy foods were associated with qualities like lust and anger, while relatively mild foods were linked with peace and tranquillity. For the Aryans, thus, consumption of food figured into a much larger cosmic moral cycle. Cooking and eating were not just about sustenance, but about connecting the qualities of the food with those of the eater. In this way, food becomes intrinsically linked to identity and thus becomes an increasingly important part of who you are and where you come from (Fischler, 1988).

FOOD TABOOS AND CASTE

Rules and classifications help us, in large part, understand and make sense of food. Claude Fischler outlines two such classifications that define a cuisine: the first level classifies food as edible and inedible. Once this classification has been established, a more complicated segregation occurs- one often based on religion and social taboos (Fischler, 1988). Indian food and the many rituals associated with it are inseparable. Apart from the basic classification of foods into different groups based on nutritional value, there is also a division based on what is "pure" and "impure". And these notions are not limited to food items, but also extend to the cook and the eater. Specifically, Appadurai points to how early Hindu treatises on food pertain more to the consumption of the

food than its creation. This peculiar feature of Indian food history marks the trend to regard commentaries on food more as instructional manuals than what we today view as recipe books (Appadurai, 1981).

K T Achaya in *Indian Food: A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food* notes a distinct taxonomy of Hindu food that derives from a distinction of cooking with and without fire. As sources for such histories he notes the discussion of food often happened in ancient medical treatises like *Susrutasamhita* (written around 3rd or 4th century AD) and *Charakasamhita* (written in the 3rd century BC) that devoted over 5 of its 120 chapters to food, detailing the kind and quantity of recommended eating (as cited in Zimmerman, 1987).

These taboos are best understood in the context of the Indian caste system. Traditionally, members of the upper caste did not deem it acceptable to receive cooked food from members of lower castes (Achaya, 1994). So ingrained are ideas of purity and pollution within this system that there were also restrictions on sharing of utensils among members of different castes. No amount of cleaning could purify utensils used by members of a lower caste. Upper caste tastes and sensibilities dictated how food was understood, defined and consumed. Food items that were most valued would thus be the ones most ridden with transactional complexity. Milk was one such item, owing to its versatility as a food and to the fact that it came from the cow, an animal greatly revered and worshipped in the country. Held as almost sacred, milk distribution and consumption were regulated, so as for it not to be "polluted"[1].

Food and ways of eating, do not just mark the boundaries between upper and lower castes, but also between human beings and God (Rege et al, 2009). The upper castes, owing to their knowledge of ancient texts, considered themselves closer to God, and thus deserving of privileges in matters of food and consumption. They even considered the domestic hearth to be a place of sanctity, and often situated it right next to the place of worship in a home. When eating a meal, it was common practice to first offer a small amount to the Gods. For the upper castes, food was understood in the context of religion and was thus treated with associated notions of purity.

Members of the lower castes, owing to these very regulations, did not have the luxury of thinking of food in the same way. The privileges of the upper caste determined the nature of food available to them. As a result, lower castes would often eat what the upper caste wouldn't or deemed impure/unworthy of consumption. The luxury of choice was afforded only to the elite. This is reflective of Bourdieu's analysis of taste, in that, what was and even today is considered "good food" originates from this luxury that the upper castes enjoyed. The cuisines of the lower castes, on the other hand, were born out of necessity, originating from making the best of what they had (Deepak, 2018). Chicken feet stews, animal blood and ant *chutney* became delicacies for them. Their tastes developed, not from concerns about nutrition or through ingenious cooking methods, but through what was left over. The Hindi word *joothan* means "that which is left over after eating". This was a precious word for people belonging to the lower castes. It was what made their daily meals and what dictated their understanding of flavour, food and the social system they were a part of. The following quote by Om Prakash Valmiki, a Dalit[2] (lower caste) man, for instance, highlights the ways in which immense pleasure was derived from eating leftovers from upper caste weddings:

[1] "Pollution" here refers to the upper caste idea that objects or spaces touched or inhabited by members of the lower caste would become impure or contaminated and thus unusable or unfit for consumption thereafter.

[2] Dalit means "broken/scattered" in Hindi and Sanskrit. It is a term used to refer to the members of the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system. This is considered an acceptable, non-derogatory term of reference as it is the name the members of this group gave themselves in the 1930's.

> During a wedding, when the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom's party, were eating their meals, the chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets. After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf plates were put in the chuhras baskets, which they would take home to save the jhootan sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeat and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The jhootan was eaten with much relish." (as quoted in Rege et al, 2009)

In the hierarchy of food, sweets and dairy products were considered upper caste luxuries. While for the upper castes, sweets represented the highest form of food, since they were prepared with milk and clarified butter; for the lower castes, they represented a sense of desire, one more aspirational than real (Deepak, 2018). In a *Marathi* folk song, a woman belonging to the lower caste asserts that a bowl of sweets will never compare to a bowl of beef, because the beef can give them a lot more nutrition and actually fill their stomach; implying that sweets are a luxury of the rich. The phrase is relevant in many ways. For one, it implies that sweets are a luxury of the elite and entirely impractical for lower castes. It also highlights an important difference in the understanding of food, thinking of it in terms of taste and as an assertion of social status versus thinking of it in terms of sustenance and necessity. For the upper castes, a bowl of sweets does not mean too much. Easily affordable, it is a symbol of celebration and happiness. For the lower castes, however, it symbolizes privilege, wealth and prosperity.

Another important thing the phrase does is resignify that which is looked down upon, in this case, beef (Guru, 2019). In Hinduism, beef is a taboo meat to be avoided at all costs. Again, this is because the meat comes from the cow, a being so revered in the religion that it is often referred to as "Mother". Thus, the lower castes' consumption of beef was seen as a reinstatement of their lowly status. In this phrase, however, a Dalit woman flips the narrative by dismissing the symbol of wealth (sweets) and choosing the food of the lower castes over it.

This kind of resignification is also visible in present-day Dalit protests. Often, Dalit agitations are named after the foods specific to their cuisine (Masoodi, 2016). For instance, they consume the head (*mundi*), trotters (*khur*) and digestive system (*sundari*) of a goat and several protests are thus titled *khur-mundi-sundari andolan* (head-trotters-intestine protest). This is important because in the process, they are reclaiming the foods they eat, that are otherwise looked down upon by the upper castes, and using it to assert their rights.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit activist, believed that the hierarchization of food is what led to the creation of the caste system and the systems of power within it. He stated that in this system, vegetarians were placed at the top of the pyramid, followed by people who consumed meat, with beef-eaters at the very end (ibid). Even today, the consumption of beef is a site of immense contestation. These decades-old rituals and taboos still seem to dictate tastes. However, in this complex hierarchy, foods considered more "elite" are also increasingly aspirational. Previous research, in conversations with members of lower castes, reveal that they have begun to change their eating habits in order to fit in with the more elite (Chigateri, 2008). While the caste system still finds a stronghold on Indian society, a lot has changed around it. Employment opportunities, education levels and mobility have all increased, leading to rural to urban migration. People from different backgrounds now work together, use the same public transport and live in the same neighbourhoods. As a result, in order to situate themselves appropriately in their milieu, members of lower castes sometimes stop consuming beef and other such delicacies, at least outwardly. This may be understood as a kind of sanskritization (Guru, 2019). However, even here, it is important not to misunderstand this as a personal choice. Decisions to forgo the consumption of specific foods, known to belong to specific social groups, seem to have more to do with forgoing markers of social status and avoiding judgement than with personal agency. In this context, aspiring to a

more "sophisticated taste" also means aspiring to a higher caste and class and what is understood as a better life.

TASTE AND DOMINANT INSCRIPTION

Though Pierre Bourdieu wrote about taste in the context of French society, the construction of taste through the construction of social hierarchy is a narrative account that we also see evidenced in the history of taste making in the Indian sub-continent. In his 1984 ethnography on class in France, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* Bourdieu noted the relation between culture and value as power and class and how taste operates at the boundaries of classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Even within the Indian context, regional identity was forged through food and as dishes became metonymies of regions, the distinctive marker of place was more its food than its people. Even though gastronomic practices differed between castes in the same region, the broader associations of food as region were written in elite terms. Unsurprisingly, a brief survey of the history of cookbooks in the Indian sub-continent reveals this practice of dominant inscription

As is frequently the case in food studies, referring to cookbooks in India reveals only a certain slice of the historical pie. What it showcases more than anything else though is the absence or exclusion of certain transcriptions of identity. What Appadurai's landmark essay points to is that while the history of cookbooks reveals that there has been a nationalization and standardization of Indian cuisine, this practice of dominant transcription has led to misrepresentation of several regions and further reveals the textual trace of social hegemony in caste terms. While an available chronology of the cookbook would reinforce this automatically, tracing foodways through Indian historical sources also reveals dominant transcription and social exclusion, through a selective documentation of exalted memory. The written record does not in any way subsume food memories but, as this essay will detail, the gaps in documentation and cookbook chronology are refracted through other records. As Appadurai (1998) so eloquently says,

> Cookbooks, which usually belong to the humble literature of complex civilizations, tell unusual cultural tales. They combine the sturdy pragmatic virtues of all manuals with the vicarious pleasures of the literature of the senses. They reflect shifts in the boundaries of edibility, the proprieties of the culinary process, the logic of meals, the exigencies of the household budget, the vagaries of the market, and the structure of domestic ideologies. The existence of cookbooks presupposes not only some degree of literacy, but often an effort on the part of some variety of specialist to standardize the regime of the kitchen, to transmit culinary lore, and to publicize particular traditions guiding the journey of food from marketplace to kitchen to table.

While the dominant trace of foodway stories for India would focus on the history of trade, a side history emerges, as is the case for example with Arabic cookbooks like Al Warraq (that date to the 9th century), when we see how an early 12th century Sanskrit text, *Manasolassa*, has incidental descriptions of food habits. The five book compendium *Manasolassa,* details this in an entire volume, namely Book 3, *Bhartur Upabhogakarna.* As early treatises on ancient India, such texts, as Achaya states in the case of the Keladi Kingdom's King Basavaraja's S*hivatattvaratnakara,* as a work that includes food as one of the 64 arts are looked to as a historical source for ecological and food histories of ancient India. (Achaya, 1994).

Recently, recuperative attempts have drawn from records that also directly recorded age-old recipes. In keeping with these records of royal patronage, recent publications such as *The Mughal Feast* (which transcribes the Persian *nuskha-e-shahjani*) and *Khazana: An Indo-Persian Cookbook*

with recipes inspired by the Mughals also draw on the limited availability of archival sources for their descriptions. The former is a translation from the original Persian manuscript of handwritten recipes from the kitchen of Mughal emperor, Shah Jehan into English and the latter (as the cover informs us is written by the winner of Masterchef 2017) is a contemporary adaptation inspired by a history of traditional dishes. All things considered, the abundance of Persian and Mughal food references is also as mention of archival abundance--recipes were extensively documented in Emperor Akbar's *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Alwan-E-Nemat* written during Emperor Jehangir's time, and many cookbooks derive such historical inspiration (Vishal, 2019).

Such historical developments reflect a specific culture of food and gastronomy that are now framed by the modern-day genre of the cookbook. This was even the case in Richard II's era, when we already see the textual appearance of a homogenized "curry" that denotes a single ingredient wrapped in mystery and lore. "Indian" food was a similar invention for nation and diaspora. In K T Achaya's foundational historical companion, chapter 10 details "regional cuisines" through archaeological and literary evidence. Achaya notes the history of arrival of foods from the new world where he finds that "language carries clues to food movements and adoptions wherever cultures have come into contact," right from very ancient times to later historical periods, and in his description of region too Achaya relies on finding culinary traces in language. So, in the case of Karnataka, he delineates a progression over 1000 years and also identifies specific regions such as Hyderabad, Kerala etc. as containing points of contact and modification. It is this selective transcription of taste, as region, which constitutes the secret history of cookbooks. Just as Arjun Appadurai (1998) has argued in "How to Make a National Cuisine", a narrative of nationalization conceals the specific elision of region and caste.

Moving on from "moral and medical beliefs and prescriptions" and royal kitchens, the rise of the modern-day recipe book gains importance with dislocation. As Appadurai notes, when communities move away from their original homelands and nostalgia drives the need to remember, we see a new category of food writing emerge in the form of transcribed recipes. The "textualization" of food into cookbooks already indicates privileged arrival. As many of these works are in English, Appadurai notes that cookbooks in postcolonial India circulated amongst middle class women through magazine recipes and manuals of aspiration. Given that many of these publications are in English, it also indicates an urban readership, whether in India or abroad. The popularity of Madhur Jaffrey's cookbooks in the west, with titles like *World of the East, 1981* and Tarla Dalal's bestsellers in India, most famously, *The Pleasures of Vegetarian Cooking*, point to a new audience ready to learn the ways of cooking via an imagined past or cosmopolitan future. Whether in the form of cookbooks or community anthologies, these collections tended to select a few samples of the vast cuisines they claimed to represent, and in so doing often ended up constituting the category of that very community's identity on the basis of that sample selection of consumption.

Today too, whether in food blogs or other media, the narrative of food memory is still recorded through dominant inscription. The perception of the digital world as one of freedom, where many voices mingle does not bear out much subaltern inscription. With greater accessibility and fewer barriers to language and class, one would expect the digital to be a site of diversity and inclusion, especially with regard to food and cooking. However, the voices of diaspora, in blogs like Archanaskitchen.com or the emphasis on vegan options on foodomania.com reflect the aspirations of a citizenry that craves the familiar or the sanctioned surprise through a known cosmopolitanism. Well known food journals and platforms cater more to food in relation to lifestyle choices, rather than a new historical documentation of what was largely left out in the past. The food histories of the lower castes remain in oral histories, just as they have always been and still struggle to find their way into mainstream digital spaces and bestselling cookbooks. Just as there was a historical lack of culinary documentation in India, today we have homogenized the

caste distinctions to focus on common aspirations for fast food, western cuisines or, closer home, food that is largely upper caste and elite. If the history of culinary documentation and its present have shown us anything, it is that those who remain hungry, are also left off the page. In order to even begin piecing together and understanding the great mystery that is Indian food, we must first acknowledge and actively bring forward the oral histories and food memories of the lower castes, the voices that could change the entire narrative of culinary history in India.

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