

Social stigmas in Food: A Source of Socio-political Conflict

Jilu Jose Devasia

Assistant Professor on contract
Bishop Chulaparambil Memorial
College for Women,
Kottayam, India

Abstract

The lifestyle choices of the present day humans have made their life more complex. Basic necessities of people like food, shelter and clothing seem to be hugely politicized. Early humans, whom we unfortunately call primitives, consumed food for their physiological needs and benefit; but the ‘civilized’ human often seems to use food to exhibit his/her social standing. So there is a conscious hierarchisation using food in the social sphere. The advertisements for food items deliberately create a class/ caste divide in order to indulge in the process of ‘othering’. This paper titled *Hierarchisation of Food: A Source of Socio-political Conflict* will argue that food, more often than not, becomes a ‘class signifier’ thereby keeping the class/caste conflict alive. As a result we find the pseudo food-culture propaganda propagating mindsets which lead to segregation and its natural consequence victimization. In the Indian context the Dalits are an important group of people who are subjected to this kind of maltreatment using food. Financially disadvantaged and socially underprivileged, they are deprived of “good” food. This paper endeavors to question the ‘order of hierarchy’ followed in serving dishes even in the postmodern age on the basis of class and caste distinctions.

Keywords- *Lifestyle, Caste, Politicization, Hierarchisation, Class Signifier, Othering*

Introduction

Social stigmas can be reflected even in food which can be a source of socio-political conflict called hierarchisation. This further leads to a question why is there hierarchisation even in food? The idiosyncratic exposition of each social being is associated with its culture. Food traverses with culture. Food is embedded in culture and culture is embedded in food. A seamless unity holds the inseparable binaries. The organic bond between food and culture disseminates owing to the advent of food politics. The synthesis of food politics leads to socio political conflict and political identity; the way how we eat, how we decide what to eat and above all what we eat is hugely politicized. We can see how class is constructed through culinary from a political lens. Culinary political stories germinate from one of the oldest institutions i.e., the family. We see the dynamics of how food is served in a hierarchy basis first to the head of the household (grihapati), and then the rest. In the same way, we see how food is served and difference in the menu of food serving from VIP to the rest in special occasions. While travelling by flight, we could observe that food is first served to the so called 'business class' people and then the rest. This is an overt expression of the class- constructed bridge between the people. So, why is there inequality in how the food is served?

Food no more seems to be 'essential' for us but rather 'instrumental'. The 'tapioca' which is the staple food of Kerala has enchanted Keralites with its richness in taste. Tapioca represents the indigenous food culture that is formed in that part of southern India This very same food item, which was once the household name and household commodity, has been commercialized recently because of too much of instrumental value adhered to it. For example, the 'tapioca' which is available at the rate of Rs10/kg while selling in the local market, when bought and cooked wouldn't cross more than Rs.35; but the same food when eaten from the so called best five star hotels can cost ten times it. Every single human being who has eaten from there, would say that it's not any better than their mom's cooking. It is then the question arises to eat or not to eat from Taj. Well our pride and dignity becomes inferior when we eat any food for low rates. Quality of food no more matters, sometimes not even the 'quantity'. One is ashamed to say that they had food from one of the local shops, but on cloud nine when the same food is eaten from 'star hotels'. What pride do we get in spending money for food that doesn't fill our stomach? Yeah! though it won't satisfy our appetite it satisfies our class consciousness. It is then we should ask the question why is there hierarchisation of food?

The contemporary culture industry frames societal habits. For example the advertisement's highly impact today's society. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "the culture industry as mass deception" a benchmark once set "is not for an age but for all time" is proved true still. Despite from the motive of selling their product, advertisements have ingrained caste/class consciousness into the mindset of people.

It is often observed that the children from the sophisticated upper middle class are usually depicted in the advertisements of energy drinks like 'Horlicks', 'Boost', 'Maggi', 'Oreo' etc. The advertisements imply that those products are meant for the so called upper class people. In a latent format these advertisements attempt to construct a psychological system even amongst children which further increases the gap between different classes.

They also reinforce the stereotypical construct of femininity which is highly patriarchal. The culinary skills, as depicted in advertisements, shows it to be women's 'duty' which when performed by men becomes 'professional'. A typical example is the 'Kitchen surprise' advertisement of 'Oreo' where we see Jyothika baking cake for her husband. This portrays how Indian women, especially housewives, are expected to wait patiently with a beautiful smile for their husbands. The same idea can be traced in Kate Millet's, renowned work 'Flying' which says. "I'm slammed with an identity that can no longer say a word; mute with responsibility."

In relation to this, the unwritten law of serving habits requires an analysis. If a woman serves, it's her 'duty'; and if a man serves it's 'her' failure. Why such concealed hierarchisation even in food-serving habits? This exemplifies how gender plays seminal role in food politics.

Man is a social being. There lies in him the social urge to share food with his fellow beings. The recent ad on KFC's chizza presents us how a guy is rejected by his friends to dine for pizza only because of his looks. The advertisement which only lasts for thirty seconds shows how the young guy is rejected each time even though he dresses up well. Finally it's only when he decides to change his hairstyle into spikes which is the trendy fashion amongst youngsters he is accepted by his friends. Now the question is how could one's attire or appearance really matter in having what food they want?

Another striking feature of the advertisements is its ability to captivate the minds of the audience. It is surprising how, an ad that lasts for short duration makes such lasting impressions in the psyche of an individual and makes them biased to different products. To reiterate the words of Theodor W. Adorno "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu".

The big fat Indian weddings are believed to highlight the social status of the upper middle class. Plated meals or buffet are the most common modes adopted by people. Nowadays, an average price of Rs.500 per person for plate is usually asked by the caterer. In the buffet system we see a variety of 'starters' and soup served at the beginning to which finally leads to the main course meal. By that time some people (especially children) would have enough food and wait for the desserts.

THANKS TO THE STARTERS! Thus avoiding the main course meal, all these would surely lead to a massive wastage of food. The hidden politics of buffet system is the 'law of diminishing marginal utility'. The law of marginal utility states that as more and more units of commodity are consumed, marginal utility derived from every additional unit must decline. It is also called 'fundamental level of satisfaction' or 'fundamental psychological law'. For instance, the favourite food of a person when eaten first, gives maximum satisfaction. When the same person eats the same food for the second time, the total satisfaction will increase. But the utility added for the second (MU) is less than the first. Usually modern man prefers buffet system because it is considered as sumptuous and luxurious. We, no more exhibit any emotional attachment for food but try to showcase our prestige. These trends in organizing extravagant ceremonies sweeps right through the invisible membrane of class division to the lower class that are forced to imitate like the upper middle class. In this case we see how hierarchisation again plays a vital role.

In gulf countries like United Arab Emirates, for wastage of food, fine is demanded by the concerned authorities. The surplus food which is left after the functions in Muslim communities is given off to 'Etheemkhannas', the community that runs shelter for homeless people.

In the context of ritualistic cleansing, followed during the festival of 'Shivratri,' we see tons of milk, ghee etc poured on the 'shiv lingam' as part of a libationary act. The same kind of wastage is seen during the release of new movies of celebrities like Rajnikanth, Kamal Hassan etc where enormous amount of milk and other edible products are lavished over the posters. More than half of the Indian population is starving whereas; the rest who have got ample food is wasting it.

For instance, the romanticizing of western tradition shows how food etiquette tries to exhibit 'class. Juice is no more a drink to quench ones thirst! When juice or coffee is offered in business meetings, one often sees a portion of it being left. To leave the portion of juice seems to be a matter of 'dignity' amongst Indians recently. Is it because of the whoosh sound that would make your colleagues giggle at you?

The South Indian style of food serving was usually on ornate banana leaves or thali instead of using platters and bowls. Usually Indians eat with their hands and rice is rolled into balls. The using of fork and spoon while having food, using tissue paper or finger bowl before and after eating are the recent trends adopted by Indians to imitate the westerners. The tremendous change in the cultural landscape of modern society is reflected in the way food is dined and consumed.

The transition, from having food sitting on the ground to having food in the table as like the westerners; shows how etiquette has influenced us. Leaving behind our culture and tradition, we have set the standard as 'western. The colonization had quite an important role to play here. Western table manners and the English etiquettes have infected us. In fact, west is still the norm, by default.

Hierarchical wave in terms of food, we have lost our identity. We are giving up 'Bharat' and taking in the idea of western defined 'India'.

Treat! Birthday treat! Anniversary treat! first salary treat! If we take a survey of the treats offered, we find that teenagers and youth would prefer to offer western food rather than their own traditional food, due to a matter of pride. One feels there is lose in their value if they use such kind of food. Why do we assign a 'hierarchical' value to food?

Narendra Modi's request to blend fruit juices in fizzy drinks suggests the supreme ironies of India. Though India is the second largest producer of fruits, we willingly let the foreign brands dominate the markets. We have this pre-conceived notion that western products will always be of superior quality, than Indian. This idea which was cultivated in us by the colonizer still decides our choice of goods. Though, we are being deeply consumerised, we still stick on to the politicized eye of ours and blindly trust the western goods which flows across the boundaries. This exemplifies the incongruity between the developed countries and the third world nations; snippet of hierarchisation in international forum.

Tipping in restaurants is a common phenomenon originated from America in the late Middle Ages. It then spread to the British commercial establishments. Now Indians too have adopted it. As a matter of fact we see the upper middle class people giving tips as a token of appreciation for the food prepared but the same people hesitate to tip if they have food from local shops. We see hierarchisation even in tipping of food in restaurants. "Few American restaurants such as Sushi Yasuda and Riki restaurants have made the news for banning tipping at their restaurants, paying their wait staff higher wages. In 2015, several restaurant groups also banned tips."

The malignant tumor called caste/class identity, plays a major role in the lives of the downtrodden. Taking into account the Indian context, we see the Dalits were the oppressed and repressed ones in society. Even though caste system seems to be abolished over fifty years ago, its legacy is still felt in modern society. The most menial jobs are done by these sections of the society and they are the ones who are often deprived of 'good' food. Eventually, they are the ones who are forced to have the 'leftovers'.

The atrocities unleashed to the Dalits can be illustrated with the following example. The ethnic cleansing known as 'MadeySnana' (Spit Bath), which was practiced in specific states like Karnataka and Mangalore, had a humiliating tradition where, after the Brahmin's had their food, the Dalits had to roll down on the leftovers of the plantain leaves. It was believed that in doing so there illness would be cured. The ritual in its original form was banned, still the modified version of the ritual usually takes place in the month of November. Last year, people were not allowed to roll over the left-over food of Brahmins, the casteist aspect of the ritual is done away now.

The Indian Tamil film 'Kaakamuttai' written and directed by M Manikandan, crosses the spatial frontiers that language creates and fascinates all kinds of audience. This phenomenal movie revolves on the story of two slum children's desire to eat a morsel of pizza. Here we see 'pizza' as a semiotic sign of food which can form economic and social constraints and how politics plays a crucial role in food identities. The gist of the movie focuses "the effects of globalization in a metropolitan city. It critiques politics, media and reverses the quest for a pizza into a symbol of consumerism which is shunned at the end. The ending leaves an indelible impact and finds resonance with the middle class movie-going audience irrespective of their cultural background."

The movie holds a mirror up to socio political realities and comments how food can stimulate class divide thereby again forming a hierarchization in today's postmodern society. Initially, the movie begins with the desire of the two slum children to have a 'normal egg' but tries to be contended with the 'crow's egg'. The younger boy tries to save a portion of his breakfast and gives it to the crow so that, by the time, the elder brother can climb the tree and take the 'kaakamuttai'. Even though there are three eggs in the crow's nest, the elder brother picks two, which shows that the lower middle class give importance to their 'needs' rather than their 'wants'. Ironically, the two brothers name themselves as Chinna 'kaakamuttai' (Crow's Egg the Elder) and Periya 'kaakamuttai' (Crow's Egg the Younger) and the whole movie does not reveal their names.

The enticing advertisement of pizza on TV enralls the children and their mouth start drooling which shows the impact of advertisement. The delivery boy of the pizza who asks them the way, catches their attention and they beg him to just open the cover of pizza to know how the pizza looks like. The delivery boy does if in return they would help him find the way. The delivery boy opens the square shaped pizza box and the two children are lost in the aroma of the pizza. The smell lingers in their nostrils and they plan to somehow make their dream of having a slice of pizza come true. One sees an instinctive desire of any individual to relish the mind pleasing food. In order to savour a slice of pizza the children involve in all kinds of herculean task. They collect coal from railway tracks, take the drunkards to their home. Once they have the money, they go to the pizza hut to relish a piece but unfortunately are again denied and called as "kuppathu pasanga" as they are shabbily dressed. The children toil hard collecting more and more coals to buy a new set of dress. Once they have enough money they go to 'Mylapore City Center' to get clothes. There follows a barter system between the kids of upper class family and the slum children ,where we see the desire of middle class children to have panipuri despite the warning from their father that it is unhealthy. Manikandan tries to convey the desire for food by an individual irrespective of where or what they belong to. With the new attire the children try to enter the pizza hut but only to be whacked,

humiliated and insulted again by the owner. Even though they had money they were denied entry in to the restaurant to have food.

“Foods as class markers are so important that, elites have often resorted to “sumptuary laws” to protect themselves from status emulation. Such laws ban the “lower orders” from eating elite foods, wearing elite clothes, riding elite horses, and so on.”(Understand Food and Culture, 136)

The movie shows a clear hierarchisation of food between the haves and have nots. An idea is ingrained that modern or foreign food like pizza, burger, KFC’s are meant for upper middle class and traditional foods are only meant for the lower class.

There is a scene where the upper middle class boy offers the brothers the leftover pizza of what he had. The younger brother instantly accepts the offer but the elder one refuses. The refusal of the leftover pizza by the elder brother highlights that the lower class always has dignity and we fail to recognize it.

The desi version of the pizza which the grandmother made would have been nutritious though not visually appealing. The kids who refuses to eat that represent each one of us who try to imitate the western ‘classy’ cushions.

Status, class, and prestige comprise probably the most important area signaled by food. Jack Goody (1982) has shown systematically and in detail what many of us had more or less suspected: fancy cuisine is a product of social differentiation. Societies divided up into elites and commoners have a corresponding division of food. Really elaborate cuisine, such as that of modern France, Italy, or China, apparently depends on the rise of a middle class and of regional elites and middle classes. The interaction between class and region, and between central and regional societies, gives us fancy cooking. (Everyone Eats,133)

According to the preamble of the constitution, India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic, republic. Even though we see India is claimed to be a ‘secular’ country, food which often establishes mutuality, solidarity between groups became a battle of existence due to the recent ‘ban of beef’ controversy. It affected the poor people. Food thus became a divide for society. “Vegetarianism is a Sanskrit tool adopted by certain castes to enhance their ritual status. It is not an expression of solidarity with nature, but an act of aspiration. This is precisely why it is important to unravel these strategies so we understand the complex dynamics of food and how it can be a weapon in the hands of few”

There is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor depending on the availability, attainability and accessibility of food. The production of food is mostly from the cosmopolitan and hence its accessible and more feasible to them than the rural areas. There is class diversification even

in the production of food. For example 'Atta' has different brands. The 'Atta' of low cost would be of low quality and is made pertaining to the underprivileged, whereas if the 'Atta' is of high cost the quality will be high and the cost too. Hence according to affordability we see how the companies hierarchize their products.

On one side we see people who are famished, the other side who are obese because of too much intake of food. This divergence in nutrition can solely be accredited to the polarity in terms of class and income. The society keeps on favouring the privileged, whereas, the poor aka lower class are left to fend for themselves with the least or no support from the authorities or the community in which they live in. They are often looked at with spite or hatred, which reflects even in the kind of food which they get.

We see the hierarchisation between the producers and consumers. The producers like farmers who have spent years working hard, earns very less. The upper class consumers don't often seem to give that value to the stuff that they get. We see too much of wastage. Basically, the society is constituted by producers, consumers and yet another sect which feeds on the waste alone.

The food items which are for sale inside well kempt in shops appeal more to our (egoistic) senses. Though of better quality, buying food items from a local shop would seem uncouth and not polished to most of us. Even the marked price systems which curtail our freedom to bargain don't seem to bother us. We prefer branded curry powder over the homemade curry powder.

The value for food differs according to class. A classic example is the value attached to the traditional South Indian dish 'kanji' (rice porridge). When it is the only meal which lower class could afford, the upper class uses it to starch the clothes? The class disparity is very much evident from the way they make use of the same thing. When it is about sustenance to one group; the other attaches mere instrumental value to it.

Hierarchisation of food is a manmade construction. The paper throws light on how in different aspects of food we find hierarchy. The choice of food lies for an individual. It does not matter what we eat, how we eat or what we eat. It is always a matter of personal taste. The problem arises when we try to find which food is 'superior'. Every food is unique in its own way; each food is special to its own culture. There is nothing wrong when an Indian has a pizza. The best way to associate with different cultures is through food. But, while eating pizza if we think ourselves as highly developed individual and remarks about another person having idli and sambhar as 'inferior'; then there is problematization of food. Of course, there are differences in every food. There should be differences but not in association with class/caste .The recent Chennai floods showed us that whichever class/caste we belong, ultimately all those haves and have nots had to be satisfied with the

‘same’ bread and biscuit dropped from the helicopters. INSTEAD OF JUDGING THE DIFFERENCE,LET’S CELEBRATE THE DIFFERENCE!!!

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