

FOOD PRACTICES AND STRUCTURING POWER HIERARCHIES

Abstract of the work

The present endeavour is to understand how food traditions and practices are taken as one of the strategies employed by the social categories (social groups such as castes & religions) to stay and to be located in the desirable positions in the social hierarchies. Food is an important tool used by the caste, religion, class categories to define and claim their respective positions in the social structure. Food is an identical agency that defines the boundary, pattern and possibilities of a social group and an individual. Food system is worthy of study because it is a fine test-bed for analytical considerations of social change and practices. The dietary and culinary practices and traditions are social product, which are culturally used by the social categories who claim upper position and used to assign lower position to other groups in the ladder of social structure in one way or other. Narratives of food and dietary practices are used as a tool to (re)define social positions by the caste and religious groups, by which these categories locate their positions in the society as higher or lower. Food traditions, practices and the narratives are used as resource for the construction of power hierarchies and hegemonies. The power relations and the process of constructing hegemonies cutting across caste and religious identities would be sufficient enough to be explained through studying the nature and the dynamics of food practices.

Keywords: Food traditions, food practices, power hierarchies, social hegemonies, narrative capacities/resources, social construction hegemonies.

Introduction

Food and eating in Indian society have been understood as a complex set of social and cultural activities, designed through traditions and practices claimed to have thousands of years of history. Food is a natural claim of every living species. The struggle for subsistence, of animals, cannot be understood

understanding the necessity of the provisions of food and eating. In the larger context of human society, food and eating is social and cultural, rather than biological. Eating practice is very much determinant of cultural and social biographies of people. It varies from culture to culture and from time to time. There are several groups who follow more or less the same pattern of eating wherever they are, and still other groups who easily follow eating style of the group to which they are in contact.

The early sociological enterprises on food has very interesting note on practices relating food production and consumption. The earlier studies mentioned food as one of the components that help to understand a community, rather than as a complex system that exert certain degrees of regulation on its members. Food has always been an important dimension in the everyday life of human beings in a number of ways. Poverty as a social problem, malnutrition and obesity as health related issues prevail in a varieties of ways in different societies. Norms related to consumption is set in every country to understand the socio-economic conditions of the people's living. Food is also used to identify the social positions of people and the distinctive ways how everyday life is structured.

Food Traditions and Food Practices

Food practices and food systems are studied through wide varieties of approaches by sociologists and anthropologists. Scholarships on food is considered to be significant since food consumption is considered to be one of the core activities that is common to all human societies. It is through the social constructions of food and food practices that social groups claim their positions. In the process of structuring the social hierarchies, social groups such as caste, class, use food practice as one of the distinctive and distinguishing factor. This is done through narrations of their idiosyncratic patterns associated with food. But the narrations of the legacy of the past is not uniformly done by different groups, which are found to vary. The social

groups (caste, class, religious etc.) possess different capacities to have their own narrations through which their distinctiveness is socially constructed. The resources required for the narrations to be recognised by other groups greatly depend upon the position that the particular group being occupied in the social ladder. The acceptability of food practices and the narrations of another group is also socially defined.

Traditional norms, rules and rituals of eating has been subjected to modifications constantly. Food has been treated as the single most important factor ensuring group loyalty. Many a times the adherence to the similar food pattern convey a number of meaning as far a group member is concerned. Religious & caste hegemonies of food practices could be studied through narratives. Food has been assumed of having a variety of roles to be performed as far as a group is concerned. Food performs the role of an element of gratification to individuals and groups at the same time, in a variety of ways. The construction of ideals regarding food practices takes place through deliberated efforts of a few. Crystallisation of the same infuse strong emotional bond towards the iconic food. The food in turn is believed to unite the group; narrative traditions would certainly work on this direction. This is how food narratives and narrative capacity of a group become important. Through this, the cultural practices, construction of dietary practices and the politics of food shall be understood without establishing its relationship with caste practices.

Studying food practices through its narratives is one of the best tools or methods for understanding the power relations underlying a social structure. Being the principal medium of social interactions, food brings into focus the hidden aspects of power relations as social life, as well as production of social facts and people (Hastorf, 2017). The power relations cutting across caste and religious identities would be sufficient enough to explain the power relations. The diverse ways of announcing the food pattern and the use of traditional capital to narrate the traditions are the expressions of power that each group possesses or believed to possess.

As a prime instance of consumption (Wilk, 2004), eating recommends itself as a mundane and routinised activity, which is founded in bodily habits and learned taste, of both sensual and social type. Eating is a propitious area for investigation because it can incontrovertibly be characterised in terms of the material, the corporeal and the mundane, and by repetition, routine and convention.

Food Traditions and Social Significance

Anthropologists found in food habits and rituals important sources of cultural meaning and diversity which revealed patterns of social organization (Douglas, 1984). Sociologists showed some interest in the social arrangement of the meal as an institution (Simmel, 1991) for the drawing of the boundaries of sociability and, increasingly as a means of social differentiation.

The meal is perhaps the principal concept for the sociological understanding of eating (Wood, 1994). The meal is a major institution of social organization, for families and for societies. Meals can be, and usually are, highly rule-governed, rules covering, in different degrees, what, where, when, with whom, how and why eat. Rules thus orchestrate social interactions and underpin judgments about affect and respect. Conduct repeatedly performed and reproduced generates relationships, bonds, commitments, understandings, and rationales (ie practices) (Warde,). Food habits are seen as the culturally standardized behavior in regarded to food manifested by individuals who have been reared with given cultural tradition. These behaviors are interrelated with other standardized behavior in the same culture (Mead, 1997).

Narratives are important cultural practices that are identical to the social categories and explains the pattern of living that gives shape to social structure. Understanding how narratives exercise power is therefore more pertinent than ever (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). The narrative capacity of people is determined by several factors and it is mostly used to define their position in the social structure and claim respective status in the social

hierarchy. Narrative, is thus a subclass of discourse (Molly & Monroe, 1998), which is in turn defined as a constitutive structure of meaning (Howarth, 2010). The scholarships of the Indian sociologists such as MN Srinivas (1995), GS. Ghurye (1969), Andre Beteille (2012) etc. on food practice that are power inductive explain the empirical reality of the food pattern.

Although the sociologists consider narratives as a simple pattern of expressing the cultural practices through words, it is understood as an important indicator of understanding the complexities of a social structure. Narrative can be a way of ascribing meaning and explaining the logic of the social constructions, that people use to announce the specific and unique pattern of the way how the cultural patterns, such as food practices are constructed. When we define power as the capacity to produce effects (Morriss 2002, 12), narratives and practices about food, produce the desired effects towards the dominant categories who occupy power and privileges compared to others in the socio-cultural domains.

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Indian Sociologists' Account of Food Practices

Several Indian sociologists have accounted the food traditions existed among different caste and communities across India. According to Ghurye, (1932, 3) “restrictions on feeding and social intercourse” is one of the distinctive features of Indian caste system. For village panchayats, one of the offences which deal with utmost priority is “eating, drinking or similar

dealings with a caste or sub-caste, with which such social intercourse is held to be forbidden". There are several rules regarding food traditions being practiced as norm among different sections. "First, the twice-born castes; second, those castes at whose hands the twice-born can take "Pakka" food; third, those castes at whose hands the twice-born cannot accept any kind of food but may take water; fourth, castes that are not untouchable yet are such that water from them cannot be used by the twice-born; last come all those castes whose touch defiles not only the twice-born but any orthodox Hindu. All food is divided into two classes. "Kachcha" and "Pakka". The former being any food in the cooking of which water has been used, and the latter all food cooked in "ghee" without the addition of water. "As a rule a man will never eat Kachcha' food unless it is prepared by a fellow caste-man, which in actual practice means a member of his own endogamous group, whether it be caste or sub-caste, or else by his Brahmin 'Guru' or spiritual guide." But in practice most castes seem to take no objection to "Kachcha" food. from a Brahmin. A Brahmin can accept "Kachcha" food at the hands of no other caste; nay, some of them, like the Kanaujia Brahmins, are so punctilious about these restrictions that, as a proverb has it, three Kanaujias require no less than thirteen hearths. As for the "Pakka" food, it may be taken by a Brahmin at the hands of some of the castes only. A man of higher caste cannot accept "Kachcha" food from one of the lower, though the latter may regale himself with, similar food offered by a member of one of the castes accepted to be higher than his own" (6-7).

Ghurye also speaks of the other dimensions of the rules of commensality in the same book. "The ideas about the power of certain castes to convey pollution by touch...The idea that impurity can be transmitted by the mere shadow of an untouchable or by his approaching within a certain distance...In Bengal there are some people who will not accept any "Kachcha" food even from the hands of a Brahmin. "Pakka" food can be ordinarily taken not only from one's own or any higher caste, but also from the confectioner class, the Myras and Halwais.....Even wells are polluted if a low caste man draws water from them, but a great deal depends on the character of the vessel used and

of the well from which water is drawn. A masonry well is not so easily defiled as one constructed with clay pipes, and if it exceeds three and a half cubits in width so that, a cow may tum round in it, it can be used even by the lowest castes without defilement. . . ." Certain low castes are looked down upon as so unclean that they may not enter the courtyard of the great temples. These castes are compelled to live by themselves on the outskirts of villages....It appears from a passage in the Satapatha Brahmana that property of a Brahmin was exempt from the royal claim, The remains of the sacrificial food must be eaten by nobody but a Brahmin.....Baudhayana exhorts, for a Brahmin to eat the food given by a Sudra is a sin that must be expiated; and to avoid taking it is one of the few things the practice of which assures a Brahmin of bliss in heaven. A person who dies with a Sudra's food in his stomach will be born again as a pig or a Sudra. If after partaking of such food a Brahmin be so unwise as to have a conjugal intercourse, the offspring will belong to the Sudra, and the Brahmin cannot ascend to heaven. In another passage Vasishtha gives a list of persons whose food must not be eaten. They are the outcast, the Sudra, the physician, the carpenter, the washerman, the cobbler, etc. (8-79).

According to MN Srinivas (2002, 166-171), "restrictions on inter-dining" is the distinctive feature of caste system. The Commensal and conjugal relations (civil/religious disabilities/privileges of groups) are specific identical features of a group. "the rules of endogamy and commensality marked off castes each other. Srinivas observed that "Dumont has argued that the idea of ahimsa (non-violence or non-killing) which was developed by the Jains and Buddhists in the sixth century c, was appropriated by the Brahmins, and they had to give up eating beef and become vegetarians in order to retain their place in society. The cow which was sacrificed on occasions and its meat eaten, became sacred and unkillable (avadhya). According to Dumont (1970), the Brahmin became identified with the cow and the Untouchable with dead cattle: ... the opposition of the pure and impure is applied in a social context in which the Brahmin and the Untouchable are at the opposite poles, the

latter responsible for dead cattle and the former a paragon of purity, assimilated to the cow” (1970, 151).

Srinivas quotes from Dumont that, to him, “caste, he asserts, that purity is 'constitutive' & deterministic of hierarchies. Hierarchy, let it not be forgotten, is an ideology, and ideology provides an ordering of datum.. and the act of becoming conscious of something in fact always means making a choice of one dimension in preference to others: one can only see certain relationships by becoming temporarily at least, blind to certain others. This sort of complementarity can lead to a real contradiction when it is a matter of completely ordering the datum in accordance with a single principle. In our case, power exists in the society, and the Brahman who thinks in terms of hierarchy knows this perfectly well-yet hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such without contradicting its own principle. Therefore, it must give a place to power without saying so, and it is obliged to close its eyes to this point on pain of destroying itself” (Dumont 1970).

To Dumont, “the Chandala, for instance, was relegated to the cremation grounds' and lived 'on men's refuse. He 'is none other than the prototype of the Untouchable” (1970: 52). “The Chandala's untouchability was the consequence of his duties at the cremation ground, and of his eating food rendered impure by its having come into contact with someone else's saliva. (Even today it is regarded as both defiling and degrading to eat such food. To charge someone with having eaten food defiled by another's saliva, is indeed a serious insult)”. Srinivas says that “it is obvious then that the ranking of jatis on the sole ground of relative purity would assign a lower rank to the meat-eating royal caste as compared to the vegetarian merchant or farmer” (2002, 180).

According to Yogendra Sing (1997, 16), “social stratification in India relates mainly to the formulation of conceptual schemes and their operationalization through indicators of status, levels of equality and inequality, occupational differentiation or degree of homogeneity and heterogeneity of groups in status hierarchy and of interaction variables such as pollution-purity (through exchange of food articles, co-dining, etc.), dominance, fusion, fission, etc.”

Singh sees “noticeable loosening of the restrictions on inter-dining; widespread violation of food taboos as one of the reasons for the decline of caste restrictions” (p.43). But the “people who occupies dominant position in the society ensures the strict vigilance of non-occurrence of the breach of caste rules”.

“Selecting a set of conceptual attributes of caste, such as endogamy, occupational specialization, hierarchical ordering of caste and ideological-religious basis involving restrictions on social intercourse and commensality”, Imtiaz Ahmad (1973), states that “any group can define their power and status in terms of other groups”.

Onam, Food Narratives and Structuring Hegemonies

Onam as a festival has a non-brahminical origin and challenges the hegemony in its original form (myths - oral and textual traditions) and content (practices). As a season of preparations of receiving Mahabali, also known as Maveli, a Asura King, people involve whole heartedly with the richness in the diverse traditions of the ritual practices associated with Onam. Earlier, (until second half of the 20th Century) people could celebrate the Onam in such a way, closely identical with their own specific traditions. It was with the initiative of Nair Service Society (NSS), along with other caste (Hindu) groups, wanted the state government to declare Onam as the national/regional festival of Keralam, in the line with the festivals recognised by the state and celebrated by the Christians and Muslims.

A change was introduced in the year 1961 when Onam was declared as the national festival of Kerala under the cabinet of then Chief Minister Pattom Thanu Pillai. But unfortunately, after the declaration, in the following year, Kerala was unable to celebrate the newly-declared festival due to the Indo-Chinese war. Nevertheless, after 1961, Onam evolved into a grand public festival by the decree of the Kerala government.

There were dissenting voices raising questions regarding the history and the secularist dimension of the festival. But Onam continued to be hailed as the national festival of Kerala by consecutive governments. The harsh

famine of 1982 had also halted Onam celebrations in Kerala. It was in the first half of the 1980s that Onam celebration was organised under the directive of the Kerala Tourism Department. With that, the festivities acquired a greater significance and appeal.

Different caste and communities celebrated Onam in a wide varieties of ways. The regional differences in the matter of celebrations are very common even among the same communities. Since each communities recognised the rituals are part of the community identities and thereby the individual identities, deciding uniform rituals become very difficult. Text books, a series of articles, booklets, pamphlets were published by the government, local bodies, clubs and other NGOs mentioning the myths and the significance of celebrating Onam. Along with these, the descriptions about the preparations of the food and curry items for the 'Sadya' were also elaborated. This has given a sense of celebrating Onam with its sacredness and with ritual purity. The indoctrination of the puritarian notion of the Onam became possible through the designing the nature of cuisines to be served on Onam days, especially Thiruvonam (second day) There occurred an organised attempts to bring the diverse traditions of the celebrations and the rituals were brought into a particular line.

Onam is fundamentally a festival of harvest. It was conceived as an occasion for having a wide varieties of celebrations. Food has always been a essential components in every festivals. For Onam, the nature of the festivities are very well designed and defined according to the people's culinary culture. The variations and the multiplicities of culinary traditions and practices in regions and among different groups and communities are always seen as pluralistic nature of Kerala society. For the working class, and the lower caste groups, Onam was an occasion for having festive diet, both meatarian and vegetarian food. May people used to have meat/fish during the day as part of their diet. Later on through the concerted efforts of the leaders/people, media, textbooks etc. vegetarian Sadya become consensual type of food. People use to have meat as one of the curries on the plantain leave in the lunch. Different sections of people use to have meat or fish in the Onam Sadya. But the regular

and consistent efforts form such categories of people who advocate vegetarian food during the Onam *Sadya*, they used several means for the propagandas.

Establishing interconnectedness of the narratives, stories, myths and enticement of the popular imaginations facilitate the establishment of the dominant hegemonies. Narratives of the food, to be taken/eaten, manner to be followed are Brahminical rationality. The establishment of the ritualised patterns of food practices are always represent and symbolise the dominant traditions and culture of the land. The pattern of food / ritual performances associated with food practices are determined by the dominant narratives and traditions. The struggle between the different narratives have been set aside with the win by the dominant over the subordinated traditions. The subordination of narrative traditions are, in effect the struggle for position in a social structure. The presence of other communities whose food traditions are rich and rooted in the traditions, comparatively long and are proved by time, do mark their own traditions. Food traditions and culinary practices of a community, whether religious or caste, such as Christian, Muslim are capable of bringing their own traditions.

As a community, both Christians and Muslims with their own internal diversifications, established their own specific cuisines identical to their own. Adherence to the community norms and values are identified as the following of food traditions and practices of the community. The different denominations among Christians and the different factions among Muslims use the food traditions to distinguish from one another.

Narrative capacity to mobilise and manage the resources that facilitate one individual or group(s) to influence the social and cultural ecosystem that one/group live(s). The struggle for gaining control over the resources and people are always depend upon the ability to narrate life, culture and history in respect of one's own favour. Higher the social position one enjoys, has direct influence upon the ability and the consensus created. Food is visible manifestations of hierarchies of different kind. Owning food 'specific' tradition(s): notions of belonging, property and identity

Narrative capacities imply caste and subcaste specific narrative capacities – narrating very specific, own narratives of know histories. Gaining space in the social structure and defining roles in the social system of the local traditions whether in agrarian or urban space. Establishing connections with the specific histories or historical events that would enhance the potentials for seeking position and gaining control in the social structure. Position of the groups in the social structure, in comparison to the other groups with whom the former group is in struggle for power. Food traditions and the practices are the foundations upon which the social constructions are taking place.

Conclusion

Eating is a socially constructed behaviour pattern of a population that has a significant importance in the everyday practices of their life. The socio cultural constructions and determinants of eating out function as an identical mark of people. The present research was designed in such a way to understand the complicit norms associated with food consumption and eating out. A comprehensive approach to study the food and human relationships were taken account, because food and eating is more than a physical activity; and it is social and cultural in its most complex sense. The transition from home and domestic atmosphere to the commercial places indicate a complex system of change. Any effort to understand the pattern of eating out as a constituent of social practice is sociologically challenging. Indeed, it is important to figure out the way food and eating indicate the degree of relationships and its varied forms.

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