Eating Bodies: Foodscape and the Gastronomical Experience in Southern India

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“The funeral baked meats,
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage table.
(Shakespeare, line 180-182)

Abstract

Food is an essential aspect of everyday life but it also encompasses the entire gastronomical experience. The gastronomical experience is the entire act of cooking, consumption, or even presentation of food. This paper explores the significance of foodscape in everyday life in the contemporary South Indian society and how it reflects lived body and its relationship with lived culture through the act of consumption, celebration of consumption and most importantly through the geography of consumption. The everyday and inevitable act of food consumption in everyday foodscape embodies individuals into a cultural paradigm by reinforcing foodways with every meal, snack or even coffee. Hence, the act of ingestion of food through the body and internal digestion of food in the everyday space, metaphorically ingests and digests individual’s identity for the dominance of collective cultural identity.

Keywords

Foodscape, Cultural Identity, Foodways, Gastronomy, Euclidean Space, Lived Experiences, Culture, Hierarchy, Cultural Paradigm, Everyday Life.

I. Introduction

Culture of any society is created through its gastronomical experience that translates ways and means of cultural practices and norms. With the gastronomy of culinary delight, and its involvement with consumption by individuals within a cultural setup comes the package of gastro-politics. Gastro-politics as Arjun Appadurai states is the conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions and exchange around food (Appadurai 1981: 495). The culinary experience within a foodscape is an important medium of contact between individual and culture. It is also an important disjuncture between communities and cultures which gives rise to gastro-politics and fissures within a societal setup. Foodscape and differentiation and aggregation with foodscape highlights the idea of separation and individuals’ association with culture. In India, sharing of food in a particular space or the act of not sharing food and space reflects how individual cultures are created, upheld and hierarchized.

Language plays a fundamental role in human existence and help human being connect with themselves and the society at large. Similarly, Food is the language of human desires and feelings. Food is not something that is basic to human existence but it allows individuals to partake in their culture’s growth. Human beings’ approach towards food has always been mediated by cultural, political and cognitive phenomenon. When we talk about food, we are, then, in the midst of a rich and complex mosaic of languages, grammars, discourses and traditions, all of which are tightly intermeshed. In this binding, they overlap and even “contradict” each other (Montoya 7). Human diet is regulated cognitively. Hence, eating is much more than ingestion and digestion. The act of eating involves choices and decision making. Food conveys multiple meanings that evokes memories, and constructs identities. Food creates foodways that make it relevant for individuals to develop a sense of community.

Culture is a complex term. It encompasses universe of meanings that are associated with values, customs, beliefs and practices. It is the defining aspect of human existence and central to human understanding. Food and culture have a close-knit relationship as they build the foundation of human identity. During the twentieth century, many sociologists and anthropologists analyzed that there are certain values and norms in eating patterns that are symbolic of broader structures in societies as a whole, and argued that what to outsiders may appear to be strange food custom may have a function that helps bind that particular culture together (Atkins, P and Bowler 5). Food is a part of any civilization and civilizations fashion themselves with culture when societies follow specific practices, food eating habits and rituals that differentiate one society from the other. Indian culture is diverse. It is a melting pot of various ideologies, religious beliefs, and postcolonial identity. Food in India acts as a symbol for its national past, present and future.

If one turns the pages of past and analyze the early Indian society of gatherers and hunters, one can observe that exploitations of natural resources always held prime importance to satisfy human needs. Fire transformed the nature of food human beings consumed from raw to cooked. It gave taste to the human palate. As human beings gained understanding of how they could exploit fire, it transformed the manner in which they handled their food supply. Gradually, increase in population gave rise to exploitation of many more aspects of nature. Hunting sustained life of human beings. One of the pioneering advocates of the hunting model, Sherwood Washburn wrote that taste of meat was one of the major characteristics that distinguished man from apes. This habit altered the entire way of life for human beings (Washburn 7). Hunting involved cooperation within the group, division of labor, sharing food, understanding of the community’s well-being and the usage of various tools. Meat was not only essential for human survival but it was a critical part of human evolution, cognitive development and development of economy. People began to protect and wisely use their animals as they gained the knowledge about sustenance and survival.

During the Vedic times, human beings believed that life and nature were unpredictable and hence, they felt that the only way to please gods was by performing rituals.

“There were three different kinds of Yagnas [1]: cooked food offered on the domestic hearth; public sacrifice, and the soma ritual” (Sen 37).
Kantilya’s Arthashastra from around 300 BCE states presence of dedicated people in-charge of state slaughterhouses. Animal sacrifice or the public sacrifice comprised of killing of animals and offering the meat to god. Animal sacrifice was a significant part of Brahmanical rituals during those times and fire was considered the purest element through which they could offer food to God. It was symbolically considered the mouth through which God eats. There was a particular procedure of cooking meat and it was always cooked in a cauldron or baked in a chulha [2].

Cows have always been a part of every holy ritual since the Vedic times and they were always an important part of the Vedic economy. The consumption of meat was reserved for the elite Brahmanical groups. Gradually, with the widespread reach of Buddhism and Jainism, cows became a symbol of veneration and as a result, there was an urgent need to ban animal sacrifice in the Hindu Brahmin society. Nineteenth century onwards, there was reaction against sacrifice, as expressed in the doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence. The protection of cows became a symbol of Hindu identity and this subject ever since has been the center of political consciousness of the contemporary Indian society. However, cow products like milk, ghee, and yogurt became a part of religious rituals and slaughtering of cow was considered sinful.

In India, food reflects foodways and it moves beyond nourishment and is extremely political in nature. Britishers, Mughals and many more rulers came to India, colonized the Indian subcontinent and ruled over our land and mind for several years. As a result of colonization, food practices became diverse. In 1954, shortly after independence, the Bharatiya Janta Sangh (BJS) offered a manifesto that re-stated the ban on cow slaughter in India and it was further banned by the Indian constitution. Further in 1994, slaughterhouses were closed by the court for health reasons (Robbins 4). These issues attracted political circles and became a part of their strategies. The meaning of meat was transformed and used for political purposes. Hence, Food can be seen as a cultural system that assigns meaning to ideologies and spaces. The role of food in certain spaces defines the acceptance of that space as a part of culture and labels the identity of an individual in that space. One can assume that 21st century Indian society dwells in its ‘post-ness’ and it is re-colonized by the influence of contemporary politics which cushions itself on religious and a caste-based society. When an individual buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion, this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information, it signifies. (Barthes 24)

Though consumption of food can be seen as a gastronomical experience that excites sense of taste, and smell, it cannot be limited to merely a gastronomical experience. Gastro-politics is conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food (Appadurai 495). Gastronomical experience translates ideologies through the plate and voices out politics of that environment.

II. Euclidean space and Religion

Descartes in his work, Principles of Philosophy, he mentions the idea of Euclidean space where the terms ‘place’ and ‘space’ do not signify anything different from the bodies in that space (Descartes 11). The food space acts as an Euclidean space which cannot be separated from the bodies within that space. These spaces are crucial as they are important markers of culture and identity. Judith Butler argued that gender is ‘performative’. Butler believed that identities are performed by ‘stylised and regulated act of repetition through time’ and suggested that there cannot be any agency outside the boundaries of discursive practises that make this identity viable. (Butler,185). Theorists Gregson and Rose extended Butler’s theory and expressed that spaces are performative articulation of power. The physical space acts as a site through which ‘powerful, citational practises are displayed, re-enacted, resisted and transgressed’ (Gregson and Rose,435). Food spaces illuminate the relationship between food and the societal beliefs and stereotypes. Place where one eats, or feasts reflect the individual’s association with the culture they have imibed and the politics of everyday life, caste, class and even displacement. Through food spaces, the dominant forces of culture that operate on the basis of religion and caste politics, can be seen as one kind of power play that controls identity of individuals.

Religion plays an important role in understanding any culture. The major part of the makeup of any religion is contributed by the ways and means of cooking and consumption of food. In chapter 26 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus prays and offers bread to his disciples saying,

“Take, eat, this is my body.” (Gospel of Matthew chapter 26)

Then he offers another prayer and gives wine saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is Poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Gospel of Matthew chapter 26)

Christ shared bread and wine in his last supper which was symbolic of his body and blood. Even in the contemporary times followers of Christianity celebrate this as the Eucharist tradition. Usage of ingredients, receptacles, utensils and the manner of eating are unique to any religion that determine the identity of the people following that religion. In the novel Aavarana by SL Bhyrappa, major conflict in the life of the main character Razia revolves around food. The politics of vegetarian and non-vegetarian diet is plays a major role in the lives of the characters in this novel. Eating involves pleasure, utility and sociality. Food is endlessly interpretable as a gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation, just like the post-structuralist texts. (Eagleton 1). Food has the capability to transform into a situation. In the novel, Razia confronts the dilemma of whether to embrace Hinduism, the identity she was born with or should she accept change and adapt to the ways and means of her husband’s faith, Islam. She says, “The religion I was born in regards to beef eating as a sin. This is a belief and practice I adhered to until I converted to Islam.” (Bhyrappa 25) and to this remark, her husband, Amir states, “Eat a bit of beef, rarely. Besides, what’s the difference? The cow is also just an animal, like a lamb or a goat.” (Bhyrappa 26)

Religion is a ‘collective representation’ of social groups (Durkheim). Religion is a way in which societies present its moral ethics and standards for every passing generation. Foodways becomes complex when involved with religion. In the Hindu thought, food is physical and moral representation of ethical standards of religion. It is central to prayers, rituals, and mark of sharing within community. In the above mentioned situation
with respect to consumption of beef, there is the ‘principle of aggregation and differentiation at work’. This model was developed by Immanuel Kant where he analysed that people try to locate themselves in the world, tend to view ‘similar’ things as the same (aggregation) and treat things slightly ‘different’ as if they were entirely separate (differentiation) (Anderson 155). Religion uses the same model where food acts as a marker of ‘aggregation’ and ‘differentiation’, where people of the same religion must eat certain food products, a certain way and must avoid particular food items to differentiate from one religion to the other. For Lakshmi aka Razia, consumption of beef was not considering ‘just an animal’ it was deeper and a question of her self-respect. It was about adapting to a newer identity and surpass her acquired idea of ‘aggregation’ and ‘differentiation’. As a result of constant pressure from her husband and his family,

“One hot weekday afternoon, I (Razia) dragged him to Hotel Ammaan, ordered a gosht biryani and ate it as he sat watching me. His eyes shone with approving happiness. Lunch done, I told him, ‘Amir, I ate gosht to prove that I’ve cut off myself completely from the roots of my previous faith. But if I eat this every day at home, it’ll mean I’ve sacrificed my self-respect.’ ” (Bhyrappa 26-27)

The consumption of beef was not only about proving that she did not associated herself with Hinduism, the faith of her birth but it was also about her identity. Similarly, for her husband and his family, the refusal of consumption of beef would make them ‘suffer in eternal hell after they die’ (Bhyrappa 27).

The experience of being in the world is that of constant navigation, of locating oneself in relation to other, of orientation of spaces and in time, of charting a course of placement and displacement, and of movements through an array of geographical and historical phenomenon. (Tally 1) Spaces play a crucial role in understanding human condition and ideology. Food spaces create food environment which helps human beings locate their identity in relation to the other. Even after consuming beef in the hotel, Razia instructs her husband not to force her to consume beef in the house as that would rip apart her self-respect. It is important to note that in any religion, space of home acts as a sacred space. Home demarcates the realm of one’s own culture. Food consumption plays a vital role in differentiating identities and spaces. For Razia, idea of home was the understanding she developed as a Hindu brahmin child where she grew up in a strict vegetarian household, where the idols were placed in a particular room and anything outside the accepted Hindu religious norm was not considered ethical. The outside space of the hotel represents the idea of choice. The space of hotel marks the realm of unknown or the other. Home on the other hand, is where one identifies with their community and religion as everyday religious practiced in the space of home. Religion is so deep-rooted in the Indian consciousness that it cannot be separated from an individual’s identity and how they associate themselves with the world at large. Lakshmi exhibits her embodied identity by designating home as the sacred food space where the norms fixed by the dominant forces felt important than her own rationality and perspective. On the other hand, purchasing and consuming beef in the outside space of the restaurant contributes to construction and representation of a safe socially imagined space where Razia felt she did not violated the larger discursive framework of the social norms of the identity she was born in and the identity she embraced after marriage. In that sense, food consumption is symbolic of the constructed social difference between fat or thin; Hindu or Muslim; rich or poor.

Michael Foucault says ‘we are living in the epoch of spaces’ (Foucault 1). Spaces are an extension of individual’s identity that are regulated by the social ethics and discourses of our society. Food spaces through foodways reflect Gastro-politics and voice out cultural stereotypes, and ideologies. If ‘we are what we eat’ then we are also ‘where we eat’, ‘what we do not eat’ and ‘how we eat’ (Mansvelt 20). Food and food spaces have an important status in the lives of human beings that contributes to construction, representation and differentiates bodies and identities.

References

[1] Yagna is a Sanskrit word that means a ritualistic sacrifice with a purpose or objective.
[2] Chulha is a Hindi word which means a small earthen or a brick stove.
[3] Foodways is the intersection between tradition, culture and history. The term was coined in 1942 by University of Chicago graduate students.
[4] Colonization is an act of ruling over the indigenous people of that area and imposing the colonizer’s ideology on the colonized.
[5] Re-colonized is a state of being chained in the meshes of dominant ideology in the post-colonial world.
[6] Lakshmi, after her marriage not only changed her religion but she changed her name to Razia.


