

## Conclusion

Bourdieu writes, “One cannot fully understand cultural practices unless ‘culture’, in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into ‘culture’ in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food”. (*Distinction* 1)

As a microcosm of culture, food speaks volumes about various systems that mingle and coexist within culture. As many food historians and scholars argue, food offers a rich avenue to study human life in its entirety. While food provides a passage to understand various social changes and conflicts, the property of food to tackle issues and bring about social changes proves that food isn't something to be dismissed of as a mundane element of culture. Rather, it engulfs within its structure, meanings, stories and realities of the world. The story of a food item is often the story of slavery, colonialism and civilization. European trade across the world revolved around food like potato, corn, tomatoes, chocolate etc. These are the foods that revolutionized the diet, economy, social structure and politics the world over. Therefore studying events and social phenomena through food opens up many facets that otherwise go unnoticed.

Food represents the aspirations, dreams and desires of its consumers, while at the same time foregrounding identity, power relations, gender and class affiliations. Because of this reason, food as a subject has attracted the attention of literary and cultural scholars who examine food as a site on which meanings are constructed. Food, an explicit marker of one's taste, is looked at as a signifier that reflects one's class, social status and power. In Bourdieu's examination of taste as a social weapon, food performs the primary function of segregating society through creation of class hierarchies and boundaries.

Coming to the ethnic communities that fall outside the caste divisions and form the fringes of the society, food habits and food related rituals mirror deep social structures that make up their culture. The lack of a fixed meal pattern, the aversion towards inaccessible food, rich knowledge about the indigenous plants and herbs are the features that distinguish the food domain of dalit groups like the tribals. Community bonding brought about through food sharing holds special significance for socially weak communities since it is through these occasions that they celebrate their identity and share their common food longings.

One cannot clearly demarcate cuisine on national or ethnic terms since no food culture embodies a unified cultural experience. But the existence of a marginal food culture that reflects the poor socio- economic stature of people cannot be denied. Efforts to create borders on the food realm have been an ongoing process. Kancha Ilaiah writes in his *Post Hindu India* that “Caste is a colossal compartmentalizer of food culture” (8). He gives a detailed analysis of tribal food culture and explains that the indigenous knowledge trapped in them makes their food unique and varied. Food choices of the tribals are looked down upon by others as uncivilized and barbaric. He goes on to talk about the tastes that determine the backwardness of communities like the tribals. The notion of civilization is a fluctuating concept that changes across communities and nations. Food cultures are determined on the basis of caste groups in India, opines Ilaiah. He also dwells on the concept of vegetarianism and non- vegetarianism. While a vegetarian diet is regarded as pure, the non vegetarianism diet is considered impure or uncivilized. Carrying the argument of vegetarian- non vegetarian diets as pure -impure forward, Ilaiah argues that when a dalit adopts a vegetarian diet, it is considered as a process of *sanskritisation*, at the same time when a non-dalit indulges in a non-vegetarian diet, it is not seen as uncivilized or impure. (5-8)

It is important to reconsider the binaries that food creates in order to comprehend how social injustices are brought into being and are maintained through time. Food exerts its presence in multiple, yet subtle ways on the society. The root cause of most inequalities that stem from casteism could be traced back to rules dictating food choices. Disparities would fade and boundaries would dissolve once the deep seated prejudices revolving around food are set aside. One needs to look at food within the larger context of structures in which it is placed. An understanding of food helps one rethink not only on notions of impurity, dirt and discrimination, but also ideas of health and nutrition as cultural constructed notions.

Myths surrounding the food of the dalits are influential in structuring prejudices. Food, which is intrinsically tied to the occupational duty of the dalits, mirrors their everyday aspirations. Whether it is the *Madigas* who peeled the skin of dead cattle to convert it into leather, the *Malas* who guarded the village from external threats, the *Kumhars* who made pots and sculptures, the *Gallas* who reared the cattle or the *Chakalis* who washed clothes, dalits were dehumanised for their occupational roles from which they had no escape. The mode of spirituality and other aspects of culture like art forms and food were in conjunction with their caste occupations. It is important to understand how certain food comes to be identified with and is invested with notions of dirt and impurity if untouchability is to be rooted out. Different dimensions of food come into play through observations of dalit eating habits and food. Illiteracy, unemployment, malnutrition, staggeringly low mortality rates and the continuance of poverty are closely linked to food. For the Dalits whose history witnessed excessive brutality on the site of food, food rarely occupies a position that they are proud of. Their hesitance towards sharing their cooking experiences or food preferences or tastes stem from the generations of long battle against the exploitative oppression they have been facing at the expense of food.

Anthropological studies have proved that social intervention through food is an effective way to combat critical social issues. Therefore studying food of a socially and economically weak community not only unveils the social relations that hold them, but also helps one understand the ways through which depravity could be curtailed. When the food of the dalits is dismissed off as unclean, unhygienic and nutrition-less, it is important to place food in the dalit cultural context and examine their food choices, likes and dislikes, and attitude towards food.

While food predominates among other cultural entities in shaping identities, food of the marginalised marked by difference in food choices, cooking methods and consumption patterns give them a distinct status that is mostly derided in the society. When the discourse on whether a separate dalit aesthetic is required continues, it is necessary to look at dalit cuisine and its representation along with how it is perceived and received by the common people. Gayatri Spivak's dictum of 'whether the subaltern can speak' finds resonance here. In an environment of abject poverty and unemployment, food is the sole object of a dalit's existence. The search for food to quell the hunger of the family goes on. Food defines their purpose of life and continues to be a site of deep humiliation and embarrassment. With limited quantities, lack of any fruits or vegetables and the large membership among families, food rarely occupies the position of relish or joy.

The researcher's experience with the dalit community in Kerala revealed a world of staggering poverty, hunger and deprivation. The journey of dalit food started off with the hope of discovering a unique culinary culture that the community ought to be proud of. The hypothesis of the research was based on the literature review of Sharmila Rege's *Isn't this Plate Indian?: Dalit Histories and Memories of Food* which debunked the myth that dalit cuisine is not worthy to make an appearance in the dominant food industry ruled by cookbooks and cookery channels. The work,

that records dishes rich in nutrition and taste, argues for a positive representation of dalit food in the mainstream food domain and addresses the silence around dalit food. Though this work provides a brilliant insight on the subject of dalit food, the observations gathered cannot be generalised as common features of dalit food. Just as the concept of homogenous national cuisine and ethnic cuisine doesn't exist, dalit cuisine also cannot be categorised as a unified entity. Each household that has its own economic stature is marked by their food choices. However much dalit food is eulogized, a large number of dalits still live on a meagre diet. In the report presented to the Ministry of Minority Affairs, 45% of the Scheduled Tribes and 33.8% of Scheduled Castes in rural India live below poverty line.

While documentation of the culinary tradition of dalits has brought dalit cuisine to the notice of the masses and has managed to receive attention through food festivals, their food gets often glorified in the process. Dalit food gets adopted as a menu option in tourist homes and resorts as a marketing strategy to enthruse food lovers and tourists. Political debates surrounding beef festivals or ban on certain foods are born when the tastes and preferences of two communities come in conflict with one another. With attention now being paid more to alternate cultures, ethnic cuisine has managed to get noticed. With novelty becoming the trend, looking for alternatives to attract the masses has become common. Dalit food occupies luxuriant hotel spaces and is marketed with much pomp at food festivals or exhibitions. Like dalit cultural forms and art, food has also entered the field of cultural appropriation. The capitalist society that we are living in offers little space to look deep into the core of dalit issue where abject poverty rules the life of most dalits in India. Awareness on the domain of dalit food shouldn't be limited to its mere presence in an exhibition stall or a dish in a five star hotel. An understanding of the ways in which dalit food gets represented is crucial. Receiving the tag of an exotic culinary experience will not do justice to the

problems that millions of dalits face on the issue of food. A study of dalit food opens up narratives of suffering, labour and survival. It portrays dalit life in all details, shedding light on the conditions of weak economic status and social discrimination.