

Introduction

Studying cultural artefacts, art forms or objects of everyday social existence gained recognition with the growth of cultural studies. The question of power and ideology embedded in socio-political structures came to be addressed when the inter-disciplinary field of cultural studies delved into daily occurrences of life. Raymond Williams, the Welsh Marxist critic who undertook extensive Marxist readings on culture and civilization, considers the word 'culture' amongst the most complicated two or three words in the English language. Culture is a complex whole that is made up of knowledge, values, art, morals, beliefs, laws and customs that a society is tied with. The growing discontent with the establishment and the ferment that the Western society was in during the 1960s led the progressive thinkers, students and academicians to rethink on the established set of ideas on which rests culture. It was with the establishment of Frankfurt school during the inter war period along with the pioneering contribution of Richard Hoggart, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and various others that the discipline of cultural studies took roots.

Stuart Hall, the Jamaican born cultural theorist who rejected the notion of culture as that to be appreciated, had immense influence in shaping many minds. Hall investigated spaces of culture where unjust power relations reside. Some of the works that moulded cultural studies include Williams' *Culture and Society*, *Keywords*, *The Long Revolution*, Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and E.P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. The concept of 'Culture Industry' propounded by Adorno and Horkheimer explains how the consumerist, capitalist culture becomes the breeding ground for production of art on a large scale.

Popular culture that looks at a wide spectrum ranging from objects and places of entertainment to digital culture and hyper reality forages into unexplored territories, shedding light

on commonplace, yet ignored corners of what can be called the complex block of 'culture'. Researching popular culture offers wide opportunities for cultural theorists and scholars. This makes socio-religious institutions that are built on the labyrinths of power, the central focus of cultural analysis and scrutiny for scholars of cultural studies. The lines between high and low culture, elite and marginalised art get increasingly blurred as studies and research in cultural studies look at the underlying aesthetic of art. The Arnoldian notion of culture as that which is the best known and thought in the world comes in for a toss when the world of subaltern culture based on oral myths is unwrapped. The possibility of alternate aesthetics and art paves way to reconsidering spaces of art.

John Story, in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* lays down different definitions through which popular culture comes to be looked at. He sees popular culture as a field accommodating texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. He mentions Raymond Williams whose notion of a text is made up of different cultural forces namely the dominant, emergent and the residual. He also identifies a link between the articulation of a particular cultural force with the social circumstances and historical conditions of production and consumption (6-11). Within the folds of popular culture lie multifarious subcultures, behaviours, attitudes and trends that catch on with the populace. Research on popular culture scratches beneath the patina of social media, entertainment shows, reality programmes, pop music, graffiti paintings, street plays, cyber space and magazines.

Food, that remained unrecognised as a subject of research till the early part of the nineteenth century attained scholarly interest with the investigation of culture turning its attention to ordinary aspects of life. From its role in defining one's identity and culture to its ability to unify and demarcate communities, food reflects multiple aspects of an individual and a community.

Drawing from Bourdieu who considers food to be a marker of social status and class, food has been taken up as a source to understand power relations arising from distinction in tastes that rules class differences. Food undoubtedly mirrors a person's social, emotional, economical, religious and political identity. Food gained attention and popularity on various platforms of media over the recent years, thus occupying a significant position in the field of popular culture.

Studies on food got a boost with the spurt in various food industries that placed food at the centre of cultural enquiry. The profusion of cookery books, food blogs and magazines, food narratives and articles, cookery channels and reality shows on television, celebrity chefs, and food-centric movies testify the growing value and interest that food has attained over the recent years. Concepts like 'food porn', a term coined by the feminist critic Rosalind Coward are ruling the elite food industry that gives overriding importance to the presentation and indulgence of food. Food-spaces like coffee houses and restaurants began to be seen as spaces of consumption that promote a certain cultural taste or experience.

Globalisation and the wide spread attention that food industry has garnered over the recent years have lead to the breaking of food barricades. Hierarchies break when people from different social groups share their food. People's interest in knowing another's culture through food has increased over the recent years. Food offers the sole experience of tasting an alien culture. This is the prime reason why food permeates travel narratives.

The discipline of food studies looks beyond the mere quality of food as a nutritional requirement and integrates its concerns with that of anthropology, history, cultural studies, economics and sociology, making it an interdisciplinary field of study. Food history speculates the history of food and studies the cultural, sociological, economical impacts of food. Food historians

identify food as a relevant medium to understand the social structure of a society. It was in the late 1970s and 80s that anthropologists started looking at food as a symbolic substance that was embedded in meanings. Paul Levy, British author and journalist who, along with Ann Barr shares credit for the coinage of the popular word 'foodie', considers Michael Pollen's *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, written in 2013 as a major work that would shape the discipline of food studies. With an array of books, journals, and conferences dedicated to the studies on food and many universities adopting it as a discipline, food has acquired a status of much critical enquiry. With the first food journal *Petits Propos Culinaires*, published in 1979 and the first conference on food Oxford Food Symposium held in 1981, research on food has engaged academicians and scholars for over three decades.

Food centric narratives are breaking new grounds in the literary scenario. Food that figures in literary texts can no more be dismissed as insignificant and its ability to offer a rich understanding of the cultural context in which the text is placed cannot be underestimated. R.S Khare's contribution to the field has been immense. His work provides an in depth understanding into the working of food on the society and the individual. Arjun Appadurai also made significant contribution to the area of food studies by delving deep into the unexplored territory of cookbooks.

As a deeply layered system of significations, food echoes the pulse of the community that feeds on it. Like language, food symbolises meanings that differ according to the context. This arbitrary nature of food invests a particular food with contradictory notions or beliefs. Thus food becomes a site of conflicts. The nature of food to break apart and bind social relations and community ties invests food with multiplicity of meanings and significations. Food figures predominantly in literature of the diaspora because of its ability to connect one to their roots. Food, a repository of one's collective cultural identity offers the space to re-enact the longings and

memories of migrants and those in exile. This is the reason why family reunions and gatherings take on special significance for those struggling to come to terms with their hyphenated identities and cultures. Food becomes the site through which cultures and experiences cross and intermingle. Literature, movies and documentaries that adopt food as a character explore multiple dimensions of food. Emotions and situations find a representation through food. Salman Rushdie uses the metaphor of pickles and chutneys to talk about memories and history in his much acclaimed novel *Midnight's Children*. Through Rushdie, the reader also learns the powerful impact that a particular food item can have on an individual. It is when Saleem Sinai tastes a particular chutney that he is reconnected to old places and people. Emotions are infused strongly into the layers of food that it resurfaces every time you taste it. Scholars who have worked extensively on food include Sidney Mintz, Mary Douglas, R. S Khare, Jack Goody, Louis Dumont, Warren Belasco, Jeffrey Pilcher, McKim Marriott etc.

The central role that food plays in religion is indisputable. Dietary laws prescribed in each religion calls attention to differing notions of purity and impurity. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism have clearly defined dietary rules. Disparity in eating habits and food choices becomes a convenient way of excluding people from sharing meals, which is an expression of intimacy and kinship. People use food to express one's faith. Religious festivities like Diwali, Ramzan and Christmas are celebrated with feasts where food and food sharing take on primary importance.

Even though the origin of caste system and untouchability is disputable, food undeniably had a tremendous influence on the way caste system was shaped in Indian society. Food was used as a powerful device for segregating people belonging to different religious and caste affiliations. The prohibition on inter-dining tightened the noose of casteism. Untouchables, the section of the

population that falls outside the four fold division of caste hierarchy were humiliated and condemned in numerous ways. Just as people were divided on the lines of caste, food too fell into the evil web of casteism. Prescriptions bordering on strict religious dietary laws ensured lack of free mingling across different social and religious groups. At the same time, these laws brought together members sharing the same cultural values together, fostering a sense of intense solidarity and community spirit in them.

With the growing attention on dalits and the marginalised sections of the population, their customs and cultural practices get recognised, studied and explored. The study of marginalised cultures opens doors to previously unexplored aspects of dalit lives, and helps one understand their struggle against an oppressive, caste-conscious society. Dalit literature being produced by the representatives of the community across India has played a vital role in bringing dalit concerns and experiences to the forefront. This paved way to alternate readings of canonical texts from a dalit perspective and a subversion of established notions of art and aesthetics. By not paying enough attention to dalit histories, we are shrouding a major part of a culture that makes up a diverse and multicultural society. Dalit voices get heard only through an exploratory study of their distinct cultural practices. The centuries old inhuman discrimination and violent injustice meted out to dalits go largely unnoticed in history when their presence is shunned in the chronicled history. With cultural studies embracing elements of folklore, popular culture, theatre and mass media, food becomes a fitting subject to understand and interrogate culture.

Food is the most pervasive element in a person's daily life and has played a supreme role in important phases of history like industrialisation and globalisation. When the interest in food gets limited to the domain of nutrition and biological sciences, a whole cultural realm that controls and sustains social relations is being trivialised. Food studies, that adopts an interdisciplinary

stand, drawing from anthropological, sociological, historical, psychological perspectives dwells on critical threads and dimensions of each of these disciplines.

The essence of dalit experiences is retained to a great extent in folk music, dance, ritualistic performances and food habits that are passed down through generations, and are treasure troves of knowledge about the dalit community. The knowledge gleaned through these sources offers a clear understanding of their experiences, thus adding to the existing domain of dalit literature and enriching the growing discipline of dalit studies. To study dalit experiences, food can turn a rich and evocative medium. With notions of purity and impurity deeply entrenched in food, a study of the food choices and dietary habits of communities separated across caste lines offers insights into the mechanism and propagation of caste hierarchy. Food embodies a personality of its own when placed in the socio- economic lives of dalits. Food consumed routinely, food cooked on special occasions like birth, marriage and death, the most relished food, food associated with festivities, food related taboos or prescriptions, the notion of fasting, food related to the divine, when studied in a dalit context offer a clear understanding of the lives of dalits. Throwing light on each of these aspects of food would help one understand the struggles undergone by dalits against caste based oppression and untouchability.

The research attempts to address the concept of dalit food by looking at the representations of food in dalit narratives and by tracing the role of food in building a dalit identity over the years. A cross sectional study of the food of *Paniyars*, a dalit community in Kerala, is undertaken as part of the methodology to gain a preliminary understanding of dalit food culture. Considering the diversity of dalit communities that exist in Kerala, 'dalit food' cannot be taken to represent the entire community. By shedding light on the culinary world of a dalit community in Kerala that continues to face discrimination, the research hopes to give a small perspective into the concept of

dalit food. By focussing on the striking food choices and habits of a particular dalit community, the paper does not hope to generalise those as features of a common dalit cuisine. The larger concern of poverty and discrimination is what the research tries to locate through the everyday aspect of food.

The dissertation is divided into five sections. The introductory chapter introduces the interdisciplinary field of food studies and mentions the recent trends of research along with the leading practitioners in the domain. It also details the characteristic features of food that make it the subject of research enquiry. The introductory chapter concludes with the relationship of food and the marginalised in the Indian context.

Chapter one of the paper examines the history of untouchability through food by looking at various instances from the pre and post independent India riddled with the violent history of casteism. It examines how food taboos, notions of purity and hygiene work in a society based on strict caste laws. The perpetuation of discrimination through religious scriptures that prescribe strict dietary laws is examined. The concept of leftovers as it exists in Hindu scriptures is also traced. Food prohibitions in various forms with references to the concept of inter-dining are looked at with examples from Indian history. Contribution of various reformists like Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule are incorporated along with their role in bringing about dalit emancipation. The chapter ends with illustrative examples from Indian context that portray socio- historical dimensions of food.

Chapter two titled, *Deciphering Marginal Food Dialects: Dalit Food Narratives*, comprises of a literature review of food narratives from selected dalit autobiographies, stories and poems. This includes excerpts from Bama, Sivakami, Sharankumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle,

Urmila Pawar, Hanumanthaiah etc. These narratives are further substantiated with theories of social stratification, purity and pollution, formation of tastes and identity. Theoretical perspectives from Mary Douglas, R. S Khare, Bourdieu and Barthes are included to validate the concepts.

Chapter three is titled *Dalit Kitchen: Subaltern Food Perspectives*. In this chapter, the survey conducted by the researcher is explained as part of the primary methodology. The characteristic features involving food habits of the *Paniyars* are noted down as observations of the field visit. The chapter also mentions secondary methodology that involves use of an interdisciplinary approach to study the role of food in shaping social structure and human relationships.

The Conclusion sums up theoretical insights gathered from all the three chapters. It touches upon the role of food in shaping a dalit identity. It also presents an overview of how dalit cuisine has come to be represented in food industry and dalit academia.

Through the thesis, the importance to analyse social inequalities and tensions through the prism of food is called for. A society's dietary behaviour and norms place attention on its social make up. Historical evidences prove that shifting patterns of social structures are brought about through changes in dietary habits. Food can be used not only as a tool to understand social problems but also to offer solution for the many problems. Therefore food that cuts across all disciplinary boundaries recommends immense possibilities in the field of research.