

Food Cultures: Dynamics of Caste, Gender, Religion, and Class in India

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I The Cultural Meaning of Foods in India: A Short Introduction

“Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start.”¹ As Raymond Williams famously writes, culture is not limited to the assigned meanings and values in the terrain of art, literature, or language. It is present everywhere, it is the material through which ideology is exercised, it is a factor which determines and limits the condition of things. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes explores how the French bourgeoisie established itself as the major articulating force through quotidian cultural objects and practices such as toys, magazines, novels, and photographs, amongst many others.² Similarly, I would like to pick one of these daily objects, food, and attempt to trace the various ideological impositions through its politics and culture in the Indian context, which is heavily guided by “upper”-caste Hindus. Since my paper is concerned with everyday practices, I will be citing examples from everyday life. However, including all the ways in which culture is entangled with food, as everyday object and practice, goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I have kept my focus on the dynamics of gender, religion, class, and caste – especially on the ways class is tied to caste.

Food is one of the fundamental elements through which cultural power is exercised. It is what Williams witnessed in the teashop: a visible sign of the “cultivated people” who would not miss any chance to show that they alone possess the nation’s culture. Even though Williams suggests simply ignoring them in order to build a new frame of reference, this is not necessarily an effective strategy in practice, since these “cultivated people” are still often the main guiding forces behind the conventional notion of culture. This problematic reality can also be extended to the context of food practices.³ It is especially true in India, where certain food practices are looked down upon because they do not fit into the conventional judgement of “taste.” Taste, according to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is determined by the

¹ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.

² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

³ Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 12.

social and cultural position from which it emerges.⁴ No judgement of taste can ever be innocent; everything is guided by the system of power relations.

In *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies* (2009), Indian political scientist Gopal Guru – a pioneer of new dimensions in Dalit discourse – observes how it is the sweetness and freshness of cooked food that serve as major criteria for deciding questions of taste in Indian culture.⁵ In this working paper, Guru defines taste with respect to the contradictory relationship between the tongue and the skin. According to him, it is mainly the tongue that plays an important role in classifying food. While spicy food such as chili produce a noticeable impact when rubbed on skin and therefore have a haptic aspect, the taste of any sweet dish is determined by the tongue alone, as sweetness is a rather simple and one-dimensional sensation. The tongue thus acquires the sole legislative power when it comes to sweetness. For the many people in India whose diet is dominated by spicy dishes such as chilies, sweetness is a taste-deciding factor and a luxury. Since food items containing sweet flavours are expensive and considered to be delicacies within the country, they become what Guru calls “a hegemonic presence in the cultural practices of the poor.”⁶ As for the freshness, it is obvious that leftover or stale food would never be considered as being of a superior taste compared to a freshly cooked meal with equally fresh ingredients. *Joothan* (leftover or rotten food) and the meat of dead cattle have been prescribed as staple foods to the “untouchables,” now referred to through the category “Dalit,” which literally means “broken” and is seen in a revolutionary sense, as it denotes the “material social experience” of marginalization, by the deep-rooted culture, system, and stratification of caste.⁷ Such foods cannot be considered items of good taste. Therefore, the freshness of cooked food and its sweet flavours serve as the main standards for Guru’s definition of taste.

The literal meaning of the Hindi word *joothan*, as Arun Prabha Mukherjee explains, is food left on a plate that is to be thrown in the garbage. But such food would be characterized as *joothan* only if someone else were to eat it. This particular term has connotations of purity and pollution attached to it, as the root word *jootha* literally means “polluted.”⁸ At the same time, sweetness implies a sense of social superiority, simply because it is such a strong and supposedly positive factor in determining the taste of any food items that contain it. A majority of the

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 16.

⁵ Gopal Guru, *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies* (Philadelphia: CASI Working Paper Series, 2009), 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ Gopal Guru, “Understanding the Category ‘Dalit,’” in *Atrophy in Dalit Politics*, edited by Gopal Guru (Mumbai: Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, 2005), 71. The term “Dalit” was popularized by the Dalit Panther Movement. Inspired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Black Panther Party in the USA, the Dalit Panthers were formed in 1972. They emerged from a Dalit literary movement led by the poets and writers Namedo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J. V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble, who emphasized the revolutionary struggles of Dalits against oppression and represented the Dalit experience through a new perspective.

⁸ Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xxxix.

consumers of sweet products are comprised of the top of the so-called “twice-born” in India: the Brahmins. Sweet flavours, freshly cooked food, and other kinds of predominantly vegetarian food automatically generate a sense of an especially “civilized identity,” as they are all culturally and socially linked to the upper castes. The economic factor also comes into play here, as sweet products are generally expensive. The association of a supposed sense of “civilized identity” to certain food practices forces a notion of “savage identity” onto the people and community who do not or cannot follow such eating habits due to various cultural, social, or economic factors. For example, in the Indian state Maharashtra *sreekhand* (a dessert made with yogurt) serves as an object of humiliation as it looks like *pithala* (a curry recipe made of gram flour).⁹ It becomes a constant source of humiliating experiences for those who cannot tell the difference between the two, as they have never had the chance of tasting due to their socio-economic and cultural conditions, and are now being punished for this perceived lack of civility. The resulting societal and cultural stratification on the basis of food consumption, and the sense of superiority that is commonly attached to particular eating practices, is internalized by its victims to such a degree that it starts working as a nearly automatic mechanism of humiliation for those who are constantly looked down upon for their eating preferences and for those who do not have access to sweet and fresh food. Even when eating in private, the shame is ever-present. The consumption of sweet food is also tied to gender-based discrimination, as I will show later.

II The Oppressive Force of Food Norms

In India, with its majoritarian politics in which the aspects of caste, religion, gender, and class dictate almost everything, “upper”-caste Hindus have been, and still are, the dictating force behind all standardized food practices. As Barthes points out, there is “a feeling of impatience at the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history.”¹⁰ This is also the case with food. The alleged naturalness with which the feeling of repulsion is generated in our minds towards certain food practices is actually created and determined by a long history of oppression and humiliation due to a critical lack of social, economic, and cultural capital within the oppressed groups in Indian society.

The caste names of those at the bottom of this hierarchy have always been associated with the food they consume. Guru points out that the genealogy of the Mahar (a caste in the Dalit community) has been traced to the meat of dead cattle. This association of cultural and caste identity with the consumption of dead cattle is a way of invoking condescension and disgust within the majority. Shailaja Paik, in her

⁹ Guru, *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies*, 15.

¹⁰ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 10.

insightful work, elucidates the different etymologies of the term *Mahar*. She notes that the word has been associated with *mritaharin* (which translates as “dragging away of the dead”) as well as *maha-ahari* (“great eaters”).¹¹ However, the leading anti-caste thinker and social reformer Jotirao Phule instead associated the word *Mahar* with *Maha-ari* (“the great enemy”) in his seminal 1873 work *Gulamgiri* (translated as *Slavery*). This etymology can be read in two ways, as Paik writes: “[E]ither upper castes used the term in a hostile way to describe their ‘great foe,’ which then raises the question of why certain castes saw the Mahar as their great enemy; or the Mahar might have described themselves thus because of their pride in the bravery with which they had fought Aryan invaders.”¹²

Led by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who belonged to the Mahar caste himself, the food pattern of *Mahars* underwent a radical shift in the twentieth century, moving away from the meat of dead cattle and towards meat acquired through hunting and slaughtering.¹³ But even after giving up eating the meat of dead cattle, *Mahar* cultural identity still remains attached to it. The notion of the “savage identity” of Dalits has also been propagated by the dominant castes through their food habits. One such example is that of the Musahari or the Musahar caste in the regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They have been given the name *Musahari*, meaning “rat eaters.” The name conjures up disgust in the minds of the wider Indian public, as rats are seen as insanitary creatures and are associated with diseases and dirty environments, without the same public ever considering the economic and social deprivation that this group faces. Such deep-seated food stereotypes bring an additional stigma to a burdened caste that is mostly comprised of landless agricultural labourers, who still have to resort to hunting and eating rats for their survival.

Most dishes of the Dalit cuisine emerged in the economics of survival by using whatever resources were available. They are practical, not intentional in nature; this was never a matter of choice. Only economic hardship, sanctioned by the social structure of the country, allowed the discarded parts of the expensive meat – like blood, offal, or intestines – to become part of the Dalit platter in the first place.¹⁴ Most of the time, it was simply only the “joothan” that the Dalits had access to in terms of available food. As the Dalit author Omprakash Valmiki writes: “After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan. And yet no one had any grudges. Or shame. Or repentance.”¹⁵ And still, their simple taking of what is available to them has led to food stigma and has become a constant source of humiliation. This is especially ironic considering that most basic food products in India were and still are being produced by the “untouchables” themselves; and yet they are the ones who are being denied access to the better parts of the product.

¹¹ Shailaja Paik, “Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist: The History and Politics of Naming in Maharashtra,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45.2 (2011): 221.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Guru describes the shift as follows: “from *Murdada* (meat abstracted from dead cattle) through *Hatfatka* (meat acquired through hunting) to *Toliv* (the meat of a slaughtered animal)” (*Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies*, 13).

¹⁴ Ashwaq Masoodi, “A Story of Culinary Apartheid,” *Livemint*, 16 September 2016, web.

¹⁵ Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, 11.

III Repression and Resistance

Lately, the cultural objects that have been used for subordination for so long are slowly turning into tools of resistance. This can be associated with Dick Hebdige's theory of subcultures, according to which the objects of everyday life, objects which are supposed to carry certain conventional meanings, are endowed with oppositional and subversive meanings.¹⁶ Such an act of subversion can be seen in the re-claiming of Dalit food and in the changing cultural context of beef eating. Guru mentions that the homogenous notion of *Thali* – literally “plate” or “platter,” but often designating a multi-course Indian meal defined in terms of its elaborate nature and with sweetness as the dominant association – has been rejected by the Dalits. They use non-vegetarian food as an important source of cultural resistance to counter the nationalist construction of this *Thali*. To do this, Dalits now actively try to reconstruct the notion of downgraded and filthy food.¹⁷ In the cultural taste of the Dalits, goat meat (which is prevalent in most of the Brahmin households) is considered inferior to beef. There are various contestations around this resistance. On the one hand, we find Guru highlighting an important point about the Dalit self that resists by enjoying the freedom to choose and eat any food, which is mainly because their food summons their difficult past into their cultural present. On the other hand, a recent article in *Dalit Camera*, a website which documents life in India from the perspective of Dalits, Bahujans, and Adivasis, talks about how “dalit food becomes a metaphor for the liberation of dalit women, and not of humiliation.”¹⁸ In this article, Tarjane Parmar narrates her great-grandmother's experience of buying cheap leftover meat (offal and remains of the meat that the upper castes would throw away, citing it as “dirty”) after the daily wage work and all by herself from the male-dominated area of the butcher's shop, where women were not allowed. This act of disrupting the centre, just to carve out a space near it, by the doubly marginalized is seen as an act of resistance and power on the part of Parmar's grandmother and her community.

It seems important to take into account the international perception of Indian food culture as homogenous. For this purpose, I want to draw attention to a well-known international television show: more specifically to season 11, episode 18 of *MasterChef Australia*, in which a team of cooks had to prepare Indian street food. In this episode, a contestant picked up some beef, to which a teammate immediately responded: “We cannot have beef in the Indian cuisine. Absolutely not. We will be

¹⁶ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1997), 18.

¹⁷ Guru, *Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies*, 15.

¹⁸ Tarjane Parmar, “Between Love, Longing and Resistance: Dalit Food and Women's Agency,” *Dalit Camera*, 5 November 2020, web.

insulting them.”¹⁹ Along these lines, rules that are not at all held universally among all Indians, but only propagated by oppressive elites, come to be seen as universal facts about the nation and its culture. This incident shows how the global notion of Indian food has been homogenized, guided, and dominated almost exclusively by the food on the upper-caste Hindu platter.

In India, vegetarianism is strongly charged with a visceral feeling of disgust expressed towards the smell and taste of non-vegetarian food. In a recent podcast by *The Swaddle*, titled “Is Eating Meat Ethical?” (2021), various issues around the culture, politics, and ethics of food habits popped up, especially with reference to vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism.²⁰ As was mentioned in the podcast, there are separate microwaves for vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods in the cooking areas of major companies within India. Various instances of this active and blatant separation of two social groups along dietary lines can also be found in our ordinary day-to-day lives. In urban spaces – where, on a superficial level, discrimination on the basis of caste is a thing of the past – separate utensils are still being commonly kept for guests and house-helpers. All of this is done under the guise of maintaining hygiene, but to see that as the sole reason would mean to read the culture in a naïve way. Another such instance can be found in Dalit writer-activist Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories* (2018), translated from Marathi by Priya Adarkar. Here, the experience of untouchability is presented in a story in which the narrator is invited to an event. He is to participate in a talk concerning the Dalit experience. The house in which he stays for the duration of the event initially leaves him gratified, as there is no direct sign of discrimination on the basis of his caste. But the actual reality ends up being quite the opposite, which he only realizes towards the end of the story. The narrator notes: “What Dinesh said was true. In that house, every article meant for my use had been decided in advance. The shawl. The cup. The cot. The thali [i.e., plate]. The chair.”²¹

Apart from the persistence of caste division maintained through various food practices, the general hypocrisy regarding dietary laws is also striking, as becomes evident in another episode of the already mentioned podcast on *The Swaddle*.²² A girl from Vapi, Gujarat narrates her personal experience of the blatant hypocrisy in her hometown. She mentions that the men of Jain families (who are not supposed to consume onion and garlic) would go out at night when everyone sleeps, to eat tandoori chicken. They would even boast about it later; and obviously the women of the houses were not allowed to do so. Then, very conveniently, in the morning, these men would eat their food without onions and garlic in it, proclaiming their impeccable manners. This hypocrisy is also highlighted in Omprakash Valmiki’s

¹⁹ Amanda Yeo, “*MasterChef Australia* Recap: Everything is Awful and Nothing Goes Right,” *Junkee*, 23 May 2019, web.

²⁰ “Is Eating Meat Ethical?” *The Swaddle*, 2021, web.

²¹ Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit Brahmin,” in *Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*, translated by Priya Adarkar (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2018), 43.

²² “Is Eating Meat Ethical?” *The Swaddle*, 2021, web.

autobiographical novel *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003), in which the sanctimonious upper caste known as the Tyagis (a Brahmin caste) go to eat pork in the *basti* (settlement) of the Bhangi (formerly untouchables whose subcaste is Chuhra) at night, yet shame the community on that same pretext during daytime. Valmiki writes:

The boys would torment me about them. "Abey, Chuhre ke, you eat pork." At such moments I would think of all the Tyagis who came in the darkness of the night to the Bhangi *basti* to eat pork. I felt like calling out the names of all those people. Those who came to eat meat secretly at night observed untouchability in daylight in front of everybody.²³

In another article from the *Dalit Camera*, public health doctor and researcher Sylvia Karpagam throws further light on the dynamics of caste and gender in food.²⁴ She writes that eggs, labelled as "sinful," "violent," and "agitating the senses," have been denied to children as part of the mid-day meals in schools for several years.²⁵ The Akshaya Patra Foundation, which is run by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), is one of the largest providers of mid-day meals to these schools. In her paper "Krishna's Cows: ISKCON's Animal Theology and Practice," religious studies and social anthropology professor Anna S. King talks about the dietary restrictions of Krishna Consciousness, according to which abstaining from meat is a key principle. Indian society has also made the protection of cows one of its main political goals, a direct consequence of a religious food dogma. King writes: "Abstention from meat, fish, and eggs is one of the four regulatory principles; [...] Krishna-consciousness leads to cow-consciousness. Key Vaishnava texts teach a human ethos of cow protection (*gorakhsha*) in which the cow is the focus of service and love."²⁶ Similarly, onions and garlic are not to be used in preparing meals, as they cannot be offered to Krishna.²⁷ The story of the origin of onion and garlic that Srila Prabhupada (founder of ISKCON) narrated, as circulated through ISKCON websites, refers to the cow's hoof being transformed to garlic and its ankle to onion. In consequence, eating onion and garlic would be as bad as eating cow's flesh.²⁸ According to the Ayurvedic concept of nutrition, onions and garlic fall under the *Tamasic* category.²⁹ Tamasic food is supposed to have a dulling effect on body and mind, thereby hindering the process of spiritual advancement, as opposed to the Sattvic diet, which consists of dairy products, fresh fruit and vegetables, supposedly

²³ Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, 21.

²⁴ Sylvia Karpagam, "Caste, Food and Ideological Imposition," *Dalit Camera*, 21 November 2020, web.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Anna S. King, "Krishna's Cows: ISKCON's Animal Theology and Practice," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 2.2 (2012): 179–204, web.

²⁷ "Why No Onion & Garlic in the Krishna Diet?" *ISKCON Toronto*, 20 January 2010, web.

²⁸ Hari-Sauri Prabhu, "Srila Prabhupada Tells Story of Origin of Onion and Garlic," *ISKCON Seshadripuram Bangalore*, 10 January 2021, web.

²⁹ Vaishali V. Agte and Shashi A. Chiplonkar, "Linkage of Concepts of Good Nutrition in Yoga and Modern Science," *Current Science* 92.7 (2007): 956–61.

rejuvenating the mind.³⁰ Hence, onion and garlic are not seen as pure elements that can be included in a healthy, morally good diet.

The elimination of meat and eggs from mid-day meals in these schools, where most of the students come from Dalit communities, despite their inclusion in the official menu, shows how caste-based discrimination has become institutionalized in India. Karpagam further talks about how, according to an interim order of the Supreme Court regarding mid-day meals, preference was to be given to cooks and helpers coming from Dalit and tribal communities. This sounds like progress in theory, but in reality, the practice has not shown significant impact in most Indian schools, if it has been followed at all. The idea of sinfulness being associated with meat, eggs, onions, and garlic in a sense becomes a tactic of those in the position of power to regulate the food habits of marginalized people by associating them with a mark of disgrace. The notion of “spiritual advancement” then can be seen as nothing but a façade, under which casteism and sexism operates, driven by the strong desire of protecting dominant cultural structures.

IV

Food and Gender: An Intersectional Analysis

Turning to the issue of gender, even today we can see that in most parts of India women in family households often eat only after the men are finished with their meals. This practice is usually explained as a necessary sign of respect towards the husband and the in-laws.³¹ Only after these have finished, the womenfolk sit down to savour their modest meal. In earlier times, the wives waited for their husbands to come home, and would eat only after serving them. When their husbands did not come home, they had to go to sleep without eating anything at all. In her autobiographical account *Amar Jiban (My Life)*, which was translated into English by Enakshi Chatterjee and published in 1999, Bengali author Rashundari Debi remembers how she would wait for her husband to come back, serve him food, and then eat: “There was no sign of him, so I served all the others and waited up for my husband. It was so late that pretty soon the children would be up, I kept thinking. That meant going without food again.”³²

³⁰ In her article “Food in the Vedic Tradition” (1985), *India International Centre Quarterly* 12.2 (1985): 141–52, Dina Simoes Guha talks about the *Gunas* (i.e., properties) of food. Foods in traditional Hindu culture are divided with respect to their effect on the souls of human beings. She writes, “Only those foods that were bland, light to eat, free from strong smell and flavours, rose to the mind and developed into a cooling light. They would illuminate the elemental soul. [...] The illuminative foods were called *sattvic*, the passion foods *rajasic*, and the putrid foods of darkness *tamasic*” (146; emphases in the original).

³¹ Payal Hathi, Diane Coffey, Amit Thorat, and Nazar Khalid, “When Women Eat Last: Discrimination at Home and Women’s Mental Health,” *PLoS One*, 2 March 2021, web.

³² Rashundari Debi, *Amar Jiban*, translated by Enakshi Chatterjee (Kolkata: Writer’s Workshop, 1999), 47.

Debi's account, originally written in the 1860s, is not some obscure cultural artefact that is simply lost in the past. These practices of waiting for the dominant figures of a household, where mostly it is the woman who waits, and then eating one's food together or after these people have eaten, no matter how hungry the waiting party is, persist even now. Through new ways of discussion, these practices have been shoved into the whole Indian cultural discourse of "love" and "care" and are forced into the conventional structures of the same.

Women in many upper-caste Hindu households are also still not allowed to eat meat. Even though the alleged reasons for this range from avoiding hot food to preventing heavy blood flow during menstruation or the process of birth, the whole idea is really based on keeping the female body "pure" for conceiving and curbing sexual appetites, which are believed to increase through the consumption of meat.³³ In Brahmanical patriarchy, as Uma Chakravarti explains, a woman's existence is a constant struggle of trying to resolve the contradiction between her supposed nature and her assigned function.³⁴ Female birth is the result of a "bad karma" in a previous life, which results in a supposedly promiscuous nature. This promiscuity needs to be suppressed and directed towards a woman's function as wife and the duty of reproduction. In the case of widows, who have no prescribed place in the Hindu social order because the subject (husband) due to whom their existence is recognized has perished, sexuality has to be strictly kept under control. Thus, "[t]he wife's sexuality," according to Chakravarti, "had to be channelised, the widow's sexuality had to be abruptly terminated."³⁵

At the same time, consumption of "hot" food is totally acceptable for men, because they do not have to police their sexuality. The body of a woman in caste society is reduced to a singular organ: the uterus. A woman is defined only in relation to her roles in the patriarchal structure. She is not seen as an individual outside these structures. The "urges" of women have to be controlled by means of domestic rituals centred around fasting, which is often deceptively expressed as a matter of choice. This false notion of choice is utterly intrinsic to the patriarchal institution. It also relates to what Barthes said in the context of women writing within the French bourgeois framework, where they can exercise their choice, but only if they come back to their condition within the limits of patriarchy.³⁶ Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in the case of Dalit women, who labour outside their homes, no such restrictions are put forth. But for upper-caste women, controlling female sexuality suddenly becomes highly important. As Chakravarti writes: "Control over female sexuality was almost obsessively applied among high caste women because the danger to the structure of brahmanical patriarchy was greater in their case."³⁷

³³ Henrike Donner, "New Vegetarianism: Food, Gender, and Neo-Liberal Regimes in Bengali Middle-Class Families," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31.1 (2008): 148.

³⁴ Uma Chakravarti, "Gender, Caste, and Labour: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.36 (1995): 2249.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2251.

³⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 50

³⁷ Chakravarti, "Gender, Caste, and Labour": 2251.

V

The Past and Present of Indian Food Politics: A Conclusion

As evident from the analysis above, the cultural identities of various Indian minority communities have become attached to their specific food practices. Banning certain food habits and marking them with labels such as “unacceptable” or “hurting religious sentiments” leads to the subordination and ultimately even the complete dissolving of these identities. The emergence of so-called “cow vigilantism” is an especially suitable example for this process. In many Brahmin households, where meat is consumed, chicken as food is looked down upon as dirty meat cooked by Muslims, but at the same time there is no hesitation in consuming goat meat. The double standard does not stop there. Cows, which are regarded as holy in Hindu religion, are banned by law as a food item in some parts of India. One of the most recent bills against cow slaughter was passed in the state of Karnataka in December 2020. This bill allows the police to seize cattle if they have “reason to believe” that it is being sold for the purpose of slaughter.³⁸ It also guarantees protection to those who try to protect the cattle, thus giving vigilante groups a license to lynch minorities in the name of cow protection. This horrific practice has dramatically increased in scope and frequency under the current government led by Narendra Modi. The 2015 case of mob lynching in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, where a mob of villagers attacked the home of Mohammed Akhlaq, killing him for suspicion of slaughtering a cow, is a scary example of how these structures of power use violence and force to discipline subjects into submitting to the majoritarian ideology.³⁹ The veneration of cows has been converted into a symbol for Hinduism itself and has also been turned into a powerful cultural and political tool. This arbitrary association, according to Dwijendra Narayan Jha, refuses to acknowledge that the cow has not always been this sacred, especially in the early Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions. Jha cites H. H. Wilson, who asserted in the early nineteenth century that “the sacrifice of the horse or of the cow, the *gomedha* or the *ashvamedha*, appears to have been common in the earliest periods of the Hindu ritual.”⁴⁰

Dalit rights pioneer Dr. B. R. Ambedkar contextualizes untouchability in the struggle for supremacy between the Brahmins and the Buddhists. The practice of untouchability, used against beef eaters, started only after the Brahmins stopped cow sacrifices to win the ideological battle against Buddhists. It was a political, not a moral move from the very start. The Buddhists preached against animal sacrifice, thereby gaining popularity among the cultivators whose cattle were seized for ritual sacrifices by the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. According to Ambedkar, in order to regain their allegiance, the Brahmins banned killing cows and eating their meat.⁴¹ It is interesting to note how smoothly meanings change in these cultural processes,

³⁸ Supriya Vohra, “Where’s the Beef?” *The Caravan* 13.4 (2021): 9.

³⁹ “The Dadri Lynching: How Events Unfolded,” *The Hindu*, 3 October 2015, web.

⁴⁰ Dwijendra Narayan Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2009), 21.

⁴¹ Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*, xxiii.

always suiting the dominant structures and conveniently developing overtime to uphold them. This particular change of meaning assigned to all lower castes who ate beef a tag of “untouchables” and religions other than Hinduism that of “foreign.” Food always was and continues to be central to the practices of untouchability and discrimination within Indian society. It is an important site, where questions and memories of communalism, caste, and gender constantly come up. Food history and some of the recipes of specific communities have become common topics in Indian cyberspaces, sparking much needed debates on the national level.

Relating all of this back to the topic of this book, an issue that truly demands our urgent attention as international and transnational scholars right now lies in the inclusion, the study, and the documentation of these food practices within global theories and frameworks such as the transnational framework of cultural studies, which is an especially promising way of approaching this topic. This is because cultural studies as a discipline primarily engages with quotidian practices, along with focusing on the power dynamics of the hegemonic structures of society, owing to its Marxist foundations. Its transnational frameworks allow for a better understanding of cultures and questioning of the dominant power positions by providing perspectives that are outside the set of traditional national contexts. By widening transnational horizons, the shackles of national cultural stigmata can eventually be weakened, and potentially even broken.