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THE JOURNEY OF FOOD

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The word 'food' is too bland to convey the plethora of sensations and emotions that it evokes in the human mind. Absolutely vital for human survival in its bare essentials, it has, over millennia, developed into elaborate and complex structures that hold the secret to human civilizational history and culture within them. It is consumed not just for continuance of existence, but almost as an end in itself – bestowing not just the benediction of sustenance, but the luxury of epicureanism.

The idea of food is a multi-pronged affair and that straddles diverse fields, from literature to culture, to science, and technology. Not only are there aspects of dietetics and nutrition to consider, but the technology involved that had spawned a multi-billion industry linked to food and ancillary units. Ideas from politics and history and literature and popular culture pour into this medley to add richness of body and the taste of variety. The warp and weave of the saga of food reveals myriad facets of culture, politics, gender, aesthetics, and technology that act, interact, and counteract and demonstrate some of the deepest of human endeavours and emotions. This short article is to probe some of the features – not comprehensive by any means but only as pointers for further investigation.

For the earliest human inhabitants – the hunters and gatherers – the natural flora and fauna of the habitat provided the means of survival and sustenance. Thus the earliest settlements came to be in areas that were rich in natural resources. India, a land lush with vegetation and natural resources was a haven for settlements that did not need to look far for nourishment. Yet the amazingly diverse topography of India meant that the natural resources would differ greatly, giving birth to the development of diverse cultures, of which food was a part.

Gradually, as human population grew on the planet and available resources began to come under stress, ways had to be discovered to augment them; and humans learnt to 'create' food through agricultural activities and breeding of livestock. Today, we hark back to the pre-industrial age as a halcyon era where 'natural' crops – rechristened as 'organic' from the twentieth century onwards – were not yet infected with heavy doses of chemical fertilizers and were, therefore, healthier and more nutritive.

However, as Massimo Montanari has shown in his book, *Food is Culture*, the modern presumption of agriculture being 'natural' as opposed to modern 'technological' production is fallacious. The invention of agriculture indubitably differentiated the earliest human beings from animals that did not possess that ability. The capacity to create food rather than merely consume available resources was seen as a decisive intervention in human civilization. The mediation was also perceived as an act of violence by early humans, and communities devised rituals to seek divine forgiveness – rituals that are extant in societies all over the world even today. These rituals are in consonance with the sowing and reaping calendar, as local geography dictates and continue to be celebrated not just with joy but reverence. The crops that grew in a region depended on the natural topography and climactic conditions. However, with robust trade being carried out across continents since ancient times, food items were not only transported to non-native places but even transplanted there. This has enormously enriched the available food resources all over the world.

The concomitant intervention, wrought by the discovery of fire was of changing the 'natural' and 'grown' produce through means of 'cooking'; and this revolutionized the consumption of food. This discovery affected both the fruit and vegetable produce and the meat products. Theft of fire from the gods is celebrated in legends across different communities. This is not to state that this was the only means of artistry as 'creating' cuisine could have several other dimensions as well – making a salad or preparing sushi for example. Incidentally, the raw has seen a revival in modern times as 'healthier' food, packed with nutrients otherwise lost in cooking processes. Fresh fruit and vegetables, consumed raw are seen as powerhouses of nutrients and it is believed that cooking or packaging destroys some of these.

Even with the advent of the agricultural age, insecurity about the availability of food did not disappear as production was largely dependent on climate and seasons. The challenge was to find nourishment when the harvested crop was either inadequate or depleted before the next one. So the next stage in the saga of food was to find or invent methods to ensure that the seasons interfered less and less with the food items and to prolong their edible life to the maximum. Conserving and preservation techniques were experimented with. Food had to be made to last as long as possible by conserving techniques; and if not in its natural form, in other edible forms through preservation techniques. Local ingredients like salt or honey, and climates like hot or cold determined the form that conservation and preservation would take. Meats, vegetables, and fruit came to be dried, stored, or preserved in an assortment of ways and could be used at a later date in different ways in combination with different spices. Employed mainly to prolong shelf-life, these experiments had an added value; they were creative and appealing to the taste buds as well. Jams and pickles further enhanced and complemented the food range.

All this was a part of human endeavour to find ways and means to augment food, ensure its uninterrupted and adequate supply throughout the year; and to be able to store enough quantities in lean seasons or times of drought. In addition to this, humans had to ensure that inadequate food resources could be supplemented and/ or substituted to create nutritionally rich sustenance. The goal was to find ways to put together a meal that was holistic in terms of nutrients required for a healthy body. Food intake was prescribed in a manner to balance the four humours in the body as it was believed to impact one's personality and life. Western civilization based their consumption of food on the theory of four humours making up the human body – blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, leading to four types of personality – sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, and choleric respectively. Indian concept of food was based on the concept of saatvik, rajsik, and tamsik. The first is what comes from the top of the tree or plant and promotes purity, health, and happiness. Rajsik is hot, spicy food that promotes passion, restlessness, pressure. Tamsik includes food that grows underground or is heavy and promotes dullness, ignorance, and anger. In earlier times, eating a hearty meal was a sign of improved physical strength, and merely picking at food a sign of anaemia or weakness. But gradually this underwent a change over the centuries as what one ate, rather than how much became increasingly more important.

This brings us to the notion of cuisine. The primary motive for the development of any kind of cuisine was to put dishes together to boost the meal's nutritive value in terms of hygiene and health; but it also aimed to make it tastier. A balanced meal was one that restored the balance of requisite nutrients in the human body and it was the food believed to be the tastiest as well. This seems to have been upturned in modern times, where 'pleasure' food is not necessarily healthy, even though one must remember that it is largely an excess of consumption of a specific kind of food that is unhealthy, not the food itself. As Ashis Nandy says in an article, "The Changing Popular Culture of Indian Food: Preliminary Notes," "Food is now supposed to remedy some of the health problems that food itself has produced and to serve as a quick fix for problems such as obesity, malnutrition, cardiovascular and oncological disorders, even sedentary lifestyle and repetitious work" (9-10).

Montanari says even dietetics was understood not in terms of restrictions as the corrupted meaning of diet indicates today, but in the "construction of a gastronomical culture". Modern research into the break up of food ingredients into carbohydrates, proteins, etc. accentuates the abstractness of nutrition and delinks the object from its taste.

Just as over millennia, humans have advanced from simple technology of ploughing and tilling to the complex technology employed in farming today, the act of cooking has come a long way from simple nourishment to the complexity of dishes rustled up – the elaborate structures required to bring the farm produce to the kitchen, and then to the dining table. With the same grains, spices, meats and vegetables, communities around the world have learned to concoct a mind boggling range of products that form a part of the food industry. Structures of food are linked to the importance given to the various courses a meal entails – appetizers, salads, meats, vegetables, breads, sauces, pickles, desserts, and wines to accompany it. Montanari deconstructs it as the 'grammar of food' with its

constituent parts – each in a complementary, but vital role. To the science of food was added the aesthetics of food – how it was coordinated and presented as a visual treat.

Industrialization in the nineteenth century and globalization in the twentieth have transformed the ways of production, transportation, consumption. Food items from all over the world are available, and at times all through the year. This has led to a fading of the memories of want and famine and has consequently impacted patterns of human behaviour. The mechanization of food has liberated women (mostly) from the drudgery of cooking. On the one hand, food items like potato chips or instant noodles, chocolates or cheeses, Coca Cola or Pepsi or McDonald's are demanded all over the world and their near-identical taste is like a collective cultural memory, although, significantly some changes may be incorporated to cater to the local taste. On the other hand, almost paradoxically, 'authentic regional' cuisine is now available at the global table! With a knowledge of a variety of cuisines available freely, a large number of variants and hybrid cuisines have further enriched our palate. A familiar example is the variety of cuisines that is now almost a given at weddings, banquets, etc. One would find, in addition to Indian (largely Mughlai) food, Chinese, i.e. noodles, Manchurian, etc., while also including counters with the taste of different parts of India and of the world, as expansive (an expensive) as the pocket allows.

These dimensions bring us to a realization that food matters are related not only to nutrition or dietetics, but segue in with issues of politics, economics, gender, class, caste, and culture. In *Food and Cultural Studies* Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones and Ben Taylor have associated food with the idea of the circuit of culture, developed first by Richard Johnson (1986). Accordingly, he argues that "the meaning or 'life story' of any food cultural phenomenon – a foodstuff, a diet, and table manners – needs to be understood in relation to five major cultural processes: production, regulation, representation, identity and consumption" (Ashley, Hollows, Jones, Taylor, 2004: vii).

It is pertinent to note that the very people producing food, usually produce it for tables not their own, but of those who control the means of production and distribution. A history of exploitation of the peasant and the landlord forms the bulwark in a feudal society and informs most societies even today, directly or indirectly. The development of cities due to the control of neighbouring farmlands is well documented. Till date, the lack of adequate compensation for their produce usually keeps poor, landless farmers in abject poverty; and has driven them to suicide time and again in our country. A large proportion of trade from the ancient times onwards was carried out to seek spices and condiments – the spice trade route and the merchant silk road are two main examples of the great lengths many took to obtain desirable ingredients. It is this quest for resources that led to colonialism when the domination of one country over another country or a continent was imposed to ensure that European needs were fulfilled; and this was also responsible for the slave trade, to furnish free labour for cotton farms, for instance. This stripped the colonized economies to shrivel and wither away in order to fatten European colonial masters.

Moreover, the range of foods one can afford to consume and how frequently one can access them is dependent on one's economic heft. What food is put on the table determined the social and economic status of an individual – expensive, hard-to-procure, out-of-season items on aristocratic plates, while the humble hovel dweller had to make do with the seasonal and the Spartan. There is often an assumption that the poor eat a diet that is constricted in terms of range, but includes 'better' options that are easier on the pocket and also makes them physically stronger. For instance, the use of chickpea ... So in a reverse movement, the elite may hanker after 'rustic' foods – due to their perceived superior nutritive value, like coarser grains which they seek to include in their diet as well. As Montanari has noted, in earlier times too, often what was the main source of nourishment on a humble table would wind up on the nobleman's table as well, as an accompaniment or as garnished with extra vegetables, meats and condiments. This may push up the demand, and consequently the price of such food items and result in their diminished accessibility for the marginalized classes, further widening the divide of the haves and the have-nots. The agriculture and livestock breeding practices impact the environment considerably, too and it is an important aspect of the saga of food.

Gender, too intersects in many ways in the saga of food. Primitive man was the hunter-gatherer, the woman the conserver-preserved. In agricultural societies, this role was by and large undisturbed, with man tilling the plough and the woman storing the crop, with equal importance imparted to both aspects. The technologies used in the kitchen to conserve, preserve, cook and serve food were largely in the hands of the women. As the book *Food as Culture* demonstrates, choices of roasting and boiling are cultural, and while the former indicates the manly and the natural with raw meat being cooked over an open fire (and the aristocratic, if profligate), the latter indicates that greater care was taken usually by women to conserve the nutrients through the mediation of water and a container and evokes the image of the woman hovering over a kitchen fire with a pot boiling over it. The image of

the woman in the kitchen cooking and serving men and eating the leftovers, with the men seated with the first option on the choicest foods is also a familiar trope. Gender also affects nutrition as the girl-child is discriminated against in terms of what food is served to her, nor were widows to partake of certain food items in traditional Indian patriarchal terms. Typically, as these activities shifted increasingly outside the home-space and became directly economic activities, they changed gender and passed into the hands of the men, while women continue to be an overwhelming majority of food providers at home – a part of their unpaid services as ‘homemakers’. Even the idea of physical beauty has been influenced by the abundance or lack of food in cultures and civilisations. In times of food scarcity, the idea of beauty is likely to be a voluptuous, filled out figure but in times of abundance, slender figures are desirable.

Not just in domestic space, even in a society as a whole, food is a marker of how individuals socialize with each other or with a community group; and how a community group socializes with community groups. Sharing food attests to our belonging to the same set and people who eat together affirm a bond – familial, clan, etc.... Cooking and eating certain foods as part of a celebration can solidify social bonds. Thus relationships and food fused especially at the time of festivals, with prescribed food items being prepared for these special occasions and shared by families and friends, as can be seen by specific dishes being associated with Basant, Holi, Pongal, Diwali, etc. Each culture has prescribed days of fasting and feasting, Lent and Easter in Christianity, Ramzan and Eid in Islam, Navratras and Ashtami in Hinduism. The kinds of food that can be consumed are prescribed, as per seasonal availability and as per prevailing requirements. In India, the added dimension of caste even throws up questions of who could cook for whom, etc. Thus the politics of food determines what we eat, when we eat, how we eat and with whom we eat (and with whom we don't).

Taste is believed to be a function of the brain as much, if not more, as of the tongue. Over a period of time, societies and communities construct the idea of taste as a collective value. In Indian cuisine, for instance, the preference for certain kinds of meat, or the amalgamation of sweet-savoury taste in predominantly Gujarati cuisine. The use of a particular kind of milk – largely dependent on geographical and topical availability – is another example. The adoption of cutlery or to eat with one's fingers are all culturally determined. Cuisine facilitates a sense of collective identity and even nationhood based on collective cultural memory and experience. Culture makes one adhere to familiar tastes even in far off geographical spaces, for example, the hankering of Indian diaspora for their familiar familial meals. Indian food, diverse due to diverse indigenous regions and cultures, has also been enriched enormously with constant foreign influences that have seeped into the culture. Some of our iconic 'Indian' food items – both in terms of ingredients and recipes – would be unthinkable without non-indigenous interventions. Potatoes, tomatoes, cashews, peanuts, chilli, etc. are an integral part of our cuisine. Tea, for instance, is a perfect instance of assimilation into a culture and being transformed into 'chai'!

To conclude, one can say that the issue unfolds a banquet of ideas and theses. These points are only teasers and can lead to fruitful research in this area.

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