

## CULTURE AND FOOD POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING FOOD DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN UNIVERSITIES

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### Abstract

Food is an essential part of human survival. The diversity of food consumption and habits depends on geographical and cultural locations. Human beings eat what they like and what they have for their survival. However, food becomes controversial when people make it sacred and impure. There are politics around making certain foods sacred and others are impure. This food hierarchy creates conflicts among people, it leads to violence and intolerance. The series of incidents in universities indicates cultural conflict over food in university spaces. This cultural conflict is structurally rooted in the very functioning of hegemonic ideology. Hence, democratizing food culture is deeply rooted in counter-cultural politics. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of culture and food politics is important. The present paper outlines the nature and reasons for cultural politics over food with case studies of university incidents. The fieldwork and in-depth interviews with respondents were done at the university.

Keywords: B.R Ambedkar, Beef, Caste, Dalits, Food, Democratisation, Osmania University

### Introduction

Food is an important part of culture. The cultural diversity is often reflected in food. Across India, there are many varieties of cuisines that are served and celebrated on specific occasions. Some cuisines are cooked in special cultural and religious rituals. There are religious and cultural taboos to food in India. B.R. Ambedkar observed that beef eating made Dalits broken men. The caste system imposed and legitimized untouchability through religious scriptures like Manusmriti. There are different taboos for non-vegetarians in this country. B.R. Ambedkar (1916) drew attention to these two taboos and the socio-cultural codes they carry with them. He observed.

“Even a superficial view of the food taboos of the Hindus show that there are two taboos regarding food that serve as dividing lines. There is a one taboo against meat –eating. It divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh eaters. There is another taboo against beef-eating. It divides Hindus into who’s who eat cow’s flesh and those who do not (B.R. Ambedkar, 1948)”.

Thus, these two food taboos divide Hindu society broadly into three social groups, a division that corresponds with the social divisions on caste and community lines. 1. Vegetarians, specifically Brahmins 2. Non-vegetarians are meat consumers (But not beef eaters), including various categories of non-brahmins; and 3. Beef consumers, primarily the Dalits. It is constructed on a matrix of the superiority of the ethic of non-violence, a conception of the graded hierarchy of living things, and especially a belief in the sacredness of the cow (Gau mata), to produce a conception of necessary food. Two things are clear from this religious spiritual discourse by Gandhi 1. The hierarchy of food consumption is constructed around the principle of non-violence

and necessity. 2. Non-violence is understood in terms of a graded valuation of living things and creatures. At the top of this hierarchy is the Gau Mata, an important economic unit integral to the ecology of the village (Gandhi, Harijan 15<sup>th</sup> September 1940) 1940. Recognition of this culture is not just a courtesy of the Indian society but also an obligation of the Indian constitution. During the colonial period, the organizations like Brahma Samajam, Arya Samaj, and Harijana Sevak Sangh introduced vegetarianism among untouchable communities. The members who are part of these organizations. Started to sensitize cleanliness, stopping non-vegetarianism in lower caste communities.

### Caste and Hierarchy of Food Culture

According to B.R Ambedkar Caste is not only a division of labor it is also a division of laborers. In the same way, caste hierarchizes the food culture makes it sacred, and sees it as pure and polluted. There are historical phases in which human beings developed their food system. From hunters to food producers' human beings' experiments with food are deeply influenced by their evolution of cultural life. D.N Jha (2010) a committed historian explored the food habits and beef-eating culture of Brahmans in his book Myth of the holy cow. He argues that in the early days, Brahmans were the beef eaters and they also sacrificed animals in the “Yagnas and Yagas” After this phase, Brahmans left the eating beef culture. As Ram Puniyani rightly pointed out that

“Many gods such Indra and Agni are described as having preferences for different types of flesh—India had a weakness for bulls' meat and Agni for bulls and cows. In the Vedas, there is a mention of around 250 animals out of which at least 50 were supposed to be fit for sacrifice and consumption. In the Maharasta there is a mention of a king named Ratideva who achieved great fame by distributing food grains and beef to Brahmins. Taittiriya Brahman categorically tells us: ‘variety the cow is food’ (atho annam viagauh) and Yajnavalkya's insistence on eating the tender (amsala) flesh of the cow is well known. Even later brahmanical texts provide evidence for eating beef. Even Manusmriti did not prohibit the consumption of beef (Ram Puniyani, 2001)”.

In Ram Puniyani's opinion making the cow a sacred animal is deeply political. Any attempt to make animals sacred for example cows creates sentiments among people, these sentiments are attached to the Hindu religion. Gau Raksha organization often targets Dalits and Muslims in the name of cow vigilantes. It is observed that the ban on selling beef, and cow slaughter all are linked with food politics. The caste system made many communities untouchables who refused to accept the Brahmanical cultural system. Some divisions eat veg and non-veg. among non-vegetarians, some people eat only other than Beef and Pork. Others eat beef and pork. People who eat vegetarians are upper caste from Kshatriya, Vaisha, and some Brahmans as Saraswat Brahmans. Those who eat beef are considered impure and stigmatized. Brahmans in West Bengal eat fish and treat it as vegetarian. The meat eaters also restrict themselves from meat on some special occasions on a specific day that are prescribed by religion and cultural norms.

### Food Culture in Universities

On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2012 under the “Democratic Cultural Front”, the “*Peda Kura Panduga*” (beef festival) was organized at Osmania University. But at the final stage when some of the students belonging to communal forces attacked the active members of the festival, it attracted the media. There were many discussions and debates in both media and intellectual circles on this festival. The beef festival organizers of Osmania University, keeping the EFLU beef festival experience started a constructive campaign two months before the festival to get solidarity from different civil societal groups part of the campaign the organizer argued that “beef eating “is a democratic right, where to eat, how to eat and what to eat should be decided by individuals who want to eat but not by any religion, dominant group, and communal rules. So, they demanded that the institutions be constitutionally governed which is supposed to be secular and should respect each culture and the student's food culture also, the university should include beef in the daily food menu of every hostel. This has been opposed by communal student organizations. They have given different reasons for this which are

1. Cow is a holy animal to the Hindus, so eating beef is hurting the majority of Hindus' sentiments.
2. Eating beef in public places is nothing but humiliating and creates communal riots among students.
3. Celebrating the beef festival in the OU campus is dividing the students who are fighting united for the Telangana cause.
4. They demanded that cows be useful for agriculture, and also constitution in its directive principles suggested protecting the cow.

In JNU also the issue of the Beef festival came in 2012, the student group called ‘new materialists’ took it, and demanded beef and pork be served in the canteen. Although some of them have been eating for the long term in the left students’ groups, they did not make it a public issue/political. The interesting thing is that talking about beef and demanding to serve it in a hostel on a left-dominated campus has become very difficult. It shows the cultural negligence of certain left groups within student activism and politics. The experience of three universities or four that are University of Hyderabad, Osmania University English and foreign languages universities, and JNU clearly shows that the embedded deep-rooted religious hegemonic cultural rules are operating in the name of sentiment discipline. At the OU beef festival, some of the Brahman progressive intellectuals also attended and Expressed Their solidarity with their beef festival. Later they also wrote an article that means all upper castes also do not oppose the beef festivals (as communal forces put some SC/ST students in front to oppose the beef fest. Outside the campus, there are hostels where Reddy (upper caste) becomes the owner of the Kalyani Biryani (beef Biryani) hotel and the Muslim and Dalit boys become workers in that hotel. Where there is an economy out of meat there upper caste tends to be silent.

Some of the Dalit groups also opposed the beef festival saying that beef eating is not Dalit culture; it is forcefully imposed on them. Why should Dalits feel that it is part of their culture at all? Moreover, the energy, and time resources should be used for achieving political power and celebrating Buddha Jayanthi instead of wasting on “beef festival. And some of them argued that it is not preferable activity to celebrate beef in the name of “beef festival”, but these arguments indicate that there are diverse understanding and opinions on the consumption of meat and beef, pork, etc. the political active member of Dalit students argue that One should know the “beef festival” is celebrated in public on the campus which is a “democratic right” of everybody who wants to eat whether they belong to untouched communities or not. Further, they posed the question of whether there is a right to eat beef on the campus is important. So, celebrating “beef fest” is a struggle to ensure the “democratic culture/ right” on the campus, it carries the implicit universal concern that Dalit students struggle, it is not only for untouched communities but also for everyone. It is a part of the democratic cultural struggle against hegemonic food culture which is imposed on students in the mess. Kadiyam Raju from the right-wing group wrote an article in Andhra Jayanthi, in which he argued that the “beef festival is a conspiracy to divide the Telangana students who are united in the ongoing struggle for separate Telangana (2012). Further, he argued that while students are dying in the Telangana movement, Dalits and left groups are organizing beef festivals, and these activities are hurting the family members who lost their children. Contrary to these arguments beef festival organizers brought the argument that while students are dying why do they celebrate Srirama Navami, Deepavali, etc. in the name of Hindu festivals on the campus? So, is it not hurting the family members who lost their children, particularly SC, ST, OBC, and Minorities? Dalit students also brought cultural counter-narratives through the celebration of “Narakasura”, “Maisasura, etc. This cultural assertion created a public discussion on alternative histories, cultures, and symbols for the democratization process. EPW journal in its editorial observed that.

“Until some years ago, the entrants from the margins into the national mainstream were too few to assert themselves. But the cumulative effect of the slow, yet steady, rise in literacy, social as well as physical mobility, the opening up of professions, the Development of the media, the consumerist boom, etc, of the past few decades are all perhaps leading to a structural transformation of India’s mainstream. It is not a coincidence that the beef festival was organised in a university that has been at the heart of live political battles over caste, region, and religious identity and not in one of the traditional left bastions. This new politics challenges and confounds not just the Hindutva forces, but equally the gentrified left-liberal politics of composite culture and *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (EPW, 2012)”.

The new generation of students from marginalized groups, who are entering into universities creates a new cultural assertion. Burning manusmrithi in both JNU and HCU and Osmania University also brought the symbolic challenge of casteist ideological state apparatus this disjuncture is taking place because of the coming presence of marginalized groups into

institutions. They are the people who bring new symbols into campus present there in the classroom, hostels, mess halls, TV rooms, and canteens in a way clamming the campus space is also a big struggle for them after them taking admitted into institutions. Dalit students preferred to cook beef in the open and eat it together as an expression of their cultural identity and as their constitutional right. They chose the month of April to celebrate the beef festival, as the month has the birthdays of national leaders and reformers like B R Ambedkar (April 14), Jyotiba Phule (April 11), and Babu Jagjivan Ram (April 5), who were anti-caste ideologues who made efforts to change Indian society. “Last time we conducted the beef festival, we were beaten up by forward caste students and they urinated in the vessel in which the beef was being prepared.

### **Cultural Conflict, Food, and Public Sphere**

Eating beef: Public Vs Private: After the OU incident the anti-beef eaters brought the public vs. private dichotomy, they argued that eating beef in “public” places is nothing but hurting the sentiment of Hindus. Here the pro-beef eaters argued that what to eat when to eat, and where to eat has to be decided by the individuals who want to eat it and not by any religion, dominant groups, etc. so, they also extended their argument that not allowing the beef eaters to eat in the place where they want to eat itself is a violation of constitutional right (right to eat food). As rightly reported in BBC News that

“Dalit groups want beef included in the food served at the campus hostel. Festival organizer B. Sudarsharshan told the BBC that they were involved in a fight for the “Freedom to eat” Further it is also reported that “Everybody should have the freedom to eat the food of their choice. Beef has traditionally been a part of Dalit food, it's part of their identity” he said.

The anti-beef groups argue that their definition of “public” is only the claim of the people who believe in the so-called Hindu beliefs. This religiously determined “Public sphere” is always anti-secular and democratic values. (Creating the conflict between religious rules and secular values. Finally, it may end up with communal riots or the killing of human beings as it happened in one of the Haryana incidents. Similar kind of symbolic representation in the public sphere one could see a paradox that the killer of Shambuka that is Rama has portrayed in public, when Ravana claims to be a Dravidian ancestor and tries to be portrayed in public it actively hurts Hindus. They don't see any act of hurting the Sudra and Atisudra people when they portray Rama the normalization of dominant hegemonic Hindu cultural rules is always embedded in the very functioning of institutions and the people who govern the institutions. It has to be challenged to protect the constitutional values for greater interest. Feminists always argued that private is political in this context also one has to see and understand the politics of deep-rooted politics of anti beef eater definition of “public”

## Institutions and Hegemonic Culture

The institutions are run by constitutional rules. The individuals and groups with some social background heading these institutions are deeply influenced by their ideologies and functions. The dominant ideologies are perpetuated through institutional structures. There are questions that why they organized a beef festival the simple reason is that their food (beef) is not included in the university canteens and mess. Then they want to celebrate the stigmatized and so-called polluted food beef as a mark of representing each food culture whoever eats it and start the struggle for the right to food, thereby democratizing the food in the hostel menu. Most of the time the argument is that publicly people should not eat privately it is not objectionable. Why public? What is this public? Who decides that particular place is public? So, we have to understand the politics of the public.

It is argued that public eating of beef hurts the people's sentiments privately eating beef also hurts the feelings of beef eaters. That means one has to eat beef when there are no beef eaters or when no beef eaters are allowed to eat beef. Let us examine the first point it is very difficult to get a context to have a context where non-beef eaters are present. In the family there are non-beef eaters, in the friend's circle there are non-beef eaters. The second argument is to get the acceptance of people getting a consensus to eat is not possible. So, here is the question why should one have to get their consensuses? Then who are they to decide other food choices? If they believe they can believe and make the cow a holy animal, nobody opposes it but the problems come when particular religious rules decide not to eat a particular food is objectionable. Dalit students argued that not allowing people to eat their food (beef) whenever they want to and whenever and in whatever manner they want is also violating basic human rights. "Not having the right to eat beef in public" also public humiliation" the people who the cause for this humiliation" should be punishable. "*Annam Parabrahmma Swarupam*" (food is godly) the very formulation or attaching to the sacredness of the food is a strategy of the dominant caste, rooted in the very idea of hierarchization of food. The food converting into sacredness and purity is explicitly disconnecting with the people who produce the material which helps to prepare the "food". In this way, the food hierarchy is taught and practiced in educational institutes. In our childhood days within our families and outside families that is in schools. Because in the family religious beliefs (brahmanical beliefs) are forced to become their psyche and also these are normalized. It also continues among scholars among educated teachers. This finally makes an individual an intolerant person.

## Democratizing Food Culture in University

In the background of intense debate around beef, and pork, the veg- and non-veg food culture the idea of recognizing diverse food cultures and the democratization process is emphasized. The assertion for the democratization of food culture is widely accepted. Scholars from Dalits and

subaltern communities wrote many articles both in vernacular media and mainstream media. One of the English daily newspapers commented on the incident and beef issue on campus. The above statement clearly says that the assertion of Dalits is for democratizing social relations including food relations in a way it challenges the two things 1. Questioning the sacredness of any meat and 2. Challenging the purity and pollution relations that are built in the caste system. Here the question one may raise that why the cow became a holy animal, not a buffalo. Buffalo is dearer to the Dalits, Adivasis, and shudras than a cow. For Hindu brahmanical spirituality, they become polluted because they eat meat. Between the cow and buffalo which eat the same grass, why has the buffalo spiritually and politically become untouchable; why has only the cow become so preferred? Kancha Illaiah argues that.

“How many children of the Sangh Parivar leaders are trained to graze cows in the fields as they are “sacred” animals? On the contrary one can find hundreds of Dalitbahujans children feeding and naturalizing these animals. Many of their lives have been sacrificed in the service of cattle in India through the ages. We know how much they were humiliated for such service and where they stand economically today. These are the people who should have more nationally respectable space in a democracy” (Kancha Illaiah:2001).

That means the casteist culture not only marginalized but, more importantly, stigmatized the Dalits and their culture. The hegemony of a particular kind of “Caste culture” in India’s public sphere. However, it reflects a dichotomy between the stated constitutional declarations and social reality. Two debating effects of such rejection are that Dalits have become “citizens in exile” in their own country and that the human agency of Dalits has been “tampered with” and injured on an everyday basis (Gundimeda Sambaiah, 2009). Further, Sambaiah argues that there are two possible ways to recover the human agency of Dalits that are. 1. Rejection of any community’s culture is a way of injuring the human agency of that community such can be healed only by a dialogical process, namely, the assertion of positivity and pride in their own culture by the injured community and positive recognition of such assertion by the injurer. 2. Democratization of the public sphere can be effectively actualized not only according to the representation of marginalized cultures, but such representation needs to be accompanied by respect for “the other” (Gundimeda Sambaiah, 2009)

## Conclusion

The paper in its analysis brings the broader cultural conflict that often arises over food in the university spaces. Universities are places where everyone is expected to respect each other and humanize through interactions and learning processes. However, the studies document that universities reflect societal structures in their functioning. The students and stakeholders who enter into universities also carry a cultural background of their own. Hence the diversity of food culture in the university. The instances in the form of beef festivals in various universities posed new questions about food practices in campus space. The questions from Dalit students in the context of beef festivals critiqued the prejudice against certain food cultures of subaltern

communities. The insensitivity of groups and authority violates the basic human right 'right to eat'. The debates around the diversity of food culture question the elitist and hegemonic food menus in the hostels of students. Food is an essential part of culture. Culture is the foundation for one own identity. The denial of the right to food is a denial of human agency. This tendency violates human dignity. To ensure and respect the diversity of food culture including veg-non-veg, beef, and pork, civil society, institutions should develop a civic culture on the campus. So, the universities/ institutions should create a condition that will make students (disadvantaged) much more confident and secure. It is only possible when higher learning institutions ensure 1. Inclusive pedagogical practices and research agenda. 2. Secular and democratic institutional space. 3. Moral and material institutional support structures for Dalit students for a sustained academic life will ensure quality and equality in higher education for the Dalits.

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