

## FOOD AS A SOCIAL SYMBOL AND EXPLORING ITS CULTURAL ROLE: VIEW FROM SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD

**Dr Joydeb Patra**

Assistant Professor, Department of Law, Brainware University: Kolkata

[joydebajoy@gmail.com](mailto:joydebajoy@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Food functions as more than a source of nourishment; it is a profound social symbol that reflects cultural values, social hierarchies, and collective identities. This paper explores the cultural and symbolic role of food from the perspective of the sociology of food, emphasizing its capacity to signify identity, demarcate social boundaries, and foster communal ties. Through a critical analysis of traditional cuisines, festive rituals, and everyday consumption practices, the research investigates how food embodies and perpetuates cultural narratives.

The study further examines the impact of globalization on food symbolism, highlighting phenomena such as the fusion of cuisines, the commodification of ethnic foods, and the rise of digital food culture. Drawing on theoretical frameworks like Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Mary Douglas' work on cultural codes, the research illustrates how food choices and practices reinforce societal norms and hierarchies.

The findings underscore food's dynamic role in shaping cultural expressions and social interactions, while addressing contemporary challenges, including food inequality and cultural appropriation. By situating food as a central element of social and cultural life, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of its multifaceted significance in a rapidly evolving world.

**Keywords:** Sociology of Food, Food Symbolism, Cultural Identity, Social Hierarchies, Food and Society

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### Introduction

Food is an essential part of human life, transcending its biological function to become a powerful cultural and social symbol. It communicates identity, status, and relationships, serving as a lens to examine societal structures. This paper delves into the sociological aspects of food as a symbol, addressing questions such as:

- How does food represent cultural and social identities?
- What role does food play in marking social boundaries and hierarchies?
- How are cultural practices around food evolving in a globalized world?

Food is more than a biological necessity; it is a powerful social and cultural symbol deeply woven into the fabric of human societies. Across cultures and histories, food has served as a marker of identity, a medium for communication, and a tool for fostering relationships. Its role extends beyond sustenance to encompass complex meanings tied to cultural values, social structures, and collective memory. Through food, individuals and communities express their

heritage, affirm social bonds, and navigate societal hierarchies. In the sociological context, food acts as a dynamic artifact that reflects and reinforces social norms and power dynamics. The choices of what to eat, how to prepare it, and where to consume it are shaped by cultural codes and social frameworks. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital highlights how food preferences can signify class distinctions, while Mary Douglas' analysis of dietary rules illustrates how food taboos and rituals structure social order. Moreover, the globalization of food has added new layers of complexity to its symbolism. The hybridization of cuisines, the rise of food as a commodity in international markets, and the increasing influence of digital platforms on food culture have transformed how societies engage with and ascribe meaning to food. As traditional practices intersect with modern influences, food continues to play a critical role in shaping identities and communities. This paper explores the multifaceted role of food as a social symbol through the lens of the sociology of food. It examines how food embodies cultural identities, delineates social boundaries, and facilitates connections, while also addressing contemporary issues such as food inequality, cultural appropriation, and the erosion of traditional food practices in a globalized context. By understanding food as a sociological phenomenon, we can gain deeper insights into its enduring significance in shaping human culture and social life.

### Theoretical Framework:

The sociological exploration of food as a social symbol and its cultural role can be enriched by employing three pivotal theoretical frameworks: Pierre Bourdieu's Distinction Theory, Mary Douglas' Cultural Codes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss' Structuralism. Each framework provides unique insights into the intricate ways food interacts with societal structures and cultural practices.

### 1. Pierre Bourdieu's Distinction Theory

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital sheds light on how food choices are not merely individual preferences but reflections of social class and cultural hierarchies. According to Bourdieu, the consumption of specific foods and adherence to particular culinary practices can serve as markers of social distinction.

- **Taste as Socially Constructed:** Bourdieu argued that taste, including culinary taste, is shaped by one's social upbringing and education. For example, consuming expensive, niche foods like caviar or truffle oil often signifies upper-class status, while fast food is associated with working-class habits.
- **Food as a Marker of Status:** Dining habits—such as formal dining etiquette or preference for organic, artisanal, or international cuisines—act as indicators of one's position within social hierarchies. These choices help individuals signal their cultural capital and reinforce group boundaries.

- **Example:** In contemporary society, the preference for sustainable or plant-based diets may be associated with affluent and educated groups, reflecting an alignment with progressive values and a higher social status.

Bourdieu's framework underscores how food operates as a tool for both inclusion within and exclusion from social groups, perpetuating class distinctions through everyday practices.

## 2. Mary Douglas' Cultural Codes

Mary Douglas' work focuses on the symbolic meanings of food in structuring social norms and rituals. Her analysis highlights how food is more than physical sustenance; it is embedded with cultural codes that dictate its preparation, consumption, and significance.

- **Food as Structured Meaning:** Douglas proposed that food patterns mirror broader societal structures. For instance, dietary laws, such as kosher or halal practices, are not only religious mandates but also reflections of social order and purity.
- **Rituals and Social Cohesion:** Food rituals, such as sharing meals during festivals or ceremonies, serve to reinforce communal bonds and cultural continuity. The sequence, combination, and context of meals often carry specific symbolic meanings tied to societal values.
- **Example:** The structured courses in a formal Western dinner (appetizer, main course, dessert) symbolize order and hierarchy, reflecting broader societal norms. Similarly, the centrality of rice in Asian cultures denotes its historical importance and cultural reverence.

Douglas' framework illustrates how food choices and practices are governed by cultural codes that uphold social norms, fostering a shared understanding within communities.

## 3. Claude Lévi-Strauss' Structuralism

Claude Lévi-Strauss approached food from a structuralist perspective, emphasizing the cultural construction of food practices through binary oppositions, such as raw vs. cooked or natural vs. cultural.

- **The "Raw-Cooked" Dichotomy:** Lévi-Strauss argued that cooking is a transformative process that signifies humanity's move from nature to culture. Cooking practices are imbued with cultural meanings that reflect societal values and beliefs.
- **Binary Oppositions in Food Practices:** Food classifications often embody fundamental societal oppositions. For instance, the distinction between "pure" and "polluted" foods, or "traditional" and "modern" cuisines, reflects deeper cultural narratives.
- **Example:** In many societies, the act of cooking meat versus eating it raw symbolizes civilization and control over nature, whereas raw food consumption may be associated with primitivism or modern dietary trends like raw veganism.

Lévi-Strauss' framework helps explain how food practices symbolize broader cultural systems and how societies assign meaning to food preparation and consumption as part of their collective identity.

### Food as a Cultural Identity:

Food as a cultural identity refers to the idea that the foods people eat, the way they prepare them, and the traditions surrounding eating are deeply connected to their cultural heritage, social practices, and sense of self. Food plays a significant role in expressing who we are, where we come from, and how we relate to others within and outside our communities. Here's a breakdown of how food is tied to cultural identity:

#### 1. Cultural Heritage and Tradition

- **Historical Roots:** The types of food people eat are often influenced by historical factors such as geography, climate, agriculture, and trade. For example, Italian cuisine is known for its use of pasta, olive oil, and tomatoes, ingredients that were shaped by Italy's historical trade routes and agricultural practices.
- **Generational Continuity:** Recipes and food preparation methods are often passed down through generations. This continuity helps maintain a connection to ancestors and preserves the cultural heritage of a community. For instance, a family might gather for traditional dishes during holidays or special events, reinforcing shared customs and family identity.

#### 2. Community and Social Bonding

- **Meals as Social Gatherings:** Food is often a central part of community rituals, whether it's a family dinner, a religious feast, or a national holiday. Sharing food strengthens social bonds and fosters a sense of belonging. For example, in many cultures, communal eating (e.g., sharing a large dish with friends or family) is a key part of social life.
- **Symbolic Meaning:** Certain foods hold symbolic value and may be associated with specific rituals, celebrations, or milestones. For example, cake is often served at birthdays and weddings, and rice is symbolic in many Asian cultures as a sign of fertility and prosperity.

#### 3. Expression of Identity and Belonging

- **Personal and Collective Identity:** Food can represent one's individual cultural identity, as well as the collective identity of a group. The way people prepare and consume food can act as a symbol of their ethnicity, nationality, and community. For example, the consumption of spicy food can be an important part of Indian, Mexican, or Thai identity, while the types of bread baked may signify regional or cultural diversity within a country.
- **Food and National Pride:** National cuisines are a point of pride for many cultures. For instance, the French are proud of their culinary traditions, the Japanese have a strong

connection to sushi and rice, and the Chinese consider their food part of their national identity. These foods often go beyond mere sustenance, carrying cultural significance and pride.

#### 4. Food and Religion

- Many cultures' food practices are heavily influenced by religion. Religious beliefs dictate what is permissible (halal, kosher) or forbidden (pork, beef, alcohol), as well as when and how certain foods can be consumed. For example, the Islamic tradition of fasting during Ramadan involves particular foods eaten at specific times, which helps to reinforce religious and cultural identity.

#### 5. Globalization and Migration

- **Fusion and Adaptation:** With globalization, people often migrate and bring their culinary traditions with them, adapting them to new environments. Immigrants may combine traditional recipes with local ingredients, creating new dishes that reflect both their cultural heritage and their new environment. For example, Mexican-American cuisine blends traditional Mexican dishes with American influences.
- **Food as a Way to Preserve Identity:** When people move to new countries, they may continue to cook the foods of their homeland as a way of staying connected to their roots. This can be seen in immigrant communities where traditional food becomes a way of maintaining cultural ties in a foreign land.

#### 6. Food and Memory

- **Emotional Connection:** Food is often linked to personal and collective memories. The smell of a particular dish might evoke memories of childhood or special family gatherings, creating a deep emotional connection to one's culture. For example, the smell of bread baking might remind someone of their grandmother's house, or a special sauce may be associated with a family tradition.
- **Food and Storytelling:** Foods can tell stories about a community's history, struggles, and triumphs. For instance, some food traditions arose out of necessity or scarcity, yet they continue today as symbols of resilience and creativity.

#### Food and Social Hierarchies:

The relationship between food and social hierarchies is complex and deeply rooted in cultural, economic, and historical contexts. Food can reflect and reinforce social structures, symbolizing power, status, and identity. Here's a detailed breakdown:

##### 1. Symbol of Status

- **Luxury vs. Necessity:** Certain foods, such as caviar, truffles, or fine wine, are often associated with wealth and privilege. Their rarity or expense makes them markers of higher social status.

- **Cultural Prestige:** Some foods gain status because of their cultural significance. For example, ceremonial foods in royal or religious settings often symbolize power and divine favor.

## 2. Access and Inequality

- **Economic Disparities:** Access to high-quality, nutritious food often correlates with socioeconomic status. Wealthier individuals can afford diverse and healthful diets, while poorer communities may rely on cheaper, less nutritious options.
- **Food Deserts:** In many regions, marginalized communities have limited access to fresh and healthy foods, further entrenching social and economic divides.

## 3. Rituals and Power Dynamics

- **Feasting and Hosting:** Historically, hosting lavish feasts or banquets was a way for elites to display their wealth and reinforce their social dominance.
- **Food Distribution:** In many cultures, the allocation of food during communal events reflects social hierarchies. Leaders, elders, or higher-ranking individuals often receive the best portions or serve first.

## 4. Cultural and Religious Significance

- **Dietary Restrictions:** Religious or cultural dietary rules (e.g., kosher, halal, vegetarianism in Hinduism) can reflect and enforce group boundaries, reinforcing social cohesion or exclusion.
- **Festivals and Ceremonies:** Foods associated with specific traditions often underscore social roles. For example, in Indian weddings, the bride's family traditionally prepares or sponsors elaborate meals, reflecting familial and social expectations.

## 5. Colonialism and Global Trade

- **Exotic Goods as Power Symbols:** During the colonial era, spices, sugar, and other foods were symbols of colonial wealth and power. Their consumption reinforced the wealth of imperial nations and their elites.
- **Labor Exploitation:** The production of these goods often depended on systems of slavery and exploitation, cementing global hierarchies.

## 6. Modern Impacts

- **Gastronomy and Class:** Fine dining and gourmet culture often cater to the upper classes, creating exclusive culinary experiences.
- **Diet Trends:** Organic, plant-based, or gluten-free diets can sometimes signal higher status due to their perceived cost or health benefits, even when not accessible to all.

## Globalization and Changing Food Symbolism:



Globalization has significantly altered the symbolism of food, reshaping its cultural, social, and economic meanings across the globe. As global trade, communication, and migration increase, food that once held localized or traditional significance evolves in new contexts. Here's a detailed explanation of globalization's impact on food symbolism:

### 1. Expansion of Culinary Exchange

- **Global Spread of Traditional Foods:** Foods that were once regional staples, such as sushi (Japan), tacos (Mexico), or pizza (Italy), have become global icons. These dishes often gain new meanings in international settings, symbolizing cultural diversity or cosmopolitanism.
- **Fusion Cuisine:** The blending of culinary traditions, such as Korean tacos or sushi burritos, represents the interconnectedness of global cultures. These creations symbolize innovation and the breaking of traditional culinary boundaries.

### 2. Commodification of Food

- **Cultural Appropriation:** Some traditional foods lose their original cultural significance as they are commercialized and adapted to global markets. For example, the transformation of Italian pizza into fast-food chains or Indian curry into pre-packaged meals can strip these foods of their cultural authenticity.
- **Luxury Food Globalization:** Foods like quinoa, once a staple for Andean communities, are now marketed globally as health foods. This shift can change their symbolic meaning from survival staples to elite wellness commodities.

### 3. Homogenization of Diets

- **Fast Food and Modernity:** Global fast-food chains like McDonald's and KFC have become symbols of modernization, urbanization, and Western influence. In some cultures, consuming these foods signifies a connection to global trends, while others see it as a loss of local food traditions.
- **Decline of Local Foods:** As global brands dominate markets, traditional foods may lose their symbolic importance. This can result in the erosion of cultural heritage and identity tied to local cuisine.

### 4. Food as Identity in a Global Context

- **Cultural Pride:** In a globalized world, food has become a way for communities to assert cultural identity. National cuisines are celebrated in international food festivals and media, symbolizing pride and heritage.
- **Diaspora Influence:** Immigrant communities often use food to maintain connections to their heritage while also adapting it to their new environments. For instance, Chinese-American cuisine reflects a blend of Chinese traditions and American tastes, symbolizing cultural adaptation.

## 5. Global Health Trends and Food Symbolism

- **Superfoods and Wellness Culture:** Foods like avocado, kale, and açai have become global symbols of health and wellness. Their symbolism reflects broader trends in globalization, such as the rise of health-conscious and eco-conscious consumers.
- **Organic and Fair Trade:** In globalized markets, foods labeled as organic or fair trade symbolize ethical consumption and environmental awareness, catering to socially conscious consumers.

## 6. Economic and Political Symbolism

- **Food Sovereignty:** In some regions, the adoption of global food systems is seen as a threat to food sovereignty. Local foods, therefore, symbolize resistance against cultural and economic domination.
- **Trade and Diplomacy:** Foods are often used in diplomatic gestures, such as state dinners showcasing national cuisines, symbolizing goodwill and cultural exchange.

## 7. Hybrid Symbolism in a Globalized World

- **Cultural Exchange and Misinterpretation:** Foods adopted globally often acquire new meanings detached from their original contexts. For instance, ramen noodles, once an everyday meal in Japan, have become a trendy, upscale dish in other countries.
- **Celebration of Diversity:** Global food markets now celebrate the availability of diverse ingredients and cuisines, turning food into a symbol of interconnectedness and multiculturalism.

### Food as a Medium of Social Connection:

Food plays a vital role as a medium of social connection, transcending its biological necessity to become a powerful tool for building relationships, fostering community, and expressing cultural identity. Its ability to bring people together lies in its universal nature and the shared experiences it creates. Here's how food serves as a medium of social connection:

#### 1. Rituals and Celebrations

- **Festivals and Holidays:** Food is often at the center of cultural and religious celebrations, such as Thanksgiving in the United States, Eid feasts in Islamic communities, or Lunar New Year banquets in East Asia. Sharing these meals reinforces communal bonds and cultural traditions.
- **Life Events:** Weddings, funerals, and births often include communal meals that bring families and communities together, symbolizing support and solidarity.



## 2. Hospitality and Generosity

- **Symbol of Welcome:** Offering food to guests is a universal sign of hospitality. In many cultures, sharing a meal with visitors is an expression of goodwill and an invitation to form a connection.
- **Breaking Bread:** The act of eating together symbolizes trust and unity, breaking down social barriers and creating opportunities for dialogue.

## 3. Family and Domestic Bonds

- **Family Meals:** Regular family meals are a cornerstone of many households, providing time for members to connect, share stories, and strengthen emotional bonds.
- **Generational Links:** Recipes and cooking traditions passed down through generations serve as a medium for preserving family heritage and creating intergenerational connections.

## 4. Building Community

- **Potlucks and Gatherings:** Community events often center around shared meals, such as potlucks or picnics, which encourage interaction and collaboration.
- **Street Food Culture:** In many urban areas, street food fosters a sense of belonging by creating informal spaces where people from diverse backgrounds interact.

## 5. Cross-Cultural Understanding

- **Culinary Exchange:** Sharing foods from different cultures fosters mutual respect and appreciation. For example, international food festivals or dining experiences introduce people to new traditions and perspectives.
- **Fusion Foods:** The blending of cuisines, such as Tex-Mex or Indo-Chinese, symbolizes cultural interaction and the formation of hybrid identities.

## 6. Symbol of Love and Care

- **Nurturing Relationships:** Cooking for others is often seen as an act of love, care, or gratitude. A home-cooked meal can express emotions that words may fail to convey.
- **Comfort and Support:** Bringing food to someone in need, such as after a loss or during illness, is a common gesture of empathy and connection.

## 7. Collaborative Cooking

- **Team-Building:** Cooking together, whether in families or among friends, encourages teamwork and communication. Activities like baking or hosting a barbecue create shared memories.
- **Learning Together:** Participating in cooking classes or food preparation workshops can build relationships and foster camaraderie.

## 8. Food as a Cultural Identifier

- **Shared Identity:** Communities often identify themselves through their unique cuisines, creating a sense of belonging among members who share the same culinary traditions.
- **Diaspora Connections:** Immigrant communities use food to maintain ties to their homeland, bringing people together through shared flavors and memories.

## 9. Food in Digital and Social Media

- **Virtual Bonding:** Sharing food experiences on platforms like Instagram or TikTok allows people to connect over recipes, food reviews, and cooking tips, transcending physical boundaries.
- **Global Trends:** Viral food trends (e.g., dalgona coffee during the pandemic) unite people worldwide in shared culinary experiments.

## Challenges and Ethical Considerations:

The relationship between food, society, and ethics is complex, involving challenges that span sustainability, equity, cultural respect, and health. As food production and consumption practices evolve, ethical considerations increasingly influence choices and policies. Here's a breakdown of key challenges and ethical concerns:

### 1. Environmental Impact

- **Climate Change:** Agriculture, especially livestock farming, contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. Ethical considerations focus on reducing the carbon footprint through sustainable practices and dietary shifts toward plant-based options.
- **Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss:** The expansion of agricultural land for crops like soy or palm oil leads to deforestation and habitat destruction, raising concerns about balancing food production with ecological preservation.
- **Water Usage:** Food production, particularly for water-intensive crops and livestock, strains freshwater resources. Ethical questions arise about prioritizing water for food over other essential uses.

### 2. Food Security and Inequality

- **Global Hunger:** Despite sufficient global food production, distribution inequalities leave millions malnourished while others experience food waste and overconsumption. Addressing this disparity involves ethical considerations around fair trade, food aid, and local empowerment.
- **Food Sovereignty:** Globalized food systems often marginalize local producers, raising questions about protecting indigenous practices and ensuring communities control their food sources.

- **Food Deserts:** In urban and rural areas, limited access to affordable, nutritious food perpetuates health disparities, sparking ethical debates on government and corporate responsibilities.

### 3. Labor Rights and Exploitation

- **Exploitation of Workers:** Many agricultural and food industry workers face poor wages, unsafe conditions, and lack of protections, particularly in developing countries. Ethical consumption involves supporting fair trade or certified products.
- **Child and Forced Labor:** The use of exploitative labor practices in industries like cocoa and coffee production highlights ethical concerns about transparency and corporate accountability.

### 4. Cultural Appropriation and Respect

- **Misrepresentation:** Commercialization of traditional dishes can strip them of their cultural significance, reducing rich histories to trendy commodities.
- **Respect for Origins:** Ethical considerations include acknowledging and compensating cultures and communities from which foods, ingredients, or techniques originate.

### 5. Health and Nutrition

- **Obesity and Malnutrition:** The global rise in processed and fast foods contributes to obesity and related diseases, while malnutrition remains prevalent in poorer regions. Balancing profit motives with public health is a critical ethical issue.
- **Misinformation:** Marketing tactics that mislead consumers about the nutritional value or sustainability of products (e.g., "greenwashing") raise concerns about consumer rights.

### 6. Animal Welfare

- **Factory Farming:** Ethical questions surround the treatment of animals in industrial farming, including overcrowding, inhumane conditions, and lack of ethical slaughter practices.
- **Alternatives:** Debates about plant-based diets, lab-grown meat, and reducing animal-based food production reflect growing concerns about animal welfare.

### 7. Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)

- **Safety and Impact:** While GMOs can enhance food production, their long-term health and environmental effects remain contentious.
- **Corporate Control:** Ethical concerns about biotechnology companies controlling seeds and farming practices highlight issues of power and autonomy for small-scale farmers.

## 8. Food Waste

- **Scale of Waste:** Globally, about one-third of all food produced is wasted, exacerbating hunger and environmental damage. Ethical consumption emphasizes minimizing waste through better supply chain management, education, and household practices.
- **Redistribution:** Ethical dilemmas include how to redistribute surplus food effectively while addressing legal and logistical barriers.

## 9. Indigenous and Local Food Systems

- **Preservation of Knowledge:** Indigenous food practices often prioritize sustainability and biodiversity but are threatened by industrial agriculture and cultural assimilation.
- **Ethical Tourism:** Consuming indigenous foods as part of cultural tourism raises questions about fair compensation and respect for traditions.

## 10. Biotechnology and Food Innovation

- **Lab-Grown Foods:** Ethical considerations include the potential benefits of reducing environmental impact and animal suffering versus concerns about affordability, accessibility, and unintended consequences.
- **Food Security:** Innovations like vertical farming or precision agriculture raise questions about inclusivity and access for small-scale farmers.

## 11. Ethical Marketing and Consumer Choices

- **Responsibility of Corporations:** Ethical debates focus on whether corporations should prioritize health and sustainability over profit in product development and advertising.
- **Consumer Responsibility:** Individual choices, such as buying organic, fair trade, or local products, raise questions about the balance between personal and systemic responsibility.

## 12. Global Trade and Power Dynamics

- **Monopolies and Inequality:** Multinational corporations often dominate food markets, reducing competition and marginalizing small producers.
- **Fair Trade:** Ethical trade policies aim to ensure that farmers and workers in developing countries receive fair compensation for their labor.

## Conclusion:

Food is far more than a biological necessity; it is a powerful social symbol deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and political contexts. From a sociological perspective, food reflects and reinforces social structures, identities, and relationships. It serves as a marker of status, a medium of connection, and a repository of cultural traditions and values. Through food,

individuals and groups express belonging, distinction, and solidarity, navigating the complex dynamics of power, identity, and globalization.

The sociology of food emphasizes how consumption practices reveal broader societal patterns. Food rituals, choices, and distributions mirror class stratification, gender roles, and ethnic identities. At the same time, globalization has transformed food symbolism, introducing hybrid identities, creating cross-cultural dialogues, and raising ethical concerns about sustainability and equity.

In a rapidly changing world, food remains a dynamic cultural artifact, bridging tradition and innovation. It invites critical reflection on how societies balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the demands of modernity, equity, and sustainability. By examining food as a social symbol, we gain profound insights into the ways people construct meaning, foster connections, and navigate the complexities of their social environments. This exploration not only enriches our understanding of food but also highlights its role as a vital thread in the fabric of human society.

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