

The Significant Role of Food in Determining One's Cultural and Religious Background

Leethu Victor, Post Graduate student, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri-690525, Kerala, India

Dr ShibaniChakravertyAich, Assistant professor, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri-690525, Kerala, India

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Abstract:

Culture is an important factor that is inseparable from the lives of people and so is food and culinary traditions. Food is not just a necessity of life or just a means of survival but it is the identity of the consumer. Like culture differs from land to land, from people to people, so is the preference for food; its shape, taste, colour, and flavour. The food habits of a person define his culture and identity. The way you eat, what you eat, how you cook them, all of these defines the person you are. The link between food and culture is very strong. Our food preferences symbolise how we express ourselves in terms of tradition, culture, ethnicity, and heritage. Food has a very significant role to play in the ritual and cultural practices of certain communities and religion. People incorporate food into religious and cultural practices, the food incorporated is sacred and meaningful. Food eaten has much more to do with our identity and culture than what we think. The food consumed by people around the world differs and it shows their traditional and cultural culinary background and heritage passed on from one generation to the other. This paper tries to analyse how the food habits of a person or community expresses the culture, identity, religion, and tradition, and the influence of food in defining who you are based on one's food habits.

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1.INTRODUCTION

Food attaches people to their identity, culture, religion, and folkloric background. Food, exists as a vehicle for expressing culture and status. Food is what brings people together, the family sits together during the meal. The pattern of food preferences totally rests upon their social, religious, cultural background and the region of origin. People from different regional backgrounds, following different traditions, customs and culture are identified through their food habits. The food prepared by the person shows the culinary background he or she is from. The use of spices and ingredients used in the preparation of a dish, the cooking time and even the utensils play a major role in predicting or determining the traditional and culinary background of the person. The dislikes and likes of a person are affected by the religious and

cultural practices. The taste, flavour, culinary techniques, shape and even the smell of the food varies from country to country or even within specific regions. In a country like India, rich and diverse in culture and tradition, the food preferences differ from state to state or even from one city to other. The preference of spices and flavours fluctuate throughout the country. The dishes having the same name varies in look, taste, texture, and flavour. Desserts and sweets occupy a major space in the Indian culinary tradition and in the religious and cultural procedures. Food connects people, brings them together. Therefore, throughout the paper, we particularly pay attention to on how food habits and preferences of people of certain country or a region is influenced by their background of culture, religion, and tradition.

2. FOOD AND TABLE MANNERS

When the topic is food it is necessary to discuss a little about etiquette dining. The young ones should be taught to maintain certain standards while eating to chew with their mouth closed, to use knife and fork, not to waste food. Certain things that seem right in one culture may seem rude in other cultures. In certain cultures, it is considered normal to burp and slurp but in some other customs it is an insult. To know the table manners of other culture comes handy so that lest you insult them unknowingly. Table manners around the world has its own uniqueness, in Europe the diners never rest their hand on their lap; in Ethiopia they follow a tradition of feeding each other with their hands, this method of feeding using hands is termed as Gursha. This is to show their love, bond, care, and their generous nature. This method is part of tradition and culture. In Muslim culture, they eat only using their right hands because left hand is normally used to preserve cleanliness. In both Muslim and Christian tradition, if one drops their bread they have to kiss the bread, this is to show respect for food because daily bread is a blessing of God. Wasting food is unexpected in certain cultures but in Russian tradition the diner is expected to leave some food on his plate. In India, people rarely use a knife or fork, Indians eat food using their hands and most parts of India follow the tradition of having their food sitting on the floor. This tradition is practiced by people in the regions of Tamilnadu and Kerala and men are given priority in the house so that women eat only after the male folks of the house have finished their meals. In Tanzania it is considered rude for the guest to arrive earlier, while in India, the guests arrive a week earlier before the function. The Indian table manners are different from the rest of the world, India constitutes of 28 states and 9 union territories and the food manners and table manners varies from one to the other. In most parts of India, the food prepared in the family depends on the preference of the head of the family. No other people in the world eat food with their hands, other than Indians. Most part of India still have their food with

hand, they believe that only if one has food with their hands the fullest of its benefits can be acquired from it. Even though we call it table manners, most of the Indian communities still sit on the floor to have their food, it is an old belief that when they sit on the floor the healthier one becomes and also by leaning forward and backward the faster the food gets digested. Unlike other countries, Indians take a heavier four course meal, normally others eat less compared to Indians. In the southern parts of India, the people dine on banana leaves rather than using plates, the food served on the banana leaves absorbs the polyphenols from the leaves that has antibacterial properties that kills all the germs in the food and reduces the risk of falling sick.

3. FOOD AND RELIGION

Religion is an approach to human spirituality that follows a set of beliefs, narratives, myths, and practices. The food habits of a person are highly influenced by the religious principles and ritual practices. The choice of food items and the methods of culinary are based on one's religious practices. As Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin said "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are", food included into the diet and the method of consuming it defines who you are and what you are. The values and tradition of a person are affected by his or her religious beliefs and so is his dietary practices. The relation between food and religion is complex. The dietary practices of a religion are often connected to some myth or legends. The culinary traditions are diverse and unique, as a celebration of this diversity lets observe the sacred dietary practices of a few major religions. In Christianity the dietary traditions fluctuate in different congregations, some congregations do not practice any restrictions over their alimental practices. Bread and wine are given priority in the Christian tradition, for, Jesus Christ offered bread and wine as his flesh and blood to humanity. Jesus, "Broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way, after supper, He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood;

do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” In remembrance of this, Christians practice this in their rituals, and hence the bread and wine has become an unavoidable component in their dietetic practices. Christianity has always provided prominence to consuming the meals together as a family. The food is blessed and prayers are recited as a symbol of thanksgiving to god for providing with daily bread. the consumption of non-veg is considered a sin during the special days like “Ash Wednesday” (emphasis added), Good Friday and on sabbath. Hinduism never restricts its believers from eating any food, but the followers of Hinduism mainly refrains themselves from eating beef, as they consider cow as god. Hinduism is a combination of different castes and so is their food practices. Brahmins, do not consume any kind of non -veg items; they solely depend upon the green food. The food practices of Hindu’s diverge depending upon their geographical background. Ghee plays an important role in the dietary as well as the ritual practices of Hinduism, according to Hindu mythology ghee was created by Prajapati, by rubbing his hands together. Therefore, ghee is considered holy and pure by the followers of Hinduism. Ghee is used for ritual as well as cooking purposes. Islam has separated the food into Halal and Haram. Halal refers to those food that can be consumed and Haram mentions to those unfit to be consumed. Pork is considered Haram. Jainism and Buddhism strictly practice diets that are green, they do not support taking one life to nurture the other. The traditional and religious practices followed by the people affects their food habits. In the modern era people have deviated slightly from their religious customs and practices of tradition. The Christian community has deviated from the traditional Christian practices. The traditional Christian beliefs has changed with different communities of Christianity, the food consumed by them also has changed along time. Christianity rebukes people from consuming pork and certain other substances, but now people consume these food items. Fasting during holy days has also been excluded by the

Christian of certain regions. Even in the Hindu community there are different classes that follow different traditions, the Brahmin community follows vegetarianism while the other Hindu communities follow non vegetarianism.

4. FOOD CULTURE AND HERITAGE

As Winona Laduke remarked, “Food for us comes from our relatives, whether they have wings or fins or roots. That is how we consider food. Food has culture. It has history. It has a story. It has relationships.”, every food has a story to tell, a culture to display and tradition to pass on. Everyone grows up eating the food of their culture. It becomes a part of your identity. Every country has its own food culture and tradition. when one hears Dosa and sambar, they get reminded of the south Indian dishes. Rasagulla reminds us about the traditional sweet of west Bengal. When someone mentions about Indian food the first thought one would have is about the spicy curries and the street food. The foods of various regions are the exact representation of their cultural values. When we hear of America we get reminded of the tasty hamburgers, it is a representation of the American culture, their tradition. Hamburgers symbolise the overriding and open nature of the Americans. The staple Italian cuisine famous for its tradition, technique and style of preparation is pasta. The kneading and mixing of the dough in correct proportions, only, can make it richer in taste and texture. The Asian cuisines are hot and flaming, the extensive use of garlic and onions are also major trait seen in these dishes. Geetha Kothari, in her work “If you are what you eat, then what am I?”, depicts the problems faced by an Indian living abroad, who tries to follow the food standards of the foreign land. The feeling of being a weirdo, persuades one to take up the culinary traditions of a foreign land, also shows how her American friends expected her to adopt their living standards and imbibe their food traditions. Kothari mentions the instances where she being a vegetarian try to taste or cook tuna for the first time. We can

never do undo our heritage and so is the same with the age-old dietary practices.

5. SOCIAL STATUS DETERMINES THE FOOD HABITS

What we eat is what we are, the quantity and the quality of the food depends on the social class that we are born to. The lower level of the economy prefer quantity over quality and vice versa. The lower income they earn must be utilised into a hundred different things so they prefer to get more than having a healthy diet. The education, the class difference, the income, etc. counts on the food preferences and habits. The upper class prefers a more refined and balanced diet compared to the middle and the lower class. This class distinction is brought to light through the food habits of the various classes of the society.

5.1. Upper class Diets

The upper-class diet is considered refined and organised compared to the other classes of the society. The food preferred by the upper-class has the sense of luxury, class, and distinction. Meat is the major component of the upper-class diet; the price range of meat is often unaffordable by the other sections of the society. The upper-class diets are more organised, and well plated; they have the touch of class and prestige. The flavour and essence of the upper-class meals stand out from the meals of the other sections of the society. The richness and the exclusivity of the elite class outstand in the diets. The upper-class diets are slow cooked, less spicy, and refined in taste. The upper-class prefer foods of nutritional quality, vegan, and vegetarian; they try food from different cultures and traditions to show their sense of worldliness, which can be achieved only through economic stability and social outreach. Compared to the lower and the middle class the upper-class has access to the various cuisines of the other cultures. They also prefer food of nutritional quality, quality is given importance over quantity, the education and the monetary status has helped the upper-class to follow a better nutritional diet. Their

financial stability gives access to the premium quality food products and this is evident in the health conditions of the upper-class society. The elite class use Products only from the reputed brands of the world, the upper-class society makes no compromise on the quality of the food they consume.

5.2. Middle class Diets

The middle-class food is always a combination of the upper and the lower class. They try to imitate the upper-class food habits or culinary practices. The food habits of the middle class are always a matter of ambiguity; they never have a specific diet prescribed to their social status. The menu they prefer is never the same compared to the other two classes of the society, they mainly consume fast-food and tin foods. The middle-class people prefer to follow the standards of the upper-class society through food as well as by imitating other practices of the elite class. The middle-class prefer to consume any food that is easily accessible to them, the price range and the quality also comes into consideration when they choose a food. They prefer foods that closely resembles the food preferences of the upper-class to show their status in the society. The middle-class people had also started to prefer vegan and nutritional food lately, this indicates that the they have adequate knowledge about the nutritional values and their benefits. These food habits of the middle-class people grant privilege to look down upon the lower class that depend on cheaper food products.

In India, a middle-class family follows a fixed menu for their daily meals and only on special occasions do they prepare different food items that includes variety of dishes. They follow either a vegetarian meal or non veg meal including fish fry and fish curry daily. On special occasions they prepare various meat dishes, sweet dishes, and desserts such as payasam. A Kerala middle-class family prepares a Sadhya only on special occasions and functions.

5.3. Lower class Diets

The lower- class people are the biggest consumers of fast food in America, to meet both ends they rely upon low cost food even though knowing that its unhealthy and of less nutritional values. A lower-class staple diet comprises of potatoes, canned food items, and expired products; the restricted income force them to include even the expired food items. A typical Indian lower-class family depends on the government rations; their diet includes mainly fish, rice, cereals, and vegetables. The American lower-class people feed upon fast food like burger, sandwich, tacos, and soft drinks. The preparation and cleaning of the raw food items is time consuming compared to buying the processed and packaged foods; taste is less valued by the lower-class people unlike the other section of the society, they value quantity over quality. Fast food restaurants and ready to cook meal outlets are more prevalent in the lower-class areas enabling these people to easily access their meals at a lower cost. The lower nutritional quality and its adverse effect on their health are neglected purposefully by the lower-class society.

6. FOOD AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

Human behaviour is influenced by many factors, it could be our job, health, status, and even our food habits. The food we consume influences the behavioural pattern; the various ingredients have effect upon our body that makes us react in a specific manner. The food consumed by children often leads to behavioural disorders and can also cause conditions such as hyperactivity, physical aggression, etc. The food we consume affects the health/behaviour of the person in both negative and positive ways. People eat food when they are stress induced, especially the lower level of the society consumes more food when they are stressed compared to the upper-class of the society. Stress induced consumption can often cause health issues, due to the intake of high calorie and unhealthy foods. The behavioural disorder is often seen in children; the high intake of processed foods and

sweets cause behavioural disorder patterns in children. The foods that has high sugar content and artificial colouring makes children aggressive and impatient. According to the research conducted by the online blog “Whole New Mom” they found out that children who consume processed and packet foods were comparatively aggressive to those who consumed refined healthy food. The major ingredients that affected the behaviour of the children are artificial colouring, sodium benzoate, and sugar. The artificial colouring causes serious disorder such as ADHD, it makes the children hyperactive and unable to control their impulses. Every kid likes sweets, candy, chocolates, and drinks, but they make children aggressive and restless; preservatives such as sodium benzoate are often restricted from food of their serious health disorders caused in both children and adults. The disorders caused by the food in children will have great impact upon their health and behaviour even after they grow up. The research shows the variation of the behaviour of the children those who consumed healthy nutritious food and of the children who ate processed and unhealthy food that contains sugar and preservatives. The below shown table are the findings of the conducted research.

Table 1

RESULTS		
	Healthy Food Group	Party Food Group
Mean Behaviour	0 incidents	69 incidents
Physical Aggression	8 incidents	63 incidents
Hyperactive Behaviours	30 incidents	163 incidents
Total incidents of Bad Behaviours	120 incidents	720 incidents

This shows that how much food can affect the behaviour of a person negatively and positively; the children who consumed food of better quality and

nutritional values shows that they restrained from bad behavioural practices compared to the party food group of consumers. It is believed that the people who consume nonvegetarian food and spicy food are often short tempered compared to those who consume vegan and vegetarian food items. Though this has no proven scientific records that show that people have short temper due to the food they eat, it can be considered true for some reason.

7. FOOD AND FAMOUS TV/YOUTUBE SHOWS

The TV channels had taken it into their hands to celebrate the wonderful flavours of food. These tv shows changed the way the people look at food and the people who chose to be a chef. Television shows like “MasterChef”, “The Kitchen: Food Network”, “Chopped”, etc enhanced the title of ‘chef’. These food shows really enhances the passion for cooking in the young home cooks. Through these television programs millions of viewers as well the participants are exposed to the variety of ingredients and the flavours of different parts of the world and to understand the importance of dietary practices of the people around the globe. The shows respected the culinary traditions of the different classes around the world, by trying to bring the essence of the food and its taste of other nations and making the participants understanding the importance of a food item in that part of the country. These famous shows highlighted the various traditional cuisines and dishes of the world which screams tradition and culture, the traditional roots are laid so deep into these dishes that speaks about the heritage and ancestral background of a country. The YouTube program “Hiho Kids”, was a new definition of introduction the world food tradition. In every single episode they try to bring new kind of food from different countries and by introducing these food they bring out the values and heritage behind the particular dish.

8. CONCLUSION

Food is what brings us together, the values and heritage that is connected with the food brings the people closer to their culture and their heritage. The authenticity and the values of a tradition are always celebrated through its food; the heritage that is passed on from one generation to other is through the family or cultural dishes, by celebrating these dishes the folks enhance its richness. The different lands of the world have its own speciality and they are often represented through the culinary practices. In a diverse land like India the variety in culture is often embraced through its diversity in food. The social and the cultural aspects of a person is what defines a him/her, but mostly the food we eat defines who we are and what we are, our preferences often help people to easily determine, to which culture or social status do one belong. Therefore, it can be said that food is what defines one’s identity, tradition, heritage, status, and culture.

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