

Consuming Culture: A Reading of Food Capitalism

Anjana Treesa Joseph is an MPhil student in the English department at the University of Calicut. Her research interest lies in the area of cultural studies with food culture as discourse and focuses on the cuisine integrations along the Malabar coast of Kerala.

Abstract

Capitalism has the unique ability to adapt itself through beef bans and vegetarianism. From vegetarian Big Mac's at MacDonald's to fat free 'Quaker Oats', Indian food industry has much to owe Capitalism and its claim to the triumph of the will. This paper looks at how each aluminium foil we open is an invitation for the specter of Capitalist ideology to come possess us; in the sense of a liberating 'neutral food for a caste-run India'. The paper critiques the notion of Capitalism that creates a modern all-inclusive space in relation to food capitalism, and thus brings to light the radical stratagem of the liberation of culture and caste from themselves.

Keywords: Food Capitalism, Modernity, Caste, Caste-free food, Vegetarianism

Food is culture. Moreover, food is that fantastic lens which provides us with a plain but probably less bias view of history, social issues, economics, science and technology. Economic growth of a country is typically, always accompanied by improvements in food supply, both quantitative and qualitative, and a gradual reduction in nutritional deficiencies. It also brings about changes in the production, processing, distribution and marketing of food. And along the way, amidst all these changes, diets evolve. Income, prices, individual preferences, beliefs, cultural traditions, as well as geographical, environmental, social and economic factors, all influence them. Food, thus, is a lens we all share and that most of us are interested in and therefore it is probably the most perfect medium to explore most of the big questions in our lives.

Eating, though engaged in alone, is anything but a private act. It is an act with ethical and political relevance. We bet our destiny on it.¹ When we choose to put something in our mouth, we are not just fuelling a car to keep it running; instead we are making political and social statements with those choices. And as autonomous decision makers, we can make a difference by buying with a conscience and eating logically. We ourselves are responsible for transforming our habits and lifestyles. And our one decision might not be enough to change the whole world, but as Joseph Beuys, the German artist said, "Everything seems to be out of order: a new direction is needed. This is where it all starts... it starts with the salad we eat."² Here, I am attempting a reading into the food culture of modern India. This is an attempt to study the food capitalism in the light of a caste run India - how each aluminium foil we open is an invitation for the specter of Capitalist ideology to come possess us.

¹ Linda Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

² Ibid

Private to Public, a Journey of Food

A cuisine is a style of cooking and is characterized by its distinctive ingredients, techniques and dishes. Cuisines are often associated with a specific culture or geographic region.³ A cuisine primarily favours the ingredients that are available locally or through trade. Religious food laws, like Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and other dietary laws, also exercise a strong influence on cuisine. And regional food preparation traditions and customs along with regional ingredients combine to create dishes unique to a particular region. Climate, trade, religiousness and culinary culture exchange all influences a region's cuisine.

Food is influenced as much by history as is vice-versa, and the French Revolution plays a major role in the birth of the public eateries of today. The foundation for the modern restaurant was coincidental with the birth of the Republic of France. As per *Larousse Gastronomique*, the French culinary encyclopedia, the first restaurant as we know it today was opened in around 1765 in Paris by a bouillon seller named Boulanger. He sold clear soups which were, at the time, considered restorative, whereby the term 'restaurant' came up. However, the first Parisian restaurant worthy of the name was Grande Taverne de Londres, founded by Beauvilliers in 1782 in the Rue de Richelieu. Beauvilliers is also the one who introduced the listing of the dishes available on a menu and serving them at small individual tables during fixed hours.

Restaurants have undergone tremendous change since Beauvilliers. Restaurants, today are a meeting point between cuisines and tastes of different regions. And they provide the eating public with access to new tastes and have brought a change in the ways of socializing. Modernization and globalisation unquestionably brought the palettes from across the world together. McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut are today local names, anywhere in the world, including India.

Modernity and modernism, its artistic partner, is distinctly a western affair. The colonized globe took many of the economic, industrial, political and cultural trappings of the colonizers, as their own. Modernity, which is defined as a set of institutions and technological processes that shape economic and political life of people at large, has become a global aspect of every human experience. But it doesn't mean that it has the same significance everywhere.

Modernity is a richly multiplicitous, inescapable concept and is today global and multiple with no longer a Western "governing center" to accompany it. Modernity unfolds within specific cultures or civilizations differently and different starting points of the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes.

Food changes result from modernization, urban life styles and contacts with new ideas about food, but are always ingrained in local representations of food and food habits. Modernization has proved to be a double edged sword in the history. Basically,

³ Massimo Montanari, *Food is Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

any and all developments in the name of modernization has been eurocentered and capitalistic. And in the instance of modernization in India, it ploughed through by upholding the brahmanical value systems. In the Indian context, when modernization took its position with the brahmanical forces, apart from the European gender and race biases, it was the dalits, adivasis and muslims, who were sidelined along with the already marginalized group of women and nature.⁴ The modern Indian man was one born from the colonial and brahmanical mixture.

Eateries, where overwhelmingly accepted, in the Indian context as venues of modern day '*panthibhojanam*'. *Panthibhojanam*, the word, literally means community feast. It can be traced back to *Parayi petta panthirukulam*, a legend of ancient Kerala. The title translates to twelve kulams born of a parayi. A '*Kulam*' refers to vocation based hierarchical ethnic group. According to this legend, Vararuchi, one of the nine wise men in the court of Emperor Chandragupta Vikramaditya (375 – 415 AD) married Panchami, a girl belonging to *Paraya*, a lower caste. When he realises the caste of his wife, he leaves the court and sets out on a long pilgrimage with his wife. On the way, they were blessed with 12 children. Upon each delivery, Vararuchi enquired whether the baby had a mouth. If the wife said "yes", he would say, "God will appease the one with mouth" and would ask his wife to abandon the baby there and proceed. Eleven children were thus deserted. These children were adopted and brought up by eleven different families, varying from the aristocratic upper caste to very low caste. However, the twelfth child was born without a mouth. Vararuchi consecrated this child on a hill near Kadampazhipuram in Palakkad district of Kerala, and he is now known as "Vaayillaakkunnillappan" (Hill Lord without mouth). The other eleven children are Mezathol Agnihothri (Brahmin), Pakkanar (Parayan), Rajakan (Washerman), Naranathu Bhranthan (Elayathu, a lower class Brahmin), Karakkal Matha (high caste Nair, only girl born to the couple), Akavoor Chathan (Vaishya, farmer), Vaduthala Nair (Nair Soldier), Vallon (Pulaya, dalit), Uppukottan (Muslim), Pananar (Panan, country musician) and Perumthachan (Carpenter). The eleven children later found each other and they met every year at the house of Mezathol Agnihothri, the eldest, on the day of their father's *sraadham*, death anniversary. The meal they shared together forms the first *panthibhojanam*, a community feast in the caste run India, as known to us.⁵

In the socio-political context of Kerala, the term is further relevant since Sahodaran Ayyappan, a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, launched his *panthibhojanam* participating people belonging to various castes and communities. The question that should be raised undoubtedly regarding *panthibhojanam* is about the food served. *Panthibhojanam*, a Malayalam short story by Santhosh Aechikanam, from the collection *Komala*, first published in 2006, and later adapted into a short film of the same title, by Sreebala K Menon, beautifully puts the question before us.⁶

⁴ Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, Penguin Books, India, 2000.

⁵ Santhosh Aechikanam, "*Panthibhojanam*" from *Komala*, Kottayam, DC Books, 2006.

⁶ *Panthibhojanam*, Dir. Sreebala K Menon, Perf. Lakshmi Priya, Jyothy Rajesh, Manjusha and Krishna Viswakarma, Sreebala K Menon, 2010, Film.

Panthibhojanam, begins with a banter among three lawyer friends which veers into a verbal battering of the Public Prosecutor, a Dalit. On one side is the trio of Christian, Nair and Nambudiri girls, upper caste in their own words- Susan (Lakshmipriya), Ramya Nair (Jyothy Rajesh), Sangeetha Nambudiri (Manjusha) - whose innuendos and snide comments point to the potential threat from the Dalit advocate Rugmini (Krishna Viswakarma). There is also the competition offered to the Nambudiri girl by the Dalit advocate by way of the attention received from the young Varma colleague - Sathish Varma (Rajeev Shankar), an eligible bachelor.

The story opens right into the tension of the hearing of Sangeetha Nambudiri's first independent case; she is the lawyer of the defendant C P Gopala Menon, who is accused of calling Kappakutty, a Dalit, by his caste name (which is prohibited by the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1999), and attempt of murder. He is a distant relative of Rugmini, the public prosecutor. Around a lunch table at the bar, Sangeetha and friends had once talked about the caste and heredity of food, and she had pointed out the classlessness of Rugmini's food - the nauseating smell of "chettu meen" (fish from muddy waters). Rugmini, who came to know of this has not even looked at Sangeetha since. The trio of friends decide that Sangeetha's only chance of winning the case is a compromise with Rugmini, which they orchestrate through Sathish Varma, Rugmini's partner. The compromise talk happens at yet another dining table, filled with dishes from the Christian, Nambudiri and Nair kitchens. Rugmini brings her fish curry too. The meal does bring out the desired victory for C P Gopala Menon. As Rugmini leaves contended having gained three friends, the trio is seen gathered around a wash basin where Sangeetha Nambudiri is vomiting out the "chettu meen". Sreebala's script ends with Rugmini's question "When will 'they' come to our home for a meal?" A question to which we know the answer, as of now, is never, since even Sathish Varma is leaving her soon.

Indian Caste over Capitalistic Class

This caste run India is no more just run by caste but class has put its mark on it too. In India, with all the regulatory dietary laws, caste food is nothing new.⁷ In the old *panthibhojanam* of siblings, where each sibling brought something from his /her own house, pakkanar's share was thrown off. And in *Panthibhojanam*, the Nambudiri, Varma and Nair all happily share the Christian table but yet again Rugmini's fish is uneatable. This aids in clearly identifying the caste food. In spite of a hundred castes and sub castes, all foods are not caste foods. And in a society of dominant twice born castes, food of the savarna, the mainstream food with its card of acceptance takes up space on all tables; while the food of avarnas remained like them, beyond the boundaries of the temple born. Thus, all throughout ages, arranging panthibhojanams is not the real issue, but the caste of the food served is. The food served in *panthibhojanams* was clearly not caste food but caste free food.

⁷ T S Preetha, "Her take on caste and more", *The New Indian Express* 15 January 2010, Web, 24 March 2016.

Capitalism and its triumph of the will brought the eating community of India closer. Brahmin vegetarian restaurants made 'sambhar' and 'saadam' available for the common man. Hamburgers became veg burgers and even veg big Macs are now available. And world's first vegetarian McDonald's is set outside the Golden temple, Amritsar. They bring to the common man caste free food again and again. Capitalism, while it brought a false engagement with social revolutions and reformations, also kept us from engaging in any serious event, thus keeping the status quo. As Ayn Rand says, the method of capitalism's destruction rests on never letting the world discover what it is that is being destroyed.⁸ According to Fredric Jameson, capital and modernity are synonymous.⁹ If the cultural characteristics of our time are economically determined, we live in a kind of eternal present. Far from proliferating difference, the capitalist market ensures an ever-increasing homogeneity, with particularity eroded and uniformity enforced.

Modernization has induced a source of standardization. This is usually discussed in terms of consumerism and economy but the effects of standardization remains diffused. When we think about food in terms of a caste run society, M N Srinivas' idea of Sanskritisation which he introduced in his book *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of India*, takes a front seat in the discourse. The upward social mobility which the lower classes and castes aim at is attained, as, Srinivas says, through abstinence. Abstinence in the food ways has been adopted as the way since early brahmanical ages.¹⁰ The fall in the number of beef eaters is cause for no wonder in the present Indian scenario. The basic necessities of human life are food, shelter and clothes. But these, as we know are not mere necessities anymore. They have become symbols and statements in themselves. If where one lives and what one wears, shouts out loud one's status and class; what one eats, who one eats it with and where one eats portrays that and more. Food is no more just a nutrient source. The global flavours are often consumed knowing they deteriorate health, but the consumption rates only increases as the modern man gets busy forming his global identity. And as decision makers for our individual and collective purposes making a statement with the food choices and matter.

Food, despite all this is very sensitive to local tastes and habits. A careful study of the semantics of food indicates to what extent culture determines an individual's perception of what constitutes food which gives great satisfaction. As decision makers for our individual and collective purposes making a statement with even our choices in food becomes an obligation. But as Adorno points out, culture industry does create and market our opinions, tastes and choices. Food capitalism, thus seemingly liberates culture and caste from themselves, only to place them back into larger and complex squares.

⁸ Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, New York, New American Library, 1966.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London, Verso, 2002.

¹⁰ M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003. [This theory has been contested since: cfr. George Thadathil, *Vision from the Margin*, Salesian College Publication & Asian Trading Corporation, 2007, pp.172-177.]

