

Caste: The Main Character of Indian Food

Ragini Kashyap

ABSTRACT: Food has been one of the most visible expressions of hierarchy and power in India for over three millennia. Today, India's caste-based rules of food consumption, preparation, access, and exclusion are more deeply ingrained in the public psyche than perhaps many are comfortable to acknowledge. Although India is a young country, the caste system has been legitimized by centuries of practice and is embedded within the fabric of the culture. It has given rise to an incredibly complex food system, rife with symbolism, which is used to maintain power, status, and notions of religious purity.

This paper will first discuss the definitions and Vedic origins of the confluence of food and caste identity in India. It will explain the impact this system had on Islam and Christianity on the subcontinent, consider the role of modern politics, and finally show that these antiquated ideals have moved far beyond national borders to influence Indian food internationally. Today, the perception of Indian cuisine is primarily that of an upper-caste cuisine. It is ironic that approximately a quarter of all Indians are unlikely to ever access to this food which restaurants around the world serve in abundance.

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Caste is ubiquitous, and that is precisely why it is imperative to consider the role it plays in any study of Indian food. Examining the food practices of those typically excluded from the discourse is the first step to address generations of social conditioning, and to unpack the marriage of caste and culture that surrounds food in India.

[C]aste is ingrained in our taste buds and eating habits. Food snobbery is a part of India, and the food that belongs to upper castes has always been more celebrated. In a caste-sensitive India, labelling your product as Brahmin is a way to communicate that it boasts of the highest form of purity.' - Pushpesh Pant¹

The access to food is a practical necessity, and perhaps, a rather unimaginative one. In India, however, a wholly imagined construct dictates the details of this access: the caste system². Food has been one of the most visible expressions of hierarchy and power in India for over three millennia, since the composition of the *Manusmriti*. Vedic civilization divided people intentionally and irreversibly through categorizing what people can eat based on their caste.

Subsequent religious and colonial incursions have failed to challenge this system, and in fact, have most often built upon it to further their political interests. This imagined structure has therefore become a defining characteristic of the nation and every community

within it. From the *badhraloke* of Bengal in the East, to the Tamilian Brahmins in the South, the *Pathare Prabhu* in the West, the *Gangaputra* Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh, and the Kashmiri *Pandits* in the North, caste is truly a national feature of Indian society's collective imagination.

Regional Indian cuisines are a manifestation of this highly stratified system, and bound in their Indianness not by flavour, spice or technique, but by an adherence to caste-based exclusionary measures. Despite boasting a staggering diversity of highly developed cuisines, this division is, incredibly, one of the few constant features of Indian food along the length and breadth of the country. The ghee-laden curries enhanced with elaborate spice mixtures are primarily the prerogative of the upper-castes, while the curries of the lower castes are often simpler counterparts that maximize available ingredients. In doing so, however, they hinder their upward mobility through the caste-system.

This paper will first discuss the definitions and Vedic origins of the confluence of food and caste identity in India. It will elucidate the impact this system had on Islam and Christianity in the subcontinent, consider the role of modern politics, and finally show that these antiquated ideals have moved far beyond national borders to influence Indian food internationally. Today, the international perception of Indian cuisine is primarily that of an upper-caste cuisine. It is ironic that approximately a quarter of all Indians are unlikely to access to this food which restaurants around the world serve in abundance.³

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A System Designed to Discriminate

The caste system in India traces its roots back to the Vedic Civilization of Aryan invaders who arrived around 1700 BCE. They established a structure to classify the population by occupation, placing themselves at the top. They were intellectual and violent warriors who used caste to subjugate the indigenous populations as they expanded their rule.⁴

In the first years of the Common Era, the Aryans recorded the Hindu caste system in the early Vedic constitutional document, the Manusmriti (Laws of Manu). This established the order and occupation of four major caste groups: the Brahmins, who were priests and teachers; the Kshatriyas, who were warriors and law keepers; the Vaishyas, who were the economic engine of society; and, finally, the Shudras who were craftspeople and labourers. These groups were then further divided into thousands of *jatis* based on occupation, family-clan and ethnic identity.⁵ The stratification is so deeply embedded and forms the basis of Indian identity today, with little distinction between caste and culture.

A fifth category, previously referred to as the Untouchables, was reserved for those who worked with waste and other tasks considered 'polluted' by the upper castes. Today, *Dalit*, a term popularised by activists in the late 1800s, describes those who sit at the bottom of the caste system, or worse still, outside of it. K. T. Achaya notes *Dalit* comes from the Hindi word *dal* (lentils), which comes from Sanskrit for split or broken.⁶ The metaphor of food

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to denote a community that sees itself as broken is powerful, as food is one of the most common and powerful caste markers in Indian society.

Several lower castes are named for what they eat rather than for their occupation, implying that it is their most defining character: the *Mahars* are those who eat carrion, the *Musaharis* named for their consumption of rats, and often, the *Valmiki*s are called the *jhootan* caste for accepting leftover foods of upper castes.⁷ A nuanced translation of *jhootan* implies that contact with another human being has sullied the item and rendered it impure. One can safely assume that these were not names that communities gave themselves, and it is difficult to underestimate the impact of these classifications, as they continue to govern social interactions across India today.

The *Manusmriti* has no less than 56 verses devoted to food, exalting the purity of ghee and milk, categorising plants and vegetables, categorising animal products, outlining cooking instructions, who to accept food from, and whom to exclude for fear of polluting oneself.⁸ Given these texts were in Old Sanskrit and confined to the readership of Brahmins, they brought the system to life through practice for the rest of society. It is the implications of this practice that perhaps led Arjun Appadurai to claim that the convergence of the moral and social implications of food is most clear in Hindu India.⁹

It would be a challenge to speak of Hinduism and not address the two symbols popularly associated with the religion: the cow and vegetarianism. A common misconception in the modern times is that the early Vedic Aryans attributed a sacredness to the cow based on a desire for cow protection, thus giving the religion a symbol that is threatened by anyone who consumes beef.¹⁰ As D.N. Jha has shown, the holiness of the cow in Hinduism is a politically motivated fabrication that gained prominence much later. While the early Brahmins respected the cow for its value in dairy production and farm work, they routinely sacrificed the animal for consumption. In fact, all of the earliest Indian religious texts, including the Hindu Vedas (1500-600 BCE), the ancient Buddhist texts (1 BCE) and to a lesser extent the early Jain texts (5 CE), all reference some consumption of flesh as a recommended dietary practice.¹¹

The first record of Brahmins abstaining from beef was in response to a famine. As the most powerful caste, they eased tensions with the starving masses by adopting a partially vegetarian diet. This was radical for its time, and despite the nobility they attributed to their own restraint, the *Manusmriti* maintained that 'it is not sinful to eat meat of eatable animals. For *Brahma* has created both, the eaters and the eatables.'¹² Following this, the veneration of the cow went through cycles of Brahminical rigidity and relaxation for centuries. During a period of territorial expansion, in 5 CE, into Southern India, Brahmins travelled with their armies and a small herd of cattle. This was the first time they prohibited cow slaughter for two major reasons: first, they had a lot of land to cover; and second, they established their Brahminical superiority through a rejection of local dietary practice. They

therefore introduced southern India to a version of Hinduism where vegetarian Brahmins led the most meritorious, righteous lives.¹³ This would give rise to arguably some of the most conservative Brahmin cultures in the present day Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, whereas in the North, Brahmins continued to consume beef well into the 18th century, even requiring it for certain religious rituals.¹⁴ Over the centuries that followed, this system became an accepted way of life across the country, despite certain Brahmin communities maintaining a diet that included fish, like in Bengal or meat in Kashmir and Kerala.

The Aryan nomads were meat-eating warriors and herders before they were farmers. Conversely, today's popular Hindu discourse idealises an agrarian lifestyle and the vegetarian Brahmin, only making patronising concessions for the upper castes who eat meat, but not for anybody who eats beef. The vegetarian ideal in India is myopic, as it exalts the cow while literally milking it for all its worth. The hyper consumption and religious postulation of dairy, specifically of ghee and milk, has facilitated the growth of inhumane and problematic dairy and leather industries.¹⁵ It is noble to revere and protect the cow while the animal is dairy cattle, however, killing, skinning, consuming or disposing of the animal are impure acts.¹⁶

Further, given that beef is the cheapest protein in India, it is a significant source of nutrition for those unable to afford more expensive meats. Since the caste-system encompasses all aspects of one's professional, personal and spiritual life, this consumption perpetually keeps *Dalits* who consume beef bound to the bottom of the Hindu system.

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Islam and Christianity in India

‘[Originating] in the Hindu social order, [caste] has infiltrated all faiths on the Indian subcontinent. As old as the order of the Indic civilization, the phenomenon of controlling human capacity, creativity and labour has been core to its ideological performance secured by strict legal order. Caste in India is an absolute sanction – of the dominant class over the dominated.’¹⁷ – Suraj Yengde¹⁸

Although Hindu in its origin, the occupation-based caste system is a South Asian phenomenon and is therefore also a feature of the religions that did not originate in India, namely the subcontinental expressions of Islam and Christianity. Initial Christian and Muslim incursions were minor, but by the time of the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century, the first large-scale Muslim rule in the subcontinent, the Hindu way of life had persisted for over a millennium.

While some lower-castes converted to escape the tyranny of their birth, many upper-caste Hindus converted to Islam (e.g., Muslim Rajputs), and Christianity (e.g., Syrian Christians) as well. Historically accustomed to significant social capital and the servitude of others, caste would prove too significant a benefit for them to forego, and caste-based power and food dynamics persisted. In South Asian Islam, as Zarina Ahmed argues, the

social distance between the castes is so great that inter-caste commensality is exceedingly rare and socially unacceptable. The *ashraf* castes, or those who can trace their lineage to non-Indian ancestors (typically either Arab or Persian), hold higher status than the non-*ashraf* castes, who are predominantly indigenous converts.¹⁹

Colonial powers, Gandhi and the new state

As we move towards the twentieth and twenty-first century, it is imperative to note the influence that the British colonial rule and the ultimate rise of Mohandas K. Gandhi had on what M.N. Srinivas refers to as the ‘Sanskritization’ of caste-based food practices in India.²⁰ Both these forces legalized and legitimized the caste-system, as well as the idolization of vegetarianism in the Hindu imagination.

As the British looked to make administrative sense of highly fragmented Indian communities, Dirks claimed ‘that ‘caste’ became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization’,²¹ suggesting that this was the genesis of caste becoming a prominent feature of modern Indian politics. This further blurred the lines between caste and class, equating lower castes with lower economic class, since occupation was the basis of division.

The colonial administration and army primarily employed Brahmins,²² putting them not only at the top of the religious order, but the administrative order as well. From the time of the Aryans, caste-based politics honoured upper-caste sensibilities, but it was only during colonial rule that the system became a part of modern law and governance, thus moving this wholly imagined system to a legally valid identification, which persists today. As we will see in the next section, this dominance had a significant impact on India’s national food policy and popular food culture after independence in 1947.

In the years leading up to and after Indian independence, Gandhi, played a significant role in glorifying an upper-caste Hindu diet, alienating the majority meat eating population of India.²³ Born into the *Vaishya* caste, he was raised a strict vegetarian, and upheld the notion of the righteous vegetarian for most of his life. More troubling, however, was his obsession with the self-governing, agrarian Indian village, which is structured on a strict adherence to caste norms.²⁴ As discussed, these norms are all-encompassing and near impossible to challenge, so implicit in his patronage of the caste system was an acceptance of the food hierarchy previously discussed. Gandhi has been criticised by Dalit scholars for conflating caste with culture, and further cementing the caste-system as the ideal structure of the nation.²⁵

Following independence, in the 1950s and 60s Indian food policy and the Public Distribution System (PDS) went on to champion a vegetarian Hindu Brahmin diet.²⁶ Dr. Veena Shatrugna, former Deputy Director at the Indian National Institute of Nutrition, opines ‘[o]ne should note here that these experts were upper-caste Brahmins whose

personal diet was vegetarian, [and despite] scientific evidence that animal protein came closest to human tissue proteins, with an almost 100 per cent utilisation in the body (called biological value), it was said that if cereal and pulses are eaten in a ratio of 4:1, in every meal, it will provide sufficient proteins... justifying the decision to not include milk and other sources of animal protein' in the PDS.²⁷

Since the basic Hindu caste order, as identified by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, begins with those who do not eat meat at the top, followed by those who eat meat but not beef, and finally, those who eat beef at the very bottom, the PDS' focus on cheaper grain and pulse rations further encouraged vegetarianism. It was also used as the basis to reduce minimum wage, and together these factors have contributed significantly to malnourishment, stunted growth, and increased communal and caste stigmatisation.²⁸

One nation, many castes

224 'In India, casteism [...] affects 1 billion people. It affects 800 million badly. It enslaves the human dignity of 500 million people. [...] and [results in the] loss of moral virtuosity for 300 million Indian untouchables.²⁹ Further, today, approximately 1500 years after the Vedic civilization, Hindu thought continues to underlie contemporary Indian food practices. Indian law no longer states the required conditions for food consumption, as in the *Manusmriti*. However, food practices are one of the strongest definitions of culture and identity, and meals across the country are still strong statements of caste belonging, exaggerated in recent years by laws against cow slaughter, and the subsequent violence against those suspected of disobedience, most of whom are *Dalit* or Muslim.³⁰

With over 4000 distinct communities there is almost no homogenous feature of Indian food, except caste, which is truly national. As Yengde points out, the caste system is unique because vertical mobility is not an option³¹. This gives rise to two very specific cultural phenomena. First, since human identity is relative, the rules of food consumption apply as much to oneself as they do to others, making it exceptionally difficult to access foods that society believes one should not have access to. The reasoning is bindingly circular: the Brahmins are at the top of the social order, their diet is pure, and other practices are naturally inferior because their logic is the pinnacle of morality. Second, it has given rise to innumerable micro-cuisines across the deserts, jungles, plains and mountains of the subcontinent, since inter-caste commensality was religiously implausible. As a result, we see the Tamilian Brahmin cuisine, the Pathare Prabhu cuisine, the food of the Kayasths of Delhi, the Baniyas of UP, the Nimboodari Brahmins of Kerala, the Mewar cuisine of Rajasthan, and the Ghanchis of Gujarat, to name a handful. Marriott describes this phenomenon well, concluding that the Hindu thought runs parallel to the assumptions made by Western social science, where rank decreases intimacy. In the Hindu social order, rank increases intimacy within the group and higher castes are likely to insulate themselves collectively, for fear of pollution from lower castes.³²

While the upper-caste communities had the luxury to create elaborate cuisines within the boundaries of their restrictions, *Dalit* food has historically been the food of poverty, subsistence, and foods permissible to them by other castes. They eat millets where the upper castes eat wheat, broken corn rather than rice, intestines rather than shoulder or breast meat, molasses rather than jaggery or sugar, watermelon seeds rather than white flour, sun-dried pig skin rather than sundried lentil poppadums, and finally, they use animal fat in place of cooking oil or ghee. Though divided by language and geography, *Dalits* are more likely to share food practices across India, including a dependence on chili and salt for flavouring and the consumption of animal parts that upper castes reject. A nutritious, vegetarian diet is simply too expensive. Indeed, the adherence to a caste-based system of food may well be the most common feature of India's 'national' cuisine, and the societal, cultural and mental capital spent to preserve this divisive structure is so well-ingrained, that upholding it is a reflex for upper-caste Hindus. Though a *Dalit's* place in society may determine what they eat, it is the imagined narrative of impurity in the minds of upper castes that impose a social narrative on *Dalit* food.³³

What is Dalit food?

'Whatever meat could not be consumed, quickly before it got spoilt, she dried it in the sun. After a few days of drying, the sun turned the meat into thin, crackly strips. Those *chanya* were so delicious! *Aaee* would roast them in the fire for us to eat and for so many weeks, we would beg her for the treat'- Narendra Jadhav³⁴

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The foods of *Dalit* communities are both understudied and underrepresented in popular discourse, and a cursory look at Indian cookbooks, both in India and abroad, will confirm this. While community-specific cookbooks have been on the rise since the mid-twentieth century,³⁵ it has been the prerogative of upper-caste communities who feel pride rather than shame for their diet. A seminal sociological study titled '*Isn't this plate Indian?*' hosts one of the first collection of *Dalit* recipes published in English.³⁶ The three sample recipes in Figure 1 are samples of Indian delicacies, from a cuisine that has to exist under the radar.³⁷

Where the Brahmins may define themselves by what they refrain from consuming, *Dalit* narratives note that their strength comes from being able to digest just about anything. After all, it is they who plough the fields to harvest the rice, wheat and vegetables for other Indians.

In recent decades, increased urbanisation has not displaced the Hindu food hierarchy, which persists as the most prominent claim of social superiority.³⁸ An upper-caste, vegetarian landlord in Mumbai will comfortably proclaim that his/her home is available only to vegetarians, immediately excluding people of lower-castes or other religions.³⁹ Broomfield has described the new urban Indian middle-class as '[a] socially privileged and consciously superior group [...] keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of

<u>Chunchune</u>	<u>Rakti</u>	<u>Mohol Chi Poli</u>
<p>Ingredients: Beef fat, oil, salt</p> <p>Process: Cook the beef fat on a medium flame, allowing the oil of the fat to separate fully. Then take out the dry lump of fat cut it into small pieces. Sprinkle these pieces with salt and deep fry them to a crisp.</p>	<p>Ingredients: Oil, goat blood, onion, red chili powder, salt</p> <p>Process: Clean the blood well. Dry roast the onion in a pan, adding the blood once the onions have browned slightly. Cook till the blood is thick, then add chilli and salt and continue cooking till it is solid.</p>	<p>Ingredients: Bee larvae, sliced onion, and red chilli powder.</p> <p>Process: Cook all three ingredients together to the consistency of egg whites. This dish has to be consumed immediately, lest it sticks to the top of your mouth!</p>

FIGURE 1. Three recipes from Dalit communities in Maharashtra

high- caste proscriptions and its command of education [...] ⁴⁰ Horizontal inter-caste, or inter-community exchanges, although common in urban India, are seen as cultural, rather than caste exchanges. Even the few urban, financially mobile *dalits* are therefore not able to bring their traditional, lower-caste foods to this exchange, and are more likely to mimic upper caste diets in urban India.

Indian food internationally

226 Appadurai argues that the definition of a national cuisine in India was essentially a postcolonial process, that was initiated by the need for a new pan-Indian identity. ⁴¹ Until the nineteenth century, regional Hindu culinary traditions were transmitted orally, they were largely domestic, and they were regional in scope. As addressed earlier, Hindu state was politically, linguistically and geographically Balkanized, which resulted in innumerable local cuisines.

Indian food has long captured the western world's imagination. Every tradesperson, coloniser or missionary effort that has come to India has taken something with them, whether it was a trunk full of spices, the very idea of a 'curry', or an adaptation of Indian recipes. Part of the appeal of Indian food is how diametrically opposite it is to the Western palette, namely the artful combination of spices, and an exaggerated vegetarianism that is used to define the cuisine. ⁴²

Regional Indian cuisines undoubtedly play a key role in defining the national cuisine, but it was the colonial expression of the Indian food that was the most significant precursor to the internationally emerging Indian cuisine of the twentieth century. ⁴³ The culinary manuals produced for the colonial administration, the colonial army, and colonial trade paved the way for Indian food outside India. Influenced primarily by the extravagance of the Mughal courts, colonial Indian food looked to be as opulent as nobility, while appealing to a Western palette. The export of Indian cuisine is, therefore, primarily the export of lavish, upper-caste foods.

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Later Indian immigrants of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries further propagated the ideals of upper-caste or royal foods as the norm. A quick look at popular Indian restaurants in countries like the U.K, U.S and Canada will reflect this trend, whether through a higher reliance on ghee than on animal fat, through serving primarily vegetarian foods, or by the sheer number of spices required to construct their menus. Since culture and caste have been intertwined for so long in the public imagination, it is plausible that many restaurateurs may be unaware of the caste hegemony reflected in their menus. For example, the restaurant *Disboom* in the U.K, which is positioned as an ode to the Mumbai of yesteryear, only serves the food of certain upper caste communities: the vegetarian street fair delights of Gujarati and Jain traders, the foods of Punjabi and Sindhi migrants⁴⁴ and then finally a classically Mughlai biryani.⁴⁵ The menu overlooks the foods of the indigenous inhabitants of the city, the *koli* fishing community and the indigenous *Dalits*, whose *rakti*, *bhakri*, *mandeli* or *nevtā*⁴⁶ are not on the menu. Ironically, the one menu item that mentions the *koli* people, prawn *koliwada*, is a dish that was invented at a Punjabi restaurant in the 1950s.⁴⁷

This story is common across restaurants (and Indian cookbooks) in the West and urban India alike. Unfortunately, the food that developed as a means for survival is neither celebrated nor acknowledged, and the superstitions of a few continue to define the many.

Conclusion

On the surface, Indian food is a variety of produce and spices combined with the finesse of highly developed cooking techniques. Many home cooks are equipped with generations of oral tradition and are highly skilled. However, it is the narrative in the minds of the cooks and consumers that give us true insight into Indian food culture. Who is cooking? who is being fed? what are they eating? what are they excluding? And finally, who is forbidden from being at the table? Answers to these questions tell the story of an imagined structure that has dictated Indian food practices for over three millennia. Today, India's caste-based rules of consumption, preparation, access, and exclusion are more deeply ingrained in the public psyche than perhaps many are comfortable to acknowledge.

Although India is a young country, the caste system has been legitimized repeatedly by history, and is now deeply embedded within the fabric of the culture. It has given rise to an incredibly complex food system, rife with symbolism, which has been used to maintain power, status, and notions of religious purity. Despite some changing patterns of consumption in cosmopolitan India, most of the country continues to practise food habits that were prescribed thousands of years ago. Therefore, if *Dalits* continue to eat foods that are accessible and affordable (e.g., beef and pork), upward caste and social mobility is impossible. At the same time however, a nutritious upper-caste vegetarian diet is unaffordable to them.

Caste is ubiquitous, and that is precisely why it is imperative to consider the role it plays in any study of Indian food. Examining the food practices of those typically excluded from

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