

Dietary Politics in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's Short Story "They Eat Meat"

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Abstract

In India, the political implications of the food one chooses to eat have never been so prominently perceived than the present times. It is a sensitive topic that has resulted in religious conflicts and a certain amount of high handedness from the powerful. The present paper problematises the violence embodied in the systemic choice of food imposed on a meat-eating Santhal family when they are transferred to a largely vegetarian state, in the short story, "They Eat Meat" by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar from his controversial work, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. The condescension of the "pure"; the forced isolation of those who do not comply with the "conversion"; the travails of the minority who are forced into conformity by the cultural hegemony of the standardised class; are some of the issues explored in this paper. Hansda's short story calls forth attention to the very idea of the politicisation of this discrimination based on something as trivial as one's food choice and highlights the significance of harmony and tolerance.

Key Words: food identity, systems of oppression, discrimination, violence, tolerance

Food plays a telling part in an individual's mental and physical wellbeing; evocative enough to bring back memories and make one feel at home. However, when people are discriminated on the basis of dietary prejudice, the cleavage between the forces of the acceptable and unacceptable becomes difficult to bridge. These environmental, historical, socio-political and aesthetic implications of food have led to a critical branch of study called as "food studies". Therefore, the present paper tries to unravel issues like food as a marker of one's identity, food systems of oppression, intrinsic discomfort in the sudden switch from one's traditional habits, and food taboo present in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short story, "They Eat Meat".

Yogesh Pawar's frank account about the alienating forces in India is quite pronounced in his article "Layers of Exclusion: Understanding the casteism behind Nirmala Sitharaman's onion statement" where he reminds, "Exclusion is written in the DNA of India's socio-cultural fabric for centuries. If not caste, class, religion, region, gender, sexuality language or

food habits, we will continue to find newer ways to 'otherise' and exclude." ¹Indeed, regardless of what one may consider truthful, a cursory look at history reveals that diet discrimination and social prejudice based on food has been prevalent from time immemorial in a largely stratified society like India. This discrimination finds its roots in the cultural milieu of the society. In fact, caste based discrimination also demands that the upper caste dictate what the purity of food based distinction really entails. Food, therefore, also becomes the yardstick of one's social status, further strengthening stereotypes and condemnation of the scorned.

Unfortunately, this sort of dominance is still so pervasive in modern India that people have come to accept it without much dissent. The high incidence of crimes against the religious minorities points to their continuing discrimi-

¹<https://www.freepressjournal.in/weekend/layers-of-exclusion-understanding-the-casteism-behind-nirmala-sitharamans-onion-statement>

nation, exclusion and humiliation. Sunder Lal Sagar discusses this form of dietary dominance under caste based discrimination when he states that, “Dietary habits and dietary customs were factors that have played roles in the formation, evolution and development of Indian caste system” (Sagar 1975: 49-64)

This discrimination is also clearly evident in Harari’s *Sapiens* which discusses the history of the humankind in the domination of the earth. Its primary thesis is that it is the collected fiction that defines mankind. Man’s ability to generate a collective myth, and the unlimited number of cooperating, believing individuals who could belong to a belief-group decided the longevity of such myths. Caste and religious differences, for instance, is one such popular myth. His insight about the privileged upper caste making crucial decisions for the underprivileged, underlines the dominant principles of the upper caste and its sustenance:

The Hindu caste system and its attendant laws of purity became deeply embedded in Indian culture. Long after the Indo-Aryan invasion was forgotten, Indians continued to believe in the caste system and to abhor the pollution caused by caste mixing. Castes were not immune to change. In fact, as time went by, large castes were divided into sub-castes. Eventually the original four castes turned into 3,000 different groupings called jati (literally ‘birth’). But this proliferation of castes did not change the basic principle of the system, according to which every person is born into a particular rank, and any infringement of its rules pollutes the person and society as a whole. A person’s jati determines her profession, the food she can eat, her place of residence and her eligible marriage partners. (Harari 2011: 155-156)

Similarly, the French sociologist Claude Fischler discusses the different connotations of the influence of the food one chooses to incorporate in one’s life. He underlines the power of food in building a hierarchical society, when he claims:

“[t]he way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and otherness of whoever eats differently. Food is also central to individual identity, in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate.” (275)

Against this backdrop, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s controversial collection of short stories titled *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is arguably an answer to the cultural hegemony of the powerful over the minority. This discomfort of political oppression is quite palpable in the short story “They Eat Meat”. One realises that when the choice of food depends on the societal pressure, this simple pleasure is fraught with a great deal of trauma and stress. The pressure to conform to the changing environment and being accepted by the larger majority is another stifling reality that one can empathise with. Therefore, cultural hegemony threatens to destroy the social fabric of a culturally diverse country like India. It is the domination of the Adivasi Soren family, by the largely vegetarian city in Gujarat that defines the story. When they get transferred to Gujarat, their main concern is the food that they would have to give up in order to be accepted. Time and again, they encounter judgement and condescension over their ethnic background and food habits.

Linda Civitello explains how food can be used as a political weapon, an identity marker with reference to the French and American cultures. “Identity – religious, national, ethnic

– is intensely bound up with food. Every group thinks of itself as special and exceptional and uses food to show it.” (Linda Civitello (xvi)) While very often, in a cultural milieu, an individual’s status is measured by what he owns and consumes, food is one of the significant elements of an individual’s prestige and status. What one can afford, what is consumed by a particular class, and what is acceptable and what is not are all deciding factors that play a crucial role in marking one’s identity. If one accrues to the powerful, or in this case, the larger majority, you are readily accepted and accordingly given an identity which is safe for the powerful. However, if you demur and go by your standards, chances are that you will not be accepted and may be even threatened to be ousted from society itself. This is exactly what happens to the Mohammeds as they don’t fit into the largely vegetarian society of Gujarat. The Sorens are reminded of this fact time and again. Thus, As Deborah Lupton says in her Introduction to *Food, the Body and the Self*, “. . . Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day” once again one is reminded of the divide created by food politics. (Lupton 1996:1)

Food is also a marker of one’s social, political and sexual life. Emma Parker’s claim addresses the issue of the Sorens when she discusses the power of the “eating” vs the “non-eating” in the article, “You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood. Parker states that, “Atwood displays a profound preoccupation with eating in her writing . . . in her novels eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examin-

ing the relationship between women and men. The powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their noneating.” (Parker 1995: 349)

Notably, Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois claim the power of food in building relationships in their article, “The Anthropology of Food and Eating.” According to them, food is “used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, [since it] serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart.” (Mintz2002: 109) The dynamics in the relationship between the dominating and the dominated is quite explicit in their high-handedness of the “purer class” and condescension towards the Sorens. The hypocrisy embedded in the Raos’ apparent respect for all communities is quite palpable in the following lines, “. . .I respect all communities. And in this city, you see, even we are outsiders.” (6) It is also perceivable in their understanding of the term “purity”. “. . .People here believe in purity. I am not too sure what this purity is, but all I know is that people here don’t eat non-veg. You know? Meat, fish, chicken, eggs. Nor do they approve of people who eat non-veg.” (6)

Invariably, the patronising undertones of the host party, works as a warning for the Sorens’ fragile status. During their inception into the vegetarian society, the Soren’s stand warned, “Tribals, even lower-caste Hindus, they are seen as impure. I hope you understand.” (6) The suggestive threat shrouded in the idea of the segregation of the minorities is a constant reminder about the consequences of their choice. “Yes, sir. I have some idea of this,” Biram-kaung said. “Muslims and Christians, they don’t stand a chance here. They have separate areas where they live. Cities within a city. Separate basics for Muslims, for Christians.” (6)

The status of a vegetarian diet is so important to the host that he forces the Sorens to lie

about their diet and the place of their origin. "Mr. Soren, you seem like a good man, a family man. We trust you. But could I ask you to do one thing?" (6) "...Better still, can you tell them that you've been transferred from Bhubaneswar? Mentioning a well-known city usually clears the air quicker. You understand, don't you?" (7) The viciousness embedded in this false status is seen as a guard against the larger majority which is also discernible in the appalling confession of the host's wife to Panmuni-jhi that she too does not believe in a vegetarian diet and secretly loves to eat meat.

The taboo of the "impure" diet is also appallingly associated with the character of an individual which is evident in Mr. Rao's statement, "if someone asks me, I'll tell them I know you through colleagues and friends I know and trust, I'll say that you are a good person."

They are forced to be so discreet that they are made to feel like criminals when they go to the market for shopping something as plain as eggs: "There was a small shop in a far corner of the market near Subhanpura Colony, run by an immigrant from Bihar. It was the only shop in the entire market which sold eggs, and there were always a number of people at that shop. Biram-kumang or Hopon would go there, look around to make sure there were no familiar eyes spying on them, but two eggs, wrap them up discreetly, put them in their cloth shopping bag, and return home." (13) Their trauma did not end with buying food secretly but cooking it was the other most challenging task. "If buying eggs was a difficult task, cooking one was a mission in itself." (13) After the food was cooked secretly, disposing off the refuse was another harrowing task. "...Hopon would throw these bags into the municipal garbage bin outside the colony. On days the garbage included egg shells, they would go even further. On some

days, when they couldn't throw the eggshells in the garbage, they would bury them in the kitchen garden." (13)

Inevitably, so stifling is this whole food business of procuring, cooking and discarding the refuse that the Sorens long to go back to their old home. "Panmuni-jhi would miss the freedom of Bhubaneswar, and the cool sea breeze of the Bay of Bengal which touched each person in the same way." (13) The very identity of the minority is threatened and the irony embodied in Soren's dilemma is manifested in these lines, "In Odisha, Panmuni-jhi could be a Santhal, an Odia, in Bengal. In Gujarat, she had to be only a Gujarati." (14) However much they try to fit into the new social order, the unnatural transformation suffocates them. "And when she had such thoughts, the demands to conform to the society she was living in made her feel constricted." (14)

This dominion of the fundamental group over the group that appears to be different is defined by Gramsci as cultural hegemony. What entails this sort of domination is the acquiescence of the minority group.

"Gramsci's translated writings contain no precise definition of cultural hegemony. What comes closest is his often-quoted characterisation of hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (Gramsci 1971:12)

When Hansda's short story, "They Eat Meat" is viewed in the light of the above quote, it is quite ostensible that the Sorens also give "spontaneous" consent to the violation of

their basic human rights. They are deprived of the things they love to consume and reminded of the fact that if they indulge, they would also risk isolation from the dominant society.

“...while they do sell meat and eggs in some places, those things are not easily available. People here don't like to mix with those who eat meat and eggs. It's like that.” (4)

Although, they find it very challenging to change their palate according to the demands of the society, it is never overtly expressed anywhere until they decide to stealthily arrange for their desired food. The guilt of having to consume the unacceptable food looms largely on the family's wellbeing. The patronising attitude of the owners of the house they had rented is a constant reminder to the Sorens about their secondary status in the society. For instance, when Mr. Rao enquires about the ethnicity of the Sorens, he is completely aware of their discomfort but chooses not to be discreet. “Er...Isn't Soren a tribal surname? Please, I just want to know. For information's sake.” Biram-kumang was shocked at being asked this so directly, especially by the gentle-seeming Mr. Rao, but he kept his composure.” (5) This also brings up the debate over the structural danger of the exotification of the minority group. It is their cultural difference that threatens their very survival. As Said warns, “To objectify a culture as something different, exotic or underdeveloped is to generalize that it is not like 'normal' society”. (Said 1978:357)

The inherent power of the dominant class and their bigotry is also betrayed in their expectations from the minority group. This is quite succinctly articulated in Said's understanding of the exclusion of the group when he says, “Imagined differences serve to categorize people into groups and assign them characteristics that suit the imaginer's expectations”.

(Said 1978:360) Several parts from the short story reveal the inherent hatred and bigotry embedded in the way the Sorens get excluded from the rest of the majority. Alison Mountz describes this practice as “Othering”, which according to her, “is the term used by some to describe a system of discrimination whereby the characteristics of a group are used to distinguish them as separate from the norm.” (Mountz 2009:328) This systematic “othering” of the Sorens is glaring in the patronising way the Raos describe the do's and don'ts for being accepted in the larger society. Their disdain about the Mohammed's in the neighbourhood consciously works towards building a sense of caution for the Sorens. It is the religious and diet based differences of the Muslim family that cause their exclusion from the society.

The invariable tension built in the condescension towards the minority is also justified in terms of the secondary status awarded to them. The justification of such a demeanour is also thought after as something essential. This is overt in their ability to classify the minority as beastly and therefore needing correction. As contended by Igor de Garine, “...since immemorial times, contempt from the elite towards the ways of life and feeding habits of the lower strata of the society has been a rule. Their “beastly behaviour” is a justification for their domination.” (Igor. 2001: 487)

Social status is another criterion of one's diet. The stigma attached to “impure” food habits is a constant reminder of the in-group and out-group behaviour. The pressure to be considered one among the larger group is so daunting that the Raos themselves confess to being meat-eaters in the past. However, this does not make them any less critical of the Sorens' food habits. “You see, even we used to eat meat and chicken. And eggs. We used to have eggs for breakfast almost daily. My

sons, they eat non-veg. But not when they're here. When we decide to settle here—because this place is so neat and tidy—we had to pay a small price. I hope you understand.” (7) The following lines convey the latent fear and anxiety of the minority of not being accepted, “...I don't know how many people here, in this colony, where we've lived for a decade or so, hate us for not being from Gujarat.” (7) The systemic exclusion of the Muslim family of the Mohammeds also builds the fear of rejection in the Sorens' minds: “Mr. Rao pointed to the house right across the narrow street, “the Mohammeds. Not everyone in this colony is comfortable with their presence. So you see, one has to be cautious all the time.” (8) Panmuni-jhi is repeatedly reminded about their limits. “Can you assure me that you won't cook any non-veg in my kitchen? No meat-egg-chicken-fish. Nothing” (8)

To any sane mind, this sort of discrimination is completely beyond comprehension. Having come from a society that respected her for her culinary skills, it is utterly shocking that this very talent would almost threaten their survival. Their relationship with food undergoes tremendous change due to which Panmuni-jhi is driven to the end of her tether. She is unable to fathom the reason behind such a ridiculous notion and retorts in outrage, “How can people dislike those who eat meat?” (8)

Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony leading to “spontaneous consent” is once again palpable when eventually, Panmuni-jhi and her family learn to adjust with their new surroundings. They make it a point to mix and mingle with the new tastes and culture of their new place. However, there are times when they crave for their traditional diet: “...The Sorens did wean themselves—and quite suc-

cessfully, to some extent—away from fish, chicken, and mutton. However, at times, they would crave the simple sin of an egg.” (12) Their desperation to be accepted drives them to conform. “And while it was now well known that the Sorens were of Adivasi origin, they conformed to the norms— they went to mandirs, celebrated Hindu festivals, fasted on certain days, lit dhoop-batti in their house—and were accepted.” (15)

Although, the Sorens are treated with a great deal of prejudice from their tenants, the ultimate tenacity of the family is finally tested during an inter-religious conflict. The neighbourhood turns into a turbulent war zone with the battle between the Hindu fundamentalists and the Muslims over the disputed burning of a train carrying Hindu passengers. The lone Muslim family in the largely Hindu neighbourhood, becomes the target during the riot. But for the bravery and presence of mind of Panmuni-jhi, they would have easily perished. The entire neighbourhood joins her in attacking the rioters with whatever utensils they can lay their hands on and saves the Muslim family.

The closing of the story is a marker about the perils embedded in the stratified notions in the society and its serious implications. After the family is transferred back to their hometown what Panmuni-jhi claims about their regained status holds true about all sort of divisiveness in society. “No one minds what we eat here,” she would say, marinating silver carp with salt and turmeric powder, without a care in the world. ‘And we don't mind what others eat.’ (27) As Yogesh Pawar reiterates once again, “Otherisation and ghettoisation feed off each other and only help fuel hate and suspicion, sowing seeds for further anarchy and feuds that politicians then milk for electoral gains.

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