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Politics of Food: Exploring the Voice and Identity of Dalits and African Americans

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Abstract :

There are a considerable amount of similarities between Dalits of India and African Americans as these two groups have been exploited violently for decades by the hegemonic institutions of society and this constant exploitation and abuse somewhere raises a concern that it is time one needs to redefine the hierarchical structure of a society. It's time one needs to question the power which is enjoyed as well as misused by the authoritative ones. A significant amount of literature regarding Dalits and African-Americans investigates into the subject of subjectivity of the oppressed and down trodden ones. This paper is an attempt to shed some light upon the discourses of class, caste, and race through the politics of food. One might not want to believe that food and the access of it can be highly political. What happens when food is denied to a certain section of a

society on the premise of identity? What happens when food and its consumption becomes political? What happens when food becomes a determinant of social as well as political expression? These are some of the questions which will be explored in this paper. This paper is also going to look into the construction of Black and Dalit identity through food.

Key words- *Food, Soul Food, Dalits, African-Americans, Identity, and Subversion*

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (23)

-Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

If one scrutinizes the whole contextual setting of food within the historical and socio-political context of a community then it would not be an exaggeration in claiming the fact that food renders a sense of space and existence. It's believed that food is one of the essential determinants of subjectivity and it plays an important role in the construction of 'Self' and 'Identity'. Food can communicate a lot about a culture. It works as a social signifier which signifies the cultural location of a group. Even though, Food does forms the individuality of diverse socio-cultural groups but at times this formation of individuality can be extremely complex.

Massimo Montanari in *Food is Culture* writes that food is not culture rather it becomes culture and the way food is assimilated within a culture can be thought-provoking as different communities choose to consume different food consciously. Montanari writes;

Food becomes culture when it is prepared...Food is culture when it is eaten because man, while able to eat anything, or precisely for this reason, does not in fact eat everything but rather chooses his own food, according to criteria linked either to the economic and nutritional dimensions of the gesture or to the symbolic values with which food itself is invested. Through such pathways food takes shape as a decisive element of human identity and as of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity. (2006, xi-xii)

However, what happens when food is denied to a certain marginalised sections of a society on the basis of caste, class and, race? Which kind of a power dynamic does it create? What happens to the formation of a cultural identity of a certain group when food becomes an unattainable entity? Both African Americans and Dalits of India have been exploited for years by the so called authoritative hegemonic groups. African Americans faced exploitation and segregation through the hands of powerful whites for years. While in India, Dalits have been shunned by the so called uncontaminated and pure upper caste Brahmins. Both Whites and Brahmins did not consider the marginalised Blacks and Dalits as humans. In fact, apart from socio-political exclusion, physical and psychological violence was also inflicted on the helpless others. This paper is going to look into the construction of Black and Dalit identity through food. Moreover, this paper will also glance at how food can also become a determinant of social and political expression?

As far as African Americans are concerned, most of them are the descendants of African slaves who were brought to America by force and held captive from 1555-1865. Most of the

slaves were forced to work in unforgiving conditions and death or lynching would normally be the reward in case of any protest against the order of the whites. Many slaves suffered in silence for years however there were a few who chose to speak up against the draconian rules and regulations of the white masters. Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. in his essay “Politics and political philosophy in the slave narrative” points out;

The slave narratives were intensely political document. Although one may find many motivations behind their writing, all were published to play a role in the fight against slavery. Encouraged by the rise of the abolitionist movement in the 1830s, the narrative quickly became that movement’s most essential texts, providing eyewitness accounts of slavery’s brutal reality. (28)

However, the status of blacks in comparison to whites in America has been one of subordination. It is true that The Civil War outlawed slavery but it did not eliminate stratification based on race. The Civil Rights act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped in erasing the lines of difference. It’s a different matter that as a few lines were obliterated the others cropped up. The ghost of slavery and racism haunts America even now. As far as food is concerned, many blacks even after working for the whole day in the cotton fields for their white master could hardly manage a meal. Most of them would survive on basic food. Food was not really a site of extravagance and overindulgence for African Americans. It was mostly a device of survival. In southern US, many blacks were dependent on soul food for their subsistence. In the times of extreme impecuniousness and discrimination, blacks negotiated sufficient to endure. Just like the Dalits of India, they were not paid for their work. There was no recognition of the

work which they were doing. As a matter of fact, the powerful ones subjugated the marginalised ones.

Nevertheless, Soul food is an ethnic cuisine and traditional food which is made by African-Americans of the Southern United States. The culinary tradition known as ‘Soul Food’ is celebrated widely as part of African-American culture. During the mid1960s, ‘Soul’ was a common adjective which was associated with black culture and black power movement and thus the name ‘Soul food’ was derived. This name was given to southern style cooking by African-Americans who prepared food during slavery. Soul food is mostly known as the comfort food because of the way it is cooked. Today, Soul food has become a foundation of bringing back memories of family dinner during special occasions. Before we talk about Soul Food it is necessary to understand the term ‘Soul’ in its isolation. Frederick Douglass Opie in his book *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* opines that;

Soul is the mixture of various Africans tribes and kingdoms. Soul is the style of rural folk culture. Soul is black spirituality and experiential wisdom. And soul is putting a premium on suffering, endurance and surviving with dignity. It is the intellectual property of African-Americans. (2008, p.XI)

Soul food originated with slavery in the United States where slaves were given only “throwaways” of whites to eat such as pig’s feet, chitterlings (intestines of a pig), hog jowl (cheeks of pork), leftover vegetables etc which the slaves reclaimed from the garbage heap. However, African-Americans were able to make something delicious out of this leftover nothing. This act of transforming food from nothing to something demonstrates the tiresome voyage

which African-Americans took to endure and exist. Most of the plantation owners would spend a minimalistic amount on the food of their slaves as a result they had no means to buy food and uplift their despondent condition. If some slaves were fortunate then they would be given a small piece of land by their owners to grow vegetables but slaves would have to work for long hours in fields and they would hardly have time to take care of the given land. With regard to slaves, there were of two kinds; Ones who worked outside in the field and others who would work in the house of their masters. James Sterling, a British writer who had gone to the Southern United States in mid-19th century draws a distinction between slaves in his book *Letters from the Slave States*

In judging of the welfare of the slaves, it is necessary to distinguish the different conditions of slavery. The most important distinction, both as regards numbers and its influence on the wellbeing of the slave, is that between house-servants and farm of field-hands. The house-servant is comparatively well off. (1857 p.287)

House servants could afford to eat the leftover or castoff from the dinner table of the slave owners after they would have had their fill. But this was possible only if the food was not put aside for another mill. The term ‘Soul’ is an adaptation to conditions of slavery in America. African-American Cuisine (Soul Food) developed from an assimilation of several cooking traditions of Western Africans, Western Europeans and Native Americans. West African community shared a deep relationship with spirituality. They acknowledged god and would give reverence to the almighty, friends and family through music and food. West African eating customs played an essential role in formulating the eating habits of African-Americans. The consumption of yam in various ways is primarily African. It is a versatile vegetable which can be

roasted, boiled, barbecued, grilled, baked and smoked. Yam is the staple crop of Igbo people of Nigeria but African-Americans use yam too in their diet. Another parallel is how African women use Shea butter¹ and palm oil to cook vegetables, chicken and fish. On the other hand, African-Americans in South would use fatback² and salt pork³ in the same way to prepare vegetables. The continuation of African culinary practice within African-Americans can be seen in the use of excessive amount of salt and pepper to season food.

However, during 18th century when slaves were being brought to America on ship, they didn't have many options available with regard to food. They would have to eat whatever was given to them. The diet of the blacks on board was mostly made of boiled yams, composed of rice, and horse beans. All of this would be boiled and thickened to a consistency which is called a dab-a-dab. Many African-American slaves were farmers, cattle raisers and fishermen, and they introduced many plants and seeds to plant such as black eyed peas (bean), okra (lady finger), collard greens, sweet sorghum (cane) and watermelons as part of American food. On the other hand, there is a deafening silence around Dalit food practices in India. This silence clearly denotes to a subversion of cuisine culture of the marginalised.

As far as Dalits are concerned, the term 'Dalit' stands for someone who is downtrodden, suppressed, oppressed, and, marginalised. Om Prakash Valmiki in his memoir *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* tries to trace the root of the word 'Dalit'. He writes; "It comes from the Sanskrit root dal,

¹ Shea butter is a yellowish colored fat extracted from the nut of the African Shea tree.

² Fatback is a cut of meat from a domestic pig.

³ Salt pork or white bacon is salt cured pork. Long used as shipboard ration, salt pork has become a part of American cuisine.

which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth, and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and lentils.” (xviii) The name Dalit has been in existence since the nineteenth century however, it was B. R. Ambedkar who popularised the term. Ambedkar in his speech which he published in 1936 titled *Annihilation of Caste* writes that inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage is not sufficient to eradicate the caste system. He says the tangible system to abolish the caste system is to extinguish the rigid religious notions upon which caste itself is located. On the other hand, rigid caste notions also politicised the space in which food would be consumed. A Brahmin would not share his food with a Dalit as it may pollute the Brahmin as well food. Caste restrictions were used by Brahmins as a weapon to maintain their status quo and taboos which were constructed around food were a result of caste hierarchy. Amar Nath Prasad in his book *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration* writes;

The ideology of food taboos could have evolved out of an environmental necessity to conserve precious food resources to one’s family, and extended kin or sub-caste only. Economic sensibility of feasting only those who are superior in wealth and status and who may therefore benefit the host in some way rather than share one’s very limited wealth and food with those whom one could benefit little from, the other poor low castes. (23)

Sharing food only with those who are superior in wealth represents the preposterous sense of superciliousness which most of the Brahmins suffered with. There have been incidents of biasness and utter abhorrence wherein Dalits have been punished for having food with upper castes.⁴ For instance, a Dalits man’s nose was chopped off for dining with the upper caste men in

⁴ This incident took place in February, 2015.

Uttar Pradesh. Amar Singh who worked as a labourer in the Dalit-dominated village Jalaun, had gone to a wedding with his master's family. At the wedding, some people created an uproar after he ate the food. Apparently some upper caste people threatened to leave the occasion without having anything on discovering that a Dalit man had dared to eat with them. In Jalaun village, Dalits are not even allowed to touch the utensils which are used by upper castes let alone eating with them. In another incident, which took place in Bibipur in UP, the children of a school were told not to eat mid-day meal as it was cooked by a Dalit woman who was hired as the cook. Vikram doctor in his article "Dalit food: How it became a mean of oppression"⁵ opines that once when Ambedkar was a student at Elphinstone High School in Bombay, his teacher asked him to solve a problem on the blackboard. When Ambedkar approached the board it created a big havoc in the classroom as caste Hindus used to keep their tiffin boxes behind the board. The upper caste students ran to remove their boxes as they thought Ambedkar might pollute their food. In the times when beef is banned in India and when people are being killed for eating beef, many Dalit's right to have meat has been snatched away from them as most of the Dalits can't afford to have meat apart from beef as it is more expensive and they don't have enough money to buy it. The upper caste belief of cow as a sacred animal is being circulated across India. It clearly denotes the fact that upper castes of India are as authoritative as they have always been.

Upper castes like to dictate terms around food and they expect everyone to follow these terms without any question. Moreover, many upper castes prefer to throw the leftover food away

< <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/dalit-lower-caste-up-violence-nose-chopped-off/1/419703.html>>

⁵ < <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/the-leisure-lounge/dalit-food-how-it-became-a-means-of-oppression/articleshow/2945790.cms>>

instead of sharing it with Dalits. Mostly the thrown away food would later be picked up by the Dalits. Om Prakash Valmiki talks about this phenomenon in Joothan. He remarks that during a wedding of Brahmins often the lower caste Chuhras⁶ would sit with their baskets outside the pandal to collect the leftover food and this food they would eat for days to come. He writes;

We dried in the sun the pieces of pooris⁷ that we collected from the leaf plates. We would spread a cloth on a charpai, a rope-string cot to dry them... these dried up pooris were useful during the hard days of the rainy seasons. We could soak them in water and boil them. The boiled pooris were delicious with finely grounded red chilli pepper and salt. Sometimes we mixed them with gur⁸ to make a great delight.
(10-11)

Just like the Dalits, African Americans too used preservatives so that Soul food could be eaten for a longer period of time. Soul food travelled with freed slaves but it was a great challenge for them to cook it with primitive tools and very little utensils. Taking utensils from their owners was simply out of question as one could pollute the purity of the utensils. Cooking was mostly done in open with the help of a fireplace and big iron skillets which were made by blacks. A large amount of fat, sugar and salt will be used as these were easily available and salt specifically would be used as a preservative since there was no refrigerator to keep the food fresh.

⁶ Chuhra or Bhangi is a lower caste in India and their tradition occupation is sweeping which is considered to be a 'polluting' occupation.

⁷ Puffed bread

⁸ Jaggery

In the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, the term “soul” became a signifier of unity of black community. Black power movement made soul food popular. Amiri Baraka, who is one of the foremost figures in the black arts movement, wrote about Soul food in 1966 in his book *Home: Social Essays*. In an essay on Soul food, he criticised people who argue that African-Americans have no language and characteristic cuisine. He insisted that chitlins, sweet potato, pork sausage, hoe cakes, biscuits, salt pork, dumplings represent the best of African American cookery. Amiri Baraka says that these foods taste more like memory and soul food is much more than food. In 1971, culinary writer Helen Mendes in her book *The African Heritage Cookbook* writes that soul food unites black Americans beyond class. Soul food represents an art where wild plants were converted into tasty vegetables and intestines of animals are not seen as a site of disgust, it provides a thread which connects them to their African past just like Dalit cuisine, even though it is close to oblivion in its representation in cook books, connects them to their past.

To Conclude, I would like to state that food is an art which reflects the intimate relationship of a community. Food has been a significant entity which provides a close look into the past and history of Dalits and African Americans. Food more often than not becomes a symbol of identity, celebrations as well as retaliation and it may provide a cognisance of both struggle and survival. Moreover, both Dalits and African Americans were accused of eating food which was not considered to be characteristic enough.

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