



Original Article

The tales of Survivorship: The food history of the Dalits in India directing towards a booming industry

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Abstract

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Amidst the social stratification, the ones left behind the shadow of power, were in Sanskrit, termed as Dalits, meaning The Oppressed. Because of the social ranking made, they were marooned from the enlightened, educated and the powerful. Casteism stigmatised sharing of means leading to untouchability. As a result, they had to contrive a world of their own. This world that they made, consisted of new attires, new codes of living, and particularly a new variety of food, that being the most vital parameter of sustenance. Being the human left-overs of the society, they formed cuisines of their own, crafted from the residues of the people. The ingredients of the cooking therefore were not only nutrition deprived, but a lot more factors regarding hygiene were compromised. Surprisingly, contrary to the prevailing situation of the Dalits, it can be traced over time that those cuisines, that once the elites twitched their noses about, are refashioned by the crowd of today, tagging them as ethnic specimens of resilience and distinctiveness. The acceptance of this newness in the world of food has also opened a phenomenal dimension in the business perspective. The reformed, simple, easy to make foods, and the remaking of leftovers, with an affixed tinge of hygiene, have resulted in adding versatility to the stereotypical tastebuds of commoners, adding to a new genre of food in the restaurant business. The typical soaked-rice and dried-fish formula of the Dalits, therefore, nowadays can be seen transformed into a glamorous and wholesome cuisine culture. This paper is an attempt to find out the roots and reasons of the birth of a varied style of cooking by a discarded class of strain, by assessing their immediate circumstances, to the tracking down of the act of the unimagined inclusion of Dalit food culture into the restaurants, directing towards their acceptability in the contemporary society, along with their sustainability in the modern time, acknowledging them as a thing once discarded downright, making it a fulfilled and prospective booming business.

Keywords: Dalits, food, business, contemporary, sustainability, ethnic, inclusion.

Introduction

The introduction of casteism in India can be traced back to the Vedic era, coming into practice around 1500 to 600 BCE. With the inclusion of casteism as a social practice, the concept of untouchability came into existence, and the Dalits as a class were introduced. The word Dalit, was popularized in the 19th century after the usage of the term by the Indian social reformer, Jyotirao Phule to denote the oppressed amongst the rest. At their introduction as a class, the Dalits were the once excluded from the Varna gradation system of the society and considered the outcasts. It can thus be said that the Dalits, therefore by the society, were tagged as the lowest castes in the social order. Their job was to perform the most menial tasks where they had to handle dirt of all sorts as an engagement to help clean the society. The power of the Brahmins amongst the community had left them with a numerous quota of impositions upon them. They were dictated to have a lot of restrictions on food and living. Due to this social isolation of the Dalits as practiced in the prevailing system, the men of the socially stranded class started venturing for a more sustainable palate portraying its minimalistic nature, created out of the left overs of the socially acknowledged mass. Resulting from their exclusion, they had to choose and form varied ways of life.

The history of the food of the ostracized

As humans in the society were ranked into specific orders, the foods prevalent in the community also had its own hierarchical rank, the Sattvik, the Rajasik and the Tamasik food.

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The Sattwik food was tagged as the most pure form of the edibles. The Rajasik food was considered suitable for a King, and the Tamasik food was considered as the most corrupt form of the same. The food of the Dalits could be categorised amongst the Tamasik variant of food as the main concern of the origination of Dalit food was rooted from the necessity of supporting life. The ingredients discarded or rather not chosen by the people of the higher ranks, were included in the foods of these ostracised masses. The minimal amenities they were left with, started being served in their palates. The Brahmins or the elite masses of the society generally considered consuming vegetarian meals, as a symbol of purity within the consumables. Therefore, to make the Dalits understand their deliberate social separation, they were left to consume foods with more meaty components in them. The two basic things on which the Dalits had to compromise their standard of living were, lack of provisions and their economic constraints. The most vital component of their food system thus proved to be as composed of the items that the well-equipped of the society usually discarded.

Dalit food being unique in its form cannot be restricted as a specific culinary variant. Despite being made out of easily available means, Dalit food is miscellaneous and highly diverse in nature. Variety can be seen in Dalit food as it is region and culture specific, resulting from the varied nature of the easily available ingredients across different landscapes. Meat being the most staple, their food consisted of elements of beef, pork, and other animal parts along with blood, which too was too precious for the deprived class to be wasted, and that the Brahmins usually banned from the periphery of their domesticity. They also ate the meat of such animals which the affluent ones could never think of. The primary motive of the existence of these foods was to focus the reduction on wastage that indicated resourcefulness. As the food of the ordinary was mostly compromised on its hygiene and nutrition efficiency, they had to be compensated by some other means. They ate lentil dishes to support the protein needs of their bodies, and roughly textured grains such as jowar and bajra along with seasonal leaves and vegetables that were not expensive and therefore easily available to be consumed.

Their food showcased the culinary skills of making the utmost use of the available components. Therefore in the Dalit cuisine, we can often find dishes based on single ingredients. They had *usal*, the legume based curries, *bhakris* made out of jowar and bajra flour, varied sorts of chutneys made from available vegetables and spices. Apart from these, the unique dishes made from the unusual parts of animals included, *rakhti*, the dish made from coagulated blood of animals. Due to the low availability of food sources all over the year, they depended highly on dried meats and fish. Though the emergence of the Dalit food culture tells us of a story not so heartwarming, the dishes created by these segregated masses of people also included special delicacies composed for special occasions. An example of such a dish still existing in the contemporary world is the *Puran Poli*, a sweet-bread made of flour, jaggery and chickpeas.

Sustainability of the Dalit cooking styles

The food of the Dalits can be called sustainable as they are highly dependent on the locally-sourced ingredients. The culinary culture of the Dalits also talks about the remaking of left-over foods into a new variant, implying on the implementation of lowering wastage. The ingredients like wild greens, and ragi, jowar and barre, on which Dalit food is majorly based, require very less water resources to grow. Their method of preparing the sun roasted meat and fish, points out the cut down on usage of fuels. As their foods greatly depend upon seasonal and regional vegetables and legumes, their nutritional value also doubles up in their cuisine. The technique on which the cooking style depends, is directed towards a food culture that is both nutritionally effective as well as beneficial for the environment. Thus, it can be said that the cuisine that once evolved out of necessity, could be gradually found proceeding in the longer run only for its sustainability and its intention of lowering waste generation while cooking. Sustainability here is the correct word to be used, as this art of waste management and the creation of something new out of the locally sourced ingredients, in their style of cooking helped sustain a group culturally affected, proudly for generations.

Inclusion of a new culinary culture in the palates of the Elites

Considering the newness and the sustainability of the Dalit cuisine, the Dalit dishes are gradually finding their acceptance in the mainstream food culture. One of the most prominent reasons why these foods are finding their inclusion in today's world is because these foods tell us the tales of resilience and cultural struggle. The fast food industry of today is highly dependent on the culinary arts that the Dalits followed. It could be apparently seen that the foods that originated inside the kitchens of this deprived class, were somewhere nutrition deprived, if compared with the Sattwik and the Rajasik categories of food. But later on, the Dalits understood the fact quite vividly that if they as a mass did not create something into their palates that compensated for their nutrition deficient diet, they as a mass would fail to sustain. If we consider the example of soaked rice, it was first introduced on the plates to use up the left-over rice and fill the hungry stomachs. But now, soaked rice is seen showcased as a cultural delicacy all over India, even served at the starred restaurants. These left over foods are today examined by their health benefits and not judged by the parameter of what the affluent considered to be real food. Therefore, over time, Dalit food improved on its nutritional benefits. The modern crowd of the modern world today likes to experiment with food. One of the prime factors working over here is the lack of ongoing generational prejudices concerned with food items. Serving of new palates including varied and distinct types of meats are also enjoyed and appreciated in the recent world. Hence, the food that once the dominant class discarded completely, leaving them for a crowd, too desperate to just live, if analysed carefully, holds much possibility in the upcoming food business. The acceptance of the Dalit food therefore,



can be somewhat tagged as a voice of protest as a result of the age of suffering of the people of the masses.

Conclusion

The story of the formation of the food of the human scavengers of the society can be thus found speaking of their resilience and struggle. A cuisine culture once introduced in history because of the lack of resources can nowadays be found securing a place in the modern food business space. From this we can understand that a thing once discarded can result in something demanded for in future times. Once the food that had no monetary value, the food that was devised from the scrapes of the social strata, can be now seen gaining popularity, resulting in people spending a lump sum on them, directing their taste buds towards towards easy and simple meals emerging from history that paint the picture of pliability and courage.

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Conflicts of interest

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