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EDITORIAL MESSAGE

This issue brings together a strikingly interdisciplinary assemblage of essays that collectively interrogate the entanglements of food, embodiment, language, and power across diverse cultural and historical contexts. What emerges is not merely a thematic convergence around "food studies," but a deeper methodological and epistemological intervention: the contributors treat everyday practices—eating, cooking, naming, sensing—as sites of knowledge production that both sustain and unsettle hegemonic structures. In doing so, the volume aligns with and extends critical trajectories in cultural studies and anthropology that foreground the politics of the ordinary (Appadurai, 1988; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). Importantly, while food serves as a central axis, several contributions extend beyond it to examine parallel domains such as language, performance, and sonic culture. These essays are not tangential but integral, as they illuminate analogous structures of embodiment, marginalization, and resistance. By situating food within a wider matrix of sensory and cultural practices, the issue resists reductive thematic containment and instead foregrounds a shared methodological commitment to interrogating the politics of everyday life.

Several essays anchor the issue in urban and performative contexts, where food becomes legible as text, archive, and embodied practice. Vismayi Kadakol's exploration of Bengaluru's darshinis through Performance as Research (PaR) offers a compelling methodological intervention, positioning quotidian eating spaces as dynamic cultural texts. Her work resonates with the theoretical frameworks of Richard Schechner, particularly the notion of performance as restored behavior, while simultaneously situating darshinis within the accelerated temporality of neoliberal urban life. Similarly, Vaibhavi Bhat H S essay on reconnecting with the city through PaR extends this inquiry, suggesting that embodied movement and sensory engagement can reconfigure urban alienation into forms of situated belonging.

The epistemic status of food itself is rigorously interrogated in multiple contributions. Mollika Lahiri's study of achaar through Ayurvedic and Indian philosophical frameworks challenges reductive classificatory systems that rely solely on guna properties. By foregrounding processing, function, and modes of consumption, Lahiri offers a nuanced taxonomy that complicates Western nutritional paradigms. This intervention finds an echo in Nukso Chakma's critique of the marginalization of Global South diets, where development discourse and industry logics erase culturally embedded food practices in favor of homogenized standards. Complementing this, Gajal Kasera's critical study of food labels and consumer trust interrogates the contemporary regime of nutritional signification, exposing how the language of "health" is manufactured, regulated, and often misleading within neoliberal markets. Together, these essays underscore the need to provincialize dominant nutritional epistemologies (cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000).

The volume also foregrounds the intimate relationship between food, identity, and memory. Diya Rose Denny's reading of Banana Yoshimoto illuminates how culinary practices function as sites of continuing bonds, enabling characters to reconstruct fractured selves through acts of cooking and eating. Rohini Sinha Roy's examination of Tangra and Tiretta Bazaar in Kolkata similarly situates cuisine as a spatial and diasporic practice, where Indo-Chinese foodscapes produce hybrid identities and contested belonging. Humeera Banoo's evocative exploration of Kashmiri food—particularly mutton, wazwan, and the domestic kitchen—extends this inquiry into the terrain of memory and nostalgia, where culinary practices become repositories of affect, loss, and cultural continuity in the face of displacement. These essays collectively affirm that food operates as both mnemonic device and spatial practice, mediating the tensions between loss, migration, and cultural continuity.

A significant thread running through this issue is the politicization of food within public discourse. Mytreyi Narasimha Prasad's analysis of food metaphors in Indian political rhetoric reveals how culinary language is mobilized to naturalize ideological positions, transforming abstract political concepts into affectively charged, everyday terms. Shivika Kumar's examination of beef consumption as a site of purity and resistance further exposes how dietary practices become battlegrounds for negotiating caste, religion, and nationalism. This concern with the politics of consumption is also reflected in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat," where, as Dr. Sreevidya Surendran argues in *The Politics of Food*, meat-eating becomes a charged site for negotiating tribal identity, marginalization, and dominant cultural norms. Jewelika Saha's essay on chicken in neoliberal discourse complements this by demonstrating how notions of purity are rearticulated within market-driven frameworks, often masking underlying hierarchies. Ambika Singh Tomar's study of bhaang in contemporary India adds another layer to this discussion, tracing how a substance embedded in ritual, legality, and counterculture is continuously renegotiated across shifting moral and political landscapes. These contributions resonate with Michel Foucault's insights on discourse and power, particularly the ways in which seemingly mundane practices become instruments of governance and control (Foucault, 1978).

The body—gendered, disabled, lactating, or subaltern—emerges as another critical site of inquiry. Dr. Tirtha Pratim Deb's exploration of disability in the colonial public sphere reveals how reformist education and philanthropy were entangled with soft nationalist agendas, producing ambivalent forms of inclusion. Dr. Sharon Lopez's essay on the wet nurse economy foregrounds reproductive labor and the politics of the lactating body, challenging the invisibilization of care work within dominant narratives. Dr. Manola Gayatri Kumarswamy's provocative analysis of nudity as performative excess further destabilizes normative constructions of the sexed subaltern body, pushing the boundaries of what constitutes legible resistance. Together, these essays engage with and extend feminist and subaltern studies, particularly the question of who gets to speak—and through which embodied registers (Spivak, 1988).

Language and cultural production also receive sustained attention. Meghnavi Ravuri's examination of colonial recipes in the English print sphere reveals how culinary instruction becomes a site of linguistic and epistemic colonization, where indigenous practices are translated, codified, and often distorted. Shamika Singh Hanspal's essay on metal music as resistance situates sonic expression within broader struggles against anti-intellectualism and hegemonic suppression, suggesting that cultural forms beyond the culinary nevertheless share analogous dynamics of marginalization and dissent.

Finally, Cheryl Jasline's meditation on taste as an epistemically marginalized sense offers a fitting conceptual anchor for the volume. By interrogating the hierarchy of the senses—where sight and reason dominate over taste and embodiment—Jasline calls for a revaluation of sensory knowledge. Her argument invites us to reconsider the very foundations of what counts as knowledge, aligning with broader critiques in sensory anthropology and phenomenology (Howes, 2003).

Taken together, the essays in this issue do more than map the cultural politics of food; they collectively reimagine the terrain of knowledge production itself. Crucially, even those contributions that move beyond food as an explicit object of analysis participate in this reimagining by foregrounding analogous questions of embodiment, discourse, and resistance across diverse cultural forms. By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the volume underscores that the epistemic stakes it engages—around the sensory, the marginal, and the everyday—cannot be contained within a single domain. Instead, they demand an interdisciplinary approach that cuts across food, language, performance, and culture at large.

In doing so, the contributors challenge disciplinary boundaries and invite readers to engage with these practices not merely as discrete phenomena, but as interconnected and deeply generative sites of inquiry.

Dr. Sharon Lopez

Editor

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And When, And When: A Performance as Research Exploration of Darshinis as a Cultural Text in Bengaluru

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ABSTRACT

This research builds on ongoing research of Darshini spaces as cultural markers of the city in Bengaluru, entering it from the lens of a performance as research scholar-practitioner. Apart from empirical studies on service quality and spatial design, Darshinis haven't received much scholarly attention, and this study addresses that gap by asking what the Darshini as an everyday space can reveal when a performing body decides to pay attention to it. Moving through the space, inhabiting characters built from earlier ethnographic observations, the performance operates between presence and observation through performance as research (PaR). The performer's body is used as an instrument to make further inquiries that potentially offer new insights. The performance, And When, And When, itself, was conducted through a combination of fieldwork, ethnographic observation, and experimental embodiment. Pre-performance negotiations with the Darshini management, post-performance auto-ethnographic and Performance Studies reflections, and analysis of the performer's experience make up the primary data. The performance revealed that Darshinis operate as accommodative spaces, though the nuance of the accommodation is centred around the normalisation of consuming food in the space. Additionally, the performer noted a heightened quality of observation while in the performance, as compared to field visits as a part of the earlier research project, highlighting the value of embodied inquiry, such as PaR in spatial research.

Keywords : *Darshinis, Performance-as-Research, Bengaluru Cafes, Semiotics.*

INTRODUCTION

There is a particular kind of space in the city that has no formal name in cultural theory, no clear category in urban planning, and almost no trace of existence in scholarship on the city, i.e. the Darshini. It is a usually self-serviced cafe, offering primarily South Indian food with options to eat either standing or sitting. Darshinis, as non-traditional texts, through their food practices, public spaces, class differences, and architectural aesthetics, collectively narrativise the city and are an important space to study. This research builds on other research (Kadakol:2026) that treats the Darshini as a semiotic text, with signs, symbols and behaviours that can offer insight into

socio-cultural realities and brings to this earlier work the paradigm of performance as research. In this paper, a performance intervention made in a Darshini is analysed to consider two related questions:

1) What does a method such as Performance as Research reveal about the Darshinis treated as a semiotic text?

2) What does the Darshini as a semiotic space reveal about this kind of performance intervention?

The site of the performance intervention is Cafe Aswadam, a Darshini that sits on a quiet, curved road in J.P. Nagar, Bengaluru South, and the event takes place on a Sunday morning in early April 2026. Without a demarcated stage or an anticipated audience, or lines rehearsed in the space, this performance, *And When, And When,* explores different imaginations of conversations heard at Darshinis, built through observations. A performer, moving through a space that already runs its own choreography.

In Performance: A Critical Introduction, Marvin Carlson identifies that performance is, at its core, a contested concept. Drawing on the philosopher W.B. Gallie, Carlson notes that performance has been developed in an atmosphere of disagreements across disciplines, varying from anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and theatre studies (Carlson, 2004, p.1). What holds these definitions together is a quality of self-consciousness, he argues. A body is performing even when it is simply aware that it is acting. Consciousness is a big part of performance. doing and re-doing (Carlson, 2004, p.ix). When trying to define this performance, I'd said that it is a performance simply because I am taking up space and time to communicate a story, entering the Darshini, embodying the performance with the awareness of what I was intending to do and how I was doing it.

This understanding of performance as a self-aware behaviour informs this study. My entering Aswadam Cafe was a conscious act of occupying space with the intentionality of a performer. Moving, borrowing gestures from prior observation, voicing imaginations and conversations, and observing what the space was doing in return. In Richard Schechner's concept of 'restored behaviour,' as cited by Carlson, groups any behaviour that is consciously separated from the person doing it as performance. This could include role-playing, trances, and rituals (Carlson, 2004, p. 3). [1] The performance at Aswadam Cafe was precisely this.

Behaviour replicating and participating in the food ritual, and consciously separating from those participating in the very same food rituals. This paper addresses that gap through an embodied methodological approach grounded in performance theory.

A significant theoretical resource for this study is Sreenath Nair's essay "Mudra: Choreography in Hands" (Nair: 2013), in which Nair reframes the concept of mudra away from its conventional reading as a fixed symbolic sign and towards an understanding of it as kinetic energy. For Nair, the mudra is not a gesture that points to a meaning outside itself but an act of energy that generates meaning through movement. This distinction between sign and kinesis is central to the present study. Where semiotics reads the body and the space as a text composed of meaning, Nair's framework draws attention to the energetic and temporal qualities of movement. Bringing this framework into conversation with Darshinis, and specifically with the performer's experience, it allows for a richer account of what happens in that space, like that.

Methodology

As stated earlier, this study is a Performance-as-research exploration of Darshinis as cultural spaces that could be read as semiotic texts. While a previous research study conducted by Kadakol offered a theoretical situating of Darshinis as cultural texts in the city (Kadakol, 2026), this work engages with Performance as Research to explore what a performance-based embodied approach would offer to our understanding of the Darshini. In order to do this, a performance script, *And When, And When,* was created, which was in itself inspired by the kinds of conversation one is privy to at a cafe, and that was created from data collected from the earlier study. Various options, such as minute costume changes through the addition and removal of sunglasses, or the wearing or not wearing of a scarf to note character changes, were considered until it was finally decided to note character changes via different phone calls, each call marking a new voice in the script. The next step was a pre-arranged negotiation with the space, which happened the day before the performance, between the performer and the proprietor of the space. Conversation and notes make up a vital method in practice as research, and all of these were intentionally used during this research investigation. Visual documentation through photography, field notes, and post-performance notes was made, and the latter two were extensively analysed. Performance Studies' theory frameworks and scholarship that looked at performance as a way of thinking were then studied to accompany the interpretation and analysis made. This also helped in reframing the context and conceptual background of this study. Reflection and critical analysis are two

methods used extensively in the discussion of the results.

The Performance, "And When, And When": Between presence and observation

"The performance was unrehearsed at the site and unannounced to its happenstance audience. I entered Aswadam Cafe as any customer would. I ordered food, ate, moved between tables, sat, and stood. What distinguished my presence was that I was simultaneously inhabiting characters and voicing imaginations from a script delivered to an 'uninformed' audience. I say uninformed here because there was no announcement made before the performance began. There was no intended audience, hence an absent audience. The performer's body, slipping between characters built from observation, imagining conversations, and borrowing gestures. This performance script was the residue of the people who had been observed in Darshinis."

(-VK, post-performance notes)

Performance Site and Script of And When, And When

The title, *And When, And When,* is drawn directly from the script's opening, like a chain of thought that cannot be stopped. "*Sometimes when I think, I forget to blink, and when I don't blink, I cry, and when I cry...*" The "and when" that follows acts like a link that connects each clause to the next. The title mirrors the quality of thinking in transit, in public, in passing. To name the performance, *And When, And When* is to name that particular quality.

The site chosen for this study was Aswadam Café, located in JP Nagar, Bengaluru. The night before the performance, I approached one of the managers and explained that I was conducting a research project on Darshinis across the city. I asked for permission to move through the space, take photographs, and spend some time at the Darshini as part of the study. The manager laid a few conditions: as the performer was not to enter the kitchen, and was not to 'disturb 'the space. These two conditions were agreed upon, and they aligned with the vision of the performance. The performance was not imagined to intervene in Darshini's functioning was designed to move within it and to become part of its existing choreography.

The process of writing was [2] putting together lines from the residue of ordinary days. These are the kinds of thoughts that surface in passing, in transit, in public. These lines, although emotional and intense, are not cerebral. The writing of the script itself developed from a cumulative process. These lines emerged from observations, notes, diary entries, surveys, and utterances. Each section begins mid-thought. There is no building up to these lines. The bilingual-ness, the way Kannada slides in and out of English, was written exactly as I thought. The Kannada passages remain untranslated, and they are not footnoted. They are simply present.

The script begins with the following lines, and they are uttered three times during the performance: "*Would you like some coffee?*" / "*Nanige coffee beku.*" (I want coffee). These lines are said after the 'Tuesday lunch memory' scene, after the 'best-friend' scene, and finally, in Kannada, in the first person, as the script's closing line. The first two instances are offered outward, performing care by asking someone else if they would like some coffee. This is a social utterance that could lead to a conversation. The last refrain, i.e., "*I want coffee,"* is a voice of want, directed at no one. Uttered in Kannada, it is the first time in the piece that I ask for something for myself. The script ends with a private thought voiced aloud. This movement of public and private, inwards and outwards, reflects the performance, the process, and the space.

Attention, Performance time, Space and Nair's Kinetic Energy'

"I didn't have a sense of a beginning or an ending. It was hard to get into the performance, which I didn't expect to happen."

-VK, *post-performance notes.*

The embodied quality of the attention I had in the body of the performer intensified my awareness of the environment. I took notice of the choreography of movement around the counters, the collective noise all the steel utensils made, of the blistering steel table tops, and the thing that bound everything together, food."

Everyone at a Darshini has a clear purpose as to why they are there: to eat, to pay, to leave. The architectural design of the space allows people to move quickly. My time at the Darshini in the body of the performer was the opposite. It was open. One of the things I had written in the post-performance notes was that "it was hard to get into the performance" and that there was "no sense of a beginning or an ending." Placing myself, embodying the performance, inside a space where the entire logic is directional and purposeful, I had to build my own sense of logic. Nobody else in the space was doing that. Everyone else seemed to know when they started and when they were finished.

There was also a difference in the quality of attention itself. The customer's attention moved towards a task: the food, the bill, the person across from them. To participate in a food ritual and then leave. But my attention had to move in two directions

simultaneously: towards the space and towards the 'self -doing' performance. There was a difference in pace. This difference in pace is, in Nair's terms, a difference in kinetic quality.

Drawing on Sreenath Nair's conceptualisation of mudra as kinetic energy rather than sign (Nair, 2013), the Darshini operates on a directed, purposeful energy. Arrivals are oriented toward food, departures are oriented toward the exit, and attention moves cleanly from want to fulfilment. The performer's energy, by contrast, was dispersed. It moved inward and outward simultaneously, generating its own momentum without the pull of hunger or the release of a bill paid. Nair's framework helps name what is otherwise difficult to articulate: that the performer is operating within a different energetic logic altogether. The challenge of finding a beginning and an end to the performance, noted in the post-performance reflections, was precisely the challenge of sustaining kinetic energy without the directional structure that Darshini's food ritual provides for everyone else in the space. Darshini's time was collective. My time as a performer was solitary and self-generated. Without any stage cues, I had to make sense of my own structure in the space. I found spaces where I could linger, surfaces where my voice could be heard, and corners where I would be seen. I created my own stage within a space where there had been no intention of its existence.

Another interesting finding was how Darshini absorbed my presence. Customers continued their food rituals undisturbed. When I stood at a table with my food and spoke my lines in front of a stranger, he did not find it unusual. He was there purportedly to eat and leave. This happened repeatedly as I moved through the space. I don't think the performance went completely unnoticed. I had a sense that people registered my presence, but nothing felt out of the ordinary. The space simply made room for me, the way it made room for everyone. This making of room can be better understood through kinesis than through semiotics. If the Darshini were functioning purely as a semiotic space, the performer's behaviour [3] would be seen as a sign for something. Let's say that someone ignores the performer; this can be interpreted as a semiotic choice. Specifically, a choice to ignore that sign. This implies that there would have been conscious rejection of meaning. That it did not suggests that Darshini's hospitality operates at a different register entirely. Drawing again on Nair's conceptualisation of mudra as kinetic energy, it can be understood that the Darshini, as a space, absorbs and accommodates different energies and movements rather than signs. The stranger who continued eating while I, as the performer, spoke my lines was not choosing to ignore a strange message, but rather he was simply unaffected by a different energy running alongside his own. The Darshini, in this reading, is less a text and more an event. It is a field of co-existing energies, each following its own choreography, none cancelling out the other.

Kannada and English in Performance

"The Kannada lines were easier to perform. And I think that is because those lines were conversation pieces. The rest of the performance was mostly internal dialogue, more emotional, and it was hard to embody that in a space like this. There was a choreography to how I was moving and how I was taking up space, and imagining and creating my own stage."

-VK, *post-performance notes.*

The efficacy of the performance is linked to language. The Kannada lines mirrored the organic, conversational 'noise' of the surrounding space. By adopting a vernacular that matched the exchanges taking place in the space, the lines felt easier to navigate. There is also a distinct shift in tone between the two languages. Kannada: public, outward. Harmonising with the space. English: private, inward. Making those lines more difficult to perform. The shift to Kannada is subtle but decisive. Kannada here offers care to the performer as well. These moments of internal dialogue burst out and reveal what I, as a researcher, observed: that one's own language can provide comfort and community.

Encountering Unnoticing as Hospitality of Non-Interference

There were no interruptions as such throughout the whole performance. At one instant, after I had got my food and I was saying my lines, I was standing at a table in front of a man. He was a stranger, and I was looking at him and speaking my lines. And it was interesting to see that He didn't really care for what I had to say. Or for what I was doing, He was just there to eat and leave. This happened a couple of times when I moved from one table to another. I was sitting down, and I was saying my lines out loud to the stranger in front of me, who didn't really find it unusual that I was talking. He was busy with his plate of food."

I think people noticed the performance. I don't know if it stood out; I don't know if my embodying the performance was unusual because it was in a space where people primarily go to eat. But I do know that it didn't go completely unnoticed. During the performance, two people spoke to me, but it didn't seem out of the ordinary, and I continued my performance.

The people of the Darshini are, in many ways, the Darshini itself. In the ethnographic work, I was observing the space from a researcher's perspective. Noting, categorising, reading the particular choreography of arrivals and departures, gestures toward food, negotiations of shared spaces, and collective noise as signs within a semiotic framework. The Darshini extended hospitality of non-interference. The performance added a different quality of encounter with the people that the ethnographic gaze had not. Specifically, it revealed the indifference of the people at the Darshini and how generative that indifference actually can be. People in that space have complete autonomy. I noted in post-performance reflection that people registered my presence and did not find it unusual. The performance intervention made the role of the Darshini goer all the more visible because I was performing against that space just enough to notice them.

Blurring the Performer/Researcher boundaries

Embodying both roles at once offered the performer/ researcher a dual lens. I had to be both instinctual and analytical. The performance functioned as an experiment that *lived out* the research question rather than just observing it passively. This deepened the findings beyond what fieldwork alone could have offered.

In relation to the first question posed about what a method such as Performance as Research reveals about the Darshinis treated as a semiotic text, the method, through the performance, helped the research in the following ways:

Deepening observation: I, in the performer's body, noted making a lot more observations while performing than during my field visits to Darshinis. Embodying a performer's body amplified attentiveness to the space in ways that ordinary research visits did not.

Confirming the research thesis in practice: The performance itself became evidence of Darshini's accommodative-ness. People around me did not really find my behaviour unusual. The customers who were strangers continued to eat, existed in their own ways, and didn't find my presence out of place. This validates the idea that Darshinis are spaces that negotiate multiple people, realities, and existences simultaneously.

Revealing the space's choreography: By moving through the space as a performer and observer, I was able to identify and define spaces where I could linger and take note of the existing choreography of the Darshini. This might have been harder to realise as a passive researcher.

In relation to the second question, what does the Darshini as a semiotic space reveal about this kind of performance intervention? This research has offered many insights into the nature of this performance through the performer. Apart from all that has been detailed earlier, I noted that this performance was more flexible, which also meant that I had to be more intentional. With the embodiment of a performer in that space. I had to treat the space, my body as a performer, and the script, just as seriously as the space itself.

Conclusion

This study contributes an embodied dimension to cultural and urban studies of Bengaluru, public spaces, and food practices through Performance as Research. A key finding from it is that Darshinis are 'accommodating' spaces not just in terms of multiple socio-cultural identities and agencies, but also of performative experimentation and learning. Another key finding has been in recognising that reading Darshinis only as a semiotic text is inadequate, as these are eventful, negotiated, and even choreographed sites. Drawing from Sreenath Nair's conceptualisation of mudra as kinetic energy rather than sign, the category of kinesis might help add to the richness of understanding this unique cultural space in Bengaluru. An intriguing observation of the comfort levels while performing in Kannada and English has been noted, but further investigation and analysis into this, yielding more information about linguistic preferences and cultural contexts, could perhaps take this work in a new direction.

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Reconnecting with the City: A Study Through PaR and its Allied Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at *Found Narratives,* a participatory tapestry-making workshop, a Practice-as-Research project developed and facilitated in Bengaluru's greenspaces through four theoretical and methodological frameworks of Practice-as-Research (PaR), Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and autoethnography. Because of rapid urbanization and development, as well as increasing restrictions and regulations in Bengaluru's greenspaces, young residents of Bengaluru are becoming progressively disconnected from the city's greenspaces. This study raises the question of how participatory art practices like *Found Narratives* can foster ecological reconnection and civic awareness among urban youth. Drawing on the PaR scholarship of Estelle Barett, Brad Haseman and Annette Arlander, this essay positions *Found Narratives* as a legitimate mode of knowledge production and assembles Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied epistemology, Sara Ahmed's theory of orientation in Queer Phenomenology, and autoethnography as the frameworks to support this research. Through this essay, I present that *Found Narratives* produces embodied knowledge, reorients young people to develop connection and care towards greenspaces from the city's urban life that has alienated them and generates artefacts that function as personal and civic documentation of these spaces that are getting increasingly inaccessible.

Keywords
Practice-as-Research, participatory art, urban greenspaces, ecological reconnection, phenomenology, autoethnography, artefact

INTRODUCTION

Bengaluru, once known as India's' Garden City,' is a metropolitan city undergoing rapid urbanization, infrastructural development, and policy changes. This has led to the neglect and decline of Bengaluru's greencover and increasingly restrictive regulations governing public greenspaces that have progressively harmed the conditions under which young residents of Bengaluru might encounter, inhabit and connect to the city's parks, lakes and other greenspaces. Young residents are losing out on the possibility of an ecological relationship with the city's greenspaces or even having a strong sense of connection to them. This essay examines *Found Narratives*, a participatory tapestry-making workshop developed and facilitated in Bengaluru's greenspaces, as a Practice-

as-Research (PaR) project concerned with this problem of disconnection. *Found Narratives* brings together urban youth and Bengaluru's greenspaces through a collaborative, tactile making process, the making of tapestries from materials found within those spaces. The central question this essay pursues is: how can participatory art practices like *Found Narratives* foster ecological reconnection and civic awareness among urban youth in a city whose greenspaces are becoming increasingly inaccessible? To address this question, this essay takes four interconnected theoretical and methodological frameworks to examine how *Found Narratives* produce embodied knowledge, and reorients young people to develop connection and care towards Bengaluru's greenspaces.

Found Narratives as practice and PaR

A participatory tapestry-making practice, *Found Narratives*, sits within the Practice-as-Research (PaR) paradigm, a methodological and theoretical framework that understands artistic practice as a mode of knowledge production in itself. This practice emerged based on Brad Haseman, Estelle Barrett and Mark Fleishman's scholarship on PaR. Haseman (2007) identifies practice-based research as a third research paradigm as PaR produces artefacts, performances and other creative works that carry knowledge in forms that conventional academic forms of writing cannot reflect or convey.

This practice invites young residents of Bengaluru to participate as duos/trios and spend time in a park walking, observing, touching, and collecting before returning to make a tapestry from what they found and felt. The participants use found materials like leaves, twigs, flowers gathered from the park, and other craft materials like embroidery thread, paint, etc., to recreate their experiences of the space onto a white A4-size fabric. The tapestry that emerges is not just a representation of the park but a materialisation of the embodied experience of being there. The tapestries created by the participants tell us the narratives, textures, and other human and non-human encounters in the greenspace that participants noticed, and chose to hold onto as memories. Within the PaR paradigm, the tapestries produced operate as the artefacts that emerged during research. Artefacts in PaR refer to the physical objects that emerge and embody the process of making. Artefacts are significant because they are understood not merely as an outcome or product of the research process, but as a form of knowledge in itself. As Mäkelä (2007) argues, the artefact in PaR is the site where tacit, embodied, and experiential knowledge becomes materialised and communicable and becomes a mode of 'knowing through making'. The artefact does not illustrate findings that exist separately from the research, but that *is* the finding. Candy and Edmonds (2010) extend the definition of an artefact further by arguing that the artefact functions as both the outcome of practice-based research and a framework for its interpretation, which we will discuss in the further sections.

Referring to what Barett (2007) says, we can say that the artefact is the primary site of knowledge production in PaR and that originality in PaR is rooted in the impulse that sets the inquiry in motion and the particular route taken through the practice. *Found Narratives* was also developed because of that impulse of my experience of Cubbon Park as a space to escape and 'feel human' in a fast-paced city that made me feel isolated and disconnected, and allowed me to reflect about the state of this city's greenspaces, their functions, think about care, and the well-being of the city and its residents. As Barrett (2007) says, the practice itself as it was motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, this kind of research operates based on explicit and exact knowledge, and on that of tacit knowledge as well.

Barrett (2007) says, "It can be argued that the generative capacity of creative arts research is derived from the alternative approaches it employs-those *subjective, emergent* and *interdisciplinary* approaches-that continue to be viewed less favourably by research funding assessors and others still to be convinced of the innovative and critical potential of artistic research." I think this is where the other allied theoretical frameworks come in to strengthen and further explain the PaR enquiry carried out. These frameworks help bridge the gap between the research expectations of creative practitioners and the criteria set by the research industry and other learned bodies that define what research is and what is not. Ongoing research projects, such as *Decolonising Phenomenologies* may in the future also prove to be valuable for work like *Found Narratives,* as it specifically looks forward to how what they term "decolonial aesthetics" could "indicate areas of experience and formations of subjectivity that have escaped phenomenological interpretation."

Embodied Perception: Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

PaR establishes how knowledge is produced through practice and making, while Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception explains how this knowledge is produced. He moves away from the mind-body dualism and says that perception is not something that is a separate cognitive act performed by the mind, but it is fundamentally embodied. The body is the site of perception and knowledge, and it is precisely through sensory engagement with the

world around us that we are able to embody it. This is also the epistemological foundation of *Found Narratives,* where the workshop begins with the participants taking time to engage with the greenspace that they are in for twenty minutes. They walk, touch, listen, observe, converse, and engage with the space sensorily. They engage with the greenspace through their bodies first and then try to recreate their experience by making a tapestry. The making of the tapestry is a continuation of the embodied experience; it allows the participants to process and recreate their experience to make artefacts that function on multiple levels. The tapestries that emerge from the workshop are then what Merleau-Ponty would call 'materialised perception', which is the same as the artefact in a PaR enquiry.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology also helps to explain the shift that some participants experienced in terms of the desire to return to the park, think about the importance of greenspaces like this, and find a sense of community. As he says, the body forms habits and attachments through repeated and engaged presence in a certain environment, the act of spending almost three hours of attentive making in a park was enough to create awareness in some participants, and to begin the process of attachment and care for the park.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*

Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology takes Merleau-Ponty's embodied perception as a beginning point and politicises it. She asks the question of whose bodies come to engage and know the world through sensory engagement, and towards what? What do we move towards and what are we moving away from? Ahmed says that orientation is not just a spatial or perceptual phenomenon, but it is a political one. Ahmed argues that orientation begins with disorientation, and we notice it through its absence. The way we move through space by situating ourselves in relation to the space and its objects, and how we inhabit that space, is being oriented in a space. Her arguments allow us to rethink the phenomenality of space itself. Ahmed (2006) says, "The work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic renegotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar, such that it is still possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which effects are within reach." When certain bodies are made to feel at home, and others are made to feel surveilled and unwelcome, the question of who is oriented toward a space and who is disoriented within it is a question of power for Ahmed.

This can be applied in the context of Bengaluru's greenspaces. The increasing restrictions and regulation of the city's green spaces where entry is timed, there are prohibitions on sitting on grass or touching any flora, signboards with how to behave in a park and what is acceptable and what is not, bureaucratic restrictions on public gatherings and communal activities in public spaces (given these greenspaces are also public spaces), it affects all bodies but in particular, it produces some bodies as legitimate and others as the illegitimate. Young people, and other individuals who are using parks as their third spaces or without any purpose, who want to simply be in a park without performing productivity, are affected by their bodies. Whoever wants to access the space and engage with it is subject to disorientation because this kind of disorientation is produced by how the space is being controlled by the authorities. Parks and other greenspaces in Bengaluru have mostly been spaces that kids and old people frequent to walk or play or hold community clubs or classes in the assigned areas, making the space feel unwelcome to young people.

Found Narratives, then is operating as a practice of re-orientation by bringing young residents to engage with the space on their own by being mindfully present and exploring the greenspace, and then making something tactile. The workshop redirects their bodies to explore a space that they might have passed through without really feeling belonged or caring much for it. The tapestry functions as what Ahmed refers to as "orientating object" because it directs attention and attachment towards the greenspace and brings in the feeling of care, leisure, relaxation, and well-being. Several participants were visiting these greenspaces after a really long time or for the first time, and during the presentation and feedback discussions, they shared that they would love to come back to the park to simply be there, read or just explore the place. That would be reorientation according to Ahmed because it shows that a body that was previously indifferent or alienated from a space now feels like the space can be inhabited and feels drawn towards it, and we would like to further this by saying that this leads to ecological and civic awareness and development of connection and care for the city's green spaces, the city, and its residents.

Autoethnography and its role in this study

Autoethnography is a research method that uses the researcher's lived experiences as a primary source, situating the self as a subject whose personal history, embodied knowledge and social position are constitutive of the inquiry. This research project is largely my original work, as it is a primary inquiry that started because of my lived experience. Autoethnography is a way the researcher can be ethical and accountable to what the inquiry needs. By being able to articulate the conditions that produced

this research, so that these conditions are made visible. As a practitioner-researcher, I, too, am encountering the space by myself, and my experience is also entangled with that of the participants. Hence, it also brings insight into my first-hand experience with the research inquiry. With regular journaling and documentation of the process, through writing, in moments of doubt or experimentation, I found the autoethnography method helpful to come back to where I started and continue working with that. Autoethnography connects all the other frameworks mentioned in the other sections in a single figure of the researcher's own body.

Conclusion

The four frameworks are entangled, depend on, and extend the others. The PaR methodology allows for the development of a practice like Found Narratives and establishes that the tapestries produced in the workshops are not a record of findings but the finding itself. Through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology framework, it is established that knowledge is produced through the body. Ahmed politicises this embodied knowing, asking whose bodies are oriented in these greenspaces and whose are not, revealing *Found Narratives* as a practice that can be seen as a practice that reorients young people towards greenspaces where urban life, policy and constant regulation have progressively alienated them. Autoethnography holds all these three frameworks accountable to the lived experience of the researcher and the conditions that produced this research.

Reading the resulting tapestries through this multi-framework lens establishes a foundation that this practice and the tapestries produce the kind of knowledge that the city, its greenspaces and the residents need. The frameworks also open up the theoretical possibilities of *Found Narratives* like Ahmed's work on 'sticky objects', which opens further lines of analysis. These frameworks together have revealed that the knowledge produced in *Found Narratives* could not have been produced in any other way because it requires bodies to be present in these greenspaces, making something from what those bodies found there and a researcher whose own embodied experience was the condition of possibility of this entire inquiry.

As Bengaluru's greenspaces continue to be increasingly regulated and inaccessible to all, especially the youth of Bengaluru, the need for research that can account for embodied evidence of ecological connection or disconnection becomes important and urgent. Surveys or any other kind of research cannot measure or take into account how a space feels or what it can produce in a body. Through *Found Narratives* and these theoretical frameworks, this essay shows how participatory art can produce embodied knowledge, reorienting young people to develop connection and care towards Bengaluru's greenspaces

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An Exploration of How Ayurveda and Indian Philosophical Food Systems Allow Contextual Reclassification of Food Based on Processing, Function and Mode of Consumption Rather Than Relying Solely on Guna Properties — A Study of Achaar (Pickles)

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ABSTRACT

Achaar, as a type of pickle, provides a case study demonstrating the contextual sophistication of the Ayurvedic/Indian philosophy-based food system. The analysis herein reveals that Ayurvedic food categorization is not based on guna[i] at all, but rather on the process of categorizing the food according to the ontology of three elements, namely, svabhava[ii] (natural), samskara[iii] (through processing), and sanyoga[iv] (from combination). For achaar, this implies that its neutrality and health benefits are achieved not by contradicting sattvic food philosophy, but rather by its logical samskara ontology.

The argument follows through four stages: first, the elements that constitute achaar are plotted on the guna scale to demonstrate why, in terms of its base ingredients and preservation method, it is categorized as non-sattvic; second, the concept of samskara is employed to propose a rationale behind the re-classification of the substance rather than simply an expediency; third, the act of each form of preservation used during achaar production is demonstrated to be a form of ontological transformation; and finally, the re-positioning of achaar as aushadha ahara[v] disqualifies it from the guna classification scheme and places it in the pathya[vi] category. This research utilizes three theoretical models of substance classification proposed by McKim Marriott (1976), Mary Douglas (1966), and Francis Zimmermann (1987).

Keywords : *Achaar, Samskara, Ayurvedic Food Classification, Guna System, Ontological Transformation, Aushadha Ahara, Pathya-Apathya, Substance-Code Theory, Svabhava, Indian Food Philosophy*

Introduction, Literature Review, and Theoretical Context

The typical Indian thali, especially when it is sattvic in nature within the Brahminical or Vaishnavite tradition, poses a classification puzzle that seems impossible to solve. A tiny steel katori of achaar, which consists of onions, garlic, mango, or limes in salt, oil, and hot spices, co-exists peacefully next to freshly cooked vegetables, pulses, and rice cooked strictly according to sattvic dietetic rules. Within the framework of the tri-guna philosophy that forms the basis of classical Indian philosophy regarding food, not only the individual components of achaar, but also the method of cooking and physical condition of this dish would exclude it from

being sattvic.

Palandu (onions) and lashuna (garlic) are explicitly classified as rajasic[vii] in the Charaka Samhita (Sutrasthana 27.89-90), while the spices used in the preparation of almost all types of achaar, namely red chili, mustard, and asafoetida, are similarly identified as rajasic in the Bhagavad Gita (17.9). Furthermore, the process of aging used in preserving food items to give it its characteristic tangy flavor also fits into the category of tamasic food[viii] as described by the Bhagavad Gita (17.10), which refers to old food with visible signs of deterioration. Nonetheless, achaar is prescribed as such in the tradition of Ayurveda as being beneficial to digestion, mentioned as such in classical literature as an aharayoni[ix] (food catalyst), and recorded as such in food history over a period of more than one thousand years. The following study aims to prove that this is neither a contradiction within the system nor a compromise made due to practical concerns.

This research question seeks to examine the following query: how do achaar become neutral and medically valuable from a philosophical and analytical point of view, given the fact that their compositions are not entirely sattvic? It can be stated that through this case study, the thesis will show how Indian food philosophies and the Ayurvedic system allow for the contextual reclassification of foods according to their processing, functional aspects, and mode of consumption, as opposed to the properties of their raw compositions alone.

The scholarly traditions utilized by the present research encompass five traditions altogether. These include the texts on classical philosophy and Ayurveda – the *Samkhya Karika* (dated to c. 4th century CE), *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Charaka Samhita*. The *Samkhya Karika* lays down the basic ontological foundation of food categorization; that is, the concept of three gunas should be interpreted as referring to the essential constituents of the material world, rather than being an evaluation (Samkhya Karika 11-13). As regards the systematic classical classification of food, this can be found in the Seventeenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which introduces the notion of achaar based on food's freshness. The *Charaka Samhita* is the most commonly referenced text in this paper. This text is responsible for the three-fold system of svabhava, samskara, and sanyoga as determining factors of the properties of food (Vimanasthana 1.21), the pathya-apathya evaluation system, and the recommendation of achaar as an aharayoni. Classical cookbooks include the *Manasollasa* (1130 CE), the *Soopa Shastra* (1508 CE), and the *Pakadarpana* (1200 CE). All three texts demonstrate achaar's importance in Indian cuisine as a dish that has existed for over one thousand years in traditional Indian kitchens (Achaya 87-89). The *Lingapurana* (1594 CE) contains a list of over fifty types of achaar.

In common with these other culinary sources, these texts have a consistent research gap in that they describe the process but not through theorization and without consideration of the philosophical question regarding the role of achaar within Ayurveda classification.

The three theoretical ideas represent the analytical framework for this study. In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas explains that both purity and impurity are not intrinsic qualities of objects, but rather result from the act of classification; thus, impurities are "matter out of place" (36), matter that does not fit within the established system of classification in a certain culture. The application of Douglas's theory to achaar highlights the nature of the anomaly that exists between the raw ingredients of achaar and the classification system used in sattvic food order, and also allows us to understand the importance of managing such anomalies to understand the underlying classification logic. The ontological basis of the substance-code theory developed by McKim Marriott (1976) is as follows: Marriott contends that both person and substances in Hindu philosophy are "dividuals," i.e., fluid and open objects whose identity is defined through their substance exchanges (111). A food substance has guna qualities encoded in its present substance code[x]; this code can be altered through the process of samskara due to processing and combinations, and, hence, the food after it has undergone samskara will have an ontologically different identity. According to the work of Francis Zimmermann titled *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats* (1987), Ayurveda can be characterized as a contextual science of food medicine where food qualities arise from relationships between substances, their environment, consumers, and applications (3-25).

The contemporary scholarly understanding of Ayurveda, especially in relation to the idea of samskara causing an ontological change in kind and not degree, comes from scholars like Rastogi (2014) and Rastogi and Chaudhari (2014). The work of Rawat et al. (2018) helps to provide a physical and chemical account of how the processes of samskara cause a transformation in the material nature of the food item achaar. The common gap in all these areas of scholarly work is the lack of textual and philosophical discussion that shows how achaar can be ontologically recategorized through Douglas, Marriott, and Zimmermann's ideas.

This paper uses close reading and comparative analysis as its methodology. It takes as its object of

reading three classical Sanskrit texts, which serve as the philosophical grounds for Ayurvedic and Indian food classifications, namely the *Charaka Samhita*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Samkhya Karika*. The philosophical case is made through logical argumentation within the logic of the tradition itself. Douglas, Marriott, and Zimmermann's theories are used as frameworks to understand the logic of the selected texts.

The argument of this study is ontological in nature. This means that the process of making achaar changes what achaar is as a food substance, not just what it does to the body. After the process of Samskara, which involves salting, oil saturation, and sun-drying, achaar is not the same food as the raw ingredients put together. It has a different identity.

The key ontological argument, hence, can be stated as follows: samskara does not just alter the function or physiology of achaar but alters the ontology of achaar itself as a food entity. If we were to interpret the process of samskara only as altering the function of achaar, then the logical conclusion would be that the rajasic or tamasic ingredients in achaar are overcome by the positive effects of samskara, resulting in a food product that, although it is not a sattvic food, creates an effect similar to that of sattvic food. This contradiction remains intact. However, the ontological argument is entirely different in that it states that after the process of samskara, achaar becomes a completely different kind of food entity.

The Tri-Guna System and Achaar's Classification Problem

The concept of tri-gunas emerges out of Samkhya philosophy, where the *Samkhya Karika*, dating back to the 4th century AD, states that all prakriti[xi], or the physical world, is made up of the three gunas – sattva, rajas[xii], and tamas. These gunas are not qualities that have been added to substances from the outside but are essential parts of all physical reality (11-13). The predominant guna determines the nature of the substance and decides the effect the substance will have on the mind of the person ingesting it. It is the *Bhagavad Gita* that gives the framework a proper dietary application, stating that sattvic food leads to longevity, purity, energy, and gratification (17.8); rajasic food is bitter, sour, salty, highly hot, and spicy; it causes pain and illness (17.9); tamasic food is stale, putrid, decomposing, and unclean (17.10). However, according to the *Charaka Samhita*, there is another determinant of the sattvic state of the food, and that is whether it is fresh or not. If the food becomes spoiled due to improper storage, it ceases to be sattvic through this spoilage. Thus, we can see how the criterion of freshness leads to the contradiction of achaar.

The classification of the properties of achaar in terms of guna results in a decisive and negative evaluation. According to the *Charaka Samhita*, both onion and garlic are classified as rajasic (Sutrasthana 27.89-90), and the prohibition on consuming them in various Hindu communities is well-known. The pungent spices used as the taste component in achaar - chili, mustard, and asafoetida - reinforce this rajasic nature. Tamasic qualities emerge due to the process of preserving, such as the emergence of sourness, the alteration in texture, and the increasing pungent aroma, which are considered as characteristics of tamasic foods according to the Bhagavad Gita (17.10). Based solely on svabhava, the guna classification approach will conclude that achaar is rajasic-tamasic. In applying the guna framework using Douglas's approach, achaar regarding its raw materials, is out of place.

Ayurvedic Theory of Contextual Food Transformation

One of the crucial elements of Ayurvedic dietetics is that it does not reduce itself into a fixed system of guna attribution. The theory of the characteristics of food in the *Charaka Samhita* is based on a three-part schema, wherein all three of these coexisting and interdependent aspects make up what a particular substance of food essentially constitutes: svabhava, samskara, and sanyoga (Vimanasthana 1.21; Rastogi 10-11). However, while the svabhava represents the first step, being the basic nature of a particular food before processing, the *Charaka Samhita* leaves no doubt that the svabhava alone does not make up the last aspect of what a particular substance of food is like when being eaten or what it will eventually do in the body. The eight rules of proper eating outlined in the *Charaka Samhita* (ashta ahara vidhi visheshayatana) explicitly show that the characteristics of a food at the time of eating depend not only on one of the above aspects but on all of them together.

There is substantial and concrete proof from classic Ayurvedic sources to indicate that samskara is capable of ontological transformation. One such example is the transformation of milk into curd. In Ayurvedic texts, milk is considered heavy and indigestible, along with its kapha-producing nature. But when raw milk undergoes fermentation to form curd, there is a clear indication of transformation in the *Charaka Samhita* that curd is much lighter, easier to digest, warmer to agni[xiii], and supportive of digestive processes (Sutrasthana 27.217-220). The milk post-fermentation differs from the raw milk both in terms of substance code as well as effect (Rastogi 11). This is

not just a quantitative difference but a qualitative transformation where the transformed milk assumes a completely different meaning altogether as far as its substance code goes. Moreover, from the description of pathya kalpana (therapeutic convalescent food) in the *Charaka Samhita*, it becomes clear that samskara involves a definite prescriptive and teleological process in which even slight differences in cooking or preparations result in marked differences in effectiveness.

The pathya-apathya schema – that determines the kinds of foods that should be prescribed for a particular doshic constitution[xiv] in a particular state of imbalance – assumes great philosophical importance due precisely to its structure that renders the Ayurvedic diet impossible to reduce to an objective guna-attribution scheme. The same food can be either pathya or apathya[xv] depending on the dosha-constitution; pathya in a state of normalcy can be apathya in a state of pathology (Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 25.40-45). Such contextual relation-based reasoning is the evaluative framework for achaar as well, and as such, it always remains pathya. By highlighting different kinds of viruddha ahara[xvi] (dietary contradiction), as the *Charaka Samhita* does through its discussion of samskara viruddha (processing-related incompatibility) and sampat viruddha (unprocessed spoilage-related incompatibility), the importance of samskara in making food compatible is made evident (Sutrasthana 26.85-102; Rastogi 19).

This dichotomy is clear in the case of Ayurveda and how it defines the difference between the unintentional decomposition of a substance that imbues it with tamas and the intentional process of controlled preservation, which itself is a samskara that can change the ontological nature of the substance altogether. Indeed, in Zimmermann's ecological reading, Ayurveda can be understood as a holistic system where the properties of the substances do not reside in themselves but in the interrelationships that obtain between the substances, environment, consumer, and application (3-25). In the case of Achaar, its classification cannot be resolved through guna-assessment alone; rather, it can only be determined in relation to its use as a stimulating condiment within the meal.

Central Analysis: Achaar as a Case Study in Samskara

The first and foremost point to be understood when it comes to the reclassification of achaar based on its samskara is the difference between deliberate transmutation and passive putrefaction. The guna classification of tamasic food in the Bhagavad Gita (17.10) includes foods that have been subject to uncontrolled putrefaction, negligence, and decomposition—the phenomenology of passive tamas, which is characterized by the disorganization of matter caused by a lack of deliberate structuring action. Achaar represents the exact opposite of this concept. As per the traditional process of Indian achaar production, deliberate actions are taken in order to avoid the passive disintegration process, which classifies the food under tamas (Achaya 32-45; Rawat et al. 1873). The vegetables or fruits are chosen when they are perfectly ripe, thoroughly cleaned, dried, cut accurately, and mixed with precisely proportioned amounts of salt, oil, and spices according to a certain order. Every step in the process is considered a samskara—a deliberate intervention that creates new qualities in the food item through the individual's expertise in what effects each step achieves. This separation between achaar and other foods goes beyond mere practicality or hygiene; it is ontological. As mentioned in the *Charaka Samhita*, the pathya kalpana differs from other preparations based on the degree of accuracy and expertise involved in their preparation (Sutrasthana 25.46-48). Achaar-making that is improperly done is also called samskara viruddha. Salt (saindhava lavana) works on the achaar from two different perspectives that can be analyzed independently but which also reinforce one another: the physicochemical and the ontological-symbolic. The physicochemical role of salt is the creation of an environment with a high osmotic pressure, where the water is drawn out of the vegetable cells and water activity becomes so low that it does not sustain pathogenic microorganisms that cause decomposition (Rawat et al. 1874). Both the physical form of the food and the microorganism content become different; chemically, it no longer resembles the same food. Ontologically, the symbolic meaning attached to salt is that of a purifier, a harbinger of auspiciousness, and a protector (Sharma 4-5). According to the *Charaka Samhita,* salt makes food easy to digest, opens up the channels of the body, and promotes transformation (Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 26.42-44). Following Marriott's model, the meaning associated with a particular substance is included within its substance code, and it is transferred to another substance when there is a transaction between the two (109-114). Thus, while the chemical function of salt is to preserve the food, its ontological value as a purifier becomes a single samskara operation.

Oil in the preservation of achaar comes into confrontation with another key binary of Hindu food categorization, namely the distinction between kachcha and pakka food[xvii], which has been explored by Marriott (122-124) and Khare (35-38). While the former is simply a distinction between different methods of preparing food, the latter constitutes an

ontological distinction, inasmuch as different food substances are involved in kachcha and pakka foods. The former, according to Marriott (122), possesses a protective ontological coating, which is constituted by a substance-code that renders it resistant to polluting transactions. In this sense, the former is able to transcend social and ritual divisions that the latter cannot. Achaar, despite not being cooked in oil, is fully saturated with oil; oil forms a physical barrier against oxygen and microorganisms. It is through this process that achaar is put on an ontological and functional par with the pakka foods through the same mechanism and not through metaphor. The particular oils that have been traditionally used in the preparation of achaar have medicinal properties of their own. Tila taila is known to be heating, strengthening, and good for agni (Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 27.316), whereas sarshapa taila is considered penetrative, digestive, and anti-microbial (27.319). Thus, the choice of the oils that have been used in the process of achaar-making itself qualifies as a samskara choice. However, the conscious nature of the act of sun-drying, whereby one takes time to expose the substance to the direct rays of the sun, stir it constantly, and monitor its progress, places this activity near the threshold of ritual performance. Using the perspective of the substance code offered by Marriott, sun-drying can be seen as an exchange of substance between the sun's energy, a purifying and rejuvenating substance in the Hindu worldview, and the achaar itself, as highlighted by Babb (292-95).

The various spices used in making achaar — turmeric (haridra), methi seeds (fenugreek seeds), hingu (asafoetida), maricha (red chili), and sarshapa seeds (mustard seeds) — serve three purposes in achaar making: they are material preservatives, providers of rasa[xviii] (the essence of taste), and sanyoga substances, whose collective effect brings about certain qualities that are not present in any single substance. According to *Charaka Samhita*, sanyoga can produce qualities that are entirely different from the qualities of each substance involved (Vimanasthana 1.21; Rastogi 11). In the case of achaar, sanyoga of turmeric with oil, salt, and spices is important in terms of analysis because haridra is a tridoshic substance according to Ayurveda's materia medica, which makes it a balancing agent for the rajasic qualities of pungent spices. Though Asafoetida (hingu), with its strong odour and connection to rajasic elements, is considered in the Ayurvedic system as a carminative, anti-flatulent, and digestive stimulant (Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 27.182-185), the effect of the combination of all these spices in the light of salt and oil preservations as well as sun drying is such that it is impossible to understand the nature and properties of the achaar based on the properties of each element. Achaar, being a holistic element of matter, seems ontologically different from the mere sum of the elements used to make it — a case of a transformed state of the matter as defined by Douglas (48-50).

The curative aspect of the redefinition of achaar brings about the completion of the ontological argument. According to the *Charaka Samhita*, agni is the primary factor of well-being and illness: illness stems from the derangement of agni, while well-being comes from its normal activity in jatharagni (digestive fire), dhatvagni (metabolic fire in tissues), and bhutagni (metabolic fire in elements) (Chikitsasthana 15.3-5; Rastogi 4-5). In any food substance that enhances agni's potency, there is a therapeutic value even when the individual attributes of such food substances are considered rajasic. It is in this therapeutic capacity that the food substance known as achaar exists. The sour taste of achaar, known as amla rasa[xix], is no accident in the composition of achaar but comes about through time. As per the *Charaka Samhita*, the taste of the amla rasa is known to be agni-provoking. Sour taste stimulates the digestive juices, facilitates salivation, stimulates the digestive tract, and helps in assimilation through the creation of proper gastric heat (Sutrasthana 26.42-44; Rastogi 17). The process involved in the creation of sour taste through controlled mixing of vegetables, oil, spices, and salt over a period of time is what makes achaar acquire its medicinal value.

If one accepts the healing role of achaar, then the second transformation appears in terms of its classification, from ahara[xx] (the food that provides nourishment) to aushadha ahara (the food that provides therapeutic benefits). By this definition, achaar can be totally excluded from guna classification and can be considered only in relation to the pathya/apathyaya scale of evaluation. The question is not about what guna the ingredients have when they are raw, but rather about whether achaar, in its particular formulation and in the required dose, is a therapeutically suitable food. This view is clearly confirmed by the classics. The *Manasollasa* (circa 1130 CE) and the *Soopa Shastra* (circa 1508 CE) record the inclusion of achhaar style food preparations in the classical Indian diet as an adjunct in this manner (Achaya 87-89). The instructions provided in the *Charaka Samhita* identify specific varieties of achaar as aushadha ahara based on their medicinal attributes: amla achhaar to balance the three doshas (27.116-118); ginger pickle because of its ability to decrease kapha and increase agni (27.56-59); lime achaar due to its antimicrobial and agni-boosting effects (27.121-122). This position of achaar as a condiment, to be eaten in small quantities, as a part of something larger, makes the ontological duality complete for

achaar: It defines how achaar must be consumed to make it pathya, and at the same time makes use of the evaluation criteria of pathya-apathya instead of the classification based on gunas. According to the *Charaka Samhita*, quantity or matra is one of the fundamental criteria in defining whether something is pathya or apathya, and the same thing can be pathya when taken in small quantities but apathya when used in larger quantities (Sutrasthana 25.40).

Conclusion

What this study has shown is that the supposed anomaly of achaar, a food substance whose raw materials are rajasic-tamasic in nature and which goes through a process of preservation phenomenologically akin to tamasic decay, is, in reality, no anomaly at all. According to Douglas's (1966) theory, there is no doubt that on the plane of svabhava, achaar, when compared to its unaltered constituents, constitutes matter out of place within the sattvic classification of food. However, what is important to remember is that the Ayurvedic model functions not merely on the plane of svabhava but also within the ontological parameters of svabhava, samskara, and sanyoga. In other words, while the Ayurvedic classification of food substances is based upon the identification of the latter's unalterable intrinsic qualities, the Ayurvedic transformation of these food substances is based upon their ability to be transformed through various processes into entirely new categories of food substances.

In other words, what is being argued here is not that there exists some essential quality of achaar that makes it sattvic, or even that there is some metaphysical process of neutralisation at work on its non-sattvic properties. Instead, there exists a logically consistent criterion for determining the ontological identity of a food object through the samskara process according to Ayurveda and Indian philosophy – and that criterion applies perfectly to achaar. Every process of preservation involved in achaar-making has a corresponding samskara technique; each property conferred upon the product of such preservation processes is a known therapeutic action; and achaar is considered an aushadha ahara rather than a guna-category.

The larger importance of this research is perhaps less about the specific findings about achaar itself, but rather about the approach taken here. Through a careful consideration of classical texts on Ayurveda through the lens of the simultaneous application of Marriott's (1976) substance code theory, Douglas's (1966) classification system, and Zimmermann's (1987) ecological interpretation of Ayurvedic food medicine, this work illustrates how far from simply offering a description of the system from the outside, these interpretive lenses offer an insight into the very internal logic of Ayurvedic thought. Tri-Gunatita is not opposed to Samskara and Pathya-Apathya; these three elements, understood through the theoretical lens used in this paper, form a unified philosophical structure. What the proposed study suggests, methodologically speaking, is an exercise in textual-philosophical analysis wherein modern anthropological and ontological theories are put in conversation with classical Sanskrit and Indian literature, not in order to superimpose novel theories onto this corpus, but rather to highlight the sophisticated concepts already contained therein. The suggested method would result in rethinking the categorization of Ayurvedic foods from an inert taxonomic exercise to a dynamic ontological one – with consequences for how Indian philosophical food cultures are interpreted in academic discourse.

This research, nonetheless, does have certain boundaries, and recognizing them is a vital part of the methodology. It constructs the argument solely from a textual and philosophical standpoint, making no claims about empirical evidence of the samskara concept in its actual practice and understanding among present-day communities. In dealing with the classical sources, the researcher relies on their translation and interpretations found in secondary literature, which implies that there is an intrinsic danger of reducing the scope of interpretation. Moreover, the researcher considers the tradition of Ayurveda homogenous, although the classical texts represent different schools and periods. These restrictions also delineate future directions for the current research to take.

This framework for analysis suggests itself to several possible applications in the context of other liminal food products in Indian cuisine — fermented products, such as the idli and dosa batter, where the act of changing the substance through fermentation could be construed as a samskara that is similar in structure to, but different from, the preservation through oil and salt that is characteristic of achaar; or, similarly, of the aushadha dravya, where food and medicine become indistinguishable via the processes under investigation here. The further ethnographic development of such a framework — that is, a consideration of how this dynamic is engaged by cooks and Ayurvedic physicians in their daily practices — would provide an empirical element that cannot be provided by a textual study alone. In all, then, these possibilities indicate the promise of samskara as an ontological framework for comparative research on Indian food philosophy.

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[i] Guna(s): According to the Samkhya school, the three primary and irreducible gunas – sattva, rajas, and tamas – of all prakriti. In reference to food, gunas refer to the quality influence a material substance has on a person mentally, physically, and consciously (Samkhya Karika 11–13).

[ii] Svabhava: The intrinsic nature of the food substance before undergoing processing, which is a function of its elemental constitution, dominant taste, potency, and post-digestive reaction. Point of departure for classification by guna qualities, but not, as will be shown in this thesis, the ultimate factor in ontological determination.

[iii] Samskara: Qualities acquired by a food item through processing involving heat, water, salt, fat, drying in sunlight, and mixing of spices (Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthana 1.21). For the purpose of this research, samskara is considered ontological, or something that can alter the very essence of a food item and not just its qualities.

[iv] Sanyoga: Qualities acquired through combining the various ingredients, but not possessed by any single ingredient individually (Charaka Samhita,

Vimanasthana 1.21).

[v]Aushadha Ahara: Food or other treatments considered not therapeutically beneficial or contraindicated due to an individual's constitution.
Aushadha Ahara: Food used as medication, taken for its medicinal purposes.

[vi]Pathya: Any dietary item or diet that is therapeutically prescribed for an individual in a particular state of health.

[vii]Rajas: The quality of energy, passion, and stimulation. Foods that have rajas make the body active and energetic but create restlessness and desires when consumed excessively. Onion, garlic, and hot spices are some examples of rajasic foods (Bhagavad Gita 17.9).

[viii]Tamas: Gunas associated with inertia, heaviness, and decay. Tamasic foods make one sluggish and cloud the mind; such foods include those that have gone stale, spoiled, and rotten (Bhagavad Gita 17.10). Contrast with controlled preservation processes, which fall into the category of samskaras in this study.

[ix]Aharayoni: A food adjuvant—a preparation taken in minute quantities along with a meal to increase digestibility and curative effect thereof (Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 27.347–352).

[x]Substance-Code: A concept introduced by McKim Marriott to describe the amalgamation of physical properties and spiritual qualities that a substance possesses and communicates during transactions. Through the process of samskara, the substance-code of a food changes, making it a different substance altogether (Marriott 109–122).

[xi]Prakriti: According to Samkhya philosophy, all matter in the universe together forms prakriti, which consists of the three gunas in different mixes. Different from purusha (pure consciousness).

[xii]Sattva: This is the guna of purity and clarity. The consumption of sattvic foods ensures psychological balance and spirituality; examples of such foods include fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy, honey, and ghee (Bhagavad Gita 17.8).

[xiii]Agni: Fire associated with digestion and metabolism in Ayurveda; its optimal performance turns food into life force (ojas), whereas its malfunction leads to the formation of ama (Charaka Samhita, Chikitsasthana 15.3–5).
Ama: Toxic residue formed as a result of defective digestion; clogs the bodily channels called srotas and causes disease according to Ayurvedic medicine (Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 28.5–7).

[xiv]Dosha / Doshic: The triadic biological energies of Ayurvedic medicine – vata (movement), pitta (metabolism), and kapha (structure) – which control all bodily processes and form the constitution of a person.

[xv]Apathya: Inappropriate diet or regimen for a particular individual due to its therapeutic properties and/or constitutionality. It corresponds to pathya, being the inverse term for the specific situation in point.

[xvi]Viruddha Ahara: Foods considered to have opposing qualities causing adverse health consequences. Examples include samskara viruddha (improper preparation) and sampat viruddha (decay). Both categories are listed in the Charaka Samhita (Sutrasthana 26.85–102).

[xvii]Kachcha / Pakka: A fundamental dichotomy of Hindu cuisine – kachcha refers to foods cooked in water (unripe, liable to contamination), whereas pakka refers to foods cooked or immersed in ghee or oils (ripe, immune). The immersing of achaar in oil marks it as pakka (Marriott 122–124).

[xviii]Rasa: Primary taste; the initial qualitative impression made by a food item. Six rasas (sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, astringent) exist according to Ayurveda, with each having its own physiological impact and association with particular doshas.

[xix]Amla Rasa: Taste of a sour nature; one of six principal rasas as defined by Charaka, which increases agni function (Sutrasthana 26.42–44). The sourness of the achaar caused by samskara of preservation is its chief medicinal quality.

[xx]Ahara: Regular food that serves as nourishment; contrasted with aushadha ahara (medicine food).

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Whose Diets Matter? The Marginalization of Global South Diets in Nutrition, Development and Industry

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ABSTRACT

When we think of the ideal framework of nutrition, we often turn to the global North (Europe) to demonstrate the image of optimal dietary health. This singular association has been generated by multiple layers of marginalization within media, research, industry and development against the culinary and agricultural heritage of the global South. What is often established as a site of perpetual scarcity and suffering is actually a situation of complex policy trade-offs, economic dependence and colonial and post-colonial effects. The global South, comprising hundreds of traditions across Latin America, Africa and Asia, possesses incredibly valuable food and agricultural heritage that continues to remain sidelined in nutritional discourse. Without proper precaution, attention and nuance, key solutions to dietary diversification, food sustainability and local medicine could be endangered and lost.

Keywords : *Nutrition, Diets, Heritage, Agriculture, Global South, Development*

INTRODUCTION

Lissner (1981) was one of the first to describe Global South imagery used by development NGOs as 'pornographic'. The 'emaciated children with bloated bellies', and juxtaposed photographs of starving, despairing fathers and mothers' exposes something as deeply vulnerable as sexuality– that is, human suffering. It is this perpetual image of scarcity, suffering and deprivation that shapes how the world views the Global South, and by extension its dietary and agricultural heritage.

The emaciated children, despairing parents, and barren landscapes that saturated Western fundraising campaigns staged an encounter with vulnerability that bore no resemblance to the complex realities it claimed to represent. Over four

decades later, that representational logic persists (Pachauri, Singh 1) ; not only in humanitarian advertising, but across nutrition science, mass media, and development policy. 'Functional Nutritionism' and the era of nutritional quantification from the early 21st century has promoted a scientific and social shift wherein the value assessment of food becomes quantified and measured, rather than wholesome and perhaps satiating. This heightened appreciation of nutrition at the molecular level by both science and consumers has been made possible by the pre-existing adoption of understanding human bodies of 'functional bodies', where the body is imagined as constantly 'at risk' of underperformance (Scrinis 167). The inclusion and thus consumption of more 'qualitative' values situated within food, such as heritage, culture and dietary diversity are sidelined in a scientific and social environment where meeting daily intakes of omega-3 fats and Vitamin D is the language of modern nutrition. Development organizations and policy bodies operate within the same epistemic environment as their donors; the frameworks they use to understand food insecurity and design interventions are informed by the same deficit-centered, Global North-derived assumptions that characterize Western media. Singh et al. (2025) argue that rights-based frameworks for addressing hunger that are dominant within international development discourse tend to depoliticize food insecurity by reducing it to bureaucratic and legal categories, systematically excluding questions about who controls food systems, how land and labour are organized, and how global trade relations produce local vulnerability. This is not a technical oversight but a structural feature of frameworks designed in, and for, a different set of political and economic conditions.

Postcolonial scholarship establishes the asymmetric power structures through which the West has historically controlled the production of knowledge about the Global South. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) demonstrates that Western representations of colonized societies were never neutral descriptions but active constructions, produced through what he terms the figure of the "Orientalist" — the Western researcher who functioned as the sole legitimate site of knowledge about the East, through whom every understanding of colonized life was mediated and filtered. (Said 4). Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" (1984) extends Said's argument into development discourse specifically, demonstrating how Western representational practices flatten the heterogeneity of Global South populations into a single, deficit-defined figure that forecloses recognition of their complexity or agency. Entman's media framing theory (1993) identifies an asymmetrical dynamic in contemporary mass media: framing operates by selecting certain elements of reality and rendering others invisible, concentrating interpretive authority in those who control the frame. The Orientalist and the media frame perform the same epistemological function across different historical moments — both determine what can be known, by whom, and on whose terms. Together, these frameworks provide the analytical tools to identify multiple intersecting sites of what Santos (2014) calls *epistemicide* — the systematic destruction of non-Western knowledge systems — of which the erasure of Global South dietary heritage is one consequential and underexamined instance.

This paper argues that the marginalization of Global South diets is not incidental but structural, produced at the intersection of the three primary, interlinked systems: A mass media framing that represents the global South through perpetual scarcity and deficit narratives; an evolving, quantified nutrition science that epistemically sidelines the question of dietary preservation and heritage; and development and policy frameworks that impose decontextualized, Global North-derived solutions onto societies shaped by distinct colonial histories, economic structures, and cultural logics. Together, these systems do not merely misrepresent the Global South but actively render its dietary knowledge as invisible and potentially irretrievable in the future.

This analysis draws on three theoretical anchors. Media framing theory, developed by Entman (1993), holds that media does not mirror reality but selects and emphasizes particular aspects of it, constructing interpretive frames that shape how audiences understand social phenomena. Applied here, framing theory explains how crisis-centered, deficit-driven representations of the Global South in nutrition and development journalism are not neutral reporting but active constructions that carry ideological weight. Second, Gyorgy Scrinis's concept of nutritionism, that is, the reduction of food to its nutrient components, provides a framework for understanding how Western nutrition science systematically devalues the cultural and holistic dimensions of food, creating conditions under which heritage diets are unrecognizable to institutional frameworks. Third, postcolonial theory, drawing on Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) and Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" (1984), grounds the analysis in the understanding that Western representational practices do not describe the Global South so much as produce it– constructing it as passive, underdeveloped, and in need of external intervention in ways that reflect and reinforce colonial power structures.

This paper intervenes in existing literature by connecting these three systems– epistemic, representational, and structural, into a unified analysis of how the marginalization of Global South diets is produced and sustained. Individually, each domain has received scholarly attention. It argues that their convergence is what makes the marginalization so durable and difficult to resolve. This paper proceeds in five parts. First, it critiques mass media reporting and imagery of the global South, analyzing how Western news media and foreign-aid NGO advertisements construct and produce the narrative of the global South as a site of perpetual scarcity. Second, it critiques the epistemy of modern nutrition science, demonstrating how the quantitative, value-judgement attitudes in contemporary science makes no room for questions of dietary heritage and preservation. Third, it examines structural issues and complexities within development and policy-making, arguing that inadequate knowledge of global South contexts of food insecurity and malnutrition cause harm, especially when it erases the reality of food and labour, industry control and global trade relations. The challenge of food security experienced by a multitude of global South nations is complex with many trade-offs, and policies enforced within the West are unlikely to be successfully applied in the global South–and hence, dietary preservation and heritage by governments is a difficult task to impose nationally. Fourth, it demonstrates the numerous advantages of heritage diets across Latin American, African and Asian cultures, outlining its ability to contribute to dietary and agricultural diversity across the globe. Finally, it addresses the consequences to the enduring erasure of the global South and its deep culinary heritage, emphasising that we may globally experience an irretrievable loss.

Theoretical Framework

This paper operates through the intersection of three bodies of theory that together constitute its analytical framework. First, Robert Entman's Media Framing Theory (1993), which holds that media does not mirror reality but re-presents it through active selection, emphasization and even omission. Media constructs 'frames' that determine how audiences understand, remember and even choose to act upon what they're shown. Media Framing theory is applied here to explain how Western news media, especially photojournalism and humanitarian advertising, produce the narrative of a global South that is perpetually scarce and lacking agency by consistently selecting deficit-centered imagery and language, omitting the complexity of its reality.

Second, Gyorgy Scrinis' Nutritionism (2013) describes a rising appreciation within nutrition science for 'functional' and 'reductive' nutritionism, where food is broken down and understood at a molecular level. Through the increased quantification of food to a microbiological degree, the invisible is made visible. With the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* suggesting balancing calories alone as the only necessary concern in maintaining a well balanced diet (113), the sidelining of the more 'whole' aspect of food is sidelined. Hence, this foundation is applied to illustrate that this reductive framework standing as the governing epistemology of nutrition science sidelines the cultural, ecological, and holistic dimensions of food. Nutritionism is therefore not merely a scientific methodology but an epistemological position that makes certain kinds of dietary knowledge institutionally unrecognizable.

Postcolonial theory, drawing primarily on Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) and Chandra Mohanty's 'Under Western Eyes (1984). Said demonstrates that Western knowledge about colonized society was never truly descriptive, but 'productive'. The Orientalist did not 'find' the East but constructed it, generating knowledge that reflected Western power and authority over genuine reality. Mohanty, although addressing the representation of third-world women by the West, clarifies the ideology of 'Universalism' which is a repeated pattern of behaviour by Western reporting that applies a singular, broad stroke of meaning to an otherwise complex cultural history. Western representational practices homogenize Global South populations into deficit defined figures, removing the power of agency and complexity from its people. These two texts primarily ground the paper's insistence that the marginalization of global diets is not a matter of incomplete data, but an ongoing, structurally biased system of knowledge production.

These three frameworks are not applied in parallel but understood as interlinked. Scrinis's nutritionism provides the epistemological vocabulary through which both media and policy assess dietary value — it is the shared language that makes heritage diets invisible across all three systems this paper examines. Said and Mohanty explain why that vocabulary goes unquestioned: the asymmetric power structures of colonial and postcolonial knowledge production naturalize Western frameworks as universal rather than particular. Entman's framing theory explains the mechanism through which both are reproduced at the level of public perception and institutional common sense. This convergence is captured by Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of *epistemicide* (2014) — the systematic destruction of non-Western knowledge systems — which this paper treats as the cumulative effect of all three systems operating simultaneously.

The marginalization of Global South dietary heritage is not produced by any single institution or discourse but by the interlocking, which is why addressing any one in isolation has so far proved insufficient.

Media and Representation

The representational logic that now governs Western understanding of the Global South was consolidated approximately in the 1980s, when humanitarian fundraising campaigns used photographs of emaciated African children with distended bellies to mobilize public support for food aid initiatives, including as much as airlifts to Sudan and a military intervention in Somalia during the 1990s famine. Cultural movements involving popular musicians amplified this imagery to mass audiences, embedding an association between the African continent and extreme hunger that has proved remarkably durable ("Foreign Aid is Having a Reckoning").

Similarly, Western feminist writings of the third-world woman garners a significant amount of sympathy through the universally applicable tools they frame these women with, much of which oversimplifies and generalizes these women's lives to effectively portray a condition of constant sexual subordination (Mohanty 347).

Both Western-origin narratives have been proven to demonstrate significant omission and understanding of local, historical and cultural context. Intellectuals, aid workers, leaders and spokespersons from Africa outline that despite a short-term, positive effect of food aid ('planeloads of free American corn), the damages incurred include potentially putting local farmers out of business, making long term food supply more precarious than it was previously. In the same vein, the West applies a universal meaning to the 'veil' in any form it appears within images of global South women, whether that be the purdah or the hijab, removing historical and cultural contexts that are crucial and reducing it to an image purposely evocative of gender violence (346).

These were not neutral acts. These were representational choices, or selections, in Entman's terms, that foregrounded scarcity and suffering and omitted everything else.

And it is this construction of the 'other' or the 'Oriental' that the West derives a sense of superiority and paternalism. The starving African exists as a site from which one can measure their own wealth, success and prosperity, and celebrate one's cultural triumphs. Women in developing countries by the usual discourse are poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, victimized, etc (Nathanson 107). The global South is a land of constant crisis, exploitation, economic dependency, visual spectacle and epistemic marginalization in Western media, and this is not accidental but purposeful (Pachauri, Singh 1183). It is viewed in a state of perpetual 'lacking', that can only achieve its development through Western intervention.

The empirical consequences of this framing are documented. A 2001 Voluntary Services Overseas poll of the UK general public found that 80% of respondents strongly associated the developing world with famine, disaster, and dependence on Western aid (Kennedy et al. 56). Clough et al. (2024) additionally provide experimental confirmation: exposure to negative messaging in international development advertisements measurably reduces respondents' belief in the agency of people in developing countries. Western reporting compounds this effect by attributing hunger to natural scarcity and technical failures of production and distribution rather than to the structural conditions of global trade, land ownership, and colonial economic legacy (Singh et al. 2). The result is a representational environment in which the Global South appears as a condition of perpetual scarcity and violence that is self-produced and requiring Western intervention.

Below is a table adapted from Pauchari and Singh's research on the representation of the global South in Western media. These observations were derived from assessing various papers looking at North-South media dynamics and compiling them within a tabular format.

Analytical Theme	Interpretive Focus	Discursive Indicators
Crisis Framing	News depiction of the South as unstable or perpetually imperiled	"Violence" "chaos" "emergency" "failing state"
Economic Dependency	Construction of economic inferiority and financial helplessness	"Foreign aid" "donor nations" "IMF" "underdeveloped"
Visual and Ethical Framing	Use of imagery and moral tropes to define cultural and political narratives	Victim imagery, dichotomous visuals, moral binaries
Epistemic Exclusion	Silencing or marginalization of Southern voices and knowledge systems	Absence of local sources, expert dominance from global North

Table 2. *Coding Matrix of Dominant Themes in Media Representation Studies*. Adapted from Pachauri, Sumit, and Vinita Singh. "Representation of the Global South in Western News Media: A Postcolonial Analysis." *Journal of Informatics Education and Research*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2025, p. 1179.

This has a direct consequence for how Global South dietary heritage is perceived. An audience conditioned by decades of famine imagery and deficit-centered development reporting cannot easily

receive the Global South as a site of any kind of epistemic abundance, and that includes nutritional abundance, culinary sophistication, or agricultural diversity. The oversaturation of Mediterranean diet research in nutrition science and journalism is not coincidental in this context. It reflects the same bias, which is that a dietary tradition from the Global North receives institutional recognition, research investment, and media endorsement, while heritage diets from Africa, Asia, and Latin America remain outside the frame entirely. Not because they lack nutritional value, but because the populations that hold them have already been defined as lacking. A heritage of health and nutritional density cannot be recognized within a representational system that has reduced its people to a single, ahistorical image of deprivation.

Nutrition Science and Industry Bias

Much of dietary advice is 'ephemeral', changing from one day to the next, and is perceived as such by consumers (Nestle 20). Gyorgy Scrinis outlines a particularly dominant pattern within nutrition science and national health guidelines from the 21st century onwards, namely 'functional' or 'reductive' nutritionism. This is particularly characterized by a heightened interest in understanding the inner workings of human microbiology in response to certain nutrients. This includes a popular understanding of food as simply being made up of calories. The 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* suggests balancing calories as the only necessary concern to be accounted for in maintaining a well-balanced diet (Scrinis 113). With this logic, the qualitative aspect of food, i.e. what the food item is made up of; metaphysically and culturally, is set aside in favour of a quantitative understanding. 100 calories in a sandwich is the same as 100 calories of ultra-processed cereal. Nutritional advice especially in post-war America has been consistently shifting narratives, jumping from low-fat, high carbohydrate dietary frames to low-carbohydrate diets within a decade or two. This particular frame of nutritional knowledge production would not be as popular as it is, Scrinis states, if it were not for the pre-existing idea of the 'functional body'. The functional body, which is conceptually a 'goal' to work towards, is a nutritionally enhanced body, where the foods and nutrients work functionally to optimize bodily functions (166). Studies, for example, that demonstrate the correlation between high red-meat consumption with increased smoking habits, BMI and diabetes attribute its participants' unhealthy body to the red-meat itself, rather than to the host of unhealthy activities outside of it. "These food based studies," Scrinis states, "are also dependent upon, and subject to the limitations of the often reductive understanding of the role of these biomarkers (172).

According to Marion Nestle, People often obtain their information about nutrition and dietary health from mass media– newspapers, magazines, radio, television and of course, the internet. These mediums source their information from research publications and nutrition experts as well as public relations representatives belonging to certain food and beverage companies. The mechanics of journalism means partiality towards breakthroughs, controversies and new developments. Hence, it's far more likely that a nutrient or vitamin's connection to increased or decreased health concerns is reported, and this behaviour is similarly observed amongst scientific researchers. This is largely because new discoveries are much more likely to receive funding. This isolated, confusing relationship with food and nutrition is most beneficial to the food industry, whose representatives can produce various claims about the products they produce, and the misguided consumer is bound to take these claims at face value (20, 21).

There is a heightened interest in quantitative studies within the epistemology of contemporary nutritional science, and this framework is bound to sideline questions of heritage, preservation, and culture. A quantitative, functional relationship to food is beneficial to the industry that controls our supermarkets and their produce because a relationship with food that is primarily quantitative is unlikely to question why some vegetables populate these grocery stores while others are difficult to procure, or the risks we may face once diets become entirely homogenous at a global, corporate scale. The way we decide what is 'good' and 'bad' for us is influenced by scientific study and news media, and the encouragement of a functional and fortified relationship to eating by these institutions is sure to encourage individual consumers to marginalize an interest in food heritage and preservation, especially from the global South.

Policy and Development Complexity

Definitions and frameworks surrounding global food and nutrition insecurity are often framed by the global North themselves. However, these definitions can reflect certain values that may not resonate with or apply to the diverse realities of those residing in the global South. Global trade dynamics play a significant role in shaping food insecurity, and power relations within trade agreements and policies can often exacerbate vulnerabilities for low-income groups within the global South (Laar, Vorkoper, Escamilla 4).

Uniform policies on nutrition cannot be applied at a global scale, and must be tailored towards 'context-specific strategies. Avantika Singh and scholars

studying the framing of hunger in colonial and post-colonial India state that rights-based frameworks may demonstrate a tendency to depoliticize hunger by framing it simply in bureaucratic or legal terms. They may ignore questions about who controls food systems and access, how land and labour is organized, and how global markets may affect local access. How we frame hunger has profound political implications– it describes, determines not just who is fed, but also how state responsibility is represented as well as how inequality is reproduced, addressed or challenged (3). However, news reporting of the global South tends to present the disparities and complex socioeconomic and cultural issues within the global South in relation to food security as a one-dimensional image of suffering, lacking significant context of history, geopolitical struggle, and cultural issues.

A thorough study by Balié observing strategic objectives, policy measures and possible trade-offs in different case studies and research projects across the global South reveal a variety of concerns. Improving food safety might mean more thorough, strict food safety regulations. However, higher safety standards could mean higher costs of food, and market actors within the food industry could be excluded. Reducing the consumption of ultra-processed foods could mean imposing tariff escalation, regulate advertising of unhealthy foods, and tax the consumption of such unhealthy foods. However, a significant drawback is the prevalence of undernutrition (as opposed to malnutrition) (5).

T. Reardon et al. reveal that developing countries within Africa face the dual problem of obesity induced by increased consumption of ultra processed food as well as 'wasting' or undernutrition. Policy-making becomes difficult as urbanization and employment shifts lead to a rapid transformation of the way populations eat. Policies cannot take away what allows their developing population to access convenient, cheap, labour-saving food. Simultaneously, many packaged items such as milk have been a boon to nutritional development. Double malnutrition (DBM) also appears to be a significant or growing issue across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan, Timor, Maldives and Cambodia. In an analysis by Alina Ioana Forray and Cristina Maria Borzan assessing 194 countries from 2017 to 2021 in their implementation of national nutritional health policies, conclude that their findings called for a 'nuanced understanding of the barriers to policy implementation', encouraging tailored and context-specific strategies to deal with diet-related NCDs (non-communicable diseases).

The policy frameworks that may prove effective in the global North are unlikely to function properly in the global South due to various cultural, political and socio-economic reasons. However, as we've explored previously, the genuine reality and complexity of food insecurity rarely find itself a whole and complete voice within development communication, which often uses language and frameworks originating from the global North.

What many Global South nations are currently experiencing is what the Food Research Network (1993) terms the *nutrition transition* — a structural shift in diet, physical activity, and disease burden that accompanies urbanization, economic development, and demographic change. Most commonly, it describes the displacement of traditional dietary patterns by Westernized diets high in refined sugars, saturated fats, and ultra-processed foods, alongside increasingly sedentary lifestyles. The transition is well-documented across multiple Global South contexts where traditional dietary patterns developed over generations are being displaced by food retail systems designed to attract foreign investment and accommodate global corporate supply chains.

The nutrition transition is not a spontaneous cultural shift but a structural one. The expansion of large supermarket chains into Global South urban markets, driven by foreign investment and multinational advertising, creates food retail environments in which traditional and heritage food systems cannot compete on price, convenience, or visibility. Weerasekara et al. argue that sustaining traditional dietary supply in Sri Lanka requires the modernization of the food retail sector and the vertical integration of agricultural supply chains — conditions that, by definition, subordinate local food heritage to the logics of industrial food production (2). Reuter's study of Bali documents the same dynamic: agricultural modernization has simultaneously degraded local ecologies, disrupted moral economies organized around food, and eroded the nutritional and public health foundations that traditional polyculture systems had sustained for centuries (7).

In the global South's efforts to modernize, grow economically, and urbanize itself, populations begin to move away from agriculture and traditional diets towards manufacturing, industry and service sectors to make ends meet. The sustaining and preservation of both agricultural and culinary heritage becomes complex with increased funding from both private and government sectors towards large-scale and widely accessible, processed foods.

The multitude of nations within the global South experience their own, unique challenges of achieving food security. But it is also true that the global North experiences food insecurity themselves. This is significant because of the existing context of the global South as needing Western intervention through donation and charity; this framing has always intended to imply that the global North is superior and developed in its food security and must generate help for those groups that belong to the 'underdeveloped' countries with its abundance and policy-making practices.

In a 2023 study by Kerins et al., food poverty has been demonstrated as a significant issue in the global North as the right to food continues to be compromised by poverty through unexpected changes in employment, as well as a lack of savings for emergency expenses. Food poverty is a rising problem in affluent societies, where people cannot afford to eat a nutrient-dense diet for reasons of unaffordability. In the European Union (EU) itself, 95.3 million people are classified as at risk of poverty, with data demonstrating that 19.7% of those were unable to afford a meal containing meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent in 2022 (2). This is not to say that the struggle for food security in the global North versus the global South exists on a similar plane, but rather it is an important clarification to make in the network of mass media, policy and nutrition science that generalizes and emphasises on the deprivation and lack within the global South.

This section of the paper seeks to argue that various countries across the global South do not receive 'whole' or adequately nuanced reporting in their struggles that highlight geopolitical power dynamics and colonial and post-colonial history and its effects. In reality, public policy frameworks that are instructed and devised by mass media and development reporting do not sufficiently give light to the complexity of food security and heritage within various global South countries. Various nations are currently experiencing nutritional transitions, where populations are shifting away from traditional heritage diets to more processed, market-supplied food to meet the demands of an increasingly urbanized, 'modern' lifestyle. What 'third world' countries experience in terms of food security is a complex web of colonial and post-colonial history, geopolitical conflict, socio-economic issues and so on– but none of this should degrade generational culinary and agricultural knowledge that could significantly develop modern nutrition as we understand it.

Benefits of Global-South Heritage Diets

In smaller studies across countries of the global South, significant nutritional value has been observed in traditional, heritage diets. K.E Leblanc et al. comprehensively compiles a number of dietary assessment research papers to present potential alternatives to the 'Mediterranean' diet example.

Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula, a 'hot spot' of longevity underwent an investigation of the lifestyle habits of the local people. Research demonstrated high intakes of dietary fiber, suggesting adherence to a traditional diet of beans, fruits, and vegetables and low-processing. In fact, 82% of the Nicoya population reported eating black beans 1-3 times per day, no daily intake of red meat, and 74% consuming fruits,vegetables and tortillas 1-3 times a day. Similarly in Mexico, adherence to heritage diets meant both diet quality and food cost was lower in rural areas versus urban areas. (6)

In an assessment of dietary patterns within the Asian continent, a cross-sectional and multiethnic study identified a shared healthy eating pattern amongst Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures within Singapore, based on fruits, vegetables, whole grain bread, dairy, unsaturated cooking oils and more. Many diverse and healthy food traditions continue to exist in several East Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia and South Korea– all receiving high scores according to the Alternative Healthy Eating Index; suggesting a level of success in preserving the healthy components of traditional diets, despite high levels of sodium intake.

Additionally, South-East Asian nations such as that of Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia observed a high number of nuts and seeds intake, and high-intake of vegetables was observed within East Asia and Asia Pacific countries. High amounts of whole grains consumption were observed in South and Southeast Asian nations like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Malaysia and Myanmar (7) (8).

Adequate research on heritage diets within Africa remains sparse. However a study conducted within Tanzania published in 2025 featuring the Kilimanjaro Heritage Diet observed significant non-inflammatory benefits in their participants when consuming traditional cuisine. Comprised of green vegetables, plantains, legumes and tuber,whole grains and root and tuber crops such as cassava and taro, the heritage diet provided significant amounts of dietary fiber, non-inflammatory compounds improved the gut microbiome as well as metabolism (Temba et al.). Simultaneously, Weerasekara et al. identify that traditional food in Sri Lanka, consisting of indigenous cereals, tubers, green leaves, roots,

vegetables, fruit, animal fats and fish are linked with various benefits, especially protection from non-communicable diseases.

Thomas A. Reuter in his study of the endangered food system of Bali states that traditional food systems incorporate a vast body of experiential cultural knowledge surrounding food production that has evolved over long, extended periods of settlement that provides a diverse, balanced, healthy and complete food supply through traditional recipes. Regional and local food systems are hence essential repositories of cultural heritage, possessing incredibly valuable knowledge on food.and sustainable production.

Evidently, the global South possesses varied and nutritious eating habits. The global South and the history of its food systems– that is, the movement between agriculture and food production– proves and demonstrates a solution to sustainable and nutritious agricultural and dietary practices.

Consequences of Erasure and Resulting Impact: Diminishing Agrobiodiversity and Cultural Memory

The drawbacks in a diminishing traditional agricultural and dietary heritage are several. According to Weerasekara et al., several colonial and post-colonial effects have severely damaged Sri Lanka's biodiversity. Large forest areas were transformed into monocultures, and a gradual erosion of the land has taken place. Many traditional food varieties have been lost, and local fruit types have been dried out (10). Within Bali, large-scale cash crop plantations of clove, coffee, cacao and especially citrus have transformed arable land into widespread monocultures, reducing the crop diversity within the island.

It is also incredibly crucial to address the cultural endangerment that moving away from traditional diets implies. In a study conducted in Columbia addressing 'food fears' and the loss of culinary heritage, post-covid 19 health-consciousness and increased, stringent safety standards meant a distanced engagement with food heritage. The transformations under food modernity have resulted in cultural fragmentation, visible in increasingly homogenized diets and eating habits. The consequent results are the risk of losing traditional recipes and culinary heritage. Due to the demands of modern life, a limited and reduced amount of time can be allocated to traditional preparations, potentially restricting their consumption to gastronomic spaces outside the home. We risk losing important cultural practices, such as the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next with regards to culinary practices, which are often based upon oral traditions, family and community cohesiveness surrounding food, and also the radical disappearance of recipes and associated preparations. (Quintero-Angel 7, 8).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the marginalization of Global South dietary heritage is not incidental but structural. It is produced at the intersection of three interlocking systems that together determine what counts as nutritional knowledge, whose diets are legible to science, and whose food cultures are visible to the world. Scrinis's nutritionism, explains the governing epistemology and attitudes of Western nutrition science which reduces food to its measurable components and thus renders unrecognizable the cultural, ecological, and holistic dimensions in which the value of heritage diets resides. Entman's media framing, operating through decades of deficit-centered humanitarian imagery and crisis-driven development reporting, has produced a Western public for whom the Global South is a site of scarcity by definition. This condition of representation thus erases the possibility of recognizing its dietary abundance. Development and policy frameworks, designed within and for Global North contexts, impose decontextualized interventions onto food systems shaped by colonial histories, trade hegemonies, and socioeconomic conditions they were not built to, or purposely did not address, and in doing so, accelerate an erasure they claim to provide remedies to. Santos's concept of epistemicide names what these three systems produce collectively: the systematic destruction of non-Western knowledge, of which the displacement of Global South dietary heritage is one consequential and potentially irreversible instance.

Heritage diets across Latin America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa have been documented, where they have been studied at all, to offer nutritional outcomes comparable to those of the Mediterranean diet, within agricultural systems that are simultaneously more ecologically sustainable and more culturally integrated. The Kilimanjaro Heritage Diet, the dietary traditions of Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula, the mixed garden systems of Bali, the indigenous food heritage of Sri Lanka is evidence of what the current system is actively discarding. That this evidence base remains thin is itself an artifact of the asymmetry this paper has examined: research investment follows institutional recognition, and institutional recognition follows the representational frameworks that have already determined where value is likely to be found.

Addressing this requires intervention at each of

the three levels this paper has identified. Within nutrition science, the epistemological dominance of nutritionism must be challenged by research frameworks capable of assessing food systemically, and qualitatively It must account for cultural context, intergenerational knowledge, ecological integration, and community health outcomes that macronutrient and quantitative analysis cannot capture. Within media and development communication, the shift from deficit-centered to agency-centered representation of Global South food systems is not merely an ethical imperative but an epistemic one: audiences that cannot imagine the Global South as a site of abundance will not support the research, policy, or institutional change needed to protect it. Future policy frameworks addressing food security in Global South contexts must be developed through genuinely participatory processes that include local researchers, community knowledge holders, and indigenous agricultural practitioners as sources of input. Policy that does not begin from the structural realities of colonialism, trade dependency, and socioeconomic constraint will continue to generate the trade-offs and failures that the existing literature documents.

The stakes extend beyond the communities most immediately affected. As the climate crisis intensifies pressure on global food systems and the limitations of industrialized monoculture agriculture become increasingly visible, the ecological and nutritional knowledge preserved within traditional food systems represents a resource that a world under stress cannot afford to lose. The quantitative frameworks of modern nutrition science have no instrument for measuring what disappears when a heritage diet is displaced. That immeasurability is precisely the problem. What cannot be measured by the dominant framework will not be protected by it. The question of whose diets matter is therefore not only a question of cultural equity or nutritional diversity but it is a question of what knowledge survives, and what becomes permanently irretrievable.

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The Illusion of Healthy Food: A Critical Study of Food Labels and Consumer Trust

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the impact of food labelling design on consumer purchasing behaviour and health outcomes in India. Amidst rising post-pandemic concerns regarding deceptive marketing and a lack of transparency in packaged food communication, this study investigates how systemic design choices—including the use of technical jargon, small font sizes, and strategic visual hierarchy contribute to consumer disengagement and misinformed decision-making.

Utilising a mixed-method approach combining a structured survey, qualitative interviews, and comparative analysis of international labelling systems, this study identifies a significant trust-knowledge gap. While 50% of respondents rely on FSSAI certification as a primary health indicator, this certification frequently fails to reflect nutritional quality. Furthermore, 80% of participants reported cognitive overload due to information density, expressing a clear preference for colour-coded, front-of-pack (FOP) labelling and simplified language. Comparative analysis with international standards reveals that Indian labels systematically prioritise marketing objectives over functional readability. The paper concludes by proposing a framework for label enhancement centred on transparency and accessibility, advocating for regulatory and design reforms that enable consumers to make genuinely informed choices.

Keywords : *Food Labelling, Public Health, Nutritional Literacy, Consumer Awareness, Label Design*

INTRODUCTION

Food labelling occupies a critical position in the relationship between consumer behaviour, dietary patterns, and public health outcomes. Labels are designed to provide consumers with accurate information about nutritional values, ingredients, health claims, and other details that enable informed decision-making. However, in India, labels have increasingly functioned as instruments of persuasion rather than clarity. Rather than simplifying the communication of nutritional information, many brands employ technical jargon or present information in ways that overwhelm consumers, thereby limiting both understanding and trust.

This pattern has become increasingly visible in the

post-pandemic period. As awareness around food labels has grown, so has the sophistication of food marketing. Brands have adapted by deploying front-of-pack claims such as 'immunity-boosting,' 'no added sugar,' 'organic,' and 'low-calorie' that speak directly to heightened consumer anxieties about health. These claims are strategically positioned in maximum-salience locations, while the full nutritional picture remains buried in fine print. Before COVID-19, brands primarily communicated through emotional or aspirational messaging; the shift to health-oriented claims reflects a calculated response to changing consumer awareness rather than a genuine commitment to transparency.

This research argues that Indian food labels constitute an **'illusion of healthy eating.'** A system in which products are presented as nutritional and beneficial while structural design choices conceal information that contradicts this impression. The issue is not a matter of isolated product-level deception but of broader design and regulatory frameworks that prioritise commercial communication over consumer comprehension. Consumers believe they are exercising informed choice; the results presented in this paper suggest that label design systematically limits the conditions for such choice.

Rising rates of type-2 diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disease in India are closely linked to the consumption of ultra-processed foods that are marketed as healthy. According to the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) and the Indian Council of Medical Research's Dietary Guidelines for Indians, the average daily sodium intake in India is approximately 4,400 mg, more than double the WHO-recommended limit of 2,000 mg, much of which is attributable to packaged foods whose sodium content is inadequately communicated on their labels (NIN, n.d.).

This study is guided by three principal research questions. First, how does Indian consumers' understanding of food labels affect their purchasing and health-related decisions? Second, how clearly do consumers comprehend nutritional claims and front-of-pack information, and how do these interpretations shape label-reading habits, exploring the lived experiences of trust, misinterpretation, and disengagement? Third, what label enhancement frameworks and regulatory proposals would best improve transparency, clarity, and accessibility for Indian consumers?

By examining how Indian consumers interpret food labels, how trust is constructed through certifications and branding, and how label design influences comprehension, this study identifies food labelling reform as an urgent matter of both public health policy and design ethics.

Review of Literature

Food and beverage labelling has evolved significantly over the past two decades, driven by growing consumer demand for transparency and the parallel expansion of food marketing as a discipline. While consumers are now exposed to more nutritional data than at any previous point, the clarity and reliability of that data have arguably diminished. A synthesis of current research suggests that the primary obstacle to informed consumption is not a lack of consumer effort but a systemic design framework that prioritises marketability over functional readability.

Information Asymmetry and Market Failure

The economic dimension of food labelling is best understood through George Akerlof's (1970) theory of information asymmetry, developed in "The Market for Lemons." Akerlof demonstrated that when sellers possess substantially more information than buyers, markets fail to function equitably. In the food labelling context, this asymmetry is structural: brands know the precise composition of their products, the processing methods employed, and the gap between actual nutritional profiles and projected health images, while consumers know only what the label discloses.

Stiglitz and Weiss (1981) extended this framework by demonstrating that information asymmetry produces systemic market failures. Applied to food labelling, this explains why the problem is not limited to a few irresponsible brands. When an entire labelling system is designed to exploit the consumer's informational disadvantage, the market itself is structured against the consumer. Brands that label honestly face a competitive disadvantage alongside competitors making bold, unverified claims, a dynamic that, as Stiglitz and Weiss (1981) suggest, can only be reversed through regulatory intervention.

Cognitive Processing and the Psychology of Label Reading

Psychological frameworks illuminate why consumers are unable to compensate for information asymmetry through more careful reading. Annie Lang's (2000) Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP) holds that human cognitive systems have finite processing capacity. When a food label is dense, technical, and visually cluttered, the cognitive cost of reading it fully exceeds what most consumers, in a typical retail environment, will bear. This is not a failure of consumer diligence; it is a predictable feature of

human cognition that label design choices may systematically exploit.

This connects to Daniel Kahneman's (2011) dual-process framework of System 1 and System 2 thinking. System 1 processing is fast and automatic, responding to bright colours, bold text, and claims such as "Zero Sugar" or "High Protein." System 2 processing is slow and analytical, required to interpret a complex nutrition table. Indian food labels are designed to maximise System 1 engagement: bold health claims and certification logos trigger automatic positive associations, while the information required for System 2 evaluation is made as difficult as possible to access.

A specific psychological effect directly relevant to this study is the health halo effect, identified by Chandon and Wansink (2012) in their review "Does Food Marketing Need to Make Us Fat?" Their research demonstrated that when a label is presented as low-fat, low-calorie, or high-fibre, consumers may perceive an approximate 35% reduction in the product's actual calorie content. This halo operates subconsciously: a single positive health signal pre-frames the consumer's perception of the entire product, reducing critical scrutiny of other label information. The FSSAI certification logo functions as precisely this kind of halo in the Indian context, as the empirical data in this study confirms.

Kahneman and Tversk's (1979) Prospect Theory further demonstrates that people do not evaluate nutritional information rationally. A claim such as 'No Added Sugar' is psychologically more compelling than "Contains 12g of naturally occurring sugar per serving," even when both statements describe the same product. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) extend this through the concept of 'nudge' : the structural presentation of options can subconsciously shape decision-making. When bold health claims dominate the front of a pack and accurate nutritional detail is pushed to the back, the design quietly nudges consumers toward the commercial message.

Design Hierarchy, Semiotics, and Functional Readability

Every food label is a designed object, not merely a collection of information but a visual composition in which certain elements are made more prominent than others through choices of size, colour, contrast, and placement. Lidwell, Holden, and Butler (2010) established that visual hierarchy directs viewer attention in a specific sequence. The front/back structure of food packaging is a direct application of this principle: the front is the highest-hierarchy surface, and the back the lowest. This arrangement is a decision about which information the consumer will and will not engage with.

Roland Barthes' (1977) semiotic framework in Image-Music-Text distinguishes between denotative meaning (what an image or text literally states) and connotative meaning (what it implies or suggests). A food label operates on both levels simultaneously. Denotative content includes the ingredient list and nutritional table; connotative content is constructed through colour (green connoting naturalness), imagery (photographs of farms and fresh produce connoting unprocessed food), and language ('crafted,' 'artisanal,' "traditional recipe"). Barthes' framework reveals that connotative messages can carry more persuasive weight than denotative content, shaping consumer perception even when the ingredient list presents a more complex nutritional reality.

Schriver's (1997) research on document design introduces the concept of functional readability—the idea that a document's design determines whether its information is genuinely accessible to its intended audience. A label with a minimum 1 mm font (the current FSSAI standard), poor contrast, and densely packed text limits practical accessibility for consumers with mild visual impairment, those reading in poor retail lighting, and anyone over fifty. The design may thus limit consumer access to mandatory nutritional information even when that information is technically present on the packaging.

These frameworks collectively support this paper's central argument: the limitations of Indian food labelling constitute a structural failure—a system-level outcome produced by the interaction of market incentives, regulatory gaps, and design choices that prioritise commercial communication over consumer comprehension.

Ethics and Regulatory Responsibility

Philosophical frameworks provide additional analytical purchase. Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative (1785) holds that an action is moral only if one would universally endorse it. Applied to food packaging: if visual signifiers can be designed to contradict material reality, this treats consumers as a means to profit rather than as rational agents deserving accurate information. Aristotle's concept of the Golden Mean—the balance between two extremes, is equally instructive: ethical labelling provides exactly the right amount of information, neither too sparse to confuse nor too dense to overwhelm.

Friedrich Schiller's (1794) argument that aesthetics and ethics should form a closed circle is

directly applicable: the 'beauty' of a label—images of fresh farms and natural fruits—should reflect and reinforce the ethical reality of the product's composition. In much of the Indian market, this circle is broken. The label's aesthetic functions as a mask, and what Kahneman (2011) identifies as System 1 thinking is directed away from the product's actual composition.

The work of Dr. Siyi Shangguan (2019) in 'A Meta-analysis of Food Labelling Effects on Consumer Diet Behaviours and Industry Practices' provides quantitative evidence that labelling, when effectively designed, creates measurable shifts in consumer behaviour and can drive product reformulation. This finding reinforces the case for regulatory reform: better-designed labels do not merely inform consumers; they alter industry incentives.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews and a comparative analysis of international labelling systems. The quantitative component establishes the prevalence of particular interpretive patterns across a defined population; the qualitative component provides the experiential depth and contextual reasoning that survey data alone cannot capture. The integration of both components allows for a more robust analysis of the structural and behavioural dimensions of food label comprehension in India.

A structured survey was administered to 150 participants across India, with deliberate concentration in major metropolitan centres including Kolkata, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Delhi, Pune, Chennai, and Hyderabad. Residents in these locations have the highest exposure to packaged food products and premium health-claim branding, making them the most relevant population for this inquiry. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 years and were recruited through digital channels using purposive and snowball sampling methods.

Snowball sampling was selected due to the difficulty of accessing a representative national sample for a study of this nature; however, this method carries an inherent bias toward participants with existing social and digital networks, and its limitations are acknowledged accordingly (see Section 6). The survey combined Likert-scale rating questions with open-ended responses to assess how frequently participants read labels, how well they understood them, how much they trusted certifications, and what changes they would prefer.

The sample composition was as follows: 60% of participants fell within the 18–25 age bracket, with the remaining 40% aged 26 and above. In terms of educational attainment, 50.5% held undergraduate degrees and 40% had completed postgraduate studies. Ninety percent were comfortable reading in English. 62% reported purchasing packaged food products several times a week, confirming regular engagement with the product category under examination.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with a small group of Indian consumers currently residing abroad in countries including Germany, Australia, France, the Philippines, the UAE, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These participants were selected because their lived experience of both Indian and foreign labelling systems enables a direct, first-hand comparative perspective that secondary sources cannot replicate.

Interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were reviewed for recurring patterns, and themes were identified inductively from participant accounts. Three principal themes emerged: regulatory distrust, cognitive overload, and cross-cultural comparison of label clarity. These themes were subsequently mapped against the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier.

Germany, France, and Singapore were selected as comparative cases because each has implemented a demonstrably more consumer-oriented labelling system, and because interview participants with direct experience of living in these countries provided substantive first-hand accounts of label comprehension. The goal of this comparison is not to argue that India should replicate these systems wholesale but to demonstrate that clearer and more honest labelling is achievable and that its absence in India reflects a policy choice rather than a practical limitation.

Trust, Certification, and the FSSAI Halo

A dominant finding across both quantitative and qualitative data is the prevalence of misplaced trust in certification as a proxy for nutritional quality. Approximately 50% of survey participants reported higher trust in products carrying the FSSAI certification logo; however, the data indicate that this trust is not grounded in an accurate understanding of what the certification guarantees. FSSAI certification ensures basic safety and regulatory compliance; it does not assess or validate nutritional quality. This pattern is consistent with what Chandon and Wansink (2012) describe as the health halo effect: the logo generates a generalised sense of safety and

quality that the certification's actual regulatory scope does not justify.

This dynamic is further reinforced by the trust heuristics identified in consumer psychology. When shopping under time pressure, consumers rely on visible signals like logos, bold claims, familiar brand names, rather than undertaking systematic label evaluation. The FSSAI logo functions as one such heuristic: its presence reduces the perceived need for further scrutiny, which may explain the partial comprehension reported even among participants who described themselves as label readers.

A case that illustrates this pattern at its most transparent is Kissan Tomato Ketchup, a widely trusted product bearing FSSAI certification whose primary ingredient—as listed on the back panel—is sugar rather than tomato. This data point suggests that consumers may be relying on brand familiarity and certification status rather than engaging with ingredient composition. Furthermore, a 2025 regulatory development further revealed the limits of current certification frameworks: the FSSAI's crackdown on the term '100%' previously used by brands to imply natural or unprocessed composition exposed a significant definitional gap that had allowed misleading claims to operate within the technical boundaries of existing regulations.

Cognitive Overload and Disengagement

Eighty percent of survey participants reported experiencing cognitive overload when engaging with food labels, a finding consistent with the predictions of Lang's (2000) LC4MP model. The primary drivers of this overload were identified as excessive information density, small font sizes (including the FSSAI minimum standard of 1mm, which participants frequently described as illegible), and the use of technical and scientific terminology for ingredients. Several respondents indicated that they had ceased reading labels altogether due to perceived complexity, a response that illustrates the paradox of information overload: increasing the amount of information available can reduce consumer awareness rather than enhance it.

This pattern has a direct commercial implication. Brands may leverage the predictability of cognitive fatigue by employing scientific nomenclature for common ingredients—listing sucrose, glucose syrup, and high-fructose corn syrup separately to fragment the visible quantity of added sugar or using chemical names for palm oil and colouring agents while displaying simplified health claims in bold text on the front of the pack. This constitutes what Silayoi and Speece (2004) describe as an assumption embedded in label design: that consumers will make decisions based on front-of-pack claims without engaging with the reverse.

A further structural mechanism that limits ingredient transparency is the compound ingredient provision in the FSSAI's 2020 regulations, which permits brands to list complex additives under a single name without disclosing sub-ingredients, provided the compound ingredient constitutes less than 5% of the product by weight (and does not contain allergens). This provision allows ingredients such as palm oil to be concealed within terms like "chocolate coating," making accurate comprehension of the ingredient list structurally difficult even for attentive consumers.

Selective Visibility and Front-of-Pack Design

The data reveals a consistent pattern of selective visibility in Indian food labelling design. Favourable health claims are positioned in maximum-salience locations on the front panel, in large, high-contrast typography. Ingredient lists and detailed nutritional data are positioned on the back, in minimum font sizes, with low contrast relative to the background. This arrangement reflects a deliberate application of visual hierarchy principles, as described by Lidwell, Holden, and Butler (2010), to direct consumer attention away from information that might qualify or contradict the front-of-pack message.

The example of a bread packet labelled "Zero Maida" illustrates this pattern. The claim is prominently displayed and aligns with contemporary health narratives positioning refined flour as harmful. An examination of the ingredient list, however, may reveal "Refined Wheat Flour (Maida)" as a primary ingredient. This is a direct contradiction that is structurally less accessible to the consumer. This is not an isolated instance; it reflects a broader design logic in which front-of-pack claims create strong first impressions while the full nutritional reality is positioned to minimise engagement.

The emergence of "absence claims" like 'No Maida,' 'No Added Sugar,' 'No Preservatives' as a dominant marketing register across product categories is a related finding. This shift from positive attribute claims to avoidance framing reflects both changing consumer anxieties and the well-documented psychological asymmetry identified by Kahneman and Tversky (1979): people respond more strongly to the prospect of avoiding harm than to the promise of gaining nutritional benefit. The prevalence of this framing strategy suggests that brands are systematically adapting to psychological vulnerabilities rather than to nutritional imperatives.

Survey Data: Thematic Synthesis

Rather than treating the survey's quantitative outputs as isolated statistics, the data are most productively interpreted as evidence of three interlocking patterns. The first is the trust-knowledge gap: the discrepancy between consumers' confidence in certifications and their actual understanding of what those certifications guarantee. The second is the engagement-comprehension disparity: even participants who described themselves as regular label readers demonstrated partial rather than complete comprehension, suggesting that engagement with labels does not reliably produce accurate understanding. The third is the preference for simplified systems: a substantial proportion of respondents indicated that a Nutri-Score-type system, comparable to those implemented in Singapore and Germany, would improve their ability to make informed decisions at the point of purchase.

Global Comparisons: International Labelling Standards

The challenges associated with food labelling in India are not unique in their origins, but the regulatory and design responses vary significantly across jurisdictions. The following comparative analysis draws on both qualitative interview data and secondary research to examine how Germany, France, and Singapore have addressed the legibility, accuracy, and consumer accessibility of food labelling.

Label Feature	India	Germany / EU	Singapore
Front-of-pack rating	None; FSSAI logo only	Nutri-Score (A–E, colour-coded)	Nutri-Grade (A–D), mandatory for drinks
Font size rules	Minimum 1mm — often illegible	Minimum 1.2mm enforced	Clearly legible; strictly enforced
Health claim verification	Self-declared; rarely verified	Only EU-approved claims permitted	Only government-approved claims allowed
Sugar/sodium warnings	Not required	Mandatory for high-sugar drinks	Mandatory; D-grade products prohibited from advertising
Hidden ingredients	Sub-ingredients omitted if under 5%	Full ingredient breakdown required	Full disclosure enforced
Freshness rules	Best-before date required; inconsistently monitored	Fresh products packed within 48 hours of sale	Strict freshness windows enforced

Table 1: India vs. International Labelling Systems

Interview data from participants residing in Germany indicate that packaging design in that context prioritises legibility and comprehensiveness, using readable font sizes, clear compositional imagery, and standardised colour-coding. Singapore's Nutri-Grade system, made mandatory for pre-packaged drinks in 2022, provides a single-letter grade that enables rapid assessment of nutritional quality without requiring consumers to interpret complex numerical data. Both systems embody the principle that simplified, interpretive front-of-pack labels reduce the cognitive burden of decision-making without sacrificing informational accuracy.

The absence of comparable systems in India reflects not an impossibility of implementation but a configuration of regulatory priorities, industry influence, and design conventions that have consistently favoured marketing communication over consumer comprehension. The comparison demonstrates that India's current labelling framework is the result of policy choices that could be revised.

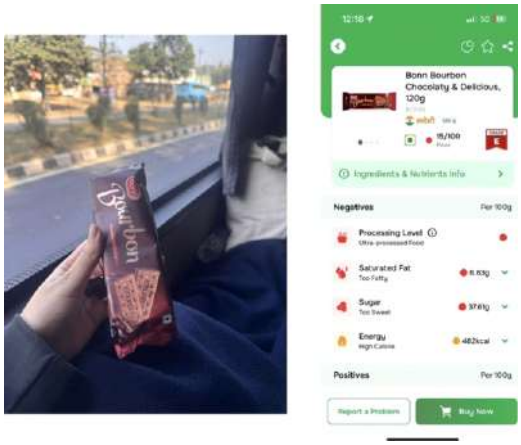
Health, Behaviour, and Inequality

The structural limitations of Indian food labelling have direct and measurable consequences for public health. In a fast-paced consumer environment where packaged food is the primary source of nutrition for a growing proportion of the urban population, the label is often the sole basis on which purchasing decisions are made. The systematic misrepresentation of nutritional quality on these labels therefore contributes to patterns of consumption that are consequential for long-term health.

The public health implications are compounded by inequality. Consumers with higher levels of education or nutritional literacy may be better positioned to interpret complex labels or to recognise discrepancies between front-of-pack claims and ingredient composition. Those with lower literacy levels, or those making decisions under time or financial constraint are likely to rely more heavily on simplified cues—precisely the cues most susceptible to the halo effects and selective visibility. The products whose labels most accurately represent their nutritional content are not consistently the most affordable or the most accessible.

Emerging digital tools offer a partial mitigation. Applications such as *Truthin*, developed by Revant Himatsinghka, allow consumers to scan products and receive simplified nutritional assessments, effectively translating complex label data into accessible formats at the point of purchase. Such tools

may serve as a complementary mechanism within broader regulatory frameworks. However, digital access itself is unequally distributed; such tools should therefore be understood as supplements to, rather than substitutes for, structural regulatory reform.



Rethinking Labels: Framework for Reform

Addressing the structural limitations of Indian food labelling requires intervention at the levels of regulation, design, and consumer education. The following recommendations are grounded in the empirical findings of this study and informed by the international comparisons discussed in Section 5.

The most consequential regulatory reform would be the introduction of a mandatory, simplified front-of-pack labelling system, a colour-coded nutritional grade or warning system equivalent to the Nutri-Score or Nutri-Grade models, that provides at-a-glance nutritional assessment without requiring consumers to interpret detailed numerical data. The effectiveness of such systems in modifying consumer behaviour and driving product reformulation has been documented by Shangguan (2019) in "A meta-analysis of food labelling effects on consumer diet behaviours and industry practices" and supported by the preference data in this study's survey.

Regulatory guidelines should additionally mandate that all health and nutritional claims—including terms such as 'natural,' 'healthy,' and 'immunity-boosting'—require pre-authorisation from FSSAI based on documented scientific evidence. The current framework, in which such claims are largely self-declared and inconsistently enforced, creates structural incentives for misleading communication. Mandatory pre-authorisation would alter these incentives at the systemic level.

Design standards should require minimum font sizes sufficient for legibility in standard retail lighting conditions, contrast ratios adequate for consumers with mild visual impairment, and the placement of mandatory nutritional information on the principal display panel (FOP) rather than exclusively on the reverse (BOP). The compound ingredient provision should be revised to require full sub-ingredient disclosure regardless of proportional weight, removing a structural mechanism for concealment.

These regulatory and design changes should be complemented by investment in consumer education, particularly for rural and lower-literacy populations currently underserved by existing labelling frameworks. The goal is not to eliminate the complexity inherent in nutritional information but to present that information in ways that align with how people actually process and act on data in real-world purchasing environments.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that qualify the generalisability of its findings. The survey sample, while geographically distributed across major Indian cities, was concentrated in metropolitan areas among participants with relatively high levels of education and English-language literacy. This demographic profile does not reflect the full diversity of Indian consumers, and the findings cannot be straightforwardly generalised to rural populations, non-English speakers, or those with lower formal education i.e., groups that may face greater challenges in navigating complex label information.

A second limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported data. Survey and interview responses reflect what participants believe they do—how frequently they read labels, how well they understand them—rather than direct behavioural observation. As the theoretical literature discussed in Section 2 indicates, there is often a significant gap between perceived and actual behaviour, particularly in the domain of label engagement.

The use of snowball sampling introduces a further bias: participants were recruited through existing social and digital networks, which likely over-represents populations with certain demographic characteristics, including digital literacy and health awareness. This limits the ability to draw conclusions about population-level patterns.

Finally, the qualitative interview sample, while analytically valuable, was small in scale. International comparisons are based in part on the lived experiences of interview participants and secondary sources rather than systematic policy analysis or empirical testing of foreign labelling

systems. While these comparisons are useful for illustrative purposes, they may not capture the full regulatory complexity of the systems discussed.

Conclusion

The central contribution of this paper is the articulation and empirical grounding of what may be termed a structural failure in Indian food labelling. A system-level outcome in which confusion about nutritional content is not incidental but is produced through the interaction of market incentives, regulatory gaps, and design choices that consistently prioritise commercial communication over consumer comprehension. Consumers are expected to make informed decisions; the evidence presented here suggests that the design of the information environment systematically limits the conditions under which such decisions are possible.

This finding has specific implications for policy. Regulatory bodies, and specifically FSSAI, should consider the introduction of mandatory front-of-pack nutritional rating systems, the pre-authorisation of all health and nutritional claims, and the revision of design standards to ensure functional legibility for a diverse consumer population. These reforms are not novel in their conception, the international evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates their feasibility and effectiveness, but their adoption in India has been deferred in favour of self-regulatory frameworks that demonstrably fail to protect consumer interests.

This study also identifies directions for future research. Further inquiry should examine how food labelling is interpreted by rural consumer populations, who are currently absent from the empirical literature and may experience the limitations of existing frameworks most acutely. Longitudinal research examining changes in label literacy over time, and empirical studies assessing the behavioural effects of front-of-pack labelling once implemented in India, would substantially advance understanding in this domain. The question for India is not whether better labelling is possible; the international evidence confirms that it is, but whether the political and institutional will exists to implement it.

Ethical labelling is not merely a design consideration. It is a matter of public health, consumer rights, and institutional responsibility. Reforming India's food labelling framework is both urgent and long overdue.

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Continuing Bonds and Culinary Practices: Reconstructing the Self in Banana Yoshimoto's Works

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the process of grieving portrayed in Japanese author Banana Yoshimoto's works published in the 2000s including 'Dead End Memories', 'Moshi Moshi', and 'The Lake'. The study aims to establish that Yoshimoto's works not only illustrate the embodied; continuing nature of grief but also highlights the role of food and culinary practices in reinforcing social bonds that challenge the abstract and Western concepts of mourning. By employing qualitative methods like close reading, textual and thematic analysis, the study draws on Western and Eastern bereavement frameworks, including Grief-Work, Continuing Bonds and Meaning Reconstruction. This analysis of Yoshimoto's texts explores how food is not merely symbolic but a social tool which helps the mourner navigate through grief. This study contributes to this minimal research area and also challenges dominant discourses of grief. The paper aims to contribute to a greater recognition of the cross-cultural relationship between mourning and social relationships to offer a new insight into grief as a continuing and socially mediated process.

Keywords : *Banana Yoshimoto, grief, continuing bonds, social bonds, food and culinary practices, reconstruction*

INTRODUCTION

Grief is an emotional response to loss. In the field of psychoanalytical research, scholars have proposed multiple models of grief over the years, starting with Sigmund Freud in 1917, who proposed that successful mourning should end with the "decathecting" or cutting off of emotional bonds with the deceased. This theory of "grief work" (Rothaupt and Becker 6) suggested that in order to complete mourning, the bereaved individual should confront the reality of the loss and "work" through grief in order to resolve it. In subsequent models, including in the dominant Kubler Ross's Stage Grief Model, grief continued to be portrayed as a process through which the individual must work through in order to successfully "resolve" it.

However, recent theorists pointed out the isolating nature of grief depicted through these models and proposed alternative grief theories. "The model of grief that began with Freud is based on a view of the world that stresses how separate people are from each other." (Silverman and Klass 14). Silverman and Nickman argue that the bereaved individuals rather than cutting off bonds with the deceased, continue to "hold the deceased in loving memory for long periods, often forever, and that maintaining an inner representation of the deceased is normal rather than abnormal. (349) Bonds can be continued by engaging in conversations about the deceased, reminiscing their memories, carrying out bereavement rituals or by keeping objects that remind us of them. (Silverman and Nickman 350) Recent theories further suggest that the "central process in grieving" is reconstructing meaning after a loss (Neimeyer 4) in contrast to the Freudian argument. Attig emphasizes that while grieving, the bereaved individual must "relearn" their "relationships with those who died" (40). The process of grieving therefore becomes not about "completing" mourning but rather about finding new meaning, purpose and direction in one's life. (43) A significant point to note here is that this process of reconstructing meaning is social. It "is rarely done in isolation and may involve active engagement with fellow mourners and other survivors." (Hagman 24). Therefore, through these interactions with others which "profoundly affect our individual relearning" (Attig 44) we depend on others and receive support throughout this process. "When people dine together, they engage in conversations, share experiences, and create a sense of togetherness that can enhance relationship quality" (Shuaibu et al 233). Relationships ultimately contribute to positive mental health and emotional expression which can further lead to healing, reconstruction of the self after loss and finding new purpose and meaning in the bereaved individual's life. This study focuses on Yoshimoto's works which were published in the 2000s, including 'Dead-End Memories', a short story collection published originally in Japanese in 2003 and translated to English in 2022, 'Moshi Moshi', a novel published in 2010 and translated in 2016 and 'The Lake', another novel published in 2005 and translated in 2011. This study situates Yoshimoto's work within psychological, cultural and social frameworks. Through qualitative analysis, it argues that grieving is a process of continuing bonds, which is not an isolating experience but is rather achieved with the support of interpersonal relations, which are often reinforced through food and culinary practices, to find new meanings and purpose in life after a loss. This paper argues that Yoshimoto reconfigures grief as a socially mediated, ongoing process, in which culinary practices function not merely as symbols but as active mechanisms of relational reconstruction. It draws on the Continuing Bonds theory proposed by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, Robert Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Theory. The study also incorporates food and social theories to examine the impact cooking and eating food with others have on strengthening interpersonal relationships. The framework also adopts the Japanese bereavement culture to examine its influence on culinary experiences and mourning rituals. This argument is developed through an analysis of continuing bonds, culinary practices, and cultural frameworks in Yoshimoto's fiction.

Rethinking Grief: Embodied Memory and Continuing Bonds

The dominant Freudian view encourages the cutting off of emotional bonds with the deceased, labelling a continuing bond as pathological. In Yoshimoto's stories, there is a pattern of characters that tend to reject Freud's traditional arc of grieving (Rothaupt and Becker 6).

The characters learn to live with the grief, making it a central part of their lives and continuing their relationship with the deceased. Silverman and Nickman argue that when a person is deceased, the bereaved individual often relies "on dreams, memories, conversations about them, and cherished objects that remind us of them" to maintain a continuing bond. (350)

In the short story 'House of Ghosts' in Dead-End Memories, the protagonist Secchan is seen to learn and pass down her dead grandmother's recipes in her restaurant. "...and Mom and I were sitting at the counter eating our staff meal of crab pilaf and miso soup. The soup was Grandma's own recipe. If someone had told me that I'd been put on this earth solely to pass down the taste of this miso soup to future generations, I wouldn't have minded one bit." (Yoshimoto 14)

This suggests that she tries to maintain an ongoing bond with the deceased by engaging in activities that honour their memory and by reintegrating them to her everyday life. In the short story Mama, the protagonist recalls her deceased mother's memories with whom she never had a good relationship. Despite her grandparents who raised her, warning her about her mother, she tries to recall her memories of her mother. "I remember my mother crying after my dad died, and me crying with her. I remember her taking me gently into her arms, putting her cheek on mine, and sleeping next to me and holding my hand. I know she had pale skin, a high voice, and a soft figure

with large hips. I remember her singing lullabies, and us dancing and singing along together to children's programs on TV." (Yoshimoto 62)

Similarly in the short story 'Not Warm at All', one of the protagonists, Makoto, is seen to constantly cherish the memories with the deceased Mitsuyo, often thinking about him and keeping his memory alive. "I remember how Makoto's sweaty hand, small and soft, would slowly dry out as I held it in mine. I felt like it was my duty to keep him safe." (Yoshimoto 75) The narrative further shows how even after Makoto's passing, Mitsuyo continued to recall her bond sweetly rather than taking efforts to stop thinking about her friend.

In the short story 'Dead-End Memories', as Mimi grieves the loss of her fiance, Takanashi, she continues to recall memories of him which consciously allows her to continue their bond while grieving for the loss. Her simple experiences of getting into a car after the loss invokes multiple memories of Takanashi, evoking pain. "I got into the car I'd only ever ridden in with Takanashi. Immediately, I was beset by more memories: the view from the passenger seat, the feel of the seat belt, the sweep of the window . . . "(Yoshimoto 118) The instance demonstrates how grief continues to seep into the little markers of everyday life. Through memory embedded environments, Takanashi remains alive in her reality. Yoshimoto's narratives are seen to illustrate a pattern of how grief is an embodied experience that is not really dissolved but rather remains an integral part of a person's life even after the loss.

Another way in which bonds are "continued" is by cherishing objects linking to the deceased as depicted in the novel *The Lake*. In contrast to the Freudian theory rejecting people with such experiences, Yoshimoto illustrates how her protagonists often reinforce their relationship with the deceased with the way they use "linking objects" as phrased by Dennis Klass. (81)

In the story, we see how one of the protagonists Nakajima, who had adored his mother, continued to cry every time he talked about her after she died. (Yoshimoto 17) He also clings to a rack while he sleeps which he considers as a "memento" of his mother. (Yoshimoto 70) This rack serves as the linking object, which serves as a tangible extension of the deceased, showing how the object becomes a site of memory, recovery, comfort and continuity during grief.

The continuing bonds theory establishes that "having an object belonging to the deceased was an important means" for the bereaved individual to continue an ongoing relationship with the deceased. "It refers to an aspect of the relationship or an object from that relationship that keeps the mourner living in the past." In the story we notice Nakajima reinforce this idea when he says that he sleeps with it under his arm whenever he gets the feeling that he is going to have a bad dream. (Yoshimoto 70) "I just held on to it because it's something she always liked, and she took good care of it. (Yoshimoto 70) The narrative illustrates how Nakajima tends to withdraw from dominant expectations of grief and chooses to cherish the object and hold on to it just because it is something that reminds him of her. Taken together, these examples illustrate that grief in Yoshimoto's narratives is sustained through embodied memory and material continuities. However, these continuing bonds do not remain confined to internal or symbolic processes;they extend outward into social life. It is through everyday practices - particularly those involving food - that these bonds become shared, enacted, and transformed.

Food As a Social Mediator

Yoshimoto's narratives demonstrate that food functions as a social mediator, initiating and shaping interpersonal relationships. Acts of eating together creates spaces for conversation, emotional exchange, and mutual recognition, allowing individuals to move out of the isolation often associated with grief. Food is not just symbolic but functions to bring social interaction which ultimately allows the individual to find life's purpose and meaning. In Yoshimoto's work, food is seen to play a significant role in initiating new relationships among the characters. The very act of eating together, which involves the sharing of stories, brings about social interaction and fosters social bonding (Woolley and Lim 1). In the story *House of Ghosts,* which is the first story of the collection, Yoshimoto illustrates how the protagonists initiate and reinforce their social bond through shared meals. The story begins with the protagonist Secchan, offering Iwakura a hot pot to express her gratitude. Iwakura however invites her to his apartment saying "eating alone isn't fun" (Yoshimoto 3). After this initial meeting, they begin to "chat or eat lunch together" whenever they see each other on their college campus (Yoshimoto 4). Similarly in the story *Dead-End Memories*, the protagonists begin their relationship with shared meals reflecting how the experience of dining together initiates conversations between each other, strengthening the bond reinforcing the social impact of food and culinary experiences. In the story, the protagonist Mimi sits by the park with her new acquaintance and co-worker Nishiyama having a picnic. Though they are not close in the beginning of the story we see how while munching on "fries, hot

dogs, coffee and dessert" they engage in deep conversations about what happiness means to each other (Yoshimoto 168, 169). These narratives reinforce how social interactions are initiated by food and the culinary experiences. In this sense, food is not merely a background element but a structuring condition for social interaction: it creates the context in which relationships emerge, develop, and acquire emotional significance.

Once initiated, even "the manner of serving and consuming food plays a role in building social bonds (Woolley and Lim 4). This is seen evidently in *Tomo-chan's Happiness,* when the protagonist feels "repulsed" by the way her ex-boyfriend ate his food. "He doesn't respect it, she thought. Tomo-chan preferred to take her time when she ate, and the way he did it- as though he was shoveling the food into a roaring void-made her shudder" (Yoshimoto 149). This instance reinforces how similar food preferences serve as factors in building social relationships.

Other than the style of eating food, even food preferences which "reflect personal tastes and values" have an effect on interpersonal relationships. "People tend to gravitate toward those with similar food preferences" (Shuaibu et al. 233) as seen in the short story *Mama.* In the narrative, the protagonist, Matsuoka mentions that she and her boyfriend "worked better than [she'd] expected once [they] lived together." She attributes one of its reasons to the fact that they had "similar food preferences" (Yoshimoto 79, 80). Yoshimoto's narratives also show how dining together, engaging in conversation allows the characters to strengthen their relationship quality and become closer to each other. In the short story *House of Ghosts*, Iwakura and Secchan gradually grow more comfortable with each other through their repeated meetings at Iwakura's apartment where they cook and share a meal. Even the process of buying and cooking food strengthens the bond between the characters in the stories. Such activities involve collaboration and cooperation, which in turn reinforces interpersonal relations (Shuaibu et al. 234). In addition to qualitative data, even empirical studies indicate that cooking can increase emotional resilience, and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Chen et al. 6), as shown in the case of Secchan and Iwakura. Through regular dinner dates and cooking together, the narrative shows how they get closer to each other. During one such dinner, Secchan reflects, "We were sitting across from each other at a kotatsu, steadily putting away a cake roll and talking like this as though it were the most normal thing in the world. We seemed like an old couple ourselves" (Yoshimoto 16).

In *House of Ghosts,* Secchan and Iwakura are also seen too often shop together for ingredients before cooking a meal (Yoshimoto 28, 40). This gradual development in the story suggests a reinforcement of the idea of how even the act of doing such chores also adds to creating ease around each other and building their bond. While cooking meals, they talk about "different things", offering support to each other throughout their internal struggles and loneliness (Yoshimoto 29).

The very act of eating together, which involves the sharing of stories, is seen to foster social interaction and social bonding (Woolley and Lim 1) between the people involved. Yoshimoto illustrates how Yoshie and her mother cook each other's food, including riceballs, ratatouille and so on which quietly strengthened their bond. "We'd pick at these and watch morning TV, and chat a little. Things that had nothing to do with us being mother and daughter, like "Do you think this is a little too salty for breakfast? —I agree, it might go better with wine." (Yoshimoto 40) Across Yoshimoto's narratives, each of the bereaved individual's interpersonal relationships are strengthened through food or cooking.

Woolley and Lim's argument that even "the manner of serving and consuming food plays a role in building social bonds (4) is illustrated in the way some of Yoshimoto's characters formed relationships with another character. For instance, Yoshie Yoshie notices Shintani-kun at the bistro and feels attracted to the way in which he ate his food. "Each time Shintani-kun came to the bistro, I observed him, trying to figure out exactly what I found so compelling in the way he ate. I held the feeling close to my chest, a small pleasure to cradle." (Yoshimoto 58) She explains that she liked the way he always put down his book the minute the food arrived and also how he said Itadakimasu, quietly, before he started eating (Yoshimoto 59), reinforcing the fact that the manner of consuming food plays an important role in the social bonds an individual makes. In the novel *The Lake*, Chihiro cooked new varieties of dishes including fried rice with pineapple and ham, ham and steak, steamed rice with ham, and so on for Nakajima, which offered a space for eating together and talking about things, ultimately building their relationship. "It felt as though we were imitating some sort of lifestyle we didn't really know anything about, playing at being a happy family. Neither of us took these moments for granted, and they made us truly content." (Yoshimoto 74) Yoshimoto's narratives not only demonstrate how food initiates and structures social bonds, they also go further. They show how culinary practices do not simply connect individuals - they also participate in

reshaping the grieving subject's sense of self and purpose.

Food as Transformative Practice: Healing and Reconstruction

Beyond facilitating social interaction, Yoshimoto's narratives position food and culinary practices as transformative processes that enable the reconstruction of the self after loss. Through cooking, eating, and serving others, grief is not resolved but reconfigured into new forms of meaning and purpose. This is depicted during the instance when Yoshie and her mother, unable to eat anything after her father's death, decide to go together to get shave ice at Les Liens. The narrative shows how they both feel hungry all over again for the first time since the funeral. "We'd both lost weight and become a little unsteady, but whenever we went to the bistro, we managed to work through the menu like a happy mother and child." (Yoshimoto 38) This narrative is suggestive of how food tends to serve as a healing potent.

Food is seen to possess the "power and complexity" to allow changes in the social life as well as in finding meaning in the bereaved individual's life. (Daugherty, Staat and Rachford 47) At the end of the story House of Ghosts, Secchan recognises that her true purpose in life is to serve meals to the community (Yoshimoto 43). She realises this after she cooks omurice and pork curry as an offering for the spirits of an old couple in Iwakura's house (Yoshimoto 42) which reinforces that food and culinary experiences serve as significant markers of self identity, and social relationships which gradually and ultimately offer the bereaved individual healing and recovery after a loss. In Moshi Moshi, Yoshimoto depicts how the culinary and food functions as a tool for Yoshie to reconstruct the meaning of the social world around her after her father's loss. She takes up a job at a restaurant and keeps herself busy all the time. She explains how her busy days at the bistro made her head spin, always bustling with work. Her experience of working at the restaurant filled her with a different kind of joy which helped her find her purpose. Yoshie's engagement with culinary labour transforms grief into a productive and relational practice, through which she reconstructs both her sense of self and her place within a social world. "I felt joy. Working at the bistro…I desperately wanted all of this happiness to stay, just the way it was." (Yoshimoto 90)

Yoshimoto's narratives therefore align with Neimeyer's claim of reconstructing meaning after a loss. Yoshie realises that she wants to work permanently at a bistro, and even makes a deal with Michiyo-san, the owner of the bistro, to join her restaurant as a full-time partner. (Yoshimoto 105) Therefore the culinary experience gives her a new realization about the deeper function of cooking. "...it also inspired a more constructive desire to cook things that even people who didn't eat that well, like Dad, would enjoy. To create a space that could nourish and empower people just by their being in it, and make them think maybe eating wasn't so bad after all." (Yoshimoto 40) Unlike memory, which sustains a relationship with the past, culinary practices are inherently oriented toward the present and future. They are repetitive, embodied, and communal acts that allow the grieving individual to re-enter social life while simultaneously reshaping their identity within it.

Food, therefore, operates not only as a medium of connection but as a mechanism of transformation, through which grief is integrated into an ongoing process of self-reconstruction.

Cultural Mediation: Between Collective Ritual and Individual Reconstruction

Yoshimoto's treatment of grief is also shaped by cultural frameworks, particularly Japanese bereavement practices that emphasise ongoing relationships with the dead. However, her narratives do not simply reproduce these traditions; they rework them within a contemporary context marked by increasing individualism. Klass explains that the Japanese believe the dead live amongst the living as spirits for about 35 to 50 years, in contrast to the Western belief of the soul going to either Heaven or Hell immediately after death (59). This cultural belief produces a sense of social obligation to the dead which is reflected in their ancestor worship, festivals and rituals including offering food to the dead (Iwasaka and Toelken 19, 20) which serves as a "powerful way to connect people across generations and backgrounds" (Shuaibu et al. 233)

In Yoshimoto's narratives the rituals and bereavement culture in Japan serve as a deeper pathway for the bereaved individuals to "continue" emotional bond with the deceased rather than cut them off like Freud suggests. For instance, in the story House of Ghosts, Secchan, influenced by the mourning ritual of offering food to the dead, makes a dish as an offering. She realises that serving food has much more depth than she could fathom after which she tells Iwakura towards the end of the story, "Once we settle in, I'm thinking of starting a delivery service for old folks living alone in the neighbourhood. Put together a cheap omurice bento or something" (Yoshimoto 56). However, though the Japanese narrative aligns with the continuing claim of grief, the influence of Western grief models cannot be completely neglected. In a research Christene

Valentine conducted in 2010, she concluded that in the Japanese contemporary context, "individualism" and "personal choice" have gained ground in a bereavement culture that "emphasizes social solidarity and promotes continuing mutual obligations between the living and dead family members." (Valentine 2) This is depicted when Yoshie shows disbelief in spirits of the dead after her mother claims she sees her dead father. "Mom said suddenly, almost as an afterthought, "I can't stay at home because of Dad's ghost." "You're joking," I said. "I swear. If I wake up while it's still dark he'll be sleeping on the other side of the bed as usual, or I'll look over and see him sitting on the sofa," she said."Mom, have you lost your mind to grief?" I said. "(Yoshimoto 28) Yoshimoto's narrative agrees partially with Valentine's claim as Yoshie chooses not to believe in the beliefs of spirits or the Japanese bereavement rituals at the beginning of the story. Later on, Yoshie begins to experience and see her father's spirit in her dreams. She interprets her dreams as an act in which her father is trying to reach her, to communicate some message. Though she gradually develops her belief in spirits. Valentine's research suggested that most individuals in Japanese contemporary society "rarely follow blindly the dictates of culture, but rather redefine, revise, or reject these to produce their own versions of established practice." (30) Yoshie is seen to "redefine" this established practice. Though she doesn't believe blindly, she later seeks to do anything she can for the spirits to cross to the afterlife. " I didn't know anything about how souls were supposed to leave this world and reach the afterlife, or about offering prayers and ceremonies so the dead could rest in peace. Nor was I interested… But I knew I had to do something, that I didn't want Dad to be trapped in that place." (Yoshimoto 89) Her interest in carrying out the bereavement ritual evolves from an individualistic motive reflecting a shift emphasis from social debt to individual recovery which does not align fully with the Japanese bereavement culture. The narrative shows a deviation from the traditional influence of rituals in mourning, placing a direct emphasis on the individual. In the narrative Yoshimoto illustrates how Yoshie, in contrast to her elder relatives, is initially more concerned with her recovery than dealing with the mourning practices. She later redefines the meaning associated with the ritual and for the sake of her betterment, which is to stop seeing her deceased father in her dreams, (Yoshimoto 90) decides to follow the ritual, which ultimately allows her to lead an ongoing attachment with her father. When Yoshie seeks Shintani-kun's help in getting rid of her haunting dreams of her dad, he advises her to get the place cleansed. Though she refuses to, citing her disbelief in such rituals, he tries to persuade her to do it for her own sake. "Remember, rituals are more important than we think. Not for the dead, but I think it's the best way to help ourselves accept what happened, and draw a line under it." (Yoshimoto 93)

At the end of the novel, she finally decides to visit her father's grave along with her friend. She takes the talismans Shintani-kun gave her to help her with the process and buries them next to the grave, along with her father's old phone. She also sprinkles salt given by her friend over the grave hoping that it cleanses the place and offers the spirit peace. (Yoshimoto 127) Rather than presenting a purely collectivist model of mourning, Yoshimoto's texts reveal a tension between inherited ritual structures and individual meaning-making. Culinary practices, situated at the intersection of these forces, become a flexible medium through which characters negotiate both cultural expectations and personal needs. Therefore, one cannot say that Yoshimoto's narratives are a true depiction of the Eastern collectivist frameworks. With complex characters like Yoshie, Valentine's argument of how "funerals are becoming more private" shifting from "veneration to memorialisation of the ancestors" and "treatment of the dead to emphasizing on personal recovery of the bereaved" are suggested in the narrative. (Valentine 3) Though Japanese bereavement rituals tend to influence their mourning behaviour towards a continuing nature; the narrative also portrays the emerging influence of redefined traditional practices.

Limitations

This paper focuses only on Yoshimoto's works published in the 2000s. In the future, the scholar will include more works from Yoshimoto's oeuvre for primary analysis. Since methods of data collection and analysis are limited to a qualitative approach, the scholar will take efforts to gather quantitative data through questionnaires, interviews and survey forms to further develop this research.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Yoshimoto reconfigures grief as a socially mediated and ongoing process, in which culinary practices function not merely as symbols but as active mechanisms of relational reconstruction. Firstly, the study contradicts the highly accepted Freudian view of grief and re-emphasizes on the continuing nature of grief as proposed by the Continuing Bonds model. Secondly, food and culinary experiences are shown to have a social impact in our interpersonal relationships which function as tools for the bereaved individuals to process grief, find healing and reconstruct themselves. In contradiction to the dominant discourse that portrays the process of grieving as an isolating experience, the findings aim

to establish the social influence of culinary and everyday practices offered by bereaved individuals. Findings of this study allow for a deeper recognition of other social perspectives of mourning including the Eastern bereavement culture.

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Cooking up Belonging: Tangra, Tiretta Bazaar, and the Production of Diasporic Space in Kolkata's Indo-Chinese Cuisine

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Indo-Chinese cuisine in Kolkata as a socially produced space through which Chinese diasporic communities negotiate identity, memory, and belonging in a postcolonial urban context. Anchored in Henri Lefebvre's tripartite theory of spatial production and Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space, the analysis reads Tangra and Tiretta Bazaar not merely as culinary geography but as contested spatial formations where migration, displacement, and cultural survival are enacted through everyday food practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with restaurateurs and consumers, and menu analysis, the essay argues that Indo-Chinese restaurants function as living spatial formations in which diasporic identity is continuously produced, adapted, and made visible within the postcolonial city. The analysis integrates Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism to account for the representational dimensions of these culinary spaces.

Keywords : *Indo-Chinese cuisine, diaspora space, spatial production, Tangra, Tiretta Bazaar, third space, Kolkata, postcolonial urbanism*

INTRODUCTION

On a Tuesday evening in Tangra, the smell arrives before the street does. Walking east from the bypass, a visitor encounters it well before the first restaurant sign comes into view. A sharp, unmistakable compound of wok-charred garlic, dark soy, and chilli oil that has clung to this neighbourhood for decades. Inside the restaurant Beijing, a low-ceilinged room lit in red and gold, the tables are full. Monica Liu moves between the kitchen and the dining room with the ease of someone who has never known another life. Her grandfather worked these streets when they smelled of tannin and lime. Her father watched the tanneries empty. She watched the restaurants fill.

This essay takes that inheritance seriously, not as a personal biography but as a spatial argument. The two neighbourhoods of Tiretta Bazaar and Tangra, carry the weight of a diasporic history more than two centuries old, and the food produced in them is not merely a culinary adaptation but a spatial practice, and a way of producing belongingness in a city that has not always been hospitable to its Chinese residents. The central claim of this essay is that Indo-Chinese cuisine in Kolkata must be understood as a socially produced space in Henri Lefebvre's sense: one generated through the layered encounter of migration history, postcolonial displacement, market demand, and diasporic cultural memory.

Indo-Chinese cuisine has attracted growing scholarly attention through frameworks of culinary hybridity, diaspora studies, and food anthropology. Arora's account of Indianisation, Roy and Basu's geographical survey, and De's ethnography of Chinatown street life have all illuminated dimensions of how this cuisine emerged and spread. Yet its spatial dimension raises the question of how food produces, inhabits, and contests urban space, but it has received less sustained theoretical attention. This essay addresses that gap. It argues that the restaurants, markets, and food streets of Tangra and Tiretta Bazaar are not backdrops to cultural processes but their very medium. These are produced spaces that encode, sustain, and sometimes obscure the diasporic history they emerge from.

Three field sites organise the analysis, each selected because it offers a different and irreplaceable vantage on spatial production. Tangra and Tiretta Bazaar are chosen as the primary geographic fields because they represent the two historical nodes of Chinese settlement in Kolkata, where one is the city's original Chinatown, while the other is its industrial and culinary successor. Within these sites, three subjects are foregrounded. Monica Liu, founder and owner of five Indo-Chinese restaurants in Kolkata, is chosen as the primary restaurateur subject because she embodies the precise historical pivot this essay examines — a woman whose family moved from tannery labour to restaurant entrepreneurship, who has fed the people of Kolkata for decades, and who speaks with unusual reflexivity about the negotiations her cooking requires. Joel Huang, second-generation owner of Eau Chew, the oldest continuously operating Chinese restaurant in India, is chosen as a counterpoint subject because his restaurant's institutional continuity makes visible what Liu's more adaptive model makes invisible. Sabyasachi Gayen, a 53-year-old Bengali consumer, is chosen as the consumer subject not because he is representative of all Indian diners but because his four decades of eating Indo-Chinese food, his intuitive spatial literacy about the difference between Tangra and neighbourhood restaurants, and his honest unreflectiveness about the food's origins make him an ideal figure to examine how the cuisine is received, translated, and territorialised in the wider city.

Spatial Threads Across the Scholarship

The literature informing this essay is selected for what each text contributes to a specifically spatial reading of Indo-Chinese food culture, and the connections between these readings form a layered theoretical perspective in which each text addresses a different aspect of spatial experience.

Roy and Basu's geographical survey of Chinese migration provides the macro-spatial foundation, tracing historical waves of migration from southern Chinese provinces and documenting occupational settlement patterns that establish migration itself as a spatial process through which ethnic communities claim and lose urban territory (Roy and Basu). Roy's subsequent study of the Hakka tanner enclave economy deepens this by showing how the state-mandated relocation of Tangra's tanneries in the late twentieth century was simultaneously a spatial and economic displacement, and the very event that pushed the community toward restaurant entrepreneurship (Roy). The transition from tannery district to restaurant district is the material hinge on which this essay turns.

Arora's account of the Indianisation of Chinese food occupies the interior spatial aspect of kitchen and menu. Her meticulous attention to how ingredients, cooking techniques, and flavour profiles were modified in response to Indian consumer preferences reveals adaptation as a form of spatial negotiation and a way of making one's culinary practice habitable within a foreign taste economy (Arora). Reading through Bhabha's lens, Arora's findings position the Indo-Chinese kitchen as a third space, which is neither Chinese nor Indian, but a site of productive encounter that generates something genuinely new.

De's ethnography of Kolkata's Chinatown spaces is the most explicitly spatial text in this review. His attention to street life, ritual performance, and material culture illuminates how public space functions as a medium for ethnic inscription. He describes vividly how dragon dances, temple incense, and festival processions assert presence within the city's visual and sensory field (De). Though not focused on food, De's work provides the framework for reading the restaurant as a node

within a larger network of diasporic spatial practice.

Zhang's study of Chinese community schools in Kolkata, and Bose and Kumar's study of the prevalence and acceptability of Indo-Chinese food, work in productive tension. On one hand, Zhang shows how institutional spaces such as schools, associations, and temples sustain cultural memory across generations (Zhang). On the other hand, Bose and Kumar show how the cuisine has expanded far beyond these institutional networks, integrating into urban food culture at a scale the originating community no longer controls (Bose and Kumar). Together they raise the question that drives the third part of this essay's analysis - What happens to diasporic food culture when it escapes its originary spatial context?

Space, Diaspora, and the Third Place of Food

This essay is anchored in Henri Lefebvre's tripartite theory of the production of space. Against the intuition that space is a neutral container in which social life unfolds, Lefebvre insists that "(social) space is a (social) product," that every space we inhabit has been actively made through the practices, representations, and imaginaries of particular historical actors (Lefebvre 26). He distinguishes three mutually constitutive dimensions - perceived space (spatial practice - refers to the routines, movements, and material rhythms through which space is generated and reproduced daily), conceived space (representations of space - where the plans, maps, zoning designations, and official discourses through which space is named and organised), and lived space (representational space - where the symbols, memories, and affects through which inhabitants experience, imagine, and give meaning to the spaces they occupy). As Lefebvre writes, lived space is "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols," and it is "the dominated, and hence passively experienced, space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 39).

When applied to Tangra, Lefebvre's triad illuminates three simultaneous spatial processes. At the level of perceived space, the daily process of restaurant operation includes ingredient procurement, the morning prep, the lunchtime smoke of the wok, the evening crowds, all of which produce a new spatial temporality that has displaced the industrial rhythm of the tannery district. At the level of conceived space, the neighbourhood's official designation has shifted from industrial zone to culinary destination, enabling new forms of development and tourism. And at the level of lived space, Tangra is inhabited by its Chinese-origin community as a site of layered memory, a place whose every corner holds the trace of tanneries, internment, and reinvention.

Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space provides the relational counterpart to Lefebvre's structural theory. Brah argues that diaspora space is "inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous," making it a site of encounter constituted through the intersections of race, class, and history (Brah 209). Crucially, Brah distinguishes between the "homing desire," the longing for a place of origin that may never be returned to, and the actual making of home in the place of settlement. The Indo-Chinese restaurant is precisely where these two orientations converge, it evokes the mythic home of Chinese culinary memory (the ancestral flavour, the family recipe, the festival dish) while producing the lived home of a community embedded in Kolkata's urban fabric.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space elaborates the cultural-semiotic dimension of this production. The third space, in Bhabha's formulation, is not a place but a condition of enunciation, "it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha 55). The Indo-Chinese restaurant inhabits this third space structurally, it is neither Chinese nor Indian, neither the authentic ethnic enclave nor the purely commercial multicultural venue, but a continuously renegotiated site where identities are produced through the very act of their unsettling. Bhabha's insistence that hybridity signals creative agency rather than cultural loss is essential — the modifications Liu makes to her dishes are not surrenders but inventions.

Said's critique of Orientalism introduces a cautionary dimension. The representational conventions of Indo-Chinese décor such as the dragons, red lanterns, gold calligraphy, and pagoda motifs are not only expressions of Chinese cultural identity but also responses to an externally imposed expectation of what 'Chinese-ness' should look like (Said). Said's analysis of how colonial power produces its objects of knowledge through the repeated staging of difference is relevant here. The "virtual China" enacted in Tangra's restaurant interiors is co-produced through the Orientalist desires of Indian consumers, who arrive expecting a particular visual and sensory experience. This means the lived space of the Indo-Chinese restaurant is never solely the diaspora community's own but

always also the space of the other's imagination, shaped by power asymmetries that the community must navigate in order to survive commercially.

Together, these four frameworks operate as a nested architecture-Lefebvre provides the structural and material scaffolding, Brah fills it with relational and intersectional content, Bhabha adds the dimension of cultural ambivalence and productive negotiation, and Said introduces the critique of representational power. They enable an analysis of Indo-Chinese food spaces as simultaneously material, relational, symbolic, and political.

The Spatial Production of Indo-Chinese Kolkata

I. The Material Transformation of Tangra

The spatial history of Indo-Chinese cuisine in Kolkata begins not with a dish but with displacement. Tiretta Bazaar, established in the nineteenth century as Chinese migrants from Hakka and Cantonese communities settled near Calcutta's colonial commercial centre, was the city's first Chinatown-a bounded ethnic territory whose spatial character was shaped by the logics of colonial urbanism — peripheral location, communal density, and the institutional infrastructure (temples, schools, clan associations) that reproduced cultural life within the enclave. This spatial formation, as Roy and Basu document, is characteristic of Chinese diasporic settlement globally (Roy and Basu). In the colonial Indian context, it was simultaneously a survival strategy and a form of social legibility within a city that organised difference through spatial segregation.

Tangra's emergence as a second Chinatown in the twentieth century followed a different spatial logic. The Hakka community's move into leather tanning, which was a caste-stigmatised occupation they could enter precisely because they stood outside the caste system, drew them eastward to Kolkata's industrial periphery, where they built an enclave economy of a distinctly material kind via tanneries, curing yards, and the sharp chemical smell of hides being processed. In Lefebvre's terms, Tangra was marked at the level of perceived space by the rhythms of industrial production, and at the level of conceived space by its designation as an industrial zone on the city's eastern edge — useful, necessary, but marginal.

The Sino-Indian War of 1962 shattered this spatial arrangement. The detention of Chinese-origin residents at camps in Deoli, Rajasthan, the seizure of factories and properties, the violent de-ghettoisation of the Tiretta Bazaar enclave driven by property speculation and anti-Chinese sentiment — all of these were spatial events as much as political ones. They did not merely displace a community, but also unmade a neighbourhood. When Chinese families resettled in Tangra's industrial periphery, it was in the context of a community that had been stripped of its central urban territory and forced to build anew from the margins. Environmental regulations in the late twentieth century completed the transformation. When the tanneries were ordered to close or relocate, Tangra lost the economic basis of its spatial identity. What was left was land, community, and the knowledge of how to cook.

It is within this crucible of loss and reinvention that Monica Liu's story unfolds, and it is precisely because her biography maps onto this spatial history so directly that she is the central subject of this section. Liu is not simply a restaurant owner. She is, in the community's own informal accounting, one of the matriarchs of Tangra's culinary transformation-a woman who runs five restaurants across Kolkata and whose account of how the community moved from tanneries to tables is at once personal, spatial, and structural.

The interview took place at her restaurant, Beijing, on a weekday afternoon, between the lunch rush and the early dinner preparations. The dining room was quiet but not empty, a few regulars sat at corner tables with tea, the kitchen staff moved between stations with the unhurried efficiency of a well-practised choreography. Liu sat at a table near the window and spoke for nearly two hours, in a mixture of English, Chinese, and broken Bengali, that interchanged as the conversation deepened. She was generous with detail and remarkably unsentimental as she spoke of the past with precision rather than mourning, and of the present with practical attentiveness.

When asked about the transition from tannery labour to restaurant work, Liu did not frame it as a rupture or a choice. “Many Chinese families used to regularly cook for community gatherings and festivals,” she explained. “The only semblance of community they had was each other, and a lot of priority was given to the community feeling.” Food, in other words, was already the primary medium through which communal cohesion was maintained under conditions of marginalisation and displacement. The restaurant did not introduce food as a communal practice, instead, it formalised and commercialised a practice that had always been central to the community's spatial survival. As Brah would put it, the restaurant became the site where the homing desire, the need to reproduce the flavours, textures, and rituals of a home no longer directly accessible, was translated into the daily labour of making home in Kolkata.

Liu's account of the restaurants' early customer base illuminates the micro-spatial dynamics of this transition. "People were always hungry and at that time, your people used to spend a lot of time outside at tea shops and they used to come to us looking for small snacks," she recalled. The Bengali public, with its culture of para (neighbourhood) sociability and outdoor eating, provided the initial market for the Chinese community. What emerged was a spatial encounter in Brah's sense, not the simple meeting of two cultures, but the co-production of a new spatial formation in which the community's domestic and communal practices became publicly legible, economically viable, and culturally transformative.

Reading through the lens of Lefebvre's triad, this transformation is visible across all three spatial aspects. At the level of perceived space, the daily practices of restaurant operation starting from the pre-dawn trips to the market, the morning prep, the lunchtime wok smoke, the evening crowds that spill onto the pavement, have all produced an entirely new spatial rhythm in Tangra, displacing the industrial temporality of the tannery district. At the level of conceived space, the neighbourhood's official designation has shifted. What was an industrial zone is now a restaurant district, marked on tourist maps, promoted in food media, and increasingly subject to the urban development pressures that attend any territory that becomes desirable. And at the level of lived space, Tangra is inhabited by its Chinese-origin community as a palimpsest — a place whose current culinary identity sits atop the memory of tanneries, internment, and the gradual attrition of a population that was once many thousands and is now a few hundred. The restaurants are the spatial form through which that memory is kept alive and made visible to the city, and not merely businesses.

II. The Restaurant Interior as Diaspora Space

If the neighbourhood provides the macro-spatial context, the individual restaurant constitutes the micro-spatial field where the dialectics of diasporic identity are most directly and most visibly enacted. It is here that Brah's diaspora space — the meeting point of migratory trajectories, local conditions, and the state's ordering of difference takes its most tangible form. The restaurant is a space of encounter in the most literal sense as every day, Chinese culinary memory meets Indian consumer expectation across a table, a menu, a plate.

Monica Liu's account of her culinary adaptations reveals the spatial logic of this negotiation at the level of the dish itself, and it is worth dwelling on what she describes, because it is more complex than simple adjustment. Traditional Hakka cooking, she explained, is built on balance and restraint-clean broths, moderate heat, light sauces that allow the natural flavours of the ingredient to come through. This is a cuisine whose spatial origins are in the domestic kitchen and the community gathering, through food that is not designed for the commercial dining room. In Kolkata, that culinary inheritance encountered a taste economy organised by entirely different principles. The Bengali palate's appetite for bold, aromatic, intensely flavoured food, the desire for gravies thick enough to cling to rice, and the expectation that a meal eaten outside the home should feel like a treat rather than a domestic staple.

Liu's response to this encounter was not capitulation but invention. "The kids and even buddhas like me could not eat anything without gravy," she recalled with characteristic directness. "But they also wanted some nice sticky flavour because otherwise the soy sauce flavour was too strong." The solution was to use cornflour as a thickening agent, increased garlic and ginger, green chillies added to the wok, sauces built on the interplay of soy, vinegar, and ketchup. This was not a departure from Chinese cooking principles but their re-application within a new set of material constraints and social demands. This is precisely what Bhabha means when he argues that the third space "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past" (Bhabha 37). There is no originary Chinese dish that Chilli Chicken or Manchurian has degraded, there is only the ongoing production of something new within conditions of diasporic encounter.

Liu was explicit that many dishes now consumed as quintessentially Chinese were developed locally within restaurants like hers, with no Chinese precedent whatsoever. "They don't even know that this is not Chinese food," she said, gesturing at the dining room. "I didn't feed my sons this, or else they wouldn't have grown up only." The remark is delivered as a joke, but it encodes a distinction of profound spatial significance — there is the food she makes for the city, and there is the food she makes at home. These are not the same food, and they do not inhabit the same space. The restaurant kitchen is a third space in the most material sense, it is a site of cultural production that generates something that belongs to neither the Chinese domestic interior nor the Indian mainstream, but occupies the productive ambivalence between them.

The spatial politics of the restaurant extend from the kitchen into the design of the eating environment, and it is here that Said's framework becomes indispensable. Liu acknowledged that the décor of

her five restaurants consistently feature red lanterns, dragon motifs, gold-and-red colour schemes, Chinese calligraphy, and serves a function that is simultaneously cultural, commercial, and representational. Some elements carry genuine symbolic weight, such as red is auspicious in Chinese tradition, a colour of luck and celebration that Liu and other owners use with intention, but others are calibrated to meet a pre-formed expectation. Customers arrive at Tangra with an image of what a Chinese restaurant should look like — an image assembled from decades of popular representation, Bollywood set dressing, and the accumulated visual grammar of the Indo-Chinese restaurant itself. Instead of expressing Chinese identity, the décor performs for an audience whose idea of Chinese-ness has been shaped, in Said's terms, by the projection of the other's imagination.

This Orientalist co-production does not make the restaurant inauthentic. As Weiss argues, authenticity in gastronomic terms "concerns how cultural identity is determined through cuisine" and refers to "the appropriateness of linking a specific ingredient, technique or recipe to a particular time and place," not to fidelity with an imagined original (Weiss 74). By this measure, the décor of Tangra's restaurants is entirely authentic. It is precisely the right response to this time, this place, and these conditions of encounter. But it is also, inescapably, a space that the community does not fully own. The lived space of the Indo-Chinese restaurant is produced in and through the desires of others, and this means that the spatial identity of Tangra is always partly hostage to the gaze it has learned to perform.

Joel Huang's account of Eau Chew introduces a second spatial register that sharpens the analysis. Huang is chosen as a subject precisely because his restaurant occupies a different position in Tangra's spatial economy. While Liu's Beijing represents the adaptive, market-responsive mode of Indo-Chinese restaurant culture, Eau Chew represents something rarer and more fragile — the survival of a prior spatial and culinary formation. The restaurant, established in 1920, is widely regarded as the oldest continuously operating Chinese restaurant in India, and its continued existence is itself a spatial argument, an insistence on remaining in place.

The interview with Huang took place in the early afternoon, in the restaurant's characteristically spare dining room with red swing doors, antique-style laminated tables, Mandarin inscriptions on the wall, portraits of the family's founders displayed without ceremony near the entrance. Huang is younger than Liu, more measured in his speech, and notably less inclined to frame his work in cultural terms. He speaks of the restaurant as a family enterprise first, a cultural institution second, and a spatial claim last of all, though it is unmistakably all three.

"We cook what we eat in our house every day," he said, when asked about Eau Chew's kitchen. The equation of the domestic and the commercial is, from a Lefebvrian perspective, a form of spatial claim of the most fundamental kind. The restaurant does not distinguish between the home kitchen and the public one but instead, it extends the domestic into the commercial without transformation. This is the opposite of Liu's model, and it produces a different spatial formation, where a restaurant whose lived space retains the texture and scale of the domestic interior, and whose food carries the flavour of a Chinese home kitchen that has not been recalibrated for the market. Lighter seasoning, less thick gravy, older Hakka cooking techniques, which is how customers sometimes describe the food, Huang noted, as "simpler" or "less spicy" than what they expect from Indo-Chinese cuisine, and the description carries a faint note of disappointment that Huang receives without anxiety. The restaurant's spatial identity is legible precisely in what it refuses to do.

Together, Liu and Huang map the spatial spectrum of Tangra's restaurant ecology. At one end, the adaptive restaurant that produces a cuisine calibrated for the city, while at the other, the institutional restaurant that preserves a prior register against the pressure to adapt. Both are diaspora spaces in Brah's sense, sites of encounter between migratory trajectories and local conditions, but they enact that encounter through different spatial strategies, and the difference between them is the difference between two ways of making home in a city that was not originally one's own.

III. The Expanding Spatial Reach

The third dimension of this spatial analysis concerns the movement of Indo-Chinese cuisine beyond the bounded territory of Chinatown and into the wider urban fabric of Kolkata, and ultimately, of India. This movement is a spatial process with significant consequences for the relationship between the cuisine and the community that produced it. As Bose and Kumar document, Indo-Chinese food is now integrated across Kolkata's social geography, available from street stalls to five-star hotel menus, consumed by diners with no knowledge of or connection to the Chinese community in whose kitchens it originated (Bose and Kumar). The diaspora space of Indo-Chinese cuisine has, in Brah's terms, become decoupled from the diasporic community itself.

Sabyasachi Gayen is the subject through whom this process is examined, and he is chosen for a specific reason-he is not a food enthusiast, a journalist, or an expert. He is an ordinary diner, a 53-year-old Bengali man encountered at Hatari, a well-regarded Indo-Chinese restaurant in a residential neighbourhood in Kolkata, far from Tangra, sharing a table with his elder brother and his son on a weekday evening. His unreflectiveness is, analytically, an asset. He does not theorise his relationship to the food but simply inhabits it, and in doing so he makes visible how Indo-Chinese cuisine has been absorbed into the spatial grammar of everyday urban life.

The interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes and was conducted on the spot, after a brief explanation of the research. Gayen was willing but not particularly interested in being interesting, his answers were practical, direct, and occasionally impatient. He visits Hatari once every one or two weeks, usually with family. He orders Chilli Chicken and Hakka Noodles, always the same combination, without deliberation. "Safe choices," he said. "Everyone in Kolkata knows what these taste like." He has eaten Indo-Chinese food since his college years in the late 1980s, when it was a treat shared with friends. Now it is routine, comfort, the food he reaches for when nothing else presents itself.

What is analytically striking about Gayen's account is not its content but its spatial structure. He knows, in an abstract way, that Indo-Chinese food is not what people eat in China. But this knowledge does not alter his experience of the food, because his experience is entirely organised by the spatial terms in which the cuisine was presented to him, always as "Chinese food," always in spaces that performed Chinese-ness through the Orientalist visual vocabulary that Said's analysis predicts. The spatial representation has become the reality. Lefebvre's conceived space is the official and semi-official discourse through which space is named and categorised, has colonised lived space-Gayen's experience of eating Chilli Chicken at Hatari is structured by the label "Chinese," even though the dish is a Kolkata invention, made by Indian cooks, in a restaurant with no Chinese ownership or association.

Gayen's spatial literacy about the cuisine is, however, more nuanced than this might suggest. He noted that Tangra restaurants "taste a little different", less spicy, slightly larger portions, a more "traditional" atmosphere, and this intuitive perception is spatially precise. What Gayen is registering, without the theoretical vocabulary to name it, is the concentric circle pattern that the Arora study identifies as the most traditionally Chinese food concentrated in the Chinatown core, with increasing degrees of Indianisation as one moves outward (Arora). He can taste the spatial gradient, even if he cannot explain it. And yet he now prefers Hatari to Tangra, not because the food is better but because it is closer and more consistent. The spatial logic has shifted and Chinatown is no longer the destination but the unconscious standard, the point of reference against which neighbourhood restaurants are calibrated without the effort of actually visiting.

This shift illuminates a process that Brah describes as the normalisation of diaspora space-the moment at which the encounter between migrant and local is so thoroughly routineised that it no longer registers as an encounter (Brah 194). The Indo-Chinese restaurant has become part of Kolkata's spatial fabric so completely that its origins are invisible to those who consume it most regularly. The food has become, in the language of spatial theory, a trace, a material residue of diasporic presence that outlives its communal context and continues to organise everyday life without reference to the community that produced it.

The tension this creates is most visible from within the community. As Liu noted, many of the customers who fill her restaurants believe they are eating authentic Chinese food, unaware that the dishes on the menu were invented in Kolkata kitchens by Chinese immigrants adapting to Indian taste. This epistemic situation, in which the spatial performance of Chinese-ness is so successful that it obscures its own hybridity, from a Lefebvrian perspective reflects the political economy of spatial production. Spaces, once produced by particular social actors, can be appropriated by others, the conceived space of Tangra, with its tourist designations and food media representation, increasingly reflects the interests of urban development rather than those of the Chinese community. The younger generation is emigrating, the tanneries are gone, the restaurants remain, but the community that runs them is running thin.

This paradox-that the cuisine survives and expands while the community contracts-is not a failure of the spatial practice but its clearest demonstration. The Indo-Chinese restaurant has produced a form of belonging so durable, so deeply integrated into the city's spatial identity, that it now exists independently of the community that integrated it. This is, simultaneously, the community's greatest spatial achievement and the mark of its ongoing vulnerability.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Indo-Chinese cuisine

in Kolkata is not simply a culinary hybrid but a spatially produced formation through which a diasporic community has negotiated belonging, visibility, and survival in a postcolonial city. Through Lefebvre's tripartite spatial theory, the essay has traced how Tangra and Tiretta Bazaar were produced and transformed through material practices, official designations, and lived memories. Through Brah's concept of diaspora space, it has examined the restaurant as a site of encounter where Chinese cultural memory and Indian consumer expectation are co-produced in conditions shaped by historical displacement and market power. Through Bhabha, it has read the Indo-Chinese kitchen as a genuine third space, which is not a degraded compromise but a site of cultural invention. And through Said, it has held open the question of how much of that invention is shaped by the Orientalist desires of those who consume it.

Monica Liu's remark that she did not feed her children the food she served her customers remains, for this essay, its most resonant field observation. It is not simply a joke about culinary standards. It is a spatial claim, a marking of the boundary between the domestic interior and the public performance, between the space of Chinese family life and the space of Indo-Chinese cuisine. That boundary is the third space, Bhabha's site of enunciation, Brah's diaspora space, Lefebvre's lived space-the place where identity is neither wholly Chinese nor wholly Indian but continuously, productively, neither.

As Kolkata's Chinese population continues to dwindle and the neighbourhoods of Tangra and Tiretta Bazaar are remade by urban development and tourist designation, the food itself may prove to be the most durable form of spatial memory available to this community. The taste of belonging, cooked and served daily, long after the tanneries have closed and the temples have grown quiet, for those who know how to feel what it carries.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several constraints. The qualitative sample is small-the perspectives of Liu, Huang, and Gayen are rich but cannot represent the full diversity of the Chinese community in Kolkata or the range of Indo-Chinese culinary establishments across the country. The research is geographically concentrated, limiting comparative spatial analysis across other Indian cities where Indo-Chinese cuisine has also developed distinct spatial formations. The finite research timeframe restricts longitudinal ethnographic depth. And the focus on cultural and spatial interpretation means that the broader market and demographic dynamics of the cuisine's spread remain outside the essay's scope, as areas for further research.

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Memories and Nostalgia of Kashmiri Food: Mutton, Wazwan and the Kashmiri Kitchen

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ABSTRACT

Located in the northernmost Himalayas in the country, India, Jammu and Kashmir is popularly known for its scenic beauty and breathtaking views. The place is known for its rich history, culture, traditions as well as its ethnic heritage. It has been ruled by various dynasties belonging both to the valley, as well as outside. Being at the crossroads of various civilizations, it has stood the test of the people. One such thing is the Kashmiri food cuisine, especially the meat cuisine, Wazwaan.

Historically, the cuisine has the blend of the Arabic, Iranian and Turkish cultures. Considered as an art form, the Wazwaan has its uniqueness with regard to its traditional methods of preparation and its importance to the Kashmiri culture. Apart from their language and other artistic materials, Wazwaan is one unique thing that boldly advocates for their identity.

The meat products are important and popular due to their appealing flavors, textures as well as a deliciousness infused by the artistry of the Waza. Wazwaan is more than a meal. It is love, memory, nostalgia, longing and a desire to be fulfilled. It is a method of keeping in link with the roots of our ancestors and their memories and skills they have passed on to us.

Considering the current context, the shifts in the consumption have immensely changed. Due to rapid urbanization, growing population and industrialization and political contexts, the demand for the meat products is ever growing. The question is – how are the people able to manage and stay in touch with the old traditions and cultures in the midst of all the new factors emerging in the society?

Keywords : *Kashmir, food, Waazwan, meat and mutton, memory, culture and nostalgia, Kashmiri Kitchen*

INTRODUCTION

Memories and Nostalgia of Kashmiri Food: Mutton, Wazwan and the Kashmiri Kitchen is an essay that attempts to study the relationship between the meat consumption, especially mutton and beef dishes from Wazaan, shapes nostalgia, memory and identity of Kashmiri Pandits and the Kashmiri Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir. Wazwaan, a Kashmiri cuisine, plays an important role in preserving cultural traditions, heritage and reinforcing the ethnic group identity.

The essay also argues that the Kashmiri Kitchen is a physical affective archive where there is a constant production of memories, identities and cultural practices sustained, particularly within familial, communal and diasporic contexts.

It has been observed that Jammu and Kashmir people, on average, consume more meat than the national average. This clearly highlights the importance of Wazwaan along with its food practices and its strong relation to memory and nostalgia. Despite constant modernisation, the people of Jammu and Kashmir are actively committed to preserving these food traditions.

Linking the themes of memory and nostalgia, the study documents Wazaan and its food practices as a powerful tool in preserving the Jammu and Kashmiri traditions while adapting to constant changes. This essay argues that these traditions, particularly the mutton consumption, act not just as cultural traditions but are also embodied mnemonic systems that are deeply rooted.

The identified gap in the existing scholarship is the lack of studies exploring the link between memory and nostalgia in relation to the Kashmiri Kitchen and cuisine.

Literature Review

Scholars have recognised the Kashmiri Wazwan as a deeply rooted cultural practice that depicts memory, history and identity. The traditions passed on to generations symbolise an embodiment of hospitality. Mattoo explicitly explores such themes in her works.

Mattoo's book analyses that the cuisine is not only a part of satisfying hunger but also "an artistic creation and a feast for all the senses." In her book, she argues that Wazwann is an elaborate meal served and eaten in such a ceremonial manner that it is like a ritual conducted according to its own strict rules.

According to the author, "the Kashmiris have developed an almost obsessive interest in food— it could bring enjoyment and sparkle to life, even on the dreariest of days. Great care is taken to plan and prepare a meal, and all social activity revolves around well-cooked food. Kashmiri food includes dishes of mutton, fish, chicken, wild fowl and all the delectable vegetables and fruits, fresh and dried, which Kashmir is famous for, and which have delicious flavours, unmatched in the world." (Mattoo)

Mattoo states that the Kashmiri cuisine has acquired an almost legendary reputation. Scholars such as Prakash and Nayna study the historical importance, context and evolution of Wazwan. Situated at the crossroads of cultural currents from the Middle East, Central Asia, the East and the South, in Kashmiri kitchens, we find a blend of the best elements of Indian, Iranian, Afghan and Central Asian haute cuisine. "Kashmir was introduced to Persian and Russian flavours by silk traders who passed through this country on their way to China. Taimoor brought chefs (Waza) from Samarkand with him when he invaded Hindustan in 1398. (Uzbekistan). And to create Kashmiri cuisine, these Wazas combined Persian, Turkish, and Afghan skills. Waza are artists who are obsessive and devoted to their craft. Long before daylight at 3 a.m., the supper is being prepared. All other Wazas are supervised by the Wasta Waza (Master Chef)" (Prakash & Nayna)

According to Rajab Dar, the mutton of sheep and goats was taken both by the pundits and the Muslims of the valley. The pundits would not touch poultry or eggs, garlic and onions, but fowls and the eggs of the lake birds were eaten by them. This aspect challenges the ideal stereotypical notions of a vegetarian practice among the Brahmins in the valley. The Kashmiri Brahmins (pundits) were and continue to be meat eaters. They usually declared that the custom of eating meat was based on decagon, a virtue of the country's cow and ox, because these animals were considered sacred by the Hindus. (pg.532)

Annapurna Chak's work allows the reader to engage with the intrinsic relationship that the cuisine has with its people. She elaborates by mentioning that the two culinary styles that are predominant in Kashmiri cuisine are those of the Kashmiri Pandits and the Kashmiri Muslims. The basic difference between the two is that of the liberal use of asafoetida (Hing) and yoghurt among the Hindus and onions and garlic among the Muslims – all of which impart a distinct flavour. She notes that there are some mutton dishes cooked by the Kashmiri Pandits who migrated to the Indo-Gangetic Plains in the 18th and 19th centuries. These dishes do not traditionally use any onion, garlic, chicken, or egg. Yoghurt, asafoetida, dried ginger, cinnamon, cardamom and cloves form the base of the gravy. "The meat is roasted in oil and yoghurt. Almonds are used more than walnuts. The meat is roasted for a longer duration, and there seems to be a fairly strong influence of the Awadhi style of cooking." (Chak)

Further ahead, Anjum states that the book's introduction, *Scattered Souls,* written by Shahnaz Bashir, situates the Kashmiri kitchen as a space where the emotional and sensory dimensions of food intersect with collective memory. The scholar elaborates that Bashir subtly weaves the relationship between food and memory into several narratives, and the presence of seasonal and ceremonial foods further enriches the narrative. "These moments also reveal the gendered nature of culinary preservation." (Anjum pg.80). Anjum states that by presenting food

as both literal and symbolic, Bashir allows the reader to understand how Kashmiri culture is preserved not only in texts and traditions but also in taste. Food is not just nourishment; it is a language spoken through the sizzle of oil, the aroma of saffron, the quiet concentration of a woman in the kitchen. These narratives, while simple on the surface, offer profound insights into how culinary heritage anchors cultural identity, especially in times of uncertainty or silence. "In Scattered Souls, the kitchen becomes an archive, and Wazwan becomes a text—both storing and transmitting a culture that lives through its people." (Anjum pg. 80)

While various other food practices, diasporic identity, and other cultural structures have been studied in relation to ethnicity, minimal attention has been paid to the kitchen as an archive that collaborates in shaping and preserving memories. The literature studied mainly focuses on the celebration of the Wazwan as a unique cultural aspect. In the research gap, I have identified that the place is geographically limited, and there is no research paper on the consumption of meat in the Chenab Valley, where various ethnic groups consume meat and mutton. At last, I would like to state that no elaborate study has been done on the pressure the Wazwan has on financially stressed individuals when it comes to special occasions.

Food, Meat and Identity

In Kashmir, serving a meat or a mutton dish, especially to guests as well as to family members or relatives, is regarded as an act of geniality and hospitality. It is a symbol of honouring the guests, building relationships and bonds, as well as a showing of culinary skills.

People take pride in preparing the dishes as they are prepared only on several special occasions such as festivals, engagements, weddings, house warming ceremonies, local festivals, family gatherings or births. Therefore, the act of preparing and serving a guest allows the basic act of food eating to become the act that strengthens social identity. In his personal interview, Mohd Shafi, a retired government school teacher, states that social gatherings of the community establish and enforce a sense of bonding and belongingness, the love for each other and indeed the time for passing down the skill and craft to the young ones.

Furthermore, cooking mutton, meat (Wazwan) in the milieu of social identity is collectively fundamental and intrinsic. Thus, the consumption of mutton or Kashmiri food is not only associated with several religious, traditional, as well as cultural rituals and practices, but equivalently depicts "our coming hither and departing from the world, our marriages, our festivals, our sacred days, our solemn moments, are all marked by this symbol of meat eating" (Shah, 22096). When such a diet is incorporated into these aspects of our life, it leads to the building of and creating unforgettable memories and healthy social bonds with our loved ones.

Niyaz, one of the local traditional occasions, elaborates the argument regarding food, meat, and social identity. Predominantly a special occasion, where the community comes together in a host's house. The host distributes food to the invited and the uninvited. It is an act of humbleness. The practice involves preparing and serving the food, distributing it among the destitutes and donating it. Food like mutton, lamb or goat curry, rice, suji ka halwa, noon chai, kehwa, and the local chapatis are prepared. Preparations began at dawn. Before the feast, people read the Quran to seek Allah's blessings. Niyaz is also a form of celebratory event where a family has built a new house, a child has scored well or secured a good job or when a family member has survived a calamity. The neighbours play a vital role in this event as they are the ones who assist the host in the main tasks. People, including men and women, volunteer to help clean up after the event is over.

The author Shahnaz Bashir, in his book, demonstrates that food creates a sense of longing and shows the individual's identity. It shapes the individual's perspective on social as well as the individual level.

In addition to this, Claude Fischler also points out that food is central to our sense of identity. He further explains that the principle of incorporation in food is "to incorporate all or some of its properties." "We become what we eat." (Fischler) According to Fischler, food and cuisine are quite a central component of the sense of collective belonging. In the process of incorporation, the individual not only absorbs the properties of food, but the absorption also incorporates the individual into a "culinary system and there into the group which practices it." (Fischler) As Fischler puts it, "to identify food, one has to 'think' it, to understand the world, in particular to distinguish, order and classify the elements of which it consists."

Similarly, Vatika Sibal confirms that food is not merely a tool to strengthen our bodies but also a tool that strengthens the bonds between individuals, communities, and even countries. "Food also transmits a meaning." (Sibal) Vatika points out that according to Barthes, food is considered to be multidimensional, as something that shapes us, our identities and our culture, and in the end our societies.

Kashmiri Literature has adequately reinforced the act of food-eating practices as well as social bonding. Agha Shahid Ali has particularly reminisced about the social gathering among the Kashmiri Pandits and the Kashmiri Muslims. He specifically points out the idea of "homesickness." It includes the following elements: the love for his people, the gatherings with his community members, his home, his traditions, cultures and food. In his writings, one often comes across "nostalgic consciousness" (Suthar, 423) and the love for his birthplace. He confirms in his works that the displacement of an ethnic group does not allow the construction of food memories and social identity in open properties. To elaborate, the poet has also reminisced about the unfair departure of the Kashmiri Pandits and poignantly shares how the migration of the Kashmiri Pandits from the valley has led to the fading and displacement of the Kashmiri Pandit style of Wazaan. To live his experience of the culinary skill, Wazwan, Agha Shahid Ali never let go of his social sense and kept it ongoing even while fighting cancer. Agha Shahid Ali used the homeland's food to depict his identity, intimacy and the constant love for his land that he was away from. With the help of his memory, he recreates the nostalgic past that he spent in the valley. Agha Shahid Ali's poetry "swirls around memory, history and family and affirms the interconnection between the elements of memory, nostalgia and sensory experience. The poet Ali was fond of cooking food. He would often talk about how the "flavour" (Suthar, 243) and the aroma of the food had "vanished" (Suthar, 243). In one of his famous memoirs, *The Ghat of the Only World,* written by Amitav Ghosh, the author, who was also a close friend of Agha Shahid Ali, shares a memory signifying Ali's love for the Kashmiri traditional food. Amitav Ghosh shares that the author loved eating Rogan Josh, a dish made out of slow-cooked lamb or mutton curry. Food linked to memory is one of the "references to material objects" in his works (Chatterjee, 822). He shared how these objects, here food, would carry "emotional" and historical weight when away from the homeland. He further shares that the poet's apartment in the US was always filled with his friends and students, all curious to taste the Wazwan dishes that Shahid himself cooked.

Thus, the Kashmiri food functions not only as a sheer notion of nourishment and sustenance but also as an entrenched old practice that continues to exist to date and acquiesces to the establishment and the construction of the social identity.

Memory, Nostalgia and Sensory Experience

This section argues that apart from establishing social identity, the Kashmiri Literature further corroborates the establishment of memory, nostalgia, and sensory experience.

The robust interrelation among memory, nostalgia and sensory experience is further supported by grounded perspectives by Abra and Colby. Studying Eduardo Machado's memoir *Taste Like Cuba: An Exile's Hunger for Home.* They discuss the question of 'food memory' and narrative, and point out that "what is it about food and the memories it evokes that sets into motion a process vested with social and cultural ideologies by which we define and redefine who we are"? To this statement, they answer that "food, beyond being a biological necessity, is inseparable from powerful material and symbolic realities."

They further enhance the argument by stating that "nostalgic feelings evoked by food might not be about a physical location or even a specific time, but about a particular flavour, taste and texture of a given food." (Abarca & Colby) The scholars clarify that the first link or connection between food and memory that produces 'food memory' is the "sensory and emotional nature emitted by and through food's material and symbolic social and cultural functions." (Abarca & Colby) They add that senses and emotions are crucial transmitters (not just triggers) of mnemonic cues. According to them, the unique quality of food memory, even though their sensory and emotional function is linked with an individual, they are still socially and culturally grounded. "The embodied experience that food provides, both on the personal as well as collective level, operates simultaneously through different forms of memories." (Abarca & Colby) Abarca and Colby declare that all the elements of a memory, the sensory, the cognitive, and habitual, as well as performative forms, together form a 'group's cultural memory where the mnemonic processes are shared through different narrative forms among individuals. The scholars also mention Jennifer Jordan, who coined the term 'edible memory.' It demonstrates how food stories create actions that build cultural memories. "*Food memories* are also linked to habitual memories shaped through repetition." (Abarca & Colby) According to Abarca and Colby, Jennifer Jordan defines 'edible memory' as a remembrance that, while deeply individual and personal, is shaped and shapes the "social and material world" by "propelling people into action" such as saving seeds, planting gardens, eating meals, and telling stories.

Syed also adds that in "In Kashmiri literature, food becomes far more than mere sustenance; it acts as a powerful symbol of memory, continuity.

Additionally, in Krishna Prasad Dar's book *Kashmiri Cooking, one* argues that the act of writing down the recipes becomes an act of preserving and protecting the memories associated with the cuisine.

Thereupon, memory and nostalgia, and the sensory experience assemble and advocate food memory that is personal as well as collective. These factors empower shaping identity while being shaped by cultural contexts.

Gender and Transmission

In Jammu and Kashmir, women play a vital role in preserving food traditions, practices and the memories built through these. The element of preservation and transmission is notably observed in women fighting diasporic situations. The transmission of culinary knowledge with the assistance of oral narratives and oral traditions displays the incorporated nature of memory.

Through blogs, poetry, and digital platforms, they maintain connections to their homeland, embedding identity within memory. These "mnemonic sites" include sensory experiences such as smells, sounds, and textures (Dhar & Swain, 579). The diasporic context has allowed women to step forward to continue using traditional techniques in their cooking so that the distinct aroma, taste, texture, and look of the food is well registered and learned by the next generations.

It has been observed that recipes are not always written, but passed down through observation and practice and instructions, making them acts of lived experience. As noted, orally transmitted recipes "become individual timelines of memories and rites of passage" (Jihan Nizar). This form of knowledge transfer ensures that memory is not only preserved but continuously enacted.

The act of cutting the essential vegetables and drying them for the winter is one such act that allows women to preserve food memory. Furthermore, in the midst of rapid modernisation and urbanisation, many women still prefer to use the traditional mud oven to hold and retain the original taste and texture of the food.

This study argues that women's engagement with food memory is not a passive preservation but an active reconstruction of cultural identity in changing contexts.

Kitchen as an Archive

Scholars such as Angela Meah and Peter Jackson have argued that the kitchen is a physical place (kitchen) that serves as a place filled with food memories. According to Meah and Jackson, the kitchen constitutes 'temporal topography of domestic life, revealing how it can become a repository for, and representee of memory and nostalgia, everyday life in the present, and future dreams and fears." Their argument has been made on the basis of ethnographic studies of domestic practice. "The kitchen can represent a site of memory within the wider domain of home, which itself can be understood as a kind of private museum, a space in which objects of personal, artistic or cultural interests are stored and displayed to narrate the untold stories of lives being lived and those which are imagined (now and into the future) within them." (Abarca & Colby) The scholars view the kitchen as the 'symbolic heart' of the home. The space is constantly in connection with food and other objects present there. "The object is once more at the heart of the museum, this time as a material focus of experience and opportunity, a subtle and nuanced construct shifting things, but also a physical, ever-present, beating pulse of potential." (Bardone & Kannike). The scholar argues that the kitchen is still depicted traditionally in folk museums or home museums as part of historical reconstructions of domestic life.

In his acclaimed book *Scattered Souls,* Shahnaz Bashir paints the picture of the Kashmiri kitchen, traditions and rituals, as well as the preparations used to set up the Wazwaan. Shanaz Bashir portrays the kitchen as the space that preserves a family's past, memories, and their link to preserving food traditions and recipes. Sayed Anjum describes that Shanaz Bashir called the kitchen an archive. It is an archive of memory, taste and nostalgia. Portraying the characters as resilient, the author shows how they, by the performance or the act of cooking, preserve their culture and create memories that might long be forgotten someday. "The kitchen becomes a cultural archive where unspoken practices hold meaning." (Syed, 82) The characters in his works are often shown as cooking dishes such as "Methi Maaz", "Nadur Palak", "Safeed Rista", "Chicken Badaam Korma".

Moreover, the Kashmiri household, the Kitchen contains unique utensils such as Samavar, copper plates, tash te Naer and other traditional vessels carrying familial historical importance. These specific substances located within the Kashmiri Kitchen act as carriers of memory, embedding sensory and emotional experiences into everyday life. As Abarca and Colby note, these spaces engage the "sensory, haptic and kinetic dimensions of memory," making them deeply embodied archives. This act is performed "through a combination of taste, sound and smell scapes and other mundane daily activities which are deeply embodied in the rhythms of everyday life." (Abarca & Colby) As

Mohd Shafi in his interview added that passing on objects, such as utensils, upholds histories, stories and the lineage.

In addition to this, scholars have also argued that to look at kitchens at a larger scale, the kitchens have a 'social', 'cultural' and a historical magnitude."They blur the line between public and private." (Meah & Jackson) Scholars have declared that the kitchens in transit act as an 'affective archive'. They build a repository for memory, trauma and cultural identity for the displaced individuals, "transcending its functional purpose of food preparations." The scholar outlines that the kitchen stores intimate histories and acts as a personal archive.

This clearly supports the argument that nostalgia and memory are always linked to materials embedded in spaces and objects. The spaces and the objects participate in the preservation of cultural identity, history, and traditions.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to point out that, despite the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, the people of the Valley have shown resilience in order to preserve their cuisine and the daily food and kitchen practices through different methods. One such method is through memory and nostalgia. The link between memory, nostalgia and food depicts that the cuisine is still dominant, and this dominance has allowed individuals to portray their identity and ethnicity. This staunch bond has allowed them to preserve their cuisine and its uniqueness. To preserve its uniqueness, people have taken the initiative to write about it. Authors, poets and individuals have spoken about their lived experiences through the form of storytelling and narrative to keep alive the importance of cultures that have been passed down to them. "I believe that the current generation wants to learn how to cook. It is not only wazwan that they are interested in but also day to day food we have." (Mansoor, Personal Interview) "Through domestic rituals, seasonal dishes, and traditional wedding preparations, food emerges not merely as sustenance but as a deeply symbolic archive of emotion, continuity, and belonging" (Syed, 83).

"A central function of all forms of memories is to archive such experiences. Narratives, the act of telling stories, provide the site for the interpretive expression that decodes food-based memories. Independently, food, memory, and narrative are quintessential to everyday practices as well as ceremonial/ritual events. Together, they provide a tool by which individuals give significance to their personal and collective subjectivities. (Abarca & Colby) "In telling what 'We eat,' we are showing who 'we are.' (Abarca & Colby)

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From the Plate to the Poll: Food Metaphors in Indian Political Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

Food has acquired a distinct rhetorical role in Indian public culture over the last decade, as political actors and digital platforms use culinary idioms to frame moral order and national belonging. This paper examines how terms such as biryani politics and kaccha-pakka function as shorthand judgments within political and media discourse. It focuses on how these metaphors circulate across television debates, political speech, and social media, and how repetition stabilizes their meaning. The paper argues that food metaphors operate as a circulating linguistic infrastructure through which caste-coded ideas of purity, hierarchy, and belonging are translated into portable forms and embedded in everyday language. By tracing their movement across platforms, the study shows how moral claims about citizenship are sustained through ordinary idioms of food and taste.

Keywords : *Food metaphors, political discourse, India, moral order, national belonging, mediatized public sphere, digital circulation, biryani politics, kaccha-pakka, rhetorical analysis, purity discourse, citizenship*

INTRODUCTION

On a prime-time television debate in 2023, a senior political spokesperson accused the opposition of engaging in "biryani politics." The phrase was delivered with a smile and followed by studio laughter. The anchor repeated it twice, once in English and once in Hindi, and the on-screen ticker picked it up as a headline. Within hours, clips circulated on social media alongside memes showing plates of biryani marked with party symbols. The phrase needed no explanation. Its meaning was treated as obvious. This moment reflects a rhetorical infrastructure built over the previous decade. Between 2010 and 2014, food metaphors became consolidated tools of political judgment. What had once been scattered usage hardened into repeatable shorthand. The 2023

exchange shows continuity rather than novelty. These idioms draw on shared ideas of taste and purity to structure political reasoning.

Food has long been central to discussions of Indian society as a marker of hierarchy, identity, and moral order (Appadurai; Berger). Studies have shown how eating, sharing, and abstaining from food are tied to caste, religion, gender, and nationalism. Yet the recent spread of culinary idioms in political speech points to a shift. These phrases do not describe meals. They function as compressed judgments that move quickly across media and language contexts. Food here operates as language. Treating it this way shifts the focus from what food symbolizes to how food terms are used. What is wholesome, corrupted, authentic, or adulterated becomes a way to sort publics.

The exchange reflects not a spontaneous rhetorical flourish but the outcome of a decade-long consolidation. Between 2010 and 2014, food metaphors became repeatable shorthand across political and media discourse. This paper argues that such metaphors now function as a circulating linguistic infrastructure through which caste-coded distinctions are stabilized and made portable. The argument develops in three steps. First, it situates food as a caste-coded field structured by cookedness and purity. Second, it shows how these distinctions become shorthand in political speech. Third, it traces how repetition across speech, television, and digital media stabilizes these metaphors as common sense.

Food in India is never only food. Everyday language carries social ordering through categories such as kaccha and pakka. These are culinary terms, but they also work as social evaluation. A person can be pakka. A community can be treated as kaccha. Edibility becomes hierarchy (Appadurai; Douglas). The kaccha and pakka divide historically structured caste commensality. Foods cooked in water absorbed touch and were restricted within caste lines, while foods cooked in ghee circulated more widely. Dalits were excluded from both preparation and sharing. Cooking space marked power by determining who could turn raw into socially acceptable food (Ambedkar; Appadurai).

These logics persist in altered forms. Dalit food practices, including beef and foraged foods, are often described as dirty or excessive in dominant discourse. The judgment is sensory but coded through ideas of cookedness and refinement. Even where urban life blurs dining boundaries, stigma moves into metaphor and ridicule (Guru; Jodhka).

Contemporary political speech activates these histories. The phrase "biryani politics" signals Muslim appeasement, while also drawing on suspicion toward meat-heavy and mixed foods associated with marginalized groups (Jaffrelot; Hansen). Biryani becomes shorthand for excess and otherness. A cooked dish is repositioned as socially suspect.

State policy reflects similar hierarchies. Welfare systems center rice and wheat, foods aligned with dominant caste meal structures. Dalit and Adivasi food traditions often fall outside this model (Drèze and Sen; Mohanty). Even when policies promote millets, these foods are reframed through elite health discourse, detached from the communities that sustained them (Gorringe).

Convenience foods complicate these patterns but do not escape them. Industrially cooked food bypasses caste kitchens, yet it is often framed as low-quality or incomplete. Older distinctions of cookedness shape judgment even here (Mazzarella).

Food metaphors in political language carry this history. They encode who is seen as legitimate, whose food counts as pure, and whose presence signals danger or excess. These histories form the semantic base for this study, which allows food metaphors to circulate and retain meaning across different media contexts.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on food in South Asia shows how culinary practices encode hierarchy and belonging. Appadurai's work on gastro-politics treats food as a social system where cooking and sharing organize caste relations. His discussion of kaccha and pakka shows how cookedness stabilizes hierarchy through everyday practice (Appadurai). However, his focus remains on domestic and ritual contexts.

Berger shifts attention to representation, showing how food becomes tied to nationalism through discipline and bodily control (Berger). Her work demonstrates how everyday discourse carries ideological instruction, though it remains within a specific social context.

Work on gastronationalism extends these insights. Ichijo shows how food contributes to national identity through both policy and everyday discourse (Ichijo and Ranta). This helps explain how phrases like "biryani politics" carry nationalist undertones, though metaphor as a mechanism remains underexplored.[1]

Conceptual metaphor theory provides a useful framework. Lakoff and Johnson argue that abstract ideas are understood through familiar domains. Guo

shows how metaphors simplify political communication, though his work focuses on limited Western examples (Guo).

Historical work on food and politics, including studies of Gandhi, shows how diet functions as moral expression (Slate). These accounts highlight symbolic uses of food but do not track how such meanings circulate across media systems.

Existing research tends to separate caste, gender, and food transition into different areas. The shared language connecting these areas is often left implicit. What remains underexplored is how food metaphors move across political speech, broadcast media, and digital platforms, and how this movement stabilizes caste-coded meanings. Existing work does not examine metaphor as a circulating linguistic infrastructure across media systems. This study addresses that gap.

Theoretical Frameworks

The study draws on conceptual metaphor theory to treat political food language as cognitive framing rather than ornament. Lakoff and Johnson argue that abstract domains are understood through concrete source domains drawn from bodily and everyday experience. Food offers a dense experiential field in India, structured by cookedness, purity, commensality, and hierarchy. When political actors say biryani politics or describe communities or policies through kaccha and pakka, they are mapping political relations onto familiar sensory contrasts, clean and polluted, finished and unfinished, inside and outside.

Rhetorical and political discourse approaches situate metaphor within persuasion. They show how repeated usage stabilizes ideological meaning. Charteris-Black shows how recurring metaphors in political speech stabilize ideology by presenting it as common sense. Fairclough's work on discourse and power explains how repeated lexical choices normalize hierarchy. Applied here, food metaphors function as naturalizing devices. Calling a welfare measure dal-roti support positions it as basic sustenance. Calling outreach biryani politics positions it as indulgent favoritism. The metaphor does ideological work without explicit argument. The study therefore reads speeches, party statements, and media circulation for patterns of metaphor selection, repetition, and uptake, treating them as mechanisms through which social order is made to sound obvious. Postcolonial and cultural semiotic work on Indian food provides the historical depth of the source domain itself. Appadurai shows how cuisine in India encodes region, caste, and nation through classification and circulation. Nandy traces how purity, vegetarianism, and urban modernity rework older hierarchies while retaining their moral charge. These perspectives explain why certain foods carry political force. The study uses this semiotic history to interpret why particular metaphors resonate and persist in contemporary political language.

The combination supports a reading of political food metaphors as culturally grounded cognitive frames that reproduce hierarchy while appearing natural.

Methodology

The study builds a purposive corpus of 120 instances where food terms are used metaphorically in political discourse. The material is drawn from four sources: political speeches (35 percent), television debate transcripts (25 percent), party and media statements (20 percent), and social media posts from verified accounts (20 percent). The analysis focuses on the period from 2010 to 2014. This period captures the point at which food metaphors moved from scattered usage to a stable rhetorical pattern. Data collection began with keyword searches for terms such as biryani, beef, roti, dal, khichdi, vegetarian, meat, kaccha, and pakka. Each instance was reviewed to confirm metaphorical use. Relevant excerpts were recorded with speaker, affiliation, date, and platform.

Each instance was coded along three dimensions: type of food reference, rhetorical function, and target. The percentages indicate relative frequency within the corpus and are used to identify patterns rather than make statistical claims.The study builds a small corpus of political statements in which food words are used as political descriptions. The material comes from identifiable actors so that an ideological position can be assigned with confidence. We collect public speeches delivered by national and state politicians during election rallies and legislative sessions, party press notes and website statements, prime-time debate transcripts from major Hindi and English news channels, and posts from verified accounts of politicians and openly partisan media handles. The analysis focuses on the formative period of 2010-2014, the years when food metaphors became consolidated as political shorthand in Indian discourse. This period covers two general elections (2009 and 2014) and the intervening state-level campaigns, capturing the critical moment when scattered usage hardened into systematic rhetorical practice. The study examines metaphor use under routine campaign and governance talk rather than during single controversies, tracking how these phrases moved from occasional deployment to a structural feature of political communication.

Collection starts with simple keyword searching inside these sources. Terms include biryani, beef, roti, dal, khichdi, vegetarian, meat, kaccha, pakka, and close variants in Hindi and English. Each hit is opened and read in full to check whether the food word is being used to characterize a group, policy, or political relation. Literal cooking references are dropped. When the use is metaphorical, the sentence and a few surrounding lines are saved with speaker name, party or media affiliation, date, place or program, and platform. We have kept the excerpt in the original language where possible, with a working translation for analysis. This produces a set of short, comparable instances rather than long documents. The percentages reported refer to relative frequency within this corpus and are used to identify patterns in usage rather than make statistical claims about the broader population.

Emergence (scattered usage- 2010)

The corpus reveals a clear shift between 2010 and 2014. Food metaphors move from scattered usage to a stable and repeatable pattern. Therefore, what begins as scattered usage in 2010 becomes systematic by 2014. A transformation that explains why food metaphors could circulate so effortlessly in political discourse a decade later. This consolidation helps explain why such metaphors circulate easily in later political discourse. Food words with communal or caste charge are present across the period, but their density and coordination increase steadily toward 2014. In 2010, welfare food language dominated the field. Roughly a third of all food references in the dataset sit around ration distribution, grain prices, and subsidy debates. Metaphorical usage is sparse at this point. Biryani appears in only about 3 percent of references, beef in 6 percent, vegetarian purity in 4 percent, and kaccha or pakka in just 2 percent. These instances are scattered rather than patterned, appearing in isolated remarks rather than repeatable lines.

Expansion (increased frequency- 2012)

By 2012, the balance begins to shift. Welfare food references decline to around 27 percent, while metaphorical usage becomes more visible across categories. Beef references rise to 13 percent of all food mentions, marking the first clear expansion of a metaphor tied to identity rather than policy. The tone in these instances is not yet fully standardized. Some uses remain indirect, others more explicit, but the association between beef and social threat begins to stabilize. Biryani references also increase to 8 percent, though they do not yet carry the immediate recognizability they acquire later. At this stage, the metaphors are still forming. They appear across speeches and interviews, but without tight repetition.

Consolidation (standardised phrases - 2013-14)

The consolidation happened between 2013 and 2014. All four metaphor categories rise together, and the increase is sharp enough to mark a shift in rhetorical style. Biryani references climb from 14 percent in 2013 to 21 percent in 2014. Beef references move from 18 percent to 26 percent in the same period. Vegetarian and purity language follows a similar trajectory, rising from 15 percent to 22 percent. Kaccha and pakka terms, used to grade governance and political actors, increased from 11 percent to 17 percent. At the same time, welfare food references drop to 20 percent, no longer the dominant frame. Food is no longer primarily discussed as policy. It becomes a shorthand for moral and political judgment.

Circulation mechanism (speech; media; social media)

This shift is not only about frequency but also about placement and repetition. In the earlier years, food metaphors appear as part of longer arguments. By 2013 and 2014, they began to stand alone. They are inserted at points designed to trigger audience response, short phrases that are easy to repeat, and positioned close to applause lines. The wording stabilizes across speakers and locations. Variants of the same line appear with minor changes, but the core association holds. Muslim-associated foods frequently stand in for appeasement, beef stands in for threat, vegetarian restraint signals discipline, and pakka signals reliability. The circulation pattern across platforms follows a similar trajectory. Between 2010 and 2011, most metaphor usage was contained within political speech. Television debate uptake is limited, and social media presence is minimal. By 2012, television began to pick up these phrases more regularly, though still selectively. Social media remains a minor channel. The shift becomes pronounced in 2013–14. Speech, television, and social media begin to align. A line delivered in a rally appears in the same evening's news captions. Short video clips circulate soon after, and audience responses repeat the same food terms, often with a sharper tone. The sequence becomes visible in the dataset: political speech introduces the metaphor, media amplifies it, and audiences echo it with variation (Udupa; Mazzarella).

Functional shift (policy; moral judgment)

The biryani line shows this pattern as it develops. In the earlier years, references to food and minority outreach appear, but without a fixed phrase. By 2013 and 2014, the wording became more consistent. Variants begin to cluster around the same structure, such as "serve biryani for votes" or "biryani for some, nothing for others." The crowd response concentrates around the food word itself, with

laughter and applause arriving at that point in the sentence. By the time it reaches television captions and circulating clips, the phrase can stand without context. Biryani is enough (Jaffrelot; Chaturvedi). The metaphor no longer requires explanation, indicating that its meaning has been stabilized through repeated circulation. Beef references follow a similar trajectory but with a sharper edge. Early mentions in 2010 and 2011 are sporadic and often tied to specific incidents. By 2012, they appeared more frequently in speech and media discussions. From 2013 onward, the tone hardens. The association between beef consumption and disloyalty becomes more direct. In audience responses, especially in social media data from 2013 and 2014, beef begins to function as a slur marker. The metaphor shifts as it moves downward through the communication chain. What begins as an insinuation in speech becomes explicit labelling in replies and comments. The food term sorts and fixes identity, marking who belongs and who contaminates (Jaffrelot; Hansen, Anand; Gupta).

Vegetarian and purity language operates differently but follows the same expansion curve. Early references are tied to cultural or religious occasions. By 2013 and 2014, they appear more frequently in political messaging, often framed as discipline or restraint. These references do not carry the same immediate hostility as beef or biryani, but they work through contrast. When placed alongside those terms in the same media environment, the hierarchy becomes legible. Grain and abstinence function as self-image, while meat and spice mark the other. The distinction is not stated directly but carried through repetition (Roy; Sen).

Kaccha and pakka terms show the slowest but steady growth. From 2 percent in 2010 to 17 percent in 2014, their increase tracks the broader shift toward metaphorical shorthand. These terms are used to grade governance, protest, and political actors. Opposition actions are described as kaccha, incomplete or unreliable, while authority is described as pakka, stable and finished. The caste history of these words is not named but remains present in the background. Culinary completion becomes a measure of political legitimacy (Appadurai; Douglas; Guru).

Semantic stabilization (meaning becomes obvious)

Timing across the dataset aligns with electoral cycles even in this earlier period. Spikes in metaphor usage appear in the months leading up to major elections, with 2014 showing the clearest concentration. Debate transcripts from these periods show higher repetition of the same food terms introduced in campaign speeches. Social media logs show corresponding increases in those terms in audience responses. The sequence that becomes more pronounced in later years is already visible here in a developing form (Udupa). When compared with opposition material from the same period, the difference remains consistent. Food references in those speeches and media appearances continue to cluster around price, access, and welfare. Metaphorical usage exists but is less frequent and rarely initiates the frame. In most cases, it appears as a response to lines already circulating. Initiation remains unevenly distributed across the dataset (Chaturvedi).

From 2010 to 2014, the figures point to a gradual but clear transformation. Food moves from policy object to rhetorical device. The metaphors become more frequent, more standardized, and more mobile across platforms. By 2014, the structure is in place. Short, repeatable food terms carry political judgment, circulate quickly, and anchor audience response. This formative period established the templates still operating in contemporary discourse. The 2023 'biryani politics' exchange with which this study opened required no context or explanation precisely because the groundwork was laid between 2010 and 2014. The metaphor infrastructure built during these years continues to structure political communication, its origins now invisible beneath routine usage. This pattern shows how repetition across platforms stabilizes these metaphors, allowing them to function as a shared linguistic infrastructure. By 'linguistic infrastructure,' we refer to repeatable, portable forms of language that circulate across platforms and stabilize shared meanings without requiring explicit explanation.

Conclusion

Across the formative period of 2010-2014, the material settles into a consistent pattern even when read against itself. Food metaphors in right-wing campaign speech and aligned media repeatedly map Muslim presence and lower-caste location onto impurity, excess, or illegitimate access to shared resources. “Biryani” in rally clips and party messaging functions as shorthand for Muslim appeasement or demographic anxiety. References to meat and slaughter cluster around security discourse and border rhetoric. Terms such as kaccha and pakka carry forward caste histories of touch, cooking, and hierarchy. These are not incidental or isolated uses. They recur across speeches by Narendra Modi, state-level leaders, and content circulated through the Bharatiya Janata Party's digital networks, particularly during election cycles and moments of communal tension. The repetition is central. It fixes the association and makes it legible without

explanation.

The social codes embedded in these metaphors remain active within contemporary usage. Ideas of vegetarian respectability, rules of commensality, distinctions between who cooks and who serves, and assumptions about whose food is polluting or whose body carries stigma continue to structure meaning. When campaign language draws on these codes, exclusion is reframed as common sense. Political hostility is translated into everyday judgment about food. Audience responses reflect this framing. Comment threads and meme captions repeat the same biryani and meat cues, attach suspicion to Muslim kitchens, and ridicule the imagined welfare recipient who consumes the "wrong" food. The shift from humour to sanction is quick. Calls for boycott and withdrawal of benefits appear alongside these representations. During 2010-2014, spikes in metaphor usage coincide with increases in hostile sentiment and documented instances of exclusionary behaviour. The relationship remains correlational, but the alignment is consistent enough to warrant attention. Comparison with opposition material clarifies the asymmetry. In the same period, food references in opposition speech and non-aligned media cluster around price rise, ration access, hunger, and agrarian distress. Here, food operates as an index of governance and material conditions. Metaphorical usage does occur, but it does not attach impurity to communities or invoke commensality as a boundary. Across the sampled corpus, this distinction holds. It supports the claim that caste- and religion-coded food metaphors are concentrated within right-wing discourse rather than distributed evenly across the political field.

The analysis shows that food metaphors became a stable feature of Indian political discourse between 2010 and 2014. These metaphors draw on caste- and religion-coded ideas of purity, hierarchy, and belonging. Through repetition across speech, media, and digital platforms, they become familiar and appear natural. The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it identifies the period between 2010 and 2014 as the point at which food metaphors became consolidated in political discourse. Conceptually, it treats metaphor as a form of linguistic infrastructure that organizes meaning across media systems. Politically, it shows how everyday food language can naturalize exclusion by embedding it in common speech. These findings explain why phrases like "biryani politics" circulate easily in contemporary discourse. Their meaning was established earlier and continues to shape how political language is understood. Recognizing this pattern is necessary for understanding how inequality is reproduced through everyday communication.

The study therefore points to a broader conclusion about metaphor as a structuring element of political communication in the Indian context. Food language organizes perceptions of belonging and entitlement. It marks who is considered fit to share in the national community, who is positioned as contaminating it, and who is seen as a legitimate recipient of state provision. Contemporary political messaging reactivates long-standing caste and religious food codes and circulates them through rallies, television, and digital platforms at scale. This process embeds exclusionary distinctions within familiar cultural categories, allowing them to pass as ordinary rather than ideological. The analysis is limited to textual and media evidence and cannot establish causality. Within these limits, however, the pattern is sustained, repeatable, and ideologically significant. The patterns documented here explain the effortless circulation of food metaphors in contemporary political discourse. When 'biryani politics' appeared in a 2023 television debate, it carried no explicit instruction yet triggered immediate recognition. The audience knew what it meant because the work of encoding that meaning occurred between 2010 and 2014. This study traces that encoding—the years when food language became political infrastructure, when scattered metaphors hardened into systematic tools of exclusion. Understanding how these patterns formed clarifies why they persist, and why dismantling them requires attention to the rhetorical foundations laid more than a decade ago.

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Meating of the Matter: Beef Consumption as a Site of Purity and Resistance

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this essay is to examine social media responses to beef consumption in contemporary India. It posits that such discourse subscribes to a 'selective sacredness' in its vilification of beef consumption in the social media space. Further, it also reads this space as necessary for identity formation within Dalit and Muslim communities. Finally, it foregrounds Hindutva anxiety as the cause for enforcing a purity complex on other communities. By employing Partha Chatterjee's framework of the inner and outer spheres, as reinterpreted by M.S.S. Pandian, it underlines how this discourse of 'selective sacredness' consolidates caste-religious hierarchy in contemporary India. Methodologically, this study adopts a critical discourse analysis of tweets on the social media platform X, alongside personal blogs and media reports. The findings of this study reveal that such restrictions have not been implemented uniformly. While it is implemented selectively to mobilise violence against the Dalit and Muslim communities in certain north-eastern states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, this is not the case. This contradiction highlights the incompleteness of the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric in the Indian state by further drawing upon Arjun Appadurai's notion of 'predatory identities.'

Keywords : *Hindutva, violence, eating habits, social media, beef consumption*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary India, meat-eating practices have become a central axis of food politics. Historically, there has been an unthinking acceptance of India as a vegetarian state, a perception that holds for only a small group of Hindus (Srinivasan and Rao 13). This has rendered the meat-eating practices of other Indian communities, such as the Dalits, Muslims, and even certain Brahmin groups, invisible (Srinivasan and Rao 13). Non-vegetarianism, specifically beef consumption, by extension, contradicts the Hindu majoritarian (or Hindutva) rhetoric that views cows as sacred, which has led to the rise of cow vigilantism and violence against these communities.

Further, this violence serves as a tool to mobilise

anxiety against those who threaten the ideal of the "nation" (Gittinger 140). The anxiety of Hindutva rhetoric targets Dalit and Muslim communities primarily as a method to naturalise casteist and Islamophobic violence. Existing scholarly work has challenged the basis on which lynchings and killings have been justified (Gittinger 147).

For this reason, existing scholarship has presented approaches such as animal rights and environmentalism (Rao), modernity (Nair), and religious beliefs (Gittinger) that have contributed to the beef ban. It has further elaborated on how the driving force for the beef ban stems from asserting cultural dominance rather than pluralistic well-being. These approaches are selectively implemented. For example, the sacredness of a cow is an important majoritarian perception, and its application is seen through activities such as cow vigilantism. The lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq is one such example, and has frequently been mentioned by other scholars as well (Deepak 76).

In 2015, Mohammad Akhlaq, a fifty-two-year-old Muslim man, was accused of storing beef. As a consequence, he was dragged out of his house and beaten to death by a mob. Deepak stated that *Panchjanya*, a magazine, also published an article by Tufail Chaturvedi defending the killers. The nineteen people who were accused of the murder, including the son of a local BJP leader, were released on bail, and later were congratulated by politicians for their actions (76).

Several other accounts of violence against Dalit and Muslim communities have been addressed in the existing scholarly work. However, they often stop at the inquiry of violence. Extending this prevalent argument, this essay positions itself within two emerging discourses that speak directly to the contradictory and circumventing nature of beef ban politics in the State: the practice of selective sacredness and the Hindutva anxiety to demarcate and uphold cultural purity.

Literature Review

Through the literature review, this essay focuses on two existing standpoints to examine the implications of banning the consumption of beef in contemporary India: i) as fascist (Mazumdar 1), ii) as a rejection of Dalit and Muslim identities and practices (Gittinger 147).

In their work, Mazumdar and Bhattacharjee have consciously used the term 'fascist' to refer to the governing bodies—the ones who are trying to implement a ban on beef—to highlight the power structure at play. By referring to the current Indian state as fascist, Mazumdar argues that the goal of Hindu fascism is to redefine India as a Hindu nation, which would mark a shift from India as a secular state (1). Through the lens of food politics, this perception of India as a fascist nation can be examined in relation to the ban on beef consumption. Scholars have argued against the implementation of the beef ban based on the sacredness of the cow. Gittinger's paper elucidates that the "present valorisation and sacralization of the cow" is more related to Hinduism and its politics than to scriptures. It concludes by discussing Hinduism's current relationship with Muslims and Dalits, which views the former as a hegemonic threat and the latter as a dehumanised community (147).

The justification of cows as sacred, or the identification as 'pure-vegetarian,' is another marker of upper-caste Hindus that has been addressed in the literature. The literature highlights a purity complex persisting in the upper-caste Hindu community, which then becomes a driving force for their dominance and need to correct other pollutants (Douglas 131). Mary Douglas, one of the key scholars in theorising purity, argues that the concepts of dirt and pollution are symbolic markers for boundaries and social structures. Superimposing these ideas of purity onto Hindutva illustrates their position within India's hierarchical structure. The consolidation of a Hindu identity is seen as a necessary outcome of such discursive logic. However, this 'Hindu' identity is also inscribed with certain markers which contrast it against those identity positions deemed as contaminatory. That is, there emerges a constant lack in establishing the demarcations of 'purity' and 'sacredness', which are then mobilised in pseudo-legal discourses of violent 'repatriation' and public 'justice'. Such acts are performed through the destruction of those identified as contaminants of a majoritarian, sacred social order, as incidents of lynching and murder of Dalits and Muslims attest.

According to the existing literature, discrimination against both communities was solidified during the colonisation. This circles back to Gittinger's argument. Her research explores the possibility that the caste system had subtle mentions in the varna system and was not solely a result of colonialism and their need for documentation and categorisation. It suggests that upper caste traditions were perceived as authentic because Brahmins shared their knowledge with the colonisers. This implies that the identities of Dalit and Muslim communities were not accounted for while creating the knowledge systems that form the basis of power and hierarchy.

This essay dissects the caste Hindu

implementation of selective sacredness as a method to construct a culturally 'pure' body politic. Further, it analyses how Dalit and Muslim communities contribute to their anxiety of incompleteness because of Hindutva's inability to achieve this purity.

Theoretical Framework

The collection of tweets has helped present the positioning of the majoritarian Hindu, for which the theoretical frameworks advanced by Partha Chatterjee and Arjun Appadurai can be applied.

Partha Chatterjee developed the inner/outer domain model to theorise the resistance against colonial rule by dividing life into two spheres. The outer domain was considered the material domain; it was the sphere of technology, science, and economy. In comparison, the inner domain was where the nation's true identity is thought to lie. According to Chatterjee, as long as the inner sphere remained uncorrupted, the nation's identity would remain protected. Chatterjee has used these terms to describe the colonisers and India through the dichotomies of inner/outer sphere and spiritual/material.

This paper argues that the split between inner and outer domains has persisted in India; it has merely repositioned itself, rooted in hierarchical caste and religious structures. However, directly applying a model designed to observe the relationship between colonisers and India would lead to a misapplication, as the social dynamics of colonialism are disparate from majoritarian Hindu, Dalit, and Muslim communities. For this reason, M. S. S. Pandian's reinterpretation of Chatterjee's model is employed. In the paper titled 'One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere.' Pandian implies that two prevalent sets of language for dealing with caste are present: one talks of caste by other means, and the other talks of caste on its own terms. The dichotomy between spiritual and material spheres that emerged during the resistance against colonialism did not account for the existing pluralism. Since the colonisers sought help from Brahmins on Indian knowledge systems, only upper-caste ideas were developed and defined as "authentic" and "Indian tradition" (Pandian 1736).

The colonial logic of ensuring that the purity of the 'ghar'/'inside'/' centre' was not disrupted was one of the primary methods of resistance; this positioning has now changed. By reading Chatterjee and Pandian's work alongside Appadurai's idea of predatory identities, the new positioning can be studied. Appadurai's idea of 'predatory identities' illustrates how the majority (upper caste Hindus) feel threatened by minorities (Dalits and Muslims), which leads to violence against them. Appadurai argues that there is an incompleteness the majority feels because of their inability to become pure, and minority groups further threaten this idea of purity. The anxious feeling of incompleteness further manifests in the form of violence against those who hinder the process of India becoming a 'pure nation.' The idea of predatory identities is further tied to the concept of purity and everyday resistance to showcase alternative frameworks that the minority groups can employ for identity formation. By reading Appadurai against Chatterjee/Pandian, the essay opens space for minority identity formation.

By conducting a content analysis, close reading and critical discourse analysis of tweets, this essay creates an unfiltered space. Additionally, X does not directly replicate social hierarchies; the visibility of the tweets is primarily dictated by virality (Stewart 4).

The list of keywords (purity, beef ban, Hindu rhetoric, cow vigilantism, food politics in India, beef ban in India, Caste & Food, Religion & Food, beef fest, dalit food culture, selective sacredness, beef as resistance, violence against Dalits) used to find relevant results was compiled from common phrases and terms in existing scholarly work. The 'top' category on X was further used to select the tweets. Additionally, the timeframe of the tweets posted is 2024-2026 to accurately reflect the current tensions and discourses.

What the Nation Cannot Stomach

As Maya Tudor writes in *The Troubling State of India's Democracy*, "the delimitation of a communal 'we' stipulates who is deserving of the special rights and responsibilities of citizenship." (84: 2024) This also illustrates India's socio-cultural power structure. The religious symbolism of the cow as sacred is primarily a Hindu ideology; in a democratic country like India, founded on multiculturalism, national identity should not be shaped solely by upper-caste Hindu values. However, with the surveillance and regulation of eating practices (Smitha Rao), control remains in the hands of a small group. There occurs a mythologising of an 'Indian' identity, whose terms of participation are directly related to the Hindutva logic of what is constructed as social and legal morality. The fissures that emerge while consolidating both, where legality is invariably influenced by Hindutva morality, thus lead to its extra-legal enactment through vigilantism and mob violence.

Only Kerala, West Bengal, and all Northeastern

states (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim), Goa, and Union Territories like Puducherry have little to no restrictions on beef consumption and cattle slaughter. According to Sanskrita Bharadwaj in Article 14, twenty states have either completely or partially banned the slaughter and sale of beef. The implementation of such laws poses a challenge for people whose diet consists of beef. Thus, the discourse surrounding beef consumption emerged on X.

On 'Selective Sacredness'

The first interaction addressed in this study highlights an original report from Maktoob (@MaktoobMedia) regarding a conviction under the Animal Preservation Act in Gujarat. Subsequently, Indian Muslim Archives (@Rustum_0) quote-tweets this report to highlight the perceived severity of the law; the post concludes with the commentary, "Imagine receiving a life-term prison sentence merely for consuming beef." This post is then quote-tweeted by William Seaborn (@will_seaborn), who introduces a counterargument by stating, "Dog meat is banned in some countries. Pork is banned in some countries. So stop crying about the beef ban in parts of India."

In the counterargument, using the example of the ban on dog meat and pork in other countries to validate the ban on beef in India decontextualises beef consumption practices. The history surrounding the consumption of beef in India, especially for Dalit communities or Muslims of lower economic classes, is distinct and structural. Historically, Dalit communities had been mandated to take on derogatory jobs, such as the disposal of dead cattle or carrion. (Nair 14) The meat of the cattle (often carrion meat) was used for consumption, and the skin was used for leather (Uppuleti). Even then, the status of untouchability and the assignment of polluting jobs to these communities were dictated by caste Hindus. Therefore, the consumption of beef is more than a dietary preference for these communities; it is linked to the caste-based exclusion to which they have been subjected (Nair 15). Thus, caste had ordered dietary practices, which were often the direct outcome of survival against precarity and humiliation. What starts as a way to survive the Brahmanical social order has now become an identity marker and a tool of reclaiming dignity and pride in the cultural practices of eating.

The use of the phrase "stop crying" in the tweet is also dismissive of the possibility that alternative standpoints can exist. Such quick, abrasive responses are used when the integrity or purity of the upper-caste Hindu is questioned. Outside academic discourse, the beef ban is a sensitive topic in India because it directly attacks the structure of the inner sphere, which deems the upper-caste narrative as the authentic account for Indian nationality. Any attempts to dismantle the homogeneity under which Hindu majoritarianism functions are often met with backlash. For example, the beef festival organised in Osmania University as resistance and then further by the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) as solidarity resulted in severe repercussions. The students who were identified for taking part in the beef festival, such as Mohammed Jalees, had their right to write their exams revoked. Jalees was charged with police complaints for consuming beef on campus (Anusha Puppala). The uproar stated that organising a beef festival would hurt the beliefs of Hindu students, the negation of Dalit cultures and their consumption of beef was once again sidelined (TNN).

To further illustrate this negation, in the above-mentioned interaction on X, William Seaborn clarified that the ban is only implemented "in parts of India" in his counterargument, which implies that some states still allow the consumption of beef, therefore connoting targeted restrictions. This claim can be further illustrated through another tweet based on MP Sudhanshu Trivedi's response to why eating beef is allowed in the Northeast of India on a news segment on the channel News 24. The tweet by Rasush (@RasushAnkita) highlights the hypocrisy under which the right-wing government functions. The tweet comments on the conflicting stances of the BJP government because while Narendra Modi was referring to cows as gaumata on the national stage, Trivedi was justifying the beef festival of Northeast India by arguing that Jersey cows are a different breed; they aren't gaumatas.

By placing the tweet along with the attached news clip, one can analyse the positioning the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric has created for itself. It raises questions of why a group with a different relationship to food and dietary practices is allowed to dictate the culinary practices of others.

The conflicting stances further connotes that it is not the consumption of beef that matters, but rather the caste or the religion of the person consuming beef. The breed of the beef consumed has rarely ever been addressed when it comes to targeting Muslims and Dalit communities. Often, through their self-designated authority as 'gau rakshaks', certain groups then hold the power to choose persons or communities that they deem dangerous for the purity of the socio-cultural fabric. Often affiliated with right-wing organisations, such groups elide over the particularities of breed or context, and instead reduce

the victim to their immediate identity of being either Dalit or Muslim. At a discursive level, therefore, there is an overriding of context towards the identification of a general religious-caste category that the person is purported to belong to. The 'crime' is thus directly associated with the category in question, in such instances of vigilant justice.

There is a selective application of the notion of sacredness to gain electoral advantage in the northeast while also withholding their ideological control, which serves as a basis for the purity complex of the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric. Shakeel Sobhan interviewed a journalist from Assam for an article on the politics of the beef ban, in which the journalist explained that the BJP government is using a more tolerant approach in certain northeastern states.

In the northeast, efforts focus on persuading tribal populations, including Christian converts, to reconnect with their 'original' Hindu roots…As part of this strategy, they take a cautious approach in regions like the northeastern states, Goa, and Kerala, where Hindu nationalist rhetoric around food or beef bans could alienate local populations. In these areas, a more calculated and less confrontational approach is adopted to avoid clashing with local sentiments" (Shakeel Sobhan).

This illustrates how selective sacredness is operationalised. The religious symbolism of the cow can be enforced or tweaked based on electoral goals and caste positioning. The ability to control the narratives of purity and sacredness is a tool to withhold power and to use the Hindu nationalist framework to define other communities as well.

The inner sphere's dominance and authenticity depend on the enforcement of purity; however, the claim for this authenticity does not rely on its devotion. Power is then selectively deployed to enforce purity as a form of oppression. Furthermore, Pandian's reinterpretation of the spheres examines the inner sphere as a mechanism for maintaining caste privilege (1737).

An example of this purity complex can be seen in a post by Rahul (@RahulSeeker), where he critiques a video of a couple. In the video, the man announces to his partner that he is converting to vegetarianism, to which he is greeted with immense happiness by the girl. The couple then tells her parents that the man, [Taran], has converted to become a "pure vegetarian." Rahul's tweet, which is attached to this clip, starts with a quote by B.R. Ambedkar on how the caste system would become a world problem if Hindus were to migrate to other parts of the world. His tweet further uses this video as a reference to state, "Indian vegetarianism is all about 'purity', i.e. caste superiority. Linking 'animal love' with those who even culturally do not consider a fellow human equal is funny."

The narrative of India as a vegetarian state often rears its head in most discourses surrounding food politics in the space of academics, journalism, and social media. Terms such as 'pure veg' are used in contrast to 'non-veg' as an approach to associate upper-caste brahmins with purity and superiority (Gorrigne and Karthikeyan 21). The association of vegetarianism as pure would also imply that non-vegetarianism is impure. Using 'pure veg' as an identity marker sets the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric apart from the other communities of India. Thus allowing them to maintain their purist status. Those who consume meat, on the other hand, are coded as pollutants within the inner sphere. Douglas's mechanism highlights this phenomenon; it views dirt and pollution as symbolic markers of social boundaries.

The terms 'dirt' and 'pollution' can further be used to present Hindutva's perception of Dalit and Muslim communities, respectively. Even though both communities have been subjected to violence, their experiences and the relationship with the Hindu majoritarianism are different. As mentioned by Gittinger, the upper caste Hindu view Muslims as a 'hegemonic threat' and Dalits as a 'dehumanised community.' The forceful advocacy of vegetarianism by Hindu majoritarian groups has led to the "Dalit writers, thinkers, critics, leaders, servants, commoners, middle classes, lower classes, literates, illiterates and the underprivileged to constantly live with a sense of shame and guilt about their food," according to Shahu Patole in *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* (14). Patole further mentioned how these Dalit people would often claim that they were eating mutton instead of beef out of the shame and guilt they have been subjected to (15). The perception of them as 'dirt' had restricted their cultural and social practices unceasingly, and even their own literature never went into detail about their food because of this (Patole 11).

The metaphor of viewing them as dirt and pollution also extends to the discourses on X. For example, the thread on William Seaborn's tweet had several replies on how Muslims should go to other countries with Muslim majorities if they want to eat beef. The Islamophobic connotations of these replies imply that the Muslim community is disrupting or polluting India. The comments further read as though they are accepting the role of the majoritarian Hindus. Such comments further delegitimise non-

Brahmin identities by excluding their culture and traditions. Since the inner sphere needs to hold on to its spirituality and purity, activities such as the consumption of beef tend to hold significance for Hindutva.

An article in *The Diplomat* by Snigdhendu Bhattacharya highlights similar accounts of the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric's aim for a 'Hindu State' by narrativising vegetarianism as 'Indian Identity'. Bhattacharya further states that "While Hindu nationalists speak of Hindu unity, they find it difficult to cope with the diverse practices of Hinduism"(Bhattacharya). The ban on beef, the targeted violence towards Muslim and Dalit communities based on their consumption of beef, and the implementation of cow protection acts, as this paper argues, is the right-wing's attempt to rewrite the constitutional plurality of India to fit the idea of their rhetoric. The difficulty in coping with the diverse practices of Hinduism, as stated in the article, stems from the accounts of Dalit and Muslim communities as a form of resistance. The violence that these communities are subjected to stems from the backward ideas of caste and religion that the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric conforms to and implements, which are only markers for the lower caste (Nair 15). This is why there was a need to step away from the narrative of modernity and the nation that has been emerging alongside the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric (Pandian 1740).

Attempts to step outside this framework can be seen in a few blogs by Dalits and Muslims. This paper looks at one such account through the lens of the spheres. 'I Like My Beef, and I Cannot Lie' is a piece by Jahnavi Uppuleti that was published on The Vice. In the article, Uppuleti mentions that their (Dalits) relationship with beef was complex even before the bans were implemented. Clearing the carcass often served as a source of leather and food for these communities. Uppuleti exclaims how there is a new wave of self-respect that is seen in Dalit communities to work towards the reclamation of their identity. Another key aspect of resistance against the inner sphere seen in this text is the use of the word "Peddakura," which translates to big meat to refer to beef. The use of such language separates their identity from the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric by creating a newer space for their food practices to exist.

So far, this essay has examined how selective sacredness functions as a tool for exclusion within the inner sphere. Next, this essay will delve into the section addressing the anxiety driving this exclusion.

Predatory Identities

Appadurai defines predatory identities as those that "emerge in the tension between majority identities and national identities…they strive to close the gap between the majority and the purity of the national whole." (52) In this paper, it refers to the Hindu majoritarianism's need to homogenise culture by hegemonising their caste and religious practices (Ilaiah). Banning beef based on the argument that it is sacred to India as a whole, while it only communicates the ideas of the caste Hindus, is a product of predatory identities. Which is to say, it is the result of reducing the idea of national peoplehood to the principle of ethnic singularity (Appadurai 53). Appadurai further implies that due to this idea of predatory identities, the existence of small communities within the nation is seen as an "intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole."

An opinion piece by Nupur J Sharma titled "How and why I went from 'Beef eating is a culinary preference' to 'those who eat beef are not my people'" illustrates this idea of predatory identities aptly. The article starts by describing the author's background as 'traditional Hindu.' Sharma then proceeds to comment on how the idea that "consuming beef is merely a culinary preference is almost always due to our exposure to a cosmopolitan crowd." Throughout the opinion piece, Sharma mentions how someone who consumes beef should not be considered Hindu. Even though she brings up the idea that some Hindu communities have been consuming beef, she quickly dismisses it by saying that Hindus have 'liberalised' their religion too much to test whether one is truly a Hindu or not (J Sharma). Using 'liberalised' as an adjective connotes a restricted and controlled position that Hinduism held earlier for Sharma. This further reinforces the majoritarian need to close the gap to achieve purity. Such implications raise questions about how important it is for the Hindu majority to hold on to the 'true Hindu' identity.

The entire essay is based on the ideas of Hindu nationalist identities. It invisibilises the identities of other communities that could be tied to the nation. It agrees that the taboo against beef is internalised and often remains unquestioned in Hindu-dominant settings. However, the article prioritises the association with cows as a marker of identity rather than other caste and religious communities of India. Caste Hindus follow a system of contrastive identification (Appadurai 51), by fashioning themselves to form a Hindu nationalist state by differentiating their practices from those of non-Hindu and lower-caste communities.

In 1991, the BJP first proposed the ban on cows, calves, bulls and bullocks in their election manifesto (Ilaiah). This ideology that emerged from their brahminical Hindutva consciousness also implied that beef eating was a non-Indian cultural practice (Ilaiah). There is a complexity that emerges from their practice of self-fashioning. Since the implementation of the ban is only exercised on beef, the consumption of other meats like chicken and mutton is not met with such actions. Brahminism, or the caste Hindus, acknowledge their own multiculturalism since there are Hindu brahmins who consume meat; however, only the consumption of beef is criminalised (Ilaiah). Using religious beliefs as a divider is one of the primary approaches to the formation of a pure-nation identity, which can further theorise predatory identities. Observing beef consumption through a lens of caste and religion both have different implications. While SCs and STs have legally been defined in the governance framework as Hindus, their food habits are not treated in the same Hindu ethos (Ilaiah). However, in terms of religion-based practices, Hindu majoritarianism does not treat non-Hindu communities as part of the nation.

In a personal blog by Mosarrap H. Khan titled "Would My Mother be Lynched for Eating Beef?" references the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq, who was wrongfully accused of storing meat. Khan then dives into talking about his mother and her love for beef. He states that even though the area they live in has Bengali Hindus who consume beef, his mother still needs to consume beef secretly.

The analysis of the personal blog illustrates two viewpoints. First, it marks the practice of everyday forms of resistance by secretly consuming beef in a Hindu-dominant neighbourhood. Instead of letting go of beef, Khan's mother found an alternate way to keep consuming it. The use of violence has been discussed as the outcome of anxiety. Additionally, it is also a tool that instills fear in the rest of the communities; however, Khan's mother is an example of how identity and autonomy can be maintained through different forms of resistance. Secondly, it also highlights the difference in the experience of Dalit and Muslim communities. Appadurai's framework operates differently for both communities. For Muslims, the anxiety is framed as a geographic threat. This form of discrimination is also illustrated through the X threads that were analysed earlier. There were a lot of replies that displayed Islamophobic implications by referring to the author as 'Pakistani,' 'desert cult followers, ' and so on. The use of such terms serves as proof for how Appadurai's framework operates in relation to Muslim communities. The verbal or physical violence they are subjected to often functions under the assumption that Muslim communities are not part of the Hindu nation, as the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric envisioned.

In the Seaborn Twitter thread mentioned, another user, @Watsay (Mandar Jain), had replied saying, "Brahminical BJP, vegetarianism is the biggest threat to Hindus. Islamophobia, vegetarianism in India screams brahminism, brahminism & brahminism." Seaborn again dismissed the tweet by highlighting the growth of vegetarianism worldwide while reinforcing his identity as a vegetarian. It is important to note that the academic lens used to study vegetarianism worldwide differs from the lens employed in India. The world is currently shifting towards more sustainable practices; however, the meat consumption in India is increasing as a form of resistance (Deshpande 71). Therefore, equating these two forms of vegetarianism does not paint an accurate picture. The use of such disjointed connections is also an example of how the anxiety of achieving purity attempts to oppress narratives that do not cater to their vision of a pure nation.

Another example is holding onto ideas that resonate with purity, such as *gaumata* and pure vegetarianism. Referring to cows as *gaumatas* or mother-cows connotes protection. The Hindu majoritarian rhetoric claims that they are fulfilling their filial duty by banning the consumption of beef and through cow vigilantism. Justifying violence against other communities based on moral duties is also a measure taken to maintain purity and achieve completeness. A similar approach was employed during colonialism under the nationalist discourse by coining the term 'Bharat Mata.' In Chatterjee's original model of the inner/outer domain, he mentions the role of women as symbols of the inner domain and views the nation as a maternal figure, i.e., Bharat Mata, to further aid the nationalist discourse. Similarly, Hindutva now invokes Gaumata as the maternal figure to hold onto the inner sphere.

Appadurai argues that violence is the manifestation of anxiety made visible. This can be confirmed with the actions of 'gau rakshaks', the cow vigilantes discussed earlier, whose filial duty is to protect their gaumatas. However, this paper argues that the notion of purity and identification labels such as 'pure-vegetarian,' not only restrict marginalised communities but also the upper-caste Hindus themselves. Which is why beef consumption becomes a site for both resistance and purity. By creating restrictions for themselves, as a method to stay away from the pollutants (Douglas), the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric has created space for resistance as well. If the Dalit and Muslim communities

continue to participate in the everyday resistance by making their practices more inaccessible to the upper-caste rhetoric, a framework for new identity formation could emerge. Using the term "Peddakura" instead of beef removes it from the mainstream discourse, further making it inaccessible as a tool of oppression and violence.

Therefore, Dalit and Muslim communities need to continue to practice everyday resistance by making their food and cultural practices inaccessible to Hiduvta. In doing so, it removes the vocabulary through which they had been policed. This would also further oppose the inner sphere by rendering its power insufficient.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research provides a new take on the complex relationship between selective sacredness and predatory identities. By reading M.S.S. Pandian's reinterpretation of Partha Chatterjee's inner and outer domains alongside Arjun Appadurai's concept of predatory identities, the study argues that the consumption of beef is not a straightforward expression of power and oppression. The power, Hindutva believes it has, is also restrictive and self-oppressing for them. The definition of power that was associated with asserting dominance is therefore more nuanced than that; it is a double-edged sword. While the Hindu majority is concerned with eliminating dirt and pollution to achieve their idea of a pure nation, they too become restricted by the rules of control they have set out to control others. This is the structural paradox through which the Hindu majoritarian rhetoric attempts to overcome its own incompleteness.

The study used discourses on X as the primary data source for collection and analysis, revealing that sacredness is applied inconsistently. The notions of selective sacredness, therefore, argue for the use of such symbolism and its exclusion of other communities to maintain purity.

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The Politics of Food in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat"

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ABSTRACT

This paper will trace the significance of food, particularly non-vegetarian food from the tribal space, in determining social and moral hierarchies that justify discrimination in a mainstream urban space. The paper intends to conduct a close reading of the short story "They Eat Meat" from the collection titled The Adivasi Will Not Dance by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. It will study the text through the prism of food to trace the socio-political and cultural nuances attached to the consumption of tribal, non-vegetarian food in a predominantly non-tribal, vegetarian space.

The paper will draw connections between food and identity, tracing the negotiations demanded of the minority through the assimilative pressure exerted by the hegemonic mainstream majority. Furthermore, the paper will deconstruct the rhetoric of purity and social superiority that is framed around the disapproval of meat in the gentile space of the urbane Subhanpur Colony, Vadodara; where well-meaning house owners will caution a migrant tenant against revealing their tribal origins to avoid unpleasantness. Set in the context of the 2002 Gujarat riots, the text uses food as a marker of the insider-outsider dynamic in a politically hostile and socially exclusionary space.

Through discourse analysis and close reading, the paper will analyse the text looking at the othering of certain food practices and implications of this on the discourse of identity. Through this process it hopes to situate food practices as a site of power and identity negotiations.

Keywords : *Food, Meat, Minority Identity, Hegemony, Exclusion.*

INTRODUCTION

When people reflect on their roots; memories of food, its availability, where that food came from, who fed them, and when food was withheld, becomes powerful markers of the creation and narration of the self. Food becomes more than just nourishment or sustenance. It turns from basic need into an entity that signifies an entire history and way of life: It turns into a powerful symbol of who people are, and where they come from. These food practices shape everyday relationships within and between communities and often take on deeper meaning in local and regional politics, where they are used to express identity, build belonging, and sometimes assert power over others. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar underscores the crisis of identity signaled by the denial of a food practice in his short story "They

Eat Meat!" from the 2015 anthology *The Adivasi Will Not Dance.*

The short story becomes a study on the coercive power of majoritarian social censure, and the inexorable push to assimilate that is packaged as a minor side-effect to the larger gain of social acceptance. Set in the gentile environs of a highly developed Vadodara, Subhanapur represents an aspiration as much as a domicile. It carries the aura of high social capital and upwards mobility, an ill-concealed elitism that presents a glowing citadel of growth, modernity and cleanliness that comes with terms and conditions. One of these being the unsaid law regarding meat. The constant surveillance regarding what is essentially a private, personal choice becomes the deciding factor on delineating the outsider and the insider. The one who comes under the radar, is in danger of being outed as the Other. Fitting in becomes a matter of survival and identity becomes a dangerous word.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper will be using the Foucauldian ideas of panopticon and surveillance alongside Gramsci's concept of Hegemony to examine the social pressures placed on individual and/or minority identities to conform to mainstream stipulations of 'clean' or 'acceptable' behaviour. It will also observe practices of Othering from a sociological and literary perspective to trace identity formation and the tensions that colour the expression of individual freedoms in a strictly monitored world.

The paper will also be referencing Tribal food practices, particularly in contrast to the mainstream food representations and the politics of meat eating in militantly vegetarian space. The consumption of meat is treated as a cultural signifier for caste, class and community differences which create socio-political tensions and reinforces existing social hierarchies. Sowendra Shekhar's depiction of the vilification of an innocent act within the panoptic space of the colony, raises questions regarding the truth of multiculturalism in modern India and whether minority identities have a space in mainstream representation.

Urban purity versus Tribal food practices

Our individual palates are a thumbprint of our socio-cultural and political positions, and our erstwhile acceptable tastes can be deemed deviant with a change of location and social etiquette. What one eats, how it is prepared, and where it is consumed often become markers of belonging and exclusion. In the Indian socio-cultural context, food—particularly meat—has been seen as a powerful symbol through which caste, class, religion, and community identities are negotiated and policed. This is especially so in the pristine " neat and clean and well arranged" (Sowvendra, 3) urban space of Vadodara's residential colony—Subhanpur.

The protagonists of the story, Biram-kumang and Panmuni-jhi, are a quintessential upwardly mobile middle-class couple: practical, resourceful, and, most importantly, comfortable in their native space. They know where they stand and there are no adjustments required for them to feel at home in their home. An unexpected transfer brings them into Vadodara, Gujarat where suddenly they are no longer in the comfortable safety of their familiar power dynamic. Suddenly their surname becomes a painted bullseye on their erstwhile confident existences and the tribal identity becomes a tangible hurdle to social inclusion. The Subhanpur colony becomes the microcosm of a larger homogenising tendency exercised by mainstream hegemony, and food becomes the tool of coercion. The colony works as a space of surveillance where the Sorens must renegotiate their identity markers under social pressure to conform. And the first sacrifice to this cause, is the food they eat.

Pamuni-jhi realises the coercive implications of this seemingly minor inconvenience early-on. As the person who not only cooks and provides sustenance to her family, but also prides herself in being an exemplary cook, she recognises at the outset that the unsaid rule against non-vegetarian food will fundamentally change their position in the social landscape. The title of the text, with its loud exclamation point at the end of the factual statement, is a telling sign of the social outrage raised by their dietary choices.

The Santhal identity is intimately tied to their food culture. With a history of famine and a food culture that celebrates sourcing ingredients from their immediate environment, the presence of meat on the menu as a form of feasting and identity assertion. Kanchan Mukhpodhyay writes in the essay "Food, Tradition and Politics among the Santhals"

> Food-culture of the Santals remained closely linked with their physical environment as well as the social-cultural milieu. While asserting their identity in a pluri-cultural situation where they mostly remained dominated by others, socially and economically, people often picked up cultural markers that conformed to dominant socio-cultural ethos. Sometimes they picked up such markers that highlighted their distinctiveness from others, especially the dominant ones, and in this way they articulated their disagreement with the hegemony to which they were subjected. A noteworthy part of both kinds of

> exercise had been the selective presentation of their food practices to others. In order to conform to the foodways of the dominant sections of the local society, they even abstained from what their community had been eating for long. To challenge the hegemony on the other hand, the Santals decided to eat such food that is tabooed for the dominant communities. (275-276)

The Santhal food tradition has a history of including 'taboo' ingredients or items that are usually discarded to consciously assert their unique and resourceful identity. This element of resourcefulness is underscored in Pamuni-jhi, who is introduced as someone excited to explore cooking and makes marvels out of tomato peels. Given this history, the food restriction placed on the Sorens is especially constrictive. The level of resistance exercised by the Santhal community in their native space is unavailable to the Sorens who lack the strength of the collective in an isolating and coercive environment. Their Santhali acquaintances endorse compliance to smooth the transition into an alien space, and reassure them that there will be surreptitious avenues to indulge in their cuisine. Their priority must necessarily be fitting in, and that meant fitting into the rhetoric of purity and cleanliness that Vadodara associates with vegetarianism.

Meat was framed as polluting and meat eaters, by extension, polluted. In a city that is obsessively clean, plagued by the memories of plague, the idea of a vegetarian, unpolluted purity is the ideal state of being. The Sorens were required to uphold this ideal if they wished to be a part of the social milieu, and failure to comply implied the possibility of social ostracization and the stigma of a taboo indulgence. This is further highlighted in the conversation with their landlord at the colony.

> "Vadodara is a strongly Hindu city," Mr Rao continued. "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, eggs. Nor do they approve of people who eat non-veg." (6)

Mr. Rao identifies himself as sympathetic and a fellow "outsider", someone who faced the threat of ostracization and has learned to navigate the hostile environment of polite society. He tells Biram Soren that his family used to eat meat and how his children continue to eat meat, "But not when they are here. When we decided to settle here— because this place is so neat and tidy—we had to pay a small price. I hope you understand." (7) Mr Rao works as a practical example of the coercive power of the threat of social exclusion, and he recognises the sacrifice that he has made. He presents this as the inevitable price to be paid for the privilege of being at the centre, as opposed to the periphery, of the Colony's social set up.

In the course of a supremely awkward conversation he advises not just caution regarding any assertion of identity and active concealment of the Sorens' Adivasi origins The fact that Biram Soren was told to expect this kind of a conversation speaks volumes about the casual discrimination prevalent in gentile society. The fact that Mr Rao seems unaware of his internalised social discrimination is proof again of the influence of the hegemonic identity over his difference as an individual. This is underscored by the model of segregation that Mr. Rao presents in a pseudo-conciliatory excuse for his warnings. "Tribals, even lower caste Hindus are seen as impure… Muslims and Christians they don't stand a chance here. They have separate areas where they live. Cities within a city. Separate bastis for Muslims, for Christians." (6) The implicit threat here is that any assertion of self that goes against the dominant idea of purity will lead to expulsion from the privileged space of the main 'city'. Which city do you want to be a part of? The clean, beautiful one with good roads, or the other city where the undesirables get relegated? The message is simple: Do not risk social expulsion and/or physical violence, comply and be included.

Food, Surveillance and Identity

Inevitably, the Sorens find themselves nudged into vegetarianism with dubious consent. Their transgressive consumption of contraband eggs and the undercover disposal of the resulting waste become akin to disposing of a dead body. Elaborate measures are taken to conceal the act within the private space of their house, for fear of inquisitive eyes discovering their shameful impurity. Food thus becomes a visible marker through which difference is made legible and punishable. The act of eating meat, once a routine aspect of the protagonist's cultural life, transforms into a liability in the 'pure' urban space. Food here becomes a tool of discipline in the Foucauldian sense. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, power often operates not through overt coercion but through subtle mechanisms of surveillance and normalization. The migrant's eating habits are monitored, regulated, and ultimately silenced to preserve the colony's fragile sense of moral order. The expectation that he conceal his meat consumption reflects the assimilative pressure exerted by the hegemonic mainstream, wherein minorities are permitted entry only if they suppress visible markers of difference. The criminalisation of

the innocent act of eating an egg is a direct throwback to Foucault's views regarding the construct of a 'crime' and the role of the panopticon in enforcing the implicit rules of the space as prescribed by those in power. This transformation of the innocent into the illicit illustrates how power operates by redefining cultural practices as social transgressions when they challenge dominant norms.

The lack of freedom in what is technically their home space becomes a marker of their difference—not only as meat-eaters, but also as people with different origins. In the space of the Subhanpur colony, all other identities were secondary or subordinate to the primary identity of the insider. "In Odisha, Pamuni-jhi could be a Santhal, an Odia, a Bengali. In Gujarat she had to be only a Gujarati." (16) The presence of multiple identities was construed as a private affair that must necessarily be kept aside in the public space. This essentially meant that any community creation for the Santhal individual in Gujarat was a risky endeavour because it marked one as an outsider and therefore easily targeted or excluded. Pamuni-jhi's happy fantasy of Santhali open air picnic, complete with non-vegetarian dishes cooked openly, was truly a fantasy in the place that she had to now call home.

However, even with this relentless surveillance and unending restrictions, fissures of resistance appear. Mrs. Rao becomes a partner in crime and fries an egg in the Soren kitchen.

This solidarity between the home-makers is especially loaded not just because of their role as sustainers of the home space, but also because they themselves are not quite the centre of their domain. Both women find common ground in the kitchen— a cultural space that is stereotypically associated with women, and a space that is under direct attack from the judgemental eye of the colony-dwellers. They need to navigate the dynamics of power, safeguarding against censure while also attempting to retain their sense of self.

Both Pamuni-jhi and Mrs Rao are following through on the decisions taken by their spouses. Pamuni-jhi, moves with her husband to wherever he is transferred and has managed to carve out her own identity in each of her new domiciles. Vadodara is a true challenge for her because her personal space becomes the site of conflict and she must find ways to hold her ground against the suffocating assimilative climate of the colony. Mrs Rao on the other hand has a more ambiguous navigation of the repressive mechanisms of the space and her household. While we know that her husband uses the plural while referencing the choice made to settle in Subhanpur, Mrs Rao's actions indicate either a dissatisfaction or exclusion from this choice. The fried egg becomes her mode of identity assertion as much as it is a satiation of appetite. It's not just an egg that she breaks in that instance, it is also the silence surrounding the vilification of non-vegetarianism and the illusion of compliance presented by Mr Rao. Pamuni-jhi finds someone who steps out of the air tight confines of caste, class and urbane colony rules, creating an island of shared interest.

Resistance and Social Responsibility

This fragile camaraderie is soon threatened by eruptions of communal violence. 2002 saw one of the worst instances of communal violence in Gujarat and India in general. It was a period of extreme religious tensions and rampant suspicion of minority communities. Once again, the Sorens' fragile position as outsider, tribal, meat- eater— particularly the last category given that meat-eating was a mark of the Other— makes them vulnerable targets for the violence brewing around them. But they are not as vulnerable as the Mohammeds, whose house is targeted by the vengeful mob bent on blood for blood. As their house begins to burn and the women inside screamed for help, a flying cooking utensil comes to their rescue.

Sowvendra Shekhar uses this moment to subvert the social dynamics of the entire colony. Steel spatulas, pressure cookers, tumblers and aluminium vessels become weapons and once again the space of food becomes a place of identity assertion and the drawing of lines. While food and food restrictions were weaponised for the majority of the text, at this moment the tools that help create food are unified in their resistance towards hostiles who will hurt one of their own – even if they are not quite included. This again reinstates the presence of multiple identities and cities working within each other, and how—when push comes to shove— the social unit rallies around itself to protect its structures and denizens.

Subhanpur does not magically become accepting and inclusive, but it recognises its people—even its minorities— and performs social responsibility in a state of duress. This moment also mirrors the energy of civilian protests and movements that mobilise in private spaces to make a public political statement. That this resistance is initiated by the women of the colony with their cooking vessels, adds layers to the exercising of agency and radical action. The colony members organise vigils around the Mohammeds' house to prevent violence and looting and in this endeavour Biram-kumang and Hopon are a part of the protection team, signifying an inclusion as a member of the mainstream; a shaky position built on

the existence of an even weaker minority presence. The vigils are also markers of privilege. In the cosmos of the colony, hierarchy is clear cut and the minority is essentially dependent on those included in the majority for their protection: they do not have the privilege of numbers or self-reliance.

Conclusion

At the end of the story when the Sorens finally get to leave Gujarat, they are released from their self-censorship and the constant threat of social punishment for practicing their own food cultures.

> It was, as she said, 'our area'... "No one minds what we eat here," she would say, marinating silver carp and salt with turmeric powder, without a care in the world. "And we don't mind what others eat. "(27)

It is interesting to note the possessive tone of the phrase 'our area'. After years of being precarious living as an 'outsider' in a tightly guarded 'insider' world, the shift of identity and belonging carries tangible power and agency. The Sorens can set the rules of their existence and their space. They are no longer required to justify their presence through compliance. This carefree existence, where you are allowed to be what you are and eat what you want, seems a basic kind of freedom. But it is this very basic thing that had been denied to the Sorens for over two years. "They Eat Meat" ultimately positions food as a site where power is both exercised and contested. While dominant discourses seek to regulate and stigmatise certain food practices, their very persistence challenges the legitimacy of these norms. By centring tribal foodways, Shekhar reclaims their cultural significance and exposes the arbitrariness of food-based hierarchies.In doing so, it aligns with broader interventions in food studies that seek to dismantle the association between diet and moral worth.

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Speaking of Chicken: Purity in Indian Neoliberal Food Discourses

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ABSTRACT

Food in India has long served as a site for producing and sustaining social hierarchy, structured through caste-based distinctions of purity and pollution. While it is often assumed that these ideas are fading in modern urban contexts, this paper argues that they are instead being rewritten through the language of health, wellness, and self-care. Focusing on chicken as a case study, and using a combination of autoethnography and discourse analysis, the paper examines how global wellness discourse interacts with caste-based ideas and becomes internalized in everyday practices.

Chicken occupies an ambiguous position within these hierarchies; while it is widely accessible and promoted as a healthy, affordable protein in market spaces, it continues to carry associations of impurity within the upper-caste Bengali domestic spaces. This contradiction reveals how older ideas of purity and pollution are not erased but translated into the language of hygiene and discipline. Contemporary health and wellness discourse further reinforces this framework by presenting chicken through concerns of contamination and environmental impact, even as it is promoted as a good source of protein.

Keywords : *Chicken, Food hierarchy, Purity and pollution, Wellness discourse, Neoliberal governmentality, Caste and food.*

INTRODUCTION

This research examines the selective regulation of purity in the consumption of chicken within upper-caste Bengali households. Unlike other non-vegetarian foods such as fish or mutton, chicken is often subjected to specific practices of cleaning and restriction. Shokra is managed through both prevention and cleansing — sacred objects are removed from the body before eating chicken to avoid contact with impurity, while bathing or changing clothes afterward addresses any contamination that may have occurred.

Such practices appear strikingly selective, as the same level of rigor is not applied to other non-vegetarian dishes. This raises two questions: why is chicken uniquely marked, and why is it regulated

rather than rejected?

In contrast, in commercial food spaces, chicken emerges as the most dominant and accessible form of non-vegetarian food, often overshadowing other meat cuisines. This contrast between domestic restriction and market acceptance positions chicken as a productive site for examining how ideas of purity are negotiated within neoliberal frameworks in contemporary India.

In everyday practices, food becomes a social code through which social hierarchies are organized, shaping distinctions of identity, belonging, and consumption.

Historically, caste norms and religious practices have organized food hierarchies through the principles of purity and pollution. "In Hinduism, the class system, caste system and food culture are the 'three sides' of the same coin...The group at the top of the Indian social hierarchy are forceful advocates of vegetarianism. The pride and arrogance of that class is visible far and wide even today" (Patole 27).

Largely, the food that has been accessible to the lower caste Hindus and discarded by the upper-caste Hindus was seen as impure. Purity distinguished lower-caste food practices from dominant caste norms, and even within meat consumption, hierarchies persisted.

"According to the food culture and dietary patterns, Marathwada society is divided into five categories: (a) special pure vegetarian, (b) vegetarian, (c) mixed diet, (d) non-vegetarian, and (e) culture-compliant non-vegetarian…The people in this non-vegetarian group [d] usually are the social elite or other upper caste, upper-class Hindus—Kayastha, Rajput and other equivalent castes who belong to the Kshatriya varna, Vaishya or even some Brahmins such as Saraswat Brahmins, who are non-vegetarian" (Patole 21).

Meats consumed by Kshatriyas, such as deer and goat, occupied higher ranks within this hierarchy, as they were seen as symbols of valor and were considered rich foods. The meat of snails, rats, snakes, or the discarded parts of upper castes' meals, like certain types of livers, consumed by Dalit communities, were considered extremely impure. "Their food customs were despised and looked down upon by all other categories. The upper classes had neither time nor interest to find out what this category ate" (Patole 22).

These food hierarchies were never uniform across regions and communities. Certain Brahmin communities in Kashmir consume meat, fish is widely eaten across caste groups in West Bengal, and communities such as the "Nayars historically consumed even the otherwise prohibited flesh of the cow" (Staples, 80). The meanings attached to particular meats have also shifted historically. Sacred animals could become "unholy after their death" as in the case of cows with rituals of sacrificing of infertile cows that existed in earlier periods. Over time, the meaning of beef shifted from ritually permissible to socially polluting in dominant caste discourse, while remaining part of Dalit diets due to limited food access (Patole 34, Fischer 124).

These socio-food hierarchies thus directed individuals to belong to either a pure or impure community based on what they ate, with whom they ate, and how they ate. Such layered distinctions reveal how food functions as a social code, often separating the "pure" vegetarian from the polluting non-vegetarian. Moreover, these shifting and uneven hierarchies within non-vegetarian foods create spaces where certain meats occupy ambiguous positions within caste society. While beef has received significant scholarly attention in discussions of caste, religion, and food politics, this paper turns to chicken. In the Indian context, chicken occupies a complex and unstable position within existing food hierarchies that doesn't strictly categorize it as solely lower-caste or Kshatriya food. Unlike beef, which is strongly stigmatized in many dominant caste discourses, chicken is generally sanctioned in the list of meats that the Kshatriyas could consume. Some orthodox upper-caste groups view chicken as unclean compared to pure meats like mutton or fish, partly due to associations with scavenging and with the communities that raised these birds, and yet it is a widely consumed and available non-vegetarian food in contemporary Indian markets.

Contrary to the popular belief that purity-based traditional food hierarchies are disappearing in modern India, in reality, they are being repackaged after negotiation with global wellness discourse and self-governmentality. This study examines contemporary discourses surrounding non-vegetarian food practices, particularly chicken.

Within these discourses, meat itself is increasingly being marginalized from dietary frameworks — health articles, government press releases, and individual practices. Doctors, nutritionists, and government portals increasingly promote health regimes that promote certain forms of protein while discouraging others. This occurs despite the paradox that meat consumption in India remains widespread, as survey data suggests that around 80% of Indians consume some form of animal-sourced food such as

eggs, fish, or meat (Suresh). While vegetarian ideology continues to dominate public discourse, everyday consumption patterns reveal a far more complex reality.

This study draws on Herbert Schiller's *Communication and Cultural Domination*, Michel Foucault's concept of neoliberal governmentality from *The Birth of Biopolitics*, and Mary Douglas's theory of symbolic purity in *Purity in Danger* to examine how wellness discourse circulating from the global market becomes internalized in Indian society, reshaping older ideas of purity and pollution.

This paper argues that caste-based ideas of purity in India have not disappeared but are being rearticulated through neoliberal food discourse, where concerns of purity are reshaped as concerns of health. Chicken serves as the site where this negotiation becomes visible due to its ambiguous position across domestic and market spaces.

Theoretical Framework

In Herbert Schiller's *Communication and Cultural Domination*, the idea of "cultural domination" explains how global communication systems allow powerful Western nations to shape the beliefs and behaviors of the "developing" countries, creating cultural and economic dependency on them. Building on Schiller, we see that communication systems from print media, television, and film to digital platforms like Instagram and Twitter function within a global network that spreads Western capitalist values of wellness and health. This discourse also encourages people to immediately associate health with vegetarian food. This process naturalizes capitalist norms of health and wellness as common sense.

While Schiller explains how wellness discourse circulates globally through media systems, this framework alone cannot explain the persuasiveness of these messages in everyday life. To understand how externally circulating norms become internalized within individual conduct, it is necessary to turn to Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality." In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault examines "governmentality" as a form of governing that works not primarily through coercion by law but through the production of subjects who regulate themselves according to "economically rational norms." In other words, this means that power operates by shaping what counts as normal, healthy, responsible, or efficient conduct instead of disciplining individuals directly. In neoliberal societies, this governmentality takes the form of the self-managing individual, "entrepreneur of himself," who is encouraged to treat life, health, and productivity as personal projects. Freedom itself becomes a technology of governance: individuals govern themselves more effectively precisely because they experience their actions as voluntary.

Mary Douglas's theories further help explain how this new internalized structure negotiates with older purity rules through the language of nutrition and wellness. In "Deciphering a Meal," Douglas argues that food functions as a symbolic system: meals follow a grammar which reflects social relationships while signaling hierarchy, intimacy, and belonging.

In *Purity and Danger,* Douglas challenges the long-standing anthropological assumption that societies are preoccupied with "dirt, pollution, and taboo" because of fear or irrationality. Instead, she argues that ideas of purity and pollution are concerned with maintaining symbolic order. What is labeled dirty or polluting is not inherently unclean, but rather "matter out of place," something that disrupts "established classifications." "In 2007, the Delhi Police brought out resources such as booklets and awareness campaigns that highlighted how migrants' cooking and eating smelly food were disturbing the social order and peace… Certain kinds of food like beef or fermented fish, considered nourishment for the body and healthy, are condemned as dirty and impure" (Kikon 3-4). In Douglas's terms, such foods become polluting not because they are inherently dirty but because they disturb dominant cultural expectations about what foods belong within particular spaces and classifications of purity, thereby functioning as "matter out of place."

These frameworks reveal how global wellness discourse circulates through media systems (Schiller), becomes internalized through neoliberal self-regulation (Foucault), and gains cultural legitimacy by resonating with existing symbolic classifications of purity and pollution (Douglas).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining autoethnography and discourse analysis to examine how ideas of purity in food are reshaped within neoliberal discourse in India. Instead of focusing on quantitative analysis of dietary patterns, this study examines how different meanings of purity are produced, internalized, and circulated through everyday practices and media discourse.

The autoethnographic component draws on personal experiences within a Vaishya caste Bengali household, where chicken is treated as shokra. These experiences are analyzed to understand how

symbolic ideas of purity operate within domestic spaces. This is further supplemented by informal conversations with a small group of Bengali participants, which help position individual experiences within a broader cultural context and identify recurring patterns across households and generations. Since this paper is co-authored, the first author's autoethnographic observations are presented in the third person.

Discourse analysis complements this research by examining how ideas of purity are reframed in contemporary health and media texts, including platforms like Healthline and the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), as well as social media content revolving around veganism and religious discourse, advertising campaigns produced by PETA, and online menus of various restaurants available on applications like Zomato and Swiggy. These materials were selected on the basis of their relevance to contemporary discussions on food and nutrition and were qualitatively analyzed to identify recurring themes such as contamination, hygiene, health risk, morality, and dietary discipline.

Chicken and Lower-Caste Associations

Chicken occupies a particularly ambiguous position within domestic caste hierarchies, where it is not fully prohibited yet not fully accepted. This section reads these practices through Mary Douglas's concept of symbolic impurity, arguing that chicken functions as "matter out of place" within upper-caste classificatory systems. Regulations around chicken therefore are not about hygiene but about maintaining symbolic order, where caste-based distinctions are reproduced through everyday food practices. Certain meats such as beef are strongly rejected as unholy, and others like mutton, duck, or fish are associated with richness and status. Chicken occupies a unique position as a meat that is widely accessible while still carrying associations of dirtiness or impurity.

Historically, country chickens were free-roaming scavengers that fed on insects and even human waste. Because of this, upper castes often categorized them as unclean compared to herbivorous animals like goats (mutton), which were seen as purer. On the other hand, poultry rearing was traditionally the occupation of Dalit and Bahujan communities and through this association, the organism itself further became a marker of lower-caste identity. This categorization of chicken as an unholy food item makes it unfit for the consumption of upper castes and as a result, it inevitably makes its space in lower caste households further reinforcing the same argument.

Kancha Ilaiah draws an interesting comparison between the chicken and a lower-caste mother in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*: "A Dalitbahujan mother trains her children as a hen trains the chickens. She takes the children along with her to the fields, and sets them very small tasks in the field." (21) This association between chicken and lower caste becomes more and more evident in everyday domestic practices.

The first author similarly witnessed a fairly large and regular consumption of meat such as fish, seafood, chicken, eggs, and goat, cooked almost every alternate day in her household. She also observed an exception for three days in a week when the family prepared purely vegetarian meals for the worship of certain deities. One of the key observations here is that none of the other meats demanded an elaborate cleaning ritual that always followed the consumption of chicken. The detoxifying or cleaning rituals after eating chicken and even during its preparation is more elaborate as compared to other meats which brings her to the question: If chicken alone carried a residue that had to be required for greater purification.

On the other hand, the concept of dirt is a "relative idea… food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing… In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (Douglas, *Purity and Danger* 35-36). This allows the residue to be read as symbolic disruption instead of hygienic danger; in other words, chicken is not physically impure but symbolically disruptive to classificatory order.

The author documents an incident from her childhood where she offered a chicken piece to her grandmother who had fish in her plate. Her grandmother moved her plate immediately saying that if the chicken touched her plate, she wouldn't consume that meal anymore. This reaction reinforces symbolic rules of purity, where contact with chicken is understood as polluting and capable of transferring impurity to her body. The author also removed her tabij (a small, hollow locket worn for religious purposes) before eating chicken as a child, which was not the case when she consumed mutton or fish further positioning chicken as incompatible with sacred identity.

Chicken was a meal mainly cooked for the children in the author's household. On the other hand, the elders preferred fish or mutton. Furthermore, whenever they ate chicken, the dining table or the floor where they kept their plates was thoroughly mopped, at least twice, to clean the

shokra. This mopping was limited to once for vegetarian and other non-vegetarian meals.

As Douglas argues, "Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation"; the elaborate rituals around chicken were practices of symbolic ordering, not hygiene. (*Purity and Danger*, 53).

To better understand the practice of shokra, informal conversations were conducted with a small group of Bengali participants. During one such conversation, a 22-year-old participant, when asked about how chicken was treated in her household, smiled and mentioned, "We have grown up listening to this thing that apparently chicken is a lower-caste animal, and we are Brahmins, so we don't consume chicken." She also pointed out how even within chicken certain body parts were considered more unclean than others, such as chicken feet. Ritually, her household rules were relatively relaxed; however, differences in the treatment of chicken compared to other meats were still evident. As she added, "Till before I put chicken on my plate it's fine, but the moment I've put chicken on my plate, now I can't touch my mom's plate anymore."

Although she belongs to a generation that consumes chicken more frequently, the symbolic ranking of meats persists in her mind in subtle ways. She elaborates on the wide range of meats consumed in her home, where chicken was not considered "elite" enough. While speaking of this hierarchy in her household, she mentioned, "If you go by the hierarchy of all the non-veg items that you're seeing, chicken would always be like… okay, it's just chicken," and smiled. When asked how she prefers to eat it now that she is away from the rituals of her home – she acknowledged that its ease of cooking and wide availability allow it to enter her plate quite often. But she still prefers to eat "more elite" meats when she is paying to eat at a restaurant." On one hand, she is distancing herself from the traditional beliefs by using words like "apparently" or, in general, how she laughs while talking about the anecdotes from her childhood. Yet, the author observed that she is not completely free of the mindset; it has simply been reshaped. Her comment, "okay… it's just chicken" reveals the hesitation and suggestiveness towards framing chicken as a lower position compared to other meats.

While these associations position chicken within caste-based ideas of impurity in domestic spaces, similar forms of suspicion also appear in contemporary health articles, where they are expressed through the language of health and risk.

Chicken and Discourses of Health Risk

While domestic practices frame chicken as symbolically impure, contemporary health discourse translates this impurity into the language of biological risk. This section argues that concerns once expressed through caste-based notions of pollution are now reformulated through scientific vocabulary such as contamination, cholesterol, and toxicity, allowing older hierarchies to persist in a depoliticized form. Contemporary health articles often use words like "contamination" and "risk" while addressing chicken. Despite being a good source of protein, many articles angle their text to frame chicken as something potentially harmful to the body. For example, the article by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) repeatedly notes the presence of "cholesterol, carcinogens, pathogens, and even feces" in chicken products. By listing these substances together, the article constructs chicken as a food that is not only unhealthy but also contaminated and dangerous to consume. The language used in such articles focuses strongly on ideas of dirt and contamination creating a clear association between chicken and dirtiness. Unlike earlier purity rules, which were explicitly caste-bound, biomedical discourse universalizes suspicion. What was once a socially specific classification now appearing as an objective health risk, making the hierarchy less visible but more pervasive.

This observation was further reinforced by the first author's own medical consultation with her gynaecologist for PCOD treatment, during which she was told that she should never eat chicken unless it came from a village poultry farm that was unaffected by industrial practices such as hormone injections. At the same time, she was encouraged to eat fish, even if it was from restaurants. Fish or other meats haven't escaped these harmful practices, yet chicken is repeatedly singled out as the meat to avoid throughout the contemporary health discourse. This selective suspicion towards chicken reflects how biomedical discourse reframes earlier hierarchies under the guise of scientific reasoning.

As a result, food is no longer rejected because it is considered morally or ritually impure but because it is framed as unhealthy or contaminated. What was once expressed through the language of purity is now rearticulated through the language of health and scientific authority. The persistence of this selective suspicion suggests that biomedical reasoning does not replace caste logic but reorganizes it.

In these articles, meat was largely absent from images of the balanced diet, while healthy food was immediately associated with vegetarian meals. When

the nutritional benefits of non-vegetarian food were mentioned, they appeared as optional additions rather than central components of the diet.

With time, the rituals in the author's grandmother's house have relaxed, but on the contrary, her mother has become stricter. Her mother, now in her mid-forties, turned vegetarian after a doctor in Hyderabad recommended reducing meat – a shift further reinforced by religious and wellness content she consumed online, through which vegetarianism appeared pure, natural, and healthy.

Her opting for a vegetarian lifestyle illustrates how neoliberal wellness discourse reshapes traditional ideas of purity into individualized practices of self-regulation.

During the author's visits to home, she learnt that meat has been erased altogether from their diets in her absence. On one visit, when asked to cook chicken biryani, her mother gently refused – she no longer wanted to touch it. During interaction with other women who had similarly given up meat, the discourses revealed it as a personal health choice; one remarked, "Eating meat is not part of Hindu culture," revealing how caste-religious practices are reframed as lifestyle decisions.

Her grandmother's refusal to eat chicken emerged from a context in which chicken was viewed as religiously and socially contaminated. Growing up with these beliefs, she came to see chicken as a moral threat. For the mother, however, the shift away from meat was shaped by a repackaged neoliberal discourse circulating both online and offline, which framed meat as unhealthy.

Additionally, Henrike Donner, in her article "New Vegetarianism," says:

It can be interpreted, on the one hand, as part of the gradual integration of medicalized views of reproduction linking good health and fertility to certain diets and, on the other, as an expression of the embedded belief that mothers are the guardians of tradition and bear a duty to regulate new consumption patterns.

(Donner 159)

Donner allows this to be read not as a revival of tradition but as a distinctly modern process invigilated by medical authority and neoliberal rationalities. This explains that the mother's choice of turning to vegetarianism was not simply a personal preference or a return to older religious ideas but part of a wider shift in how food is talked about and acted upon today. When a doctor advises cutting out meat, vegetarianism begins to appear less as a moral restriction and more as common sense, something responsible and even necessary. Health, balance, and care for the body become the language through which older ideas of restraint quietly return. In this framework, abstaining from meat feels like a choice, but it is also shaped by medical authority and circulating wellness narratives that tell women how to live correctly.

Vegetarianism thus becomes a technology through which women regulate their bodies in accordance with modern ideals of health and care, even as it reproduces older hierarchies of purity, restraint, and gendered responsibility under the guise of choice.

In a conversation with another participant, a 21-year-old young woman expressed that her house doesn't believe in chicken being impure or in any traditional cleaning rituals, yet a shift from ritual purity to health discourse is evident when she mentioned, "My mom doesn't really prefer having chicken as much only because of the health issue that it tends to fatten you up and heats your body up."

Ironically, the skinless breast of chicken is often recommended for weight loss because of its high protein and low-calorie content. While some articles highlight these nutritional benefits, others continue to frame chicken negatively, with titles such as "Chicken Is Bad for You" or "10 Chicken Parts You Should Never Eat."

However, despite these discourses of suspicion and risk, chicken continues to occupy a dominant position in contemporary food markets, suggesting a more complex negotiation between impurity and acceptance.

Chicken as a Negotiated Impurity

Johan Fischer's findings further complicate the idea that vegetarianism in India is simply expanding or becoming dominant. Although vegetarian ideology continues to circulate strongly in public discourse to promote vegetarian food as the healthier and more ethical choice, everyday consumption patterns tell a different story. Many surveys suggest that about 80% of Indians consume some form of non-vegetarian food such as eggs, fish, or meat. Though meat consumption in India is still relatively low compared to many other countries, "India is emerging as a major producer/exporter of meat, and of water buffalo beef in particular. Production and consumption of meat, especially chicken, have been increasing since the 1980s" (14).

Fischer's fieldwork suggests meat consumption is being reorganized rather than declining: in modern

retail spaces, glass partitions, organic labels, and nutritional posters reframe chicken as "scientifically approved."

In commercial spaces such as restaurants, supermarkets, and university canteens, chicken dominates the meat market and is often the most widely available form of non-veg meal. Fischer notes that "within the last couple of decades, the country has witnessed a chicken revolution as more and more chicken is produced and consumed" (85). Fischer observes that when examining restaurant menus, "I could only find chicken and no other types of meat" (81). In many cases, "chicken is the only available kind of meat on the menu" (81). This suggests that chicken has become the default form of meat offered in many commercial food spaces, considering "now the frequency increased due to availability of cheap and infertile chickens from the poultries" (Patole, 316).

Unlike larger livestock such as goats or cattle, chickens can be produced quickly and in large quantities through poultry farming. Chickens grow in 5–7 weeks while goats and sheep take months or years. Fish spoils quickly; they have a strong smell and need refrigeration or immediate cooking. This makes fish harder to store and transport inland. Beef is politically sensitive and legally restricted in many states due to the strong moral stigma, unlike chicken. On the contrary, industrial poultry production enables rapid growth, standardization, and easy storage, allowing chicken to be packaged, frozen, and marketed as clean and controlled. These qualities align with neoliberal food systems, strengthening its dominance in commercial markets.

Thus, even though chicken is often questioned through the language of health, its nutritional benefits are not completely dismissed. In market spaces, chicken is frequently promoted as a healthy food. Fischer describes how chicken is legitimized in commercial spaces through marketing strategies that emphasize hygiene, quality, and traceability. In one retail store, he observed that "two posters explain that the chicken was of superior quality meat sourced locally from quality-assured farms and fully traceable from farm to fork" (73).

Consumption patterns also reflect this shift. Fischer's survey findings show that chicken is the most widely consumed meat across different communities. "The general trend was that chicken was the most popular meat, followed by mutton and fish…When it comes to the caste groups, among BCs the most popular meats were chicken, mutton and fish, while the OC preferred mutton. Among Christians, it was chicken, mutton and fish, and among Muslims it was chicken, mutton, beef and fish. Altogether, chicken, mutton and fish were the most popular meats eaten by respondents." (93). Thus, across caste and religious groups, chicken consistently appeared as one of the most commonly eaten meats.

Fischer similarly observes that meat, particularly chicken or mutton soup, "was often recommended when someone was unwell" (114). In such cases, chicken appears not as a polluting food but as a source of strength and recovery. This allows chicken to occupy a unique position within food hierarchies while it may still carry traces of impurity in ritual contexts. Thus, in commercial spaces, chicken is framed as the cleanest and least morally troubling form of meat. Additionally, compared to red meats, chicken is often described as lighter, high in protein, and lower in fat and is hence frequently recommended by gyms and wellness influencers. In this sense, chicken sits at the edge of vegetarian morality: it is not fully outside the system but not fully inside it either.

In another observation, it was witnessed that in social and peer groups, often, individuals from traditionally vegetarian families are drawn into this shift not through desire alone, but through the language of nutrition. They choose to eat meat cautiously, some limiting themselves to eggs and boneless chicken. "Rita explained that she was 100% vegetarian but took eggs at times" (Fischer 114).

Even when chicken is available, the proximity of meat to vegetarian products can still create discomfort. Fischer describes how in one supermarket the limited shopping space meant that frozen chicken was placed next to vegetarian and vegan items. A shopper expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement, noting that she was "not too happy about this" (140). Such reactions reveal that even within modern retail spaces, boundaries between vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods continue to persist.

Chicken occupies an ambiguous position within food hierarchies: still marked as impure in upper-class domestic space, yet emerging as the most accessible and socially acceptable form of the impure post-negotiation with globalization.

This ambiguous positioning of chicken not only reshapes its symbolic meaning but also produces new forms of ethical and emotional engagement in everyday consumption.

Chicken and Moral Dilemmas of Consumption

Even as chicken is normalized in markets, its consumption continues to generate moral

discomfort. This section argues that contemporary consumers navigate a form of ethical dissonance, where eating meat is simultaneously normalized, questioned, and emotionally negotiated. For many consumers, eating meat can produce feelings of guilt, particularly when they are confronted with the violence involved in animal slaughter. Seeing animals being cut in butcher shops or witnessing blood makes it difficult to ignore the connection between food and animal life. Today, many campaigns by animal rights organizations such as PETA further fuel this discomfort by using emotionally striking images and provocative questions that ask consumers to reconsider their everyday food practices.



Fig. 1 – Peta Milk-Day Campaign

One such PETA campaign (Fig. 1) depicts a woman drinking milk from a dog, with the tagline "If you wouldn't drink dogs' milk, why drink the milk of any other species?" By collapsing the boundary between companion animals and food animals, it turns routine consumption into a moral question. Mary Douglas helps explain why this image produces such a reaction. She argues that ideas of dirt and impurity are not about hygiene but about classification. Her words "matter out of place." clearly demonstrates how something becomes disturbing when it appears where it does not belong within a cultural system of categories. In most societies, dogs belong to the category of pets, while milk is associated with animals like cows or goats. By showing a woman drinking milk from a dog, the advertisement disrupts these categories.

Additionally, by linking ordinary consumption to the exploitation of animals, it encourages viewers to question their own dietary choices. Eating and drinking are no longer presented as routine habits but as moral decisions. Through this strategy, the campaign seeks to push audiences toward veganism.

Along with provoking discomfort, the campaign also proposes an alternative. PETA encourages consumers to replace dairy milk with plant-based options made from ingredients such as millets, soy, oats, almonds, and coconuts, which are "increasingly available in the market." ("World Milk Day PETA")

PETA displayed versions of this campaign on billboards across several Indian cities in 2025, including Noida, Mumbai, Chennai, Bhopal, Ahmedabad, and Bengaluru.

This moral discomfort is also visible in everyday food practices. In the earlier conversation with the 21-year-old woman, she explained that although she eats chicken, she prefers not to buy it from butcher shops in order to avoid witnessing the animal being cut. The sight of blood and slaughter produces discomfort, leading many consumers to distance themselves from the moment of killing. The author also recalls a similar experience where she briefly tried adopting a vegetarianism after witnessing chicken being cut while accompanying her father to the meat market.

As a result, many consumers prefer forms of meat consumption that distance them from the act of killing. Food delivery platforms such as *FreshToHome* or fast-food chains like KFC provide meat in packaged, processed forms that remove any visible connection to slaughter. By shielding consumers from the violence associated with meat production, these commercial spaces allow meat consumption to continue without confronting the moral discomfort attached to it. This can be further understood by recalling Douglas's "Deciphering a meal" that in the market space, the structure governing their consumption changes from the domestic and allows different meanings to emerge.

"Blood has a very strong smell…we clean everything so the smell doesn't persist," says the 21-year-old woman. This shows how certain traditional purity practices got reshaped in the new justification offered here. Special attention is still paid to cleaning chicken pieces and the sink where it is washed. In some cases, people also prefer buying pre-cleaned chicken in order to avoid dealing with blood directly in the kitchen. These practices show how the presence of blood continues to carry associations of impurity, requiring additional cleaning to restore a sense of order and hygiene.

This distancing from violence marks a shift from earlier food cultures where the act of killing animals was often associated with prestige. For instance, the valor attached to hunting among Kshatriya communities historically contributed to the symbolic richness of certain meats. Today, this has shifted toward a desire for ethical and emotional distance in consumption practices.

Yet this discomfort is not universal – the author's uncle prefers buying meat directly from butcher shops, where witnessing the cut confirms freshness.

Location and exposure to wellness discourse significantly shape these contrasting attitudes.

Expansion of chicken in commercial spaces has led markets to manage these anxieties in different ways. In supermarkets, meat products are often kept frozen and physically separated from other foods to maintain a sense of cleanliness and control. Fischer notes that in many hypermarkets only frozen meat was available while fresh meat was absent, and "thus, in terms of supply, the market in India did not seem to fully cater to the increasing demand for fresh meat" (85).

While chicken provides a useful lens to study the negotiation of purity in contemporary food practices, its dominance in commercial food spaces also hides an important shift in the wider culinary landscape. In many commercial settings, chicken increasingly becomes the default non-vegetarian option, often at the expense of marginalizing other meat traditions. This dominance is not always the result of consumer preference alone but is also shaped by what is made available in public eating spaces. Fischer notes that in a university mess "sometimes chicken and mutton were available… but not beef, so beef was purchased at the many butcher shops" (124). When particular meats such as beef are excluded from cafeterias, restaurants, or public dining spaces, they are effectively pushed out of everyday visibility.

As a result, chicken begins to represent "non-vegetarian food" in many urban settings. Its wide negotiated acceptance across religious communities, relatively low cost, and ease of production make it a safe choice for restaurants, cafeterias, and food delivery services. Other meats, however, escape the purity debate not because they are free from stigma, but because they are simply absent from these spaces. The constant availability of chicken in markets and menus gradually reshapes everyday food choices, narrowing the range of visible non-vegetarian food items while positioning chicken as the most socially negotiable form of meat.

This dynamic also complicates the study of purity. While chicken provides a productive site for examining how ideas of impurity are negotiated through health, nutrition, and market discourse, the disappearance of other meats from public food spaces shows that food hierarchies are also shaped by systems of supply, regulation, and institutional choice. What appears as a cultural preference may therefore also reflect the limits of what consumers are allowed to see and access. As chicken becomes the most accessible and socially negotiable form of meat in contemporary India, it also raises important questions about the future of food diversity and culinary traditions. For instance, what happens to other meat cultures when one form of meat becomes the default non-vegetarian option?

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that what appears as individual choice is shaped through the negotiation between caste-based ideas of purity and global health discourse. Caste-based ideas of purity in food have not disappeared in contemporary urban life; instead, they are being reshaped through the language of health, hygiene, and nutrition.

While chicken historically carried associations of lower-caste impurity, these suspicions reappear today in the form of health anxieties around contamination and risk. At the same time, it is widely promoted in markets as a clean and healthy source of protein due to its advantages in large-scale production over other meats. This tension highlights how older ideas of purity are not erased but rearticulated within neoliberal food discourse.

By focusing on chicken, this study brings caste-based food hierarchies into the domain of everyday urban consumption, where they are often understood as matters of personal choice. It suggests that what appears as individual preference is shaped by cultural narratives and market logic.

More broadly, the paper shows that social hierarchies do not disappear with modernity but are rearticulated through new discursive forms, where purity operates not only through rituals but also through the language of health and self-regulation. This indicates the broader scope of the study: that what appears as individual choice—whether in food or other areas of consumption—is shaped by cultural and structural forces.

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The Cultural Negotiation of Bhaang in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates how the cultural meaning of bhaang, a cannabis-based preparation based on Hindu ritual, is shifting in traditional as well as contemporary social contexts in India. Based on qualitative interviews with vendors in Varanasi, Lucknow, and Kolkata, case histories of three youth consumers across different socio-geographic settings, and survey data on twenty-one young adults, the study uses a mixed-method design to trace the transformation of bhaang as a sacramental substance into a recreational intoxicant. Although symbolic associations with Shiva and regional identity are still important, young consumers are being actively motivated by curiosity, peer pressure, and low-cost recreation, and are increasingly bypassing the ritual structures that previously dictated use. The paper will argue that the way youth are currently consuming represents not a continuation of culture but a selective appropriation: the ritual occasion is maintained but its normative content is abandoned. These results update the theories of Carstairs and Morningstar, who assume that there is a coherence between cultural form and cultural substance that this research does not support.

Keywords : *Bhaang, Cultural Heritage, Urbanisation, Tradition, Social Change, Intoxicant Regulation, Youth Culture, Health Humanities.*

INTRODUCTION

Very few substances have as disputed a role in Indian cultural imaginary as bhaang. Bhaang, a preparation made of the leaves and flowers of Cannabis sativa, is mentioned in the Atharva Veda, and has been used in the subcontinent for almost two thousand years. Its legitimacy is linked to its association with Shiva, the god of asceticism and transcendence. But to find bhaang in twenty-first century India is to find a substance in transit: pressed into pills in a paan shop that is unregulated, sold to tourists as something local, and still dispensed at a licensed theka in Varanasi as prasad. The question that this essay answers is how one substance carries the burden of religiosity and the relaxed recreation at the same time.

The legal ambiguity of bhaang renders it a singularly fruitful subject of cultural study. Bhaang, unlike charas and ganja, is not currently regulated at the federal level as declared in the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (1985), but left under the regulatory discretion of states, which is a grey area that has enabled comparatively easy access across Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, especially around the time of the Holi and Mahashivratri festivals. The main point of concentration of this change is urban youth, and it is to them that this essay is directed.

The argument advanced here is not one of straightforward secularisation. It is more structurally specific: a generation that has retained the ritual occasion but lost the ritual knowledge, and in doing so subverts the very norms which once made bhaang consumption both culturally intelligible and self-regulating. This is within a larger cultural studies literature on intoxication, which has regularly demonstrated that the effects of substance use are not dictated by pharmacology, but rather by the cultural structures that govern use. The modern path of bhaang confirms that thesis, but complicates it, as well.

Review of Literature

The literature that is available on the topic of cannabis (bhaang) in India can be broadly classified into three thematic areas, specifically, its mythological and textual backgrounds, its ritualistic operationalisation, and its role in the sociocultural identity and stratification. Even though these themes are interrelated, the literature has shown that a lot of methodological and interpretive tension is present which ought to be approached in a critical manner.

Mythological and Textual Foundations

The earliest scholarly agreement has been that the cultural legitimacy of bhaang is found in Hindu religious texts and mythology. Both Godlaski (2012) and Karki are of the opinion that cannabis derives its sanctity from its association with Shiva, and that cannabis is not an intoxicant, but a means of spiritual transcendence (samadhi). Where, however, Godlaski depends largely on a mythological framing, Karki draws his arguments based on systematic textual evidence - tracing the sacred status of bhaang to the Atharva Veda and ritual centrality in festivals like Shivaratri and Holi. Russo (2005) extends it further when he tries to bridge the mythological origins with the early pharmacological usage which provides a longer historical arc than either Godlaski or Karki. But there is a critical flaw in the methods of all three scholars in approaching the study of bhaang, namely the text-based approach all three offer. This renders the shift to lived practice not only useful, but analytically required.

Ritual Practice and the Regulation of Consumption

Where mythology tells the reasons why bhaang is sacred, secondary literature treats how that sacredness is enacted and controlled. Aldrich (2012) shows that Tantric traditions operationalise the Shiva-Shakti cosmology by ritual use of cannabis as a sacramental drug. Johnson (2018), who also draws on Indian and Tibetan spiritual traditions, helps fill in gaps that Aldrich left by describing the practices of preparation and consumption that are specific to the particular spiritual tradition. More to the point, Morningstar (2012) shifts the focus towards the prism of regulation, as opposed to the meaning-making practice, arguing that the consumption of bhaang in India does not represent a free, spiritual resource but, in fact, a highly circumscribed practice that is guided by rigorous cultural protocols around the thandai and the chilam. This corrects a romanticizing tendency on both sides of the discussion — Godlaski and Aldrich. The ritual is not open-ended union with the divine but rather codified, gatekept practice.

Social Identity, Stratification, and the Sociology of Intoxicant Choice

The most critical break of the literature is that of its sociological strand. The spiritual consensus is shaken with the foundation study by Carstairs, who, in 1953, re-defined the use of bhaang — instead of being a means to samadhi, bhaang became a symbol of caste and moral superiority. His finding that the bhaang preference of Brahmans over alcohol (daaru) is an assertion of ritual purity and social distinction, fundamentally challenges the universalist implication of Godlaski, Karki, and Aldrich in which bhaang seems to play out as a democratising transcendent substance. The intoxicant, Carstairs argues, is a social demarcation, rather than a spiritual equaliser. Bahibala (2024) attempts to resolve such contradictory interpretations, challenging orthodox ones. But the integrative method of Bahibala, though valuable, threatens to even out the very contradictions which Carstairs to his credit showed in the most fruitful way.

Research Gap

There are three gaps in the existing literature. To begin with, the academic emphasis is unbalanced towards the historical and textual. The little ethnographic work which deals with contemporary consumption is either old-fashioned, as in the case of the fieldwork of Carstairs, which dates back to the early 1950s, or limited in scope. No qualitative and sustained research is conducted on how bhaang figures in the lives of the urban Indian youth in other

non-ceremonial contexts. Second, current literature considers traditional ceremonial use and modern recreational use as polar opposites instead of the two sides in a continual negotiation and does not capture the processes through which young people selectively redefine the practice. Third, gender analysis is virtually non-existent in the literature: the literature focuses on male consumers and producers and obscures the role of women in the preparation, social management, and cultural negotiation of bhaang. This research is not the solution to that gap, but it recognizes the gap as a structural weakness of the field and this study.

The narrowest gap that drives this study is the methodological one: there is no published research that has subjected the two channels, that is, vendors and youth consumers, to a direct comparative discussion. Exactly in such a juxtaposition, the core finding of this research is revealed.

Conceptual Framework

The research is based on three theoretical frameworks, which are not parallel; instead, they are a layered sequence. Carstairs (1953) offers the rationale: pharmacology is not the driver of the intoxicant choice, but rather cultural meaning. It is not the effect they have on the body but the meaning they carry in the social life of the communities that determine the substances that individuals in society use. This paper builds upon and breaks with Carstairs: the current statistics indicate that his binary (bhaang as introverted-spiritual / daaru as extroverted-social) has broken down and young people are now gravitating toward bhaang over alcohol. It is no mere refinement; it is an empirical revision of his basic typology.

The second layer is given by Morningstar (2012): proper use as normative infrastructure. The socially imposed norms regarding occasion, preparation, dosage, and guidance are the traditional consumption of bhaang, which, on the one hand, gives the practice some cultural significance and on the other hand, minimizes harm. The current research builds on the model of Morningstar by recording what occurs when such infrastructure is circumvented: the edible dilemma, the sourcing anxiety, and the unpredictable and even highly negative experiences of young consumers who have inherited the substance but not the norms. The context in which Morningstar's framework was constructed is one where form and norm are consistent; this paper charts out the repercussions of disintegration.

The third layer (as offered by Bahibala, 2024) is the insistence that cultural practices can only be understood on the premise of the stories that people talk about it, stories that illuminate how memory and social context, the bodily experience, and expectation interact to create actual practice. This method is particularly useful in interviewing young people in this research where accounts of bhaang provide rich phenomenological data that could not be obtained through survey data.

Methodology and Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative design supplemented by structured survey data. The interpretive orientation proceeds from the assumption that cultural meanings are not fixed attributes of substances but are negotiated across particular social and geographical contexts. This epistemological position broadly favours qualitative methods as the primary mode of inquiry; quantitative data is incorporated not to test hypotheses but to identify patterns that contextualise and corroborate the qualitative findings.

Site Selection and Rationale

As one of the most important centres of Shaivite practice in India, Varanasi was able to provide access to arguably the most institutionally embedded traditional context of consuming bhaang, including licensed thekas and a highly established ritual economy. Lucknow was chosen as a high-income northern urban centre where the tension between the religious framing and the market logic seems to be commercially organized and relatively high-volume, making Lucknow a productive site. Kolkata presents an older thandai-and-bhaang trade, integrated into the Bengali festival economy, whose organisational structure is different enough to make any simple generalisation of North India challenging. These three sites represent a fair scope of regional traditions and levels of business, but do not hold themselves out as national representatives.

Sample Composition

The sample of twenty-eight respondents was structured into three groups with each group having a specific analytical role. Four cultural informants, including two in Varanasi and one each in Lucknow and Kolkata, were interviewed as cultural informants with supply-side and historical knowledge which could not be supplied by consumer accounts alone. A sample size of four is deliberate and is consistent with ethnographic practice, where expertise takes precedence over representativeness of population. The constraint, which is admitted here, is that vendor viewpoints may have as much commercial as cultural investment in the narration of bhaang. Three young adult consumers were chosen to undergo in-depth

qualitative interviews, each representing a distinct point on the experience continuum: a secular urban environment in Bengaluru (no festival occasion, no guide, self-directed curiosity); a tourist-mediated situation in Jaipur (cultural framing via peer recommendation rather than tradition); and a spiritually structured experience during Mahashivratri in Varanasi (full ritual setting, knowledgeable guide present). It was a maximum variation sample, which is meant to represent the variety of contemporary consumption contexts rather than to generalise across them - a distinction that must be kept in mind when reading the case analyses in Section 7. A total of twenty-one young adults aged 18–30 were asked to complete a structured questionnaire using the Google Forms platform, and had to answer five thematic clusters: festival occasion and frequency, cultural self-perception, primary motivation, sourcing channel, and reported effects. The given sample allows identifying the patterns and conducting a thematic analysis but does not permit making a statistical inference, which is once again mentioned in Section 9. Survey data is treated throughout as contextual and corroborative, not as conclusive.

It should also be noted that site selection was shaped, in part, by practical constraints of time and researcher mobility; the three sites represent locations and networks that could be meaningfully accessed within the scope of this project. While a broader geographic spread would have strengthened comparative depth, the judgements made here try to reflect a reasonable balance between methodological ambition and the realities of independent fieldwork.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed voluntary consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage. Survey respondents are fully anonymous. Qualitative interviewees are identified only by city and consumption context. Vendors are named only where verbal consent for identification was obtained. Given the complex legal status of bhaang and the associated social risk, confidentiality was treated as a primary ethical obligation throughout.

The Traditional Infrastructure: Vendor Interactions

Varanasi: Bhaang as Cultural Lifeworld

The most revealing vendor interactions were conducted in Varanasi — a city whose identity is so thoroughly saturated with the symbolism of Shiva that bhaang functions less as a commodity than as a feature of the urban landscape. The first vendor, a fourth-generation operator whose family business has run for nearly seventy years, described a significant historical shift: bhaang was once consumed exclusively on sacred occasions — Mahashivratri above all, but also Holi — as an act of ritual participation. Today, while festivals still generate enormous demand, bhaang consumption has become part of the daily morning routine for a substantial portion of local residents. This routinisation is culturally significant: it marks a transition from the exceptional to the habitual, from sacred access point to identity marker. The substance has not lost its Shaivite associations, but those associations now sustain everyday continuity rather than extraordinary encounter.

The vendor also noted a sharp increase in tourist traffic — visitors from other states and abroad drawn to bhaang specifically through its association with the city's Shaivite identity. For these visitors, bhaang is a form of spiritual tourism: they approach the sacred framing as an authenticating narrative rather than a lived commitment. The second Varanasi vendor, Vivek, made this dynamic explicit. He described bhaang as prasad of Bholenath — a gift of Lord Shiva, and said that for many local residents, the experience of being properly in Varanasi is incomplete without it. Foreign visitors, he observed, consistently ask about its religious significance before drinking; they want the story before the substance.

What both Varanasi vendors maintained, and what distinguishes them most sharply from the informal supply chains used by youth, is the system of calibrated dosage and active guidance. Bhaang is offered in light, medium, and strong preparations; customers, especially newcomers, are advised on appropriate intake based on body weight, experience, and the social context of consumption. This advisory function is not merely commercial. It is the operationalisation of Morningstar's proper use: a living tradition of responsible stewardship in which the vendor is simultaneously a producer, an educator, and a cultural custodian.

Lucknow and Kolkata: Commerce, Scale, and the Limits of Regulation

The Lucknow vendor operating a legalised shop that serves hundreds of customers simultaneously during Holi framed bhaang in explicitly religious terms as Shiva's prasad, positioning the establishment as a site of sacred hospitality. But the scale of festival consumption introduces a tension the purely religious framing struggles to manage: when hundreds of customers of varying cultural familiarity are consuming bhaang in a compressed public space, the individualised advisory function of the traditional vendor becomes operationally difficult to

sustain. The religious frame legitimises; it does not, at scale, regulate.

Rajkumar, the Kolkata vendor whose family has operated the thandai shop for sixty to seventy years, described a consumption pattern most clearly anchored to seasonal festivity. The coupon system — customers purchase a ticket before ordering; bhaang-infused thandai carries a supplementary charge — represents a form of commercial regulation that also functions as a mild throttle on impulsive overconsumption. The vendor acknowledged that effects varied considerably with quantity, and that the festival period created conditions not always conducive to careful calibration.

Across all four vendor interactions, four themes were consistent: the religious legitimisation of bhaang as prasad; the maintenance of informal regulatory practices around dosage and customer guidance; a significant peak in consumption during Mahashivratri and Holi; and an acknowledged shift, viewed with some ambivalence, from predominantly ritual to increasingly experiential consumption driven by tourism. These consistencies provide empirical grounding for Morningstar's model of proper use — and they highlight, by contrast, the degree to which that model does not describe how most contemporary youth consumers actually encounter the substance.

The Contemporary Consumer: Youth Interviews and Survey Data

Three Contexts, Three Experiences

Three qualitative interviews were conducted to examine how the setting of bhaang consumption shapes the experience itself. The selection was designed to hold the substance constant while varying the contextual frame.

The first respondent — a twenty-six-year-old in Bengaluru — consumed bhaang in a wholly secular, non-festival setting out of pure curiosity. No ritual framing, no guide, no communal occasion. Their account traces an initial lightness that gave way to hyperstimulation and an inability to manage the stream of consciousness. With no collectively validated protocol to fall back on, the respondent anchored themselves to familiar music — a private coping mechanism in the absence of any cultural one. The experience was not simply unpredictable; it was structurally uncontained.

The second respondent consumed bhaang lassi in Jaipur on the recommendation of acquaintances who framed it as a must-have tourist experience. The motivation was social and FOMO-inflected: cultural completeness, not spiritual aspiration. A delayed onset led to underestimation of potency, followed by an intense period of overstimulation in the chaotic sensory environment of a crowded market. Ordinary navigation — walking, managing noise, tracking surroundings — became effortful. The respondent reflected that they had not expected the experience to be so consuming; their low tolerance and the absence of dosage guidance had compounded each other.

The third respondent's encounter during Maha Shivratri in Varanasi was phenomenologically distinct. A knowledgeable guide introduced bhaang not as a recreational compound but as integral to the city's spiritual fabric. The environment reinforced this framing at every sensory register: narrow gullies painted with Shiva murals, vendors offering thandai in calibrated doses of light, medium, and strong as Lord Shiva's prasad, the approach of the evening aarti at Manikarnika Ghat. As the bhaang took effect, the respondent described a shift from hyper-awareness to profound mental stillness that aligned with the ritual's intensity — the aarti flames, the rhythmic bells, the scent of camphor. The experience was, in their account, deeply introspective rather than social or recreational. The context had not merely framed the experience; it had constituted it.

These three accounts confirm Morningstar's thesis empirically: the same substance, consumed with different degrees of cultural scaffolding, produces phenomenologically distinct outcomes. The Bengaluru and Jaipur experiences were marked by anxiety, unpredictability, and the absence of any meaning-making frame. The Varanasi experience, surrounded by the full apparatus of traditional proper use, was introspective, coherent, and spiritually resonant. The variable was not the substance; it was the normative infrastructure surrounding it.

Survey Data: Thematic Clusters and Patterns

The structured survey of twenty-one young adults across five thematic clusters — festival occasion, cultural self-perception, primary motivation, sourcing channel, and reported effects — produces a consistent picture. Table 1 presents the data by theme.

Theme / Variable	Response Category	n (of 21)	%	Key Insight
Festival Occasion	Holi	13	62%	Primary consumption occasion
	Mahashivratri	7	33%	Second most common
	No festival / casual	1	5%	Minority pattern
Cultural Perception	Mostly recreational (4–5/5)	15	71%	Shift away from spiritual framing
	Mixed (3/5)	4	19%	Residual traditional sense
	Traditional (1–2/5)	2	10%	Small minority
Primary Motivation	Curiosity / social experience	11	52%	Dominant motivation
	Cost & accessibility	7	33%	Pragmatic, non-cultural
	Tradition / religious	3	14%	Declining ritual motivation
Source of Bhaang	Paan shops / friends (informal)	16	76%	Bypasses traditional gatekeepers
	Licensed theka / vendor	5	24%	Minority use regulated channels
Reported Effects	Positive (euphoria, social)	12	57%	Outgoing / extroverted high
	Negative (anxiety, paranoia)	7	33%	Concentrated in informal sourcing
	Mixed / neutral	2	10%	Limited reflective engagement
Top Concerns	Sourcing uncertainty	15	71%	Quality anxiety most prevalent
	Delayed onset / dosing risk	13	62%	'Edible dilemma' pattern
	Social consequences	8	38%	Interpersonal disruption reported

Table 1: *Survey Responses by Thematic Cluster (n = 21)*
Source: Primary survey data, Google Forms, 2025–2026.

Three findings stand out. First, on festival occasion: 95% of respondents consumed bhaang during Holi or Mahashivratri, which superficially suggests continued alignment with tradition. The motivation data immediately complicates this: 52% cited curiosity or social experience as their primary driver, 33% cited cost and accessibility, and only 14% gave tradition or religion as a reason. The festival occasion is retained; the ritual understanding is not. This is the statistical expression of selective inheritance.

Second, on cultural perception: 71% of respondents positioned their experience of bhaang toward the recreational end of a five-point scale (4 or 5), with only 10% at the traditional end. This finding directly revises Carstairs' original typology. Where Carstairs observed a stable binary — bhaang as the introverted, spiritual intoxicant of the respectable classes versus daaru as the extroverted, socially aggressive one — the survey data suggests that urban youth now approach bhaang with phenomenological expectations once reserved for alcohol: social, euphoric, outgoing. 57% of respondents described their effects in these terms. The binary has not simply blurred; it has, for this population, collapsed.

Third, on sourcing: 76% obtained bhaang through informal channels — paan shops and peer networks, rather than licensed thekas. This is the structural mechanism through which Morningstar's proper use framework is bypassed. Seventy-one percent cited sourcing uncertainty as a top concern, 62% mentioned the delayed-onset dosing risk (what this research terms as edible dilemma), and 38% reported social consequences from consumption. One respondent described compressing bhaang into pill form and swallowing it with water to avoid the taste — a gesture that completes the severing of form from substance: the intoxicant without its flavour, its ritual, or its meaning. The most distressing accounts — paranoia, existential spiralling, waking in an unfamiliar city — were all reported by respondents sourcing from informal channels. The edible dilemma is not a pharmacological problem; it is a cultural one, produced by the removal of the dosage knowledge that traditional vendors provide.

Synthesis: Selective Inheritance and Its Consequences

The comparative analysis has a simple finding of both theoretical and practical importance. The modern use of bhaang by young people is neither a perversion of tradition, nor a substitution. It is a selective and structurally incomplete inheritance - the cultural event retained, the cultural apparatus abandoned. The young consumers take the festival; they do not live in the norms of the festival.

This observation amends both fundamental theoretical frameworks in the paper. Carstairs claimed that the decision in favour of bhaang rather than daaru was the expression of a culturally stable identity - Brahminical interiority rather than Rajput extroversion, spiritual disengagement rather than social aggression. This steadiness no longer holds among urban young people as the survey data reveals that they use bhaang with motivations and phenomenological anticipation akin to those that Carstairs attributed to alcohol. The binary he recorded was not universal, but a record of a particular social formation in a particular historical time. Current statistics reveal that as social construction shifts through urbanisation, commercialisation, and the decoupling of substance and ritual setting, the cultural connotations Carstairs assumed as self-evident do not occur naturally. They must be actively maintained with precisely the type of normative infrastructure that is being avoided by youth consumers.

This leads to the revision of Morningstar's findings. The structure of proper use engaged by Morningstar presupposed that form and norm were coherent in order, by being involved in the festive occasion, you were involved in its regulatory logic. The present study documents a context in which they have come apart. The youth consumers approach the festival as a legitimising alibi - as a socially acceptable frame in which recreational intoxication is absolved of the stigma that would otherwise be applied to illicit substance use without internalising or even being exposed to the dosage norms, preparation procedures, or guided consumption that gave proper use its harm-reduction role. The model of Morningstar was constructed of a world in which the theka and the festival were indistinguishable; this study maps what occurs in a world where they are not.

The positive image of the same picture is presented in the vendor data. The traditional infrastructure is still operatively present in Varanasi particularly: the traditional vendors measure dosage, give the context of the sacred, deal with the initiation of newcomers, and literally bear the legacy of appropriate use across a generation. It is not just the active compound contained in the glass of thandai prepared by Vivek or even the first Varanasi vendor, but a developed pedagogy of responsible consumption. To consume bhaang in the form of pills at a paan shop is to lose that pedagogy altogether. The sourcing anxiety, the edible dilemma, the bouts of paranoia and social disruption indicated in the questionnaire are not indicators of the inherent danger of bhaang; they are the result of taking a potent, slow-acting drug in the absence of cultural intermediaries that initially made it predictable.

Resisting the romanticisation of the traditional infrastructure is also important. Even the data released by Carstairs himself serves as a reminder that the cultural regulation of bhaang was never politically neutral; it was entrenched in caste hierarchies where intoxicant choice became one of the processes of social differentiation and Brahminical self-identification. The invisibility of women in the vendor fieldwork and in the literature already indicates another structuring asymmetry that cannot be described completely in the present study. The conventional infrastructure was both a harm reduction system and a social control system. What the present generation has lost is the former; what it may not regret losing is the latter.

Conclusion

Selective inheritance, as this paper frames it, is not limited to bhaang. Urban India is not losing modernisation — it is losing the cultural logic that once made modernisation legible. As traditional frameworks erode, the forms of practice remain while the normative content hollows out. Bhaang is an unusually legible instance of this broader pattern

precisely because its hollowing-out carries pharmacological consequences, not merely symbolic ones — people get anxious in Bengaluru market crowds and spiral alone in unfamiliar cities. The outcomes are apparent in a manner that is not the case when, for example, a wedding ritual is shortened or a harvest festival is commercialised.

The visibility creates a policy question that the existing legal architecture is structurally unable to answer. The NDPS Act's silence on bhaang — deferring regulation to individual states — was not designed with the contemporary supply chain in mind. It accommodated the licensed theka; it did not anticipate the tablet pressed and sold outside a paan shop with no dosage guidance, no cultural context, and no accountability. The vendor data gathered in this research suggests that the traditional systems include a sophisticated and embedded harm reduction system-calibrated dosage, contextual guidance and pedagogy of proper use. The challenge for any regulatory intervention is that this system is inseparable from its cultural logic: it works because vendors are cultural custodians, not licensed dispensers. Formalization is at risk of destroying the very thing it seeks to preserve.

In addition, there is a question this paper poses but does not answer: what happens next? This generation is one characterised by first or early encounters - curiosity-driven, festival-pegged, largely uninitiated. As the urban youth start to normalise the recreational use of bhaang, two futures are imaginable. In one future, a fresh non-religious framework of usage progressively comes into being - norms of dosage transmitted among peers, harm-reduction know-how circulating through the same group chats that currently drive curiosity-first, FOMO-inflected consumption. Traditions, after all, were once new and striking. In the other, a lack of cultural scaffolding creates a perpetual state of uninstructed use, with the edible dilemma and its accompanying anxieties becoming a structural rather than a transitional feature. The fate of the two trajectories relies not so much on pharmacology or policy but on whether the cultural knowledge held by vendors like Vivek finds any formal or informal pathway into the networks where young people actually source and consume.

The lanes of Varanasi and the group chats of Bengaluru are not merely two opposite ends of a spectrum. These two meaning systems are failing to speak to each other. What is lost in that silence is not just cultural continuity, but also the accumulated harm-reduction wisdom of centuries. The question that bhaang, in 2026, is asking is whether that intelligence can survive, when displaced from the normative infrastructure that produced it in the first place. This paper has attempted to state it clearly. Answering it will require research this study can only gesture toward: longitudinal, gender-inclusive approach, attentive to the possibility that tradition and modernity are not binary opposites, as bhaang itself has always demonstrated.

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Disability in the Colonial Public Sphere: Soft Nationalism, Philanthropy, and Reformist Education

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ABSTRACT

This essay studies the cultural construction of disability with reference to nationalism in the public sphere of late colonial India. Taking as its primary texts a range of archival evidence from the 1880s to 1940s, this paper positions disability as coterminous with the interrelated discursive domains of nationalism, philanthropy, state apathy, native enterprise, and pedagogical innovations. It proceeds along two primary tracks of analysis. First, the paper discusses the 'soft nationalist' practice of public philanthropy by the native merchant class of colonial India. Deeply rooted within presumptions of social and cultural difference, which eventually gets written over the body of the person with disability, philanthropy intersected with reformism and education to mark out a class of persons upon whom early nationalist discourse was contingent. Second, it reads the same nationalist zeal through writings by educators who have addressed disability in the colony, primarily through a focus on pedagogy, infrastructure, and resources. Drawing upon the same cultural expectations of disablement as being incomplete, and thus intervenable, these writings detail paternalistic responses to the participation of persons with disabilities in the colonial body politic. Both kinds of narratives, thus, speak directly to the confluence of reformist intervention with popular notions of nationalist modernity. Consequently, this paper argues that cultural framings of disability served an ideological role in articulations of nationhood and political participation in late colonial India. With the colonial state's ambivalence towards disability reform, it was largely at the behest of missionary intervention, philanthropist engagement, and reformist-educationalist channels that disability emerged as a necessary and culturally visible category in nationalist discourse.

Keywords : *Disability, Nationalism, Pedagogy, Philanthropy, Intervention*

INTRODUCTION

Framing disability in colonial India as a culturally negotiated site helps uncover the axes of meanings that not only determine the social position of the colonised disabled subject but also cast their shadows on other actors who have contributed to this cultural construction of disability. One of the primary arguments that this paper rests on, is that despite different forms of engagement with disability, both the colonial archive as well as the writings by Indian educators position the disabled body as 'intervenable' and 'reformable'. Thus, the person with disability is constructed within the discursive domain of national subjecthood, yet at the same time, is delimited by a reformist logic. This figuration, for example, comes to bear upon them only when they are transformed into "social assets"

(Bhattacharya, 9). Nationalism, thus, is shaped by the idea of disability and the points through which the latter can be 'reformed' and brought back into the public sphere. As this paper will show, there are certain thematic points which address these anxieties in relation to the disabled body and the emergent idea of the nation in late colonial India. Broadly, they include the idea of a nation of educated persons with disabilities, reform/reform(ation) as a matter of national service, charity as soft nationalism, and finally, the ambiguity inherent in the state's welfarist responses to the disabled population. These become conditional to the public discourse on disability in late colonial India.

Thesis Statements

The paper argues that disability functions as a mediating category through which nationalist modernity was articulated, specifically enabling reformist and philanthropist practices to claim moral hegemony while reproducing hierarchies of bodily normativity. It proceeds along two primary tracks of analysis. First, it discusses the practice of public charity by the native merchant class of colonial India as deeply rooted within presumptions of social and cultural difference, which eventually gets written over the body of the person with disability. Charity had provided a space for the merchant class to engage in displays of a 'popular, soft nationalism', where the injunction to cater to and provide for those designated as socially inferior could be reworked in terms of a native enterprise.

Second, it reads the same nationalist zeal through writings by educators who have addressed disability in the colony, primarily through a focus on pedagogy, infrastructure, and resources. Drawing upon the same cultural expectations of disablement as incomplete, and thus intervenable, these writings detail paternalistic responses to the participation of persons with disabilities in the colonial body politic. Meanings associated with disability are rearranged to fit the structure of nationalist discourse. The colonial print sphere, thus, constructed disability in the negotiatory space between patronage, charity, claims, and entitlements as part of a shifting disability discourse from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This paper adopts a critical-textual approach to archival evidence on disability in late colonial India, largely in the English language. It reads across texts to frame a narrative on disability discourse in the colony, while at the same time, engaging in archival ethnography (Stoler, 20) to determine the locational networks and epistemic positions of disability within such texts. Thus, it frames disability as a common theme across disparate registers of texts, ranging from official and personal correspondence to institutional reports, from memoirs to handbooks and public speeches.

Conceptually, this paper draws from existing literature on disability theory, specifically the cultural ideation of disability as inherently one of political 'lack' in the specific historical context. Anne Waldschmidt, in her description of the 'cultural model of disability', notes that unlike the social, medical, or minority approaches, such a perspective "questions the other side of the coin", namely, "the commonly unchallenged 'normality', and investigates how practices of (de-)normalization result in the social category we have come to call 'disability'" (Waldschmit, 24). Implicit in her argument is a conception of culture that goes beyond processes of representation, to describe "the totality of 'things'" (24), encompassing the many transactions between individual, social, and political worlds, and the 'relational' arrangements between systems of knowledges, institutional practices, and the person with disability. Casting disability onto cultural practices, political propositions, and points of governance, had therefore ensured its scattered resonance in archival spaces

Conveying a similar point, Susan Burch and Michael Rembis note in their introduction to an edited volume titled *Disability Histories* (2014) that "embedded socially, culturally, and materially in the lives of a diverse array of historical actors, disability reflects complex processes of creation and re-creation in both local and global contexts" (Burch and Rembis 2). This conception of disability as contingent, relational, and mediated by a range of contexts and circumstances, fosters upon it a political possibility that elides the rigidity and immensity of normative discourses. Literature on the methodological elements of 'doing' disability history has been influenced by such theoretical turns in disability studies, incorporating the notion of contingency and contextualization in practices of reading archival materials. Sara White, for example, proposes that the process of "appraisal and selection" (White, 119) of archival knowledge can benefit from a conceptual alignment with 'embodiment' in the case of subjects with disabilities, rather than a social model approach. However, such a method is delimited by the absence of experiential accounts in the archival materials under study, pointing instead to a discursive rationality that ensured its absence as commonsensical. Hence, to reinvoke Ann Stoler, this paper reads along the grain of late colonial archival productions to underscore the nondisabled assumptions inherent in their textual content.

Special Education in the Colonial State: Ambiguous Responses and Delayed Responsibilities

Taking root in a cultural understanding of inferiority, colonial interventions into the worlds of the disabled often stressed upon an intrinsic, natural difference and situated their value as irrational subjects based on this presumption. This left open a wide space where the social and moral betterment of the disabled could be affected. Proceedings from an 1891 report of the Home Department for example, bear evidence of this question as to whether education for the disabled was at all a matter of administrative concern, especially since the nondisabled, normative majority was yet to reap its benefits. An exchange between The Deputy Surgeon General, Central Provinces and The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Central Provinces, dated January 7, 1890, has the following section:

"It is certain that neither they (*the persons with disabilities*) themselves, nor the families which recognise their obligation to support them, would willingly alter the prevailing relationship established by custom between them for the elaborate and expensive arrangements which the Commission would provide. The Commission disclaim all connection between the schemes recommended by them and pauperism; but, if the people of this country once come to realise the convenience of having the support of the helpless members of their family shifted from themselves to the State, a burden will be thrown upon the latter, which may in time grow to be intolerable. ("Letter from the Deputy Surgeon General", 44) [emphasis mne]"

The Commission in question, was the Royal Commission on the Blind, Deaf and Dumb of the United Kingdom, whose 1889 report had called for the classification and aid for persons with disabilities. This it had proposed through governmental intervention in the form of educational establishments, asylums, or rehabilitation institutions in the United Kingdom. Transposing the recommendations of the Report onto colonial India, however, was a process beset with administrative quandaries. The colonial government displayed a general reluctance in interfering with what was presumed as the socially designated place of the person with disability within community and kinship-based frameworks. Between 1890 and 1891, the Home Department had sought responses to the practicality of implementing in India the Report of the Royal Commission on the blind, deaf, and infirm of the United Kingdom. The question of the education of the disabled received significant traction in this series of correspondences. Yet, most of the responses by the governments of different provinces reiterated the fact that the education of the nondisabled majority should take precedence over any attempts to expend resources on the education of the disabled.

Thus, the task of educating the disabled was directly linked with the practicality of 'civilising' a population with seemingly imperfect sensory and intellectual faculties. There was an ideological consequence of the reduction of the person with disability to their immediate sensory and intellectual capacities. It had determined the extent of these administrative-educational interventions on their social upliftment. However, this was not an unacknowledged problem. The onus of pedagogical intervention had moved from the colonial state to other actors such as missionaries and native reformers-educators (Deb, 207). Even though the necessity of such education is acknowledged in the colonial archive, the materialisation of the same is not. Thus, one primary point of contention in the discourse around special education was the extent to which the colonial government was willing to engage with endeavours that were clearly native in origin. Archival evidence of this process leads to the understanding that the colonial state was hesitant in financially involving itself in the establishment of the first schools for disabled students in colonial India. This in turn led to a discursive shift in pedagogical practice, as native reformers-educators and philanthropists began addressing this concern. What this led to, was the influx of disability into the nationalist public and print spheres.

Philanthropy, Soft Nationalism, and the Merchant Class

One of the ways in which disability as a cultural category entered the national public sphere was through the practice of public philanthropy. However, in doing so, disability was constructed within a register of 'lack'. This connotation of lack was premised upon ideas of embodied difference, thus opening spaces for reformist intervention to occur. Such paternalistic interventions were directed towards bringing disability back into a socio-cultural sphere where it could become the object of the popular reformist press. Disability, due to intrinsic 'lack', was deemed discontinuous with the normative rationality of the nation, which was often constituted through the 'wholeness' of its subjects. Reformist nationalism was, thus, inherently paternalistic in relation to disability. Further, since charity and philanthropy, especially from the colonial elites, were spaces where early - nationalist sentiments could congeal, they had become the modes of operation for such relations of disability to be reproduced.

Quoting an excerpt from Rajat Sanyal, who writes about the involvement of Indians in public philanthropy in the late nineteenth century, M. Miles mentions how Dwarakanath Tagore, a brahmin industrialist, social reformer, and businessman from Bengal had contributed one lakh rupees to the District Charitable Society in 1838. His endowment was eventually used in the establishment of the Dwarakanath Fund for the Poor Blind, from which 214 people had been provided pensions by 1840 (M. Miles 1997, 20). In fact, Dwarakanath's exercises in philanthropy had been sufficiently documented in contemporary literature. This endowment, for example, finds mention in Kissory Chand Mittra's *A Memoir of Dwarkanath Tagore*, published in 1870. Mittra's text discusses how it had been warmly received by members of the colonial civil service, such as when he writes about the praises heaped on Tagore by Mr. Plowden, a member of the collectorate of the 24 parganas. Further, Mittra goes on to describe Plowden using laudatory rhetoric which builds into the public persona of Tagore. He writes,

"A note of infinite compassion for humanity rang through the whole composition of Dwarkanath. His munificent donation of a lac of rupees to the District Charitable Society enabled that institution to extend its beneficent operations. It was an act of enlightened liberality, the likes of which had not been performed before by any of his countrymen. (Mittra, 22)"

Likewise, in the appendix to *A Memoir*, Mittra also notes an address made at a commemoration of the life and work of Dwarkanath, which was transcribed and published in *The Hukaru,* December 4, 1846. Quoting the words of Dr. Thomas Dealtry, the Archdeacon of Calcutta, the note goes

It is, then, to bear testimony to the benevolent qualities of the character of the deceased which … were manifest in the most distinguished liberality to the poor. You are all aware that in his life - time one lac of rupees was placed by him at the disposal of the District Charitable Society for the benefit of the poor and the destitute ... These were public acts, but it is well known to many here that the benevolent qualities of our late fellow -citizen were manifested in private charities, which were known only to the Omniscient God, and to those who were the subjects of them. (Mittra, xlviii)

Such descriptions of 'benevolence' account for two distinct subjects at two ends of the continuing process of nationalist rhetoric. On the one hand, there is the philanthropist whose actions lead up to nationalist-political participation. On the other hand, is the beneficiary of this intent, usually the poor and the disabled class, whose location within this continuum of nationalist belonging is contingent upon their role as receivers of such aid.

Enterprise through public philanthropy, therefore, became a significant point where social mobility could be ascertained, and early forms of nationalism could materialise. In calling it 'soft nationalism', I am demarcating it from later anticolonial thought, which was premised upon an incipient nationalist imagination. Elitist engagement in philanthropy, often within cultural silos of religious, cultural, caste-kin and regional networks, was a consequence of the discontentment and frustration which the elites faced upon encountering "legal devices by which British interests sought to dominate business enterprise" (Kaviraj, 324). As Kaviraj notes, this disaffection, for the elites, eventually led to the formation of associations such as the Indian National Congress. While this form of frustration was "mild", especially since the elites "perceived the dependence of their own eminence on British power too vividly to try to endanger or challenge it" (324), what this had led to was displays of authority over domains which were culturally inscribed, and which the elites could then control. Such an inscription was not anticolonial in its strongest sense, nor was it violent or populist, as later forms of nationalist discourse. Instead, it set out the conditions for early patriotic reform, carefully mediating and maintaining the positions of the elites with respect to British hegemony. Enterprise by the elite class, thus, found form in such public displays, contributing to a proto-nationalism, which seemed to ideologize that Indians can take care of their own. Acts of philanthropy and their subsequent reiteration in the print sphere were, therefore, important markers of the extent of their participation. The structure of aid in philanthropy, however, was coterminous with mechanisms of organised relief efforts which involved both British and Indian participation, bringing to the fore the same intervenable subject whose disability provided the space for such narratives of national engagement to exist.

One of the spaces where philanthropy intersected with incipient nationalism was education, specifically in the case of schools for disabled students that were emerging in colonial 'contact zones' (Pratt) such as presidencies of Bombay and Calcutta. P.C. Bagchi's edited collection *The Second City of the Empire*, which was published to familiarise members of the Indian Science Congress Association for its twenty fifth session to be held at Calcutta in 1938, provides evidence of this. Writing about the prominent benefactors of the Calcutta Deaf School, Bagchi mentions Raja Sarat Chandra Roy Choudhury Bahadur of Chanchal, a region in Malda, Bengal, who

had contributed "an endowment of two lacs and a donation of Rs. 20000/- towards the cost of an extension of the school building" (Bagchi, 161; "A Munificent Gift", 12). In another instance, a short column in an issue of *The Bombay Chronicle*, dated March 22, 1947, points towards the intersecting relations between philanthropy, special education, and its documentation in the popular press. The article writes about a student, Deoji, who had displayed "special merit" and had appeared for the matriculation examination of the Bombay University that month ("Blind Boy to Appear at Matric Exam", 11). Deoji had been receiving a stipend of sixty rupees every month for his "private tuition fees" from the "trustees of Sri Dorabji Tata Trust". Thus, philanthropy in colonial India had come to bear as much, if not more importance as the cursory grants by the colonial state towards the cause of special education.

Although in several instances this notion of progress manifested in terms of "filial piety and obligation, driven by family and religious motivations" (Kaul, Sandhu and Alam, 12), disability was often understood as a levelling category, including other groups who were seen as requiring economic and social aid such as the old, sick, and ill. This was a general classificatory scheme prevalent in the imperial metropole, and surely enough, were translated into the local context of the colony where it fell upon the merchant class to engage in philanthropy according to their religious or community-based interests. However, this would be a generalised presumption concerning the motivations of merchant classes. Kaul et al have noted, for example, that

This was much in line with the business practices where, despite caste differentiation, communities did come together on several occasions to form "mercantile and political" alliances for mutual benefit. Thus, in a sharply polarized Indian society, the disabled on certain occasions emerged as a fused category deserving of charity, transcending ethnic, religious and gender differences (Kaul, Sandhu and Alam, 11).

Even though this model of philanthropy had drawn on points of application from the imperial metropole, the adoption of this framework by the merchant class ended up repositioning disability as an important cultural object. Its meanings could be extended beyond the traditional kinship-based structure where it had been located before the influx of colonial technologies of governing the body. Thus, the disabled body came to hold a focal status within narratives of native entrepreneurship through which political claims could be made against the interventions of the imperial state. Public charity became a fundamental site where multiple points of interest and intervention mediated one another, leading to a concretisation of social roles in the pursuit of political assertions. As James Staples writes while prefacing his study of charitable practices in postcolonial South India,

"By constituting disability in relation to charity, gifting, and philanthropy … various kinds of bodily differences in India produce opportunities and constraints, both for those defined by themselves or others as 'disabled' people and for those who work with them in various capacities (Staples, 3)."

Philanthropy as a socio-cultural practice presents a mutable, inflected space for multiple influences to take their course. With the ascension of the native merchant class, the person with disability came to bear a significant role in the confluent discourses of national assertion through the process of public philanthropy. What this eventually led to, was the transformation of the status of disability from its communal and domestic conception to a national-charitable framework, where institutional intervention was critical in rewriting its cultural meaning, and where relief and aid coexisted with the terms of social reform. With the increased focus on special education, particularly with the involvement of Indian teachers, educationalists and philanthropists, a corpus of literature began to emerge which were directed towards politicisation of the experience of disability. These writings included educational manuals, university dissertations, reports, pamphlets, and personal essays. Disparate in form but connected by the predilection to discuss disability as an important feature of emerging political consciousness, these texts will be the focus of the following section to study the mediation of disability with nationalism.

Special Education as 'Native Enterprise': Reformist Zeal and Paternalist Inclusion in the Nationalist Public Sphere

While the first school to be built specifically for the education of deaf-mute persons was at Bombay in 1884, the Calcutta School for the Deaf followed in 1893. The school at Bombay was a missionary enterprise, yet the one at Calcutta did not draw any institutional support from the colonial missionary structure. As discussed above, the colonial government's reluctance had led to the intervention of Girindranath Bhose, who had conveyed his interest in founding a school for deaf-mute persons in Calcutta. Bhose had reached out to the Director of The School and Training College of Teachers of the Association for the Oral Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb with enquiries regarding the costs of setting

up a school for deaf-mute persons, as well as with a proposition to send a couple of Indian teachers to the United Kingdom to study the methods of special education. The latter proposition, however, fell through. S.N. Banerjee, in the 1949 article also discussed above, considered this to be a fortuitous turn of events. He notes how he

> … heard from his father, the late Jamininath Banerji, one of the founders and first principal of Calcutta Deaf and Dumb School, that there had been an agreement almost completed between Girindranath Bhose and an English teacher to bring him out to India. fortunately, however, the agreement finally fell through to give room to the native enterprise. (S. Banerji, 5)

Thus, there emerged a space where this colonial ambivalence towards specialised pedagogical approaches for deaf-mute persons was addressed through native enterprise, with Indian educators often drawing from the knowledges, methods, and technologies of pedagogy which had come up in the imperial metropole.

Such reformist-educationalist zeal also found fruition in the work of educators, most of whom were students at the schools set up by the first generation of special educators in the colony. Subodh Chandra Roy, a former student of the Calcutta Blind School, is one example of this. His book, *The Blind in India and Abroad*, which was published by the University of Calcutta in 1944, is a collection of disparate topics related to blindness in colonial India. These short pieces which had either been published in several journals and magazines as individual articles, or transcribed from radio talks and public lectures, bear evidence of Roy's engagement with disability as a transformative, political issue which demanded administrative and public attention.

Besides carefully maneuvering certain frameworks of conceptualising special education and vocational services which he had encountered outside colonised India, Roy also attributes a political valence to disability as an index of lived experience, drawing from his own account of blindness. For example, Roy writes about his personal experience of encountering special education and rehabilitative methods in his visit to countries such as the United States, England, France, and Japan (Roy, 31), with the explicit intention of adopting some of these knowledges for the betterment of the class of blind persons in India. Other points of discussion include Roy's broaching of the topic of blindness with personas of national and international repute such as Rabindranath Tagore (Roy, 34) and Helen Keller (Roy, 23), the possible ways in which the blind could aid in the efforts of the Second World War chiefly as radio operators (Roy, 192), criticism and recommendations for the Government of India's adoption of a Uniform Braille Code (Roy, 177), the contribution of other educators and social reformers such as Ramananda Chatterjee in furthering the cause of blind education (Roy, 246), several general discussions on the lived experiences of a person with blindness (Roy, 128), as well as, Roy's attempt at founding an institution for the adult blind of India, based on the model of Lighthouse for the Blind which he had encountered in Japan, and which consequently, came to called the All-India Lighthouse for the Blind (Roy, 114).

Likewise, A.K.Shah, the erstwhile Principal of the Calcutta Blind School had brought out a collection titled *Six Hundred Thousand* in 1942, which consisted of five articles of which three had been transcribed from public lectures delivered by him, one had been sent as a note to the Government of India, and another one had been previously published in a Bengali-language magazine titled *Sisusathi*. Shah's text covers a range of topics, although they are limited in number unlike Roy's. The articles compiled by Shah range from discussions regarding the social life of blindness and its variegated meanings which construct the blind person as deserving of pity and paternalism, a historical mapping of education for blind persons and its localisation in the context of colonial India, the extent of governmental and missionary intervention in affecting the lives of the person with blindness, a brief history of the philanthropic and educational work done for the blind with particular reference to the Calcutta Blind School, and a trenchant critique of the cultural meanings that determine the position of the blind person within the nondisabled sphere of social life. Both these texts present a complexly mediated, thematically diverse understanding of disability that happens to be far removed from the narrow, direct interrogations of the colonial state. In their assertion of a subjectivity of the disabled person, both texts therefore foreground a fervent desire to position the disabled body as central to a national imagination.

While these writings do not frame disability and its associated effects as a form of anticolonial resistance, there does appear a political necessity of acknowledging the democratic demands of the person with disability. This necessity is brought to the fore by the propagation of ideas about inclusion through reform and rehabilitation, as well as the adoption of methods of teaching which have been witnessed outside the colony and which the authors desired to lobby for in the colony. Such ideas existed in the negotiatory space opened due to colonial

intervention. One instance of this can be seen in a letter written by P.L Desai, which had been published in the May 1926 issue of the *American Annals of the Deaf*. Desai, who was the founder and erstwhile principal of the Ahmedabad School for the Deaf, had written a letter. In it, he acknowledges that "thanks to the foreign missions which inaugurated the schools for defectives in this country … their pioneer work has awakened indigenous efforts in this direction" (Desai, 295). He then goes on to mention the Ahmedabad school as being "the first school of its kind … that falls in this category of native schools in this presidency (Bombay)". (Desai, 295). Nationalism, therefore, is realised as a complicated, transformable, and generative process which engages with the question of disability and colonial intervention in specifically negotiated ways.

However, there was another side of this discourse on disability within public narratives of nationalism. Despite the political valence brought upon it through its circulation in the public discourse, disability was still rooted in the basic conception of physical, intellectual, and sensory difference. Correspondingly, this notation of difference served to validate these forms of political enunciation, through the hegemony of social reformation of a class of people deemed as fundamentally inferior in their personhood. It was not always within colonial governmentality or missionary schools where this ideology of perfecting the disabled on moral and intellectual grounds was directed. Writing about Lal Behari Shah, who had founded the Calcutta School for the Blind in 1897, Ras Mohun Halder mentions in his 1933 dissertation titled *Education as Guidance for Blind in Bengal,* how "Mr. Shah thought that it was not enough merely to clothe and feed the blind; there should be a definite attempt to make them useful and contributing members of society" (Haldar, 2). Likewise, Kalidas Bhattacharya, who had founded the Delhi Deaf and Dumb School in 1931 writes the following in a 1938 article titled "A Statistical Survey of the Present Educational Condition of the Infirm—the Deaf-Mutes, the Blind, and the Feeble-minded—in India":

"Modern India is a nation in the making, and all constructive work with oneness of purpose is essentially required in the various phases of the life of the people…The problem of the infirm, their low percentage in comparison with the vast mass of the population notwithstanding, is no less a problem of the country from the humanitarian and economic point of view…Many of these infirms are found with keen intellect which can compare favourably with the average intelligent people of our country. These can be turned into social assets provided proper opportunities are created for them. (Bhattacharya, 9)"

Aligning difference with inferiority, the person with disability was reduced to a figure of lack and absence. The presumption of a normative ideal served to validate the demands made on the body of the person with disability, which was further deployed as a means towards achieving the cultural-political modernity of a nation struggling with colonial dominance. Such discursive imaginings were, therefore, in line with the agenda of eugenic-based thought, which was itself premised on the civic disqualification of nonnormative physicality. Another striking example of this presumption of natural difference as a site where the collective progress of the nation could be affected, is seen in an annual report of the Calcutta Blind School. The front matter of this report from the year 1952 presents a plea to the reading public to contribute towards the aid of deaf-mute students at the school, by prefacing its request with the assertion that

"Nature has smitten the deaf child and has denied him the human heritage of *speech*. The Calcutta Deaf and Dumb School helps the *deaf-mute* to acquire *speech* and the *understanding of language*… There are 18000 deaf mutes in West Bengal. Uneducated deaf-mutes are a tragic *burden on their families as well as society*. Why not educate them and put them on their own legs so that they can earn and *live* as good useful citizens. ("Sixtieth Annual Report") [emphasis in the original]"

This didacticism was, in all probability, used for formal purposes of conveying a sense of urgent appeal within the limits of the print space available. Nonetheless, the writing here betrays a curative imaginary (Kafer, 27) which is stretched out to configure the social value of welfare for deaf-mute students. In line with the argument thus far, is also the direct mention to nationalist participation which the deaf-mute child is clearly presented as being outside the bounds of. Thus, the appeal to education of deaf-mute students is premised on a naturally determined lack or gap, which needs to be reformed so that their nonnormativity does not preclude them from being considered contributing, purposeful social beings. The idea of national service, therefore, gets deflected through the presumed lack in the personhood of the disabled.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that disability functions as a mediating category through which nationalist modernity was articulated, specifically enabling reformist and philanthropist practices to claim moral hegemony while reproducing hierarchies of bodily normativity. Cultural framings of disability served an ideological role in articulations of nationhood and political participation in late colonial India. With the

colonial state's ambivalence towards disability reform, it was largely at the behest of missionary intervention, philanthropist engagement, and reformist-educationalist channels that disability emerged as a fundamental category in nationalist discourse. This paper thus, has looked at the role of the native merchant class in aligning the 'issue' of charitable intervention with the larger narrative of soft nationalism. Further, it has argued that the colonial print sphere, especially in English, was significant in engaging with disability as a reformist goal, by looking at the writings of certain educators and reformers, most of whom were associated with pedagogical spaces such as schools for the deaf-mute and the blind. These writings fostered an imaginary of national belonging, where the person with disability was constructed as cognizant of their claims to citizenship, through sustained attention to the state's neglect of means and provisions for the disabled. Such writings also performed the critical task of integrating disability into a national public sphere, informing opinions on special education, shaping consensus regarding the nature of interventions that can be made, and locating disability within discursive reformism. Through personal anecdotes, sociological analyses, political statements, and educational treatises, these writings circulated disability as an important ideological category around the map of public discourse in late colonial India.

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Narrativizing the Wet Nurse Economy: Reproductive Labour, Narrative, and the Politics of the Lactating Body

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the wet nurse economy in India through a literary-critical framework that foregrounds reproductive labour as both material practice and narrative construction. While historical and medical accounts have documented wet nursing as part of infant-feeding regimes (Fildes; Kippley), such accounts often remain descriptive, leaving underexamined the symbolic and ideological work performed by the lactating body. This study turns to Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* (*Breast-Giver*), read in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's English translation, to analyse how literature produces knowledge about reproductive labour.

Through a close textual analysis informed by feminist theory, social reproduction theory, and subaltern studies, the paper argues that the lactating body emerges as a site of extraction, repetition, and exhaustion rather than naturalised care. By situating the narrative within Indian mythological and cultural frameworks—particularly a figure such as Yashoda—the paper demonstrates how maternal labour is both sanctified and exploited through cyclical and repetitive structures. *Stanadayini* reveals reproductive labour as historically embedded, materially exploitative, and narratively sustained.

Keywords : *Mahasweta Devi, Stanadayini, wet nurse, reproductive labour, literary studies, subalternity, embodiment, care economy*

Introduction: The Wet Nurse as Textual Problem

The figure of the wet nurse occupies a fraught position within the cultural and historical imagination of care in India. While indispensable to the reproduction of life, she remains marginal within both historical documentation and cultural recognition. Existing historical studies of wet nursing (such as Valerie Fildes' work on infant feeding practices) tend to treat the wet nurse as part of a broader demographic or medical economy. However, such accounts often fail to interrogate how reproductive labour is symbolically constructed, naturalised, and obscured. This paper approaches the wet nurse not merely as a historical subject but as a textual and ideological formation, focusing on Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* (*Breast-Giver*), read in translation (Spivak). Rather than treating literature as reflective of social reality, the paper positions it as a site where meanings of labour, embodiment, and care are actively produced. The study places particular emphasis on textuality itself—how narrative strategies such as cyclical repetition, excess, and irony formalise the experience of labour. In doing so, it foregrounds reproductive labour as the central

analytic category, examining how the maternal body becomes a site of sustained economic extraction.

Situated within the Indian socio-cultural context, the paper also draws on mythological frameworks—particularly the figure of Yashoda in the *Mahabharata* tradition—to show how maternal labour is historically encoded as both sacred and endlessly renewable. Against this backdrop, *Stanadayini* emerges as a radical critique that exposes the violence underlying such idealisations.Historical scholarship on wet nursing has been extensive, particularly within European contexts, where studies such as Valerie Fildes' *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* trace the institutionalisation of wet nursing across class hierarchies, medical discourses, and demographic transitions. Fildes demonstrates that wet nursing functioned not merely as a domestic arrangement but as a regulated labour system, often structured through contracts, surveillance, and moral scrutiny. Similarly, historians such as Rima D. Apple and Jacqueline H. Wolf have shown how infant feeding practices became sites where medical authority, maternal ideology, and labour intersected, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, while these accounts are invaluable in documenting the institutional and medical history of wet nursing, they tend to remain within a descriptive or regulatory framework, foregrounding practices, policies, and outcomes rather than interrogating the symbolic and ideological construction of reproductive labour itself. As a result, the lactating body often appears as an object of management rather than as a site of meaning-making. Within the Indian context, historical work on reproduction and gender—particularly by scholars such as Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti—has foregrounded the ways in which women's bodies are embedded within caste, kinship, and labour regimes. These studies demonstrate that reproductive labour in India cannot be understood outside the intersecting structures of caste hierarchy, domesticity, and economic dependency. Yet even here, the specific figure of the wet nurse remains under-theorised, often subsumed within broader discussions of domestic labour or motherhood. What is less fully addressed across both Western and Indian historiography is the extent to which wet nursing constitutes a form of social reproduction that is simultaneously material and representational. Feminist theorists of social reproduction, such as Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser, have argued that activities such as breastfeeding are central to the reproduction of labour power, yet are systematically devalued because they are naturalised as care rather than recognised as labour. This insight is crucial, but it is literary texts such as *Stanadayini* that render visible how such naturalisation is narratively produced and sustained. In this sense, the present study departs from existing historical accounts by shifting the analytical focus from documentation to representation. Rather than asking how wet nursing functioned as an institution, it asks how it is imagined, narrated, and ideologically secured. This shift allows reproductive labour to be read not only as a historical practice but as a discursive formation, one that is sustained through cultural narratives of sanctified motherhood, cyclical obligation, and bodily excess.

The primary text examined is Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini*, read in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation, a fact that is crucial to this analysis since the text reaches us already mediated through linguistic and cultural translation. This raises important questions about voice, representation, and accessibility, particularly in relation to subaltern experience.

The narrative is treated as a dense textual field in which labour is not merely represented but structurally embedded. Particular attention is paid to how repetition, accumulation, and excess operate formally to mirror the conditions of reproductive labour. The narrative is treated not as a transparent representation of social reality but as a formal system that organises labour through repetition, excess, and accumulation. Jashoda is described as one who "gave her breast as long as there was milk in her body" (Devi, trans. Spivak), a formulation that collapses identity into function and reduces motherhood to a condition of continuous productivity. The temporality embedded in "as long as" is crucial: it signals not care but duration under compulsion, a labour that persists until bodily exhaustion.

Similarly, the recurring suggestion that "milk flowed as if without end" produces an image of plenitude that is structurally deceptive. The apparent abundance of milk is not a sign of nourishment but of systematic over-extraction, where the body is compelled to exceed its own limits. The narrative does not merely describe lactation; it formalises it as a regime of production. In this sense, the text refuses any distinction between biological function and economic labour, instead revealing lactation itself as a site of value generation structured by depletion.

Theoretical Orientation

The analysis draws on three overlapping frameworks: feminist literary criticism, social reproduction theory, and subaltern studies. Taken together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how embodiment, labour, and representation intersect within the text.

Feminist literary criticism provides the primary lens. It allows the gendered body to be read as both materially regulated and ideologically constructed. Drawing on thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, this approach treats gender not as fixed, but as produced through social norms and repeated practices. Motherhood, from this perspective, is not simply biological. It is shaped by expectations, roles, and cultural narratives. In *Stanadayini*, this makes it possible to read Jashoda's maternal identity as something both imposed and internalised. Social reproduction theory extends this argument by situating reproductive practices within larger economic systems. As scholars like Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser have shown, activities such as breastfeeding are not outside production; they are essential to it. They sustain labour and reproduce social relations. Seen this way, Jashoda's body becomes a site where biological processes are drawn into economic circuits.

Subaltern studies adds another layer by asking who is able to speak and be heard within such structures. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it becomes clear that representation does not automatically grant agency. In many cases, it reproduces silence in new forms. This raises important questions about how Jashoda's experience is narrated and understood.

Together, these frameworks allow for a reading that remains attentive to both material conditions and discursive power.

The Wet Nurse as Literary Figure

Before turning to Mahasweta Devi's narrative, it is necessary to situate the wet nurse within a broader literary and cultural genealogy as a recurring and conceptually charged figure. Unlike the biological mother, whose relationship to the child is conventionally framed as natural, affective, and anchored in kinship, the wet nurse embodies a form of care that is simultaneously intimate and contractual. Her role is predicated on the performance of maternal functions without the social legitimacy of motherhood, thereby producing a mode of labour that is deeply corporeal yet structurally alienated. This disjunction between embodied intimacy and economic transaction renders the wet nurse a figure that unsettles dominant understandings of care as inherently private, natural, and non-commercial. The wet nurse thus occupies a liminal and unstable position within literary representation. She mediates between domestic space and the labour market, destabilising the boundary between nature and economy while complicating the distinction between intimacy and transaction. As feminist critics such as Kumkum Sangari and Susie Tharu have argued, the Indian female body is often positioned at the intersection of labour, sexuality, and social reproduction, where ideological constructions of femininity serve to naturalise deeply unequal material relations (Sangari and Vaid; Tharu and Lalita). Within this framework, reproductive labour is simultaneously valorised and obscured, producing what Sangari identifies as a persistent tension between symbolic elevation and material dispossession. Such tensions are evident across literary traditions and provide a useful comparative frame for understanding Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini*. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse's bodily excess, loquacity, and classed identity render her both indispensable and marginal(Shakespeare), a figure of emotional intimacy who nonetheless remains structurally subordinate. Similarly, *Madame Bovary* foregrounds the outsourcing of breastfeeding as a marker of bourgeois aspiration (Flaubert), revealing how maternal labour is displaced onto lower-class women in order to preserve classed femininity. In *Beloved*, the violent appropriation of lactation exposes the racialised exploitation of reproductive labour, where the maternal body is subjected to regimes of control and extraction (Morrison).

Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* both converges with and departs from these representations. Like these texts, it foregrounds the classed and embodied dimensions of care; however, it radicalises the figure of the wet nurse by centring her as the primary narrative consciousness rather than a peripheral or symbolic presence. In doing so, Devi intensifies the tensions identified by Sangari and Tharu, rendering visible the processes through which reproductive labour is both naturalised and commodified within patriarchal and caste-inflected economies.

Indian literary contexts further illuminate this configuration. In *Godaan*, the labouring female body is mobilised within agrarian and domestic economies, revealing the interlocking structures of caste, class, and gender. Similarly, *The Binding Vine* foregrounds the maternal body as a site of silence, trauma, and obligation, shaped by patriarchal expectations. Read alongside these texts, *Stanadayini* emerges as a more explicit articulation of what remains implicit elsewhere: the transformation of the reproductive body into a site of sustained economic extraction. By collapsing metaphor into materiality, Devi exposes the underlying logic that connects these diverse representations. The wet nurse thus emerges not merely as a recurring literary figure but as a critical node through which the contradictions of reproductive labour—its simultaneous sanctification and exploitation—are rendered fully legible. The ideological construction of Jashoda as a "mother

goddess" resonates strongly with Indian mythological frameworks, particularly the figure of Yashoda, the foster mother of Krishna. Yashoda represents an idealised form of maternal devotion that is simultaneously affective, self-sacrificing, and endlessly giving. However, what is crucial in both mythology and *Stanadayini* is the cyclical and repetitive nature of maternal labour—a labour that is never complete, never singular, and never fully recognised. In the *Mahabharata* and related devotional traditions, motherhood is framed as a form of sacred duty that is continuously renewed. Devi's narrative draws upon this cultural logic only to expose its material underside. Jashoda's transformation into a "mother goddess" mirrors this mythic structure, yet the text reveals that such sanctification functions as an ideological mechanism that sustains labour extraction. Thus, mythology does not simply serve as background but as an active ideological framework through which reproductive labour is naturalised and perpetuated.

Stanadayini: Narrative Structure and the Production of the "Professional Mother"

Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* offers a radical reconfiguration of the wet nurse figure by relocating her from the margins to the centre of narrative attention. Jashoda is not a supplementary or incidental presence but the structuring axis around which the text unfolds. This narrative centrality is crucial, for it enables the sustained exploration of reproductive labour not as background condition but as the primary site of meaning-making. Her transformation into a "professional mother" operates simultaneously at the literal and symbolic levels, marking the point at which maternal labour is fully exposed as commodified, regulated, and embedded within circuits of exchange. The phrase "professional mother" is marked by a profound irony that destabilises the ideological naturalisation of motherhood. By invoking the language of professionalism, the text foregrounds the formalisation and abstraction of what is conventionally understood as an instinctive and affective relation. Motherhood, in this formulation, emerges as performative rather than innate, reproducible rather than singular, and exchangeable rather than exclusively tied to biological kinship. Jashoda's maternal function is thus detached from the logic of intimacy and rearticulated within a framework of labour and utility. The violence of this transformation becomes clearer when the narrative repeatedly emphasises Jashoda's substitutional role: she becomes "mother to all," a phrase that appears to expand her significance but in fact erases singularity. To be "mother to all" is to be mother to none in particular, a condition that transforms intimacy into generalised labour. The phrase signals not affective abundance but total availability, where the maternal body is rendered universally accessible and therefore infinitely exploitable. What appears as elevation is, in fact, the linguistic mechanism through which labour is made inexhaustible. The violence of this abstraction is further underscored in the way Jashoda is named and addressed within the narrative. While she is repeatedly called "mother," the term functions less as a marker of relational identity than as a generalised title detached from specificity. The absence of differentiation—no singular child, no exclusive bond—transforms "mother" into a category of labour rather than a position of intimacy. In this sense, naming operates as a mechanism of erasure: to be called "mother" by all is to be recognised only insofar as one performs the function of care. The word itself becomes emptied of affect and re-inscribed as a sign of availability. Jashoda's work is structured through repetition and accumulation. She feeds successive generations of children, her body functioning as a continuous and renewable source of nourishment. This temporal extension produces a sense of scale that exceeds the intimate boundaries of individual motherhood, transforming her into a collective resource that sustains the reproductive needs of the household. Her body is no longer aligned with a single child but becomes dispersed across multiple bodies, diffusing maternal identity into a form of distributed labour. This expansion is mirrored at the level of narrative structure. The text accumulates scenes of feeding, childbirth, and domestic activity in a manner that resists linear progression, instead producing a cyclical and repetitive rhythm. Such narrative repetition is not merely descriptive but formally enacts the relentless continuity of Jashoda's labour. The absence of narrative rupture reinforces the sense of endurance and inevitability, suggesting that her work is both unending and structurally embedded. Through this alignment of narrative form and thematic content, *Stanadayini* foregrounds the transformation of the maternal body into a site of sustained production. The text thus renders visible the processes through which reproductive labour is normalised, intensified, and ultimately abstracted into an economic function, even as it continues to be ideologically framed as care. The text thus makes an uncompromising claim: motherhood, when abstracted into a function, ceases to be relational and becomes pure labour—circulatory, repeatable, and structurally indifferent to the body that performs it.

The Lactating Body and the Aesthetics of Excess

One of the most striking features of *Stanadayini* is its sustained insistence on bodily excess, particularly as it is articulated through the figure of the lactating body. Milk, in the narrative, is not contained within the limits of moderation or domestic order; rather, it

overflows, saturates, and exceeds, disrupting the culturally idealised image of breastfeeding as a controlled, serene, and intimate act. This excess operates both at the level of material representation and symbolic meaning, reconfiguring the maternal body as a site of intensification rather than harmony. Within this framework, the lactating body is rendered as hyper-productive, continuously generating nourishment in a manner that exceeds individual need. At the same time, this productivity is inseparable from exhaustion, as the body is subjected to relentless demands that erode its capacity for recovery and self-sustenance. The narrative foregrounds the vulnerability of this body to decay, emphasising the cumulative effects of overuse and depletion. In doing so, it displaces the sentimentalisation of maternal care with a more unsettling depiction of labour that is both generative and destructive.

Devi's attention to the physicality of lactation—its textures, rhythms, and temporal demands—serves to foreground the materiality of reproductive labour. The body emerges not as a passive or naturalised vessel but as an active site of production, one that is disciplined, regulated, and ultimately exhausted by the very processes it sustains. This emphasis aligns with broader feminist critiques, particularly those advanced by Silvia Federici, which highlight how reproductive capacities are mobilised within systems of economic extraction while remaining ideologically framed as acts of care (Federici).

At a symbolic level, the aesthetics of excess destabilises the containment of the female body within normative categories such as "mother," "worker," and "caregiver." The overflowing body resists these classificatory boundaries, exposing their instability and insufficiency. Excess thus becomes a critical strategy within the text, revealing the impossibility of reconciling the demands of labour, care, and embodiment within a coherent or sustainable framework. The imagery of overflowing milk must be read alongside the narrative's insistence on bodily strain. When milk is described as excessive, it is not simply abundant—it is uncontained, threatening to exceed the boundaries of the body itself. This excess produces a paradox: the more the body gives, the less it retains. The text thus stages a contradiction in which productivity and depletion are not opposites but coextensive processes. Milk does not signify life-giving plenitude; it marks the conversion of the body into a site of continuous extraction. Even the temporality of feeding is rendered indistinct, with acts of nourishment collapsing into one another without clear boundaries. This blurring of sequence produces a sense that feeding is not an event but a condition without interruption. The absence of pause or recovery time is crucial: it signals that labour here is not episodic but continuous. The maternal body is thus denied rhythm, reduced instead to a state of permanent readiness, where the distinction between action and rest is effectively erased.

Crucially, this excess is never stabilised. The narrative does not allow the reader to rest in the image of maternal generosity. Instead, it pushes excess toward discomfort, even grotesquerie, suggesting that what is culturally celebrated as nurturing is materially experienced as relentless expenditure.The aesthetics of excess, as articulated through the lactating body, thus destabilises the containment of the female body within normative categories such as "mother," "worker," and "caregiver." The overflowing body resists classificatory boundaries, exposing their instability and insufficiency. Excess, in this sense, functions not merely as description but as critique, revealing the impossibility of reconciling the demands of labour, care, and embodiment within a coherent framework. Yet this very excess necessitates ideological management. The body that exceeds must be contained within meaning, and it is precisely at this juncture that the discourse of sanctification emerges. The transformation of bodily labour into symbolic virtue—most notably through the figure of the "mother goddess"—operates as a mechanism through which excess is reabsorbed into a moral economy of care. It is this ideological containment that the narrative proceeds to interrogate.

The text therefore refuses the ideological comfort of maternal abundance and insists instead that all excess under conditions of inequality is a symptom of extraction.

Ideology and the Figure of the Mother Goddess

Jashoda's elevation to the status of a "mother goddess" introduces a crucial ideological layer within the narrative. At the surface level, this designation appears to confer honour, reverence, and cultural legitimacy upon her role. However, the text progressively reveals that such symbolic elevation operates as a mechanism of control rather than genuine recognition.

The designation of Jashoda as "mother goddess" must be read not as symbolic elevation but as ideological conversion. The narrative makes clear that this status is conferred precisely at the moment when her labour becomes indispensable. Sanctification, then, follows productivity. The sequence matters: she is not revered and therefore labours; she labours, and is therefore temporarily revered. This reversal exposes the logic of the

system—divinity is not intrinsic but retroactively assigned to sustain extraction.

The figure of the mother goddess functions by transforming labour into virtue, thereby naturalising the demands placed upon Jashoda's body. In this process, the material conditions of her labour—its intensity, repetition, and physical cost—are obscured through symbolic elevation. Her sustained bodily expenditure is reframed as moral duty, ensuring compliance by presenting sacrifice as an ethical imperative rather than a condition of exploitation. In this way, reproductive labour is not recognised as labour but absorbed into a discourse of sanctified femininity. This duality—reverence and exploitation—lies at the heart of the text's critique. Jashoda's identity is constituted through a discourse that simultaneously elevates and erases her, granting her symbolic centrality while denying her material autonomy. Crucially, this symbolic status remains entirely contingent upon her productivity. As long as her body continues to function as a source of nourishment, she is upheld as an object of veneration. Once this capacity diminishes, the ideological framework that sustained her position begins to unravel. The withdrawal of reverence at the moment of bodily failure reveals that the sanctification of motherhood operates not as an enduring cultural value but as a utilitarian construct, sustained only insofar as it serves the demands of extraction. This collapse of ideological framing marks a critical shift in the narrative, from the symbolic elevation of the maternal body to its material abjection. When the body ceases to be productive, it is no longer amenable to sanctification and instead becomes the site of anxiety, repulsion, and exclusion. It is within this transition—from reverence to rejection—that the narrative's engagement with bodily decay acquires its most unsettling force. What the text exposes, with considerable force, is that the sacred is not opposed to the economic; it is one of its most effective instruments.

Illness, Abjection, and the Limits of Care

The onset of illness in *Stanadayini* marks a decisive rupture in both narrative trajectory and ideological coherence. Jashoda's body, once constructed as an inexhaustible source of nourishment and symbolically elevated as maternal ideal, begins to deteriorate under the cumulative strain of overproduction. This transformation foregrounds the limits of a system that depends upon continuous extraction while denying the material consequences of such labour. The narrative's earlier emphasis on milk as flowing, abundant, and excessive is here inverted into an equally excessive imagery of decay. The breasts, once sites of nourishment, are now marked by lesions that proliferate uncontrollably. This shift is not incidental—it is structurally continuous. The same body that was compelled to exceed its limits in production now exceeds them in deterioration. The text thus establishes a brutal equivalence: overproduction and decay are part of the same process. The earlier image of endless milk finds its grim counterpart in the endless spread of disease. What had been culturally framed as sacred plenitude is revealed, in retrospect, as the precondition for bodily collapse. The lesions that emerge on Jashoda's breasts function as more than signs of physical illness; they constitute a radical re-signification of the maternal body itself. The very site that once symbolised nourishment, plenitude, and care is reconfigured as a locus of decay, pain, and instability. This shift can be productively understood through the framework of abjection as theorised by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva). For Kristeva, the abject is that which disrupts boundaries, threatens order, and must be expelled in order to maintain symbolic coherence. It is neither fully subject nor object, but that which unsettles the distinction between the two.

This reconfiguration of the body is also marked at the level of narrative attention. Where earlier descriptions linger on the flow and abundance of milk, the language of illness shifts toward fragmentation and surface detail—the "sores," the "wounds," the visible breakdown of skin. This change in descriptive focus is significant: the body that was once read through its capacity to give is now read through its inability to sustain itself. The narrative gaze, which once normalised extraction, now confronts its consequences. In this shift, the text compels the reader to recognise that what had been naturalised as care was always already structured as unsustainable labour.

Jashoda's diseased body occupies precisely this abject position. It exposes the fragility of the ideological structures that once sustained her symbolic elevation. The maternal body, previously idealised as pure and life-giving, becomes excessive in a different register—no longer productive but contaminating, no longer revered but repellent. The proliferation of sores, often described in terms that evoke multiplicity and uncontrolled growth, mirrors the earlier excess of milk, but now in a form that cannot be assimilated into the economy of care.

Crucially, this transformation precipitates her social abandonment. The household that once depended upon her labour withdraws recognition and support, revealing that care, within this system, is profoundly conditional. Jashoda's value is contingent upon her capacity to produce; once that

capacity is diminished, she is rendered disposable. The transition from indispensability to expendability underscores the instrumental logic governing her position.

At the level of narrative, this shift is marked by a corresponding change in tone and structure. The earlier rhythm of repetition and accumulation gives way to fragmentation and discontinuity, reflecting both the breakdown of the body and the collapse of the ideological framework that had previously sustained it. The narrative no longer accumulates scenes of care but instead dwells on isolation, suffering, and estrangement. Through this movement into abjection, *Stanadayini* exposes the limits of care as an ideological construct. It reveals that the maternal body, far from being inherently revered, is valued only insofar as it remains productive and legible within dominant frameworks of utility. Once it exceeds these limits—whether through overproduction or decay—it is expelled from the very structures it once sustained. The narrative leaves no room for ambiguity: a system that demands infinite care inevitably produces finite bodies—and discards them when they fail.

Narrative Voice, Irony, and the Limits of Agency

A key feature of *Stanadayini* lies in its strategic deployment of narrative voice to produce a critical distance between Jashoda's perception of her role and the reader's interpretive understanding. While the protagonist appears to accept, and at times even embrace, her position as a "professional mother," the narrative simultaneously destabilises this acceptance by inviting the reader to recognise the structural conditions that underwrite it. This disjunction between internal consciousness and narrative framing generates a sustained tension that is central to the text's critique. This tension operates through a mode of dramatic irony, wherein Jashoda's internalisation of her role stands in contrast to the reader's awareness of its exploitative dimensions. Her articulation of motherhood as duty, even as achievement, reflects the successful internalisation of ideological constructs that equate care with virtue and sacrifice with moral worth. However, the narrative voice subtly undermines this position by exposing the material realities that such discourse seeks to obscure, thereby producing a layered reading in which affirmation and critique coexist. The question of agency emerges within this framework as both necessary and deeply problematic. Jashoda's participation in the system cannot be reduced to simple coercion; rather, it is mediated by a complex interplay of material necessity, social conditioning, and symbolic recognition. Her labour provides sustenance not only for the household she serves but also for her own family, embedding her within an economy of survival that limits the possibility of refusal. At the same time, the ideological elevation of her role as a "mother goddess" offers a form of symbolic validation that further complicates her position. Consequently, Jashoda's apparent consent must be read as structured rather than freely chosen. Her agency is neither absent nor fully autonomous but constrained within a framework that shapes the terms of her self-understanding. This complexity resists reductive readings of victimhood, instead foregrounding the ways in which power operates through internalisation as much as through external imposition. In doing so, *Stanadayini* offers a nuanced exploration of agency that remains attentive to both the limits and the conditions of subjectivity within systems of exploitation. Jashoda's acceptance of her role—her apparent investment in the identity of the "professional mother"—must be read as the effect of a deeply sedimented ideological structure. When she articulates pride in her labour, the narrative does not simply record consent; it exposes the conditions under which consent becomes thinkable. Her subjectivity is shaped within a system that offers symbolic recognition in place of material autonomy. As such, her agency cannot be understood outside the terms that constrain it. The text thus resists both romanticisation and dismissal. It neither celebrates her labour as empowerment nor reduces it to victimhood. Instead, it reveals how labour becomes meaningful to the subject precisely because it is the only available mode of survival and recognition.

Gender, Class, and the Redistribution of Care

The narrative foregrounds the intersection of gender and class as central to the organisation and distribution of care labour. In *Stanadayini*, the refusal of the Haldar women to breastfeed is not merely an individual choice but is embedded within a broader socio-cultural framework that prioritises bodily aesthetics, marital desirability, and classed femininity. Their reluctance to engage in breastfeeding reflects a gendered expectation that women must remain desirable within patriarchal structures, even as they are positioned as primary caregivers. In this context, the labour of nurturing is not eliminated but displaced. This displacement is made possible through the availability of Jashoda, who's economic precarity and social position render refusal untenable. Her labour is thus not freely chosen but structurally necessitated, revealing how class operates as a determining factor in the allocation of reproductive work. The redistribution of care within the narrative exposes a hierarchical arrangement in which elite women retain control over the organisation of care while delegating its

most physically demanding aspects to subaltern women. Care, therefore, becomes stratified: it is managed at the level of privilege and performed at the level of vulnerability. Such a configuration complicates any straightforward articulation of feminist solidarity. While all women within the narrative are subject to patriarchal expectations, their experiences are mediated by class in ways that produce divergent relationships to labour and embodiment. As scholars such as Kumkum Sangari have argued, the category of "woman" cannot be treated as homogeneous, as it is internally differentiated by structures of class, caste, and labour (Sangari and Vaid). In this light, *Stanadayini* reveals how gendered oppression is unevenly distributed, with subaltern women bearing the disproportionate burden of sustaining both domestic and social reproduction. By foregrounding this asymmetry, the text exposes the material foundations of care economies and challenges idealised notions of shared womanhood. It demonstrates that reproductive labour is not only gendered but also profoundly stratified, structured by relations of power that determine who performs care, who benefits from it, and at what cost.

Contemporary Resonances: The Afterlives of the Wet Nurse

While *Stanadayini* is situated within a specific socio-historical context, its analytical force extends well beyond its immediate setting, illuminating the structural continuities that shape contemporary regimes of reproductive labour. The figure of the wet nurse, as constructed in the text, does not remain confined to the past but re-emerges in transformed yet recognisable forms within present-day practices such as human milk banking, commercial surrogacy, and informal networks of milk sharing. These practices, though often framed within discourses of care, choice, and technological advancement, replicate and intensify the underlying logic of outsourcing biological functions that the narrative so forcefully critiques. At the centre of these continuities lies the increasing incorporation of the biological body into circuits of economic value. The wet nurse can thus be understood as a precursor to what theorists have identified as biocapital, a mode of accumulation in which life processes themselves become sites of extraction and commodification. In this framework, lactation, gestation, and other reproductive capacities are no longer confined to the private domain of the family but are reorganised within market structures that regulate, distribute, and monetise them. The lactating body, much like Jashoda's, becomes a productive resource, its value determined by its capacity to generate and sustain life for others. What *Stanadayini* anticipates, and indeed makes legible, is the persistence of a fundamental contradiction: the simultaneous moralisation and commodification of care. Contemporary practices continue to rely on narratives of altruism, maternal instinct, and ethical responsibility, even as they are embedded within systems of economic exchange. This dual framing echoes the ideological structure identified earlier in the text, where symbolic elevation coexists with material exploitation.

Moreover, these contemporary configurations remain deeply stratified along lines of class, caste, and global inequality. The labour of reproduction is disproportionately borne by women whose socio-economic vulnerability renders their participation less a matter of choice than of necessity. In this sense, the afterlives of the wet nurse reveal not a rupture but a continuity, in which the extraction of value from the female body persists under new institutional and technological forms. By tracing these resonances, *Stanadayini* emerges not only as a critique of a historical practice but as a prescient commentary on the evolving economies of care. The figure of the wet nurse thus retains its analytical relevance, offering a critical framework through which to interrogate the ongoing commodification of life itself.

What appears in contemporary contexts as innovation—milk banking, surrogacy, and reproductive outsourcing—reproduces, with remarkable fidelity, the logic that structures Jashoda's labour. The separation of biological function from the maternal subject, the circulation of bodily capacities within economic systems, and the moral framing of such practices as care are all already present in *Stanadayini*. The text thus does not merely anticipate these developments; it reveals their underlying structure. What changes is not the logic of extraction, but its institutional form.

Re-reading Care: Labour, Affect, and Narrative Ethics

One of the most significant contributions of Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* lies in its radical reconfiguration of care as a site of tension between affect, labour, and power. Rather than presenting care as an inherently benevolent or self-evident moral good, the narrative exposes its entanglement with structures of economic extraction and ideological control. In doing so, it unsettles dominant cultural narratives that idealise caregiving as a natural extension of femininity, instead foregrounding its material conditions and political implications.Within the text, care emerges as a form of labour that is simultaneously indispensable and unrecognised. Jashoda's continuous provision of nourishment sustains the household and enables the reproduction of social relations, yet this labour remains

unacknowledged within formal or economic frameworks. Instead, it is moralised and reframed as duty, with its value derived not from compensation but from its alignment with ideals of sacrifice and maternal virtue. This process renders care both visible in its effects and invisible in its recognition, obscuring the conditions under which it is performed. At the same time, the narrative reveals care as a site where affect and exploitation intersect. Jashoda's attachment to the children she feeds cannot be dismissed as purely instrumental; rather, it is precisely this affective dimension that enables the continued extraction of her labour. The emotional investments that structure caregiving relationships are mobilised within a system that relies upon them, blurring the distinction between voluntary attachment and structural compulsion.

By foregrounding these tensions, *Stanadayini* advances what may be understood as a narrative ethics of care—one that refuses sentimentalisation and instead insists on accountability to the material realities of labouring bodies. Care, in this formulation, is neither purely altruistic nor wholly coercive, but a complex practice shaped by unequal relations of power. Devi's text thus compels a critical rethinking of caregiving, urging us to recognise it not as an abstract moral ideal but as a historically situated form of labour that demands visibility, valuation, and ethical scrutiny.

Conclusion: Toward a Literary Politics of Reproductive Labour

This paper has argued that Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini*, read in translation, offers a powerful critique of reproductive labour as a site of extraction, repetition, and ideological containment within the Indian context. By foregrounding the labouring body rather than the sentimentalised figure of the mother, the text exposes the structural conditions that render such labour both indispensable and disposable.

Through a close textual analysis attentive to narrative form, excess, and repetition, the study has demonstrated that reproductive labour is not merely represented but formally embedded within the text. The cyclical structure of Jashoda's labour, resonant with mythological figures such as Yashoda, reveals how cultural narratives of sanctified motherhood function to sustain systems of exploitation. At the same time, the analysis remains limited by its focus on a single text and its reliance on translation, which necessarily mediates linguistic and cultural specificity. Future work may extend this inquiry through comparative studies across regional literatures or through engagement with vernacular versions of the text. If the maternal body is celebrated only when it produces and abandoned when it fails, then care, in its dominant cultural form, must be understood not as ethical relation but as a regime of labour that disavows its own conditions of possibility. Nevertheless, *Stanadayini* remains a crucial intervention. It compels us to recognise reproductive labour not as an abstract moral ideal but as a materially grounded, historically situated, and politically contested practice. By exposing the conditions under which the lactating body is made productive, exhausted, and ultimately abandoned, the text demands a rethinking of care itself—as labour that must be made visible, valued, and critically examined.

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Nudity as Performative Excess of the Sexed Subaltern

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ABSTRACT

In attempting to explore the idea of nudity as excess, and of nudity as a language of resistance, I read two incidents and examine the narratives of two literary figures: the Chandragutti nude procession in 1986 and the Manipur nude protest in 2004, the thirteenth century Bhakti poet and saint Akkamahadevi and Mahasweta Devi's fictional character Dopdi. In the four instances that I bring together in this essay, I look at how the women in these incidents use their bodies in a performance of nudity in particular ritualized and performative ways to express a location and a position that does not seem comprehensible or communicable. Though I do not explore it in detail, I also hint at the possible connections between the excess of nudity and the excess of madness that is displayed by various female characters on stage.

Keywords : *Medieval Women, GBV, AFSPA, nudity as excess, Chandragutti Rituals*

Introduction

I remember as a school girl cycling for music class one evening when I came across the figure of a tall woman, stark naked, hair wild and matted, eyes in an expressionless hardness, walking in the middle of the road where the traffic parted like the Red Sea as she stalked furiously on towards some unknown destination. I never found out where she came from or where she went, but I do remember the complete silence and shock that greeted the vision of her, which slowly began to give way to murmurs of 'hucchi' ('mad woman' in Kannada) later. Rephrasing Theseus' lines about 'the lunatic, poet and lover being of imagination compact', this paper asks if the lines between the saint, the poet and lover (here-- violated) woman, are thin ones that sometimes disappear altogether making them all conflate into one 'mad' figure.

I do not know what this woman's story was yet as I write this essay, she comes to my mind as the figure that has become for me a personal signifier of the excesses of the sexed subaltern and one that has continued to be both moving and tragic, fuelled with a disturbing erotic energy that strangely have tones of liberation and empowerment coded within it. Uncomfortable as I am with the 'romanticising' of this figure, I cannot but speak of the powerful impression it has left on me, and the many ways it becomes possible to read this one instance in her life.

In attempting to explore the idea of nudity as

excess, and of nudity as a language of resistance, I read two incidents and examine the narratives of two literary figures: the Chandragutti nude procession in 1986 and the Manipur nude protest in 2004, the thirteenth century Bhakti poet and saint Akkamahadevi and Mahasweta Devi's fictional character Dopdi. I am interested in the performative quality of the actions in each of these instances. If it was Judith Butler who forcefully drew the eyes of Western theory to the idea of performativity re-inscribing meaning, it was Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak who drew attention to the particular difficulty of articulation that the sexed subaltern faced. In the four instances that I bring together in this essay, I look at how the women in these incidents use their bodies in a performance of nudity in particular ritualized and performative ways to express a location and a position that does not seem comprehensible or communicable. Though I do not explore it in detail, I also hint at the possible connections between the excess of nudity and the excess of madness that is displayed by various female characters on stage.

Spivak and Butler: deconstructing performativity and accessing meaning

Where I was brought up — when I first read Derrida I didn't know who he was, I was very interested to see that he was actually dismantling the philosophical tradition from *inside* rather than *outside*, because of course we were brought up in an education system in India where the name of the hero of that philosophical system was the universal human being, and we were taught that if we could begin to approach an internalization of that human being, then we would be human. When I saw in France someone was actually trying to dismantle the tradition, which had told us what would make us human, that seemed interesting too.

– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

In the first section of "Can the Subaltern Speak", through examining a dialogue between Foucault and Deleuze, Gayatri Spivak launches her critique on postmodern thought. Her point of contention is that the subject under the guise of being dismantled is in fact reinforced in the work of these two thinkers. She argues that the 'subject-effects' is nothing besides a holding on to the notion of the subject. It is this critique that is important in her trying to locate the position of the subaltern and the voice of the subaltern, or lack of it in discourse. She also tries to show how in attempting to valorize the concrete experience of the oppressed, theorists often reinforce their own subject position. It is not a transparent position. Thus, an important engagement she makes is with the issue of presentation/ representation for a theorist.

She considers the work of the Subaltern Studies group and problematises the issue of representing the subalterns. Her key criticism is that in trying to voice the subaltern, there is always the risk of reducing and essentialising the subaltern subject. She is not however advocating a complete withdrawal from the task of representation, as she says, it exists and the task must be taken up. In final section of the essay 'Can the Subaltern speak,' Gayatri Spivak takes up the issue of the representation of the sexed subaltern figure and argues that the subaltern woman is denied access to mimetic and political representation, and in some measure elucidates a clearing of space to allow the voice of the subaltern to be heard.

The denial of access to mimetic and political representation particularly for the sexed subaltern happens not simply because the subaltern woman's situation is not one that contemporary discourse has the space to accommodate; therefore, the articulation of the subaltern woman's situation is impossible because neither is there a language of communication nor a means of reception for it. She uses the example of widow burning where between the arguments of the British men who wanted to save the woman and the Indian men who said the women wanted to die the voice of the woman was silenced. This does not of course mean that women did not cry out or say anything, but that the voice of the woman at the dialogic level was not accessible, and this was because there was no space for it. The work of the intellectual therefore is not to speak on behalf of the subaltern but clear out the space for the subaltern to be able to be heard.

Using the example of Bhuvanesvari Bhaduri, whose suicide was incomprehensible, she demonstrates how one might be able to create the space to allow for one to read or hear the voice of the subaltern. Thus, Spivak in this example is not speaking on behalf of Bhuvanesvari Bhaduri, nor is she dismissing the task of accessing Bhuvanesvari's voice by claiming that not being subaltern she cannot undertake it, but she in fact creates the space for Bhuvanesvari's voice to be heard, her action to be understood or *read* through her analysis of the event. And through this she also demonstrates how in all the accounts of Bhuvanesvari's suicide, she as the sexed subaltern could not speak.

In reading the suicide as a text and attempting to find the meaning inscribed in the action, Spivak deconstructs the performativity of the suicide. The deconstructive meaning of the performative is what Butler explores in her theory of performativity. Though Butler originally looks at performativity in the context of gender identity being re-inscribed by

certain repetitive acts in Gender Trouble, the idea of performativity has come to be widely circulated with different layers of meaning and contexts within which it is understood. Interestingly the idea of the performative has also come back into Theatre studies where in the stage 'it is theatrically manifested as opposed to the deconstructive sense of it where the performative indicates an internal absorption'. The idea of the performative is used here in the context of a certain dramatic communication through the body that each 'performance' of nudity enables in the incidents referred to in this essay. It also hints at certain cultural mores and codes within which these acts are read and inscribed with meaning and how in some cases they do, in fact, destabilize these codes.

Nudity as excess: Chandragutti Nude Procession and the Manipur Protests

Chandragutti, 1986

In 1986, the little village of Chandragutti created a huge stir in the media, when 'nude worshippers', who were being forced by the police to stay clothed, stripped both police and journalists and in an ironical twist made them parade nude. Since then, this annual religious/ cultural procession has become an event in both discourse and activism for different political blocs in Karnataka. The government, using both the law (by legally banning nudity in the procession) and the police (who patrol the area at every festival trying to make sure the worshipper remain clothed) attempt to control this event, women's groups take up this 'cause' as another hideous manifestation of the objectification of women's bodies by patriarchal society, dalit groups claim this is yet another instance of the dalit woman being stripped of her dignity and made to parade naked before the eyes of upper caste men. On a British naturist/ nudist site the incident appears as part of their chronicling of news on nudists over the world. One fan site of a basketball club has a random thread mentioning this incident and invoked the comment from another user of the site who said it sounded like yet another case of 'chicks gone wild'.

In different 'representations' on the conditions of exploitation and indecency of this procession, the voice of those in the procession is not to be found. Their reaction to this discourse have been to a) lash back at their 'saviors' and strip them and b) to avoid confrontation (as they did one year by simply taking another route). In the imagination of this discourse, the worshippers were nude women; yet, this procession had both male and female nude worshippers as presented in the personal account of a photojournalist who later wrote about the incident in a section where he was called on to write about his 'most memorable experiences' as a photographer. What is it about the alleged 'protectors' of these women that makes them unable to take into account the deep desire of the worshippers to continue their worship in the way the wish to, and as in this case, in the nude?

For the women's groups, it is an indication of women so completely submerged in patriarchy that they have no sense of their 'real' selves and the dignity that must come with such a realization. The argument of the law is similar, these subjects are not aware of the dignity due to their selves due to superstition and 'outdated' practices. Yet it was in the 1970s when Protima Bedi streaked nude on Juhu Beach for the cover of Cine Blitz, that this was projected as an act of liberation. Dalit groups attribute this to the strong and deep hold of casteism in the area. The reaction of the dalit group is slightly more nuanced in this regard. And in this context, can the voice of the 'dalit woman' be accessed, when the dalit movement is interested in using this instance to attack casteism? What is the meaning of this subject location in the context of this incident anyway, when this category is being mobilized within the larger discourse of dalit exploitation and liberation? Must the dalit woman must be liberated from the control of the upper caste men and into the hands of the dalit men or her 'true' self.

These arguments are all predicated on the notion of a real and true self that each of these movements seeks to access and liberate. There is a notion of universal subject- woman/ human that is the real subject and real self that dominates the passion and rhetoric of these arguments. And since this discourse is centered round a singular subject who has certain attitudes and values, it has no space to accommodate the agency of the women and other worshippers nor their desire to worship in this particular way. Thus this incident and this desire acts as an excess of a system that cannot accommodate it within its framework and in being such an excess destabilizes the system. All the forces available within the system are thus mobilized to control and reign in this excess: legislation, police force, ideology and social pressure.

It is also interesting to note how such an incident circulates and gets inscribed with meaning in different locations from being featured in solidarity in a British nudist club and used as a titillation of sorts by fan club of a basket ball team where the post giving information about the Chandragutti incident was happily tagged, 'Chicks Gone Wild'. Yet this rather 'straight' forward post also opens up an important unexplored dimension of this and other incidents around the nudity, which is the underlying erotic energy that these controversies seem to generate in all of the contradictory discourses that surround it. Even the moral fervor and activist angst that rises against

what is sometimes meaninglessly called 'sexual exploitation' has within it a certain pleasure in its response to something that it erotic and also plays on the boundaries of the scandalous and the tabooed. And it is worth considering if perhaps given the pornographic flavours the 'scandal' takes up in the press, if it is not in fact the various other lobby groups that are actually sexually exploiting an old ritual and its current day practitioners in the guise of 'saving' them.

Manipur, 2004

Our nude protest was the last resort to make the government understand how we feel about the AFSPA. We put our personal prestige at stake (by going nude to protest). Now it all seems futile

N. Sarojini Leimia

On July 11th 2004 Thangjam Manorama was picked up from her residence, accused of being a militant and allegedly raped, before being shot to death by the 17th Battalion of the Assam Rifles. This outrageous incident sparked off protests, but what finally got the nation's attention was the protest of 12 elderly women in the nude in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters, shouting and holding banners that read, "Indian Army, come and rape us all." The nudity was understood to be a reaction of protest against the rapes in Manipur and the enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Act of 1958, and was accepted as political protest. It was shocking and gathered a lot of media attention, but the act was *understood.* In this sense the voice of these women protestors was understood, even if subsequently their demands have not been met. The women themselves were well aware of the significance of their act. They themselves saw it as 'the last resort' of having done it after nothing else had worked. Yet it was this political consciousness and their sophisticated understanding and subversion of social codes governing dress and modesty that finally made their protest a shocking incident but one that was eventually held by the very frame it sought to destabilize. The women came from a location of oppression but in their awareness and consciousness as political subjects, they were able to dialogue with the hegemonic structure. There is a clear consciousness of their position of oppression and an ability to articulate this. These women speak within the discourse of the hegemonic system and their speech is indeed within a dialogic transaction.

Their nudity is a performative reinstatement of their protest. They challenge the hegemonic structure in an open, nude encounter where they seemingly 'invite' the Indian Army to come and rape them'. Their protest chooses as its site of performance, the gates of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles. They are on the 'other side' of this structure, which also re-inscribes their dialogic position with this hegemonic structure. May we then read this nudity as excess? For the women and for the media and the government at that time it seemed like an excess and indeed it was. It was a reaction to the excess of violence in the area, a failure of the government and wrote itself as an excess in the media. But the consciousness and awareness that went hand in hand with it, finally made it articulate and accessible. It was recognized as excessive action, the last resort and paradoxically through this was contained within the system. If it appeared as an excess, it was a comprehensible excess. Unlike the Chandragutti worshippers, who the system is baffled by completely and can only resort to means to try and contain this excess, the performance of nudity in the Manipur women's protest is fully comprehensible to the system that they are protesting against.

Performance of nudity as defiance in two cultural texts: Akkamahadevi and Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi

In this section I look at two literary figures, one a 'real' historical figure- the 12th Century Kannada Bhakti poet Akkamahadevi, and the other a 'fictional' character- Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi. In the case of Akkamahadevi, I am not interested as much in the historical factuality of her life, for how much of this can one reliably access anyway, but more in the way legends of her life have survived in the cultural imagination of a people. Thus when talking about her legend, I do so without claiming these to be historical facts or disputing them, but simply bring them up in an effort to consider what people are preserving in cultural memory, what people are allowing and giving space for in their cultural memory and imagination.

Akkamahadevi according to popular legend, which finds representation in contemporary dance-dramas, plays and films, speaks of the time when Akkamahadevi having married the king on the condition that he does not 'impose' himself on her or interfere with her devotion to Siva, is assaulted when she is in prayer by her husband, and reacts by stripping herself bare in anger and walking out of the palace. Thus, she wanders naked until she reaches Anubhava Mantapa where after winning a rhetorical battle with Allama Mahaprabhu, she earns a place in that place. In many dramatic representations of her life, she is often shown as passionate and powerful.

Her radical act of stripping herself, walking out of her husband's house and wandering naked is accepted as an unusual performance of her deep devotion to Siva. In the rhetorical battle where Alamma asks her why she is wandering around naked, she is believed to have replied that to a

devotee, so immersed in God, what use is clothing. She is bare before her god as an expression of her complete denial of her social ties. On being questioned as to why she allows her hair to cover her, she replies that she does this out of consideration for those still unable to transcend their mortal desires. She has survived in the popular imagination of an icon of radical freedom and self-expression. She is the darling of the women's movement in Karnataka, who often use her example to show the unusual freedom and bravery that women had. It is indeed strange that on one hand such a figure is evoked to be celebrated, while on the other nude worshippers are banned.

Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi/ Dopdi translated by Gayatri Spivak, is interesting for the irony of the story is predicated on Dopdi's name, which is a tribal 'corruption' of the name of the mythical, Draupadi, wife of the five Panchava brothers in the Mahabharata. In the Mahabharata, Draupadi who's gambled off in a game of dice, is brought into the hall and when an attempt is made to strip her off her sari, Krishna's divine intervention makes the piece of cloth unending. Thus, Draupadi stays clothed before lecherous men. In Dopdi, the tribal woman, is stripped of her tiny cloth that is not really a sari, and raped and assaulted by the officials sent to catch her. In the final scene, the morning after the rape and assault, when called before the official, Senanayak or (*Burra Sahib*) she refuses to clothe herself and stands before him with her naked and wounded body, laughs, urinates and spits blood in his white shirt.

In the instance of Akka, in the act of stripping her clothes as she is about to be molested, Akka pre-empts the molestation and is disdainful of it. Her nudity is revealed in contempt and that nudity becomes the signature of her body in her own life and through time and legend. Dopdi's clothing on the other hand was already essentialist. After her rape and torture, her complete nudity become a signifier of her own loss. In the last section, she is entirely referred to as Draupadi not as Dopdi, in her rape she becomes comprehensible to the system, yet in her reaction to the rape she once again eludes meaning. The men cry that 'she has gone mad' as she refuses to wear clothes. Draupadi laughs. Being stripped, raped and tortured, where her clothes served as no protection, she refuses to don them.

After the rape, she spits, urinates, laughs, she pushes the Burra Sahib with her mangled, nipple torn breasts. Her moment of defiance, of refusal to assume modesty in dress, speech or act (nude, mocking laughter, urinating/ spitting/ pushing a man with her bare breasts), is read as the expression of her freedom. In these acts she subverts the social code, as it has been subverted in the men's treatment of her. Her reaction to being abused is not to become a victim, but to become free. Having lost all 'propriety' of being a woman in her own society and the Burra Sahib's society, which began with the loss of her lover/ husband, her capture and rape, she furthers her stripping of propriety, until the Senanayak is completely confounded by her. And if there is laughter, there is also the terrifying freedom of death that she invites. She defies, invites him to 'counter' her. 'Counter' is understood to mean killed in an encounter, a euphemism for killed in torture; and yet it may also be read as her challenge for him to counter her presence now.

In Akka's case devotion takes on a radical performativity where her body becomes the site of the performance of radical symbols and expressions of independence and defiance on one hand and paradoxically of complete surrender to her God on the other. Social customs such as the wearing of clothes were discarded and nudity embraced as a defiant act against all claims of society on her body or her life. How does one read this act of Akka's that has for centuries captured the imagination of people? She refused mere mortal men's advances and when her husband tried to molest her, she strips her clothes to show here disdain for the sensual, like Dopdi who confronts her rapists with her nudity as a final act of independence from a location that forces a woman to hide her body and clothe her nudity with 'modesty.

This rejection of an outer covering for 'modesty' is enacted and in fact performed as a rejection of the hypocrisy of social mores. In Akka's case this is done on the strength of her inner faith and devotion to Siva and a refusal to allow any mere mortal touch her body, and on the confidence of there being an inner truth and reality that is greater than the false trapping of social mores and codes. In Dopdi's case after her brutal rape she refuses to 'play' the role: her body was stripped of her clothes and of what use is modesty for a woman really, except as a protection against rape and molestation, which Dopdi had violently undergone anyway after the slaying of her partner. Those clothes offered no protection for her in the face of rape and the next day; she refuses to enact the pretence of being clothed. Her nudity then is her weapon and one that leaves her in a strangely liberated state. How different is Dopdi's liberation really then from Akka's? Both finally find their freedom after a violent defilement of the body that then becomes a vehicle of transcendence.

Must we at some level recoil from such a transcendence? It is a transcendence in both these cases of not just the body but significantly perhaps of life itself. Akka after the incident at Anubhava Mantapa, where having proved herself 'beyond' the

world and its illusions and temptations, disappears and dies young attaining what was believed to be a final liberated spiritual state. Though Mahashweta Devi's narrative does not indicate what finally happens to Dopdi, in terms of whether she is killed or not, we are left with her terrifying invite to be 'countered', her willingness to face death in her liberated state. Both the Bhakti poet - saint, wife of a king and the hunted down, tribal women undergo extreme experiences and their sense of liberation is one that finally seems to liberate them from life itself. The destruction of the instincts of self-preservation and life is one that can only be mourned, and understood in the terms of the freedom and dignity that was finally non-negotiable, but it cannot be celebrated. Yet there continues to be a fascination for the martyr, the saint, the rebel, the 'freedom' fighter: the ones that bravely faced death.

An excursion into insanity

If madness is that which is not comprehensible within a given code, then how far can one read these acts as insane ones? And after all, perhaps many like the Burra Sahib's men cry out when they see these women that they have gone mad. It is worth some consideration at this point to explore the connections between madness and nudity, especially in reading them as excess. It is interesting that melodrama both in film and in plays, are often predicated on the hysterics of a female character. Hamlet broods and may have been diagnosed as depressive in the twentieth century but it is Ophelia who is the 'insane' figure in the text. Similarly while Macbeth shows early signs of lily-livered emotional weakness, it is Lady Macbeth who is shown to have a complete mental breakdown. In a paper presentation titled 'Madness Staged: Representation of Women on Stage in Colonial India (late 19th century-early 20th century)'Sharmistha Saha briefly mentions two characters in two Colonial Bengal plays who serve as a sort of set-character type of the mad woman or 'Pagli' in the plays of that time. She speaks of how one of the characters, Jobi in Girsh Ghosa's Balidan, comes on stage every now and again to express her mind 'freely' and highlight certain moral themes in the plays with satirical songs. Music, madness and free-speech make the character, who does not in any other way intervene in the development of the plot. While Saha reads this as her 'extra- rationality', I am interested in the excesses that mark her particular location. Even as the extra-rationality is in some way the excess of the plot, so is her own madness a sane response to the rather excessive violence that she faces as with: an abusive alcoholic husband and a cruel mother in law.

The other character appearing in a Bilawamangal Thakur play and is succinctly called 'pagli' (mad woman in Hindi) serves as sort of hysterical interlude and do not seemingly intervene meaningfully in the plot or seem to have any character sketch besides that of a certain self-explanatory position, which is that of the 'mad woman'. While the paper focuses on madness as a significator of 'othering', I am interested in how the madness of the sexed subject may be read as a performative excess, such as that of Dopdi's nudity and wild behaviour that the Burra Sahib's men call madness. Madness and nudity are thus excesses of the female subject. Dopdi's inarticulation and unintelleglibity, which is not her lack bur our inability to access her experience, finally exceeds into a performative articulation through nudity and what is seen as madness.

Conclusion

In the above exploration, I demonstrate the strange intelligibility of at least three of the acts. In three of the instances examined, nudity is performed as defiant act. The Manipur women, Akkamahadevi and Dopdi, all embrace nudity when a boundary, after which there seems no return, has been crossed. The excesses of the transgressions on them, seems to demand nudity as a response. They subvert social codes with their bodies, they write with their bodies their protest. While Akkamahadevi was capable of a dialogic relationship in the discourse she was part of to articulate the meaning of her action, and the Manipur women in the definitive use of protest language, symbols and sites had no trouble at all in having the performance of their nudity understood as they wished it to be understood. Dopdi's act remains incomprehensible to her captors. Yet within the narration it is held in logical tension: the extreme performance of her nudity and transgressive social actions is balanced against the horror of her terrible torture and rape.

In the case of the Chandragutti worshippers however their nudity is not comprehensible, within any available discourse. The voices of these worshippers remain inaccessible. Yet it has been the task of this exercise to question the representation of the Chandragutti worshippers in the contemporary discourses, to prove how the voice of the Chandragutti worshippers remains inaccessible. It is hoped that through such a critical examination, space may be cleared to hear the voice of the Chandragutti worshippers or the 'wild chicks'. Perhaps their ritual nude walk is all they have to say and perhaps we have yet to see where our own frames will allow us space to accept this statement.

I sometimes speculate about what might have been the fate of that wild woman I saw as a child. Perhaps the police got her and sent her to one of those bleak public rehabilitation centres for the mentally ill

where she was initially bathed, clothed, fed, and chained to a bed where she would urinate, defecate, eat and lie for days in what would become her own mess. But perhaps not. Perhaps she healed from whatever violence made her take that nude walk into insanity that summer evening and found work and a place that her body, mind and spirit could call home. This is my hope and it is a hope I hold for all lovers, saints and poets- all those victims of violence (be it against the body, mind or soul) that are often called mad women.

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Philosophy of Written English Language Colonial Recipes

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the philosophy of Indian cookbooks written in English during the colonial period. Existing literature on the philosophy of written recipes revolves around the understanding of written recipes in terms of their 'nature' and 'being'.This essay engages with the discourse of English language cookbooks through the conceptual frameworks of constructivism, realism, and interpretivism. Since the English language served an ideological purpose in the project of colonisation, one of the primary questions that this paper examines is whether such a form of linguistic-cultural contact prescribed a reformist hegemony, especially in terms of 'reforming' non-European cooks. Food that was specific to a regional-cultural moment is adapted upon coming in contact with the colonising power, making cuisine and recipes contentious spaces where ideological relations played out. Dishes were modified to suit European tastes, changing recipes, and with this, there was a certain loss that occurs due to food being transcribed as a written text in English. This essay will take as its object of study Eliza Acton's *Modern Cookery for Private Families* and the recipe for mulling tawny soup. It examines the distinct ontological quality in Anglo-Indian recipe texts and focuses on constructivism-interpretivism as a proposed framework through which to map such contentious cultural translations. In doing so, the essay will work with ontological and cultural discourse that surrounds the context in which these recipes in the English language were written and published/printed in colonial India.

Keywords : *Adaptation, philosophy, recipes, constructivism.*

Introduction

The ontology of recipes has not been written about, except mainly through Andrea Boghini's *What is a Recipe* and Sara Hirvonen's *Recipes without Makers*. This idea refers to the being and nature of recipes, and thus the theorising of recipes as texts with ontological value. One of the tracks this framework follows is to understand how recipes came into being and the logic that led to their creation. Boghini and Hirvonen's works on the ontology of recipes, however, do not account for the complexity of colonial contact. This essay aims to review the proposed theories of recipes and study why they do not suit the specific context of colonial recipes in English. Taking a recipe of mulligatawny soup, an adaptation of the dish 'rasam' from southern India, this essay proposes that a constructivist-interpretivist framework as an adequate framework to study ontological shifts that accrue as a result of colonial contact.

In the context of colonial India, where the popular print sphere was largely a result of colonial intervention, the space for such co-option was fertile with ideological possibilities. Food objects and their recipes, which may not have been necessarily circulated through print, took a new form. In fact, they are 'reformed', not simply in the sense of adaptation to become a new object, but also to enable certain standards of taste. There is a relationship between such structures of ideological control through domination in the print sphere and the ontological quality of a recipe. Hence, this essay looks at a potential theoretical framework that intersects both the cultural and the philosophical, where a recipe is also a tool not just for instructions to make a dish, but also for ideological subjugation. Such subjugation reproduced colonial structures in the printed text, and much like Bhabha's book, became the modicum of control in the colony.

Research Gap

Recent studies such as Borghini's and Hirvonen's are among the few looking at the theorisation of recipes. However, when looking at English recipes written and published in colonial India through the lens of these theories, they seem to be unable to cover certain aspects. Recipes are limited to being a tool of instruction for the recreation of a particular dish. This narrows the understanding of what a recipe is and what it could be. Borghini and Hirvonen are not concerned with where the recipe is made, who the author is, and what the recipe is doing to its reader.

Thus, such scholarship does not locate a recipe in its social and cultural context. Borghini and Hirvonen treat recipes as instructions, limiting their value to that of food being ahistorical and ideologically empty. Specifically, when looking at British colonisation, the recipes first published became subjects of cultural and political discourse. Hence, when looking at existing studies, there is a need to identify theoretical gaps, wherein recipes have to be interpreted as more than what is evidently observed. This critique broadens the definition of a recipe in terms of ontology and how reality can be challenged by looking at constructivism-interpretivism.

This paper uses the example of mulligatawny soup to illustrate how a recipe can depict a bigger picture which fails to be seen currently. Using constructivism-interpretivism, it allows for the evidence of what is written to be later used to construct a larger narrative. Here, it allows us to pursue a different narrative, which can be read as tools of reinforcing rule and that their identity or nature of being is one with a purpose of such and not just for instructions.

Research Question

This paper engages with the limitations in existing literature on the ontology of recipes when looking specifically at English-language recipes from nineteenth-century colonial India. It suggests that constructivism-interpretivism puts into relief the structures that create and maintain the ideological content of such recipes, which are fundamentally premised upon English as a socio-political tool. Thus, food becomes a veritable site of struggle.

Background & Context: Recipes

English, at a larger scale, emerged due to the inroads by the British East India Company in the seventeenth century, and eventually replaced indigenous languages as the political language in major parts of the colony. As this section will show, literature on the print culture of recipes has attested to the fact that a majority of the earlier cookbooks on Indian food were written in English. Consequently, such literature also argues that the impact of these cookbooks on cultural identity in terms of food consumption and reproduction of recipes was laden with power differentials. As Suraj Lakshinarasimhan writes, Cookbooks were manuals written by the British to help train the cooks, maids, etc., to perform duties in certain ways that appeased the British. The first of which was the Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book by Robert Riddell. Riddell presents English words with Anglicised Hindi translation, allowing for easier communication between memsahibs and Indian servants" (Lakshminarasimhan 8).

He goes on to discuss that these books were made to allow Anglo-Indian women to pursue activities extending beyond the space of the kitchen. One such activity, he writes, was the question of female education and reform, which drew from European liberalism as its pretext. Mary A. Procida also writes that English language cookbooks allowed Anglo-Indians, who were not concerned with the kitchen but the food, to focus on the empire through a recipe for imperial control that allowed them to retain their sway over the colonised peoples without becoming bogged down in the burdensome activities of daily life (Procida 124). Thus, giving them the food they wanted, while circumventing the question of labour.

One of the other earliest cookbooks in English was written by Colonel Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert (under the pen-name Wyvern). His book, *Culinary jottings for Madras: a treatise in thirty chapters on reformed cookery for Anglo-Indian exiles*, was based upon continental principles, with twenty-five menus for little dinners worked out in detail, and was published in 1878. It remains one of the most cited and studied pieces of work in this area.

Lakshminarasimhan writes of Wyvern.' Wyvern's cookbook is explicitly a work of identification, as he aims to explain the superiority of the new order of consumption, dispelling domestic assumptions about British lifestyle in India… Rather than preparing the food of previous generations, Wyvern's cookbook defines Anglo-Indian cuisine as the pinnacle of modernity and civility, paralleling the rhetoric of the British Empire" (Lakshminarasimhan 11).

Cookbooks in colonial India thus became a tool of the empire to govern the colonised. And this extended towards constructing an 'identity' of the same cookbooks, as tools of dominance. It was through a relationship of the coloniser and the colonised that this idea of governance was maintained, and although the Anglo-Indian would not use cooking texts as a manual for her own culinary endeavours, these books nonetheless outlined a wide variety of cooking-related tasks from the perspective of the household manager (Procida 133).

The cookbooks included recipes that were both European and Indian. However, there was an emphasis on time and place for such recipes. Many scholars then quote Wyvern, who reinstates the European hold on India by fleshing out Indian food and emphasising French cuisine. "However, the molten curries, according to Wyvern, "lost caste" in British formal settings; it was faux pas to serve Indian food at dinnertime or special occasions, yet curry remained a popular dish for lunch or at clubs, hotels and private dinners due to nostalgia" (Lakshminarasimhan 12). There was a need for sophistication and a "deliberate effort to distance from the English diet of the Company days, which had a strong sense of Indian aristocracy" (Chowdhary 585). Further, Chowdhary also argues that the need for French cuisine arose not from the dietary habits of the British but rather as a vehicle to establish the 'superiority' of European food habits, but also helped to firmly establish the racial assertiveness/arrogance of the ruling class (Chowdhary 586).

Dainty Dishes for Indian Tables, first published in 1879 by an anonymous author, aimed to improve cookery in India, explaining that the main stumbling block to preparing dishes was […] the impossibility of relying on the memory of [Indian] cooks to retain the numerous ingredients and complicated processes of European cuisine of which they have no record (Lakshminarasimhan 13).

The idea of supervision over the cook is once again brought in, with a focus on European dishes only. Lakshminarasimhan goes on to write that the author here considers Indian cooks to be unskillful regarding European dishes, and hence, the ability of the British memsahibs to throw good parties became a requirement. Their supervision then became "a key component for career advancement within the colonial administration" (Lakshminarasimhan 13).

However, when concerned with this 'unskilled' labour of the Indian cook in relation to the European dishes, it is worth noting that Procida is of the view that Anglo-Indians did not cook. "This ignorance of cooking skills and disregard for the most basic culinary knowledge apparently remained a perversely constant characteristic of Anglo-Indian society during the very years when the Anglo-Indian cookbook flourished as a literary genre" (Procida 127). She goes on to say that many of these women had no idea where their kitchen was, such as when she writes that "commenting on Anglo-Indian society in the 1930s, one woman recalled that 'the majority of memsahibs had come out knowing nothing about cooking and never bothered to learn.'" (Procida 128). Hence, contradicting what was said earlier by Lakshminarasimhan. Procida also further mentions that the Anglo-Indians did acknowledge the skill of their Indian cooks, "Anglo-Indians generally acknowledged their Indian cooks to be quite skilful and knowledgeable and were content to let the various processes of food preparation remain a mysterious art relegated to the domain of the colonised peoples" (Procida 133).

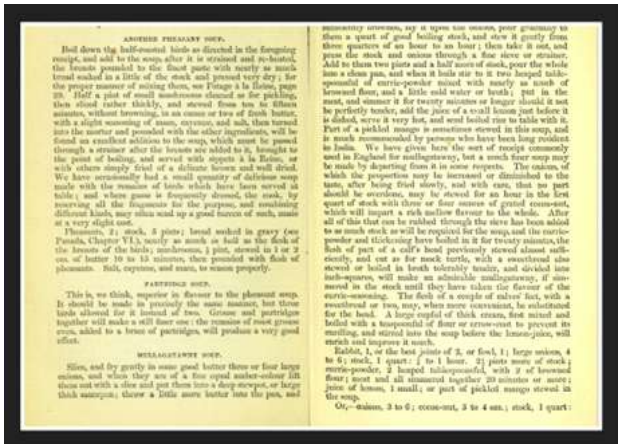
Lakshminarasimhan continues to talk about *Dainty Dishes*, saying that another volume was published, which included Indian dishes due to requests by friends. These included curries and pulaos, but the preparation of which was different from what was authentic, "indicating a demand for inclusion of Indian food while simultaneously revealing an attempt by the author to ignore Indian food in the Anglo-Indian culinary lexicon" (Lakshminarasimhan 14). The book ignores what the original recipes and methods were to create a new recipe, with the reason being their authenticity, as when he mentions that it "attempts to ignore Indian cuisine, forcing Indian cooks to prepare only proper food suited for the modern and civilised British Raj" (Lakshminarasimhan 14). This is also commented upon by Procida, who writes: The authenticity of so-called Indian dishes served in Anglo-Indian homes is, of course, open to question. Indian cuisine is itself far from monolithic, displaying significant regional variations and embodying various religious dietary proscriptions. (Procida 140).

She refers to Arjun Appadurai, whose argument is based on the creation of a National Cuisine, only

emergent after the unification of India, made possible through its Independence (Appadurai 18). This, however, seems to contradict Procida's problem of regional differences, as Appadurai also argues that a National Cuisine would progress Indian cuisine more than relying on the regional differences and character. Procida, however, mentions that such a distinction was already being made by the Anglo-Indians by means of their classification of "curries" and "pillaus." She also makes a distinction between the two, looking at intention, where the Anglo-Indians were unaware or chose to ignore certain aspects of Indian cuisine. She writes that "British thrift dictated that leftovers be incorporated into curries, whereas Indian cooking generally eschewed the use of leftovers" (Procida 140).

In turn, Indian recipes had made their way into the colonial cookbooks in Britain, due to soldiers and officials returning to England. One such important recipe to be found in many texts is that of the mulligatawny soup. Modhumita Roy goes into grave detail regarding the preparation, history, and importance of mulligatawny soup in her article 'Some Like It Hot: Class, Gender and Empire in the Making of Mulligatawny Soup.' She says that the recipe originated from the Tamilian "pepper water" (milagu tanni) and had travelled all over the world as a remedy for headaches (Roy 66). Much like the other "curries" and "pillaus" made for the British, mulligatawny also travelled to England, a recipe modified to suit their palettes.

Here, Roy looks at Eliza Acton's *Modern Cookery*, where Acton does not modify the recipe completely to suit English tastes but rather advises caution with seasoning, but not avoiding it, as it is through this cookery that taste prevails. What is particularly striking is that the recipe is not listed under foreign cookery though Acton does make oblique references to the delicate palates of her readers, unaccustomed to certain flavours and condiments: "Unless precise orders to the contrary have been given", she warns, "onions, eschalots and garlic, should be used in seasoning with great moderation" since these are "very offensive to many eaters" and "to persons of delicate habit their effects are sometimes extremely prejudicial." (Roy 69).



ANOTHER PHEASANT SOUP.

Boil down the half-roasted birds as directed in the foregoing receipt, and add to the soup, after it is strained and re-heated, the breasts pounded to the finest paste with nearly as much bread soaked in a little of the stock and pressed very dry; for the proper manner of mixing them, see Fetage à la Reine, page 19. Half a pint of small mushrooms cleaned as for pickling, then sliced rather thickly, and stewed from ten to fifteen minutes, without browning, in an ounce or two of fresh butter, with a slight seasoning of mace, cayenne, and salt, then turned into the mortar and pounded with the other ingredients, will be found an excellent addition to the soup, which must be passed through a strainer after the breasts are added to it, brought to the point of boiling, and served with sippets à la Reine, or with others simply fried of a delicate brown and well dried. We have occasionally had a small quantity of delicious soup made with the remains of birds which have been served at table; and where game is frequently dressed, the stock, by reserving all the fragments for the purpose, and combining different kinds, may often send up a good tureen of such, made at a very slight cost.

Pheasants, 2; stock, 3 pints; bread soaked in gravy (see French, Chapter VI.), nearly as much or half as the flesh of the breasts of the birds; mushrooms, ½ pint, stewed in 1 or 2 ozs. of butter 10 to 15 minutes, then pounded with flesh of pheasants. Salt, cayenne, and mace, to season properly.

PARTRIDGE SOUP.

This is, we think, superior in flavour to the pheasant soup. It should be made in precisely the same manner, but three birds allowed for it instead of two. Grouse and partridges together will make a still finer one: the remains of roast grouse even, added to a brace of partridges, will produce a very good effect.

MULLAGATAWNY SOUP.

Slice, and fry gently in some good butter three or four large onions, and when they are of a fine equal amber-colour lift them out with a slice and put them into a deep stewpot, or large thick saucepan; throw a little more butter into the pan, and

This is another example of texts citing the modifications made by the English in their recipes. Roy also mentions other variations made to mulligatawny soup, but when served, it is recommended to be served hot, with rice and mango pickles, to remind them of their Indian life. Procida also mentions this aspect of a constructed 'Indian' context, whose authenticity was important in the Indian recipes adopted by the Anglo-Indians.

One cookbook author, explaining Anglo-Indian and Oriental Cookery to a metropolitan British readership hoping to replicate this cuisine in their homes, noted that, 'The Anglo-Indian style is a modification [of Indian cookery] and partly added to by French and Italian methods to please the European palate.' (Procida 140).

Scholars often note that the recipes were modified for the palette on one hand, while also noting that the practicality of Indian chefs to modify European recipes using their traditional skills and methods also existed. It is the consensus that recipes and cookbooks existed in the subcontinent as a means of knowledge production and dissemination, through reiterating the imperial values through supervision and understanding what they were eating. This domestic domain, otherwise left ignored, became a mode of control through the inner seams.

While Anglo-Indians could, with the assistance of their cookbooks and household management guides, 'know' Indian cuisine, even if they could not reproduce it on their own, cultural and culinary barriers could not be breached from the other direction. Anglo-Indians 'putatively unique ability to supervise and to rule,' whether in the kitchen or in the greater realm of the empire, justified Britain's imperial role in India" (Procida 142).

It will be pertinent here to invoke Bhabha's notion of colonial mimesis, especially when it came to the 'book' as "a fetishized sign that glorifies the epistemological centrality and permanence of

European dominance". Such forms of mimesis, however, open themselves up to what he describes as 'colonial ambivalence', a reinscription of the ideological contours of the imperial book sign. In their many instances of mimicry of both the coloniser's and the colonised's texts, they open up gaps that are ontologically unsettling for the coloniser. Hence, the imperative to uphold ideological distinctions in the space of the kitchen, through the act of supervision of Indian cooks. The leakage inherent in the process of mimicry needs to be contained through violence, and the ambivalent knowledge in food consumption and recipe creation needs to be demarcated within domains accessible to the coloniser/supervisor (Graves 1).

Background & Context: Philosophy

Coming back to the question of ontology, Andrea Borghini has been one of the only scholars to explore recipes as ontological texts. The most popular study regarding the theory of recipes is in his work, 'What is a Recipe?' In the essay, he argues that constructivism was the theory he believed best suited his concern of the "hard problem of recipes" (Borghini 723). This "hard problem of recipes" refers to the variety of dishes that exist, dishes being anything ready to be eaten by someone, and how many recipes successfully instantiate them. The main focus of Borghini's theory revolves around instantiation and how well a recipe does so. "The constructivist maintains that recipes are the outcome of a selection process ultimately guided by human fiat," says Borghini (Borghini 724), and then refers to R. Sims, where Sims makes a distinction between authenticity and authentication as "the process whereby people make claims for authenticity and the interests that those claims serve" (Sims 324).

Sana Hirvonen, in her chapter "Recipes Without Makers," challenges Borghini's framework. She discusses that realism sets up as a more accurate theory in place of constructivism. Realism suggests that if a dish is made up of certain core ingredients, a flavour profile, which is then based on texture and temperature, with enough changes to said dish, a new one would come into being. Thus, her argument implies that any slight change in a recipe would develop a new one, and hence, recipes would be ever-changing and would no longer constitute a singular dish. Even the understanding of what a dish is differs for Hirvonen, a dish being anything that is prepared to be eaten by someone. She is concerned with the intrinsic value of dishes, as when she writes that "two recipes are the same if they consist of the same core ingredients and gustatory types" (34).

This conflicts with Borghini's focus on the instantiation of a dish as the main feature of a recipe. While Hirvonen and Borghini conflict with one another, there is only one aspect they agree on, which is apprenticeship. Here, Hirvonen says that there are certain factors of a final dish that are always left out in recipes, making them incomplete. These factors include the quality of spices, as well as the exact type of utensils and cooking instruments. All of which pertain to some degree of quality and ability on the part of the person making the recipe. Hence, as Borghini states "It seems that recipes are not autonomous entities, but are vicarious of dishes. […] it is impossible to spell out recipes that would match a full-fledged dish. If so, then it is allegedly impossible to gain full acquaintance with a recipe, unless we have experienced a dish instantiating that recipe. […] I am contending that until a recipe has not been realised, we can only speak of it as an entity that could exist in potency, but that is not yet existing. […] A recipe is existentially linked to some dish instantiating it: no such dish, no recipe. Knowledge of the recipe, hence, requires acquaintance with some dish instantiating it and, typically, a process of apprenticeship that would fine-tune our acquaintance." (Borghini 730–1)

They both agree in this case, where skill and expertise are important in order to either recreate the dish, in the case of realism, or instantiate the dish, in the case of constructivism. Both are arguing for the same cause. Due to this aspect of expertise coming to light, Borghini furthers his argument that a recipe will be unfulfilled anyway due to the lack of skill as portrayed above. He argues that a recipe works on the ability to help the cook imitate a dish, that is, a substitute for what the actual dish is, hence, instantiating the dish. However, Hirvoven agrees that from a constructivist point of view, a cook would only create a recipe knowing it can or should be replicated. So, she brings in the idea of thinking of recipes in a hierarchical way, where recipes trickle down as various "species" of a recipe, so different types of meatballs from different cultures are then "species" of a meatball.

When we learn public recipes, we typically learn either complete recipes, aka recipe species, or recipe templates that belong to a genus, which leave some choice over the details. Once one has fixed the details, the resulting dish is an instance of a recipe species, a complete recipe" (Hirvonen 38). Borghini goes on to talk about authenticity, which, for Hirvonen, was determined by the core ingredients and processes. He first looks at the fit and approval rating of a dish. The fit of a dish, he bases on context and resemblance, that is, a recipe to a certain extent must resemble the dish it is instantiating, as well as the conditions under which it is prepared. Here, Borghini uses the example of a chef who could be known for higher-quality

renditions. Hence, the expectations are also much higher for this chef.

As for approval rating, it is up to a collective of people to gauge "whether a dish authentically renders a recipe, the more the identity of the dish will be secured" (Borghini 734). Hence, Borghini's idea of authenticity is linked to open-endedness, in that the authenticity of a recipe is not a matter of its origin, as recipes constantly evolve. He says that recipes are a part and not a whole, and hence not every instance can be accounted for, as there are future instances of recipes. He writes that the "identity of a recipe cannot be tied to any property that some of its instances possess at any moment of its history" (Borghini 736). Thus, he corroborates that the best theoretical framework of recipes is constructivist as opposed to realism, as argued by Hirvonen.

Critique

With the above discussion, we now need to make sense of the reasons why the existing theories are unsuitable in the case of colonial recipes. The aspects I am concerned with are: instantiation, authenticity and apprenticeship, as stated by Borghini, as well as what Hirvonen has said in her essay. These three aspects will be covered using a recipe for Mullingtawny soup written by Eliza Acton in her book *Modern Cookery for Private Families*.

Instantiation

For Borghini, his entire theory is based on the ability to instantiate a dish. Hence, a recipe should create instructions that would build a dish that would either represent or resemble the dish it is referring to. The dish that is being represented is identified through a performative utterance. Let us look at the example of mulligatawny soup, which came from the Tamil milagu tanni (pepper water), later turning into a common dish, the Indian soup.

The mulligatawny soup deviates from the simplicity of the original recipe. In Eliza Acton's 'Modern Cookery for Private Families,' the recipe consists of far more ingredients than just pepper and water. It calls for cream, "currie powder", animal parts such as the calf's head, sweetbread, and rabbit (Acton 36). All of these depart from the initial dish of water and pepper. When applying the constructivist framework, this recipe seems to be far off from the dish it "originated" from. It is no longer a representation of the native pepper water because it has developed much further with changes and additions. Although a main component of this framework is based on identifying the dish through the means of a performative utterance, and even though the dish is not called pepper water, it is still identified as an Indian soup. This would imply that when it is being instantiated, it should hold some similarities to its Indian origins.

Hence, it fails to instantiate the milagu tanni. As for Hirvonen's realism, the change in ingredients makes it a new recipe. But it forces itself to stay rooted to its Tamil origins. The recipe can come under the species theory, as Hirvonen says, "We can think of recipes in a hierarchical way, akin to the taxonomic hierarchy in biology" (Hirvonen 38).

But even in that nature, there should be some semblance to the root, coming back to it being an instance of the former. But as said earlier, is it? In its representation, the key ingredients of pepper and water should be present. However, in the example, it is mentioned that the "currie-powder" mentioned would contain pepper, but it is not highlighted. It leaves us asking, what makes it an instance if it's different, but it cannot exist alone either, as it claims to come from some root? This shows how the recipe has evolved far beyond, and the liberties of adding British ingredients highlight the shift from the importance of pepper in the recipe.

Acton's suggestions point the way to the domestication of exotic and foreign menu items to the more cautious British palate and plate (Roy 69).

Authenticity

As said above by Modhumita Roy, Acton uses ingredients that are common in British households. The interesting part is that the recipe also calls for "cocoa-nut," but in the footnotes, she mentions, "that although the cocoa-nut when it is young and fresh imparts a peculiarly rich flavour to any preparation, it is not liked by all eaters, end is better omitted when the taste of a party is not known and only one soap is served" (Acton 35).

Borghini says that authenticity is not a matter of origin but rather the approval of the audience. In this case, it is possible that the soup is authentic because the audience of the cookbook approves its identification as mulligatawny soup. But this approval is of a British audience, when the soup clearly identifies as such. In that case, is it even possible for it to be authentic? When the audience approves, it does not know its history or where it has come from.

Hirvonen disagrees with Borghini on this one, as this recipe is not a recreation of the original, and with the addition of ingredients, it has evolved into a new recipe, but as it still identifies itself as having an Indian origin and associates with this identity, it certainly has evolved into a new recipe, but as mentioned above, there is still a web of recipes from the species theory as suggested by Hirvonen. We see

that it still has barely any connection to the former and is not a real instance in that sense, aside from a verbal connection. Its authenticity also lies in that connection. In failure to prove that connection, it becomes inauthentic.

Apprenticeship

Borghini and Hirvonen agree on two aspects when it comes to their theories of apprenticeship and expertise. For Hiroven, it is that there are some aspects that a recipe would leave out, making it difficult to truly be a replication. This would include the quality of spices and the type of utensils used. For Borghini, on the other hand, the skill on the part of the cook could be missing, and it is the recipe that must aid the cook to successfully instantiate the recipe. However, in order for the recipe to be an instantiation of a dish, the maker must be acquainted with the dish it is instantiating.

In the example used, it is difficult to say that Acton has ever come into contact with the original dish of which her recipe is an instance of. Moreover, she may be acquainted with some other recipe of the same soup from someone who has experienced the dish. This shows that she has not experienced the dish she is creating the recipe for.

The pepper water would use the natural pepper accessible to the residents of southern India, which is a common ingredient found in southern Indian food. Acton, on the other hand, uses “currie-powder,” a mix of species created by the British. As Hirvonen pays attention to the finer details of the quality of ingredients, we can say that it fails to sit in the realist framework as well. Hirvonen does mention that recipes can be trickle-down in nature, where each change in recipe becomes a species of the original. It is possible to then read this soup as such.

However, the problem is that due to the constant identification of the recipe of mulling tawny soup as an Indian dish or soup. It is identified as such, which leads it to failing to fit in either because it continues to be identified as being Indian. It is unable to fit into either theory perfectly.

Interpretivism

This essay proposes that the best framework for the theory of recipes would be interpretivism. This is in reference to Issac Reed's theory of interpretivism and minimal and maximal interpretation. Interpretivism is based on the idea of developing theory while remaining grounded in empirical facts. It operates through the minimal and maximal interpretation, to understand what these terms mean, Leslie Maccolman writes, Scholarly consensus about what actually occurred (minimal interpretation) becomes a minimum common denominator for subsequent interpretations of how, why, and what it meant (maximal interpretation)” (477).

The minimal interpretations are the facts of which we know, the evidence and literal information, while the maximal interpretations become the meaning we make using theories, to see what it actually means beyond what is seen. Reed is concerned with deep meaning and the indirect analysis of social meaning through various interpretations.

It is attentive to human subjectivity and to the 'meaningful worlds of social life' which give rise to human agency.” (Maccolman 482). Thus, it's not just meaning which can be literally anything. Rather, it is focused on experience and the construction of reality.

Interpretivism encourages the reconstruction of the text in a way that goes beyond a surface-level understanding. For instance, the simple understanding of why the recipe of mulling tawny soup differs from its origin of Tamil pepper water would be due to the taste preferences of the British. But, it could also be a product focusing on the exploitation of the exotic and then domestication of it to become neutralised into a society that has colonised India. “The intellectual goal of the interpretive epistemic mode is, therefore, to reconstruct these 'deep meanings' and resignify evidence in relation to them” (Maccolman 482). Constructivism - interpretivism allows for the recipes to be broken down into nuances that were used to build it.

Many of these recipes arose from combining elements present in India with the tastes of the British. Much like how bricolage works in subculture, where style is being formed through the usage of existing elements, reconstructed in a different context, the recipes of colonial India and the British are a bricolage of ingredients, dishes, and cultures that were available to the British and Anglo-Indians.

However, when the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed. (Clarke 1976)

These recipes occupy a similar stance to the bricolage of style he talks about. In the sense that, where bricolage reassemble signs to make sense of the world they live in, here either style or food, they create something entirely new, a new discourse, which is identifiable in these recipes. They are

creating a new discourse, an identity that is not Indian or British but an amalgamation. However, it is not just about identity. These recipes are doing something else as objects of the social and political. Interpretivism allows us to read these recipes as such, but also as tools of reinforcement.

These cookbooks served as a means of instruction to not only the British at home but also to the servants of British officials and Anglo-Indians, another means of reinforcing their rule. As mentioned in the background and context section, these recipes played a role that constantly located the colonised as its subordinate. Either through the recipe itself, changing ingredients, making names easier to pronounce, or dismissing it as a whole and as exotic. But it was also the books that these recipes were published in, books devoted to etiquette, to manners, to the treatment of servants, chefs, workers, and who could be employed. All this is integral to the recipe, and the recipe cannot be removed from it.

Hence, these parts of cultural discourse have to be taken into consideration when theorising. If we use interpretivism to Acton's recipe, we can see that the name itself, Mullingtawny, can be understood as an anglicised pronunciation of maligu tanni, which adds more layers to the existing knowledge and cannot be ignored. There is an erasure of culture, yet a clear call out to it, asking for its exotic properties, but only to an extent, for its spectacular nature. It colonises not just taste, culture and ingredients but also language. The "currie powder" does a similar function, it wants to be exotic but chooses its name only, while being spices tolerable for the British. Interpretivism allows for these indirect theories as means of interpretation, where direct theories are not the only relevant ones. Therefore, becoming more accurate as well as paying heed to the nuances of the historical, linguistic, and cultural discourse that follows these recipes. We can read these recipes as having a different purpose, and interpretivism helps us to do this

Conclusion

In conclusion, reading recipes requires a theory that enables a deeper understanding. To use constructivism or realism creates a shallow analysis of this, making recipes insignificant apart from their evidentiary purpose. Instantiation, authenticity, and apprenticeship all play important parts when locating the identity of a recipe, but they do not interact with the recipe beyond that. In a sense, it fails to see recipes in their context.

This essay particularly looks at recipes from the early colonial period in India, the nineteenth century, reading Eliza Acton's recipe for Mulligatawny soup as a case study to critique existing scholarship. This essay finds that the above categories can not be simply applied to such a recipe, where it constructs and reconstructs an identity that is not its own. Moreover, recipes and cookbooks hold information as objects that influence the social and political. It is of much more value than acknowledged by existing studies. This entails a greater comprehension and analysis of recipes.

Hence, this essay proposed that interpretivism is a better fit, acknowledging its emphasis on social knowledge and deeper meanings. The minimal and maximal interpretations display the nuances of these recipes that are overlooked when looking at only identity. Hence, it helps create social and political objects, through which the duties and functions of these recipes change. Ontology alone may not suffice. There is more when looking at language, epistemology and rhetoric, but to begin with, ontology allows for deeper investigation.

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Recognising metal music as the music of resistance in India: *In the context of Anti-intellectual propaganda, the subaltern, marginalisation, and hegemony*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary examination of metal music in India as a culturally marginalised form of expression and investigates the genre as a site of resistance within the Indian bourgeoisie. The theories and concepts that reify this are anti-intellectualism, hegemony, cultural capital, subculture, and subaltern studies. The paper further argues that the dismissal of metal is not due to a lack of meaning but to interpretive frameworks that render it ineligible for the genre. How it articulates resistance across dimensions must be considered, challenging the default paradigm. Metal functions as a form of practice, needing active engagement and fostering critical participation, aligned with the processes of cultural consciousness. Comparative survey data of listeners and non-listeners, along with a lyrical analysis, provide consistent results in lieu of this argument. There is a clear divide in perception shaped by structures of anti-intellectualism and exclusion, while its recognition as resistance is dependent on engagement with complexity. Metal is ultimately repositioned as a legitimate form of critique.

Keywords : *Metal Music, Indian Metal Music, Anti-Intellectualism, Indian Music Sub-cultures, Moshpit, Resistance, Bourgeois.*

Introduction

The paper is put together by annexing the complex socio-political trends of anti-intellectualism in the current-day ethos and the "brute force" genre of music: Metal. The indicator of this annexation comes from the fact that both Richard Hofstadter (theory of anti-intellectualism) and the genre share the equivalent lack of recognition in academics, out of the convenient fringing done by the dominant socio-cultural perspectives of these institutions. The main spine of this paper argues that Metal music in India constitutes a complex and multidimensional cultural resistance within the Indian bourgeoisie that is deliberately marginalised and misrecognised within the dominant interpretive framework, both within and outside resistance. The analysis through

Hofstadter elaborates on this by situating metal within broader epistemic structures that privilege facile immediacy, interpretive simplicity and a morally clean, distinct, 'appropriate' subculture that can be integrated in 'civilised society'. The paper also calls for contextualising India and subaltern theories that inculcate further complexity to a genre like metal, which has originated in the West, and then integrated itself in the subcontinent. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of theories by scholars across multiple disciplines (as will be mentioned ahead), the essay is a fractal piece of a much larger, complex argument, which posits metal as a discursive, symbolic, intellectual genre that embodies resistance, demanding recognition within academic and cultural discourse.

Metal music, despite its global reach and cultural presence, occupies a frequently marginalised position in the dominant frameworks of cultural value, particularly in the context of India. The genre has found its way to the south asian belt, and is still in constant negotiation with its cultural facets, so deliberate misrecognition, especially in the current rise of anti-intellectual praxis, leads metal to be dismissed as an alien, excessive, culturally unsound and unintelligible genre. This isn't a matter of aesthetic preference as much as it is to do with the deeper structure of other cultural powers and the force of epistemic exclusion. The intellectual legitimacy often afforded to other musical genres (Classical, Pop, Jazz) is subdued when it comes to metal through deliberate interpretive limitation. The essay argues that metal music in India constitutes complexity and multifaceted ways of resistance, often overlooked by the intersecting dynamics of anti-intellectualism (Hofstadter), Hegemonic cultural norms (Gramsci) and the unequal distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu). The theoretical perspectives mobilised here allow us to understand metal music not just as an isolated cultural form, but as a site where broader struggles over meaning, legitimacy and power are played out. The conditions under which the genre is misrecognised are provided by anti-intellectualism, while the other frameworks explain how metal continues to persistently function as a form of resistance despite its marginalisation. There is a troublesome theoretical move made in the application of Spivak's and Guha's work on the subaltern and marginalised to speak of a subculture within what easily fits as the bourgeoisie. But this is done to lay the roots for an intersectional move this work intends to pursue.

Metal music in India is distinctive in its position within the global circulation of subcultural forms. Shaped by transnational and local socio-cultural conditions, participation in the genre in India involves a lot more than just preference; it signifies a pathway to a wider international community who share those ideological orientations. This sense of belonging is concretised via concerts and huge festivals that helped bring well-known bands to India. Bangalore Open Air is also a subset of the same, having built a community as their slogan states: "For the metalheads, by the metalheads, of the metalheads." These events are moments of cultural validation that make India's presence known in the global metal imaginary. Parallelly, the Indian metal scene has built its own identity through the emergence of local bands like Kryptos, Demonic Resurrection, Bhayanak Maut, Pin Drop Violence, Scribe and Bloodywood, eventually gaining international traction. In spite of this, metal remains marginal in discourse, especially in Indian socio-cultural discourse. So what does Indian metal subculture reveal about the limits of recognition, and how can this also illuminate systemic structures and acts of resistance?

The central themes of this argument lie in anti-intellectualism, as articulated by Hofstadter. He defines this concept as a cultural tendency to distrust complexity and privilege facile, accessible immediacy over sustained intellectual engagement (1963). When this is applied to the production of culture, it reveals how art forms that call for interpretive effort by the subject for critical expansion in discourse, academic or otherwise, get dismissed as incoherent or ineligible. The dense sonic production and lyrical structures in metal music, moreover, its symbolic ambiguity, resist easy consumption. This situates metal at odds with the normative cultural expectations that favour clarity and emotional immediacy. Although not cited, Alexander Galloway explains the metamorphosis of the generation through his concept of displaced aggression, wherein the overwhelm of emotional content often hijacks people's analytical circuitry, culminating in immediate, gut-over-instinct reactions that dominate decision-making. It is fueled by today's technology, where social media is used to propagate anti-intellectual practices to subdue active resistance and dissent, ensuring the intactness of hegemonic structures. This tension is particularly prominent in India, where mainstream musical culture is heavily shaped by film industries and commercial imperatives, prioritising accessibility without slowing down to reapply logic.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Cultural Theory through Culture Studies, Subaltern Studies and Performance Studies forms the main analytical lens including the works of Richard Hofstadter, Antonio Gramsci, Dick Hebdige, Ranajit

Guha, Pierre Bourdieu, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, James C. Scott, Robert Walser, Deena Weinstein, Paulo Freire, Keith Kahn-Harris and Brahma Prakash. The artists that are brought into analysis include Rage Against the Machine and Bloodywood, who stand as examples of global and Indian metal (and subgenre) artists and whose work the paper argues articulates themes of resistance, alienation, socio-politics, surrealism, and power across historical and cultural contexts. Empirical data is also included in this study, through two surveys conducted via a Google questionnaire form: "Metal: the Sound of Resistance" and "Perceptions of Metal Music"; they have been circulated to metalheads (metal music enthusiasts) and non-metalheads (people who do not engage with the genre). The number of respondents amounts to about 142, of all genders and ages across India, covering metropolitan cities like Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai and New Delhi. The survey for Metalheads involves their perception of the varied philosophies the genre produces, and for Non-metalheads, the survey seeks out their view on the genre itself. The empirical findings of these two surveys provide crucial insight into the diverse ways in which the genre is perceived across different audiences. By comparing responses from both listeners and non-listeners, this evaluation seeks to uncover that the marginalisation of metal is rooted in distinct interpretive frameworks shaped by exposure to culture and anti-intellectual tendencies.

Resisting Anti-intellectualism and Hegemony through Metal

The imperative requirement to comprehend is that anti-intellectualism isn't centred around the absence of intellect as incidental, but in fact a deliberate rejection of reified knowledge based on functional bias influenced by propaganda. The concept can be understood as a structural force, influencing the valuation of how art is expressed; it determines legitimacy and marginalisation by that yardstick. For this paper, it makes for a crucial spine to analyse metal music's frequent dismissal, largely due to the socio-political disavowal of a lack that applies to a music form falling outside the fringes of what anti-intellectual discourse is willing to recognise.

The resistance potential of metal can also be viewed through Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, which fundamentally rethinks the relationship between the power dynamics of the teacher and the learner. The critique of what he terms the 'banking model' of education, in which knowledge is treated as a static entity deposited by a figure of authority into passive recipients. Freire proposes a dialogical model in which learners actively participate in the production of knowledge, engaging critically with their social realities and recognising their agency within the capacity for social metamorphosis.

Identifying Various Patterns from Data

There is a consistent pattern in the data: listeners recognise complexity and depth, and the latter lean towards reductive interpretations. This divergence substantiates the central argument of the paper; metal's marginalisation is a production of misrecognition, not deficiency. Among the listeners (n = 91), there is a strong consensus in seeing the genre as a form of resistance. When asked whether it functions as a medium of cultural or political resistance, a combined total of 80.2% of respondents either agreed (38.46%) or strongly agreed (41.76%). A small minority of 5.49% disagreed, and 14.29% remained neutral. The distribution indicates a high level of conviction; the largest proportion of the mass occupies the strong agreement category. This indicates that the perception of metal is not incidental within the listener community; it constitutes an interpretive framework through which the genre is understood. This is significant when tied to the theoretical framework in the paper. The recognition of resistance aligns with the concept of subcultural meaning-making (Hebdige), where subcultures generate alternative systems of signification that may not be immediately legible within dominant cultural codes. The agreement shows the presence of these systems, along with their internalisation across the community. Moreover, the shared understanding also offers the existence of a collective framework of interpretation that is shaped through repeated exposure and participation in the genre.

On the other hand, non-listeners (n=49) reveal a different pattern. When asked to describe their general understanding of metal music, the largest proportion of respondents, 40.82%, selected a neutral stance. Positive responses were less pronounced, with 32.65% identifying it as very positive and 18.37% as somewhat positive. Negative perceptions were limited, with only 8.16% of respondents expressing either somewhat or very negative views. The sweeping outlook seems to suggest a non-hostile outlook of metal. Upon closer examination, though, neutrality turns out to be a defining characteristic of this group over positivity. This neutrality reflects a lack of familiarity and interpretive engagement; regarding exposure to the genre, 46.94% report having heard only a few songs, and 16.33% were completely unfamiliar with the genre. A very small minority showed sustained engagement. The limited exposure is evidence of the neutral stance adopted by many participants, clearly resulting from the insufficiency of information about the genre.

Via anti-intellectualistic perspectives (Hofstadter), cultural frameworks that require interpretive effort are overlooked, hence this neutrality amongst non-listeners can be read as a form of passive misrecognition, within which the complexity of metal is simply not engaged with. The dichotomy of the two groups reflects a structural divide in perception; it's a matter of being equipped with the cultural and interpretive tools to recognise the genre as meaningful. Listeners, therefore, find it easy to engage with the complexity, whereas non-listeners resort to reductive responses due to the lack of the same. This very clearly underscores the reiterated base argument in the paper that pertains to the importance of interpretive frameworks shaping cultural perception to facilitate engagement and understanding.

These findings are an attempt to establish a strong support system for the core thesis. The divergence demonstrates perception as non-uniform, though contingent when culturally positioned for interpretive capacity. Both recognition and neutrality draw out meaning production and obstruction in varied social contexts, supporting the argument that the genre's marginalisation is not a mirror to its intrinsic qualities but in fact of the structures through which it is interpreted.

Situating Frameworks in Findings

This marginalisation is further reinforced by what Bourdieu describes as the unequal distribution of cultural capital; it refers to knowledge, competencies, and dispositions that enable individuals to interpret specific cultural forms. Metal's prerequisite is specific to subcultural literacy; comprehension of its musical conventions, tropes, lyrical structures and encoded elements and symbols via aural semiosis. People who possess this can engage successfully with the complexity and expansion of the critical discourse of the genre, whereas those who are not will most likely perceive it as chaotic or meaningless. The disparity contributes to the politics of deliberate misrecognition, through which the meaning of metal is isolated to its community and is made inaccessible to those outside its interpretive community.

The dynamics of misrecognition are further highlighted through Hebdige's analysis of subculture. The argument posed is that subcultures resist dominant meanings through the appropriation and transformation of style. This results in symbolic systems that challenge hegemonic norms (Hebdige). The aesthetic of metal is characterised by its aggression, distorted sonic complexity, intensity and dark thematic tones of gratuitous, extreme elements. This base functionality of an almost vulgar presentation disrupts conventional expectations of musical expression. It becomes symbolic in the framework of resistance, but on the other hand, falls to the risk of deliberate misrecognition and dismissal due to the same reasons. Dominant frameworks that lack tools to interpret such forms prefer to be reductive toward such complexities and override the opportunity for depth by using fear to keep people from curiosity.

Here, Deena Weinstein is particularly significant due to the conceptualising of heavy metal as a coherent cultural system. The genre is re-framed as a space with its own internal logics, values, thematic concerns, and community practices (Weinstein). The perspective offers to look at metal not as a deviation from normative musical standards, but leans into the emphasis of cultural significance. The analysis at its core identifies recurring themes like power, alienation, aggression and transcendence, reflecting broader social and psychological dynamics. These themes are deeply rooted in the conditions of modernity, experiential dislocation, structural inequality, existential uncertainty, and social hierarchy. Kahn-Harris extends this analysis to extreme metal, a subgenre of metal music, where "reflexive anti-reflexivity" is shed light on, which the genre, according to his theory, often engages with. The concept produces meanings that simultaneously invite and resist interpretation (Kahn-Harris) and is a lot more evident in the fragmented, often ambiguous nature of the lyrics, which challenges normative modes of comprehension. The frequency with which metal music operates with disjunction and irony is reflective of the complex realities it is in constant negotiation with.

Unfortunately, this becomes a barricade within anti-intellectualist philosophy (Hofstadter). Cultural devaluation of intellectual engagement leads to social spaces wherein subjects are less equipped to be hailed by forms of art that require interpretive critical analysis. Metal's resistance to simplification thus becomes situated in a way where it is conveniently overlooked, and reduced to its performed superficial characteristics.

The larger question that contextualises India when it comes to voice and representation elaborates the conversation into an even more complicated dynamic. Subaltern studies (Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak) emphasise the importance of giving recognition to different forms of resistance that emerge outside frameworks of institutions or what the elite consider eligible. However, the subaltern's ability to 'speak' is more often than not mediated by structures through which it is interpreted; hence, the articulation of resistance becomes null in the face of

deliberate misrecognition. Metal exemplifies this paradox; the lyrics of metal often engage with themes of power, inequality, and alienation. It articulates a critique that resonates with broad socio-political concerns, but is still frequently neglected, not due to the lack of substance, but the expression of the forms falls in the fringes of dominant interpretation. In this way, metal speaks, screams even, but is still not fully heard.

Beyond Sound, the Lyrical Dimension

A quick lyrical analysis provides a particularly rich site for examining these dynamics.

While the preceding content establishes a theoretical and data-driven foundation for this paper, the addition of lyrical and sonic constructions of metal makes the paper more tangible. The analysis of lyrics is imperative to understand the genre's capacity for dissent; the examination can be contextualised outside of the facile domain of representation and more as a matter of praxis. Metal performs, circulating the message of resistance by encoding it through language and sound. The result then opens metal to multiple facets: explicit, symbolic, and affective. The interpretive engagement often required for this is foreclosed by anti-intellectual perspectives. The most historically significant articulation of this can be traced to Black Sabbath, whose early work was the soil inlaid for the growth of resistance and the budding of the genre's thematic and aesthetic concerns.

Via Spivak, the articulation of the subaltern voice, where resistance is present but not always legible. They're anti-institutional, but still perform within a fringe genre, and end up functioning as a non-institutional archive of dissent that is structurally overlooked. But to elucidate in the line of directness, an even more overt group of resistance is Rage Against the Machine (the title itself is an anti-fascist metaphor).

"Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me."
(*Killing in the Name,* 1992)

The iconic refrain is a simple but powerful rhetoric, which constantly repeats, transforming itself into an act that enforces refusal. Each iteration intensifies the force, going from an individual declaration to a call for collective resistance. It can be further understood through Freire's concept of critical consciousness, where acts of articulation become tools for recognising and resisting oppression. The lyric enacts dissent, transforming passive listening into action. The song operates pedagogically, thus disrupting the 'banking model' of reception, by situating the listener as a participant.

The absence of elaboration in the statement is deliberate. The refusal is self-evident, aligning with Scott's (1990) outlook on resistance as a practice, where acts of defiance are not requisite to being articulate.

"Some of those that work forces are the same
that burn crosses." (*Killing in the Name,*1992)

This opens more explicit criticism, equating authoritative institutions with systemic racial violence, collapsing the distinction between legitimacy and oppression, and exposing the continuity between them. The structurally demonstrated escalation of the song is an amplification of the critique. The exponential rise of the intensity draws the listener to participate in the experience of resistance. This dimension is imperative; the embodiment of resistance takes place here, as it is an invitation to inhabitation.

The emergence of Bloodywood underscores the global and adaptive nature of resistance in metal.

"Don't you dare take another step" (*Dana-Dan,* 2022)

The confrontation positions the speaker as an agent of resistance. The song is also in direct contact with issues of social injustice, particularly gender-based violence. The combination of traditional Indo-centric musical elements with contemporary metal structures also expands the scope of globalisation that the genre holds. Guha's understanding of subaltern agency, where marginalised groups reshape dominant forms to express their realities, situates Bloodywood's articulation within resistance. Spivak reinforces the fact that these expressions may still face misrecognition within dominant frameworks, and the song is both asserted and contested. The use of imperative language establishes immediacy, making it a call to action via the urgency it reifies.

It is a rework of dominant forms in which global metal is re-signified (Hebdige, 1979), which can be understood as a working of dominant forms, in which global metal is localised. The song's explicit engagement with social issues demonstrates how the genre behaves as a symbolic and practical intervention.

Metal music articulates resistance through multiplicity. These forms extend beyond the facile notions of aggression and resistance that operate across content and form. The affective immersion, historically grounded critique, and introspective elements collectively clarify that metal is not singular nor static. The genre is multi-layered, a process that engages with power and identity in ways that

demand interpretive effort. This demand is also what renders the genre at risk for dismissal in anti-intellectualist contexts. Metal, in variety, enacts resistance, challenging the epistemic boundaries of cultural legitimacy and demanding a reconsideration of what constitutes a meaningful experience.

From Scott's concept of hidden transcripts, such expressions can be understood as forms of resistance that operate outside official discourse. Metal often operates in this register as an affective and symbolic challenge to dominant norms, which is not always showcased as explicit political protest. This expansion of resistance beyond overt critique highlights the multiplicity of forms through which it is expressed.

The Indian context introduces an additional complexity. Metal in India exists within a cultural landscape that has been subject to colonialism, globalisation, intense linguistic diversity and the disparity of not just class, but caste hierarchy. Bands like Bloodywood exemplify the localisation of metal, incorporating elements of Indian musical traditions and addressing social inequality. The hybridity may challenge the Western form of metal music, but the band is also widely criticised for its lack of specificity in political stances. Bloodywood becoming the 'face of Indian metal' despite musically nuanced bands like The Down Troddence, Heathen Beast, and Konflicts existing, and their tour of the West being marketed aggressively, draws speculation. The hybrid nature of Indian metal thus becomes both a site of resistance and misrecognition.

The Importance of the Mosh Pit

Outside of symbolic dimensions and discussion, metal is experientially embodied. The concept of Brahma Prakash's viscerality is imperative. While Prakash developed these frameworks to study what is called 'folk' culture, these categories from his work offer vital ways to analyse performance cultures such as metal music. He argues that performance produces meaning not only via language but also via affect, intensity and bodily immersion. The context of metal music makes this evident via mosh pits, where bodies move in response to sound, creating a place of interaction as a community.

The pit can be studied as a form of embodied resistance, disruptive of conventional social hierarchies. It creates a space of equality and collective identity for the fraction of that concert time. Participants engage physically with the music and with each other. The general look from outside makes the mosh pit seem as though a space of aggression; the sight of people pushing each other and running into one another or in circles, screaming cathartically, or flailing with wild abandon. Inside the space, there is an exchange of euphoric release and liberation, allowing the production of meaning through movement and sensation. The visceral dimension challenges the frameworks that traditionally prioritise rationality and language and highlights the importance of affect and experience in comprehending cultural expression.

Conclusion

When all these theoretical perspectives are considered together, they reveal that metal music operates as a multidimensional space of resistance. The lyrical content engages with socio-political and existential themes, and the aesthetic challenges dominant norms. The performative practices create spaces of embodied interaction and the production of a collective. Yet despite this complexity, the genre remains dismissed within dominant frameworks, largely due to dynamics of anti-intellectualism. To recognise the legitimacy of resistance in this genre, the prerequisite is a shift in perspective, moving beyond frameworks that prioritise simplicity and the development of new interpretive modes that are capable of engaging with complexity. The shift is not just academic, but has broader implications for how culture is understood and valued.

The paper attempts to elaborate on how recognising the genre as legitimate and meaningful when situated in discourse relies on the shift of perspective. The requisite it demands is simply a willingness to engage with complex musicology and lyricism, ambiguity and finally, to question the criteria through which the assignment of cultural value is imposed. In doing so, it repositions metal within academic discourse, moreover, contributing to broader debates about culture, power and knowledge (a space primarily reserved for high art).

The implications of the paper invite a reconsideration of how cultural forms are evaluated, whose voices are heard, and what could be at stake when hegemonic entities insist on neglecting certain modes of expression. When the relationship between resistance and misrecognition is positioned at the forefront, the paper sheds light on the importance of attending to forms of culture that are placed at the fringes, as sites of critical insight over the assumed anomalies they are written off as.

While the troubling application of subaltern and marginalisation theories to a subculture marginalised within bourgeois culture is recognised, it is imperative to integrate these theories in the paper to potentially expand research into intersectional studies as the next step. The seeds and roots for this

move made in the work here considers how analysis of marginalisation and the subaltern offer a way to draw on Metal's radical potential as an agent of expression against power hierarchies and dominant ideologies. Metal music doesn't just challenge the power structures; it reveals the limitations they present. It demands its listeners to confront discomfort, contradiction, engage critically, and scrutinise complexity in detail. To recognise the position of metal as the music of resistance is to then recognise the boundaries of our own frameworks, and then work to observe the meanings that reside beyond them.

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Taste: The Epistemically Marginalized Sense

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the sense of taste is positioned within an epistemic hierarchy and how its value as knowledge is shaped by cultural and sensory frameworks. Historically taste has been divided into gustatory (bodily) and aesthetic (intellectual) forms, with the latter granted greater legitimacy. While contemporary scholars attempt to bridge this divide, this paper argues that such efforts often reproduce new hierarchies by privileging certain bodies, practices, and modes of perception over others. Focusing on everyday food culture including restaurants, media, and digital platforms, the study explores how taste is constructed through visual, linguistic, and multisensory cues. These cues shape how food is anticipated, experienced, and evaluated, often before it is physically tasted. As a result, taste does not operate as an isolated bodily sense but as something mediated through broader systems of representation.

Using an interdisciplinary approach of media studies, culture studies, and sociology. The paper analyses how dominant forms of taste are naturalised and presented as universal. By studying two popular food magazine covers, it argues that the issue is not whether taste can produce knowledge, but how certain tastes come to be recognised as valid while others are marginalised. In doing so, the paper highlights the role of media in shaping contemporary sensory hierarchies.

Keywords : *Taste, Semiotics, Epistemology, Mythology, Visual Culture, Cultural Capital, Representation, Gustatory Taste, Food Media.*

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the uneven distributions of epistemic value attributed to the sense of taste. Historically, taste has been split into two types: the aesthetic and the gustatory taste. The gustatory taste was understood as the literal taste where one would eat a food item and gain immediate gratification from its flavour. However, scholars in the Enlightenment period heavily debated over the philosophical status of taste. This status was earned in the light of taste being understood in the Kantian manner of disinterest and separation from the body, and this came at the cost of pushing gustatory taste away to further distinguish aestheticism as a field of study. Taste had thus followed the primary assumption that in order for it to be taken seriously as a tool for knowledge, it had to be stripped of what it

demands bodily, just like the cognitive senses of sight and hearing. Contemporary Western scholars, not convinced by this mind vs body divide, have tried to relocate gustatory taste by placing it within the values and standards of where aesthetic taste lies in order for it to have epistemic validity. Their central claim being that even a bodily, internal sense like taste, can situate and impart knowledge. Even if this rehabilitation is erasing the original sensory hierarchies, it is creating new exclusions within the literature surrounding gustatory taste. A bodily sense such as taste can be used epistemically, yet what has not been questioned is the involvement of the physical, subjective, experiential body bringing in its own levels of unequal perceptions influencing its potential for being a knowledgeable 'objective' sense. Whose body bears the objective, epistemic value of taste and whose doesn't?

That is not clear. Universalization, and the simplification of these conceptual frameworks into everyday discourse has not accounted for the inherent inequalities that the body brings.

The subjective experience of taste therefore, is also one that adopts the standards of the dominant taste. To understand experience, we must study how it is influenced by its representation. By human instinct to universalize knowledge, the paper argues that the contemporary media plays a huge role in constructing and maintaining that narrative. The body that does hold the epistemic value is one that is actively communicated, embedded and ultimately naturalised into people's consciousness. By doing this even the unrefined palate is defined and naturalised. One of the major ways in which the dominant taste is communicated is through its visuals. In the contemporary age, restaurants largely place more emphasis on its branding, its presentation of food, the ambience of the space, the music, more than the taste itself. It is this constructed standard of visuals that determines our choices, as small as it is. To analyse this, this paper draws on Roland Barthes, who understands food as a "system of communication" that signifies beyond its material form. Through his concept of myth—where cultural meanings appear natural—visually refined taste is normalised as desirable and authoritative. This paper therefore explores this unequal distribution of knowledge attribution in relation to the body, by identifying oppressive systems and ideologies in media constructing the body that holds the dominant, objective taste. It will study this form of taste through the analysis of the covers of two popular food magazines. The analysis will employ theories of cultural studies, sociology, and media studies in tandem.

Review of Literature

The review of literature examined the studies on the intersection of the senses and sensory perception, particularly that of taste, in relation to the food experience. It also reviews and critiques the studies on bridging the gap between gustatory and aesthetic taste while exploring how scholars have viewed the epistemic value of taste and the body.

Thepapers's definitions of tastes are mainly borrowed from the early philosophical discussions of taste that are deeply rooted in the foundational distinction between the mind and the body, most prominently articulated by René Descartes. In his *Meditations*, Descartes establishes a hierarchy in which the mind, as the seat of rationality, is privileged over the senses.

He argues that "the senses … do not teach us what things are, but only what is beneficial or harmful to the body" (Descartes 59). This distinction positions sensory experience as unreliable and secondary, as further emphasised in his claim that "I have often found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust wholly those who have deceived us even once" (Descartes 13). Within this framework, taste is reduced to a bodily function, tied to appetite, self-interest, and survival, rather than a legitimate source of knowledge.

This Cartesian dualism becomes central to Enlightenment thought, shaping subsequent philosophical attempts to situate taste within broader questions of knowledge, morality, and refinement. While the mind was increasingly associated with truth and universality, the body was often regarded as an obstacle to clear understanding. Yet, paradoxically, the body and its processes continued to serve as powerful metaphors within philosophical discourse. This marginalisation of the body however, can be further understood through the lens of corporeality, particularly developed in *Bodies That Matter* by Judith Butler. She argues that the body is not simply a natural entity but is constituted through regulatory norms that determine which bodies come to matter and which are excluded. Materiality, in this sense, is not outside discourse but produced through it. This has significant implications for taste. If the body itself is shaped by cultural frameworks, then the sensory capacities attributed to it, including taste, cannot be understood as neutral or universal, no matter how much it is presented that way.

What counts as a "refined" or "objective" palate is therefore not merely a matter of sensory ability but of which bodies are recognised as capable of legitimate perception. The Cartesian dualism also establishes a hierarchy in which certain forms of embodiment are

aligned with reason and others with excess, appetite, or unreliability. Therefore, the epistemic marginalisation of gustatory taste is inseparable from the marginalisation of particular bodies whose sensory experiences are deemed too subjective, too excessive, or insufficiently disciplined to produce knowledge.

Historical Understandings Taste in Relation to the Body

The manner in which philosophers argue in relation to taste during the Enlightenment period is almost entirely dealing with questions that have to do with the placement of taste within the realms of what creates a knowledgeable and rational subject. It is the rational subject and his ability to perceive and interpret that are put into focus. Within this time period, we can identify which scholars use the bodily gustatory taste to conceptualise their world, and which extend their conceptualisations beyond that. Taste was seen as a method of refining a person. The following section will discuss the different degrees and focus of refinements.

The philosophers who majorly contributed to these discussions and paved the way for the separation of taste into aestheticism are Edmund Burke and David Hume. Therefore, the paper will be drawing differences, similarities, and inferences specifically from their conceptualisations and frameworks of taste.

According to Burke, as far as the external senses are concerned, that is, the way in which people naturally perceive objects, is uniform. He draws a distinction between taste that is naturally experienced and more commonly perceived by humans, and taste that is acquired. Acquired taste doesn't normally follow the logic of the natural taste, as it is created and shaped through habit, context, and social conditioning; hence, the potential of a unification is much less. (Burke 18).

Yet, the pleasures of the sight are not nearly so complicated, and confused, and altered by unnaturally nuanced habits, and associations, as the pleasures of the Taste are; because the pleasures of the sight more commonly acquiesce in themselves, and are not so often altered by considerations which are independent of the sight itself. This is ironic because the sense of sight does in a way, alter and condition our taste preferences.

Hume introduces the concept of 'delicacy of taste', i.e., the ability of a person to identify every element of the composition, leading to a refined, delicate, and aesthetic sensibility by being able to understand even the most minute feelings. He writes that "where the organs are so fine as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: this we call delicacy of taste." (Hume 137).

Hume places the delicacy of aesthetic taste over gustatory. To ascertain someone's delicacy of taste, it should withstand the existing principles of art. There should be practice and constant contemplation, with employment of comparisons, to build the refinement of the organ's ability to perceive. This boosts the validity and reliability of a person's word. To judge a work of art is like a performance; it must be done, free of all bias and prejudices. A person has poor aesthetic sensibility if there is a flaw in their organ of perception, not in the object itself. Even if beauty is in the subjective realm and not to be disputed with, the standard of true beauty applies to those individuals who can break down a composition into a variety of elements, being able to separate and appreciate art in detailed fragments. It is selectively subjective in that manner.

Further, Burke writes that "a wrong taste is a defect of judgment." (Burke 18). Reasoning is a requisite to the operation of refinement in the judgment of taste. It suggests that one who has a good intellect and can make distinctions with clarity is someone who has good taste. Good taste and reasoning are seldom separate. Hume's perception of taste revolves around the delicacy of taste, i.e., the ability to gain pleasure as well as intellectually distinguish flavour. However, the paradox is essentially bringing in the idea of relativism into the picture. How can taste be something that has universal judgment but also the layer of agreeability among people?

Immanuel Kant's approach was to make clear distinctions between the aesthetic and gustatory taste in terms of subjectivity and universality. Kant distinguishes between the pleasure gained by the senses and the aesthetic judgement, terming it as the agreeable vs the beautiful. "The agreeable is that which pleases the senses in sensation." (Kant 89). Even if he is making clear points about what counts as the subjective vs the objective experience, aesthetic judgement of taste solely rests on a subjective, universal agreement. He believes that gustatory taste lies in the arena of agreeability. The pleasures derived from the gustatory senses are filled with self-interest, desire, and sensuous passion. This is a type of taste that therefore, cannot be disputed with, since the pleasure that is gained will differ person to person.

The aesthetic judgement of taste, however, can identify beauty as a bridge between the two realms, with clearly defined boundaries. It is not cognitive, not bodily, not based on desire or preferences, but rather on a more reflective, disinterested plane. When

he says disinterested, he means that when one is gaining an aesthetic pleasure from art, it is not an immediate bodily response; "The satisfaction in the beautiful is disinterested." (Kant 91). This level of pleasure is rather drawn from imagination and understanding. This pleasure is gained from cultivating the mental faculties that form the aesthetic taste. The aesthetic taste is therefore, an interesting amalgamation of subjective universality.

The Contemporary Relocation of Taste

Kant's separation of gustatory taste from the aesthetic left a long and lasting gap in how taste was understood. Once taste was pushed out of the bodily realm and redefined as a capacity for aesthetic pleasure, there were fewer and fewer discussions about flavour, food, or the palate philosophically. Contemporary scholars work within this inheritance. Their writing reflects a world where foundationally taste already belongs to the aesthetic, and where the bodily sense is treated as secondary or even irrelevant. Yet, the literature in this section shows that this split is no longer taken for granted. Scholars now question whether taste should really remain outside the cognitive realm and whether Kant's divide can, in fact, be softened or rethought. Together, these scholars reveal how taste has shifted from a narrow sense impression to a complex cultural practice, redefining the sensory hierarchy. Taste in discourse has shifted gears from philosophy into a study of its culture, contexts, and sociology. However, it is important to note of what's being excluded in these debates as well. The sociological account of taste begins with Pierre Bourdieu, who displaces taste from the body into the realm of social structure. For Bourdieu, taste is not an individual sensory judgement but a form of social classification: it "classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu 6). Through the concept of *habitus*, he explains how dispositions are shaped by one's position within systems of class, capital, and upbringing (Bourdieu 101–06). Therefore, what appears as personal preference is socially conditioned. The "refined" palate is not inherently superior but socially legitimised. In this way, Bourdieu critiques Kantian universality while relocating hierarchy from the mind to society.

Building on this, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson shifts attention from structure to circulation. While Bourdieu explains how taste is formed, Ferguson demonstrates how it is performed, communicated, and stabilised. Cuisine, she argues, is "a fully social field" that depends on discourse such as cookbooks, reviews, and culinary writing to produce meaning (Ferguson 19). She further notes that cuisine "requires a community to give it authority" (Ferguson 32). Hence taste is not simply possessed; it must be articulated and recognised. This introduces the question of authority, since those who control discourse also shape what counts as legitimate taste. Taste therefore becomes not just socially produced but discursively regulated.

Both Bourdieu and Ferguson risk distancing taste from the immediacy of bodily experience. It is precisely this limitation that Nicola Perullo addresses. In *The Senses of Taste*, Perullo reconceptualises taste as a relational and ecological practice rather than a fixed sensory input. He argues that taste is not confined to the tongue but emerges through the interplay of multiple senses, including smell, touch, vision, and even sound. Tasting, in this sense is not the passive reception of flavour but an active process of engagement shaped by context, attention, and environment. He further suggests that taste operates through what he calls a "field" of relations, where the boundaries between subject and object are not stable but constantly negotiated.

This means that taste cannot be reduced either to internal sensation or external structure. Instead it unfolds through lived experience, where memory, anticipation, and cultural context all contribute to perception. For example, the same food may taste different depending on where it is eaten, who prepares it, or how it is presented. Taste is therefore situational and contingent, shaped through practice and participation. In this way, Perullo challenges both the Kantian separation of taste from cognition and the sociological tendency to reduce it to class or discourse alone.

Yet even as Perullo restores embodiment and relationality, his framework still privileges a form of attentive and cultivated engagement. This reveals a deeper tension. Across these frameworks, taste is consistently legitimised by aligning it with recognised forms of value such as cultural capital, discursive authority, or cultivated perception. On one hand, this successfully recovers taste from its marginal status but on the other hand, it introduces new criteria for legitimacy, where not all forms of tasting qualify equally.

Thus, rather than dissolving the original body and mind divide, contemporary approaches often reproduce it in altered forms. Taste becomes split between the immediate and the reflective, the pleasurable and the analytical, the ordinary and the expert. The emphasis on articulation, training, and refinement risks privileging certain bodies, particularly those with access to language, education, and cultural capital. In this sense, the central issue is no longer whether taste can produce knowledge, but under what conditions it is allowed to do so. It is

ironic to mention that certain bodily experiences are privileged, mainly that of ethnocentrism, yet this experience is mediated in manners where the body is separated, where one "eats with their eyes".

It is within this tension that the present research is situated. If taste is always mediated by discourse, other senses, or by cultural frameworks, then it becomes necessary to examine how these mediations operate. Therefore, this study moves beyond asking whether taste can be epistemic and instead explores how taste is constructed, represented, and stabilised as knowledge, and whose sensory experiences are included or excluded in this process. By foregrounding these questions, this research identifies a critical gap. Attempts to rehabilitate taste may, in fact, produce new hierarchies even as they seek to dismantle old ones.

The Construction of the Dominant Taste as Myth

Just like food, taste is also translated into its own system of language, which communicates a variety of cultures, habits, food practices, and rituals as well, however constructed it may be. According to Roland Barthes, the moment the food is consumed, it "sums up, and transmits a situation; it constitutes information; it signifies" (Barthes 21). Signs are not material objects; they hold spaces of value in the most ubiquitous ways possible. The taste can be seen as a sense that is intrinsically laced with ideology via a myth. It is then important to note how different mythologies surrounding gustatory taste have naturalised the phenomenon of simply wanting to replicate the unattainable aesthetic taste, by decoding and deconstructing what's been gazed at. It's a matter of "separating the significant from the insignificant and then reconstructing the differential system of signification by constructing a veritable grammar of foods" (Barthes 22). This naturalises not only the superior perception of taste but also the erasure of the palates in the margins. Simona Stano, in her essay "Food, Ideology, and Critical Semiotics", expands upon this hierarchy of the palates in terms of a "foodsphere" analogous with the idea of the "semiosphere" which is categorised by the signifying dynamics of periphery and the core. This system however is run by "rules" regulating food systems that are "usually unwritten and tend to remain unperceived, until they are broken or faced with otherness…exposure to unfamiliar food is likely to bring forms of ethnocentrism to the fore." (Stano 309-310)

It is precisely when these "rules" are unperceived where media becomes central to how these meanings circulate. Marshall McLuhan argues that media should not be understood merely as channels that deliver content, but as environments that actively shape perception itself. When he states that "the medium is the message," he is emphasising that the form of media transforms how information is experienced, often more significantly than the content it carries (McLuhan). In the context of food, this means that the visual and technological mediation of taste does not simply represent flavour but restructures how taste is anticipated, interpreted, and valued. The proliferation of visual media, from print advertisements to digital platforms, produces a sensory hierarchy where sight begins to dominate gustatory experience. Yet this sight is also classified. Hence "any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments." (McLuhan)

Taste, therefore transforms from a sense and goes beyond the body into even the most interstitial aspects of human life. It occupies the spheres of public commodification, being able to orbit society through media and communication. According to Yasmin Ibrahim, the broadcasting industry saw a "proliferation of cookery shows, food channels, and celebrity chefs, making food a ubiquitous subject of human consumption and of decadence and a symbol of high living where the concerns were about offering creativity and variety through food rather than issues of starvation, austerity or famine" (Ibrahim). With the increase of technological advancements, there was a significant, incommensurable shift in people's cognitive abilities of perception and reception. The introduction of every kind of media, with the intention of making life easier, actually resulted in the gradual diminishing of the senses function and the fostering of the image. From the print magazine up to the Instagram reel, the gaze over food presentation increased, while distancing the experience of gustatory taste from the body. The senses are therefore translated, simplified, and circulated by the systems of communication via media.

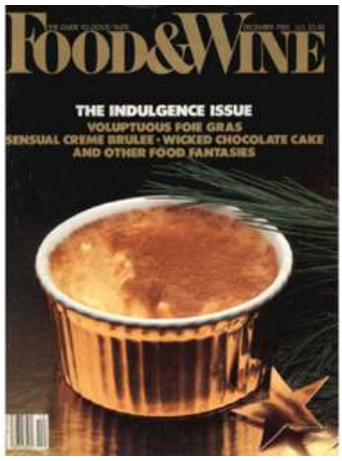
Capturing everyday life and daily routines, including meals, has become an important part of new media rituals and validation of the self" (Ibrahim). The confirmation of these standards re-emphasize that nothing is lacking in them, and they are inching closer and closer towards the unattainable aesthetic configuration. None of this is arbitrary; it speaks to a larger narrative of how our own behaviour and cognitive abilities are dictated, reinforced, and passed down to the next generation to alter and filter out what's useless to them. It's safe to say that it isn't the ideology that switches; it is the medium altering it to fit the dominant narratives.

This raises a critical issue that remains insufficiently addressed within existing literature. While scholars have worked to establish taste as a

legitimate form of knowledge, there has been limited attention to how this knowledge is constructed, mediated, and made accessible. In particular, the role of other senses, especially vision, in shaping and stabilising taste perception has not been adequately interrogated. Taste does not operate in isolation, but is constantly supported, anticipated, and influenced by visual, auditory, and cultural cues. These cues are not neutral. They are structured by dominant media forms and aesthetic conventions that shape expectations and guide interpretation.

Currently gustatory taste is defined predominantly by the same standards of aesthetic theory. A chef who has experience with a creative visual flair is one who holds a refined palate. It is the food critic who creates the standard of what a dish should look like for it to earn its place in their reviews. Working with Brian Crumblehlume's understanding of food presentations, there is a growing emphasis on the food to have a "tongue appeal" in order for it to be regarded as a valuable item of food - to drain the meat of its bodily fluids, yet to substitute its moisture appealingly with the shiny glazes and sauces that surround the meat on the plate (Crumblehumle). The food is presented in such a way that it looks unreal and unreachable. It is almost an obsession for high-end restaurants to plate the food in a way that it looks other worldly, in such a way that the viewer is made to feel lucky enough to have access to it. It is consistent with the aesthetic standard regarding the distance between the visual and the body between the origin and what it becomes. It turns into a performance to be gazed at, liked, reposted, and shared with (Ibrahim 5). The presentation is analogous to how pornography is presented as well; its purpose translated into an inaccessible, unrealistic, yet sensually charged experience. The plate is then only to be consumed by the eyes. Even with attempts to give epistemological value to taste by involving the body, clearly, the involvement of the body carries an amount of displeasure and disgust, reinforcing the perception of gustatory taste in the 20th century.

Analysis



The Myth itself can be "everything, provided it is conveyed by a discourse." (Barthes, 107).The following section will analyse two magazine covers to study the culture surrounding taste by examining how the covers legitimize and naturalize a certain knowledge and decorum of taste. The results are to decode the myths, rich in qualitative interpretation of the analysed content, aligning with my claim that taste is epistemically marginalized.

This December 1985 cover of Food & Wine constructs taste as a layered cultural sign, where visual, linguistic, and material codes converge to produce what can be understood, following Barthes, as myth. The central iconic sign, a perfectly torched crème brûlée in a reflective, gold-toned ramekin, is less about edibility and more about spectacle. Its smooth, unbroken caramelised surface signifies control, refinement, and technical mastery. The gold container and festive pine garnish extend this into a seasonal register of luxury, aligning indulgence with celebration and exclusivity. What is then presented is an aestheticised object that demands visual consumption before any imagined taste.

The linguistic signs anchor and intensify this construction. Phrases such as "The Indulgence Issue," "Voluptuous Foie Gras," and "Sensual Crème Brûlée" deploy a vocabulary of excess and sensuality. These descriptors shift food into the realm of desire, even bordering on eroticisation, where indulgence becomes aspirational. Here, Barthes' notion of myth is crucial. The language naturalises the association between luxury foods and a cultivated, desirable lifestyle, masking the socio-economic structures that make such consumption exclusive. Indulgence appears universal, when it is in fact classed.

This aligns closely with Bourdieu's argument that taste "classifies, and it classifies the classifier." The foods named, foie gras, crème brûlée, function as markers of cultural capital. They signal a refined palate that is socially learned rather than naturally possessed. The cover assumes a reader who either belongs to or aspires toward this class position. Ferguson's idea of cuisine as a "social field" is evident here, as the magazine itself becomes a site where taste is articulated, circulated, and authorised through discourse.

We can say that taste emerges through relational fields of sensory, cultural, and contextual interactions rather than isolated sensation. However, this relationality is tightly controlled in what's presented. The visual cues, lighting, texture, and composition precondition how the viewer anticipates taste, privileging sight over gustatory experience. In this

sense, the cover also reflects McLuhan's claim that the medium shapes perception. The magazine forms transforms taste into a visual and textual experience, distancing it from the body while amplifying its cultural meaning



Ultimately, the cover produces the dominant taste by constructing indulgence, refinement, and sensuality as natural attributes of certain foods while obscuring the social, cultural, and economic conditions that sustain them. Taste here is not just experienced; it is disciplined, communicated, and hierarchised.

This February 2014 cover of Bon Appétit does something subtler than simply displaying food. It stages taste as a way of being, where what you see, read, and imagine folds into what you are meant to feel and eventually consume. The plated chicken, surrounded by mushrooms and glossed with sauce, is not exaggerated into spectacle. Instead, it is deliberately restrained. The textures are rich but familiar, the plating imperfect but composed. This controlled rusticity signals a shift away from overt luxury toward something more coded. The dish looks achievable, even homely, but only within a certain aesthetic discipline.

The phrase "Modern Comfort" becomes the key to this construction. Comfort suggests the everyday, something bodily, emotional, and familiar. Modern, however, pulls it into a different register, one that implies awareness, trend, and refinement. The tension between the two is not resolved but stabilised. The viewer is positioned as someone who can inhabit both worlds at once. An interesting dynamic of indulging with a level of restraint. Taste, here, is no longer just about liking food but about knowing how to like it in the "right" way. What appears natural is already structured.

This is where the idea of taste as a signifying system becomes visible. As Barthes suggests, food communicates beyond itself. The dish signifies a lifestyle where balance between indulgence and restraint is seamlessly achieved. That balance is reinforced through the surrounding text. Words like "fresh," "decadent," and "ultimate" move between health and excess, constructing a rhythm of controlled pleasure. The effect is that no choice seems excessive, because it is always framed within moderation.

At the same time, this "natural" balance quietly reproduces distinction. What looks simple is in fact highly coded. The ability to recognise this aesthetic, to value rustic plating over overt opulence, already assumes a certain cultural familiarity. In this sense, taste still operates as a marker of position, but it does so discreetly. It is no longer about displaying wealth directly, but about displaying the right kind of restraint.

What holds all of this together is the way the image, text, and format work in relation to each other. The taste of the dish is never just in the food. It emerges through how it is styled, named, and placed within a seasonal narrative. The clean background, the editorial layout, the framing of winter cooking all shape how the viewer anticipates flavour before it is even imagined. Taste is being produced across these elements, not located in any one of them.

The magazine then does more than just present food. It reorganises taste into something that can be seen, learned, and performed. What it ultimately constructs is a myth of effortlessness, where comfort and sophistication appear to coexist naturally, even though that balance is carefully curated.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the epistemic value of taste is unevenly distributed in its capacity to produce knowledge as well as in the conditions under which it is recognised as knowledge, which are historically and culturally structured. In Enlightenment philosophy, taste was divided between the aesthetic and the gustatory, with the latter marginalised because of its association with the body. Contemporary attempts to rehabilitate taste, while challenging this divide, continue to legitimize it by aligning taste with established forms of value such as discourse, cultural capital, and cultivated perception. As a result, taste remains regulated

through systems that privilege certain bodies and modes of engagement. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of the two magazine covers, this essay has shown how visual and linguistic representations stabilise a dominant taste by naturalising specific standards of refinement, thereby reproducing hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion. This study is limited to secondary research by its focus on a small set of media texts, which constrains the scope of its claims about broader cultural processes. However, it contributes to existing scholarship by shifting the question from whether taste can be epistemic to how epistemic value is constructed, mediated, and distributed. Further research could expand this framework by examining a wider range of media forms and cultural contexts, and by engaging more closely with embodied and sensory methodologies to account for lived experiences of taste beyond representation.

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