



Food Politics and Cultural Othering: A Study of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat"

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Abstract

Identity is shaped by various factors such as culture, ethnicity, language, food habits, religion, traditions and lived experiences. Amongst these major factors, food habit is a factor that initially was considered to be playing no fundamental role in the shaping of one's identity. But recent scholarship and literary debates have highlighted the importance of food habits and practices on the social and cultural identity of an individual. Food that was earlier considered to be only a source of nourishment, has, in recent years, emerged as a tool that highly influences the social status of an individual in society.

This research article draws upon this very idea and tries to show how food preferences and eating habits are layered by the politics of power, and become a tool of exclusion and othering or social disapproval. The text that has been chosen for this study is a short story "They Eat Meat" by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a contemporary Indian tribal writer, who tries to explore this politics of exclusion and the debate of 'pure' versus 'polluted' from an insider's perspective.

Key words: food politics, cultural othering, pure and polluted, cultural capital.

For the basic sustenance of human life, food, shelter, and sleep are generally regarded as indispensable necessities. Among these, food occupies a very significant place which has been conventionally considered to be a prime source of nourishment, energy and survival. For centuries, it was believed to be only a biological necessity for mankind. However, recent studies

and scholarship have demonstrated that food cannot be simply studied as a source of nourishment. It is in fact a complex subject that carries layers of meaning with it, that directly or indirectly shape the identity and socio-cultural or economic background of an individual. What an individual or a community eats, what they avoid eating, how they prepare it – all these

aspects become reflection of a community's cultural practices, religious beliefs, and historical experiences. Thus, food becomes a source of cultural expression through which a community expresses its ways of life and its sense of belonging. When looked at from a critical perspective, it becomes noticeable that food habits are not just matter of personal or cultural choice; rather they are also shaped by social attitudes and power relations. Communities are often judged through their food habits. The eating preferences of people become reasons for their being categorized, accepted or marginalised. Certain food habits are tagged as pure, cultured, superior and socially acceptable while the others become the binary opposites – impure, uncultured/savage, and unacceptable. This division of people/communities on the basis of their food habits unravels a very true yet disturbing play of power politics. Such judgements are rarely about food alone; rather they reveal the hierarchies of caste, class, religion, ethnicity and culture. As a result, food emerges as a political and ideological tool through which identities are constructed and differences are emphasized.

Our society offers various examples of this phenomenon. One often comes across various debates on the vegetarian versus non-vegetarian diets or the notions of purity versus pollution around oneself in daily routine life. These debates reveal that eating practices are closely linked with questions of identity and social status. Food, therefore, possesses the power to create symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them/they” wherein “us” becomes the socially privileged mainstream group while “them/they” become the socially inferior and the ‘other’ in this power play. Exploring food from this perspective reveals that food becomes a significant site where culture, identity, power, and social prejudice intersect.

The tribal communities have a rich cultural heritage, distinct customs, rituals, dance forms, languages, and cuisines or food practices that have been preserved for generations. Their

way of life reflects their surroundings, the geography, the climate that engulf them. Their food habits are also a result of the resources that are available to them. Despite their cultural richness and years of experiential knowledge, the mainstream society has often looked at them as the ‘other’ and ‘outsider’. They have been often misunderstood and stereotyped by the dominant society. Their customs and rituals have often been looked at as strange and primitive rather than being accepted as a different way of life. Amongst these customs, food has become one of the pertinent markers through which the tribal people are identified and judged. Rather than considering the food habits of the tribal people an outcome of their geographical location and environment, their food habits are often evaluated according to the values of the mainstream society. Thus, food, in case of tribals particularly, has become a basis for prejudice and social and cultural exclusion. This politics of ‘othering’ and discrimination has been very vividly portrayed by one of the contemporary tribal writers in India, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar.

Shekhar is one of the popular contemporary tribal writers in India who is young, thriving and at times unapologetic in raising social issues. He belongs to the Santhal community of Jharkhand, and is highly acclaimed for bringing the tribal (particularly Santhali) life, culture, and experiences into mainstream Indian literature. Primarily, Shekhar is a doctor by profession, and his professional experiences have further enhanced his understanding and outlook towards marginalized communities. His major works include *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014), *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), an anthology of short stories, *My Father's Garden* (2018), and *The Son of the Thundercloud* (2022). Through both the genres, novels and short stories, Shekhar presents the everyday realities and experiences of the tribal society from an insider's perspective. The most distinguishing aspect of his works is that Shekhar, being a tribal

himself, doesn't romanticise his community. Neither he focusses only on the positive aspects of tribal life. Shekhar stands apart from many other tribal writers because he depicts the tribal people as complex human beings struggling with poverty, displacement, exploitation, social discrimination, gender inequality, and the effects of modernization. His writings challenge dominant narratives about tribal communities and create space for voices that have long remained ignored in Indian literary discourse.

The recurring concerns found throughout Shekhar's writings are also central to the short story "They Eat Meat", the first story in the anthology *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. The story explores how food practices become a basis for prejudice and exclusion, exposing the ways in which tribal identity is judged and discriminated against by the dominant cultural standards. Instead of treating meat-eating as merely a personal or dietary choice and as something very elemental to the tribal people, the story shows how this food habit becomes a marker of difference that separates Adivasi communities from the social mainstream. Through this simple yet powerful narrative, Shekhar reveals how everyday cultural practices are transformed into tools of discrimination and othering. The story also highlights the perspective of the mainstream. It shows how the dominant section of society approves its own practices and food habits as something very natural, civilized, superior, and thus socially acceptable. In doing so, it reflects the broader concerns that run across Shekhar's literary works—the struggle for dignity, the politics of representation, the assertion of Adivasi identity, and the resistance against cultural marginalization. Thus, "They Eat Meat" serves as an important example of how Shekhar uses ordinary experiences to expose deeper structures of social inequality and cultural exclusion.

Shekhar's "They Eat Meat" revolves around the family of Biram Soren and Panmuni Soren, basically belonging to a village in

Ghatshila, Jharkhand. However, theirs is not a stereotypical tribal family that is uneducated and lives in remote hills or forests. Rather, interestingly, Shekhar breaks the stereotype at the very outset and depicts a tribal family that is educated, cultured, and economically flourishing. Biram is a man in his fifties, a central government employee, working in the electricity department and deputed in Bhubaneswar. They have two sons, both having a well-reputed education – in fact, the elder one pursuing MBBS from Cuttack. The purpose of Shekhar is very obvious – he establishes the fact that the Sorens are socially, culturally, and economically a well-reputed and established family. The very next focus of the story is on the woman of the house, Panmuni, who has been portrayed as very fussy and whimsical woman when it comes to food hygiene and etiquettes. In fact Panmuni is so finicky about eating at any restaurant or highway – *dhaabas* that her stomach starts feeling uneasy at the very thought of it. Shekhar writes,

But so paranoid was Panmuni-jhi about eating restaurant food that her tummy would begin to rumble a warning even before she had put a morsel into her mouth. Biram-kumang would chide her, 'You cannot always find food cooked to your standards.' . . . Biram-kumang couldn't argue with his wife. . . he knew of the high standards Panmuni-jhi maintained in the kitchen. (Shekhar 1-2)

However, all was well till Biram was posted in Bhubaneswar because that was a place where majority of the population, irrespective of the caste-class hierarchy, consumed meat. The politics of 'pure' and 'polluted' and the accompanying issues emerged when Biram got transferred to Vadodra, a city where majority of the population is vegetarian and looks down at those who aren't. The landlord of the Sorens in Vadodra, Mr. Rao who himself was from

Andhra but settled in Vadodra since many years, behaves very oddly with the Sorens. He makes it very clear in their first meeting that this city has a hierarchy-driven mindset. He says, "Vadodra is a strongly Hindu city . . . People here believe in purity. I am not too sure what this purity is, but all I know is that people here don't eat non-veg. You know? Meat, fish, chicken, eggs. Nor do they approve of people who eat non-veg" (Shekhar 6). Similarly, Jhapan-di, a cousin of Panmuni who was already living in Vadodra, informed the Sorens that "People here don't like to mix with those who eat meat and eggs. It's like that" (Shekhar 4). The character of Panmuni, when placed in contrast to these statements, thus serves as an ironic commentary on the prejudiced outlook of society towards tribal people. Despite her being so selective and particular about food hygiene and cleanliness, she (and her family) is judged for not who she actually is, but for the stereotype attached to her identity as an Adivasi woman.

The neighbours and members of the dominant community view the family's tribal background and their dietary practices not as a matter of personal choice or cultural tradition but as an evidence of moral and social inferiority. The tribal background of the Sorens, according to Mr. Rao, could be taken in bad taste by the people of Vadodra. Though he takes them as tenants, yet his objections and inhibitions are clearly visible. He wants Biram to hide his place of belonging from neighbours or colleagues. Mr. Rao suggests,

If they ask you where you're from, please, will you just tell them that you're from Jharkhand? Just that much, nothing more. Better still, can you tell them that you've been transferred from Bhubaneshwar? Mentioning a well-known city usually clears the air quicker. . . . 'As for me, if someone asks me, I'll tell them I know you through colleagues and friends . . . I'll say that you are a good person. (Shekhar 7)

More than a request or kind suggestion, Mr. Rao's words seem to be an imposition garbed in civility. It is clear that he finds it embarrassing to be associated, by any means, with tribal people. However, he takes them as tenants due to financial reasons. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar has also framed the title of the story very thoughtfully. It instantly draws the attention of the reader towards the prejudiced and demeaning mindset of the mainstream. The use of the pronoun "They" in the very title of the story reveals the superiority complex of the dominant section. It functions as a discourse of accusation. "They" highlights that the name, gender, education, knowledge, culture, experience or any other important attribute of identity is not important in case of the people being talked about. What matters is only the fact that 'they' eat meat! Only their food habit becomes the sole criterion for judging their identity and personality. Here the use of 'they' is so humiliating that it reduces the identity of the Sorens to just meat-eaters, people who can even be equated to animals or even cannibals. The sharp insight of Shekhar is also very clear when we place the title of the story in contrast to the background and overall personality of the Sorens. The title is an example of stereotyping and the characters of Biram, Panmuni and their sons are examples of challenging and breaking the stereotype.

The concept of the 'cultural capital', proposed by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu seem to be very much applicable to this story. 'Cultural capital' refers to the set of social features or assets that promote social mobility and success. It is a broad concept that includes education, taste, manners, language, art, lifestyle and so on and so forth. Food is also one example of cultural taste within this larger framework. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, one can easily relate how food habits are also treated as cultural practices that carry social meanings and become markers of identity. Bourdieu explains that different communities develop different food cultures

based on their history, environment, and traditions. However, these very differences become reasons for exclusion, segregation or total rejection. Mr. Rao, while talking about the restrictions that the Sorens would have to follow if they wanted 'acceptance' from people in Vadodra, very politely inflicts casteist and religious remarks on tribal people. In one-go he places the tribals, "lower-caste Hindus", Muslims, and Christians as one category that has no approval or acceptance in Vadodra.

Tribals, even lower-caste Hindus, they are seen as impure. I hope you understand. . . . 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. (Shekhar 6)

It is ironic that Mr. Rao, himself an educated man whose children are settled abroad, could have such a narrow-minded view of people and life. It shows that sometimes education, culture, elite exposure - nothing can help an individual change his mindset. It also reflects that perhaps some people take a sadist pleasure in humiliating someone as inferior to one's own self. It can be best understood through Mr. Rao's character who is not even a native of Gujarat, and still pressurises Biram Soren to follow the Hindu elite class rituals in Vadodra.

This study is also influenced by Edward Said's idea of the 'other' or 'othering' - how dominant groups often define certain communities as different and inferior. Though, originally, Said's concept was proposed in context to colonial relations, the basic idea can also help explain the treatment of tribal communities within a society. In "They Eat Meat", the tribal people are judged as per preconceived notions, rather than as individuals carrying their own knowledge and experience. As a result, they are looked at with suspicion and distance rather than with compassion. The story reveals the fact that this process of 'othering' is based less on the reality of the tribal

people, than on the prejudices of the dominant society. The character of Panmuni-jhi is totally a reflection of this.

One of the important insights that emerges from a study of this story is that food, of any kind - vegetarian or non-vegetarian, in itself doesn't have any universal or intrinsic value of its own. The value is rather attached, as per the changing contexts, with a particular kind of food; it is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which the food is consumed. The case of Biram and Panmuni-jhi is a clear example of this. When they were residing in Bhubaneswar or Jharkhand, or later in Ranchi their eating habits and preferences never attracted any undue attention from the people or become a source of discrimination for them. When Biram is later transferred to Ranchi, Panmuni-jhi very confidently marinates silver carp with salt and turmeric powder, "without a care in the world" in the open and says, "No one minds what we eat here . . . And we don't mind what others eat" (Shekhar 27). However, as soon as these same people shift to Vadodra, where the dominant class is majorly vegetarian, their food habits become a major concern for the neighbours and others and also lead to a kind of social exclusion. They could be part of the 'centre' only if they yield to the norms of the dominant class or else they would be marginalised and would have to live in the outskirts of the city. The 'centre-periphery' politics was also a part of the structural design of the city of Vadodra. The dominant class lived in the main city, in the centre, that was more developed and had better opportunities, resources, and infrastructure. While on the other hand, those who didn't fit into the norms of the mainstream were pushed to the periphery, literally and metaphorically. The "Muslims, Christians and other lower- caste Hindus", who were meat-eaters were an example of that (Shekhar 6). In fact, there's an instance in the story of a Muslim family that dared to live in the main city, despite being non-vegetarian. As a result, they always had to bear the brunt of the

mainstream. During the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots, an event covered in the story as well, it was only this family in Mr. Rao's neighbourhood that was harassed, abused, and threatened for life. Shekar has very explicitly portrayed the consequences of the 'mainstream' versus the 'periphery' struggle. The Muslim family stands as a hope for people that one has to assert oneself despite adversities. But the consequences of this assertion could be equally threatening.

However, the story offers a ray of hope when we see that all the women of the neighbourhood, irrespective of their caste, class, or religion stand in solidarity against the rioters that tried to trouble the Muslim family. The idea is very clear – the divisionist policy has been framed by some in the society, so a counterattack against this divisionist policy also has to emerge from within the society. The only solution is that people have to be more humane and less class-caste conscious in order to sustain humanity and brotherhood in the society. In conclusion, it may be summed up that "They Eat Meat" presents an insightful exploration of how food, identity, and prejudice intersect in shaping the experiences of the tribal people. The story shows how discrimination often begins with ordinary assumptions and stereotypes that gradually influence social attitudes and human relationships. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar has questioned these preconceived notions and prejudices and encouraged readers to move beyond superficial judgements and engage with cultural difference in a spirit of empathy and understanding. Ultimately, the story reminds us that respect for diversity begins with recognizing the dignity of everyday cultural practices, including something as ordinary yet socially significant as food.

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