

FOOD HISTORY AS A NEW TREND IN INDIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Food is undoubtedly a wonderful way to get inside a culture. Food has always been a barometer of mankind's social standing and aspirations. Food and eating practices have huge prospect of being used by historians to define socio-economic, cultural, even political developments of any area in any era. This paper explores how food history has appeared as a new trend in historical research various countries including India, how food history has become enmeshed with other disciplines like Anthropology, Nutrition, Sociology, Medical Science, how issues of identity and self-fashioning of any particular class, caste, or community are getting entangled with food practices and how Indian scholars are getting more involved with food history since the late twentieth century. In short, this paper aims at depicting the brief history of food history writing in India.

Keywords: Food Culture, Historiography, Taste, Identity, Eating practices, historical research.

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We are well acquainted with the popular proverb – the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. Really, food is not just a substance for fulfilling one’s appetite, fuelling ourselves and satisfying biological need; rather food’s role is much more significant in human life. Food and eating are central to our sense of embodiment. As food is so central to identity and existence, therefore, food history has also appeared as a major stream of historical research all over the world. Many socio-cultural discourses and meanings exist around food practices and food cultures; food historians try to bring out those discourses and meanings. Food history plays an important role as it reveals the system of communication, man-nature relation, power relations, social taboos, boundaries of class-caste-religion-gender. In the field of historical research in India, Food History is a comparatively new trend. This paper brings out the historiography of food history in India, i.e. the history of Indian food history writing. Therefore, the main focus of this paper is to explore how food history writing emerged as a significant trend in the domain of historical research specially in the last 3-4 decades.

In this context, it needs to be mentioned that this paper consciously uses the term ‘food history’ and not the term ‘culinary history’. Now, the question is what is the connection between these two terms in the context of historical research. Are they synonymous? Or is any of them the branch of the other? According to the Oxford Advance Learners’ Dictionary food means anything that people or animals eat. On the other hand the word “culinary” comes from the term “culina”, the Latin word for kitchen. Culinary history is a limited area which deals with the cooking procedure and cooked and served foods; but food history is a broader domain. Culinary historians commonly share a deep interest in ingredients, recipes, cooking techniques, and origin of different dishes. But food historian may ignore cooking as such but stress on the study of food to illuminate the broader aspects of society, culture, science, technology and several other dimensions. If the question of the space is to be seen, culinary history is confined mostly within the kitchen and dining space, but food history can include the paddy field, the market, the grinding

area etc. Food history covers all the food items eaten or supposed to be eaten by a person or a community where as culinary history focuses mainly on what goes into the kitchen and what comes out of the kitchen. In this context, Barbara Haber's comment is very pertinent. She argues that in time it may be universally recognised that knowledge of how dishes are prepared, served and eaten is indispensable to the proper historical study of food.ⁱ When that is going to happen the terms 'food history' and 'culinary history' will become a distinction without a difference. And historical research will become richer and deeper.

Cambridge World History of Food (Volume II) while analysing why food history as a distinct area has become so popular recently mentions four factors such as –

1. A growing medical interest in the history of food, diet and health.
2. A growing agricultural-biological interest in the diversity in food species and varieties which is a part of the global concern of preserving bio-diversity
3. The growing interest in food habit and eating practices as a part of social history and women's history.
4. Many with political-economic and ethnic studies perspectives are becoming interested in the history of food for the ways it shaped and were shaped by social forces.

There is no doubt that food history writing all over the world gained gradual popularity since 1970s/ 1980s, yet in this connection we cannot ignore the contribution of the French Annales Schoolⁱⁱ who included food in their broad interdisciplinary vision of "total history" and food production, food consumption as well as history of cuisine found their expression in the Annales School studies in the 1950s and 1960s. But since the 1950s food appeared in historical works as it related to other topics such as history of agriculture, socio-cultural analysis, history of industrialisation and economic history. But in the recent years food history gained its distinctive importance as 1970s onwards a growing number of academic scholars

began to see themselves as 'food historians' who liked to illuminate a much broader scenario through the prism of food.

Theories of Levis Strauss, Douglas and Barthes became widely used theories among the food historians. Transformation of 'natural' foodstuff into 'cultural' products of the table began to mediate relation between the nature and culture. Levi Strauss demonstrates how food and cooking idioms are keys to understanding social organisation and cosmology. His oft-quoted statement that certain animal species are chosen as totems 'not because they are good to eat' but 'because they are good to think' brings out the cultural association between food and meaning. On the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu's theory is also used and referred in the food history writings. He developed theory of social stratification based on aesthetic taste in his 1984 work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. According to him tastes in food, culture, and presentation are indicators of class. Each section of the dominant class in the society develops their own aesthetic criteria which means that the social position is asserted mostly through aesthetic practice. With the passage of time, these concepts are not only used extensively but also becomes deeply co-related with food history.

Food History Writing outside India

This section of the paper will study briefly how food history emerged as a distinct trend of historical research especially since late twentieth century and what kind of historical writings came into the picture in the domain of food studies all over the world. It is not easy to point out exactly when food history emerged as a discipline; but it is true that food anthropology as well as reference to food studies in various forms existed in 1960s in the Western scholarly field. But, food history as a separate trend became prominent since 1970s and appeared as more popular in the 1980s. Since then huge number of texts are composed and published in the field of food history; just a few of them are mentioned here.

British Scholar Reay Tannahil's *'Food in History'* was first published in 1973 which tries to examine the forces which have shaped the nature of man's diet throughout the course of 30000 years to show something of the way in which the pursuit of more and better food has helped the movement of history itself. In this analysis the author claims that food is not only inseparable from the history of mankind but essential to it. Without food, there would be no history, no mankind. For thousand of years the search for food has helped to shape the development of society. It has dictated the population growth, urban expansion; profoundly influenced economic, social and political theory. Food has had a part in religion helping to define the separateness of one creed from another by means of dietary taboos. It also describes how there was a world of difference between the food of rich and that of the poor. According to some researchers Tannahil's work was the first comprehensive work in this field.

In the 1980s food studies as well as food history underwent rapid development because of many changes occurring in the world of food itself and because of the so called cultural turn in the social sciences. A great variety of new themes were explored like taste, eating disorder, social differences etc. similarly, as in the social sciences in general, the notion of identity was taken up to which food was directly and intimately linked. This is strongly supported by the claim that sentiments of belonging via food not only include the act of classification and consumption but also the preparation, location, time, language and meaning of eating.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is in this decade that a number of works of food studies were published. For example we can talk about Jack Goody's work. Jack Goody's *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: a Study in comparative sociology*, (1982) tried to answer two major research questions, why are traditional African Cultures largely lacking a differentiated cuisine, even in larger states with differentiated political scenario and what are the conditions responsible for the emergence of a high and a low cuisine? He criticizes those approaches which overlook the comparative historical

dimension of culinary and other cultural differences that emerge in class societies, both of which elements are highlighted in this book. He concludes with an examination of the world wide rise of industrial food and its impact on the third world society.

Food History received a boost with the publication of *Sweetness and Power* (1985) by Sydney Mintz, an Anthropologist who created an influential interdisciplinary model for future food historians as he combined the field-work among the Caribbean Sugarcane workers and a study of the social, economic and political history of sugar as a major agricultural product.

Here I must mention two works which are not considered as historical research works but have left their contribution in interdisciplinary research inspiring the domain of food history. Carole Counihan edited *Food and Culture: A Reader* (1997) contains a number of papers which are considered classics and are valuable in the field of history of food. This book explores the gustatory selectivity of all human groups, and the 'mystery' of food taboos, even when the prohibited foods are available, nutritious and 'edible'. Deborah Lupton's *Food, the Body and the Self* (1996) has used a concept that food in a society helps in making various kinds of boundaries (though in a different sociological context). In this book, the author explores the links between the overtly 'practical' phenomena of food and cooking and 'abstract' phenomena of subjectivity, emotion and memory. In doing so, this work discusses the aspects of intertwining of food habits and embodiment and self in western societies such as childhood, family, gendering of foodstuff, food tastes, dislikes and preferences. The author claims that although this book fits into the broad category of 'sociology of food and eating, yet it has adopted a strongly interdisciplinary approach in exploring the sociocultural and historical aspects of food in western societies.

In 1992, a survey of the historical writing on the modern diets in various European countries was published which revealed that mostly issues like

production, price, per capita consumption, calories prevailed in the previous years' food history writings and cultural approach was absent in such writings. Therefore, since the 1990s, emphasis was given to link food history with cultural identity and social identity. Therefore, in 1996, Flandrin and Montanari edited magnificent collection *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* was published where the question of identity comes to the fore in relation to food history.

Simultaneously in the 1990s, academic food studies focusing on women's history proliferated. Amy Bentley's *Eating for Victory* examined American women's important roles relating to food in supporting the nation during the World War II and its aftermath. Inees offered in her study *Dinner Roles* (2001) the deep connection between the American women and food throughout the twentieth century. In *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks they Wrote* (2002) Janet Theophano makes evident that women's cookbooks can be outstanding primary sources for understanding cultural forces and changes, revealing not just one individual's or a small group's values and history, but providing insights into social, political, and economic forces at work in a given community and time period.

The new millennium added a new boost to the food history writing. Lots of good research based works began to get published in the period in the field of food history. One such work was Massimo Montanari's book '*Food is Culture*' (2006) which explains that every facet of food production, distribution and consumption is itself a cultural act, encoded with implicit and explicit intensions which reveal how people make sense of what they eat and why. Montanari sets out his argument with a brief sketch of the thought behind how humans transformed food (and themselves) from a state of nature to a state of culture, from a hunting economy to an economy characterized by commodity production. Further, he relies on a more flowing concept of culture, when he posits the concept of cuisine. For example, he mentions that how we eat is neither global nor local but both (*glocal*). This kind of convergence comes forth in case of chocolate or bread, where each is prepared and

used differently according to native tastes. Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Tale Of Cooks and Conquerors* (2006) tells us the history of curry as it travelled from the Mughal courts of Delhi to the European world. Linda Civitello's work *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People* (2008) explores how food has been intimately related to the human identity for example white bread is connected to the French identity and South Italians insist on the tomato sauce. Moreover, it provides the information that some important foods first came from India: the first ploughed field in the world before 2800 BC and the chicken. The technology for turning sugarcane into sugar also existed in India from 800 BC. The words for a rice dish with spices and meat – *pilaf*, *pilav* or *pulao* in Persian and Arabic – come from the much earlier Indian *Pulao*. English words for rice (*arisi*), pepper (*pippali*), mango(*mangga*), curry(*kari*), all originated from India.

Indian Food History getting inspired by Food Anthropology

Food appears to be a prism that absorbs a host of assorted cultural phenomena and unites them into one coherent domain while simultaneously speaking through that domain about everything that is important^{iv}. Food history is a very recent trend in the context of Indian historical research. The recent development of historical scholarship of food was inspired by food anthropology. Food Anthropology existed in India since the 1960s or 1970s. Anthropologists like R.S. Khare did a wonderful job in the field of Food Anthropology. In his book *Hindu Hearth and Home* (1976) he located the existence of Hindu's domestic hearth in its immediate surroundings, a detailed survey of Hindu's handling of food, and the meaning of "cooking" in lives of Hindus^v. He has further put forward how cooking and eating were distinguished according to the domestic and public dimension and tried to extend this distinction to the North Indian distinction of *Kaccha* food and *Pakka* food. In another work published in 1992 Khare examined the cultural essence and experience food evoke among the Indians.^{vi} According to him food in India is never merely a material substance rather it is synonymous with life and its goals. While focusing on the cultural language of food this work explains the Hindu interrelationship food, self

and the ultimate reality of cultural formulations. It is argued that Hindus eat according to their Karma – inherited moral dispositions. The author further elaborates that the fasting is the moral underside of eating and fasting emphasizes dominance of soul over body.

Another scholar of Anthropology, Arjun Appadurai, has contributed significantly in the Indian Food Anthropology. In his article (1988) he discussed that the cookbooks raise a variety of interesting issues like ethnicity, literacy, women and domesticity that are involved in understanding the process by which a national cuisine is constructed in India^{vi}. The author explores that in the social interaction that characterizes the urban middle class families of India; women verbally exchange recipes with one another across regional boundaries and are eager to experiment with them. In the progress of argument, he is further claiming that food boundaries seem to be dissolving much more rapidly than marriage boundaries because of the push of guests, children and husbands, the concern for budget of a family, the notion of using left over foods, and the increasing practice of eating out. One recent most work in Food Anthropology is the work of Manpreet Janeja (2010) which tries to answer the question why and how food became pivotal to the social relations and the forms of identity.

These anthropological works in the Indian food studies inspired and augmented the food historical studies in India. Food anthropologists were becoming more attentive to history and Indian food historians also enriched the domain of anthropology by utilising various unused sources and by their thoughtful history-sensitive analysis. With the gradual development of interdisciplinary studies the strict boundaries between disciplines are getting blurred and food historical works and food anthropological works are supporting and enhancing the scope of each other.

Indian Scholars' Contribution to Food History

While doing my own doctoral research on the food history of colonial Bengal, I have found that it is a very interesting field of historical studies. But at the same time it needs to be mentioned that researchers who have worked and are still working in the field of food history in India in recent years face certain difficulties as in India if one has to write food history, s/he has to develop own archive and evolve own methodology of research as documentation and preservation of resources are not properly done for this basic need of the human being. Yet scholars and historians have tried to overcome these difficulties in their own ways and Indian food historical studies have got enriched.

Now, I would like to highlight some of such historical works dealing with food practices or food culture of different regions, communities, classes of India of different time periods. Ancient Indian food practices were analysed from historical viewpoints by scholars like Tapanath Chakraborty(1959), Indira Chakraborty(1972), and Om Prakash(1961) much prior to the recent upsurge of food historical writings in India. Since the late twentieth century Chitrita Banerjee became a well known name in food study related works. Though she was not a historian, but her works have influenced the food history related research in India, especially in Bengal. K T Achaya's historical works are of immense significance in the food history field.

Jayanta Sengupta tries to establish the cuisine and culinary art of a nation as a significant site in which the hegemonic aspects of colonial culture were adapted, emulated, subverted, or resisted. Addressing the situation in colonial Bengal he first brings out the colonial discourse of food in Bengal with its typical essentialisations about the diseased constitution of the Bengali. He then goes on to show how Bengali *bhadrolok* tried to negate the epithet of effeminacy through a quest for a diet conducive to masculinity. Sengupta, connectedly, examines the importance accorded to food by *bhadrolok* publicists in late colonial Bengal. Our

study draws upon Sengupta's insights and substantiations. However, Sengupta's article has tried to situate the entire notion of Bengali gastronomy exclusively in the conjuncture of the interface between colonialism and nationalism. But it must be noted that the *bhadralok* discourse of food cannot be defined exclusively in terms of the colonialism/nationalism dialectic; the discourse was much more complex.

Utsa Ray's work 'Aestheticizing labour: an affective discourse of cooking in colonial Bengal' (2010) located how the discourse of cookery in colonial Bengal became gendered in a complex way and how in the changing curriculum of the 'new woman' of Bengal cooking was incorporated as a significant part, and how women's cooking was given an importance in aesthetic sense in comparison to hired cook's cooking. The issue of caste in food culture of the Bengali Hindu middle class during the late colonial period was highlighted in Ray's another work (2011). In this connection she has highlighted the intermingling of castes in the new eateries. Ray's book (2015) examined the connection between taste and class formation in colonial Bengal and how middle class culinary experiences helped in their self-fashioning.

Srirupa Prasad's article brings out the cultural self-fashioning of the Bengali *bhadralok* through a reading of its discourse on food and nutrition in late colonial Bengal. She shows how food became a symbol for refined taste, on the one hand, and a means to good health, on the other; health, after all was an anxious concern in the nationalist agenda of the *bhadralok* in the late colonial era.

Venkatachalapathy's work "In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Consumption, Popular Culture, and Middle class Formation in Madras" explores how coffee became deep-rooted in late colonial Tamil society. In the initial days of colonisation, the author shows, coffee was seen as a 'threatening' and 'alien' substance by the middle class intelligentsia who saw it as a symbol of the West/modernity which supposedly weakened the very vitals of Indian/Tamil society. But he also takes care to show how the discourse got reconstituted, by the turn of

the century, when coffee had already captured the imagination and the diet of the middle class. A discursive volte face saw coffee now becoming a cultural marker (as against tea) of the Tamil diet; tea came to be now seen as a working class/Muslim drink.

In Krishnendu Ray's *The Migrant's Table: meals and memories in Bengali-American households* (2004), the author has found out how since the 'Bengal Renaissance' in the beginning of the nineteenth century food has been an important symbol in the contest between the Westernizers and the Traditionalists. Many Bengalis had a fond place in their hearts for the iconoclasts of the Young Bengal Movement who raised an open defiance about the Hindu social convention in the matters of foods and drink. But the traditional Bengalis like Bhudeb Mukherjee were deeply offended by the exaggerated 'Anglo-philia' among some Bengali middle-class students. Bhudeb found it nauseating that his friends were eating *kebabs* from Muslim shops and chased it down with Whiskey. He blamed the Bengali babu culture for this transformation of the eating habit of the Bengali Hindu Middle class. These arguments of this book (though argued in a different context of the food of migrated Bengali communities) are useful for my research which focuses on the creation and violation of social boundaries through food.

An understanding of the cultural politics of food in the ideological environment of imperialism as produced in the metropole and then transplanted in the colony – is also derived from a reading of the works of Nupur Choudhury's "Shawls, Jewelry, Curry and Rice in Victorian Britain", Mary Procida's "Feeding the Imperial Appetite: Imperial Knowledge and Anglo Indian Domesticity", Susan Zlotnick's "Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England", and Cecilia Leong-Salobir's *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire*.

Concluding Remarks

Food is- and always has been one of the most suggestive four letter words in the vocabulary of culture. There are manifold cultural meanings and discourses surrounding food practices and preferences in all human societies. Food history as a discipline in historical research is pregnant with immense possibilities; specially in such a time when we live in a globalised food culture, with continually changing fashions in festival foods, national and regional cuisines, with food becoming more and more a commodity and celebrity chefs coming now and then in various Television shows with newer recipes. Since last two decades food history as a course is becoming popular in a number of international universities and institutes^{viii}. Food Historians have begun to learn from each others' works through their publications in a number of food history oriented journals like *Food and Foodways*, *Gastronomica*, *Food History News*, *Food, Culture and Society*, *Food and History* etc and by attending the growing number of conferences that have been held since the 1980s^{ix}.

Food history has gathered much importance in recent years also in India, as discussed in this paper. Scholars are developing own methodologies for writing food history of different regions of India as well as of different classes and communities. Food is gradually getting more attached to our academic pursuits crossing its popular limit within the material substance. Hence, we can hope that this field of food history will get more thrust in the future days and the discipline will get more enriched with the passage of time.

Notes

ⁱ Haber, Barbara (2007) Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink

ⁱⁱ Annales School was established by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929. It was a major development in the historical and contemporary research. Later the studies were enriched further by Braudel, Duby, Le Roy Ladurie and many others.

ⁱⁱⁱ Notion of using food as a signifier as brought forward in the theory of Levis Strauss was getting used more in the food history writing in this period.

iv Counihan, C., (1999) *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power*, New York: Routledge. P. 6

v R.S. Khare, (1976) *Hindu Hearth and Home*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House

vi R.S. Khare, (1992) "Food with Saints: An Aspect of Hindu Gastrosemantics" in Khare ed. *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*

vii Appadurai, Arjun, (1988) "How to Make a National Cuisine : Cookbooks in Contemporary India", *Society and History*, Vol 30. pp

viii Masimo Montanari, a Professor of Medieval History at University of Bologna, launched the first Masters Course in food history. Apart from this Gastronomy Graduate Course is also available at Boston University Metropolitan College where Food History as a discipline is taught beside Food Anthropology and Food Ethnography. New York University also offers Masters Level Degree an Scholarship in food history.

ix First Food Historical Conference was the Oxford Symposium on Food, organised by British Food Historian Alan Davidson who brought together food scholars from different parts of the world.

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