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POOH-POOHING THE 'OTHER'.THE POLITICS BEHIND TASTES

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Abstract:-Culture is very much with the notion of power which paves way for the hierarchical structuring of cultures. Power refers to how certain cultures maintain privilege over the 'other'. At a secondary level it refers to choices related to personal matters like which movie to watch, which confectionary to eat in. Such choices comprise what we call as 'taste' which we call as 'refined and discerning choice', things that are 'interred within our skins and bones'. It is a very comprehensive term and is very much linked to the society in which we were born and brought up .I can signal my taste through the books I prefer to read, the kind of music I keep on listening ,the type of food I am used to etc. . . To possess likes and dislikes is the natural instinct of human beings. But there are certain power structures at play within the deeper recesses of these cultures.Taste has been associated with the concept of civilization i.e.'the taken for granted virtues of the gentleman '(Highmore, 23) .The tendency to disseminate gentlemanly conduct and to promote the taste culture of the taste makers of the day was very much prevalent. Envy, greed, fear for certain objects are evoked in us by lifestyle magazines and television advertisements as a result of which we are interpellated into the ideology of the high.The word 'Culture' with the capital 'C' referred to the elite way of living and their beliefs.What we have today is 'culture' with the small 'c', a term which is applied worldwide irrespective of all differences. The main agenda of Cultural Studies as a discipline is to dismantle the hierarchical impulses within culture and to negate binaries such as 'high culture' and 'low culture'.

Keywords:Politics , hierarchical structuring , society.

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu suggests “aversion to different lifestyles is one of the strongest barriers between classes”. (Highmore, 25)There is always a reluctance on the part of the high culture to assimilate the practices of the lower culture branding them as inferior. This is the outcome of 'schismogenesis',a concept developed by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the 1930's.The term was borrowed from the Greek words 'skhisma' meaning 'cleft' and 'genesis' meaning generation or creation. It refers to the divisions created in terms of the social behavior of people which evolves out of the 'ethos' i.e. the values, beliefs and ideals particular to a specific culture, movement or person. Schizogenesis may be a kind of competitive relationship among categorical equals and a relationship of dominance and submission between categorical unequal. The apathy of the American whites towards the black art, jazz music is indicative of the tendency of people to call 'barbarous' whatever deviates from one's own tastes and apprehensions (Highmore, 26).My concentration will be on the notion of 'disgust' aimed at an alien matter, behaviour that threatens the individuality exhibited by different cultural groups with special focus on the various food cultures and also the ambivalence in such an attitude.

The term 'disgust' signifies something offensive to the taste. It comes from French via Latin .The word 'dis' is a negative prefix and 'gustus' means taste. It was a word that found entry into the English lexicon in the seventeenth century to refer to “expressions declaring things or actions to be repulsive ,revolting or giving rise to reactions described as revulsion and abhorrence conveying a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its power to contaminate ,infect or pollute by proximity ,contact or ingestion”.(Miller,2).Disgust is communicated by wrinkling of noses, turning the head away ,physical nausea, vomiting etc. . . It is a word that proclaims the inferiority of something and has the power to pollute and defile an object. Disgust does the work of maintaining hierarchy.

The practice of untouchability is a classic example of evoking disgust. The socially low do not smell good to the high. In Kerala seeing a low class person was polluting to the Brahmins. Let me quote a passage from Darwin's 'The Expression of

the Emotions in Man and Animals'.

“In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty”.(Miller,2)

Here, the native pokes fun at the softness of Darwin's food. Darwin describes the savage capable of polluting his food. The insult that Darwin suffers at the hands of the savage transforms his contempt to the savage into disgust and expresses his fear whether some element of savagery would be ingested into his food by the touch of the savage in spite of the latter's hands being clean. Darwin also talks about how the question of disgust becomes contextual. The soup on a man's beard is a disgusting sight. This accords to the structural theory of Mary Douglas who states that “a manifestation of things becomes polluted by being out of place”. Here there is nothing disgusting in the soup but in the man who fails to present himself in a way the society demands him to be. To be too much hairy produces the image of being wild and savage. Hair on head is innocent but in food is disgusting.

Taste is something tricky. We can never say that something that smells bad is not tasty and vice versa. “If smell alone were to control access to the mouth we would not only miss cheeses but also repent of drinking perfume and eating flowers”.(Miller,66).This can be associated with the tendency of certain people among Brahmin communities to regard garlic ,onions and cauliflower as non-vegetarian food.

Kancha Ilaiah in his book 'God as Political Philosopher, Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism' describes the tension that existed between Hinduism and Buddhism in India. Buddha challenged the spiritual fascism engineered by the Brahmins who established a hegemonic control over other religions making others believe that they were the mediators between the people and the divine. The slogan of the Brahmin community was 'Brahmin Hitaya, Brahmin Sukhaya'(well-wishers and pleasers of Brahmins)while Buddhism aimed at “Bahujan Hitaya,Bahujan Sukhaya(well-wishers and pleasers of the many).(Ilaiah,210).Buddhism started emerging as a great challenge to Brahmanism. Ambedkar's conversion into Buddhism prompted many dalits to follow the same path.Buddha asked his followers to embrace the theory of ahimsa, mix with all castes and share their food with them while for the Brahmins it was a taboo to have food from shudras and chandalas since they did not want to violate the vegetarianism they strictly embraced .Brahmins killed a number of Buddhist monks as a retaliation to check the burgeoning importance of Buddhists and to prevent further propagation. They occupied the Buddhist viharas and installed Hindu idols in them.Thus, they brought back the caste system and presented vegetarianism undermining the practices of sudras, chandalas etc... The truth was that more than “eighty five percent among the Indians were 'mamsaharis', thus projecting the self-image of a minority into nationalism itself”.(Ilaiah,214).

Taking the cue from Kancha Ilaiah, famous Malayalam writer and film critic G.P.Ramachandran talks about how cattles have been deeply politicized. Cows are looked upon as god in among some communities in Hinduism. He mentions about an incident where a group of dalit students in Osmania University and EFLU, Hyderabad made a demand that beef has to be included in their hostel menu which sparked a great deal of controversy. They organized a beef festival in protest against the authority's decision to include all kinds of meat except beef. Student organizations such as ABVP unleashed a great deal of violence and destroyed the packets of beef. The question that Ramachandran poses here is what's wrong in holding a beef mela when we have payasam melas,biriyani melas etc.

He also talks about how Puttu(steam cake),a food item regarded to be that of the lower castes was looked down upon the elite Brahmin communities comparing them to human excreta(kandiyappam).The hypocrisy of the Brahmin community is revealed when he talks about 'Brahmins puttupodi' ,a brand in the markets these days. Here he brings about a connection between religious principles and consumerism.

Swami Sandeep Chaithanya recently made a remark that god does not expect offerings in the form of money from his devotees. Common people are not in any way benefitted by this money. Instead they should buy food for the poor which is real devotion. In the Guruvayur temple if a child urinates inside, the food prepared that day will be thrown away with the foolish excuse that the food has been polluted.It is high time that Brahmins rise above such practices when people in the world die of hunger.V.T. Bhattatiripad, famous social activist and writer who was responsible for the opening the doors of the temples to the avarnas in Kerala stated that

“If I were a priest I would serve the cooked food of God to the hungry poor of Kerala .I would tear off the silk robe from the idol and give it to the half-naked to cover their loins. I would use the thick smoke of the incense to drive away the bandicoots (Namboodiris and Pattars) from the shrine .Such a hatred I feel towards the temples.Set fire to the temples.”

To examine this politics at an international level we shall focus on the political implications of the word 'curry'. It was a defining dish that formed a culinary link between the British and the Indians. It was a favourite dish among the memsahibs and workers of the English East India Company. Each presidency had their own mode of preparing curry. It was an issue of great debate that which curry was original. There were efforts on the part of various presidencies to claim ownership to the fact that their curry was original.”Curry was a savoury dish made up of meat,fish,fruit,vegetables cooked with a quantity of bruised spices and turmeric served to flavor the two staple foods of the east ,bread and rice, both of which are bland dishes”.(Salobir,40)The word 'curry' was a single term used to refer to the food in Asian countries and considered it an inferior kind of food that found place in the bottom of the menu in the restaurants. “The idea of curry is a concept that the Europeans imposed on Indian food culture. Indians referred to their dishes by different names.But the British lumped all these together under the heading of curry.”(Salobir,42)

But the British officials and ladies exhibited a contradictory attitude to 'curry'. Curry was an inevitable item of the

culinary repertoire of the everyday lives of the sahibs and memsahibs in India. Despite this it did not find a place in the formal dinners. British army officers in India and their wives refused to have curry served to them by Indian cooks. Contrary to this attitude East India company officials returning to England had an Indian cook accompanying them. The recipe books prepared by memsahibs themselves had curry as an important item in it. Susan Zlotnick claims that Victorian women had the habit of appropriating things and practices of the 'other' to save themselves from the threat of the others. Then they naturalized and domesticated the product. This is also what happened in the case of 'curry'. The British domesticated and presented curry as their own food and even started commercializing various curry powders. Zlotnick says that "In the Victorian era, curry was already part of the national cuisine; it was commonly served to guests in home and in cookbooks curry recipes were found among British recipes. (Salobir, 45).

We can find common ambivalent attitudes on the part of the British and Brahmins here. The British show reluctance to accept and appreciate curry as the dish of the colonized but shows the cunningness to make use of it for commercialization just as Brahmins take a double stand with regard to the issue of the steam cake. The Brahmins sacrificed cattle for their various rituals. It was the Buddhists who introduced the concept of ahimsa and vegetarianism and the Brahmins adopted it for their own material gains. A deep analysis of such practices will convince us beyond doubt that such hypocrisies existed at the levels of caste, religion, nation etc.

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