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# Kitchen Disseminating Power Structures: An Analysis of Indian Culture Post-Colonization

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## ABSTRACT


Studying food is the ultimate pathway to understand the construction of our world: the diet, the process in which one acquires the food, the hierarchy in relation to food recipes, the preparation and the consumption of food is a cultural and social construction. Commensalism (sharing of food) is the power to determine sociability by maintaining and forming social groups. In many Asian cultures, the denial of food is socially constructed to refusal to refusal of acceptance and general hospitality. Kitchen becomes the primary representation of food and its consumption. Gender plays a vital role inn food centric activities, as it structures human societies, their histories, ideology, economic and political structures. Power is exerted through accepted norms of who has the right to control judgement disseminating through the kitchen. The paper will analyze Kitchen as an authoritative power structure in the Indian settings. It will focus on two major aspects, i.e. food preparations in different Indian culture and the power acquired by Indian women in the walls of the kitchen. These aspects will be studied, on the basis of caste hierarchy prevailing in Indian, post-colonization. A social discourse analysis will be taken into consideration for the study.

**Keywords:** *Kitchen, Food, Power Structures, Serving techniques, Cutlery.*

The kitchen forms an indispensable component of our day to day life. In the 20<sup>th</sup> C. it forms a space of family get together, open to family and dining rooms forms. From welcoming guests, to conducting business, kitchen forms an inevitable part of our living conditions. Homeowners today are seeking out large size kitchens, for spaces like baking, cooking and hosting. The importance of kitchen have gained an idea of 'Trophy' for home-owners, it is amazing to know that not long ago, the concept of kitchen was merely one desirable room in the household. In spite of inflation in the sizes, the kitchen disseminates immense amount of power and authority not only through food, but also through the evolution of kitchen, tracing back to history.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 1984, narrates the constitution of taste as a judgement of the aesthetic quality of items and activities in particular. These judgments are tacit, and hence is said to be derived through people's possessions and accumulation of cultural competences. Its aesthetics hence form an indication of position and power. The paper examines kitchen and it's traits of food disseminating as a representation of

power in the Indian society of modernization. Varying from class to caste, food cooked and consumed in these Indian households and also the depiction of women in these Indian kitchen, a representation of the power possessed kitchen in an Indian household.

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Kitchen space today performs various other jobs, other than mere cooking of food, it forms a escape from the hectic lifestyle, the interiors of a kitchen, the flooring, the roofing and an overall layout of the kitchen form symbol of status in a society. This taste in kitchen building ethics forms “A weapon for drawing social distinctions and for exercising social and symbolic domination, hence expression of social superiority and subordination is made possible” (Warde 2). The kitchen thus forms an imagery of power 21<sup>st</sup> C dynamics.

The kitchen in the Indian households have been considered as a sacred part of house for generations now. In the caste pyramid, members of the lower class are prohibited from the kitchens of the higher caste. This custom was strictly followed in terms of the kitchen, other than other household spaces. This practice is mainly referred as a fear of ritual contamination (cite) of self, where even the higher caste refrains from entering the house of the lower caste. These restriction aggravates to a level of in acceptance of the basic kitchen amenity, the water by the higher caste into a lower caste home.

### **The Caste in Kitchen:**

With the history of diversity to this 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there is no such thing as Indian cuisine. Its cuisines are rather divided into cultural and class variation that exists in India. In the Indian kitchen, cooking patterns are followed through the belongingness caste and its history. Food that is consumed divides people into separate hierarchical positions. Every region has its own distinct traditions.

Brahmins in the south and some other regions do not consume the recipes made of onions or garlic in their dishes. For a North Indian household, making a good gravy-based dish without onions and garlic is nearly impossible

An article by Stanley A. Freed on caste hierarchies and the exchange of food and water in the predominantly traditional Indian families, there is by far a huge distinction in food items consumed and also their preparation techniques. Food is divided between the *Jat* Brahmin and the *Chuhra* Sweeperranking. These divisions of the society, portray as consumption of food for superior as the *Pakka* food consisting of clarified butter and inferior *Kachha* food that is cooked in water respectively. In the terms of water, the superior had it from the brass pitcher whereas the inferior's source remained the earthen ware. Indian recipes are immensely caste based.

A young bride marrying into an Indian Brahmin household, they are expected to cook the dishes in the family repertoire. There is a continuous representation of food to be in collaboration with the society, where a *Brahmin* bride is a representation of new beginnings.

The South- Indian Brahmin tribe *Iyengars* forbid the usage of leftovers from the previous. They prefer eating Jaggery (concentrated date, cane juice or palm sap) over sugar. Abiding by the popular Brahmin tradition, meals cannot be consumed without making an offering to the gods and hence a smidgen of every dish that has been cooked is placed as an offering, making self- devotion and surrender. Mrinalini Mehra, a Marathi Brahmin and novelist comments on the Brahmin kitchen traditions, “It's not just the bathing and the clothes. You also have to be in a suitably pure and peaceful frame of mind before cooking," As the caste tapers down to the Indian system, its different food preparations gain value and the rules followed by the Brahmin community become lesser stringent.

Anurima reacts on the formation of terminologies and beliefs on preparation of foods in our kitchen mentioning, neologism, “non-vegetarian”, she says, “it is created by vegetarian India itself speaks volumes, and makes the country possibly the only one in the world where meat is not called by its name! Consequently, the normative status of vegetarianism is reinforced by rendering meat nameless, and by reducing it to a depleted “non” of vegetables!.” This is indicative of the power wielded by vegetarians in India who form a minority of the population; the *Brahmins*.

Hence the category 'non-vegetarian' is denied to be a homogenous entity exercising the cultural factors – caste and religion being chief among them – they determine the flesh foods forming a part of the Indian kitchens constituting of the lower class. The Hindu religion is classified being the land of taboos where the angst of the consumption of cow's flesh which, in the 19th century, was used as a rallying point during the nationalist mobilization in northern India.” (Sarkar and

Sarkar, 2016). It now contributes a major topic of the contemporary debates.

An overview of the presence of caste in the Indian kitchen ceases in recognizing food as equivalent rather strengthens the hierarchy. Amrita Dhillon in the *South China Morning Post*, reveals "Like the caste system itself, the kitchen rules constitute an immense and informal codification whose only *raison d'être* appears to be the classification of Indians into "higher" and "lower" categories, with infinite gradations up and down the food chain." (Dhillon; link)

### **Kitchen Notions of Hierarchy Depicted by Women:**

Representation of women in the post-colonial writings, have been either been submissive or a portrayal of a journey to emancipation. The representation of the women in Ambai's *Kitchen in the Corner of the House* and RK Narayan's *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* (1949) are writings depicting the representational cultural norms, propagating from the Indian households.

Sarika Goyal in an article "Marriage and Family: An Indian feministic Critique", argues that, "It is noteworthy that Indian kitchen turns out to be the hub of family politics where mother and wife competes as chefs and present choicest delicacies to win the male. But the poor condition of the kitchen makes life hard for the women who spend the biggest part of the day by making meals for the entire family" leading to a depiction of *Minakshi's* kitchen saga.

Ambai seeks the process of cooking and food a medium of exerting power within the family. The framing of the character *Minakshi* narrates a modern women entering into a traditionally backward Indian household, where kitchen forms a space a medium to voice out her opinions. *Minakshi's* first look at the kitchen "Right at the end, stuck at the careless manner. Two windows. Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above are opened... within ten minutes there will be a small flood." (Ambai 63). This neglected state of kitchen is the micro-level depiction in the women of the house. An emancipation is observed where *Minakshi*, being the youngest daughter-in-law of the family expresses her desire to rebuild of the kitchen:

Papaji, why don't you extend the verandah outside the kitchen? If you widen it, we could have some chairs out there. If you then build a wash place to the left, you could have a really wide basin for cleaning the vessels. And then beyond that, you could put up some aluminum wire for drying the clothes. (Purple Sea, 234).

The other issue of caste-ism is represented from an instance from RK Narayan's *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* (1949), where the woman representation can "sometimes the predominant aim is to portray realistically and sensitively the entrapment of middle class women in the codes of this tradition. Sometimes it is based on revolutionary romanticism" (Raman, 119)

In the novel protagonist Narayan's friend *Srinivas* is against the caste hierarchy and considers it as an evil venom. Whereas, his wife holds a contradictory view. In an instance *Srinivas's* wife hesitates to take the "Hotel food" as the touch of it may pollute her caste:

"Hotel food! I can't," she said. She was brought up in a very orthodox manner in her little village. "And I can't eat any food without a bath first. It'd be unthinkable." The boy tried to say through his full mouth: "Mother has been fasting since yesterday— wouldn't take anything on the way."

"Why?" asked Srinivas.

"Should you ask?" she replied.

"What foolish nonsense is this?" Srinivas cried. He stood looking at her for a moment as if she were an embodiment of knotty problems. He knew what it was: rigorous upbringing fear of pollution of touch by another caste, orthodox idiocies—all the rigorous compartment of human beings. He looked at her with despair." (Narayan, Mr. Samapath 34-35)

The kitchen and its notions forms a medium and also a barrier of hierarchy in the cultural settings, gaining a power

against the male opinion about the male expressed cultural norms. There is revelation of the traits of power, through the medium of kitchen, studying the aspects of caste and women in the Indian settings. The walls of an Indian household defines the politics of the patriarchal system. On the contrary, the kitchen forms a space and belief predominantly of women who ensure power narration through this space. The paper is an attempt in order to frame women in power position over the space of kitchen.

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