



Home Politics And Eating: The Indian Micro-Habits Chaining Women To Kitchen And Women's Health

Anwesha Beria

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Perpetuation is succeeding. Women eat the offals, the stale and the latest.

The habits of women surrounding the kitchen make us raise several questions regarding eating, culinary, and cooking habits, especially in stark contrast to the behavior of the male family members, all of which constitute a large part of home politics. There is a lot of tracing back to be done to understand why such behaviors happen and why men, especially the bread-earners, shelter themselves under weaponized incompetence: a phenomenon where they leave things undone and untouched under the garb of incompetence or not being taught and, leaving it for the woman to handle.

Despite the diet [ICMR](#) suggests for women who do not exercise regularly (around 53% of them), the stated nutritional needs do not meet nearly as much as they should. Homemakers and working women do not get the time to eat even if they are the masters of their kitchens. Their cooking choices are governed by what the man (or the head of the house) wishes or likes to eat, so much so that the breadmakers forget what they even used to enjoy. This sacrificial and giving nature is upheld not only in media portrayals but also by the previous generations of women who perpetuate these values subtly but chronically and are now normativized to be the virtues of an ideal woman. Ironically, she is not the patron of nutrition as she goes ill-fed or underfed most of the time while making sure it is met for others. A phrase popularized by Bollywood "*Maa ki haat ka khana*", is used as a nostalgic ammunition to keep mothers (and their primary worth) cemented in the kitchen, turning cooking from an act of love to that of a liability very soon. It becomes a self-reinforcing cycle of cooking favorite meals, shaping the food preferences of the family, and being asked to make the same again. Mothers, and consequently women in general, are associated with nourishment as they have the biological means to nurture and feed fetuses into functioning adults via birth and breastfeeding. This notion gets transferred to the wives, who are hunted down to mother their future offspring, husbands, and fathers-in-law and share the burden with the mothers-in-law. The ongoing cycle has solidified juxtaposing nourishment with mothers beyond their biological function and capacity. "Mothering" (and never fathering) human beings by women (only) has been woven into the social fabric as an inherent nature and duty of women despite their socioeconomic or political

situation. This notion is established through the nourishment association and bolstered through media representations.

Stale or not, the woman must not waste the food that she prepared, otherwise her efforts would go to waste even at the cost of her health. This habit has a strong correlation with India's colonial history. Being dominated by the fear of famine and agricultural crises, there is now an inherent tendency to conserve, which is linked to the habit of Indians to be not wasteful. Since women were almost always in charge of the kitchen, it was also their responsibility to plan and cook the meals measuredly. If there was anything left over, the cook was to blame, and not the ones who bought the ingredients from the market to home. It was almost a punishment that fit perfectly under the model of sacrifice that was silently imposed on her and continues even to this day, causing her to eat the stale leftovers, and sometimes only that for her meals. Sacrifice is remodeled to be the *kartavya*, which morally shackles women to the kitchens. In Indian philosophy, according to *Sivpurana* 2.3.29, *kartavya* refers to “those procedures that should be followed.” This word has significance not only in Indian philosophy but also in religious practices. The former is a set of duties meant for the development of the individual to perform certain selfless acts for the well-being of themselves and society, whereas the latter is a set of strict rules and procedures to be followed during a religious ritual, the non-performance or underperformance of which is sacrilegious. Often, the average household, being unaware of the difference, jinxes these two forms of *kartavya*. The result of this unhappy marriage leads to a morphed notion of *kartavya* bleeding into kitchen spaces that leads the inaction or unfulfillment of these duties to a blasphemous tarnishing of a woman. Kitchen duty as a woman's *kartavya* is made a necessity for the family's growth, which is also how the notion of nourishment got extended. This punishment model has been normativized via generational traditions and the necessity being reinforced by media portrayals. The sprinklings of validation that come from fulfilling kitchen duties make this cycle of *kartavya*'s spiritual association self-fulfilling: the woman starts with the skewed notion of *kartavya*, occasionally gets applauded for following through, and even creates a race for betterment when rebuked. This prolongs this cycle of what I call the ‘*kartavya* trap’. The last stage of that has been studied thoroughly in the Marxist school of thought, postulating that, competitive environments are created by capitalistic systems to not only increase the opacity of their intentions and prevent the workers from engaging in critical questioning but also drive them against each other, which fosters division of labor and their consequent deskilling. This is also perhaps a rudimentary reason behind women's apparent hatred and jealousy towards each other. In his book *Poverty of Philosophy*, Karl Marx begins part 4 of the second chapter, titled ‘Monopoly of Competition’ by quoting PJ Proudhon's affirmative proof of both the good and bad sides of competition: “Competition is as essential to labor as division.... It is necessary ... for the advent of equality.” [186, 188]

“Its most certain result is to ruin those whom it drags in its train.” [185]

Though lacking in intersectionality, the modern-day interpretations of Marxist thoughts acknowledge the co-functioning of patriarchy and capitalism, both of which are perpetuating these norms.

Restructuring of *kartavya* in this way creates an absolutism: if not the woman, who? An artificial scarcity is created in the domestic sphere which compels only the female members, or some house-helper for household responsibilities. However, ironically the food industry remains male-dominated. Creating a career out of experimental cooking or fine dining, which is an evolved form of home cooking, is done by men primarily because of family support and funding of a lucrative future. Keeping the discrimination in workspaces in mind, women are anyway discouraged from taking up jobs in things they are deemed to be good at, which is counterintuitive. “Research shows that men make up for 80 - 90% of chefs while women hold only 10% of executive chef positions, earning nearly 22% less as against their male counterparts”, says Deccan Herald. With the number of chefs leaning largely towards men, it is up for speculation whether women take experimental guidance online from mostly male or female chefs. Chances are, it is the former. The amount of YouTube channels run and owned by women is steadily on the rise, but the popular and top-paying spots in the industry are still occupied and reserved for the Gordon Ramseys.

There are strict culinary rituals that women are groomed to obey, like adhering to the serving order, vegetarian hegemony, and touchability practices in kitchen spaces. Such rituals and practices prevent women from getting out of the kitchen space itself, let alone venturing out of the domestic sphere. In the current scenario, women are rebuked for protesting against these norms, the argument being that the traditions or *Sanskriti* are dying and that we should never question these anomalies in family dynamics, so much so that it goes unnoticed and unquestioned even by the sufferers. Such questions are famously raised in Ashapurna Devi's novel *Subarnalata* where the namesake protagonist recognizes these traps and tries to distance herself from the kitchen space by indulging in literature and questioning the rigid household at a time when it was forbidden. Though set in the 1930s, the *Subarnalata* in every woman seems to be still dormant, which is all about realizing their domestic and reproductive rights.

But how did these rituals come to be? Starting from the serving order, it is believed that adhering to that order was a marker of social status and, in the microcosm of the family, it comes down to filial hierarchy- usually the bread earner eats the first, followed by the children (sons first, then daughters), and lastly, the cook which is usually the housewives. The bread earner's filial value always outweighed that of the bread maker's and, that is because of the former's commercial monetary value and the latter's unpaid domestic labor not being quantified. It is assumed to be their divine duty for which they would not gain anything materialistic in this realm of being but rather in their afterlives. Therefore, expecting or demanding anything for this labor is sinful. This is largely the reason behind the disproportionately skewed shared responsibilities in modern-day households where working women have to do the "double day." The serving order also keeps the women glued to the same dining area to serve the ones eating, in case anyone needs a refill while they are starving themselves. Not only do they have to make the meals and set up before the dinner, but also, clean up after. Even after the whole process of dinner, the women can be found sitting in the unventilated kitchen and quietly gulping down their cold meals. The serving order not only ekes out the entire breakfast, lunch, and dinner processes, which already is an asymmetry of responsibilities in itself, but it also ghettoizes the women from the daily family union that is the meal times. A huge corpus of tasks are the meal processes for breakfast, lunch, dinner, evening snacks, and midday meals, which, on most days, are not limited to just three times of the day. The reason why I am calling it 'processes' is because it is multi-layered and not a simple task of cooking. Cooking is the easiest part. It begins with planning the meal at the start of each day, bringing the ingredients from the market, cutting the vegetables and preparing the ingredients, keeping the utensils ready, then cooking, transferring them to serving utensils, setting up the table by bringing the meals, the plates, water arrangement and sitting arrangement, serving the people and finally, the cook eats and after that, transfer everything back to the kitchen, put them to wash, clean the table, wash the dishes, store the leftovers (which leaves additional dishes) along with the vegetables. This was for one meal. Each time this exhaustive list of tasks is repeated with cuts and additions depending on many factors. This whole set of steps calls for a division of labor. The laborers are usually the females of the family. The younger girls are asked to give a hand at bringing the dishes, the elder ones (typically adolescent daughters or daughters-in-law, or the wives) are asked to do the heavier tasks, whereas the cooking and cleaning are to be done by the more experienced woman in the house. The boys may be seldom summoned.

The dichotomy between pollution and purity is one of the dividing agents of castes. Sanskritization tries to bridge the gap between secular and ritual rank. To secure the ritual rank, such aspiring castes emulate the customs, traditions, beliefs, and ideas of the higher castes. Sociologist MN Srinivas, the father of the concept of Sanskritization, furthers this point, "It also meant obtaining the services of a Brahmin priest at various *rites de passage*, performing Sanskritic calendrical festivals, visiting famous pilgrimage centers, and finally, attempting to obtain a better knowledge of the sacred literature. Ambitious castes were aware of the legitimizing role of the Brahmin." One such product of Sanskritization is vegetarian hegemony, something that resurfaced recently as Swara Bhaskar called out a vegetarian food blogger for their "self-righteousness" in her [Twitter post](#). The "pure-

veg fleet” of Zomato also sparked controversies of pro-brahminism, aggravating discriminatory attitudes towards marginalized delivery-persons, which is about 54.5% according to a study by University of Pennsylvania. How this hegemony manifests in home politics is the Sanskritization of brahminical eating practices that are inherently associated with cleanliness and consumption of *satvik* meals, the opposite of which also has been stereotypically linked to marginalized “impure” eating practices. Therefore, this desire for attaining upward caste mobility inadvertently fuels these culinary practices that women follow in their kitchens. This desire is hidden subconsciously under the garb of cleanliness and hygiene, the maintenance of which is made compulsory during cooking and serving. There are many things considered “unclean” in eating habits: touching the utensils containing a non-vegetarian meal or foods containing “heating” ingredients like garlic and onion, eating with the left hand, even touching the masala jars with the hands with which utensils containing non-veg food is touched (not even the food or the ingredient). This notion of touchability induced by vegetarian hegemony keeps women chained to kitchens, as they continually tend to these micro-practices that cumulatively consume a lot more time in kitchen spaces than they otherwise would have. This touchability is even more prominent during religious occasions, especially ones accompanying fasts or *vrats*. It is made crucial for women to maintain the purity of both food (vegetarianism) and body (menstrual chastity). It is also a food for thought that it is ritualistically obligatory for women majorly, to perform these fasts routinely because of umpteen festivities of our regional and national cultures, and rarely ever, the men. These fasts undoubtedly pose a nutritional threat to their health, especially if done long-term, which is usually the case.

The larger implications of these poor eating habits and lifestyles of women extend far beyond the current body to intergenerational health. I shall explain this with an example and conclude my essay:

Indians have a greater tendency to be diabetic than the rest of the world, and one of the reasons for that is the famine-ridden colonial past. Stretched periods of starvation, hoarding of goods by upper classes creating scarcity in the market, and inflation of the bare essentials, created the poorest living conditions India had ever faced. Economist Amartya Sen had found out that it was the unequal food and wealth distribution system which caused a rise in famines. “The economic historian Mike Davis recounts 31 major famines in the 190 years of British colonial rule, compared to only 17 famines in the 2000 years prior” ([Syed 1](#)), which has now translated to high levels of insulin resistance, high body fat percentage, low muscle mass, slower metabolism and much more complications due to the average Indian body still stuck in starvation mode.

The endocrinally more complex women have a greater risk of hypothyroidism, insulin resistance, and an array of health disorders if hormonal disorders persist extensively; colonial genetics exacerbates said risk. Similarly, daily cultivation of these poor eating habits might lead to intergenerational health hazards, such as PCOS, PCOD, poor reproductive and menstrual health, endometriosis, anemia, higher risks of eating disorders, and myriads of neonatal diseases. The risk of congenital feminine diseases increases overall, which may get permanently stitched into the DNA, causing a faltering quality of women’s health from birth onto the subsequent generations. The incorporation and dissemination of these unquestioned patriarchal and casteist practices within the discourse of Women's Health and Cultural studies is essential to prevent this major threat before it is too late. Though cooking is a primary skill essential to sustain life, instead of making it a point to acquire and improve at it, a specific group of the demography is responsible for doing this every day as unpaid domestic labor. To answer the question, if not women, who? Everyone. Children and young adults should be taught from an early age to recognize ingredients, clean up after themselves post meals, and learn to be safe around hazards while being slowly introduced to cooking. Learning to do that will produce two independent individuals: the mother and the children (and their potential partners). As for the bread earners, they should be sensible enough to detect when a task is done out of care and when it becomes a burden, preferably via healthy communication. That is one of the simplest ways of preventing imbalanced task distribution and improving family dynamics. Realizing that and being vocal about the micro-habits aforementioned playing little to no role in being hygienic and tidy would

slowly lead to less time being consumed by women in the kitchen. It is a long process to undo the damages imposed by such brahministic tendencies however, These might be some preliminary steps to initiate the healing process rather than accepting defeat.

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