

**The Food Façade: The Politics Behind the Indian Food Habits and the Culinary
Exclusion of the Adivasis from the Mainstream**

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Abstract

While the West has frequently associated vegetarianism with progressiveness, eco-friendliness, sustainability, animal welfare and ethicality the Indian attitude of practicing vegetarianism has birthed from other reasons. According to the sample registration system (SRS) baseline survey 2014, 30% of India's total population are vegetarians, a number vastly greater than any other country. Indian vegetarianism manifests with markedly different values. One of its main features is to cultivate a social distance from non-vegetarian food and non-vegetarian people from the mainstream. The non-vegetarian population mostly includes the religious minorities, the lower-castes and the tribals. Thus India has relied on its culinary habits for the purpose of including the dominant by excluding the non-vegetarians. This paper is inspired by the first chapter, *They Eat Meat!*, in the book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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Vegetarianism is the practice of abstaining from the consumption of meat and may also include abstention from all the by-products of animal slaughter. Preferences for vegetarianism may root from social, economic or political reasons. Vegetarianism may be adopted for plethora

of reasons. Several people object to eating meat out of respect for sentient life, some are driven by their animal rights advocacy, others are inspired by health-related, political, environmental, cultural, aesthetic, economic, or personal preferences. A large population of Indians are also motivated by the idea of ahimsa or non-violence. As opposed to animal and environmental welfare elsewhere in the world, Indian vegetarianism is majorly driven by the concepts of purity, authority and tradition. Here the question is why vegetarians in India prefer distance from non-vegetarians, if not in general proximity then at least in their kitchens and dining areas. The social and political exclusion of one group from the other on the basis of culinary habits demands some introspection especially when meat has become a prominent source of contention, repression and violence, along the lines of caste and religion.

Several Indian states practice tiffin policing in schools and workplaces to demote the consumption of non-vegetarian food. Many workplace canteens refrain from selling and serving vegetarian food. Similarly, many urban schools instructs the parents to pack appropriate vegetarian food in their wards' tiffin boxes. In April 2014, a notice was issued to the employees of *The Hindu* asking them to refrain from bringing non-vegetarian food into the office canteen as it caused discomfort to the majority of the employees who are vegetarian. This vegetarian cult behavior is frequently observed even among educated young people, especially when they look for people to share urban living spaces. Often the non-vegetarians are expected to not 'pollute' and 'contaminate' the shared kitchens by bringing in non-vegetarian food items. Shockingly surveys show that urban India is more vegetarian than rural India.

Suryakant Waghmore, professor of sociology, IIT Bombay remarks, "The morals of Indian vegetarians continue to be based less on compassion for humans and animals and more driven by ideas of hierarchy and purity." In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, the Soren family

belongs to a tribal community in Jharkhand. Mr. Soren who is transferred to Vadodara, Gujarat experiences a culinary shock when his house owner, Mr. Rao, explained to him the need to follow a vegetarian diet. Describing the social situation in Gujarat Rao says, “Vadodara is a strongly Hindu city, people here believe in purity. I am not 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). Ethical vegetarianism, which is primarily rooted on the concern for the environment and fellow creatures does not account for the strong, visceral belief in ‘pollution’. This vegetarianism does not attempt at tweaking another person’s eating behavior unlike the latter which has time and again begotten discrimination and violence towards non-dominant, non-Brahmin cultures. This is quite contrary to the non-violence or *ahimsa* inherent in vegetarianism globally.

The term *dalit* and *adivasis* have been widely assimilated to the oppressed. It is a term that has been adopted by some to mark social and political exclusion of certain communities and groups of people. While caste has been widely used and circulated as a convenient tool for the division of labour, it has also been a hereditary system of inequality legitimized by the Hindu religious texts. In India, the caste system is so pervasive, that it is also found among other religious groups. Caste, along with the culinary habits has facilitated as a system of social exclusion and continues to determine a person’s socio-economic location within the Indian society. Denoting the division of living spaces on the basis of religion and consumption of meat, Mr. Rao remarks, “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 60).

The 'purity' of caste is maintained by strict endogamy. Echoing the observation of Suryakant Waghmore, a joint study conducted by researchers in US, Canada and India in 2013 found that vegetarianism in North America and India differed. While the primary concerns among the vegetarians in America and Canada were universalism and environmental welfare, their Indian counterparts were driven by the idea of purity, pollution, authority, and tradition. The study also found that Indian vegetarians did not differ significantly from their omnivorous fellow Indians in possessing heightened concerns for the environment.

Several Indians who favour the idea of vegetarian canteens and dining areas assert that it is all about respecting the vegetarians and sparing them the discomfort and that it has nothing to restrict the non-vegetarians. The rationale behind exclusionary vegetarianism is often attributed to the argument of 'respect other'. It is a frequently employed, sacrosanct defense to ward off all questions related to hegemony. Explaining the gravity of the situation in Vadodara, Soren remarks, "It was the only shop in the entire market which sold eggs, and there was always a number of people at that shop. Biram-kumang or Hopon would go there, look around to make sure there were no familiar eyes spying on them, buy two eggs, wrap them discreetly, put them in their cloth shopping bag and return home." Social exclusion is, therefore, not merely a problem of social, political and economic disadvantages such as low income or unemployment, but it is also social disintegration, alienation/isolation from society, powerlessness and inability to take part in the mainstream owing to the differences in culinary habits as well. In India, social exclusion is largely based on caste, religion and gender. Some communities and groups that have been historically excluded for decades and continue to be excluded even today based on these culinary habits which include meat diet.

In the Indian context, marginalized, socially excluded groups include the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and the Muslims. Historically, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who account for 16.6 per cent and 8.6 per cent of India's total population have become the worst victims of exploitation and discrimination and social exclusion. They have been excluded from the mainstream economic and social spheres in India. However, Gandhi did not advocate a ban on slaughter of cows as he felt it would "mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus ... It is not as if there were only Hindus in the Indian Union. There are Muslims, Parsis, Christians and other religious groups here. The assumption of Hindus that India now has become the land of the Hindus is erroneous" (Gandhi 424). Instead of blindly adapting to the culinary habits which forms the basis for culinary exclusion of the minorities in our country we need to ask ourselves how the idea of 'purity' is unquestioningly accepted and how an instinct of disgust for non-vegetarian food is blindly cultivated. Even the younger, modern, educated Indians showcase a tendency to support these inane, outdated culinary exclusion, often along the lines of caste and religion. Many are indeed unsure about the roots of such culinary practices, except for the fact that they were raised to do so. Above all, this exclusivity achieves nothing for non-violence at the heart of vegetarianism.

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