



‘Unconventional’ Food Historiography

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Abstract: *The Study of History is not limited to wars and politics but transcends into the study of the then-contemporary thoughts, society, and culture. A proper understanding of history can be achieved only through an in-depth study of the customs, traditions, norms and values, and emerging technology. Food is an important factor to gauge the development of human culture. Systematic study of food can throw light on all the spheres of human life. However, study of food is relatively a recent field of enquiry for the historians. New field of historical research requires reexamining of sources or use of hitherto unknown source. The present paper studies unconventional sources of food history.*

Index Terms: Cookbooks, Food History, Literature, Oral History, Unconventional Sources

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhasa (Language), *Bhesa* (Attire) and *Bhoos* (Food) are considered to be the basic components of understanding human culture. Every region's geography, physical and natural environment, socio-economic and political conditions influence the above three components of culture. Among these, the most important component which undergoes continuous change, in spite of being traditional in essence is *Bhoos* (Food). The food historian studies human society through the prism of food. Since sources and methodology are the basis of historical research, each discipline works within the framework by adopting a specific research methodology. However, food history is a branch of knowledge that falls within the realm of latent history, food researchers must use conventional as well as unconventional sources to throw light on various aspects of food history and culture. In this paper, a modest attempt is made to trace the nature of unconventional sources being used in the study of food history.

II. WHAT IS FOOD HISTORY?

‘Food History’ is the new branch of historiography that emerged as an independent discipline in the 1970s and provided an opportunity to the historians to throw light on many aspects of the human civilization by the systematic study of food which has been marginalized as a source of historical writing. Food History is a broad concept and various scholars have tried to define it. According to Ellen Messer, Barbara Haber, Joyce Toomre,

Barbara Wheaton (2000) ‘simply a narrative account of what was eaten by a particular people at a particular time or entertaining stories about food or telling anecdotes of people cooking and eating is not food history. Food history is an informed analysis of how food expresses the character of a time, place, society, and culture. Food history studies the origin and development of the foodstuffs, equipment, and techniques of cookery, the presentation and eating of meals, and the meaning of these activities to the societies that produce them.’ Food historian Dr. Mohsina Mukadam (2014) states that ‘the study of the nutritional value of food or the food recipes is not the history of food. Because geography, topography, climate, the natural environment, history, technological development are the building blocks of food history and culture. So, the history of food tries to explain what is the role of food in the perspective of time and space, society and culture or how people express themselves through food.’ It encompasses everything from cultivation, processing, marketing, cooking to diverse consumption practices.

III. AN UNCONVENTIONAL WAY TO STUDY FOOD HISTORY: WHY?

Sources are ‘basic raw material’ for historical writing as historians used them to reconstruct the past and to interpret the historical events (Marwick, 2001). Sources are classified into two broad categories i.e., conventional, and unconventional. Archaeological sources, archival records, documents or letters of historical personalities, government correspondence, government reports etc. are considered authentic and credible conventional sources. Unconventional sources comprise literature, personal diaries, biographies, paintings, artifacts, folk songs, folk literature, folk tales, oral tradition, etc.

In the nineteenth century, Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Leopold Von Ranke, the German historians developed a scientific method to reconstruct the past. They believed that historical writing should be based on archived conventional sources as they made history more objective and scientific. By rejecting many of the sources previously used by historians – particularly memoirs or accounts written after the event – Ranke argued that historians should only use ‘primary’ or original sources, those which are

generated at the time of the event under consideration. He also argued that historians should refrain from judging the past and simply write 'what actually happened' (Green & Troup, 1999). Consequently, from the late nineteenth century up to the beginning of the twentieth century, a historical study was dominated by political and administrative history, and social-cultural history was marginalized. By the 1880s there set in a kind of reaction against the Rankean 'no document, no history'. Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Dilthey in Germany tried to maintain the distinctiveness of history as a separate kind of knowledge making it more fit to be classed with cultural or human studies. American historian Frederick Jackson Turner believed 'All the sphere of man's activity must be considered, no one department of social life can be understood in isolation from the other' (Faragher, 1998). James Harvey Robinson proposed the need to study social changes in history by the concept of 'new history' (Robinson, 1911). A turning point came with the publication of periodical named as *Annales d Histoire, Economique et Sociale* by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel who emphasized on a study of all the spheres of man's activities instead of partial history and explained that this will also be the 'true history' (Ganachari, 2010). This journal was renamed several times and finally, in 1946 it was named as *Annales- Economies, Societies, Civilization*. The name itself indicates a transition from a traditional political approach towards history to a socio-economic one. They reconstruct the present research methodology and used unconventional sources to study. They created the link between history and other disciplines, which altogether gave a new perspective to history writing.

Annales historians drew the attention of historians towards food. They believed that the history of food would throw light on all aspects of history (Aymard & Mukhia, 1988). They applied an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to the study of food history. Conventional sources of history, most of the time are silent about the dietary practices of the society as it is commonly believed that it is not a serious enough subject to deserve mention in a historical document. Archaeological evidence including the physical remains of past human activities namely food grains, pottery, arrowheads, animal bones, etc. found in the excavation helps us to understand the vegetarian and non-vegetarian food habits of the people. *Grains* and their impressions in pottery, *husks*, and plants found give us an idea about the soil, the climate, and the type of crops grown by the farmers. Mention of food offerings are also found in the inscriptions and copper plates. Archival records like official documents provide information about the government's agricultural and revenue policies. However, there is a paucity of archival records regarding the daily life of the common people. Hence, to study the effects of geographical-political-social-economic-historical changes on dietary practices of people, researchers must take help of the unconventional sources. According to the *Annales* historians' travelers accounts, custom excise records, diaries, dictionaries,

encyclopedias, lexica, biographies, folklore and poems form an important source of dietary habits of the community. Visual materials like paintings, drawings are also suggested as sources for the study of food. Let us look at how unconventional sources can be interpreted:

A. Literature

Literature is not just a creative endeavor; it is also a reflection of contemporary society, as such literature forms an important source to study food history and culture. Many facets of social life which are not mentioned in archival sources are mirrored in literature. Contemporary literature can give us some idea of food items enjoyed by the people. Systematic study of literature would help a researcher to place ingredients as well as various food items in proper chronological perspective and helps scholars to trace foreign and other influences on food habits. *Vedas, Dharmashastras, Puranas, and Epics* enable us to form an idea about the food habits of ancient Indian society. Some of the Puranas and Smritis throw light on rules and regulations regarding inter dining and taboos. Puranas provided detailed descriptions of sumptuous food served at the time of sacrifices performed by the kings. It is true that that the main purpose of these texts is not to document the gastronomic practices of the people and one must use them with some caution, no researchers of food history can afford to neglect the vast material provided by these unconventional sources of the history of food. Other forms of literature such as memoirs, poetry, Bhakti literature are also important for understanding food tradition. The memoirs like *Baburnama, Ain - i - Akbari, Jahangirnama, Shahjahannama* are all valuable sources to the study of Mughal cuisine. In these sources, the references of food are not merely 'incidental' but occupy a prominent position in the narrative. Also, very interesting information about eating habits comes from poetry. For example, among the Marathi poetry *Swayamvar Kavya* or nuptial poetry describing the wedding of *Rukmini, Seeta* and *Damyanti* are gold mines of gastronomic information. Stories of *Swayamvar* offered these poets the opportunity to give a voluminous description of the various ceremonies, rituals, ornaments, and food. Especially description of *Rukhawati* and wedding feast refers to various types of fruits, vegetables and food items enjoyed by the people (Mukadam, 2013). A profusion of food imagery is a striking feature of Bhakti literature (Aklujkar, 1993). Although it is religious in nature, many times saint poets use food items as a metaphor to put across their views. Long detailed descriptions of a feast; lists of distinguished dinner guests; poetic menu cards with mouth-watering delicacies; accounts of divine and mortal serving squads; and certificates of satisfaction given by the assembled guests are employed at every imaginable context of worship or bhakti. Similarly, other issues related to food such as the concept of *Bhiksha* (the begged alms) for which Marathi Sant Ramadasa (1608 – 1681 CE) devotes a

whole chapter of treatises in *Dasabodha* are worthy of note.

B. Medical Treatises

Medical treatises are a treasure trove for the understanding medical approach towards food. In India, food and health are two sides of the same coin. Ayurveda not only discusses various methods of diagnosis and medicines but also describes the characteristic of food suitable to people belonging to different age groups as well as regions. These treatises insist that the balance between three bodily humors i.e., *Kapha*, *Vata*, and *Pitha* is to be maintained through food. They are a dietary guide whose main purpose was to show the reader the correct properties of the ingredients and cooked dishes that would not disturb their bodily functions. They provide us the therapeutic value of grains, pulses, vegetables, etc. Sometimes we found recipes or methods of cooking in the medical text. Charak Samhita and Sushruta Samhita give a list of articles that are conducive to health and those which are unsuitable for different people. However, as these works are free from any religious or communal bias it is important to throw light on the vegetarian and non-vegetarian food habits of the people.

C. Cookbooks

For the study of the cuisine of any region or community, cookbook form a less conventional but most important source material. A cookbook is a manuscript or printed book that contains instructions for preparing food. That is, it contains recipes and may well contain many other kinds of information (Wheaton, 2014). Cookbooks provide an opportunity for researchers to trace continuity and change in food history and culture. A comparative study of cookbooks from different periods tells us how particular food items, their names, ingredients, cooking techniques, and recipes have changed over time. Old cookbooks hint at how families actually lived—the equipment available to them, the ingredients they favored—and what they valued, be it frugality or lavishness. They present a kind of living history, giving us insight into dietary practices and beliefs of our ancestors, regional and economic differences in diet, gender roles, and the development of culinary literature and vocabulary.

Regional cookbooks as well cookbooks written by various communities and races are a valuable source to understand their food culture, dietary approach, their specific cooking technique, the influence of various political-economic-cultural factors on their cuisine, special dishes cooked on the special religious occasion (Appadurai, 1988). Many recent critical works on gender studies have used cookbooks. By focusing on cookbooks, researchers learn many things about gender roles (Neuhaus, 1999). Cookbooks provide alternative ways for women to assert their individuality, especially in a patriarchal society that uses every possible means to suppress their voices. Looking beyond the recipes one can detect how women have been using cookbooks to express their desires, assert their individuality, educate themselves and structure their lives.

In addition to these cookbooks, the food columns in newspapers and magazines, their special culinary issues, recipes mentioned on the backside of the calendar, as well as the calendar devoted solely to recipes are useful for food researchers to understand the taste of the society. The bibliography mentioned in the cookbook helped researchers to expand their avenues for study in this field.

D. Utensils and Cooking Equipment

In the various stages of development of human evolution man used his intellectual prowess to design the utensils in different shapes for storing water, food grains, cooking food, etc. Numerous Indian utensils were given the shapes of natural objects. Gourds were the inspiration for lotas and *chombus*, fluted pumpkins for numerous rounded base heavy water, and cooking pots. The shapes of the coconut, mango, lotus flower, and banana leaf were transferred to vessels made of clay, stone, leather, and metal (Achaya, 2002). Added kitchen paraphernalia like the *chulli* (*chulah*), the spit or *Shula*, *Pata-Varvanta* or *sil-batta* (flat grinding stone), curd churner, *bharjanapatra* (*kadhai*), *Thava*, *Parat*, etc. are prominently used from the ancient period to till. Of course, there are specifically regional utensils. Punjab has the distinctive tandoori baking oven, Maharashtra has Modak steamer, Puran Yantra. Also, Kashmir with Central Asian affiliations, like the large *traem* with its cover, the *sarposh* (on which *Wazwan* food cooked by professionals is served), the *khandakari* (*samovar*) used for brewing the aromatic *kahwah* tea, and certain distinctive ladles used in cooking and serving (Achaya, 1998). Even community wise we find variation in the utensils like the Muslims preferred copper vessels for cooking whereas Hindus preferred brass vessels. Hence, the systematic study of utensils will throw light on various aspects of the food culture of a region and community.

However, these utensils are not only cooking equipment they also have socio-cultural significance. Once upon a time, the wealth of a family was counted on the utensils they have in the kitchen. Names and dates mentioned on the utensils, memories, and stories related to them provide valuable information about a family and community. Who gave a vessel to someone as a gift? On what occasion did they come into the kitchen? Did they get it at the wedding or in the naming ceremony? The answers to these questions can also throw light on the history of family and relationships. Ayurveda and the utensils used for cooking are also closely related. According to Ayurveda the nature and effect of cooked food on the human body depend on the types of metal that is used for cooking. Vedic literature, medical treatises as well as culinary texts have given special attention to the utensils used for cooking.

E. Visual Materials

The visual materials such as drawings, paintings, sculptures, menu cards, pamphlets, photographs, videos, and films are the other unconventional ways to get references to contemporary eating styles, meal presentations, placing of the meals, and dining etiquettes. Paintings or pictures depicted in medieval manuscripts can tell us what kind of food was eaten by different social classes, methods of cooking, and serving. Sultan Ghiyat Shah (1469-1500 CE), the ruler of Malwa was a connoisseur of food, music, dance, and art. He ordered his court painters to create an illustrative book compiling recipes of dishes, fine perfumes, and aphrodisiacs which he named *Nimatnama* or The Sultan's Book of Delights (Titley, 2012). The manuscript is illustrated with 50 wonderful miniature paintings in the Indo-Persian style. Each miniature depicts culinary activities being supervised by Sultan Ghiyat Shah, followed by a detailed explanation of the recipe of a dish. So, for understanding the culinary traditions of the royal kitchen, *Nimatnama* is a treasure. As per the Mughal tradition hosting a lavish feast was a part of the gift-giving culture. The sharing and gifting of various food items in a grand manner conveyed the message of friendship, status, and power (Narayan, 2015). And it was highly reflected in Mughal miniature paintings. Hence, a proper understanding of food and drinks in Mughal India - the dining arrangement, the festive atmosphere during the meal, different types of utensils used for serving and eating – Mughal miniature paintings are very good sources.

Since the beginning Cinema has been a great medium of reflection of the social, cultural, economic, and political changes of society. It has an immense potential to project the image of a society in a way that conventional sources never could. Many films give some serious thoughts over the prevailing contemporary issues in society. The Marathi movie '*Gulabjaam*' highlights the nature of authentic Maharashtrian cuisine and various aspects of cooking like shopping for ingredients, cleaning the kitchen and utensils, etc. whereas movies like '*Chocolate*', '*Babette's Feast*' highlighted the correlation between religion and dietary practices. The recent Malayalam movie '*The Great Indian Kitchen*' underscores that the kitchen is a major haunt of the everyday oppression of women. The film creates a notion of gender differences, high patriarchal manifestation from all the angles of the kitchen. Apart from movies food documentaries, cookery shows also play a vital role in documenting the changing food habits of society in the age of globalization.

Advertisement is the most effective tool to attract consumers to buy the product. Through this method sure but subtle change in the consumption pattern of the society was made and the best example of this is the advertisement of tea. In the first half of the twentieth century, tea was consumed primarily by Britishers and the elite class of Indians. It did not become a common habit of all Indians. However, The Indian Tea Market Expansion Board (ITMEB) used tea advertisements in vernacular periodicals to

promotes tea as a healthy, civilized, and modern (not western) beverage. By using slogans like 'The only family drink: Indian tea', 'Indian tea: Anytime, anywhere', 'Come, let us all drink Indian tea' etc. they tried to create tea culture in India (Nijhawan, 2017). During the Second World War, to overcome the problem of food shortage and to discipline citizens in the matter of consumption many nations used the form of advertisements. Pages of various newspapers and magazines especially women's magazines were full of advertisements related to austerity measures regarding food. In 1943 American based Life magazine has used the slogan 'Food Fights for Freedom' in the advertisements along with the concepts of 'Produce and Conserve' and 'Share and Play Fair'. These were intended to encourage citizen-consumers to follow the rationing restrictions placed on food. Even Advertisements offered tips on how to manage food budgets, how to store food to prevent waste (Brasted, 2018).

Along with these, menu cards and pamphlets are important to trace the changing taste of society. In the early days, the list of food items prepared on that day was mentioned on the blackboard along with their prices. Eventually, they were replaced by one or two-pages menu cards. Nowadays four to five pages menu cards are found in ordinary restaurants. A comparative study of the menu cards will show the changes that occurred in the taste of the society, changing demand of the food items, their prices, their quantities. Even, how the demand of the people made restaurants change their menu cards as well as how menu cards made people change their food habits can be studied through it. Even, pamphlets of the kitchen appliances such as refrigerator, microwave oven, food processor, pressure cooker, and food advertisements are useful to trace the changing consumption pattern of the consumer, their preferences, responses, and adaptability to technological development.

F. Folklore

Folklore is also a valuable source for understanding food and dining-related conventions, norms, and practices. In the folk literature, we found many phrases, idioms, proverbs related to utensils, food items, and food habits. Therefore, folklore is being studied all over the world as an important source for interpreting food culture. This study is known as 'Foodways'. Folklorists, Anthropologists, and food historians have been exploring 'what we eat, as well as how and why and under what circumstances we eat' through the study of foodways (Lowitt, 2011).

G. Oral History

As culinary tradition is passed from one generation to another by oral tradition, the method of oral history is also important to study food history. A researcher can interview people to collect oral histories about cultural aspects related to food. Irish Food historian Mairtin Mac Con Iomaire had used the oral history method to explore the Emergence, Development, and Influence of

French Haute Cuisine on Public Dining in Dublin Restaurants (1900–2000) (Mac Con Iomaire, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Food history asserted itself as a radically new form of history-writing as it studied human culture by reexamining the existing marginalized sources. Therefore, an unconventional approach to the identification and analysis of research material was adopted by many food historians. Prof. P.K. Gode, Dr. Om Prakash, Dr. K.T. Achaya, Dr. Mohsina Mukadam have used unconventional sources and multi-disciplinary approaches to conduct comprehensive research on the history of Indian food. Though, unconventional sources are sometimes difficult to interpret due to metaphorical or even personal impressions of the composer. When the same cookbook contains multiple manuscripts, then the information in various copies of the manuscript may be different. Then the researcher must study that manuscript in the context of time and place. However, in spite of their limitations, we cannot overlook their importance as source material for the study of history. It has given new dimension to historical writing. Historians has been using food history to interpret sociological, economic, environmental, colonial, and feminist history. 'History is not only in archives, but the unconventional sources of history can equally and efficiently explore the various aspects of human life, it is shown by food history'.

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