

Food Habits Research : Notes Toward a Culture-and-Communication Approach

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ABSTRACT Viewing food habits as areas of intersubjective communication, consensual negotiation and pragmatic action the paper attempts to reinterpret food habits in terms of recent anthropological studies. Basing on Habermas's concepts of "Communicative action" and "universal pragmatics" the paper examines food habits as grids of cultural markers and pragmatic action with the help of a case from India.

Food habits attract anthropologists as a subject of study because they are a form of repetitive social behavior, with (often unconscious) cultural dispositions and communications concerning food handling everyday. We will argue in this essay that as a pattern of social behavior, food habits refer to much more than unconscious inclinations in everyday personal eating. We will view food habits as arenas of intersubjective communication, consensual negotiation, and pragmatic action. We will begin by situating and reinterpreting food habits in terms of recent anthropological studies. Next, gaining from Jurgen Habermas's helpful formulations of "communicative action" and "universal pragmatics," we will examine food habits as "grids" of cultural markers and pragmatic action, especially with the help of a case study from India. In conclusion we will recapitulate some communicational characteristics of food habits, with implications for food and nutrition research programs.

Not Mere Habits

Popularly in the West, food habits imply routine eating by individuals, involving minimum conscious attention. Such a conception is of limited use in cross-cultural food research because food in most societies

actually demands people's constant attention during its acquisition, storage, preparation and eating. Over time, the changing forces of ecology, economy and society often keep the food supply so uneven that people can seldom take food availability for granted. Even technological societies must invest a lot of conscious efforts and organization to produce, market and manage food for their populations.² In anthropological terms, food habits and habitude are always a significant part of the socio-cultural norms and everyday life conditions of people. One's gastronomic habits are enmeshed with enduring cultural ideals and principles on the one hand, and everyday practical strategies of interpersonal communication and negotiation, on the other.

In such a view food habits are not negative excrescences of repetitive (rather mechanical) behavior that need to be periodically broken up by expert-engineered external interventions. Instead, they are about "social uses of food," to employ a phrase of Mary Douglas (1984: 7-18). Social food use for us represents a host of strategies of cultural communication and practical action for acquiring and managing food in socially meaningful (and personally satisfactory) ways.

Several previous anthropological studies help us acquire such a point of departure. For

example, when Margaret Mead conducted a survey of food habits research during and after the second World War (see Mead, 1946, 1964, 1970), she argued for recognizing the full cultural grounding the human food and nutrition behaviors reflect. Alongside Mead's effort, we should recall the pioneering work of Audrey Richards (1932; 1939) on interrelationships between food and work patterns.³ More recently, as already alluded, Mary Douglas (1984) found the real content of such habits to be conjunctions of social events, social relationships and social meanings. Translated for our exercise, these habits constitute crucial clusters of comprehensive cultural communication for securing one's physical and social survival under changing material and practical conditions. In one's eating habits the issues of practice and practical feasibility intersect with cultural norms and their changing markers and meanings (including notions of personal satisfaction).

Processually, we must treat food habits as socially changing nexuses or grids of significant cultural markers and their communication by devising appropriate consensual strategies for practical action. This formulation could be as useful for strongly cohesive societies as for those with weak social solidarity (to use Mary Douglas's language). For example, if cohesive societies tend to produce enduring food habits, they should also tell us how they adapt for overcoming practical conflicts and constraints in food availability. Societies with weak cohesion, on the other hand, should secure sufficiently stable consensual action. We thus treat food habits as comprehensive structures of "communicative action" across widely different societies for how people *mean, communicate and act* as they handle food. It also means to know how—by evolving a suitable cultural language—people forge viable and effective interrelationships among their cultural ideals, changing ecological surroundings, material constraints, consensual group choices, and personal preferences.

Finally, in our scheme, whether a society is developed or underdeveloped, its food habits fundamentally communicate about a wide range of social markers and pragmatic constraints in food handling, with appropriate structures of cultural expression, communication, negotiation, and communicative action.⁴ Food habits in even a simple society is a product of neither mere individual idiosyncracies nor only of the moral or material determinism, but rather a product of repeated cultural *negotiations* and pragmatic constraints across such considerations.

Cultural Communication and Pragmatics

Formulated this way, food habits are found to share several concerns and characteristics which Jurgen Habermas addresses within his analysis of "universal pragmatics" (1974, 1979). This is neither unexpected nor far fetched because human food is so deeply coded with multiple meanings, some universal and others contextual, that it acquires many important properties of comprehensive and complex human communication. Anthropology of food shows us how human foods readily become carriers of such social messages as respect and insult, intimacy and distance, promise and performance, and command and obedience (Douglas, 1984; Khare and Rao, 1986). Discrepancies between saying and doing (or promise and performance) are similarly scored by food situations, resulting into finely graded social ranks and an appropriate transactional language (Marriott, 1968). For good sociological reasons, therefore, one's habitual food exchanges must depend on one's acquired competence in communicative action, establishing multiple relations between food (an objective commodity) and "food" (a moral and symbolic construct grasped and expressed by appropriate speech-like "food-acts"; see below). Food habits, so interpreted, yield us messages and inclinations helpful in negotiating the gaps between ideology and practice, and language and objects. Such bridges

constitute the content out of which people fashion their cultural pragmatics, reflecting most often how they actually reconcile the contextually prudent with the culturally given and the socially consensual.

With such a close interdependence between language and food, and food and communicative action, we discover, once we closely examine a food category like "breakfast" or "lunch," that they remain surrounded by what we have called "food acts." These express people's

(a) general cultural propositions and intelligibility,

(b) performative components,

(c) personal intentions and preferences, and

(d) sincerity and satisfaction.

Food acts this way lead us to what Habermas calls "validity claims" for speech acts. If a culture has a meal category like "breakfast," it produces a distinct configuration of communicative actions signifying to us its intelligible definition, accompanied by appropriate food content, intentions, actions, preferences, and a sense of what is or is not the current cultural consensus on a meal like breakfast. Such configurations essentially structure themselves like speech acts, fulfilling the above four criteria. For example, the American breakfast these days retains "orange juice" and "cereals" as those crucial food items that award breakfast its general cultural intelligibility. Food portions, timing, and additions or deletions in the basic breakfast menu illustrate for us the place breakfast has for the expression of personal preferences and commensurate communicative actions.

Such a term as an "American" or "Continental breakfast" also informs us of a more basic cultural fact: these cultures have "breakfast" as a basic meal category, since each of them has a culturally distinct internal intelligible structure of food constituents. The American version may usually contain orange juice, toast, cereals, butter, jelly, and coffee or tea, accompanied by a corresponding sequence of "food acts" that reflect the performative

components, personal intentions and preferences, and the consensual cultural recognition that what one ate was indeed a "breakfast."⁵ As a socially credible practice, a food event like breakfast therefore has to satisfy the culturally agreed criteria on the one hand, and their contextual (*i.e.* historical, social, and ethnic) modifications, on the other. Since human societies place strong emphasis on the internal cultural intelligibility of discrete constituent food items, their structures within a meal, and of associated food handling activities, we can see why food habits have to be constantly about shared cultural communication and consensus within everyday life. When examined on the analogy of speech-acts [now directly recalling Searle's (1969) work in linguistics], food habits also carry communications of another order: These concern messages about changing ecological, economic, and material historical conditions⁶. These habits contain food-acts which

(a) "describe" pragmatic conditions of food scarcity or abundance,

(b) "command" interpersonal behavioral patterns for appropriate alteration of meals and meal sequences,

(c) "question" what is ecologically and culturally infeasible, and economically unaffordable, and, in return,

(d) "promise" cultural satisfaction and authenticity to people about their food choices and food acts.

Neither socially static nor insulated from forces of ecology, economics and history, such food acts show how at a more general level they are not only about a grid of communicative action but also address the issue of what Habermas calls "communicative competence."

To illustrate this concept within food habits research, let us return to our example of breakfast. As a meal category it demands that its speakers share a series of cultural notions of meal patterning and eating, and associated pragmatic competence in communicating such knowledge to others. All those wanting to have

knowledge to others. All those wanting to have breakfast must have a minimal notion of what a breakfast meal is (or is supposed to be), with the ability to make basic distinctions between applicable food categories, and to relate to, and communicate about, appropriate menu structures on the one hand, and to share performance, deictic expressions, and intentions with other breakfast eaters, on the other.

Accordingly, communicating about breakfast—a culture-specific meal, a food event and a food habit—demands that there be certain agreement among the speakers about “morning foods” and their sequencing within the meal, and time spacing *vis a vis* the other meals of the day. Now such an “agreement” could be either culturally inherited (and thus genuine) or emulative (and thus approximate)⁷. Though communicative competence concerns both situations, only the first one will spontaneously produce shared food categories, performance, speech-acts, and intentions. It will have minimal internal cultural constraints. The second situation will demand conscious translation of intercultural gaps and constraints from the speaker as well as the listener, to reach the desired minimum intelligibility.

Thus, when studying breakfast as a meal category and a food habit spread across cultures, we could reach either an indigenous or acquired (analogic) understanding of it, depending on whether such a category has been traditionally within a culture or not. But either way breakfast remains a culturally valid piece of knowledge, and it rests on recognizable degrees of communicative competence. We concern ourselves with this range. The question whether there is (or should be) a “universally valid” single definition of breakfast, does not interest us that much. Our anthropological exercise on food habits rests on such shared intelligibility and relative communicability across cultures. These are necessary and sufficient grounds for us to examine the communicative properties of food habits in a more specific context—the case of the Indian mother-in-law.

Communicative Contexts and Agents : The Indian Case

Sociologically, most food habits are normally formed, nurtured, modified, and transmitted within one's household. People exchange varied messages about them within their households, retaining those habits that they cherish and wish to pass on to the next generation, and questioning or modifying those outmoded or unsuitable for changing social conditions. Though household is the most crucial hub for socialization and learning, food habits are also differentiated there along caste and class lines on the one hand, and along age, sex, and generation, on the other. Inter-subjective communication is developed over time between and among influential relatives (*e.g.* parents, family elders, mothers-in-law, and uncles) for evaluating family's prevailing food habits and their suitability within prevailing circumstances.

In India, for example, kin and caste groups regularly characterize and comment on each other's food habits. They make stereotypical as well as contextual comments as a matter of normal social discourse. In general, for instance, Brahmans are known to like sweets in excess, while Ksatriyas relish spicy, heavy and hot foods. Brahmans (correspondingly in the domain of speech-acts) must restrain harsh words, while Ksatriyas must employ them to rule. Across caste, on the other hand, women are found to favor sour and piquant foods, tending palate (and analogously gossip). The Vaisyas, as traders, balance these two tendencies much the same way as they must “weigh their speech” to avoid loss and maximize profits within business transactions. The lowest and the least powerful, the Sudras, are left with maximum freedom in food habits and speech. They are treated “just like children by the traditional society, requiring supervision and control” (the remark of a low-caste informant in Lucknow in 1980).⁸

Besides caste and region, food habits in India communicate a cultural ideology as well

as a practical management of food along age and sex differences⁵. Husband and wife, and sons and daughters display different attitudes and criteria toward eating and feeding. The aged and the young similarly must translate their physical differences and demands into clearly distinguishable food preferences. If the young seeks strength and vigor in his food, the aged looks for agreeability and disease-preventing or curing properties in his. Food habits are not only attentive to such facts of life but they employ them as a part of the strategies of communication for effecting desirable changes in family habits. Food habits are often shaped as well as modified within such interpersonal contexts and the kith-and-kin influence. Local medical practitioners, whether Ayurvedic or allopathic, know this property of communicative action so well that they instruct the relatives of the patient (rather than the patient himself) to ensure that the patient follows his special dietary instructions. Given the overpowering influence of such social communicational strategies in a country like India, food habit research should gain most from systematic ethnographic descriptions and analyses of who influences who when food practices are concerned. We should also be able to examine this way how the "life" of a food habit ties in with influential relatives and the intergenerational changes they initiate within domestic life. For an appropriate ethnography of such changes, an ethnographer should start with a study of people's own markers and classifiers of speech-cum-food acts, including those identified by age, gender, social rank, and special occasion. Next, each such marker must be studied as platform for communicative action, where relatives evaluate the habitual behavior and devise a strategy to modify it to meet the changing practical requirements, on the one hand, and the retention of cherished cultural norms and ideals, on the other. Within the same context one needs to recognize that in India, food actions of adults, superiors, and "big men" directly influence

those of children, inferiors, and "little men." High caste, old male adults in India routinely carry maximum authority and influence, while young women and children, the minimum.

The elders and the respected easily show how they initiate changes in food habits by selecting an appropriate *occasion* for launching and legitimating new strategies of communicative action. My previous work on the Hindu food system helped me study such questions to some extent (Khare, 1976a, 1976b; Khare and Rao, 1986). I found, for example, that food habits changed mainly in *two* way ways—first by setting one's personal example within the family, and second (more dramatically) with the help of rites of passage and special life events. The Hindus, not unlike others, tend to open themselves to greater flexibility and change (*i.e.* modification or transformation) after every major life cycle event—birth, adolescence, marriage, occupational changes, migration, old age, and death. It is also on these occasions that the crucial "grids" of communicative action and communicative competence surface within one's life for debating change *vis a vis* continuity. These grids are usually launched and managed by one's parents, influential relatives, trusted advisors, and friends. Such a grid carries within it all the essential ingredients of effective "speech-acts":

trust,
influence,
promise,
criticism, and
command.

Certain relatives (*e.g.* the Indian mother-in-law) work as major communicators around the domestic hearth; they exemplify all of the above properties of a speech act. They command trust by age and personal example, influence other family members by preserving cogent message-making and consensus, and criticize and command as and when the traditional events (*e.g.* festivals, ceremonies, and crucial rites of passage) justify. Such relatives

increase their influence and promise by ensuring their concern for feeding "the household" in a way that would enhance positive self and group identity of family members, and award cultural continuity and authenticity to their own initiatives.

Though the scope of this paper does not allow me to trace in systematic detail the communicative actions of such networks or grids, I must comment on how directly relevant these are to such dyadic Indian relationships as husband and wife, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Both dyads trade influence, by context, for modifying food acts, but generally within a given order of precedence—husband over wife and mother-in-law over daughter-in-law. Both mother and son direct their influence, authority, and criticism toward the new bride. They demand her cooperation for observance of their family food norms and practices. They normally dissuade her from introducing her natal food habits during the first several years after marriage. During this period, instead, she must adopt the ways and habits of her husband's family. Such a command-obedience relationship between a mother-in-law and a bride is justified for continuation of the bridegroom's caste identity and family culinary traditions. However, once watched over the years, women gain increasing influence on domestic gastronomy, and they ultimately become custodians and trainers of men's everyday food preferences and food habits. Once a mother, the same novice bride becomes the manager of domestic hearth. With consultation and consensus of other older ladies, she carefully oversees what endures as the family culinary tradition. Under crises, however, she becomes the benign modifier of such traditional norms.

Traditional India's mother-in-law is able to do so much within the household because she develops unique communicative competence when matters of food, cooking and feeding are concerned for the members of the household. She becomes the hub of multi-

channel communication grid on feeding and eating habits within the Indian household. Let us examine her case a little more to see how she demonstrates different characteristics of "communicative action or interaction" and "communicative competence." Here, once again, we take after Habermas's concepts for showing how issues of practical interests and cultural norms proceed in each other's terms (see 1974, 1979)¹⁰

Communicative Action and Performance

The communicative competence of Indian mother-in-law should be ethnographically studied over time to learn how she slowly develops her ability and authority (as she graduates from being a bride into a mother of a married son) to engage in communicative action by employing various properties of "speech acts." She is, by norm, supposed to be a careful watcher and commentator of household members' food preferences and habits, and of any changes overlooked in them by others. By controlling and managing the domestic hearth and its activities, including meal preparations and everyday feeding, she masters the "pragmatic universals" of food events. She masters what Habermas's communication theory calls "performatives" in terms of prevailing food taboos, caste norms, and personal habits and preferences of individual family members (*i.e.* from what is traditionally eaten [norms] to what is culturally permissible [alternative idioms] and practically feasible [pragmatics]). Her communicative and performative competence arises out of her knowledge and concern for each family member's personal preferences, habitual biases, and situational attitudes toward specific food preparations, and food events. Other family members also eventually learn to depend on, and emulate her performative competence.

Though some ethnographies generally support the above summary of the role of Indian mother-in-law in domestic food culture (Khare, 1976a), we need a systematic study of the

communication grids she masters, modifies and introduces as she goes through her different life phases of wifehood and motherhood, particularly by taking charge of domestic food events, daily feeding and eating, and habitual (as well as idiosyncratic) culinary styles and dietary preferences. Only such evidence will help prove that her performative expressions and communications are neither passive nor sporadic and marginal even within a patrilineal and hierarchical society like India. My data show that a mother-in-law actively contributes to all the four classes of Habermas's speech-acts:

constatives,
regulatives,
representatives,
and communicatives.

(For an accessible summary and discussion of these four theoretical formulations, see Thompson, 1982: 116-133, p. 123). Let us see briefly how does she do so.

When a mother-in-law expresses herself to convey family food traditions to her son's bride, she makes food norms and food habits intelligible to the bride by combining and recombining the above four modes of communication: When she explains the family norm of, say, vegetarianism, she imparts knowledge about a family-accepted food taboo as well as a household food habit. She handles "constatives" with traditional authority, accompanied by socially effective strategies of communication (which customarily means that she must regard the bride "like her own daughter" for training). Her effective communication also demands that she suitably explicate the peculiar gastronomic complexities of the family and the clan to the bride. Thus, a mother-in-law may simultaneously have to convey that the family, because of its particular (e.g. the *shakta*—goddess worshipping) sectarian tradition, allows meat to be ritually prepared and offered to the deity on certain festivals during the year. Still communicating a constative, she must do so in unambiguous practical

terms (e.g. see Khare, 1966). Additionally, she may announce that she herself does *not* want to cook the ritual meat any more on such occasions. It means that the bride should not only do so alone but that she cannot expect any help from her. By doing so, the mother-in-law exemplifies a "representative" act; it secures a place for her personal dietary feelings and preferences "in old age"¹¹.

The mother-in-law thus renders a family food norm meaningful from both ends—the familial norm of ritual meat offering and the wider social preference for vegetarianism. She becomes convincing only by giving her own example of how she, as a bride, also had to take charge of the ritual meat cooking so many years ago. What in theory seems to be an unmanageable conflict, turns out to be a matter of intergenerational pragmatics. The bride is told how she could manage the religious requirement of meat-eating and the personal preference for vegetarianism. Such pragmatic "representatives" selectively express and conceal the bride's feelings toward the food norms of her husband's family¹². The overall purpose of such "communicatives" is to ensure that the daughter-in-law maintains her husband's distinct culinary norms *alongside* personal preferences¹³.

Further, as Habermas's (1979) theory of universal pragmatics postulates, implicated by constatives and representatives are the "regulatives," which establish the *range* of intelligibility and legitimacy of a norm by distinguishing between prohibitions, permissible transgressions, and fading sanctions within the life of the household. Domestic food norms and habits in India invariably recognize a zone of "appropriate" behavior, allowing room for individual desires, preferences and even certain deviations. A vegetarian family may thus allow some of its members to eat meat at feasts and "special occasions," but not daily. Such "occasional" eating of meat (of specified animals and in specified ways) may be often condoned

as falling within the bounds of vegetarianism of contemporary India.¹⁴

More than Eating Habits

The Indian mother-in-law and her unique communicative—particularly regulative competence also help us realize that food habits should *not* be equated to “eating habits” of individuals. Instead, food habits should refer to that whole range of individual and family food behavior that begins with domestic food acquisition and ends with the digestion of what is eaten. A mother-in-law concerns herself with food habits that pertain to the entire domain of domestic food handling. For instance, in a case different than the preceding, if she has to guard her family’s *strict* adherence to vegetarianism, she has to exclude all potential contact with meat right from the market place, where the family’s provisions are bought. Her training in the rules of ritual purity and pollution (an aspect well discussed in recent anthropological writings on India) amply prepares her to secure concordance between regulative expressions and communicative actions. She consistently distinguishes, evaluates, and prohibits unwanted foods and food contacts throughout—from buying, processing, storage, cooking, feeding, eating, and left-overs to waste disposal.

Though the scope of this paper does not allow elaboration of many other domains that should be included within food-habits research, I must mention that the mother-in-law also influences the habits of family members for acquiring cooked foods (snacks, drinks, and delicacies) from street vendors, vegetables from grocers, and the separation of safe and healthy foods from those unsafe and unhealthy. As a guardian of the family dietary culture, it is she who most often oversees how foods-as-medicine should work according to a family member’s age, sex, kinship position, and personal inclinations (which includes one’s specific configuration of Ayurvedic humors [*dosas*] and innate dispositions [*gunas*]; see note 9).

Not unlike the domains of food acquisition and consumption, food distribution issues are also subject to appropriate “habitual thinking and behavior.” In my fieldwork on north Indian households (1980, 1988), for example, “habitual thinking” also concerned people’s sense of the right to food, equity, fair play, and individual food entitlement, again by age, sex, and kinship position (for a general introduction to the subject, see Sen, 1981; Alston and Tomasevski, 1984). However, appropriate research strategies are needed here to distinguish between the reflective, communicative, and the “unsaid” ends of “habitual behavior,” so that one could examine the role of people’s often *implicit* cultural communication on the crucial issues of equity and social justice. The Indian case is again significant because its hierarchy, by expressing inequalities, is often considered to foster inherent injustices.

Once we thus focus on such a specific locus of communicative action within households, we are able to see how food habits cannot be adequately treated by narrow psychological markers and dividers, especially if we artificially dichotomize conscious from unconscious, objective from subjective, and theoretical from practical concerns. Food habit is a thoroughly holistic notion, supported by commensurate communicative strategies of learning, communication and training from one generation to the next. As a matter of universal pragmatic interest, food habits involve arenas of significant and pervasive intersubjective communication. And as the people’s communicative action modifies, so does the configuration of food habits (whether it is about the constitution of breakfast in the West or of vegetarianism in India).

Food habits are neither unchanging nor unchangeable. Their life is tied to the cultural norms and to the life-cycle changes within a family. If such cycles are not free of internal value conflicts, they also are not free of special “openings” for greater communication and flexibility. These particularly tend to increase

with ecological, economic and social changes (or upheavals) within a society. And such changes increase the demand that erstwhile food habits either remain multichannel grids of effective communication or adapt to the changing circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Some of the general imports of our discussion of food habits as grids of communicative action are : (a) Though a particular culture may emphasize a particular configuration of speech-cum-food-act over others (*e.g.* regulatives over representatives and communicatives in traditional India), all the four characteristics are necessary for considering food and eating habits and their "universal [cultural] pragmatics." (b) Food habits, as approached here, are seldom only about personal gastronomic behavior; they represent grids of comprehensive social regulations as well as interpersonal communications for upholding the crucial criteria of cultural intelligibility and pragmatic management. (c) Food habits, not unlike other socio-cultural formations, resort to such a "language" which is at once general and particular, and which renders the walls porous between objective (*i.e.* the material) and subjective (ideal, social and personal) worlds, and theoretical, practical and policy research concerns¹⁵. (d) The new food habits *research*, accordingly, must be prepared to explore more fully the linkages which exist between food as a cultural construction and food as a comprehensive language of social communication, and food habits as clusters of food-acts and food-acts as grids of people's communicative action and pragmatics.

As I recapitulate the above points of departure for a more comprehensive proposal for food habits research, I note that my dependence on Jurgen Habermas's theory of universal pragmatics also undergoes modification. As some of his critics have noted, and as he himself has remarked, his formal universal pragmatics

"so far neglect the dimension of time and thus do not take into account of phenomenon having to do with linguistic creativity, and with creative ways of dealing with language" (Habermas, 1982: 272). My anthropological approach to food habits, on the contrary, heavily relies on sociocultural (time-bound) contexts and on people's recognized creativity in linking food to language, and communicative practices to practical requirements on everyday basis. However, if I find Habermas on such occasions constructive, his basic premises of, and major perspectives on "universal pragmatics" still provide a congenial paradigm for further explorations by critical anthropology.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally written as a talk given during the International Conference on "Changing Food Policies and Habits in Africa: Human and Social Science aspects," sponsored by the International Social Science Council and the Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies of UNESCO, held in Dakar, Senegal, from September 28-October 2, 1987. Aspects of this paper were also presented during the Indian Science Congress, 1988, held at the University of Pune, India. For comments and suggestions during the conference and afterwards, I am grateful to several colleagues from the conference and the congress, but in particular to Dr. Ulrika von Haumeder of UNESCO, and Dr. Christine Wilson, an American nutritional anthropologist. However, I alone am responsible for the final version.

2. One could argue that automatic food availability is only a myth, started to establish a distance between "advanced" and poor societies, especially after the second World War, when food production technology and social psychological security (born out of economic power) converged to liberate most Americans from the threats of hunger. Similarly, food habits of other peoples appeared as rote behavior born out of ignorance, while in fact such habits stood for time-tested gastronomic customs and practices that adapted to fluctuations in food availability for ecological, economic, political, or cultural reasons. As will be evident later, I use the term "food habit" differently, to underscore a comparable language of cultural communication and practical action across widely different cultures and conditions.

3. A systematic bibliographic overview of the food-habits research is now in order, to determine how, in different disciplines, this subject is approached and what are some of the major points of departure. Anthropologists, it seems, may have defined food habits with different

conceptual assumptions, at different times, essentially according to prevailing theories, whether structural-functional (Mead, 1964), symbolic and hermeneutic (Douglas, 1984; Sahlins, 1978) or cultural materialist (Harris, 1985).

For a recent review of food habits research and its wide ranging relevance, especially in nutrition studies in Europe, see Fischler and Garine (1987: 52-68).

4. The incompletely attended issue continues to be the same as before: Food habits of non-Western societies tend to be seen with a certain cultural bias, arising out of assumed ignorance and lack of knowledge. It often deprives them of their everyday agility in producing consensual communication and making rational practical decisions. Intensive anthropological studies are needed on people's communication and decision-making in this area, to clear up the issue.

5. For an historical account of changes in American breakfast, in comparison (or in relation) to that European, see Levenstein (1988: 15-17, 62, 166). American breakfast was large and it included cooked meats in the 1880s and 1890s. By the 1920s, the breakfast highlighted citrus fruits, along with dried cereals, eggs, and toast.

6. Though it is to stretch the linguistic analogy, I find the works of Austin (1976) and Searle (1969) useful in extending the significative powers of food and food habits from cultural to material conditions. At the most rudimentary level, the analogy helps me underscore that food habits are not idiosyncratic actions but a multichannel grid of communicative actions, reached by people by intracultural negotiations and trials and errors over a period of time.

7. India of the nineteenth and early twentieth century may provide us with varieties of emulated Western-style breakfasts. The English educated Indian not only tried to create a time and place for Western breakfast by introducing himself and his family to appropriate food items (e.g. toasts, butter, and tea) but he wanted to *feel* the same sense of personal and group vanity that he thought the British felt in having such a meal. For glimpses of such a sense of vanity in colonial India, from both Indian and British sides, see Chaudhuri 1976; Allen 1976.

8. Such information attracted British administrators of the last century and they wrote about these "peculiarities" in their "reports" and journals (see Khare and Rao, 1986). Food habits varied widely across regions and their ecological conditions. Thus fish for the Bengali, coconut for the Tamil, and wheat for the Punjabi are the well known "food markers" that high and low caste groups may incorporate within their food habits. However, at the next level, castes may distinguish themselves by favoring particular preparations or uses of such food markers.

9. Though the scope of this paper does not allow me to expand on the Hindu cultural ideology on habits and habitude, we should note that the Hindu works with a range of *dispositions* of body and self. Roughly, configurations of three Ayurvedic humors (*dosas*—phlegm, bile and wind) combine with three innate dispositions or "strands" (*gunas*—lucidity, passion and dark inertia) within

a Hindu (male or female) to produce a whole range of individual "natural" (in Hindi *prakritik* or *kudrati*) predispositions throughout his life. These also get expressed in a person's particular taste for sweet, sour, astringent, and intoxicating foods, and for dispositions toward "hot" and "cold" foods in different parts of the year. Though a Hindu's food habits are structured by such innate tendencies, they remain open to change by different external forces encountered in life. One important step for affecting change is to recognize one's innate dispositions, so that corrective steps could be taken.

10. It should be obvious by now that I have consistently employed Habermas's concepts in this paper essentially as instigators of analogic analysis and interpretation of food habits. I hope this strategy is capable of illustrating how several overlapping discourses proceed along cultural norms, intersubjective communication, and practical interests, illustrating a central contribution of Habermas's work and its critics (e.g. see Thompson and Held, 1982).

11. Among the Kanya-Kubja Brahmins, who exemplify the situation, mothers-in-law regain their personal (natal family's) preferences by remarking that they had done their family "duty" of cooking meat offering for the past so many years, and now it was the turn of the new bride. Looked one way, such a step is a part of the intergenerational socialization; another way, the mother-in-law "represents" her personal value preference for the strict vegetarianism of her father's family. And she regains it *without* compromising her husband's family values.

12. Effective communication in such a case demands that the mother-in-law reveal her personal likes and dislikes of the family's food habits to the bride only gradually, and only in such a way that her authority remains intact.

13. The example should illustrate how I interpret Habermas's notion of communicative action, to enable one to deal simultaneously with issues of conception, value and action. The Indian mother-in-law represents to me such a persuasive communication grid that no food habit can remain opaque while through it.

14. Though this may be, in paradigm, similar to what Western books on food and nutrition label as different modifications of vegetarianism (depending on whether one includes dairy products, eggs, sea foods, onions and garlic, or fleshy vegetables), social communication and negotiation are at the heart of such intergenerational compacts in today's India. Family negotiations in such matters start casually, though they retain the potential of eventually altering the long-held norms of one's caste and lineage. For comparative, historically changing evaluations of vegetarianism in America, see Jones, 1981; Levenstein, 1988: 92.

15. Accordingly, some pointers for "applied" research on food habits should not be out of context. This is particularly appropriate when the conventional food habits research is increasingly less rewarding and we need a perspective that would combine theory and policy issues with those of description and communication. Our culture and communication approach should help us move towards

such a goal with such specific steps as devising more effective, grass-root strategies for improving people's nutrition education and meal modification by employing people's own strategies of effective communication and active participation on everyday basis. Whether the issue is food sufficiency or nutrition improvement or food safety (Khare, 1988), people invariably depend on their deeply ingrained cultural values and on their communicative (culturally patterned) biases for effecting the needed change. When cultural biases in communication are concerned, we should remember that experts themselves are not above such biases, and that they bring them from their own social surroundings and historical conflicts (Khare, 1987).

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