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Culinary Capital as Female Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Select Indian Tribal Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Food has its own language and a system of communication. Every household has its unique way of preserving and maintaining its culinary capital and food culture, thus holding a unique language and heritage of the kitchen. Therefore, this unique language also helps establish and sustain gender and power relationships in the family and society. Thus, food helps in understanding the culture and history of a family, community, class or caste. However, the space in and of the kitchen is not just a space to own and control by women but also a space for camaraderie, women bonding and empowerment. Reading and critically analysing Indian tribal texts –They Eat Meat! by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Civilising the Tastebuds by Techi Nimi, A Respectable Woman and A Terrible Matriarchy by Easterine Kire through the lens/idea of culinary capital, the present paper highlights how women use food and kitchen as power centres for women empowerment. The concept of culinary capital reads how food and culinary practices serve as the markers of sociocultural and hierarchical distinctions within a culture. This manifests in the preparation, consumption and presentation of food discussed by Tech Nimi in Civilising the Tastebuds while They Eat Meat! Offers resistance by women through the kitchen, A Terrible Matriarchy and A Respectable Woman show women's creativity and intelligence in food preparation. Subverting the power dynamics, a tribal woman transforms the kitchen from a given limited space to a space for exploring her creativity, sisterhood and resistance.

Keywords: Culinary Capital; Culinary Creativity; Resistance and Women Empowerment; Tribal Kitchen Power; Women Camaraderie

INTRODUCTION

Food, an essential and integral part of human existence, is not only something to be consumed but also an important medium to build, form, and sustain relationships between/among families, neighbourhoods, and communities. As foodways help shape the personality of an individual and a community, a close examination of food practices helps in understanding "power relations and conceptions of sex and gender", and as Counihan says, "for every coherent social group has its own unique foodways" (Counihan, 1999, p. 6). Even hierarchies are mediated with the help of food. In the Indian context, food helps distinguish one caste from another and one religion from another. Food is a form of language, "a system of communication, a body of images, protocol of usages, situations and behaviours" (Barthes, 1995, pp. 49-50). Every household has its unique way of preparing and cooking a dish, thus retaining a unique language in its kitchen. Therefore, this unique language also helps establish and sustain gender relationships in the family and society. Counihan (1999) says:

> Class, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. One's place in the social system is revealed by what, how much and with whom one eats.
>
> (p. 8)

This makes food central to an understanding of any culture, as well as the lived and experienced power relations within and outside a culture. India's heterogeneous fabric is reflected in the variety of dishes, cuisines and food items, as every state, community, class, and family has its own unique cuisine. Food in India is not just limited to sustenance; it also acts as a symbol of identity formation, keeping communal values intact, social stratification, sustaining hierarchy and ascribing gender roles. In the sociocultural dimension, food is differentiated on the basis of being sacred and polluted. On the economic level, food is a growing industry. This makes food a constitutive of power structures as it encapsulates religion, history, and social frameworks.

Easterine Kire (2019), an Indian tribal writer in *A Respectable Woman*, talks about the significance of food at the time of funerals in the Indian Ao-Naga tribe. During funerals, when people want to express their sorrow, grief and affection, "they bring you gifts of food" (p. 35). Food is used as a means to express emotions and communicate feelings, even during funerals. "Making food for the family becomes our way of showing them sympathy and a way to partake in their sorrow", highlighting the importance of food in sympathising with the bereaved family in tribal communities (p. 35). In Kire's (2013) *A Terrible Matriarchy*, food is also gifted at the time of the funeral. Whenever there is a funeral, the kith and kin join and pool a lot of food for the bereaved family. The family then again gifts the food back to them. Everyone in the family "worked on giving away some of the food gifts people had brought" (p. 142). This signifies the respect, love and bond the families/ communities share.

Food also helps strengthen gender roles in society as the "production, distribution and symbolism of food"are controlled in society. The power relations in any society are translated into the power of the sexes, which is mediated through food (Counihan & Kaplan, 2005, p. 3). While quoting Adams, Counihan and Kaplan state how a woman is objectified via food: "patriarchal power in Western society is embodied in the practice of eating meat which . . . involves the linked objectification and subordination of animals and women" (Adams, 1990, as cited in Counihan & Kaplan, 2005, p. 4). As men took charge of the public sphere, women were conveniently pushed to the indoors, the domestic sphere. The responsibility of the kitchen and free labour, the patriarchal structure ascribed to women, remain unnoticed. Though food helps in connecting relationships, it is also used as a medium to create gender differences/grids. This usually pushes women to the secondary role vis-à-vis men and the kitchen to the corner of the house. The kitchen generally remains to be a site of subjugation and oppression for women.

In tribal communities, food also plays a significant role in forming the collective consciousness of a community. Apart from forming a distinct identity marker of a group or community, the kitchen also becomes a space for the autonomy of tribal woman where she can master her culinary skills to use her creativity liberally. This gives her power and control over her kitchen and food space. She adds to her inherited culinary capital through which she gets identity and agency within and outside the family. She turns food and the kitchen into sites of female empowerment through camaraderie among women from different social, cultural, ethnic, caste and class coming together to share food, feelings and emotions.

Often, food and the kitchen are seen as a means to suppress women and ascribe them to secondary status. The present paper, through a critical reading of the tribal narratives – Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *They Eat Meat!* (2015), Techi Nimi's *Civilising the Tastebuds* (2023),

Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019) and *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2013) look at food and food practices not as co-terminus with oppression and subjugation of a woman but as a space to express feelings, togetherness and uphold the ethnic identity of a tribal woman. Menon (1995), during her research on women from the Nayar community, holds the view that "women covertly contest and disrupt" the patriarchal hegemonic structures (p. 132). This is done within the private space of the family, where the kitchen is also a private space where women challenge patriarchal notions. So, the kitchen is no longer seen as a stifling setting, and cooking is no longer seen as a mandatory labour done unwillingly by a woman. The paper advances a more nuanced understanding of the culinary capital of a tribal woman through which she asserts her identity and creates her own space. During a study on Nyonya food habits, Fauzi and Ahmad (2022) note that "food and foodways may become a means to reinforce gender roles in Peranakan Chinese women; it can also accord them power in matters related to the household and the family" (p. 114). The same is true for various tribal communities in India, where a tribal woman exercises power via food.

Hamari Jamatia talks about the politics of food in Tripura (India). Wahan mosodeng (pork meat) is a favourite delicacy of the tribals living in Tripura. Jamatias, an indigenous tribe, have sworn off pork meat for generations as a mark of its dedication to the Hindu royal family of Tripura. For Jamatia, food becomes a metaphor for memory, as evident in the children's song that she remembers:

> *Gaain de khoklu cha?*
> *Aata, gaain de khoklu cha?*
> 'Does the artist eat gourd? Brother, does the artist eat gourd?'
> This question could be either answered with
> *Chawo chawo chawo aata,*
> *chawo chawo chawo!*
> 'Yes I eat, I eat, I eat, brother'
> or
> *Chaya chaya chaya aata,*
> *Chaya chaya chaya!*
> 'No, I don't eat, don't eat, don't eat, brother'
>
> (Jamatia, 2023, p. 57)

Here, the word 'Gaain'refers to artists as Jamatias, who "were also celebrated theatre artists" (Jamatia, 2023, p. 59). Though they have sworn off pork during their troupe performances, they would sing the song to consume pork in secrecy. The word gourd here is used for pork euphemistically. The use of the word 'gourd' would hide the intentions, and a 'yes' would subsequently seal the deal. The songs and memories build the wall of resistance for many tribal communities that secretly practice different food habits and maintain their cultural and ethnic identity.

The paper is divided into three sections: literature review, theoretical framework of the study and discussion. The literature review section sets out to see how gender via food is infused and strengthened in society. Being pushed to the 'private' walls of the kitchen, women employ food as a strategic tool to resist oppression while simultaneously establishing spaces for expression, solidarity, creativity and ethnic and individual identity. The literature review section further embarks upon different studies that discuss food/kitchens as the culinary capital of women. The critical framework of the study section talks about the theory of culinary capital, which leads to the discussion section, where different tribal narratives highlight the significance of food in tribal communities, especially that of women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food is not just what appears on the plate. Food is much more than that. For Whitt (2011), food and food choices mirror an individual's cultural identity. Food is not limited to something cooked and served on the plate in a culture; it is a "social, political and religious statement of personal belief", paving the way for cultural and personal identity formation (p. 14). Counihan (1999) emphasises the importance of foodways in the formation of individual identity as "[f]oodways influence the shaping of community, personality and family" (p. 6). Through food, men and women define their masculinity and femininity, respectively, in a culture, thus making food a site of genderisation. While men's economic status is visible through their purchasing power of buying food, women are relegated to the status of preparing, planning and serving food. Easterine Kire, an Indian Ao-Naga tribal writer, talks about genderisation perpetuated via food. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire offers food as a lens through which conditioning is appropriated when she is scolded for taking a chicken leg. She is reprimanded by her grandmother as she states, "That portion [chicken leg] is always for boys", thereby distinguishing and defining two domains – feminine and masculine (Kire, 2013, p. 1). Even Schafer and Schafer (1989), while collecting data on Iowa households, conclude that it is the wives who are primarily involved in food-related activities in a household, thereby affirming the sexual division of labour in a household where a woman gets no other option than to push herself to the space of the kitchen. Gogoi and Baruah (2020) see food as a gendered site in visual media where a woman's identity is constructed through the use of androcentric language in food blogs.

Ellena and Nongkynrih (2018), through their case study done on Khasi and Chakhesang Indigenous rural people of North-East India, state that though women produce almost 60 to 80% of food in a household and a community, their contribution is always overlooked in society. Women play a crucial role not only as traditional nurturers of the family, society, and culture but also help shape children's dietary patterns and maintain indigenous identity (Ellena & Nongkynrih, 2018, p. 11). Similarly, in America, women in the cider industry, challenge the patriarchal paradigms existing within the farm family. Kennedy (2020) remarks that as women have taken hold of being the participants and producers in the American family farm, they have found a foothold in the beverage industry (pp. 29–30). Dolly Kikon (2015) talks about a dish called 'akhuni' – fermented soya beans and the creative role Naga women play in preparing the dish, 'akhuni'. During her fieldwork, she realised that though Naga men dominated the initial conversation in an interview, they ultimately pushed women forward when they were questioned about 'akhuni', its preparation, its ingredients, the way it is cooked, etc. She even focuses upon the intimate space of the kitchen where 'akhuni' becomes a carrier of the unique Naga identity, of memory brought in the kitchen through mother and grandmother, a belonging to home and continued resistance.

Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1999) emphasise the sacred role of the kitchen in Indian Hindu households. In Hindu households, the kitchen is a sacred, functional and ritualistic space where the concepts of purity and pollution are strengthened (p. 163). As cooking is a major responsibility of women in any household; cooking, meal planning, distribution of food, and organising the kitchen become the central aspects through which the socialisation of women is carried out. That is how the kitchen is embedded with intricate rules, norms and regulations that are strictly followed by the members of a household, especially the female members. Thus, a kitchen becomes pivotal as it is a space for understanding the nuanced relationship between power and gender. Chongtham Jamini Devi's *Kitchen Duty* exhibits the story of Ekashini and her subjugation by her husband through the kitchen. Though she is in charge of the kitchen, during her menstruation, she is kept

away from the kitchen. The kitchen, a ritualistic pure space, is prohibited to a woman at this time when she is considered impure/polluted by the family and society. The concept of pollution shows how a woman is otherwise, and she is not allowed to cook or touch any material in the kitchen as that would lead to pollution. Ekashini realises the dual nature of the societal norms that entrap a woman. She comments, 'All these household chores – sweeping, mopping the floors, fetching water, washing clothes, cooking food – everything is supposed to be women's responsibility. . . . But there are many rules society binds us with – women can and can't do or that" (Devi, 2019, p. 51). Often, a woman's domestic engagement with food is viewed as oppressive, reinforces genderisation in the household, is socially derided and is taken for granted like that of Ekashini's work. However, Meah (2014) calls this view as partial as work and home, especially the kitchen, which allows slippages between masculine and feminine subjectivity. The kitchen is not just a space of silence and subjugation but also a space of agency and resistance (p. 675). Women create their own space in the space that is filled with oppression for them, and that space is the kitchen space where they enjoy autonomy, control power, and create intellectual knowledge. Through the kitchen, women enjoy subjectivity, authority and control over the use of kitchen and household food resources (Meah, 2014, p. 687). The kitchen is seen as synonymous with the room that Virginia Woolf talks about, where she displays creativity, intellectuality, and a space for conversations. Joel Rodrigues (2023) talks about the importance of kitchen space as "the kitchen was an important space for me [Joel Rodrigues] to ask my mother questions and listen to her stories", making the kitchen a shared space for stories, for conversations and where oral history rests (p. 17). For Abarca (2006), the acts of agency transform the kitchen place into a woman's space. By constantly redefining the meanings of kitchen and cooking, she converts the prescribed natural place into her own self-inscribed social space (p. 24). Naccarato and LeBesco (2012) recognise "that food and food practices play a unique role as markers of social status" (p. 10). Culinary practices help women exercise control and wield power, thus making it capital for women to negotiate their roles and identity within the household and the community.

The literature review undertaken foregrounds that the kitchen has been a gendered space globally where women are pushed to a corner, but by taking charge of the space, women are able to carve out their own space in and through the kitchen. The present study underscores that for a tribal woman, the kitchen is packed with narratives, songs, oral histories, creativity, liberation, and cultural and ethnic identity. It is no longer a space where genderisation is carried out; rather, it is a space for her to create power and build her culinary capital. By undertaking diverse tribal narratives on food and kitchen, the study endeavours to see how a tribal woman exercises resistance and carves out her own agency through kitchen and food.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper employs the concept of 'culinary capital' given by Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco. Taking French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's idea of economic, cultural and social capital formation as the premise, Naccarato and LeBesco (2012) develop the idea of culinary capital to understand "how it circulates across this cultural landscape and how it interacts with any number of prevailing values and ideologies" (p. 11). Bourdieu talks about various forms of capital formation, such as economic, cultural, social and symbolic, that dominate the social sphere. Through these multiple forms of capital, an individual/group is able to acquire power and status in society. Similarly, culinary capital plays an important role "in circulating and accessing power"

(Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012, p. 12). The food is loaded with creating, maintaining, and sustaining identities, power, and status in a society/culture.

Using a deconstructive lens, the paper analyses food-related practices in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *They Eat Meat!*, Techi Nimi's *Civilising the Tastebuds*, Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*. The paper examines how a tribal woman is able to create culinary capital in the patriarchal non-tribal world and is able to wield power, decision making and creativity through food. Through food, she acts as a "gatekeeper" in upholding her distinct ethnic identity, such as safeguarding their traditional recipes from the onslaught of the dominant cultures (Counihan & Kaplan, 2005, p. 132). Food does not subjugate her. Rather, it becomes a tool for her through which she can even draw pleasure and form camaraderie with other women.

DISCUSSION

FROM KITCHEN TO COMBAT: THE FEMINIST PRAXIS OF CULINARY CAPITAL

On the axis of food, the division of labour is demonstrated at the intersections of caste, ethnicity, class, gender, socio and economic structures. Parasecoli sees food as "an arena in which social structures, ideological systems, and power relations are constantly negotiated" (2019, p. 130). Lalrofeli (2023) discusses how food endows women with subordinate positions in the Mizo society. Citing the example of rice, which is a staple food in the North-east, Lalrofeli says: "The rich diversity of rice in the northeastern region, which has been nurtured by women's knowledge and skills, is the result of a gendered division of labour, of roles learnt and practised over generations" (2023, p. 74). Sociocultural factors in Mizo society have pushed women to do household work while men are assigned 'tough' tasks such as hunting and jhumming (Mizo's cultivation method of agricultural practice). This clearly demarcates women's and men's work. Thus, the role of a woman in cooking is prominent in the Mizo society. This division of labour and the subjugation of a woman in a tribal community through food echoes in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (Dai, 2014). Dai, a tribal writer from Arunachal Pradesh, articulates a tribal woman's socio-economic position in her community. Gimur, in *The Black Hill* (Dai, 2014), belongs to the Abor tribe. She, like other girls of the village, wakes up early in the morning, even before men, to complete her household chores of the day:

> The village woke early, and for young girls like her, there was little rest . . . She lit the fire, let out the chickens, threw a stick at the pigs and as squeals and grunts mingled with the crowing of roosters, she started pounding paddy on the verandah of the house.
>
> (Dai, 2014, p. 27)

Food plays a central role in the affective conditioning of women in tribal communities as they start to believe that maintaining the kitchen and cooking food is their role. Santhals cultivate fields, and women play a major role in the cultivation and production of food. This conditioning becomes worse when they move out from the communal boundaries. Sowvendra Shekhar's *November Is the Month of Migrations* (2015) narrates the story of Talamai Kisku, a twenty-year-old Santhal girl. A jawan of the Railway Protection Force signals her and then disappears to the corner. He offers her food in exchange for "some work", which indicates sexual favours by the girl to the man in exchange for food (Shekhar, 2015, p. 40). Despite owning culinary capital, a tribal woman is exploited outside her community boundaries. Her socio-economic and ethnic position and class endanger her and her body in an outside/ non-tribal world.

The kitchen space is configured in such a way that suppresses women but women are also transforming this private space to a space of women's autonomy and empowerment. Schroeder sees kitchens "as places where women's capacity is built and women become more empowered" (2012, p. 512). Thus, the creation of culinary capital through the kitchen works at two levels – at the level of control a woman takes over the kitchen and its subversion (as she takes on the traditional gendered role and challenges the patriarchal norms) and at the level of forming bonds and sharing stories with other women.

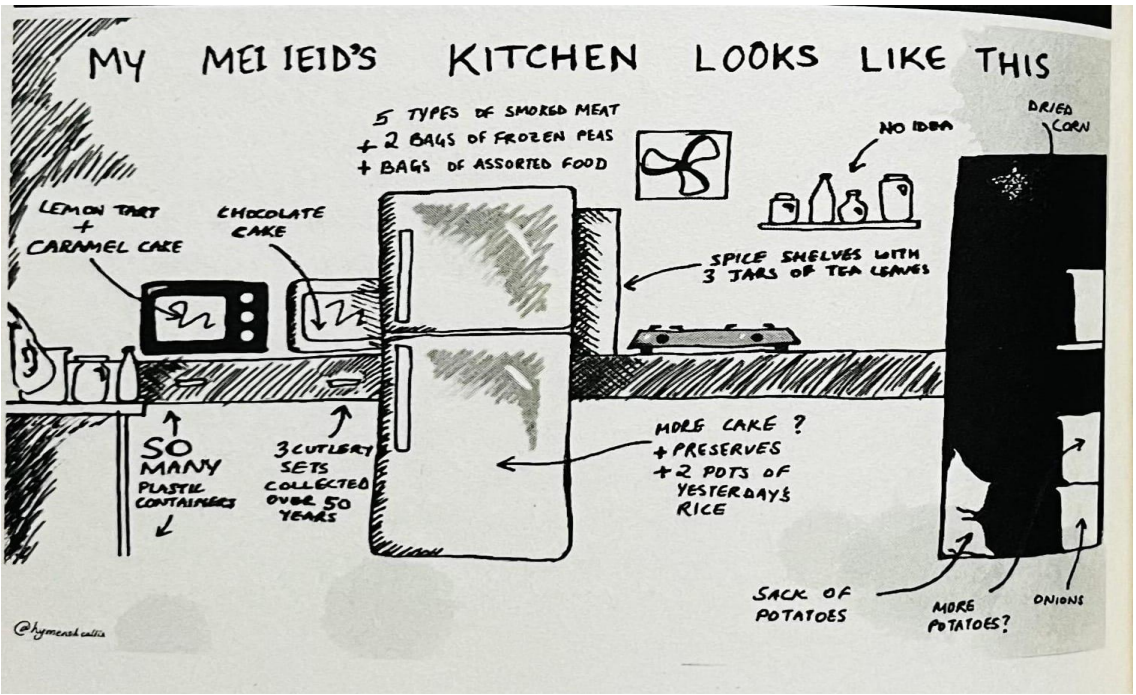

FIGURE 1. An illustration of the kitchen signifying the material culinary capital of a tribal woman
Source: David, E. L. (2023) 2 Pots of Rice. In Janice Pariat (Ed.) *We Come from Mist*: *Writings from Meghalaya* (pp 151-156), Zubaan.

The picture illustrates the tribal kitchen, which signifies the culinary capital of a woman. Here, Mei Ieid means maternal grandmother. So, Mei Ieid's kitchen means maternal grandmother's kitchen, a kitchen that is organised and styled by the grandmother, thereby giving the touch of her own style to the kitchen. The illustration shows how a woman uses the kitchen space intelligently by storing, stacking, and preserving food while keeping in mind the needs of the present and the future. The culinary capital of a tribal woman is not just limited to her intelligence in storing and preserving food; it goes beyond it. The culinary capital here includes a woman's inventory, her kitchen tools that she uses not just to cook but also to resist the hegemonic patriarchal regime, involving her art/trademark of cooking from which she derives a sense of achievement, her individual and collective identity. This keeps her past intact by making it the centre of control in the household and imagines a future where equality exists.

Food even helps a tribal woman in expressing her creative spirit. In Shekhar's, *They Eat Meat!*, Panmuni-jhi, a Santhal residing in Vadodara, enjoys cooking food. She cooks not just out of sheer social and cultural obligation upon her. Her dishes become a site of her culinary creativity where she can experiment the way she wants and cooks whatever she wants to. For Lisa Heldke

(1992), "foodmaking can be a "thoughtful practice" indeed given the careful choice of the cooking method employed" (p. 203 as cited in Devasahayam, 2004, p. 11). For Panmuni-jhi, cooking is not just limited to a gendered role, but it is a creative space for her where she "would experiment liberally" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 2). Whatever she gets her hands on, she starts to create her own dish. She uses many creative ideas to cook new items in the kitchen: "She experimented with eggs, milk, semolina and pumpkins; even tomato skins and potato peels. She made idli using only semolina; eggless cakes in a pressure cooker; tomato pickle with a tart, tangy flavour; and numerous items out of rice flour" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 2). Using different items and different equipment for cooking, Panmuni-jhi tries to carve her own identity via food. Devasahayam (2004) highlights the creativity of a woman in the kitchen: "The mass-produced commodity takes on a new meaning when it appears on the dining table"as "a woman makes the product of her own- modifying it in her own way" (p. 12) thus creating her own culinary capital in society. Even Rabi, Panmuni-jhi's son, complimented her mother's culinary creativity by saying, "'If my mother is given cowdung, she can make pitha out of it'" that highlights the mastery and culinary skills of Panmuni-jhi (Shekhar, 2015, p. 2). She even masters several "fancy" items that are usually hard to cook (Shekhar, 2015, p. 2). Even when she learns that her sons have eaten outside, she cooks the dish again and then asks them to vote on who cooked it better. The food that Panmuni-jhi cooks, is no longer a commercially produced item. Rather, it showcases her creativity, which comprises her feelings and emotions, thereby making food a medium of expression for her.

The culinary capital that Panmuni-jhi has created, is reflected in her fear of eating outside. Whenever Biram-kumang, her husband or Hopon and Rabi, her sons, call her to go out and eat outside, she resists and her resistance becomes evident when she starts feeling uneasy as she fears losing her culinary capital. She would become paranoid "that her tummy would begin to rumble a warning even before she had put a morsel into her mouth" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 1). Panmuni-jhi wields power via food as she maintains her standards/norms regarding the kitchen and cooking. This helps her claim the kitchen space as her own space. On many occasions, Biram would scold her and often repeat, " 'You cannot always find food cooked to your standards'", but she did not give him an ear (Shekhar, 2015, p. 1). She is clearly the 'gatekeeper' of her identity as well as that of her community identity. She not only maintains rules in her kitchen but also influences the eating habits of her family as well: "Because a great deal of consumption occurs in the home, it has been assumed to be the province of women. Women are credited with control over purchasing, storing, cooking and serving of food. In addition, they are perceived as greatly influencing the food habits of family members" (Counihan & Kaplan, 2005, p. 132). Panmuni-jhi makes the kitchen her province and influences everyone's eating habits in the family.

Similarly, Techi Nimi's *Civilising the Tastebuds* shows the cultural, communal and individual expression of a tribal woman through food. A tribal woman's culinary capital is reflected in the form of 'yamter' (dried meat and chilli pickle) she prepares for her loved ones. Preparing 'yamter' "is almost like a rite of passage" for every woman residing in Arunachal Pradesh (Nimi, 2023, p. 49). During the customary visit to the grandparents or relatives before going outside for studies, a child usually gets money in return for notebooks, pens, tea or cakes s/he would require on her/his journey or during her/his stay in the hostel. The most treasured gift a woman, or any woman, gives to the child is the 'yamter'. Nimi narrates an account in this regard. One of the aunties say "'Ayyaaa, Aunty has no money to give you, so I'll prepare some yamter for you before you go'" (Nimi, 2023, p. 49). It highlights Naccarato and LeBesco's (2012) concept of the formation of culinary capital, where a woman gives her love, sweat, tears and effort in making 'yamter' thereby making 'yamter' a woman's capital that she gives/gifts as an act of love and

hence makes a tradition out of it. Nimi narrates her ordeal in a boarding school in Arunachal Pradesh where 'yamter' was prohibited and forbidden on the school premises. For all the tribal girls in the boarding school, "Home food to us is tribal food" (Nimi, 2023, p. 48). To smuggle 'yamter' in the school bags becomes a task for all the girls. All the girls form a bond to safeguard 'yamter' from being seized by the school authorities. This signifies how food offers a space for women to form and share a bond. 'Yamter', on the one hand, connects a person to home and, on the other, acts as a tool of resistance. The girls' resistance to eating 'yamter' despite being banned shows the traditional, individual, communal and feministic bond with the food. Food is the only way to go back to the memory lane of home. The bottle of 'yamter' does not just signify cultural food but also signifies the indigenous knowledge and wisdom of a woman. 'Yamter' is "known to increase the appetite when someone is ill. It is used as a cure for fevers and colds" (Nimi, 2023, p. 49).

Sowvendra Shekhar's *They Eat Meat!* becomes a testimony to how food is different for both men and women. As Biram "wasn't very particular about food" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 1). Panmuni-jhi would even say, "'If I don't get food cooked to my satisfaction, I will not eat'" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 2). Even Biram is defeated in many food-related arguments as "he knew of the high standards Panmuni-jhi maintained in the kitchen" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 2). When she learned that Biram was being transferred to Vadodara, Panmuni-jhi's primary concern was food. She looks up through her contacts in Vadodara and calls Jhapan, one of her acquaintances, to enquire about food. She is terrified to note that she needs to change her food habits if she has to live in Vadodara. Jhapan informs her, "the food habits here are very different. You may have to stop eating quite a few things we take for granted'" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 3).

The two women – Panmuni-jhi and Jhapan, plan to create their own space via the food trope. Even though their current geographical boundaries restrict their culinary capital, they claim to hold over their skill and create a borderless space between them by making, sharing and eating food together. Thus, the food that represents or pushes a woman to gendered roles also becomes a space for women's camaraderie where they start enjoying themselves through the sharing of food. Jhapan assures Panmuni-jhi that she can come to their place whenever she likes or whenever she wants to eat eggs or chicken. As Jhapan stays on the CISF campus, she makes her home a safe and secure place for women who assert their identity through food.

The men in the story are the ones who try to guard the boundaries drawn by food. When Biram-kumang shifts to Vadodara, he rents a place in the Subhanpura Colony. The landlords of the flat are Raos, an elderly couple from Andhra Pradesh. While enquiring about Biram, Mr Rao tries to guess his identity by using his name. He confirms with him whether he is tribal or not. Upon confirming Biram's identity, Mr Rao urges him not to eat meat, fish, eggs, or chicken. He advises him on how food can create boundaries within people in a city like Vadodara. Through food comes acceptance or rejection. Food even controls the notions of pollution and purity as not only tribals but lower caste Hindus are also marked as impure because of their eating habits. He even informs him that:

> You see, even we used to eat meat and chicken. And eggs. We used to have eggs for breakfast almost daily. My sons, they eat non-veg. But not when they're here. When we decided to settle here – because this place is so neat and tidy – we had to pay a small price. I hope you understand.
>
> (Shekhar, 2015, p. 7)

Mr Rao even mentions his own fear that is generated by different food practices. He even claims that people of the Subhanpura colony have a dislike towards a family that are Mohammeds who are suspected of eating chicken/eggs. All such instances compel Panmuni-jhi to resist the

oppressive patriarchal structures. She even questions Jhapan in outrage: "'How can people dislike who eat meat?" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 8). With this outrage in their hearts, both women create their own space where whatever food they want to eat can be cooked and enjoyed. They fix a date and dinner menu which comprises chicken and "A traditional Santhal meal – daka and sim-jill" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 9).

Panmuni-jhi's ingenious idea is to cook one egg per week. She not only dares to cook eggs in her colony where no one can imagine her doing so, but she also uses ideas to dispose of eggshells by burying them in the kitchen garden. Food even attains specific meaningfulness where "meaningfulness refers to emotional and affective association and memories evoked by food as opposed to an intellectual understanding of a food as a symbol" (Long, 2015, p. 120). Panmuni-jhi even dares to imagine what if "all the Santhals in Gujurat go out on a picnic together and cook jill-leto openly" as food triggers memory and connects to a distant native place (Shekhar, 2015, p. 14). Her resistance is even evident in her imagination, where she feels that she can build a world free of discrimination, an egalitarian world through food. As food contains political and cultural agendas, it is used as a medium by the dominant caste, class or religion to suppress and oppress the marginalised caste, class or religion. The food politics that helps create hegemony and hierarchy is discussed in Sowvendra Shekhar's *They Eat Meat!* Sorens, the Santhals from Jharkhand, have shifted to Vadodara for work, and they are shocked when they are made to understand that they cannot touch certain foods and must abstain from eating and cooking non-vegetarian food. Mr Rao, the owner of the house rented by the Sorens, warns Mr Soren regarding his food habits and choices: "People here don't like to mix with those who eat meat and eggs. It's like that." signifying that Mr Soren and his family will be cast away from the mainstream as "Vadodara is a strongly Hindu city" because Vadodra is mainly a Hindu dominated city and does not allow the consumption of chicken, fish, mutton or eggs (Shekhar, 2015, p. 4). Gaurav J. Pathania (2016) discusses how society's dominant or mainstream section weaponises food to perpetuate violence upon the minority. The butter (ghee) becomes a point of contention between untouchable and caste Hindus in the Chakwara village of Jaipur. This act of consuming butter (which is loaded with the 'pure' connotation) by an untouchable, leads to an eruption of violence. Food maintains the status quo by keeping the power relationships intact and operational even if the minority group has to be slaughtered/discriminated for their food choices.

Both the women try to listen to the food voice that expresses identity and selfhood. Despite prohibitions, both the women form a camaraderie and cook eggs in the kitchen. Seeing Panmuni-jhi's courage, Mrs Rao even comes out of her house and asks her to let her cook the eggs as she, too, is fond of eating eggs. She says, "Please, Mrs. Soren, can I fry an egg in your kitchen? Mr. Rao won't let me" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 15). Mrs Rao even narrates how her husband tried to control her food habits. She tells Panmuni-jhi: "The family who lived here before you . . . Mr. Rao sent them away. I haven't had any non-veg for months. He won't let me" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 16). Panmuni-jhi helps her by allowing her to make "a spicy Andhra egg fry" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 16). This makes the kitchen a place of camaraderie for women. This highlights the power exercised by women over the kitchen. Despite prohibitions, both women cook eggs, breaking the local norm of not cooking eggs at home and then helping each other to hide them. "After their meal, Mrs. Rao went into the bathroom, and Panmuni-jhi heard her gargle. When she was leaving, Panmuni-jhi gave her an elaichi as mouth freshener" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 15). In the next course, Mrs. Rao too joins Panmuni-jhi and Jhapan on the CISF campus to enjoy their favourite meals. As Belasco comments, "To eat appropriate foods is to participate in a particular group" (Belasco, 1989, p. 44, as cited in Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012, p. 15). Jhapan, Panmuni-jhi and Mrs. Rao form a group

where they enjoy the freedom to cook and eat whatever they want. This makes the gendered place like the kitchen a feminised space for resistance to form a group and assert and safeguard their unique ethnic and communal identity as Abarca (2006) states that "through the process of appropriating the kitchen's space, a woman, . . . converts the kitchen from her seemingly prescribed natural place into her own self inscribed social space" (p. 24). This holds true for Panmuni-jhi, Mrs Rao and even Jhapan, for whom the kitchen is not just a place assigned to them but rather it is a space where they form groups, collect memories, remember the recipes and continuously disrupt the patriarchal oppressive forces to subjugate them.

Food is also seen as a way to memory in Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019). Utilising ammunition boxes, many tribal women in the Angami society use them to bake cakes. After the war ended, every household now possessed at least one ammunition box and baking cake "became the new skill that a young woman can lay claim to" (p. 22). Even during celebrations or get-togethers, women would bring out the ammunition boxes and "warm them on a slow fire"and would then bake the cake (Kire, 2019, p. 22). In the next incident, Nimi, in the story *Civilising the Tastebuds*, associates being hungry with denying ethnic and cultural food. Through her memory, she visits those moments in her school life where she could not have her own cultural food. She recalls an incident wherein all the girls in the boarding school steeped together to make their home-cooked food:

> I recall us girls strolling around the school campus to collect some ferns, dhekia, as we called them, and boiling them in our steel bowls over a candle. At some point, the flames from the candle would heat up the steel, so each one of us would take turns holding the bowl over the flames until we couldn't anymore before handing it on to the next girl. The cycle would continue until the dhekia was properly cooked.
>
> (Nimi, 2023, p. 48)

The culinary resistance is evident when the riots break out in Gujarat in *They Eat Meat!*, and women play a significant role in controlling the mob. In one of the incidents, when the mob comes to attack Mr Mohammed's house in Subhanpura Colony, it is the women who guard the houses as well as their lives through the tools/equipment used in the kitchen. When the mob comes to attack, only four women are in the house. The mob outside keeps on abusing them, and soon, "a lighted petrol-bomb was hurled into Mohammed's living room", resulting in choking and suffocation (Shekhar, 2015, p. 23). The women gathered all the tools from the kitchen and showered them on the mob one by one. "Clang! A steel degchi fell at the feet of the men standing at the edge of the mob" surprises the men who thought that the women in the house would not be able to retaliate (Shekhar, 2015, p. 23). And then "Thud! A well-hurled steel spatula hit another rioter right in his eye" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 23).

Watching this, Biram-kumang keeps on questioning who could hurl the vessels from the terrace. Panmuni-jhi remains silent as she is aware that it is the women who are throwing vessels used for cooking as weapons to protect themselves and their families. She goes straight into the kitchen, and "[q]uitely, she gathered some cooking vessels and stole out to join her friend" (Shekhar, 2015, p. 23). Thus, she shows the mob what culinary capital is:

> The women of Subhanpura Colony had turned out in force. Some pelted the rioters with their kadahis and katoris; others threw degchis and frying pans. Some threw old, heavy irons. Some threw sticks and brooms. Those who had nothing heavy to throw pelted vegetables, packets of juice and butter, and bottles of oil and ketchup.
>
> (Shekhar, 2015, p. 24)

This clearly shows the ingenious methods used by the women to counter the mob. They even subvert the notion of the men protecting the women. Using kitchen tools, they resist the mob and use their intelligence to counter the force and violence.

CONCLUSION

Food becomes a medium for women to show their creativity where "they manipulate it and cooking is conceived as a means for creating their identity" (Devasahayam, 2004, p. 13). The kitchen and cooking are not limited to a gendered role that a woman submissively accepts and fulfils; they have become spaces for women's camaraderie and creativity. In the Indian text, *They Eat* Meat!, Panmuni-jhi, Jhapan, and Mrs Rao build their own space in the kitchen for bonding, sharing and resisting through food. The women in the story negate the capitalist separations of the division of labour and build their space in the oppressive patriarchal structure. Women have agency over what has to be cooked and how it has to be cooked. The kitchen is not just where genderisation starts; it is also a space for female bonding, resistance, and empowerment.

Techi Nimi, in *Civilising the Tastebuds*, shares her journey of bonding with other girls in the boarding school through 'yamter', their native food. For the tribal women in Tripura, 'yamter' is her expression of love, bonding, blessings and her culinary capital that she gifts to the children and the next generation. The tribal women, through food, subvert and disrupt the hegemony of the patriarchy that reinforces gendered fault lines through food.

The paper offers a transvaluation of the kitchen space that is generally seen as a space of subjugation for a woman. The kitchen becomes a space where hegemony and hierarchies are challenged and contested by women. Thus, the paper expresses and argues about the agency of women in the kitchen and how food becomes a tool for empowerment, resistance and identity creation. It focuses on how a woman uses her culinary capital to assert control over her life in a patriarchal society. It will be interesting to research how this culinary capital is even transforming into economic capital for tribal women as women are now looking for entrepreneurship through their creative skill of making and baking food items. Another aspect that can be formed as a premise for food study is how food is linked to the memory, especially of a woman. Remembering the recipes that the girls have seen in their households and improvising them in their in-laws' houses can also become a base for research. This is how the kitchen acts as a space of symbolic power for women.

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