The act of consumption of food is considered not only one of the most basic of human somatic activities, but also a major marker of social, cultural, and psychic identity. Food is a crucial determinant of subjectivity of an individual, playing a major role in the process of enculturation. Coming together and sharing a meal becomes a vital activity for development of social bonds and establishment of a community. Food cannot be divorced from its social inscriptions. It acts as a social signifier, a bearer of interpersonal and cultural meanings. Food discourses have become an integral part of individual and collective cultural identification and stereotyping. Food and the act of eating together have become symbolic of social inclusion as well as exclusion, thus further resulting in formation of structures and institutions governing social life. One can observe various forms of documentation of food discourses taking place since time immemorial. The literature written about food is symbolic of preservation and production of culture. For understanding the role of food and its discourses in formation of social structure, it is crucial to develop a framework to assess the manner in which food and literature affect our identity and communal life. There is a need to identify the role food plays in determining our cultural identity and social position. This paper is an attempt to analyse the role of food as a social signifier. It is organised into five sections. Section I focuses on the understanding the role of food as a symbol of enculturation. Some analysis of food as a marker of stereotyping is done in Section II. Section III presents the role of food as marker of distinction within the spiritual sphere, while Section IV provides the role of food as a marker of exclusion of the marginalised groups from the society. Finally, Section V offers some concluding observations and discusses the importance of food discourses in creation and identification of culture.

MEETING VIA MEALS

Through the record of food traditions, culture and history are transmitted as well as transformed. Practices of sharing, preparing, and eating recipes create and convey human interactions. Anthropologists, sociologists, and many others have emphasised on the fact that, “eating is never a ‘purely biological’ activity” but, rather, one of many arenas in which we invest “a basic activity with social meaning(s).” Sharing of food is a staunch pillar of creation and development of a culture since it is responsible for strengthening of social bonds. The recording of food discourses in the form of cookbooks, memoirs, novels etc. is responsible for transmission of cultural practices across generations. Both individual and collective memory are profoundly and densely embedded in, enacted, and communicated symbolically through the many forms of engagement with food. Literary writings about food elaborate on the creation and celebration of culture and social living. This documentation of discourses pertaining to food is a record of both individual and collective memory. Many scholars have taken keen interest in understanding the role of food in the social, religious, and cultural lives of people and the ways food consumption, preparation, assimilation, and transmission of knowledge about food has figured in how individuals conceive of themselves, affiliate and identify with home, homeland, and a range of social groupings. These earliest and most persistently retained individual memories are profoundly incorporated into the creation and structuring of collective memory and cultural identity. For recording recipes, the subject needs to trace a part of the individual as well as the collective memory of their own families by doing research on, and then documenting, the personal and social history of a recipe. Indeed, eating (or refusing to eat) is an act of remembrance: it is the memory of the body, which is further recorded in the text for preservation of one’s culture and its practices. Jamie Oliver’s cookery show “The Naked Chef” is also a multimodal product, where speech, graphics and actions interact to generate meaning. The show is one semiotic room where different modalities, organised in sets of semiotic resources, interact to represent culture and create meaning through assemblance of products of memory.
show also creates a new concept of cultural identity by creating a new version of food derived from the individual and collective memory. It is flesh-and-blood memory, memory that is always already in the present tense. These recipes require that readers/viewers re-taste, re-feel, and re-see the product of memory produced by the chef. Consumption and documentation of food is an act of preserving the memory of one’s culture and DOMESTICATED DAIMSELS creating newer forms of it. The reader’s engagement with these various discourses of food involves re-visiting and re-creating one’s own memory. To quote Toni Morrison, it is re-memory. Thus, food and its recorded representation involves remembering, reviving and recreating one’s culture by re-visiting one’s memory and developing a re-memory.

A 19th century South Indian painting showing the dominance of men in the public sphere and confinement of women to the household during annaprasana ceremony.

A survey conducted by People First revealed significant gender imbalances within different sectors of the hospitality industry. Male chefs dominate the restaurant and hotel restaurant sector; according to the survey 77% of restaurant chefs surveyed were male and just 19% were female. On the other hand, the same firm claims participation of 98% females in the catering and household sector. These numbers are a reflection of dominant ideology that promotes a distinct nature of participation depending on whether the activity belongs to the public or the private realm. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak asserts that ideology is not a strict set of rules but loosely articulated sets of historically determined and determining notions, presuppositions, and practices, each implying the other by real or forced logic, which goes by the name of common sense of self-evident truth or natural behaviour in a certain situation. Literature and media play a crucial role in representation and popularisation of the dominant ideology. The ideological framework of the patriarchal society aims to confine the other within the domestic zone and establish a dominant position in the public sphere to hold the reins of power. “The Lakshmi of Home” depicts the way families were run by male members (karta), while the daily life household was controlled by female members. (grahni/ ginni) This distinction was clear in the patriarchal society. It is no surprise that one witnesses this division and feminisation of domestic cooking in the literatures of food. For every bon vivant novel written by a man about "masculine" food topics (food tasting, Epicureanism, poisoning), there are ten written by women about a main character who is finding her maternal roots or trying to re-locate herself through cooking within the household. The expression that the way to the inevitable love interest's heart is
clearly through that old oesophageal path is a representation of women’s role of performance of activity within the boundary of kitchen of the house. More specifically, much food literature is not only feminized but is also relentlessly middle class and hetero sexual: it is often a romance novel with its setting being the domestic arena.

Further, on an examination of recipes of shortcakes from Emeril Lagasse and Jamie Oliver, one notices the distinction between feminine and masculine through language as well. Lagasse uses a domestic, confessional voice while Oliver asserts his authority as “master chef” (never “cook”) in his precision, knowledge, and haute cuisine twists on the old favourite (Emeril’s “New Orleans Chocolate Strawberry Shortcake”, and Oliver’s “Short Crust Strawberry Pastries”). An analysis of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver’s popular television program, The Naked Chef, highlights the distinction between “culinary masculinity” of a professional male chef and a female domestic cook. For Oliver, “domestic cooking is experienced as a form of creative leisure,” characterized by entertaining guests and far removed from the labour of daily food preparation. Engagement with food in different spheres becomes a mark of labelling within the social structure. The activity of cooking is ascribed to different genders depending on the space defined for performance. The professional public sector is dominated by male master chefs whereas the domestic sector witnesses a dominant participation of female cooks. Not only do the numbers symbolise this distinction, but the language used within the discourse of food also represents this ideology of the patriarchal society. Food and literature act as a medium to strengthen the dichotomy of gender and represent the dominant ideology of the society.

SEGREGATION WITHIN THE SPIRITUAL SPHERE

Late 18th-century painting from the Nathdvara temple in Rajasthan depicting the offering of food to Krishna by male priests in the Annakuta festival.

From about 500 CE new forms of belief and worship started to appear within the Indian subcontinent. Vedic sacrifices were being replaced by new forms of worship at home or in temples called pujas. The new forms of worship were called Puranic, as opposed to the Shramanic, or ascetic, religions of Jainism and Buddhism. The name comes from a series of texts called the Puranas, collections of stories about the myths, legends and genealogies of gods, heroes and saints as well as descriptions of cosmology, philosophy and geography. They were composed in Sanskrit over a very long period of time, perhaps between the fourth century BCE and 1000 CE. They were translated into vernacular languages and disseminated by brahmins who read from them and told their stories at local temples. In effect, they became the scriptures of the common people. A puja can be a simple offering of food at a home altar or an elaborate ceremony conducted by priests in a temple. Food becomes an essential part of this form of devotion towards the deity. One observes a differentiation within roles performed by different genders within the spiritual sphere as well.
Different Hindu Gods are appealed by offering different foods. The worship of Krishna is often expressed in culinary metaphors; for example, ‘I hunger after the sweet nectar of devotion.’ One of the world’s most spectacular food-related events is the Annakuta, or Mountain of Food, held annually at a temple in Mount Govardhan near Vrindavan at the end of the rainy season. A similar food festival is organized every year by members of a sect called the Vallabhits or Pushti Marga, founded in Gujarat in the fifteenth century. They worship Krishna in his infant form, depicted with one arm upraised, a ball of butter in his hand. These celebrations taking place within the realm of a religious institution are usually dominated by male priests and cooks who take it upon themselves to prepare the feast and serve the Divine Being. On the other hand, the duty of preparation of saattvic food within the house is of the female members. The offering called naivedya is an essential part of the puja ceremony and the preparation of food is undertaken by different sections depending on the public-private dichotomy.

The practice of undertaking fasts is also extremely popular within the Puranic trend of worship. It can be a mandatory part of a religious festival, a form of worship, out of gratitude for a blessing, a petition to a god for a favour, an instrument of self-discipline or a method of physical cleansing. The act of fasting is an individual performance, usually taking place within the domestic arena. Women generally fast more than men and have special fast days on which they pray for blessings for their husbands and family, including an annual fast, karvachauth, observed in North India. The significant number of female participants in the ritual of fasting is also symbolic of dominance of women within the private sphere. The spiritual arena is not devoid of distinction and division based on rules designed by human beings. While the dominance of men can be observed within the religious institutions, a significant increase in participation of women is observed in the private sphere. This division indicates the inclusion of religion and spirituality within the domain of dominant ideology and acceptance of hierarchy of power and social living in this space as well.

ENGAGEMENT WITH EXCLUSION

A.K. Ramanujan wrote an essay “Food for Thought” as an attempt to capture the “common sense” regarding food and recording the commonalities of Hindu food paradigms. His account looks at food as ‘a system of signification’, in which individual ‘communicative acts’ emanate from this underlying communicative system. One can observe the centrality of food in the traditions and customs of the society and analyse how food functions as a metalanguage to express the behaviour, practices and ideas of groups that vary from the conventional patterns of social living. Transgender designates a person whose identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender roles but combines or moves between these two. A survey done by Dr Sridevi Sivakami PL and Ms Veena KV highlights the exclusion of transgender community within the society.

### TABLE III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not accepted</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindrance in marriage for brothers and sisters</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill-treated</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live freely and happily</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel embarrassed</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table is a part of research paper presented by Dr Sridevi Sivakami PL and Ms Veena KV highlighting exclusion of individuals belonging to the transgender community.
The literature corresponding to food discourses is predominantly heterosexual in nature symbolising the exclusion of this marginalised section. A significant number of transgenders have to opt out of social lifestyle and stay away from their family because their gender has not been accepted by the society. Moreover, religious places like Ayyappan Temple at Sabarimala in Kerala, Shani Shingnapur Temple at Ahmednagar in Maharashtra shed light on the exclusion of the ‘other’. Women have been barred from entering these temples since ages. However, a transgender dressed in a shirt and dhoti is allowed to enter the premises, while the same individual, when dresses in women’s attire, is barred from entering these places of worship. These religious spaces of worship highlight the dilemma faced by borderline communities who do not fit into socially accepted divisions. Festivals like Koovagam transgender festival, in which the gender-variants become for one night the brides of the son of Arjuna and represent the transgender nature of Krishna, is also an example of celebration within the ambit of isolation and exclusion. Existence of rituals and natural spaces demanding forbidding of one of the two accepted genders has been acknowledged since time immemorial. The inability to know their own ideological position and being caught up within the cage of rejection leads to a version of Baconian project that generates a new philosophy in a fragmented way relying on fluidity of position and is unable to create concrete ideals and structures.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Overall, on the basis of observation and analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of food and literature as markers of labelling and exclusion within the contemporary society:

i. Food is a social signifier: Food cannot be divorced from its role as a marker of identity within the society. The discourses of food function as reminders of individual and collective memory. This reminder encourages an individual to re-visit and re-create one’s own memory. This act of revival and recreation leads to production of a newer form of cultural production through the subject questioning their access to meaning, re-asserting it, and leading to generation of a newer form of memory, or the re-memory.

ii. Ascription of gender roles on the basis of space of performance: The activity of cooking is performed by both men and women. However, men dominate the professional kitchen while women are confined to the kitchen and domestic space. The roles have been asserted according to the public and private sphere. Cooking by male master chefs is considered a serious profession, while women cooking within the house is an activity meant for leisure and entertainment of guests and visitors. This public-private dichotomy defines the subject of performance. Literature and other forms of media circulate this ideology developed by the patriarchal society through graphics, language etc. and strengthen the gender roles.

iii. Gender distinction within religion: The Hindu religion is dominated by the concept of fasts and feasts. Feasts are usually a part of public sphere. Various feasts like the Annakuta festival etc. are headed by male priests and chefs. On the other hand, women actively participate in the ritual of fasting that is usually a part of private sphere. The difference in gender roles is a feature of religious practices and institutions as well and this distinction strengthens the practice of gender differentiation within the society.

iv. Fluid identity of the ‘Other’: The transgender community has not been accepted. The lack of representation of this community in various food discourses is symbolic of their exclusion from the society. The documentation and description of food is usually heterosexual signifying the marginalisation of this section. Their identity is based on exclusion and they hold no concrete position within the society. The fluid nature of their identity derived through the act of exclusion is represented by food and its description through literature.

The paper analyses the function of food as a representative and producer of society and culture. It also highlights the construction of the masculine professional chef and his disavowing of the female cook and consideration of domestic cooking as a fun leisure and lifestyle activity. This suggestion of domestic cooking being leisure is a result of distance from both economic and temporal constraints involved with cooking within the household, a position that is gendered. Moreover, the construction of constraints is questioned by the inability to include all the sections within the society and grant them specific positions within the social ladder. Food and literature represent cultural production through selective inclusion and memorising of that selective representation.
References


