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How food semiotics helps to understand the culture of a land? An observation study on Melaseval village, Tamilnadu

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***Abstract:** Food as a communication medium is unique to human beings. Food as a communication medium helps a community of people to have a feeling of oneness and to alienate outsider from the community. The objective of the study is to describe the need to consider food as a semiotic medium of communication in understanding culture of diversified complex landscapes like Tamilnadu. For the purpose of the study the researcher observed Melaseval Panchayat in Tirunelveli district of Tamilnadu. The researcher employed flaneur as the observation technique. And the researcher employed standardized open-ended interview with key informants to describe their living condition. The collected data were discussed through the prism of Semiotics. The study concluded that there is an enormous space for the exploration of food as a semiotic medium in the communication of culture in Tamil society.*

***Key Words:** (Food communication, cultural communication, food and culture, semiotics)*

1. INTRODUCTION

Food is inevitable in our daily life. Other living beings consume food according to their geographic and biological need, but only the human beings consume food based on social, cultural and psychological preferences. The preference of food differs according to the temporal and spatial element of the consumers. (Mazumdar, 1995) said that food helps to understand various aspects of social and cultural life.

Food as a communication medium is unique to human beings. Food as a communication medium helps a community of people to have a feeling of oneness and to alienate outsider from the community. If food communicates, how it communicates? According to (Barthes, 2008) food has become a form of communication through images, situations, and behaviour. (Douglas, 1972) said that if food is a code, the encoded messages will be found in the pattern of social relations associated with the food. To understand the communication of food we need to understand its grammar, structure and usage. As same as like language food also has grammar, structure and usage that differs among different set of people.

Roland Barthes used semiotics to understand the role and function of food. (Stajcic 2013) quote Barthes as *"food function as a sign, a sign communicating something in addition*

to itself, perhaps something other than itself… by consuming food we eat the whole system of cultural meaning associated with the food."

. Preparation, consumption and serving of food create a cultural barrier in cross-cultural communities and also help to explore a culture. (Stajcic, 2013), said that one need to consider *"when arranging food the Japanese way, such as uniformity vs. contrast, asymmetry, the five colours, the importance of empty space, and seasonality. There is also a whole bunch of don't rules, including never arranging four elements on a plate, as the Japanese word for four is a homonym for death"*. Thus food is an undeniable element in understanding communication of culture.

This research attempted to describe the relevance of food as a semiotic medium of communication in Tamilnadu. For the purpose of the study the researcher observed Melaseval Panchayat in Tirunelveli district of Tamilnadu.

The objective of the study is to describe the need to consider food as a medium of communication in understanding culture of diversified complex landscapes like Tamilnadu.

Research Questions
1. What is the topographic structure of Melaseval village?
2. What is the living condition of different strata of population residing at Melaseval village?
3. How food as a medium of communication helps us to understand the culture of a land, Melaseval village?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevance and importance of food as a semiotic medium of communication has been explained by many scholars, (Douglas, 1972) asks that, if food is a code, where is the precoded message? And she answered that as, encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. (Appadurai, 1981) studied the general semiotic properties of food and said that when human beings convert some part of their environment into food, they create a peculiarly powerful semiotic device. (Stano, 2015) discussed about semiotics of food and said that food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment but is also part of a sign system as it is strictly involved in processes of signification and interpretation.

The study classified literatures into the following broad three categories: Food and culture; Food and geopolitics and Food, identity and social stratification.

Food and Communication

Food and culture   Food and geopolitics   Food, identity and social stratification
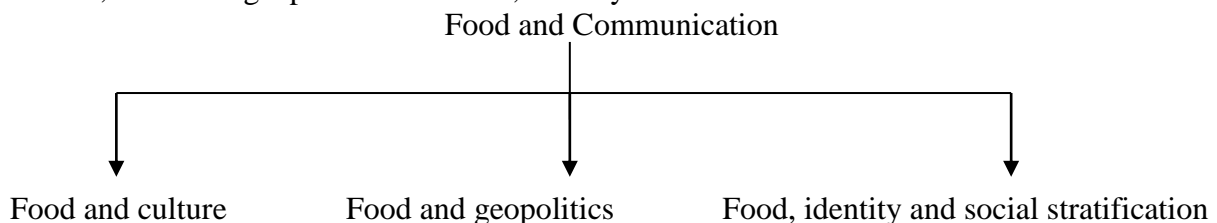
Food and culture: (Mazumdar, 1995) studied how food is handled around the Changlang household and the process that makes food culturally meaningful and acceptable to them. (Barthes, 2008) compared and contrasted the American food culture with that of the French. Barthes explained that every country has their own way of preparing and consuming food that impact their culture. (Bree, 2010) described an ethnographic research study lead within French families in order to examine food learning transfers between parents and children. (Janet M. Cramer, 2011) studied food as a means to understand culture of everyday life. He

said that food has become increasingly important with the processes of communication as a means of expression, manifestation of identities, form of discourse and ritual, hallmark of social relationships. (Parasecoli, Savoring semiotics: food in intercultural communication, 2011) studied what happens when people from different cultures interact? He said that the meaning in cultural signs introduced politics into semiotics and he pointed out that the way semiospheres are structured points to hegemonic and ideological tensions. (Hunter, 2013) explained eating and drinking practices as social and cultural experiences and he proposed two views on studying food as anthropological element. One is *"The Anthropology of Food"*, and the next view is *"Nutritional Anthropology"*. (Tan, 2016) study concentrated on the formation of family identity through the study of consumption behavior in Chinese family using Epp and Price's (2008) framework.

Food and geopolitics: (Watson, 2000) explored how did a hamburger chain become so prominent in a cultural zone dominated by rice, noodles, fish, and pork? (McIntosh, 2013) discussed about studies that talks about the production of food through farms, its process through food companies and how it consumed by families. He said that *'Sociology of consumption'*, a sub-area of *'sociology of culture'* holds several perspectives to study about the sociology of food. (Valenze, 2013) said that the main focus of cultural history of food is to understand the political and economic structures, institutions, and social pressures through the narratives of food. (Parasecoli, Food, cultural studies, and popular culture, 2013) said that the presence of food in everyday life is pervasive, permeating popular culture as a relevant marker of power, cultural capital, class, gender, ethnicity, and religion, which both cultural and food studies recognize as crucial. (Parasecoli, Food, identity, and cultural reproduction in immigrant communities, 2014) studied how do culinary traditions develop as they do among migrants? The study focused on what role do cooking and other food-related practices play as migrant communities negotiate their presence in post-industrial societies where individuals and groups define their identities around lifestyles and consumer goods? (Michael K. Goodman, 2017) said that while our daily diet clearly shapes our physical and emotional selves, we are not simply 'what we eat' but we are also the virtual, mediated foods we consume, desire, and discuss on screen.

Food, identity and social stratification: (Parasecoli, Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men's Fitness Magazines, 2005) examined the connections between food, masculinities, and body image in male fitness magazines. (Parasecoli, Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture, 2008) said that pop culture constitutes a major repository of visual elements, ideas, practices, and discourses that influence our relationship with the body, with food consumption, and with the whole system of social and political ramifications on a daily basis. (Micheelsen, 2011) focused on the ways in which desires for food are experienced and handled in everyday life. He studied the experiences of 'food cravings' to be instances of semiosis that intersect biological, psychological and cultural spheres. (Meza, 2013) examined the ways transmigrant women exercise resistance to maintain cultural continuity through food. (Shapin, 2014) analysed the deep historic adage 'You are what you eat' through the Galenical dietetics and modes of analogical reasoning from the qualities of food to the qualities of people. (Almerico, 2014) discussed how food has a powerful impact on people and groups in our society? (Lukianova, 2015) explored the semiotics of visual imagery associated with fast food. He said that gastronomic practices unite or divide people, and as such are a powerful communication tool. (Parasecoli, Global Trade, Food Safety, and the Fear of Invisible Invaders, 2017) analysed how food is produced, distributed, bought,

cooked, and disposed has reached new heights, causing unprecedented anxiety at all levels, from the personal to the international.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study attempted to understand how food as a medium of communication helps to understand the culture of a land. For the purpose of the study *Melaseval* Panchayat was chosen as the research setting. To understand the topography of the village the researcher observed the village for a month. To understand the living condition of the population in the village the study employed standardized open ended interview technique.

Flaneur

The researcher employed flaneur as the technique to observe the topography, the livelihood, the settlements and the placements of hotels and groceries in the melaseval panchayat.

Rizk, J., & Birioukov, A. (2017) says that *"Flâneurs would read the public, the streets, buildings, and commodities as signifiers of a new type of existence."*[1] Flaneur is a method to explore and observe the places by casual wander. *"..the flâneur does not attempt to partake within the activities he or she is observing, rather choosing to remain on the fringes of the social interactions being examined. Through this act, the flâneur is able to be an insider looking out or an outsider looking in as the situation demands[2]"*

Standardized open ended interview

Through standardized open-ended interview the researcher had key informants describe their associations with living condition in the village. When approaching potential key informants, the researcher introduced himself and told them of the purpose of the study, then invited them to participate. In this standardized format, the researcher asked all key informants essentially the same sets of questions about the demographic details such as religion, community, educational qualification, occupation, type of house and PDS (Public Distribution System) consumption pattern.

Semiotics

The data collected from the methods of flaneur and open-ended interview was discussed through the prism of semiotics to understand the relevance and need of food as a medium of communication in exploring the culture of a land.

Presentation of Findings
Topography of the village:

Melaseval is a village in Tirunelveli district. Melaseval Town Panchayat is in the Ambasamudram Taluk of Tirunelveli District. The location of Melaseval Town Panchayat is 15km away from the west of Tirunelveli Town. According to 2011 census the population of

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[1] Rizk, J., & Birioukov, A. (2017). Following the Flâneur: The Methodological Possibilities and Applications of Flânerie in New Urban Spaces. The Qualitative Report, 22(12), 3268-3285.
[2] Rizk, J., & Birioukov, A. (2017). Following the Flâneur: The Methodological Possibilities and Applications of Flânerie in New Urban Spaces. The Qualitative Report, 22(12), 3268-3285.
Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss12/12

Melaseval is 8435. This Town Panchayat is divided into 15 wards and there are about 74 streets in these 15 wards.

Through 6 over head reservoirs having a capacity of 7.20 lakhs liters Melaseval Town Panchayat is provided with protected water supply from Thamiraparani River. The town has 8 primary School, 1 Middile School and 1 high School.[3]

The following table explains the wards and streets in the Melaseval Panchayat[4].

Ward Number	Street Number	Street Name
03	Street-01	Periyasamy Colony
	Street-02	Kaathan Colony
	Street-03	New Colony
	Street-04	Periyar Nagar
07	Street-01	Nadar Theru
	Street-02	Periya pallivasal Theru
	Street-03	Koliyar vadakku Theru
	Street-04	Koliyar nadutheru
	Street-05	Koliyar therku Theru
10	Street-01	Kammangudi Theru
	Street-02	Thevamar vadakku Theru
	Street-03	Thevamar nadutheru
	Street-04	Thevamar therku Theru
	Street-05	Mugammathiyar Theru
	Street-06	Illathar vadakku Theru
	Street-07	Illathar therku Theru
11	Street-01	Mela idakudi theru
	Street-02	Vaniyankudi theru
	Street-03	Keela idakudi theru
	Street-04	Venu gopal sami sannathi theru
12	Street-01	Palaiya Graamam
	Street-02	Annavi mudukku theru
	Street-03	Rastha therku theru
	Street-04	Keelarathaveethi mudukku theru
	Street-05	Therku ratha veethi
13	Street-01	Selvipuram
	Street-02	Vadakkurathaveethi
	Street-03	Rastha vadakku theru
	Street-04	Navaneetha Krishna perumal sami sannathi theru
	Street-05	Keelarathaveethi
	Street-06	Melarathaveethi

In Melaseval, every street is exclusive particular caste and the hierarchy declines from the centre of the village towards the outer circle. And also most of the street name reflects the

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[3] http://www.townpanchayat.in/melaseval

[4] The data has been obtained from Village Officer in the Melaseval Village Panchayat Office

presence of caste majority in that street. Even in this twenty first century inter-mingle of different caste households in a street happened in very small number. And the mobilization of households from outer circle of the mentioned village topography towards inner circle didn't happen in the Melaseval village.

The structure of Melaseval village still reflects the typical village structure of caste pyramid. (Tho.Paramasivan, 2018 (fifth edition)) a Tamil scholar, writer and also an ethnographer who prominently worked on the culture and society of people of South Tamilnadu (specially Tirunelveli and Madurai) defined the topography of village in South Tamilnadu as 'the village that built around a big temple with the support of government possess a structure around the temple. In the core near to the temple Brahmins usually lives, next to that circle Vellalar (Saiva pillai) usually lives, next to that circle in-between castes lives and the dalits live distant from that circle'.

Regarding observation of hotel or restaurant, there were only two hotels in this village. That too situated at outside of the village, i.e. near to main road. In the ward no.3 there was no hotels and this ward was situated outside of the village.

Living Condition
Religion: Majority of the population in Melaseval panchayat is Hindu. Christian population is minimum and scattered in few streets. Muslims are exclusive to one street alone in Melaseval Panchayat.
Community: Brahmin, Saiva Pillai, Udayar, Kambar, Yadavar, Maravar, Koliyar, Nadar, Pallar and Lebbai
Educational qualification: In the Brahmin and Saiva Pillai communities the education of men and women almost in an equal ratio and most of them were graduates. And these communities educational qualification ratio is far above than other communities in the same village. Among communities other than Brahmin and Saiva Pillai, education of men was comparatively more than education of women. There were very few graduates in these communities.
Occupation: Agriculture is the major occupation of the people residing at there. Most of the family owns land. Land owning differed among different communities. Socially backward communities have less land owning compared to the socially upward communities. Bread winner of the family with no 'land owning' probably ends up working as agricultural labour in a farm land.
Type of house: Most of the houses in Melaseval panchayat were own houses.
Public Distribution System: PDS ensures food and nutritional safety to the need and the poor. In many households of Melaseval panchayat, the commodities acquired from PDS are their major source for daily nourishment. In the PDS purchase and consumption pattern there is a motif that differs among the people of different stratum in Melaseval panchayat.

4. DISCUSSION

Food Communication in the exploration of a culture in Tamil nadu:
Melaseval village was chosen as the research setting for the present study. The social structure of Melaseval still follows the structure of feudal system. In this village social structure and social hierarchies revolves around owning of a farm land and working as a farm labour. There were about 1395 households in Melaseval village panchayat. Almost there were 10 castes living in this village panchayat. But considering the geography, there were no much differences. Of these 10 castes, 9 castes represent the same religion, i.e., Hindu.

The social structure in India is more complex. (Marx, August 9, 1853) mentioned social structure of India as *"a country not only divided between Mahommedans and Hindoo, but between tribe and tribe, between caste and caste, a society whose equilibrium resulting from a general repulsion and constitutional exclusiveness between all its members."*

The luxury of ghee, usage of coconut, preference of mutton, preference of beef, lack of usage of onion, potato or anything that grows under soil, etc,. communicates the social hierarchy and social structure in the Tamil society. According to (M. Srinivasa Aiyangar 1914) 18 castes inclusive of the Pallas and Paraiyas, constitutes the principal castes or tribes of Tamilnadu (*"பள்ளுபறை பதினெட்டு சாதியும்"* *(palluparai pathinettu jathiyum).* He said that the reasons for the breakup of few Dravidian tribes into innumerable castes were because of food, occupation, religion and locality.[5] So there is a relevance to explore the food practices of a caste to understand their culture and social status in the Tamil society.

5. CONCLUSION

Indian society food culture and its practice are unique than western nations. For example, in Tamil society for a long time Brahmins only accept raw food from inter-caste because receiving raw food considered sacred and regarding Dalit they can only receive cooked food from inter-caste, because it implied alms. In this context food communicates pure vs impure, art of preparation, facilities of preparation and the material culture of the community. So there is an enormous space for the exploration of food as a semiotic medium in the communication of culture in Tamil society.

Even vegetarian vs non vegetarian foods in India also hold higher semiotic interpretations and symbolic interactions than in western nations. (Ambedkar, 1948) stated that *"Hindus will show that there are two taboos regarding food which serve as dividing lines. There is one taboo against meat-eating. It divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh eaters. There is another taboo which is against beef eating. It divides Hindus into those who eat cow's flesh and those who do not."*

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