

# Chapter 10

## Food and Mediations: Tales of Culinary Cultures and Punjabi Media Representation

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter attempts to look at food and its representation in media with a special focus on Punjab and its cuisine. The work locates important symbols pertaining to the food culture of Punjab in sites such as cookbooks and cinema, which interestingly mix traditional with contemporary representations of material life. The first section looks at the cultural expressions of Punjabi cuisine in cookbooks against the backdrop of the history of Punjab, its ancient ties, and cultural affiliations of the past. Questions of caste, gastro-ethnicity, and stereotyping are also examined. The second section attempts to review select Bollywood films in order to cast light onto the contemporary socio-cultural conceptions of Punjabi culture. The study concludes by observing the ways in which food emerges as a commodity spectacle through stories and ideas on the food of Punjab. The work is carried out in order to exemplify the role of food in the creation of a cultural imaginary and explore the subtle connection that food and food culture share with the multiple intersections of an individual's identity.*

### INTRODUCTION

It should come as no surprise that food is invested with profound symbolic significance. This is well illustrated in our cultural coding of possible nutrition into acceptable food and subsequent categorizations that structure that food as edible or inedible (see Levi-Strauss, 1966; Mäkelä J, 2000). For, as famously argued by Roland Barthes (2013), food serves as a 'sign'—it is not only a useful lens and a remarkable tool to understand the nuances of a particular society, but is also the means for examining the construction of ideas, values, assumptions, practices, and institutions of a social group. For instance, the general semiotic properties of food as well as its important affective role through its classification in the traditional Hindu society was/is crucial in the examination of the caste system in India. Food transactions,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6605-3.ch010

much the same as preparation, distribution, and consumption of food, form an integral part of the moral and spiritual universe of the people in India (Appadurai, 1981). Indian food culture has been studied and understood through many parameters. There is a wide range of scholarship on Indian food which has examined food practices in India through the questions of identity, religion, ethnicity, regionalism, nationalism, colonialism, caste, class and gender. This is conspicuous in substantive literature which has examined food practices in India in relation to caste identity (Guru, 2009; Khare, 1992; Appadurai, 1981, 1988; Thorat and Lee, 2005; Freed, 1970; Iversen & Raghavendra, 2006; Mayer, 1997; Parry, 1999; Dixit, 2018; Beteille, 1997) and changes in food habits or dietary acculturation (Mahadevan and Blair, 2009). A study of food restrictions, asceticism, commensality (rules about 'interdining'), and social change has drawn the attention of many scholars like Adrian Mayer (1997), Stig Toft Madsen (1991), McKim Marriott (1968) and Stanley A. Freed (1970). However, a major focus of the literature on the food culture of India and commensality has come from sociology, anthropology and history. How food in its diverse functions can signal powerful social messages (Strauss, 1966) and mobilize strong emotions in different contexts has yet not been examined substantially from the media perspective. As yet, little attention has been given to locate food within the field of study that deals with the mediated experiences of food in the popular media. Therefore, a survey of its media representation as well as 'mediated' knowledge that it produces also forms an important area of investigation in social science research.

The study explores some interesting storytelling methods and techniques in media representation through which *Punjabi* foodways have been popularly discussed. E.N Enderson (2005), in his discussion on the constitution of foodways, talks about the importance of 'biocultural approach,' which incorporates human biology, culture, and political economy, all at once – recognizing that all are crucial determinants of particular food systems. His main argument, however, is that our food preferences are notoriously subjected to cultural and social factors, although our basic nutritional needs are set by biology and regulated by the environment. In agreement with this debate, the present work tries to locate how media invokes an experience of eating food, especially *Punjabi* food, which is dependent not only on the haptic sensitivity of the tongues and mouths but also on our olfactory abilities.

It can be noticed that the specific media uses various techniques—media techniques—like language, articulation, visuals, spatial arrangements, gestures, and performance to deliver the meaning or taste of food. Also, media produces a set of new parameters, ideas, taste, behaviors, etc. to food, which on the one hand is specific to media but on the other hand also relates to the question of consumer culture and production of a new set of values, taste, ideas about people, class, and region. Therefore the study would like to contextualize various food and media practices to understand how media appropriates the ethnic cuisine or a *Punjabi* recipe to induce new ideas about food and its consumption patterns.

This work is primarily about mediations of socio-cultural tropes of Punjab, which has been analyzed through its distinct cuisine and foodways. It further explores the manner in which *Punjabi* food is semanticized in media weaving a complex web of stories on *Punjabi* identity. *Punjabi* cuisine and its representation in two important media sites, cookbooks and cinema, have been chosen as the fulcrum of study. This is mainly because it is in these media sites that the socio-cultural importance of food (traditional as well as contemporary) can be located. Cookbooks tell us about consumption practices and food tastes popularized by the name of *Punjabi* cuisine. Movies tell us about the popular representation of regional identity and issues of stereotyping in media.

The significance of analyzing media platforms like cookbooks and cinema for the discussion on the process of mediation lies in their uniqueness, affordances, and biases, which may reduce or amplify the effect of representation. The study, while explores the mediation of food of Punjab (i.e., exploration of

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