



THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF FOOD CHOICES: CLASS AND CULINARY IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Food is more than just something to eat; it is a cultural artifact that reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, identities, and power structures. This article explores the interplay between class, culinary identity, and the politics of food. Class distinctions are often made visible through food choices, with affluent groups associating themselves with “organic” or “artisanal” options, while economically disadvantaged groups are relegated to affordable yet stigmatized diets. Cultural heritage through ethnic and regional food practices are mostly commodified and consumed to reduce their cultural importance. Marketing and food fad continue to reinforce the stereotypes related to class and gender. As globalization impacts the old food systems, indigenous groups suffer from commodification of staples such as quinoa and avocados. However, food also becomes a site of resistance, with movements for food sovereignty and the preservation of culinary heritage challenging homogenization and inequality. As Wendell Berry says, “Eating is an agricultural act”, reminding us of the interconnectedness of food, identity, and politics. By deconstructing food choices under the prism of this lens, the study reveals how much they are embedded in the systems of privilege and resistance. Therefore, food emerges as a powerful tool of cultural expression and social change.

Keywords: Food politics, class identity, culinary traditions, globalization, food sovereignty, cultural appropriation, resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

Food is much more than just sustenance; it is a potent social and cultural symbol that cognizes and recreates class hierarchies. Food consumption choices have marked status identity across societies, wherein the affluent consume gourmet, organic artisanal foods while the economically disadvantaged rely on cheap, low-cost, and moreover, stigmatized alternatives. Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital explains how food acts as an agent for distinguishing social status, thereby displaying the legitimation of elite identities while relegating the others. In India, food is very much intertwined with caste, religion, and regional identity - urban elites prefer premium and international cuisines, while traditional rural staples face deep disdain. The rebranding of millets, from being popular staples of the lesser privileged to their promotion as over-the-top elite health foods, is a case in point. This is an example of how traditional foods are coming to be monetized and commodified in a manner in keeping with aspired culinary choices. Chennai nurtures a class distinction with vast ranges of accommodation; the rich patronize upscale restaurants, and street food remains devalued. Consumption patterns elaborate food as a medium of class application through which identity and social mobility become socially constructed. This paper will look at how food choices invoke political power structures and aspirations, and lateral ideas of traditional commoditization and hierarchization play an inexorable role in the construction of new social landscapes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, the extremejuena patatera, once considered a humble rural staple, became an extraordinary product of the highest standards. Traditionally prepared with pork fat, mashed potatoes, and spices, patatera had a low price, a food missing from the table of peasants and shepherds during periods of scarcity, appreciated for its durability. Gourmetisation, promoted by regional authorities through the heritagisation of local festivals, has upgraded the patatera to a status of being a premium, culturally relevant product. Restaurants and food experts have

repositioned it for the high-income consumer to target the “foodie” crowd looking for authenticity and exclusivity. This move is reflective of more profound trends in commercializing cultural cuisines towards being palatable to elitist cuisines, following Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts on cultural capital and social distinction. This devalorization, although benefitting the local producers, leaves an ethical question regarding its access to the people as well as the authenticity of their cultural heritage (David Conde Caballero).

Another article examines how the Shakespeare's plays, used food as a very potent symbol of social mobility and class dynamics. In the 17th century, exquisite foods that were once only for the privileged families, such as the Capulets, had become available for common celebrations. Food was also a means of imitation, whereby the common folk adopted elite culinary practices to emulate upper-class lifestyles. Conversely, Shakespeare represented food as a venue of class conflict, in the food riots or more humorously in the turning of Falstaff into 'mung pudding.' Through these food symbols, historical and modern audiences have resounded with communication, conflict, and social change (SH, 2011).

People who dealt that how taste transformation processes occur when consumers experience social mobility dynamics. This is precisely the case of consumers from the new middle class around the world, mainly represented by the BRIC economies and emerging markets like Turkey, India, and Eastern Europe. The recent growth of this social stratum in emerging countries became interesting contexts to investigate taste transformation phenomena, chiefly because of the occurrence of multiple and coexisting taste structures. (LF, 2018).

Supporting the above content, food reflects and reinforces class identity, with dietary preferences acting as cultural capital. Working-class parents prioritize affordable, filling meals amid stigmatization from public health narratives, while middle-class practices emphasize health and etiquette. Cultural ideals, like Black women's preference for curvaceous body types, challenge universal beauty norms. Woolhouse critiques policies like calorie labeling, advocating for community-based approaches that address disparities without stigmatizing marginalized groups, emphasizing food's cultural significance. (Woolhouse)

While much literature explores food and class, there is limited focus on how culinary identity intersects with cultural politics, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study addresses this gap by analyzing food practices within global, Indian, and local frameworks. This study aims

to address these gaps by exploring the influence of culinary capital on class perceptions and social opportunities in both global and local contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pierre Bourdieu

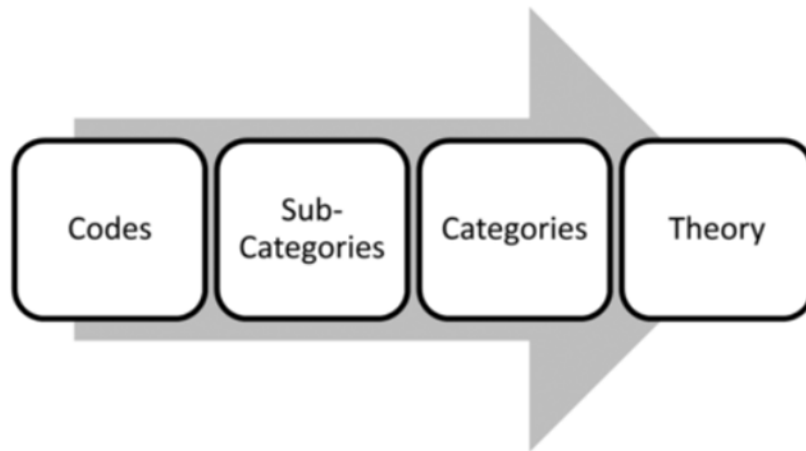
French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term in his 1973 book, *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*. Cultural capital is the term used to describe a kind of social currency that covers values, experiences, knowledge, and behaviours that make it easier for individuals to move around cultural contexts. It is a non-economic, intangible resource that people use, like dialect, educational credentials, and the social signaling carried in material items such as clothing. Bourdieu proposed that differences in cultural capital are responsible for the reinforcement of social class differences. He discussed how cultural capital could be used to move up the social ladder between classes or how institutions, especially schools, reproduce class by passing on cultural capital.

Bourdieu identified three types of cultural capital which shape an individual:

- Embodied State: All the knowledge and skills a person owns.
- Objectified State: Tangible items that hold cultural or social significance.
- Institutionalized State: Formal recognition and valuation granted by society to cultural capital.

Grounded Theory - This theory was developed in California, USA by Glaser and Strauss during their study on “Awareness of Dying”. Grounded Theory is a research method which is concerned with generation of theory, from the systematic collection and analysis of data collection. It aims to bring out unexplored areas in social processes. The data is analysed in three stages. Primarily, its *open coding* which involves line by line coding where main concepts are highlighted into sub-category and category. Secondly, its *axial coding* where a

relationship is identified between the categories. Lastly, *selective coding* in which the theory proposed revolves around one core idea¹. (Helen Noble, n.d.).



Alienation - Alienation is a state of estrangement or disconnection, where individuals feel separated from their work, society, others, or their true selves. Rooted in theories by Karl Marx, it often arises in capitalist systems, where workers lack control over production and its outcomes. Alienation can also reflect broader existential, social, or psychological discontent, manifesting as isolation, powerlessness, or loss of meaning in life, exacerbated by modern societal changes.

While none of these theories specifically address the relationship between food and class, their application to our study allows us to explore food as a culturally embedded phenomenon that influences personal and collective decision-making within specific contexts. This approach provides a deeper understanding of how astrology continues to influence various aspects of daily.

¹ The relationships must be authenticated and categories refined. Categories are then integrated together and a GT identified to define a core idea.

OBJECTIVES

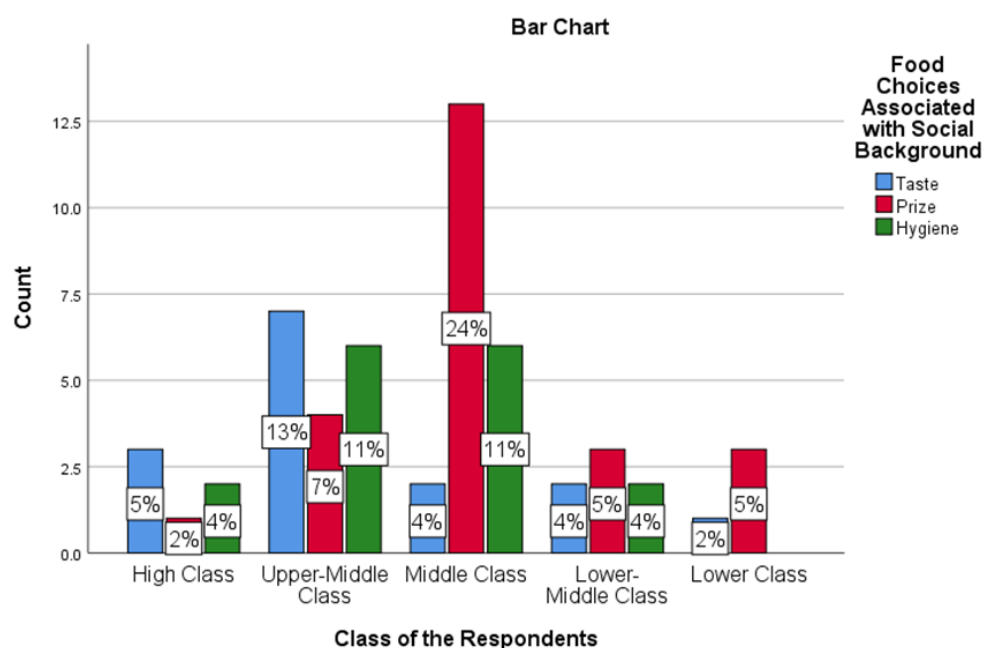
- To explore the relationship between food practices and the construction of class identities in contemporary society.
- To analyze how cultural traditions and family structures influence food choices across different social classes.
- To identify various trends in foods as an impact of class.
- To investigate how food consumption patterns reinforce or challenge class-based social hierarchies and stereotypes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a mixed-method approach to examine the relationship between food practices and class identities in Chennai. The objectives include the analysis of socio-demographic characteristics, the cultural influences on food choices, and how consumption patterns reinforce or challenge class hierarchies. Structured interviews were conducted with 55 participants, aged 20 or older, comprising 23 women and 32 men through convenience sampling techniques. The schedule of the same interview was improved as necessary with a pre-testing of 10 respondents. Primary data were collected through interviews from December 12th 2024 to December 25th 2024, while secondary data came from research papers, articles, and journals. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Limitations included reluctance of respondents, social desirability bias, time constraint, and little empirical validation.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN FOOD CHOICES AND CLASS OF INDIVIDUALS



The bar chart shows the relationship between food choices and social backgrounds, which are classified into High Class, Upper-Middle Class, Middle Class, Lower-Middle Class, and Lower Class. The difference must be analysed with the aspect of caste as it is intertwined in our culture. The factors for food choice considered are Taste, Price, and Hygiene. In the High Class, Taste is the most important factor 5%, followed by Hygiene 4% and Price 2%. In the Upper-Middle Class, Taste is the first, 13%, followed by Hygiene, 11%, and then Price, 7%.

“I mostly eat in the place which has variety of cuisines to explore and incorporate proper standards of food maintenance”, says a respondent.

In the Middle Class, Price is dominant at 24%, followed by an equal amount of Taste and Hygiene at 11% each. For the Lower-Middle Class, the factors are all at parity for all three: Taste, Price, and Hygiene are all at 4%. Finally, in the Lower Class, Price and Hygiene are equal at 5%, while Taste is the smallest at 2%. All in all, the table shows that Price is considered more important to both the Middle and Lower Classes, whereas Taste and Hygiene carry more importance in the Upper-Middle and Higher Classes, which illustrates variation in food choice based on social class and economic needs.

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BASED ON THEIR PERCEPTION ON PEOPLE ABOUT DIFFERENT CLASS



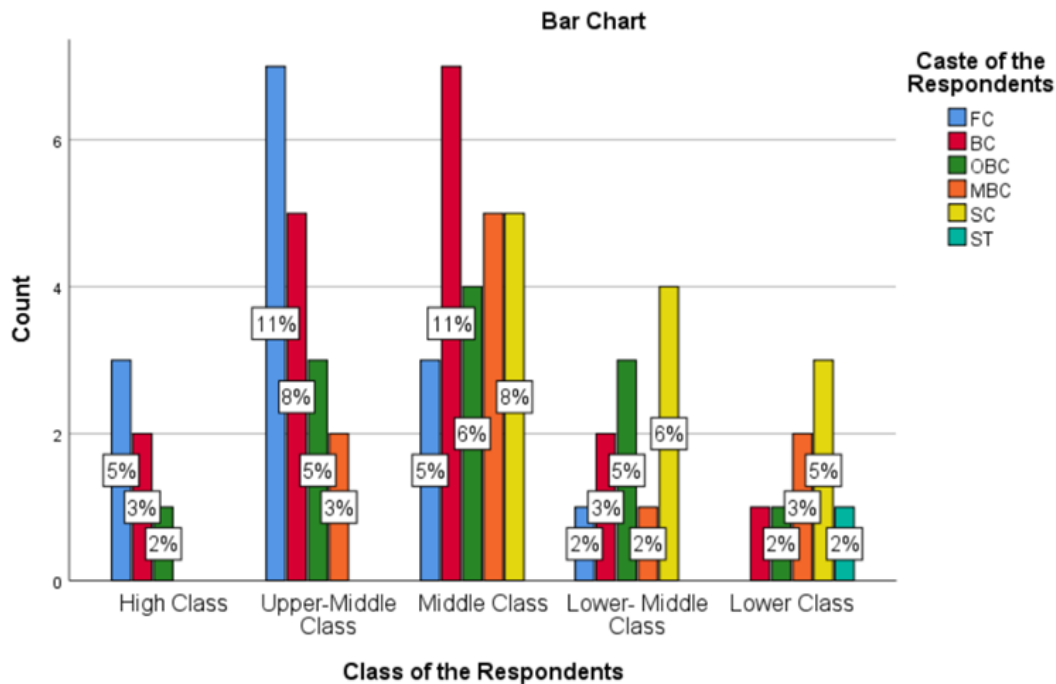
This bar chart represents peoples' perceptions of food preferences with regard to the social classes and further focuses on three categories such as costly food with less quantity, moderate cost and quantity of food, and low rate with more quantity of food. The biggest group constitutes 45% with moderate cost and quantity, indicating the perception of balancing the affordable portion is most common in this regard. The second segment, at 35%, associates with expensive food but in lesser amount, often being viewed as an indicator of more upscale tastes.

“Expensive but smaller servings of food are sometimes considered classy and expensive tastes”, says a respondent.

The last smallest segment is at 20% and associated with inexpensive, mass amounts of food, most likely related to lower socio-economic status perceptions.

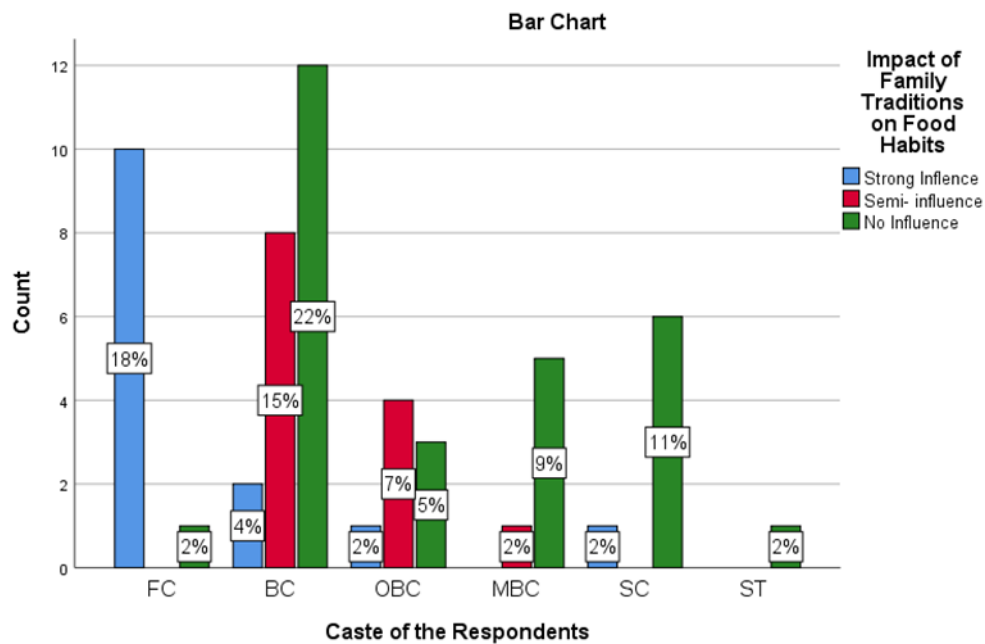
“Our family is usually large in number and our family often loose a breadwinner consequently, thus we tend have a special meal rarely in a large quantity to feed our family needs”, says a respondent.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CASTE AND CLASS



The bar chart gives us a picture of how and where social class and caste intersect within socioeconomic status. Within the High Class, the forward castes (FC) dominate at 5%, followed by backward castes (BC) at 3% and other close margins for Others Backward Classes (OBC), Most Backward Class (MBC), SC, and ST at a scanty 2%. This gives way to slow upward mobility for some backward castes in the Upper Middle Class, where BC occupies the high ground at 11% after FC at 8%, OBC at 5%, and SC at 3%. In the Middle Class, it is BC at 11% OBC at 8% holding the lead, with smaller doses from FC, SC, and MBC. In the Lower Middle Class, SC is the most represented at 6% in conjunction with BC, which is next at 5%, while FC and ST occupy lower positions at 5% and 2%, respectively. The lowest class is found mostly comprised of SC at 5% and BC at 3%. The data indicate, however, that more of the higher classes are well represented by BC and FC, while marginalized castes such as SC and ST remain concentrated in lower socioeconomic segments with sustained caste inequality.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CASTE AND IMPACT OF FAMILY TRADITIONS ON FOOD HABITS



This bar chart analyzes the influence of family traditions on food habits in different castes. It shows how family traditions influence food preferences and the differences in their significance in the context of various castes. Among the FC respondents, strong influence is the highest influence 18%, with minimum representation for semi-influence 4% and no influence 2%. This reflects that family traditions are most significant in influencing food habits among this group.

“Brahmins often emphasize traditional food practices, vegetarianism, and rituals, with meals deeply rooted in cultural and religious significance”, says a respondent

“To reduce my craze towards non-vegetarian my grandma said that I will get a body structure resembling a Shudra woman”, says Brahmin girl.

For the BC, maximum percentage 22% is in no influence followed by semi-influence which accounts for 15% and strong influence 2% is relatively the lowest. The OBC respondents are

not different in pattern, though no influence predominates here 7% followed by semi-influence 5% and strong influence 2%. This is also a case of gradual distance from tradition.

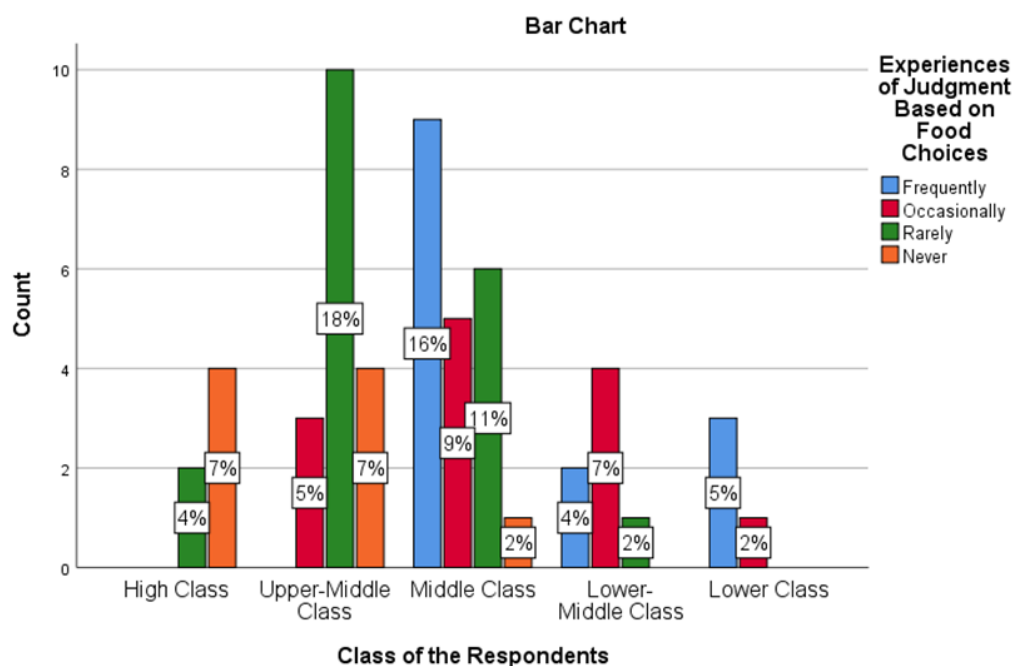
“The detachment from traditional food habits in the BC group may stem from increased urbanization, exposure to diverse cultures, economic mobility, and practical adjustments to modern lifestyles and work environments”, says a respondent.

Among the Most Backward Caste respondents, no influence again leads 9%, followed by semi-influence 2%, and strong influence 2%. This again indicates an inclination toward practicality as opposed to tradition. For the SC, no influence is highly significant at 11%, while semi-influence and strong influence remain low at 2% each. ST respondents continue to do badly across all the categories, wherein an equal representation of 2% for strong, semi, and no influence is noted. This shows a more varied or poorly defined interaction between traditions and food habits.

According to a respondent, ***“The fact that MBC and SC tend to prefer practical food habits shows inclusivity, since this allows for acceptance with social integration, breaking caste barriers, and fostering change for participation in diverse economic, professional, and social settings”.***

Summing up, no influence dominates for BC, OBC, MBC, and SC groups, which depicts diminishing importance of family traditions while strong influence persists most notably in FC respondents and represents a stronger connection with cultural practices. This chart is meant to highlight the diversity of how caste groups have put emphasis on tradition when choosing dietary choices.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CLASS AND PREJUDICE LAID ON FOOD CHOICES



The bar graph presents an exploration of the experiences of respondents exclusively from various socioeconomic classes. The Middle Class has the highest reports of judgment being leveled toward the group, with 16% declaring they experience it frequently and 11% report occasionally. The Upper-Middle also gives them a fair bit of judgment, with 18% reporting that they have felt judged but seldom, with only 7% experiencing it occasionally. In stark contrast, High Class would enjoy minimal judgment experiences, with only 4% reported to have ever felt judged and 7% saying not even once have they ever felt judged.

“They are always out judging everything we do, with whatever opinion they want about us being middle-class women; we are always filled to the brim with judgment toward our food habits, as they judge us whether we are too flashy or too cheap, depending on their verdict on such judgments; judgment being the unquestionable visible check-mark of social class,” stated a respondent.

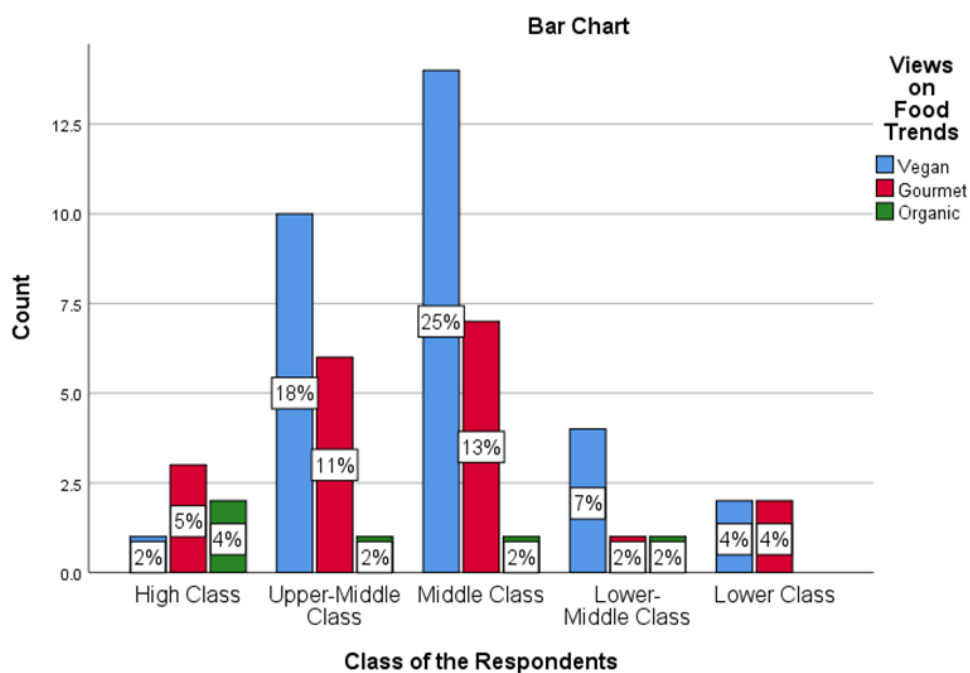
On the other side, the Lower-Middle was somewhat divided about judgment, for six occasionally by 7% and very rarely by 4%. Lower Class had the least engagement in judgment behavior; for both the periodic and seldom judges together-with 5%-the results indicate that judging is finally just not a part of life for them, as 2% say they have never been judged.

“I do not like going to the fancy places. Even when I do, when I arrive people do not see me as a privileged customer, and consequently, we are treated in the same way,” says one respondent.

To summarize, the Middle Class and Upper-Middle Class received the most consistent judgment for their food choices, while High Class and Lower Class received much lower orders of judgment and bullying on the food issue, establishing an idea of the differences around the social opinions directed along each socioeconomic line.

Case study 1 - Arjun, aged 32, a Brahmin, was brought up in a strict vegetarian household, which became the source of trouble for him at his elitist corporate office, where team lunches went to non-veg restaurants like KFC. To be accepted by his group, he chose meat for the very first time despite his internal struggle. This very choice opened for him a whole new world of discussion and togetherness during office outings and showed how food choices developed into symbolisms of class and modernity. His experience exemplifies how one manoeuvres the alleyways of cultural practices to create space for negotiating upward social mobility and social acceptance.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CLASS AND FOOD TRENDS



This bar chart analyses the prevalence of veganism, gourmet food trends, and organic food preferences among the different socioeconomic classes. Each one shows a unique pattern in the light of affordability, accessibility, and aspirational values.

Veganism is most prevalent in the Middle Class 24%, followed by the Upper-Middle Class 18%. The Middle Class adopts veganism as a way to align with health-conscious and environmentally friendly trends, reflecting their desire to signal upward mobility and progressive values.

“Veganism reflects our commitment to sustainable living and staying current with global trends”, says a respondent.

The Lower-Middle Class 9% shows less engagement due to perceived restrictions and costs, while the High Class 2% and Lower Class 4% exhibit minimal interest, with the former having broader access to diverse food options and the latter constrained by financial limitations. Gourmet food trends resonate most strongly in the Middle Class 13% and Upper-Middle Class 11%, where they are symbolic of sophistication and indulgence within achievable limits.

“Tasting gourmet food allows us to enjoy luxury but stay on the ground”, says a respondent

The High Class 5% has relatively low interest, as gourmet food is a staple part of their lives and lacks the novelty or exclusivity factor. For the Lower Class 4%, gourmet trends remain largely inaccessible, reflecting financial constraints and prioritization of basic needs over indulgence. Organic food trends have limited representation across all classes, with the Upper-Middle Class 4% leading, driven by their focus on health and ethical consumption. However, the High Class 2%, Lower-Middle Class 2%, and Lower Class 2% show minimal interest, with the High Class considering organic food as part of broader premium options, while lower classes face affordability and availability challenges.

“Choosing organic is about prioritizing health and supporting sustainable farming practices”, says a respondent.

In short, the Middle Class and Upper-Middle Class lead the trend for veganism and gourmet food as an expression of their aspirational lifestyle, whereas organic food finds little acceptance among all the groups. Socioeconomic factors such as cost, accessibility, and symbolic value weigh upon the adoption of these food trends.

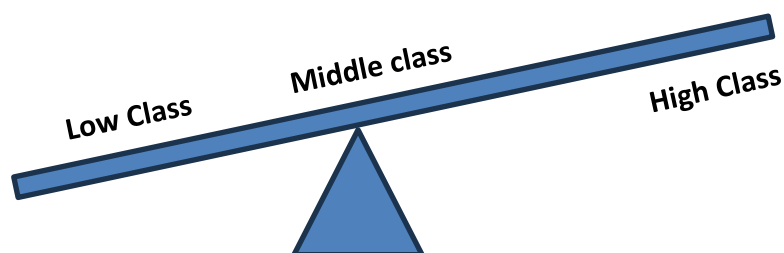
This concept of *alienation* can be implied to the commodification of tradition foods. These organic foods are mostly made up of traditional ingredients like ragi, thinnai, samai, etc. These were staple food of working class in the society. As an impact of class domination people felt alienated and as they are currently consuming leading to a situation where their basic need food is served to elite class.

Case Study 2- An organic biscuit exporter has made it clear that actual customers are middle-class consumers, not upper-class ones. They think of organic biscuits as a symbol of sophistication and health-conscious lifestyles connected with a higher-class status. While those biscuits do cost more money than regular ones, they buy them so as to show their upward mobility. The exporter referred to his biscuits as "affordable luxury"- a symbol of modernity and progress. Conversely, the upper-class view those goods as ordinary, thus favoring some niche, exotic food items.

5.3 RECOMMENDATION

Grounded Theory is a research method which is concerned with generation of theory, from the systematic collection and analysis of data collection. It aims to bring out unexplored areas in social processes based on a core idea. Thus, based on the paper a theory is built.

IMBALANCE BETWEEN FOOD AND CLASS



This image shows the food access inequalities sharply drawn across class boundaries, starkly conditioned by caste mobility rigidity. In general, significant inequities in food access across caste lines have been overlaid by the rigidity of caste mobility. It is well known that Chennai is mired in the rigidity of caste-based systems. Caste hierarchies intertwine themselves with class as economic structures to prevent mobility for marginalized groups. Historically, these

communities are relegated to the ranks of lowly labour, often clutching tightly to the aspect of poverty that now renders them unable to gain safe and healthy access to food and a diverse diet.

This rigidity is a result of generation-old discrimination in which marginalized castes do not have access to land ownership, schooling, or stable jobs. The absence of these resources bars their escalations within the economic strata and access to food security. On the other side of the fence, dominant castes generally enjoy systemic and generational privileges, together with richer economic classes, that guarantee them nutritious and diverse food choices.

The immobility based on caste propels such inequalities wherein access to food remains a reflection of one's caste and economic status. Until these structural barriers are dismantled, food access inequalities will remain. This is how people begin a few habits to break this rigidity of the ancient caste system, following which a theory was put forth to analyze the implications of such attitudes.

Grounded Theory: Socio-food Aspiration Theory

Core Concept-

Lower and middle-class people consciously adopt certain high-class food habits and choices as gestures of social mobility that could be interpreted as aspirations to fit in with the perceived elite cultural norms. This behavior results from the quest for recognition, respect, and inclusion into the higher socio-economic classes.

Key Components of the Theory:

- ***Symbolic adoption:*** The lower and middle classes adopt high-class food items such as gourmet foods, fine dining restaurants, or organic and health-conscious eating as status symbols reflecting the class's affinity with elite consumption trends.
- ***Economic costs:*** Low disposable income forces these people to choose high-class food occasionally, which signals their aspirational identity, for example, eating in expensive restaurants at exorbitantly high costs on special occasions.

- ***Social visibility:*** These food choices are often ostentatiously displayed in social contexts-say, from social media posts, community gatherings, or even professional events-to signal sophistication, a membership to the upwardly mobile elite.
- ***Accumulation of cultural capital:*** Adopting elite food habits allows one to collect cultural capital-that is, ease with oneself and access to elite circles where career and networking opportunities exist.
- ***Perceived validation:*** The positive reinforcement from the acknowledgment or approval of social peers for this behavior serves to strengthen the behavior in a positive feedback loop, creating an identity that is a societal member who occasionally engages in high-class food preferences.

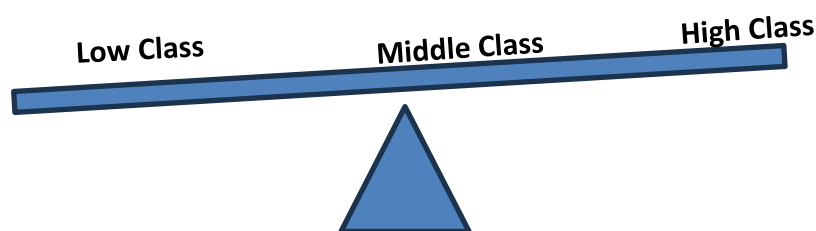
Stages of Adaptation:

Awareness Stage-People come to be aware of high-class food habits through the media, occasions, or interaction with higher-class people.

- ***Experimentation Stage-***Minimal introduction to high-class food habits, an instance-to-instance exploration of gourmet or organic food items closer to their economic status.
- ***Adoption-***Widespread adaptations of high-class food factors to everyday consumption patterns, in general, in the right context, like the occasion where it can enjoy all eyes and attention by having an inclusive food culture.
- ***Normalization stage-***In a second stage, these decisions come to represent part of that individual's social identity,¹⁰⁰ thereby altering perception in terms of self-conception and also how others conceptualize that person.

This grounded theory ostensibly illustrates the intersection of food, aspiration, and identity, showing just how pivotal are, in fact, symbolic choice in consumption in the configuration of social perception, as well as upward mobility.

BALANCE BETWEEN FOOD AND CLASS



The seesaw signifies upward social mobility among the people. Social mobility is multi-directional. Food, able to indicate class change more subtly, can be used to explore it. People in the lower classes often transition out of food that is bulk-based and considered cheap (oriented toward quantity) toward a stage where hygiene and sometimes presentation become criteria of choice in luxury items. They might begin to consume branded or trendy foods like packaged snacks or drinks and show off better-cooked traditional meals on festive occasions to gain social respect. In between are the middle classes, incorporating regional and international influences, and these end-users' tastes are almost universally modern and eclectic. The shift towards foods that were previously not present on the dining table, like organic or vegan foods and all their manifestations hidden inside some cool or mid-range restaurants, marks a need and quasi-membership into an upper-class lifestyle.

In contrast, the upper class chooses food due to its exclusivity, sophistication, and environmental consciousness. Wealth becomes a statement as the dining experience explodes with common, yet rare ingredients such as truffles or high-end imports—stories of conflict, bribery, beauty, and collaboration precisely recreated at the table. The upper class sustains its cultural capital by linking food choices to sophistication and conscious consumption. Thus, a decipheration of the upward mobility intuited through the migration from one social class to another marks this journey as actually a wink out for escalation and further empathy of not only an in-road toward class conscience but even an attempt to balance between elitism and access as an accidental mix that maybe aspires socially.

CONCLUSION

The study brings to the fore the interdependence of class, caste, and culture frustrating their perception and habits regarding food. With respect to taste, the distinction between the Middle and Upper Middle Classes and Lower and Lower Middle Classes came forth, with such latter groups being said to be rather practical. The Forward Castes have still held onto their tradition; for the others, the change is slow-urbanization and economic mobility. Food plays such an important role in the transition of Middle-Class identity in their aspiration for upward mobility. For lower castes, stressing hygiene and affordability is considered paramount, while for upper cohorts, such distinctions pertain to exclusivity and finesse. Food moves beyond mere consumption to become an important social and cultural marker of class mobility and identity. Choices around food inclusions might serve as deterrence for levels of inequalities in society, as well as equity in food culture.

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