

National Seminar on Food Cultures of India

November 28-29, 2016

Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Assam, India

Sponsored by: Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) and Tezpur University

Concept Note

Food is indisputably one of the most important aspects of our everyday lives. Since the advent of the 'cultural turn' in the sixties of the last century, many taken-for-granted-aspects of culture have come to be questioned in academic discourses. Food is a wonderful example of this. While consumed on a daily basis, it is often considered as mere sustenance. The consumption of food is a common act, which, in spite of its importance for our survival, deceives us by its everydayness. This everydayness helps to underplay the manner in which food pervades all aspects of our lives from the most intimate to the most professional practices. It is also a key factor in how we view ourselves and others; it is at the center of social and political issues, and is one of the mainstays of popular media.

As a topic of academic interest, food provides multiple points of entry. Food has been studied in history in order to look at its cultural, economic, and environmental impact. The more traditional field of culinary history focuses on the origin and recreation of specific recipes. Historians look at food as one of the most important elements of cultures, reflecting the social and economic structures of society. Archaeologists/prehistorians tried to explore this dimension by linking food with evolutionary perspectives and issues of migration/diffusion etc.

Anthropology and history offer us the opportunity to explore food historically and culturally. Marvin Harris explored the relationship between food and ecology, trying to understand how food practices are finally related to material conditions of life. Food habits, in terms of what is considered as edible or inedible by a community is as powerful a marker of social identity as the incest taboo. Margaret Mead cited the relationship between the two taboos in the following proverb from New Guinea:

“Your own mother, your own sister, your own pigs, your own yams which you have piled up, you may not eat” (quoted in Rosman, Rubel, and Weisgrau, 2009: 86).

The proverb also highlights the symbolic aspect of food and women’s relationship with it. Many literary writers have explored the symbolically cannibalistic nature of the relationship between the sexes in terms of food; in a society marked by unequal power relationship between the sexes who ‘eats’ whom is a political question. We are all aware of the surprisingly lesser number of representations of scenes of women consuming food in the literary and visual arts. The powerless can only be equated with food; she cannot be in a position to ‘eat’.

Sociology of food enables us to understand the connection between food and social identity. Food is also a marker of class and caste identification; for the sake of being included in a group, people will eat things that they actually hate and avoid perfectly tasty food that is on the forbidden list. The process of upward social mobility entails the learning and unlearning of food related practices.

On the other hand, folklore enables us to look more closely at how traditional food is prepared and to draw the boundary between authentic culinary heritage and invented traditions. Practices of social change and continuity can thus be meaningfully interpreted through an exploration of the connection between food and folklore.

Though philosophers have generally stayed away from undertaking sustained analyses of food and food-related practices, in recent times there have been attempts made to address this issue academically. Two edited collections - Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe’s *Food and Philosophy* and David M. Kaplan’s *The Philosophy of Food* bring together leading philosophers of our times to consider the most basic questions about food: the questions of ethics, choices and scarcity.

Food paintings constitute a separate line of development. Food images echo and revise the character of different schools of painting, but these are also never quite divorced from their own particular histories of places.

Management of food involves looking at the economics and business operation of food processing. It is possible to analyze food policies and their relationship with food industries. The scarcity of food and the political question of food aid (for example, which country will qualify for it in the event of a natural calamity) are vitally important questions.

The interdisciplinary field of food science draws from disciplines such as biology, chemical engineering, and biochemistry in an attempt to better understand food processes to improve food products for the general public. Food scientists study the physical, microbiological, and chemical makeup of food. The food we consume everyday is the result of research. Along with research on

the improvement of food, food technology is concerned with the mass production of food products.

As discussed earlier, consumption of food is both a material practice as well as a symbolic act. What people eat, how and with whom apart from what they feel about food and why are crucial markers of the relationship between the members of a society. Theoretical frameworks for understanding consumption practices, commodification and food imagery are aplenty – one is of course immediately reminded of ‘fetishism’ as conceived by Marx and Freud, and the anthropological views of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

More recently, Cultural Studies has provided several theoretical frameworks for understanding food cultures. In *Food and Cultural Studies* Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones and Ben Taylor have associated food with the idea of the circuit of culture, developed first by Richard Johnson (1986). Accordingly, he argues that “the meaning or ‘life story’ of any food cultural phenomenon – a foodstuff, a diet, and table manners – needs to be understood in relation to five major cultural processes: production, regulation, representation, identity and consumption” (Ashley, Hollows, Jones, Taylor, 2004: vii).

In more recent times, Food Studies has emerged as an important interdisciplinary field of enquiry, situated at the convergence point of a number of disciplines. Several leading institutions around the world are offering courses on Food Studies. Food Studies is not just only about the study of food itself. One could argue that the trajectory of development of Food Studies has been along the same lines as Cultural Studies (which also, is not only about the study of culture per se). Food Studies deals with more than the mere production, consumption, and aesthetic appreciation of food. It provides the vantage point to look at the relationship between food and people from the variety of perspectives offered by art, science, management, technology, sociology, cultural studies, economics, health, social justice, literature, anthropology, and history.

With these in mind, papers are invited on the following sub-themes. These sub-themes are however only indicative and presenters would be free to associate with any of the central issues relating to food.

Sub-themes:

- i. Food, identity and ethnicity
- ii. Prehistoric food culture/domestication of plants/animals
- iii. History of food/spices
- iv. Representation of food in literature, cinema and other expressive traditions

- v. Edibility and the absence of food
- vi. Food and gender
- vii. Food, trade and the market
- viii. Food, orality and stratification
- ix. Diet, disease and medicine
- x. Appetite, consumption and the ad-world
- xi. Globalization and food-security

References:

Rosman, Abraham, Paula G. Rubel, and Maxine Weisgrau. 2009. *The Tapestry of Culture: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Alta Mira Press.

Allhoff, Fritz and Dave Monroe (Ed.) 2007. *Food and Philosophy: Eat, Think, and Be Merry*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.

Kaplan, David M. 2012. *The Philosophy of Food*. University of California Press.

Ashley, Bob, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones and Ben Taylor. 2004. *Food and Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Harris, M. 2001. *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*. London: Alta Mira Press.

Important Dates

Events	Dates
Deadline for abstract submission	October 22, 2016
Notification of abstract acceptance	October 26, 2016
Submission of full papers	November 19, 2016
Seminar Dates	November 28-29, 2016

The abstract should be a 250-300 word summary of the intended paper with 4-5 key words at the end. The language of the seminar is English. The abstract will be reviewed and acceptance notified as per dates. Mere submission does not imply acceptance of the abstract. The abstract should include the title of the paper, name and affiliation of the author and contact details. On acceptance

the full paper of around 5000-7000 words has to be submitted within the due date. APA style guide (6th ed.) has to be followed while submitting the full paper. Email abstracts to jd8229@gmail.com

Registration

Category	Amount
Academics, Professionals	Rs 1500/-
Researchers, Students	Rs 1000/-

The registration fee will cover the lunch and dinner for the seminar dates, high tea, refreshments and a seminar kit. The fee can be submitted at the time of desk registration on November 28, 2016. No waiver can be entertained at this moment due to lack of funds.

Publication

The organizers intend to bring out an edited volume from the accepted papers after the seminar, details of which will be intimated separately.

Accommodation

Paid accommodation will be made available for outstation presenters only on twin sharing basis in the University guest house. The current rate for a twin sharing room is Rs 500/- only per day. After acceptance of abstracts, paper presenters can share their travel details so that accommodation can be booked in advance.

About Tezpur University

Established in 1994, Tezpur University has been steadily surging ahead with its mission of producing professionals of high competence through innovative methods of pedagogy and with world class infrastructure. Nestled on a 262- acre campus in central Assam, the University has come of age in attaining certain distinctive heights in the national and international academic firmament. The University was conferred the Visitor's Best University Award 2016 among all the central universities of India. The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) of the ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, ranked the University 5th among top 100 universities in India for the year 2016. Accredited "A" by NAAC in 2016. Currently, the university offers 70 carefully chosen academic programmes through 20 departments under the School of Engineering, Humanities and Social Sciences, Management and Sciences. With 3800 students, 260 faculty members and 280 administrative and technical personnel, the university today is a hub of quality activities in higher education and research.

How to Reach

Tezpur is 180 kms. away from Guwahati, the state capital of Assam. Regular buses and mini travellers from Guwahati are available throughout the day from Paltanbazaar, Khanapara and Inter

State Bus Terminus. It takes 3-4 hrs. to cover the distance depending on the mode of transport. Tezpur University is located 12 kms. from Tezpur town, the district headquarters of Sonitpur. University buses ply from the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC) depot throughout the day. The schedule is available in university website (www.tezu.ernet.in). Alternatively, autos can be hired from the town to reach the university campus which charges anything between Rs 200-250/- for one way.

Contact

Professor Debarshi Prasad Nath
Head
Department of Cultural Studies
Tezpur University
E-mail: hod_cul@tezu.ernet.in

Dr. Jayanta Vishnu Das
Assistant Professor
Department of Cultural Studies
Tezpur University
E-mail: jd8229@gmail.com