Food Security: A mere ‘Environmental Concern?’

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Food can be a site of bodily negotiations and political contestations (Gailani, 2017; Epp, 2015; Divorski, 2008). Through the lens of food, the intertwined and intersectional ideas of identity, economy, society and agency can be explored with further nuances. Through its abundance or absence, food can create, redefine or challenge social relations and hierarchies between the kin or members of a community (Trapp, 2016; Schnegg, 2016). By analysing some of the contemporary academic papers (and chapters from a book) discussing food through a socio-anthropological lens, this essay will focus on understanding how the idea of food security not only poses an economic or policy related issue, but is also deep rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of the societies. It also seeps in deeply and tints the social process of identity creation, negotiation and rejection. The intersection between social, political, environmental and economic is built on the base of gender and class differences of the most marginalized groups in the communities. Therefore, by making an attempt to engender and politicize the bodies involved in preparation and consumption of food, this essay seeks to explore the idea of bodies as ‘spaces and sites’ of the contestation and protest facilitated by the gastropolitics. To conclude, there’ll be a brief critical analysis of the different food security policies across the globe to understand their intent, impact and repercussions on the beneficiaries. At the same time, it will also reflect upon the challenges and resistance put across by the stakeholders to unpack the political aspect of food security.

Hunger and poverty are the pressing global challenges which many societies are grappling with. War, displacement, migration, famines, droughts and unemployment are identified as some of the major reasons behind the alarming percentage of food poverty. Food security is an exhaustive concept and often encompasses programs encouraging self-sufficiency and small scale production of food. This essay looks into the different schemes introduced by governments and non-government actors across the world to tackle this challenge. However, to begin the discussion around the topic, it is first important to establish a basic definition of the phenomenon. Food security is defined as a situation where “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2009: 6 cited in Piperata et al, 2016: 807). Availability, access and preference are the key components of food security (WHO, 1996).

Intrinsic to the understanding the policy implementation of the concept of food security is the idea of foodways. It is pertinent to view both these concepts together to comprehend which factors contribute to designing and disbursing help to the various groups in form of subsidised rations, food aid, hunger alleviation programs and cash transfer schemes. Defined broadly as the ingredients, production and preparation practices, dietary patterns, ad classification of plants and animals as food or stigma, foodways are the underlying social rules around food (Jaffé et al, 2017: 56). Foodways “not only solidify group membership but also set groups apart from each other” (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002: 109). Groups defined through foodways exist on diverse scales—community or village (Douglas, 1984), regions, and ethnicities (Satia-Aboua et al, 2002 cited in Jaffé et all: 57). Sometimes, it even includes the macro nationalities and the micro gender subjectivities within. As discussed by Arjun Appadurai, foodways and their documentation often help women to commute with each other, and facilitate their representation to not only the society, but to other women as well (1988: 6).

Foodways hold not only the material, but symbolic and metaphorical value as well. Single ingredients can be linked to group identities (Epp, 2015; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993) as can certain ways of making
certain dishes or even whole cuisines (Chang, 1977). Therefore, it becomes integral to look into the process of how foodways can be politicized both by the individuals as well as the governments. In the paper *Advancing Food Sovereignty or Nostalgia: The Construction of Japanese Diets in the National Shokuiku Policy* (2016), the authors discuss the politics behind the introduction of Shokaiku (food and nutrition education) in the Japanese education syllabi to promote national food self-sufficiency through affirming to the local culinary culture. In this context, the food sovereignty is portrayed as the social responsibility of the urban citizens, on whom lies the onus of reviving the cultural diet and the agricultural practices. This aspiration is expected to be fulfilled by positing a challenge to the capitalist industrial influence on the present dietary patterns of the Japanese urban population. The reflection of the control of the state over the bodies of the citizens in terms of guiding their consumption is argued in the paper—“government-sponsored health education imposes specific ideologies and social practices by declaring benevolent goals and allowing the state to exercise its power over the physical bodies of citizens” (Lupton, 1993 cited in Takeda et al., 2016:278).

Nutrition education is posited as an impactful agent to shape normative ideologies and practices. It can also be examined as a strategy to shift the onus of action from the regime to the individuals as part of the normative discourse in order to sustain the structure of economic hierarchies in the liberal market. Through these policies, the individuals are convinced to change their own behaviour and values to be the carrier of the larger social change. The campaigns referred to in the paper are also subject to a government’s political agenda and market conditions. Like other capitalist nations, Japanese governments are reluctant to disturb the profitability of large food businesses by intervening to advance food sovereignty and therefore, rely on the individual-family unit to initiate a ‘back-in-time’ movement through preservation of the local food economy (*ibid*).

The Japanese Shokuiku policy appears a strategic initiative to shift the onus of food security and preservation of cultural diet to the consumers to safeguard the market. On the other hand, the we see a more apparent neglect and defiance of the existence of the palette of the refugees.

Micah M. Trapp’s paper, *YOU-WILL-KILL-ME BEANS: Taste and the Politics of Necessity in Humanitarian Aid* (2016) is an ethnographical account from the Buduburam Liberian refugee camp in Ghana, the paper analyses and challenges the idea of taste in the realm of the humanitarian food aid provided to the refugees. The title of the paper, which I feel is evidently taken from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “taste of necessity” (1984) is an ironical spin on the categorization of the taste of individuals based on their socio-economic status, as propounded by Bourdieu in his seminal work. In this paper, the author discusses how the geographical and economic factors involved in deciding the quality, quantity and ingredients of the food aid (for instance, distributing corn-soya blend (CSB) to the population whose cultural dietary staple has been maize) distributed to the refugees are governed by dynamics of political assertion of power and the positionality imposed on the refugees in the country of asylum. Physical and psychological suffering, as moral and bodily conditions, often function as the central justification for humanitarian intervention, and refugees are expected to produce grateful, embodied performances of the “mute victim” (Redfield & Bornstein, 2010: 17–18 cited in Trapp: 417). The refugees retaliate to this rather ‘oppressive’ food aid through keeping alive their sensory memories related to food. Food here is not merely a nostalgia reminding them of their homeland, but also an efficient weapon of defying assimilation of the food aid into their dietary culture. The discourse on nourishment and minimum nutritional requirement followed by the international agencies in deciding food aid is in stark contrast to the idea of food for the Liberian refugees, who equate sensory satiation (accomplished by the use of palm oil, spices and local condiment) to health (426). For these reasons, no attempt is made by the refugees to ‘incorporate’ CSB (corn soya blend) porridge and lentils into their culinary culture through possible renditions and additions. To express their defiance, these food items are renamed as “drip” and “you-will-kill-me beans” by refugee population to signify their functional characteristic—basic sustenance, which is a reminder of deprivation, poverty and eventual death. Subverting the power through
colloquial language is a fascinating yet impactful expression of the subaltern protest. It takes "individual tastes to the collective aesthetics" which poses a challenge to the rhetoric of humanitarian aid (434).

Trapp’s paper also sheds light on the social practice of food sharing by discussing ethnographic notes about the practice of acceptance and refusal to share food among Liberian refugees as a protest against the submitting to the food aid. This question of why people should expend time and energy to acquire resources only to give them away to others has been a long-time focus of study in the realm of food anthropology, and is also reflected in the two papers—Michael Schnegg’s article Collective Foods: Situating Food on the Continuum of Private–Common Property Regimes (2016) and the article by Elspeth Ready and Eleanor A. Power titled Why Wage Earners Hunt: Food Sharing, Social Structure and Influence in an Arctic Mixed Economy (2018). Both the papers discuss the formation and changing dynamics of social relations through the act of sharing of food. Through the respective ethnographical study of the rural Namibia and Nunavik Inuit community in Canada, these papers present the overlapping themes of exploring what is facilitated and accomplished through food sharing. Schnegg’s paper discusses the idea of food sharing in rural Namibian community through the lens of excludability of a good. Using the framework of the social cost of exclusion, he has worked on a quantitative analysis of power sharing based on an individual’s control over private and common goods. The social relations therefore according to the Schnegg are affected by quantity and visibility of the goods, sharing norms and the relationship between the actors (684-688). Ready and Power’s paper, on the other hand, looks at the human behavioural ecology to discuss the multiple mechanisms which motivate individuals to share—kin selection, tolerated theft, reciprocal altruism, and costly signalling (Gurven, 2004; Jaeggi and Gurven, 2013a; Winterhalder 1997 cited in Ready & Power, 3018: 74) in context of the harvesting of country food by the Inuit population of Nunavik. Highlighting the importance of sharing food in a cash economy by the economically marginalized population, the article alludes to the foundations of Economic Anthropology, which focuses not on the individual returns to sharing, but on how these forms of exchange are related to the operation of broader systems of social and political relationships (Kent, 1993; Peterson, 1993; Price, 1975; Testart, 1987) and on the production of value and meaning (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1980; Graeber 2001 in 75).

- The food security programs throughout the different countries manifest the benefits through various schemes and methods. Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) are a popular, albeit controversial, way to ensure food security to the most marginalized communities. In the paper Biocultural Insights for Poverty Alleviation Policy from the Brazilian Amazon, the authors have presented an exhaustive case study of the rural Amazonian population benefited from the Bolsa Familia Programme (BFP), a CCT to tackle food poverty and nutritional deficit, and to ensure basic healthcare for the expectant and lactating mothers. The cash transfers for the household are directed towards the mothers to ensure a just distribution for family well-being (Piperata et al, 2016: 809). In an ethnographic study spanning over seven years (2002 to 2009), it was discovered that it was the women—primarily mothers—who bore the brunt of restricted consumption of food to ensure basic meals to the family since the food aid money essentially went towards buying market food and for paying tithes. Receiving cash transfer also led to a decline in the small-scale production of farinha, a local staple which would add bulk to the food and would provide for the women even if nothing else was available. This decline came due to a cultural shift in the social relations of labour for the villagers post the BFP. The nature of the program set the expectation of cash for labour which resulted in people refusing to tend to others’ kitchen garden, or sharing their crop of manioc (of which farinha is made) with each other without money (814). Therefore, one of the important reasons behind the failure of BSP was increasing responsibility and declining nutrition on the women in order to run the household with CCT. This study is crucial to biocultural anthropologists to deconstruct the intrinsic relationship between policies, nutrition and social relations, since no food security program is independent of gendered dynamics.

It should also be kept in mind that poverty and hunger can never be viewed in isolation,
independent of the historical context of the community/society in question. Colonialism, imperialism and even capitalism has played a major role in making the conditions of certain communities even more vulnerable. Sanjay Sharma’s work *Measuring Hunger* (2017) is a robust critique on the state’s assessment of hunger in 19th century colonial India. Working with the records of the British official which range from sympathetic to indifferent, it also shows the process which led to the development of a uniform system of measuring hunger. The colonial prejudices towards Indian subjects is paramount in the accounts, along with the desire to enquire about hunger to ensure greater productivity among the subjects of the colony. It is interesting how the essay has explored the process of quantification of required food levels by state officials (see bhar anaaj, for instance) and the development of a cultural vocabulary around it (201). Associating hunger with famines has been a traditional approach of economic historians to explain food poverty. However, Amartya Sen challenged the direct link between draught and famine, and hunger in 1981. His analysis of historical famines in India showed that farmers produce sufficient food to feed the population of a specific geography during droughts, but these food supplies are not accessible to the poorer sectors of society who suffer disproportionately during food crises. In his seminal argument, Sen shifted attention away from the environmental as the primary causal factor toward political economic drivers in the form of inadequate distribution. “Poor people lacked the necessary entitlements—ability to access food through assets or services—that ensured rights to food supplies” (Sen, 1981 cited in Logan, 2016: 509-10). This is a crucial argument in the light of food security narrative, which challenges a lot of colonial and imperial narratives around hunger and poverty. It is also discussed in depth by Amanda L. Logan in the paper “Why Can’t People Feed Themselves”: *Archeology as Alternative Archive of Food Security in Banda, Ghana* (2016).

Taking the example of the Banda region in Ghana, the paper describes studying the cultural economy of the region from 500 years back to historicize food insecurity and to put to context the Sahel famine of the 1970s. It takes into account the transition of the nature of food security in pre-capitalist moral economy and market economy under colonialism. The nexus of crop failure, increased prices and indebtedness lead to food insecurity becoming “silent violence” leading to chronic hunger and vulnerability (Watts 2012:266–267 cited in Logan: 510). The use of the term ‘violent’ in the paper is to essentially refer to the structural violence, where underfed and undernourished people bear the brunt of low productivity and lean realization of socio-biological potential. Chronic food insecurity makes people more vulnerable to catastrophe, thereby making food and its (lack/absence of) availability not only environmental, but political in nature as well (Logan, 2016). Therefore, the exercise of using archeology as a method to trace food security goes deeper than merely analyzing the environmental factor— it also indicates how the historical socio-economic inequalities and occupational practices lead to some groups perpetually falling into the trap of hunger, what Logan has meticulously derived as structural violence (520).

The fact that food security is majorly discussed in the context of South and South East Asian, African and South American context shows a clear global North and South divide. However, this must not take us away from the issues tackles by the population of first world countries, especially the minorities and the vulnerable groups. Julie Guthman’s paper *Bringing Good Food to Others: Investigating the subjects of alternative food practice* (2008) critical take on the alternate food practices and culture in USA. She has explained the racial politics and socio-cultural implication and ideas behind the Alternate Food Movements by analyzing the field notes of the students studying food activism. She begins by explaining the concept of food justice, which entails ensuring social justice to the marginalized classes through food and involves neither condemning nor evangelizing anyone’s food habits—a practice which ironically is followed by the advocates of alternate food movements with the African Americans. The Whiteness (racialization) of alternate food movements in America is a clear indicator of the fact that organic food is a niche concept and has a limited access based on the social class. She goes on to create a comparison with the practice of organic farming in the Nazi era which exhibited both material and discursive practice around
nationalism. In the contemporary society, the same is reflected through the forces of the market and its critical gaze, which reduces food and its producers to mere objects (2008: 433). The production therefore is carried out by the marginalized only for the wealthy, indicating the appropriation of healthy living idea by the market. To make it worse, ironical names of the projects are deployed to allure African American into the system which ultimately benefits the whites.

Guthman discusses the fast-growing phenomenon of ‘Food deserts’ (432) and the reasons why they are increasing in certain pockets where the purchasing power is relatively low. The absence of the accessibility to organic and fresh food products to all social classes is therefore a market failure. The idea of ‘localism’ in the context of alternate food therefore is presented as a romantic contrast to modernity, implying backwardness and xenophobia, so is the knowledge about the healthy and organic food, which is very niche and creates a class distinction. The popular concept of ‘getting your hands dirty’ is prevalent more in the context of farming as vocation and is politically and socially problematic, because historically the land has been appropriated from the native cultivators to create white land ownership with black labourers. The alternate movements too reproduce these hierarchies on large scale.

The field experience of the students studying food justice and activism on the farm presents a stark contrast to the romantic picture drawn by the alternate food movement—volunteers are treated as labourers instead of worker, the produce is unsatisfactory in quality and unrelated to the social consumption habits of the consumers, and the community participation and effort is gravely missing on the field. In this article, there has been a comparison between “alternate food discourses to whitened cultural histories” (443).

Alternate food, instead of presenting more alternatives, creates serious binaries which ultimately only changes the manifestation of white supremacy and privileges, but doesn’t help the marginalized in food activism. The participatory essence is also gravely racialized, selectively leaving out marginalized groups.

Conclusion
In this essay, we looked into the policies and practices followed in different countries to understand how food security is understood and ensured. It is quite clear from the literature studies that ensuring access to and availability of food to different marginalized sections is as political as it is environmental or economic. The shortcomings of many of these programs are a result of the neglecting or denying the agency and history of the beneficiaries towards whom the policies are directed, showing a clear political motive behind introduction and implementation of these policies. As described by one of the cited authors, it is pertinent for sociologists, anthropologists and economists to study the nuanced layers of structural violence—discrimination, neglect, siding with the capitalist market forces, withdrawal of social safety net—encompassed within the folds of hunger insecurity. This acknowledgement is the initial step towards demanding for food sovereignty, the right to ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate food for everyone—a movement which historically has been started and taken forward by the primary stakeholders, the people who suffer from hunger and faulty policies.

References