

Analyzing the Perspectives of the British Empire on the Construct of Vegetarianism in India

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Introduction

The diet one follows plays a very complex role today in India, a country that hosts a diverse population filled with differences. The discourses on diet in the 21st century India are not only filled with religious, medical, social and moral arguments but are also politically charged. In particular, the conflict between the Vegetarian and the non-vegetarian discourses seem to be never-ending. This paper concentrates particularly on the vegetarian diet which has been prominent in the socio-cultural and religious history of India.

The definition of Vegetarianism according to the Oxford dictionary is “The practice of not eating meat or fish, especially for moral, religious, or health reasons”. Vegetarianism has its roots in ancient civilizations of India and Greece. As the world is moving towards veganism which stemmed from vegetarianism, it is important to discuss the history of vegetarianism in India. The ancient Indian culture was majorly influenced by their religious beliefs which also shaped their diet practices. Many of the Indian religions advocated the view that animals are not meant to be harmed or killed. This research paper resolves to analyze the British’s attitude towards India on the construct of vegetarianism.

The Clash of the Cultures

The British considered food as a significant bearer of national identity after their Language. Food was considered to be a marker of class and status which in turn provided a key to the hierarchy of races or nations (Gregory, 2007). Vegetables were associated with certain classes. The onions were considered as the staple for the poorest, whose strong and uneducated stomachs required their stimulus (Gregory 2007).

The English loved their beef. They bred cattle for meat rather than for dairy trade. According to New Moral World, an early socialist newspaper in the United Kingdom, Britain was a heavy consumer of meat in Europe. Meat eating was woven intrinsically into their culture that they associated it with being “English” and possessing “manly English virtues”. The English also identified meat with a man being fit and healthy. For a manual laborer being fit is what will

land him a job to provide for his family. This sequentially prompted the consumption of meat to avoid being interpreted unfit for the duty of providing his family. "The Roast Beef of Old England" an English patriotic ballad was written by Henry Fielding for his play *The Grub-Street Opera*, which was first performed in 1731 clearly portrayed the English's notions on meat eating.

Meat always found its place in the center of the table during the traditional British meal. No Christmas dinner or Sunday lunch is complete without it, they say. They prided themselves for their taste in beef. Dr. Hunter of York wrote in 1806 that "When England discards Roast Beef, we may fairly conclude that the nation is about to change its manly and national character" (Wilson, 2012). Any attempts made to criticize the consumption of meat which is considered to be a symbol for national pride were gauged to be unpatriotic. But meat was not all they ate. Another symbol of "Englishness" was the plum pudding - a meatless dessert made using plums. They followed a mixed diet and for this reason the British considered themselves to be modern and civilized.

India, which was under the influence of various rulers, on the other hand, found itself giving up on meat eating due to various reasons -- Hinduism and Buddhism, the arrivals from central Asia and Arabia and the rule of the Mughals and the Islam paved way for the vegetarian diet in India. The religious perspectives that the different rulers brought with them shaped the people's thoughts on meat eating. During the rule of the Mauryas by around 300 BC, or earlier, the beliefs that animal sacrifice will add on to your karma and that eating meat will keep you in the wheel of reincarnation, spread among the Hindus. Although this led to the downfall of animal sacrifice people did not completely give up eating meat. Then the tradition of cow veneration soared among the Indians. The Hindus worshipped Goddess Kamadhenu, the divine bovine-goddess who is described as the mother of all cows in Hinduism. She is generally depicted as a white cow with a female head and breasts, the wings of a bird, and the tail of a peafowl or as a white cow containing various deities within her body. This became one of the reasons for the Hindus to cease the consumption of beef. Cows are also held in high regard by the farmers as they proved to be their best companions in this agricultural country. Thus, the cow came to be revered not only by the Hindus but also by Indians in general. And this made most of the Indians cease the consumption of beef almost completely. With the influence of the Islamic conquests in northern India many people gave up pork as Quran criticizes it. Thus, the practice of vegetarianism in India owed its origin to multiple factors.

The Reaction of the British on the Vegetarian Diet of India

Regan has pointed out how John Ovington in his book *Voyage to Suratt in the Year 1689* has documented his fascination for the Hindu meatless diet. Regan also mentions writers like Dow, Orme, Falconer and Smellie and their views on the Indian "low-diet". Through the

writings of such writers, the fact that the English have enlisted India as an inferior race based on vegetarian diet practices can be observed. Smellie, in his 1791 *Philosophy of Natural History* has documented his views on the East Indians as a "meager, sick, and feeble race" due to their vegetarian diet. The English associated consumption of meat with military superiority. This is evident in Alexander Dow's work *History of Indostan* (1768) in which he claimed, "It is apparent... the immense regions of Hindustan might all be reduced by a handful of regular [British] troops" (*History*, vol. 2, 94).

Analyzing the British Attitude

It was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century the British began to see itself as a ruling power in India. Until then the relationship between India and England was mostly mercantile (Teltscher). Sensing that colonizing India would be advantageous to them, the British began to generate "confidence -boosting image" of the British rule in India. They did so, among other things, by pointing out the vegetarian diet of the Indians as a proof for the people to be uncivilized and that the British have to civilize them (Teltscher). According to Robert Orme, one of the three factors that led India into subjugation is a "sparing use of animal food" and the other two being the "hot climate" and "the horror of spilling blood". Orme in his "*History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan From the Year 1745*" has also said that these factors made India a perfect candidate for foreign occupation.

Change in Position at the Dawn of the World War I – Vegetarianism Preferred

The events of World War I brought about a change of heart among the English. This part of the study is indebted to the work of Jasmine Owens in which Owens has studied the ways in which the Vegetarian Organizations utilized World War I to increase the popularity of vegetarianism in Britain. I have used Owens' observations to analyze how the British went from opposing meatless diet to embracing it.

As the age of enlightenment paved the way for humanist's ideas in Great Britain, meatless diet was beginning to spread in England. The eighteenth-century Vegetarian movement was one of the movements that stemmed from Romanticism. Romantics like Thomas Tryon, Alexander Pope, Joseph Ritson and Percy B. Shelley played a great role in Vegetarianism by promoting meatless diet in their writings. Poet Shelley was an avid vegetarian who saw carnivorousism as the 'root of all evil'. He wrote a pamphlet named "In Vindication of a Natural Diet" in which he talked about vegetarianism and animal rights. Vegetarianism then gained momentum with the founding of Great Britain's Vegetarian Society in 1849. But it was not until the Great War that meatlessness came into wider practice.

Owens notes that before the Great War, the activities and events of the vegetarian society like private cookery classes, all-inclusive summer schools, and fundraising events were accessible only to the middle classes as they were expensive. The Vegetarian Society was also criticized for opposing the consumption of meat especially the Roast Beef which was strongly associated with the traditions of being “English”. Owens then identifies a turning point where “meatlessness” became the marker of patriotism and the notions of Englishness. With British entering the Great War the country needed more men in the war front and so the agricultural workers were conscripted which resulted in fewer animals being fed. With more men entering the war, the government had more men to feed. This resulted in the war rations. The British public was asked to cut down on their meat consumption. In order to get the people to cut down the meat consumption, the government then started associating going meatless with patriotism, the total opposite of what they propagated earlier. Advertisements and campaigns were run by the government Committee, endorsing the consumption of meat alternatives as a matter of national duty. A full-page spread of advertisements under the heading “Eat Less Meat: an earnest appeal” was released by the National War Savings Committee (Owens). Health food companies were set up in Britain which appealed to the housewives to provide their family with a healthy “meatless” meal. This clearly shows the dissimilarities between the actions of the British during World War I and their earlier views on the Indian vegetarian diet.

Conclusion

We notice changes in attitudes towards meat eating in Britain: From looking down upon Indian notions on vegetarianism for the sake of subjugation to changing the English notion of patriotism, deeming meatlessness with Englishness.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

Editors: Dr. V. Sangeetha, Dr. B. J. Geetha, Dr. K. Sindhu, Dr. S. Boopathi and Ms. S. Snekhya Sri

Food in Literature: Papers Presented in National Seminar on Food in Literature, 2019

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