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INSIDE THE KITCHEN: GENDERED KNOWLEDGE & FOOD LITERACY

Abstract

Women's cultural production and reproduction roles within their social capacities have long been worthy of academic inquiry. Women have for long been responsible for the welfare of their families, and feminist scholars have, over the past few decades, elaborately studied their gendered experiences within the kitchen space, the spillover of women's participation in the community, and the cultural transmission of multi-tiered, gendered knowledge within their community. Gendered survival sciences have been further developed to understand one's body, suggesting environmental programs and sustainable development strategies incorporate family, health, and ecological aspects. The primary objectives of this paper were to study the kitchen as a safe space for women towards cultural production and reproduction and to understand the trends in the transmission of gendered IKS and its impact on food literacy. The study was conducted across an urban community in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, for six months in 2020-2021. Three households were selected for an in-depth case study method using convenient sampling. The kitchen space reflects several cultural identities that influence social relations as women stand out as the primary partakers of cultural production and reproduction. A study at the household level in food literacy, gendered knowledge encourages discussions that could contribute to the discourse on sustainable development and food security at a global level.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Gendered Knowledge and Identity, Kitchen Spaces, Food Literacy, Gendered Performance*

Introduction

The conceptualization of spaces by cultural geographers for decades declares them as the product of culture and social experiences. Crucial theoretical frameworks reported in the late 1900s, for instance, Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces' (1986 [1984]), retraced the history of geographical spaces, suggesting that spaces influence people's real lives. Acquiring from the concept

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of space, feminist scholars investigated the kitchen space within the private domain to highlight gendered contestations emphasizing women's contribution to the cultural reproduction of gendered knowledge in their families across generations. Christie (2003) identified the kitchen space- both indoors and outdoors as a gendered territory that plays a vital role in the transmission of cultural and embodied knowledge over generations at the hands of women who have been reported to be the primary occupants of the kitchen. Women have for long been responsible for the welfare of their families, and feminist scholars have, over the past few decades, elaborately studied their gendered experiences within the kitchen space, the spillover of women's participation in the community, and the cultural transmission of multi-tiered, gendered knowledge within their community.

Before delving into the gendered knowledge of spaces, the kitchen, in particular, it is necessary to understand the universally constructed gendered positions in the light of the nature-culture domain. The secondary position of a woman in decision making and other spheres of power control in a society is a pan-cultural fact. In an attempt to understand the devaluation of women in society, Sherry Ortner (1974) writes that scholars who look beyond biological determinism of gender interpret female subordination given the non-human realm within a culture that engages in the process of sustenance while transcending the non-human realm 'nature'. Ecofeminists argue that in patriarchal thought, owing to a woman's body, she remains confined to particular social contexts implying a closer association with nature, while men who create artificially to sustain culture are associated with culture. The distinctiveness of culture rests precisely because; it can under most circumstances transcend the non-human realm, 'nature'. It may be perceived as Sherry Ortner writes: *'That culture asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to 'socialize' and 'culturalize' – nature'* (1974:73). Consequently, men are seen as superior to nature, and a woman's procreative roles assigned at birth are interpreted in the light of production and reproduction.

Women's cultural production and reproduction roles have long been worthy of academic inquiry. Feminist research has shown that women have, at the intersection of nature and society, exhibited absolute authority over gendered spaces within the household- primarily the kitchen. There, they engage in extensive food gathering, preparation and housekeeping for adequate nutrition to the household members while exercising authority over gendered spaces of the domestic sphere. Despite dissolved public-private binaries of space, the exclusion of a woman's identity and lack of adequate representation of the kitchen space calls for exploring the 'performance of gender, as described by Butler (1990). The kitchen space remains a contested site for exploration.

Let us now try locating gender identity inside the kitchen. Understanding gender as a social institution would help discern the gendered division of labour

to ascribe membership in a category of people by constructing similarities and differences among them, and assigning roles and responsibilities based on gender, race, and ethnicity. To understand the narratives of cultural identity from within the kitchen space, it becomes essential to discard the problematic consideration of a 'woman' as a unitary category, failing to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity, etc. Achieving gender is possible following which social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations, characteristics of their identity, both descriptive and normative. Certain categories in society can create ideological shifts that allow them to dominate others, and such shifts become ingrained over a while. A prerequisite of equality, through the capitalist patriarchal perspective, could be the uniformity. Inside a household across classes, races, ethnicities, etc., a woman may be dominated by the distinctiveness and superiority of the male members, but the kitchen space remains isolated. The gendered control over the kitchen space provides a certain degree of uniformity within a household in the form of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), considered unique to women. This ideological conception could then be further incorporated into the discourse on food literacy to conceptualize the fundamental narrative of sufficiency, access/entitlement to food following the social, political and economic components of everyday life, driven by the propagation of gendered knowledge by womenfolk from within the above-defined 'safe space' - the kitchen. As we may write, the kitchen space within the constraints of this study may be defined as a place predominantly occupied by women to prepare food for the members of the household. Here, the kitchen space is essentially a closed, indoor place, contrary to community kitchen spaces- depicting a symbolic connection between nature and society. A woman produces and reproduces the knowledge of the environment in food preparation from within this private space. This study may significantly alter social order within a household that constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms, here from within the kitchen demonstrating food literacy; and expectations that are characteristic of their identity as mentioned above, both descriptive and normative.

The primary objectives of this paper were thus to study the kitchen as a safe space for women towards cultural production and reproduction and to understand the trends in the transmission of gendered IKS and its impact on food literacy. It explores the varied perspectives of ordinary women about their cultural identity, gendered experiences within the kitchen space, and the cultural transmission of multi-tiered knowledge within their community. Therefore, the purpose is to understand the narratives of cultural identity from within the kitchen space.

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) Framework:

The framework of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) builds on the narratives that interconnect ecological issues concerning the politics of gender.

The focus is to deal critically at the intersection of feminist theories and political ecology. The feminist theory interrogates the hierarchies and essentialist formulations of the 'female' while, the perspectives of political ecology interrogate nature-society relationship highlighting the nuances of manifesting power in environmental conflicts and governance. The analysis of ecological knowledge and gender ideology, in contrast, locates how certain ideas are produced and debated within social and political processes and about particular groups and institutions. Leach's (2007) gender-centered scholarship in environment and development inspired feminist scholars to approach the nature-culture characterization by persistently linking the personal and the political.

As explored through this study, the feminist narratives in political ecology led to an inquiry into the political objectives of daily engagements in intimate sites, such as the kitchen space. In light of the subjectivities, to understand and address the dynamics of gender with natural resource management, feminist scholars have extended their inquiry to the domestic sphere to examine livelihoods based on natural resources and the management of natural resources in gendered spaces of the household. Feminist political ecologists understand and address the dynamics of gender from within food spaces to natural resource management. Their body of work includes ecology to depict gendered resource contestations. It examines women participation in political and economic activities surrounding environmental issues in a broader context. Men and women differ in their efforts and interests, linked to ecological conservation, depicted by their distinctive roles, responsibilities, and knowledge between household or familial levels of the division of labour. The conceptualization of gendered labour in food spaces concerning the environment is yet associated with women's inclination towards providing nutritional requirements of family members, and as mentioned above, the cultural identity of women within kitchen spaces is at the crux of this study.

Literature Review

Physiological conditioning of women's bodies keeps them confined universally to social spaces that reflect women's social roles within the domestic sphere. The confinement of a woman to the domestic sphere is motivated by the fact that, like all female mammals, she lactates (Ortner 1974). Through her lactation process, she builds a relationship with her children, and the nursing role drives her to engage in significant work that requires administration of continuous attention and dedicated care with empathy. The right person for such task of enculturation is the mother. The natural nursing bond generated at times of childbirth is then extended to the family, and she becomes responsible for performing chores at home. The analysis of the nature-culture dichotomy is suggestive of a domestic divide that is reflective of a natural connection between nature and women; cooking functions within the

domestic context *'show her to be a powerful agent of cultural process, constantly transforming raw natural resource into cultural products'* (Ortner 1974:80).

a. Performing Gender:

Within gender studies, it becomes essential to look at the relationship between women and nature closely, incorporating a gendered understanding of nature. While 'home' is constantly discussed as a site of oppression of women, the kitchen is a gendered territory where women assemble to influence and assert control over food preparation (Christie 2003). Christie addresses everyday life in the domestic space and cooking as a source of knowledge of the environment. She draws from the concept of gendered spaces the differential use of gendered knowledge to explore women's cultural perceptions. Deriving from the geographical concept of 'space', Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari's (1996) focus on knowledge within the gendered spaces, encourages a body of work exploring spaces and placing gendered struggles and access to space. Based on the kitchen analysis in rural Hausaland, Robson (2006) enumerates the socio-cultural constructions of space, suggesting that married women predominantly occupy the private space, the kitchen. The kitchen may be a workplace for a Hausa woman, where, she participates in production, circulation and reproduction. According to him, the knowledge for food gathering and preparation is nurtured and embedded through socialization. This gendered knowledge is transferred from one generation to the other.

Women perform tasks inside the kitchen like cleaning vegetables, washing utensils, processing condiments, feeding their family members, etc. These shape their identity as 'food literate', an identity that matters. Her performance within the kitchen space holds onto an essentialist expression in the family—this, Osella and Osella (2006) term as *'performative aspects of the self'*. A woman in a kitchen can identify and integrate gender into her identity, acknowledging a status-based aspect in the household that gives rise to intra-household hierarchies. It may be inferred that the categorization is socially constructed, normalized and to an extent essentialized. Gender is achieved through essentialized social practices, and the transmission of acquired skills and gendered knowledge occurs during child-rearing and family care. Butler writes that the identity of a female member at the household, in confirmation with her gender, is essentially performatively produced and *'compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence'* (1990:33).

b. Gendered Interests Dictate Survival Needs:

Associating gender labels with the natural environment in relation to particular groups and institutions has helped scholars understand gendered resource contestations that consequently generate ecological effects. In Rocheleau's, Thomas-Slayter's, and Wangari's view, the *'convergence of gender, science and environment in academic and political discourse as well as in*

everyday life and the social movements' (1996:9) introduces the theme of '*gendered sciences of survival*'. It recognizes the reason of interest by women in environmental issues in the light of the knowledge they possess, the skills they acquire through socialization. The reasons directly link to the need to secure health, hygiene and wellbeing. In this way, the gendered sciences of survival can be linked to gendered environmental responsibilities in the physical environment extended to a woman's family from within the kitchen space. Gendered survival sciences have been further developed to understand one's body, suggesting through environmental programs and sustainable development strategies.

c. Women's IKS and Food Literacy debates:

Development strategies have long focused on food security, and research shows that IKS are valuable to attain food security, and address issues concerning environmental health (Kamwendo & Kamwendo 2014). IKS are unique to specific communities. Quite often highly gendered as a result of cultural production and reproduction from within gendered spaces of the domestic sphere, IKS may be fruitful in ensuring food adequacy at the household level. Kamwendo and Kamwendo (2014) acknowledge that an individual household may not have access to food despite a nation being food secure. Thus, it is essential to address food literacy first, in the context of nutrient access, nutrient sufficiency and food entitlement migrating from the household towards the nation. At the household level, food entitlement is subject to the food literacy of the household member, who takes the responsibility of gathering and preparing the food. Best suited within the Feminist Political Ecology framework is the definition of food literacy provided by Cullen et al. (2015) which states:

'Food literacy is the ability of an individual to understand food in a way that they develop a positive relationship with it, including food skills and practices across the lifespan in order to navigate, engage, and participate within a complex food system. It's the ability to make decisions to support the achievement of personal health and a sustainable food system considering environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political components' (Cullen et al. 2015: 143).

Drawing from personal experiences, Kamwendo and Kamwendo (2014) write that the understanding, interpretation and transmission of local IKS calls for gender-based analysis. Their results indicate that women of ethnic groups are more involved in subsistence agriculture than men. This brings women closer to their association with nature, providing bare subsistence needs to their families while also practising, and transmitting local knowledge food systems to younger generations who exhibit enhanced food literacy of local storage and preservation techniques. A research gap has been identified that requires an exploration of a woman's identity as a food literate, her status in the family holds onto an essentialist expression of what Osella and Osella

(2006) term as the 'performative aspects of the self', she performs tasks inside the kitchen regularly. A woman identifies herself as food literate during her lifetime; she belongs to a group that is continually set apart from men (in roles, labour and other forms within the domestic space). Japanese society strongly associates the kitchen, a gendered space, to women acknowledging that women cook every day and are responsible for child-rearing (Kimura 2011). In the book *'Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Florence'*, Counihan (2004) explores the core of Tuscan cuisine that is known to be rooted in mezzadria peasant farming. On the mezzadria farms, women were responsible for the work inside the home as well as production in the courtyard, gardens and field, thereby suggesting cooking to be an essential part of a woman's reproductive labour, identity and power, especially for those who mainly stayed confined within the domestic space for their families (Counihan 2004). This is indicative of an exploration of the woman's identity as a food-literate member of the household who takes it upon herself to acquire, refine and propagate the knowledge of indigenous food systems to the members of her family across generations contributing to enhanced food literacy, and consequently food security at the household level.

The above reviews provided a backdrop to address explicitly with the following two research questions. First, does the modern kitchen provide a safe space for women to propagate knowledge of indigenous food systems? And second, what is the role of gendered indigenous knowledge in enhancing food literacy across generations?

Methods of Data Collection

For this study, we adopted an ethnographic approach that is closely aligned with the methods employed by classical ethnographers. Participant observation and interview methods are the two sources of data collection used in the study. In the interview process, the case study method helps probing specific events or spaces. It helps in understanding an in-depth insight into the trends of gendered IKS and food literacy. During the interview process, the use of an interview guide helped in the generation of new questions from the respondent's responses. Three households were selected for an in-depth case study method using convenient sampling. The three households comprise seven female members across two generations of female members of the household.

The respondents answered questions such as 'How long do you spend in the kitchen?', 'How is labor divided inside the kitchen?', 'How do you gather your food?', 'How do you organize your kitchen?', 'How do you decide what food to prepare on what occasion, keeping in mind the health of your family, including yourself?' 'How has your experience in the kitchen evolved over the course of your lifetime?' The questions are open-ended, which helped probe the kitchen space further in detail in the context of the first objective of the kitchen as a safe space. The questions were framed to encourage women to narrate how they

ended up inside the kitchen and acquired knowledge of indigenous food systems. The second set of questions includes questions such as, 'What do you know about the nutritional requirements of yourself and your family?', 'Do you share traditional recipes with the members of your household?', 'In your absence, who cooks food for your family?', 'Who else works with you or helps you with the daily chores in the kitchen?', 'On festivities, what special arrangements are made for food preparation?'. These questions focus on the second objective, wherein; women are expected to talk in detail about the transmission of their knowledge and the trends in the family.

Participant observation was used to observe respondents during their time spent in the kitchen. All respondents actively participated in the interviews. It is important to note two significant limitations of the methodology adopted. First, the study of women as a unitary category would be highly inappropriate. However, menfolk were found to be either busy or reluctant to respond, instead directed towards the female members signaling them to be the practical keepers of kitchen knowledge. Second, the kitchen space was not accessible for observation for long hours in the context of division of labour among the household members, particularly during the peak hours when food is prepared- at night. Owing to the limitations, significant data related to the functioning of the kitchen space may have been missed. Due to the constraints of COVID-19, revisiting the households at regular intervals and eliminating the mentioned limitations could not be tackled.

The study was conducted across an urban community in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, for six months in 2020-2021. Respondents are women who belong to the regular middle class, upper-middle-class households. The garden space other than the kitchen area also qualifies as a gendered space for the study.

Ethical concerns to the area of analysis and interpretation:

A critical engagement and detailed reflective account are prepared upon the social class and category when attempting to objectively understand and analyze the responses. The knowledge of ethnography and feminist political ecology perspectives helped us connect with the case studies' embedded essential meanings. However, claiming the outcome as absolute objectivity will be inadequate considering the nature of the framework including types of data (qualitative), interpretation and its dependency on the positionality and judgments of the researcher's training and experiences in the study area (Mahajan, Rajangam & Babu, 2020). For ethical purposes and truthfulness to the data, verbatims are used to avoid overrepresentation of the rigor of our analytical ideas.

Case Studies

The in-depth case study interviews are reported briefly, considering the following three loose themes generated for analysis and interpretation.

Women's role in production and reproduction from within the gendered spaces was inquired in the study. By production, it means transforming raw materials into products of consumption that ensure survival, in this context, food; and reproduction refers to the labour that women put into producing offspring, child-rearing and the propagation of knowledge across generations. Pseudonyms of the respondents have been used to adhere to the concerned ethics and to maintain confidentiality.

Food Preparation: A Survival Skill

Mita Ghosh's family comprises three members, a 21-year-old son, a 23-year-old daughter and herself. Her husband expired ten years ago. Since then, she is responsible for ensuring the survival of her family members, demonstrating authority over the gendered spaces and the domestic space of the home. Mita Ghosh works for a private company in Jamshedpur and earns enough to provide for the food sufficiency of the family. Labour inside the domestic sphere is divided chiefly; quite often, she herself takes up the responsibility to gather vegetables, fruits and other components required to prepare food. Mita Ghosh is currently 53-years old, and she informs me that she grew up in a relatively low-income family and had very few resources for survival.

'My mother and father worked hard but we did not receive as much from our parents as we give to our children today. We did not know much about luxurious food, restaurants and eating outside. My mother cooked for us, we used to have the same food every day and very little food was distributed among eight of our family members. Despite poverty, we were never malnourished, we were never vitamin deficient and I think I would attribute my health to my mother, who despite being illiterate knew what was good for us.' – Mita Ghosh [Interview conducted on 18th July, 2020].

Mita's kitchen was relatively modern; the latest technologies seemed to assist her in producing within the kitchen space amid her busy schedule of attending work and food preparation for her family. I observed that the kitchen was an extremely cosy space, and one could easily spend a lot of time cooking comfortably inside the kitchen. She does not acquire the help of any external service in food gathering and preparation but reports that her daughter and son occasionally assist her in preparing food when she is not around or is unable to cook due to reasons beyond her control. Most every day, before she leaves for work, she prepares breakfast and lunch for her children. When she cannot, she quickly processes all the materials required to prepare a meal and hands over a note to her daughter telling her what to cook and how. This rarely happened earlier, but due to the pandemic and increased work pressure these days, most often, the daughter was responsible for meal preparation for the family. She reports that the kitchen space is the most vibrant on Sundays. She can cater to the nutrient requirements of her family members and produce a delicious meal. She also informs that most of her cooking recipes have been

taught to her by her mother-in-law. Mita Ghosh, as a young girl, never cooked at her house before she got married.

She believes that her daughter and son have been brought up to ensure their survival even if she does not cook food for them.

My daughter lives in Delhi, and son in Kolkata. Both of them are aware of what they must eat, what's healthy for them and what could get them sick. I think in terms of kitchen smartness, my daughter is smarter than my son because she spends time with me inside the kitchen. If I were to ask her the difference between dhaniya and pudina, she would be able to tell. Not my son. My son calls me when he wants to cook something; I always have to help him to even prepare rice, for instance. But yes, I think both of them know what nutrients they need to keep themselves healthy.' [Interview conducted on 29th July 2020].

She also recalls memories of instances when her children fell ill, and she, over a phone call, taught them to make '*maad bhaat*' that assists in healing an upset stomach and mild digestive infections.

Cooking is not something Mita Ghosh enjoys, but she thinks that every woman must at some point in her life learn to cook and continue to cook for the rest of her life to sustain the health and well-being of her family. She looks upon cooking as a survival instinct, a skill every individual must learn to live a life not dependent on others. It doesn't matter if you're not a brilliant cook or a world-class chef. As long as one can feed himself when hungry, he has acquired a vital part of living healthy and peacefully. She loves to learn though, one of the primary reasons she never learnt how to cook as a young girl and still doesn't cook very often is due to how monotonous the daily rituals inside the kitchen space can get.

She says, 'If I am asked to prepare something unique, for instance a dish that I have never heard of, I will be extremely curious to learn how to make it and I will make it as soon as I can. I made lasagna a few days back, I hadn't heard of it ever before, but YouTube assisted me in preparing lasagna and I cannot be happier.' [Interview conducted on 3rd August 2020].

She also acknowledged that she knows what foods to consume regularly and understands why they can get monotonous. It was observed that the family was quite aware of health security, and being a medical professional, Mita Ghosh was very vigilant about what her children consumed even outside the home. '*We rarely eat outside, but when we do, we make sure to keep a check on our calorie intake.*' [Interview conducted on 14th August, 2020].

She informed that she considers it her responsibility to teach her children, especially her daughter, to cook well before she gets married to keep up with the culture in which she was born and brought up. As a proud Bengali, she is very fond of Bengali food, and she wishes to pass on her gendered knowledge of Bengali food systems, the ones she has learned from her mother-

in-law. The mother and daughter were set to prepare the fish curry. On the other day of the interview, the mother taught the daughter the recipe to make fish curry using a particular ingredient- curry leaves.

Kitchen in Nature?

Mrs. Chhanda Ghosh is a homemaker. She is 42-years-old and has been married for 18 years. She comes from a family of seven sisters, and her mother passed away when she was 16-years old. Her father and her relatives were primarily responsible for the social development of Mrs. Chhanda and her sisters as they grew up. Due to several financial struggles, she was married off to a businessman at a very young age, and due to this reason, she could not pursue her higher education. However, she did want to pursue a career in Economics. As a young girl and the oldest of the seven sisters, it fell upon her to take care of her family when her father went out for work or when she was expected to culturally produce and reproduce during special events, festivities, etc. And as she grew up, she adapted to the work expected from a home keeper, an individual responsible for her family's well-being.

Presently, there are six members in Mrs. Chhanda's household. Her husband, a 12-year-old son, a 14-year-old daughter, a sick mother-in-law, and house help, Tara *didi*, has been a family member for over ten years. Mrs. Chhanda's daughter's name is Deblina Ghosh. Due to the pandemic, she is currently in school and has been at home for over a month. It wasn't surprising that the daughter was spending a lot of time with her mother throughout the observation period. In the morning, the son is usually busy with his classes, and when not attending classes, he mainly was seen reading books or playing games with his friends. Mrs. Chhanda is a plant enthusiast. She informed that since she was a kid, confinement within the domestic space led her to pursue gardening. She hasn't stopped cultivating plants, especially those with high medicinal value and those that bear culinary purposes. Drawing it from her mother, Deblina is equally invested in gardening, and the two have been spending a lot of time with each other during the pandemic. They have been able to wonderfully redo their kitchen gardens so that now most of the vegetables that are cooked for the family come from their kitchen garden. This includes tomatoes, chilies, papayas, bottle guards, bitter guards, curry, lemons, *poi saag*, lemongrass, brinjals, etc. These plants are cultivated and often hybrid, but the mother-daughter duo ensures that the plants are grown organically. In doing so, the two female members indulge in the preparation of homemade organic plant fertilizers and soil enrichers known to improve the health of the plants and increase the nutrient value of the vegetables produced.

The *poi saag*, commonly known as the Malabar Spinach, is a plant that is quite frequently attacked by fungal spores that leave the leaves rotted, unfit for consumption. Mrs. Chhanda prepares *panchagavya* at home that helps maintain the plant's health and boosts its immunity to prevent fungal infections.

To the *panchagavya*, she adds curd, eggshells and goat milk to prepare a traditional recipe that she learnt while growing up from her relatives, and she believes that the formula is quite beneficial for the health of her plants. Deblina has retained most of the gardening techniques from her mother and says that she feels very close to her. Gardening is one such activity that she feels brings her closer to her mother every day that they indulge in it together.

'While Deblina is interested in learning how to grow plants, Piyush is least interested. He would rather just play with his friends. He considers this boring and so I refrain from forcing him to do something that doesn't enjoy. Deblina is like my student, I teach her new techniques in gardening practices and she learns. Look at that poi leaf, ask Deblina what is that and how to fix it. She will be able to answer, but ask Piyush; he will not have a clue. Just yesterday, we propagated a chilly sapling. I am expecting the hybrid chillies to be thicker, and richer in Vitamin C. What pleasure it is to cook vegetables from one's own garden!' [Interview conducted on 22nd August, 2020].

Mrs. Chhanda and Deblina's interest in gardening is extended to the kitchen, wherein they spend a lot of time processing the condiments and vegetables they pick from their garden. Most of the cooking is done by Tara *didi*; she is proud of herself and boasts that nobody in the entire building can cook as well as she does.

'Name a dish, Bengali, Marathi, Bihari anything. I can cook everything. From Hyderabad Biryani to Chinese Hakka noodles, you name it and you can have it. Chhanda didi has always been impressed by the skills that I have and for the knowledge that I possess when it comes to cooking. I learnt it from my thakuma (grandmother). My brother owns a catering business and once upon a time I even cooked for his orders. Now he hired professionals for his work but he does appreciate my work. Since Deblina and Piyush were kids I have assisted Chhanda didi in preparing healthy food for them. They are my kids too, and I love them dearly. I never bother Chhanda didi or Deblina with the kitchen work. The kitchen is my department and I am an expert. I don't even require help; I can easily manage everything single-handedly. But yes, I do love the company of Chhanda didi and Deblina when I am in the kitchen. Chhanda didi has been very kind to me. Dada Babu doesn't enter the kitchen, he only appreciates what I make for him. He often tells me that he trusts me with what I feed his family. When Chhanda didi is unwell (menstruating), I don't let her enter the kitchen. I belong to the lower caste. I am anyway impure; I can cook during menstruation, that's okay. All I want is to take care of the family, they are very nice people.' says Tara *Didi*. [Interview conducted on 30th August, 2020].

Tara *didi* did not hesitate to cook. Indeed, she is an expert.

Gender Rituals as seen Inside the Kitchen

Mrs. Kattimani's kitchen space was vibrant and colourful. She is fond of collecting antique showpieces, her house is adorned with vintage showpieces, and so is the design of her kitchen, an indoor, closed space. She is fond of the

woodwork, and thus, her kitchen has a plethora of wooden chambers, cabinets, etc. On Christmas day, Mrs. Kattimani invited guests who would come over to spend the day. Mr. Kattimani took a day off and assisted Mrs. Kattimani and his mother in welcoming the guests. As per rituals, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law went to the kitchen to bring breakfast for the guests while Mr. Kattimani sat with them, chatting over a cup of tea. Guests appreciated the tea prepared by Mrs. Kattimani. As the day progressed, all females gathered together in the kitchen, and conversations began. While men conversed over a cup of tea/coffee on the dining table, women socialized from within the kitchen space- their conversations included lengthy discussions on the latest fashion, cooking trends, places to visit, TV shows, and talks about the neighborhood that gives several directions to their discussions. Mrs. Kattimani's daughter was young. She was an 11-year-old girl and was primarily seen playing around the house. Entry into the kitchen was prohibited due to the presence of sharp objects and fire. The little girl enjoys making cookies with her grandmother, which is one of the regular activities they indulge in. Her grandmother's raisin cookies are her favorite, and each time they take up the preparation, they compete to make better cookies.

'My family loves to eat rasam rice. Today we will make rasam rice, and the best part about today's preparation will be that our husbands will assist us in gathering all the materials and the condiments that are required to make the dish.' [Interview conducted on 8th September, 2020].

The husbands were not excited about the whole idea of assisting with meal preparation; upon being asked, they answered that they would rather play chess. The females eventually let the men go away from the kitchen as they weren't enthusiastic about it and could create a mess.

'My husband always tells me that he is fine with all the work that may be assigned to him but he simply doesn't belong in the kitchen. After all, he is a man. He also makes a valid point in stating that there is no need for him to be here because I am efficient and I have always been a good cook, he loves to eat; not cook! When I was married, my mother-in-law told me that my husband loves rasam rice but to my surprise he couldn't even boil himself a cup of rice. I don't blame men, it's just not their job. But yes, the reason all of us here hoped they'd help us today is because we thought doing so, it'll be a good opportunity for all of us to spend quality time with each other. I had read earlier, couples who cook together, stay together. He will help me with cleaning, sweeping, moping, etc. from outside the kitchen.' [Interview conducted on 17th September, 2020].

Five women gathered in the kitchen to cook food, with seventeen members present as guests. Of these five women, three were guests who actively took charge of Mrs. Kattimani's kitchen and divided the work among themselves to finish meal preparation in time. Once the family sat down to eat, the men ate first and discussed the rasam rice recipe and how its taste had changed over the years. Mr. Kattimani commented that his mother's food is different from his wife's, and that day it was altogether something different. He also

admitted that he knew nothing about what goes into preparing the dish, his lack of interest in kitchen affairs was evident. Mrs. Kattimani actively participates in meal preparation partly because it's her job and partly; because she also likes to cook. Mr. Kattimani dismissed all possibilities of cooking for the household.

New Year's Eve was similar. The household women were so tired at the end of the night that they did not seem to enjoy the food they cooked themselves. And even more so, women tend to sit to eat amid the leftovers of the male members of the house.

I think this is the fate of women. My mother used to tell me when I was a kid, I will eventually grow up to be a homemaker and no, I do not consider it to be belittling. Being a homemaker is a big task. I am equally responsible for grueling tasks every day, most of which are performed inside the kitchen. I am responsible for deciding what to cook, it makes me happy. I like to pick out my own vegetables and yes, I think it's in our culture that women are trained to be such good wives. I wouldn't say I am not satisfied with what I do, you know how much fun it is to cook traditional food on special occasions! Our lives are anyway so busy, traditional food brings us close to our culture and I am proud of my culture. I will teach my daughter the skills to be a good wife; she needs to learn for a happy life ahead. And of course, one who eats healthy stays healthy.' [Interview conducted on 26th September, 2020].

Mrs. Kattimani's mother-in-law is a quiet woman. She talked about her life but was hesitant to speak in detail about her family. She believes that Mrs. Kattimani has now successfully taken over her roles in the family, and now she can retire from the kitchen. This makes Mrs. Kattimani proud. For over 40 years, she has worked for the well-being of her family, and it was now time for Mrs. Kattimani to take over the kitchen, showcase her skills and knowledge of cooking, and take care of the health and happiness of her son and grandchildren. As a mother, she thinks that her job is now done; she has raised his son, and now Mrs. Kattimani's responsibility is to test her suitability in the family and never let her son stray. The women do not believe this to be patriarchal; her mother did it, she did it, Mrs. Kattimani is doing it, and when her grandchild will grow, she will do it too. Patriarchy doesn't exist. These are one's responsibilities that one needs to fulfil no matter what situation, what upbringing.

Discussions & Interpretations:

a. Identity of a 'food literate':

As mentioned in the beginning, the politics of gendered space within the household and the extended authority over nutritional provisions of the family will be the point of exit for my inquiry. A woman's performance inside the kitchen space shapes her identity; she acknowledges her essentialist

categorization as a food literate, ‘who decides what to cook?’ and in doing so, she transcends into becoming a food educator over the generations, holding on to the same essentialist expression in the family. These are the performative aspects of the self, as suggested by Osella and Osella (2006). The terminology ‘literate’ is used owing to the definition of food literacy as adopted for this study that is suggestive of an individual’s ability to understand food in a way that encourages the development of a positive relationship with food systems acquiring skills that assist in navigating and participating in complex food systems throughout their lives. The informants have been able to build this relationship with food systems. In doing so, they have also been able to hold onto sustainable development of the health of their family members, taking into consideration the social, economic and political components of food preparation. The cases reported provide invaluable insights into developing an understanding of the gendered sciences of survival in the context of food and gender identity.

Secondly, upon identifying herself as a female, she would be expected to give normative significance to her membership in this group by adhering to gender roles. She is expected to perform all household rituals from within the gendered space of the kitchen (Appiah 2018). All respondents reckon they are also expected to dress in a particular way during festivities, wear specific ornaments, exhibit gender-appropriate behaviour, etc. Cultural events such as reported Christmas and New Year eve’s celebrations influence the gender roles assigned to the females of the household. The dominant categories observed within the household, namely, ‘male’ and ‘female’, are hegemonic ideals. The dichotomization of gender can be seen in the definition of a man gender labelled as not a ‘woman’, -a two-gender system. As a part of the stratification system, gender is known to rank men above women; consequently, what a man does is perceived to be more important than what a female does, and as Judith Lorber (1994:32) writes: *‘The process of creating difference depends to a great extent on differential evaluation’*. In doing so, automatically the tasks of a woman are considered to be linked to her identity as a nurturer-hinting towards a symbolic connection between nature and a woman.

The connection between the dominance of women from within a gendered territory and that of nature is ideological. For instance, in the ecofeminist argument, the ecofeminist scholars establish a connection between the domination of women and that of nature. As an ideology, it remains rooted in a system of ideas and representations, values, and beliefs responsible for placing women and the nonhuman realm hierarchically below men (Agarwal 2019). As a philosophical shift, it also calls upon women and men to conceptualize themselves and their relationships to one another and the nonhuman world and maintains cooperation, mutual love and care in non-hierarchical ways. However, the eco-feminist argument favouring the ‘natural connection’ between women and nature fails to consider women’s lived material relationship with

nature instead of others, or they might conceive that relationship to be based on ideologies. This is evident in our findings. Women across households experience varied relationships with nature, depending on intra-household dynamics, gendered knowledge, access to natural resources, property, and power dynamics within the domestic space.

While undermining the conception of 'women' as a unitary category, critics of the idea of 'natural connection' emphasized how these differences in gender-environment relations would help understand concerns of tenure and property, gendered control over labour, economic and natural resources, products and decisions. These differences also greatly influence an individual's environmental interests and opportunities. Consequently, their environmental rights and responsibilities may be affected by a change in kin and household arrangements and the negotiations these entails. A woman's interest in food preparation is driven by the need to provide good health for the family, as reported by Mita Ghosh. A woman's procreative roles, assigned at birth, must by no means necessarily be interpreted to establish a close relationship between her and a universally conceived nature. Nature is a generalized category, and it fails to address complex beliefs about the physical and non-physical attributes of different micro-environments- experiences within gendered spaces such as the kitchen space, varying historically and socially, and variant ecological processes. The female 'essence' attributed to nature may differ within cultures and periods. This is because the concepts of gender, nature, and culture are historically and socially constructed.

In considering nature and culture in the context of gender, it may also be observed that while women are expected to cook within a gendered territory, men may own professional enterprises endeavouring to monetize food preparation skills. Here, gender identity is often structured based on normative roles, and second, occupational income and financial independence. Compliance with the norms of society has been seen above the domestic space. Consequently, it becomes evident that cooking from within the kitchen space may be considered a household chore, but cooking at the higher institutional level is a paid profession, as Tara didi reported. Contrary to what is suggested, women transform raw material to produce food for the family members culturally. In doing so, they may be able to disrupt her essentialist association with nature. Yet, in the cultural space, while 'cooking' primarily is continued to be understood as a trivial task, outside the domestic space, men takeover the nature-culture divide in colonizing the paid professions of chefs and businessmen in restaurants and other higher-level areas of socialization that to date remain restricted to men (Ortner 1974).

b. Kitchen as a 'safe-space':

Deriving from the concept of territoriality, it may be stated that the kitchen space is a gendered territory. Women are primarily responsible for

the arrangement of this space, the execution of ‘cooking’ activity on a day-to-day basis, and on special occasions. The entire cooking process relies extensively on the gendered knowledge that women possess; the quality of food to be prepared is also determined by a woman’s efficiency in executing the traditional recipes that they learn from their elders during food preparation. In this context, it becomes crucial to look beyond the similar dichotomies of production/reproduction within the restricted space to emphasize the spillover of production and reproduction that women indulge in within varied social structures. Food is an integral part of any culture. The possession of gendered indigenous knowledge systems could be symbolic of reproductive and productive labour, which determines the health and well-being of the household members.

A woman’s primary interest is to ensure the well-being of her family. Despite an established authority over the kitchen space, as evident from the findings, entry into the kitchen remains prohibited during menstruation, especially for upper-class women. Intersectional feminist critique of the phenomenon would analyze the dichotomies of dominance and subordination in the context of task and gender. Empirical studies have shown how women spend time outside the kitchen, in leisure only during menstruation, not by choice, but under pressure and exclusion from the mainstream eye suggestive of a purity/pollution narrative. While it could be humiliating for some, women such as Tara *didi* take it upon their caste to state that it doesn’t matter whether or not I am menstruating, an outcast would always remain impure. In her household, the narratives of caste do not hinder the functioning of the kitchen. Despite prohibited entry, the household woman exercises her authority from outside the gendered territory through the other household members, influencing men to practice the science of survival. In doing so, she ensures that her family is secure. It is also evident that she remains bound in the shackles of the patriarchal society despite establishing an authority. Boys are aware of their nutrient requirements, casually learning from the trends in food gathering and daily ritual preparation. Consistent with the literature, the findings suggest that women are brought closer to nature in providing bare subsistence needs to their families. From a young age, she acquires, refines and propagates gendered knowledge contributing to enhanced food literacy, and consequently, food security at the household level.

Conclusion

In the broader context, preliminary studies at the household level in food literacy, gendered knowledge encourage discussions that could contribute to the discourse on sustainable development and food security at a global level. It is evident that despite efficient development strategies and policies to ensure food security at the worldwide level, poverty prevails at the household level. Poverty, as described by Amartya Sen, calls for the fulfilment of one’s idea of well-being to qualify out of poverty. At the institutional level, courses concerning

the home sciences curricula till senior secondary grades encapsulate the gendered sciences of survival in their application to our everyday lives.

At the household level, food entitlement is subject to the food literacy of the household member who is responsible for gathering and preparing food. Gendered IKS plays a significant role in enhancing food literacy across generations and is the key to nutrient sufficiency of the family. As food educators, women ensure the health of their families and ensure food security. The kitchen space reflects several cultural identities that influence social relations as women stand out as the primary partakers of cultural production and reproduction. Religion plays a vital role in influencing the culturally diverse conceptualization of women identifying with food literacy in their capacities and the community they belong to in its entirety. At the hands of women who, as Counihan (1999:47) writes, ‘... *feed, who satisfy hunger, who are viscerally needed, and who influence others through manipulation of the symbolic language of food*’, food spaces tend to exhibit means to establish authority and gain community recognition for their food preparation skills. In this context, the kitchen space emerges as a safe space for women to exhibit their knowledge of indigenous food systems on several occasions.

The productive and reproductive labour that women put in from within food spaces accounts for their representation in their households as food literate at the domestic level. To deal with the larger discourse of food security and nutrient poverty alleviation, gendered knowledge of food systems must be preserved and propagated. Gendered knowledge is invaluable to determine the food literacy of the members of the household, thereby contributing to the overall food security of the family, at the household level.

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