An anthropological study of food taboos among Kinnaurs of Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The socio-cultural understanding of food and related taboos has been a concern of anthropology for long. The present study was conducted among Kinnaurs of Himachal Pradesh (India) to understand their food taboos during menstruation, after child delivery and food restriction in case of death. The symbolism related to food in terms of ‘hot/cold’ dichotomy was found in the present study. The concept of ‘purity and pollution’ and related taboos was found to be closely intertwined among the Kinnaurs.

Keywords: Anthropology, Food, Taboo

1. INTRODUCTION

Food is one of the basic necessities for the survival of human beings. Anthropologists have long been interested in food, food ways and nutrition. Broadly speaking, the general premises of food anthropologists and food anthropology as a discipline is to investigate the ways in which food, food production, food consumption and food rituals are associated with socio-cultural norms, behaviour, social conventions and individuals and group ways of living. The concept of taboo is closely linked to food and interrelationship between the two have been examined by a number of scholars (Douglas, 1966; Tapper and Tapper, 1986; Chawla, 1992; Apffel-Marglin, 1994; Sharma et al., 2006). Anthropological research on food taboos has focussed on its utilitarian aspects (Harris, 1985; Harris and Ross, 1987; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002), magico-religious aspects (Simoons, 1998; Buruiana, 2003). The functionalist explanation of food taboo as mechanism for conserving resources as well as person’s health have been less popular (Whitaker, 2005). Thus, an attempt has been made to understand the interrelationship between food and taboos among the Kinnaurs.

2. METHODS

Kinnaur is a district located in the north-eastern part of Himachal Pradesh (India). Kinnaurs are a scheduled tribe situated in the Kinnaur district. The present study was conducted among Kinnauri women to understand food taboos in socio-cultural context. The data was collected using an interview guide and analysed thematically using three different themes which include food taboos during menstruation, food taboos after child delivery and food restrictions in case of death.

3. RESULTS

It was found that the food taboos are a very important part of Kinnaurs way of life. The food taboos among women becomes important especially during menstruation, after child delivery and in case of death.

3.1. Food taboos during menstruation

Menstruation is a complex phenomenon related to many areas such as biology, psychology, society, and religion. The women’s experience of menstruation is influenced by the way it is understood in the society they live in. Many cultures have particular ways of responding to menstruation, often referred to as taboo. Menstruation receives attention in society because it is linked to blood. Blood in society is often associated with death, homicide and kinship (Grahn, 1993), and pollution (Douglas, 1966; Puri and Kapoor, 2006). It is also interpreted differently in various religious doctrines. Hinduism views menstruating women as ‘impure’ (Chawla, 1992) or polluted (Apffel-Marglin, 1994) and often associates it with curse (Sharma et al., 2006). Among Kinnaurs, a woman is not allowed to enter the kitchen or cook food during her menstruation. Any other woman in house (mother-in-law or sister-in-law or daughter) would cook the food or in absence of any other woman, either a male member or a woman from same clan would cook the food. The hot/cold concept is closely tied to reproductive cycle among Kinnaurs. Blood is considered to be hot agent and during menstruation when the women is losing blood, she is advised to avoid hot foods such as goat meat, eggs and chicken as it is believed that this would cause more bleeding. Among Kinnaurs, menstruation is considered as a private event. There is a strong taboo against menstruation being made known in a public sphere or being discussed especially with the men in the family or outside. Similar findings have been made by Apffel-Marglin (1994)
who also pointed out that menstruation is a private affair in a Hindu society.

3.2. Food taboos after child delivery

Food after delivery is a subject of great concern. It is considered to be very important for the health of baby as well as mother. Immediately after the delivery, hot milk is given to the mother. Then, the mother is given khichdi to eat. Khichdi is made up of rice and pulses, and is considered as easy to digest. It provides strength to mother so that she could breastfeed her child. Healthy food including milk and fruits are preferred diet after the delivery. Hence, fried foods are not advisable and are avoided. The 'cold foods' such as lassi (butter milk), peas, cabbage, turnip, cauliflower, etc are avoided after child delivery. Rice is also considered as a 'cold food' and is given in a very small amount to a woman after child delivery. It is believed that adding clarified butter to rice changes its nature from being 'cold' to 'hot'. The woman is not allowed to enter the kitchen for at least 21 days after delivery. She is considered to be 'impure'. The food is given to the woman who has just delivered the child outside the house for 21 days otherwise house will become 'impure'. During lactation, the 'hot foods' such as eggs, meats, etc are avoided as these are believed to attract the evil spirits which can harm the mother as well as the baby.

3.3. Food restriction in case of death

Food restrictions are followed even in case of a death. If there is death of an new born, food restriction is followed for 3 days. In case, an infant is 3 months or less of age, then food restriction is followed for 5 days. In case, the infant is aged between 6 months to 1 year, food restriction i followed for 11 days. For adults, food restriction is followed for 13 to 15 days. As a part of food restriction in case of a death, only boiled food is consumed and fried food is strictly prohibited. The food is to be consumed immediately after sunset and this type of routine is followed for the number of days mentioned above in different cases.

4. DISCUSSION

The three themes such as food taboos during menstruation, food taboos after child delivery and food restrictions in case of death emerged. The food taboos during menstruation included avoidance of 'hot foods' such as goat meat, eggs and chicken. Entering kitchen during menstruation is strictly avoided and thus, the menstruating woman is socially isolated. Public discussion about menstruation is also strictly avoided. The 'cold foods' such as lassi (butter milk), peas, cabbage, turnip, cauliflower, rice, etc are avoided after child delivery. The food restrictions are also followed in case of death. Only boiled food is consumed and fried food is strictly avoided. The food has a number of socio-cultural and symbolic dimensions attached to it. The symbolism related to food can be explained in terms of 'hot/cold' dichotomy which is closely ingrained in the belief system of Kinnaurs. The other important concept that emerged in the present study is 'purity and pollution' which governs the Kinnaurs social life. As a result of belief in concept of 'purity and pollution', the two themes; isolation and silence also emerged. It can be concluded that food taboos and restrictions play an important role in the life of Kinnaurs and closely related to their belief system.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH
1. The study focusses on food taboos among a tribal population and explains how these taboos are an important part of their lives.  
2. It also tends to explore the interrelationships between food, health and taboos.

FUTURE ISSUES

The future research should focus on interrelationships between health and food taboos in other tribal communities.

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