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Culinary Transformations: Media, Ritual Hegemony and Caste Dynamics Among the Thigalas of Bangalore

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Abstract

Food practices in India are deeply embedded in caste hierarchies and function as markers of ritual purity, moral worth, and social status. Classical sociological accounts identify food as a central mechanism through which caste boundaries are maintained and reproduced. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among the Thigalas, an intermediary caste community in urban Bangalore. This paper examines contemporary transformations in food practices, with a particular focus on the increasing adoption of vegetarianism. It argues that these changes cannot be adequately explained through the classical model of Sanskritization as a bottom-up process of imitation. Instead, the paper conceptualises Sanskritization as a two-way hegemonic process, in which dominant caste norms are actively maintained and disseminated through electronic media. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative media content analysis, the study demonstrates how television and social media function as ritual infrastructures that normalise upper-caste food morality, producing consent rather than coercion. The paper contributes to debates on caste, food politics, and media by foregrounding ritual hegemony as a key mechanism through which caste power is reproduced in contemporary urban India.

Introduction

Food occupies a central place in the reproduction of caste hierarchy in India. Far from being a matter of individual preference or cultural taste, food practices have historically functioned as markers of ritual purity, social distance, and moral worth. Classical sociological accounts of caste consistently foreground food as a key mechanism through which hierarchy is maintained, boundaries are policed, and social interaction is regulated. Distinctions between vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets, the classification of food as *kaccha* or *pucca*, and the rules governing commensality have long served as symbolic expressions of caste status. Within this moral economy of food, vegetarianism has been associated with ritual purity and upper-caste respectability, while meat consumption has been marked as impure and linked to lower-caste identities.

Scholars have also documented how food practices become sites of aspiration and mobility for non-dominant castes. Ethnographic evidence from various regions of India indicates that lower and intermediate castes have historically adopted upper-caste food habits, particularly vegetarianism, as part of broader strategies to claim social respectability and ritual legitimacy. B. R. Ambedkar, in his seminal essay *Castes in India* (1916), theorised caste formation itself as a product of imitation, drawing on Gabriel Tarde's "Law of Imitation" to argue that lower castes emulated the customs and practices of the upper castes. Later, M. N. Srinivas conceptualised this process as "Sanskritization," describing it as the adoption of upper-caste rituals, values, and practices by lower castes seeking upward mobility within the caste order. Food practices, particularly the shift towards vegetarianism, played a central role in this process.

While the concept of Sanskritization has been influential in understanding caste mobility, it has also been subject to sustained critique. Scholars have pointed out its implicit assumption of a unilinear, bottom-up process of cultural

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change, in which lower castes appear as active agents adopting dominant norms, while upper castes remain passive reference points. Such formulations underplay the role of power, coercion, and structural constraint in shaping ritual change. More importantly, they fail to adequately examine how dominant castes actively maintain and reproduce ritual authority in changing social contexts. This limitation becomes particularly significant in contemporary urban settings, where traditional face-to-face mechanisms of caste regulation coexist with new forms of cultural dissemination.

In recent decades, electronic media, especially television and social media, have emerged as powerful sites for the circulation of religious and moral discourses in India. Devotional television serials, religious talk shows, festival programming, and social media content produced by religious influencers increasingly shape everyday understandings of piety, purity, and moral conduct. Food practices occupy a prominent place within these media narratives, often framed in terms of devotion, discipline, and moral self-regulation. Vegetarianism is frequently presented not merely as a dietary choice but as an ethical and spiritual obligation, closely tied to Hindu ritual life. Despite this, the role of the media in reproducing caste-based food hierarchies remains undertheorized in sociological literature.

This paper aims to address this gap by examining the transformation of food practices among the Thigalas, an intermediary caste community residing in Bangalore. Historically categorised as Shudras and traditionally engaged in pastoral and agrarian occupations, the Thigalas have been predominantly meat-eaters. However, over the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift towards vegetarianism among urban Thigalas, particularly among women, older adults, and those involved in rituals. This shift is not uniform or voluntary across all sections of the community; rather, it is often accompanied by moral pressure, ritual anxiety, and social surveillance. Among younger members, vegetarianism is often observed during festivals and religious observances, even when it conflicts with everyday food preferences.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and media content analysis, this paper argues that these changes cannot be adequately explained through the classical model of Sanskritization as a bottom-up process of imitation. Instead, it proposes that Sanskritization operates as a two-way hegemonic process, in which dominant caste norms are actively maintained, standardised, and disseminated through media infrastructures. Electronic media function as a crucial mechanism through which upper-caste ritual values, particularly vegetarian morality, are normalised and internalised by non-dominant caste groups. Rather than merely aspiring to upper-caste practices, communities like the Thigalas encounter a moral regime in which deviation from vegetarian norms is framed as ritual failure, spiritual deficiency, or ethical inadequacy.

By foregrounding the role of media in shaping food practices, this study contributes to broader debates on caste, culture, and power in contemporary India. It demonstrates how ritual authority is reproduced not only through traditional institutions such as temples and kin networks but also through mediated forms of cultural regulation. Food becomes a key site where symbolic domination operates subtly, producing consent rather than overt coercion. In this sense, the paper extends existing critiques of Sanskritization by situating it within a framework of ritual hegemony, drawing on insights from Gramscian and Bourdieusian sociology.

The paper addresses the following research questions: How are food practices among urban Thigalas changing in contemporary Bangalore? What role does electronic media play in shaping attitudes towards meat consumption and vegetarianism? How do these transformations challenge conventional understandings of Sanskritization and caste mobility? Through these questions, the paper seeks to reconceptualise food practices as arenas of negotiated power rather than simple markers of cultural imitation.

Food, Caste, and Ritual Hierarchy: Conceptual Foundations

Food has long occupied a central place in sociological and anthropological analyses of caste in India. Classical scholars identified food practices not merely as cultural habits but as constitutive elements of caste hierarchy itself. G. S. Ghurye, in his influential formulation of the characteristic features of the caste system, explicitly enumerated food practices as one of the governing principles of caste organisation. Rules surrounding commensality, restrictions on food exchange, and distinctions between what kinds of food could be prepared, consumed, or shared were fundamental to the maintenance of ritual boundaries. The classification of food into *kaccha* (food cooked in water)

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and *pucca* (food cooked in ghee or oil), and the elaborate codes regulating who could accept food from whom, encoded notions of purity and pollution into everyday social life.

Within this moral economy, vegetarianism acquired particular ritual significance. The association of vegetarian diets with the twice-born castes and meat consumption with lower castes functioned as a symbolic marker of hierarchy rather than a reflection of nutritional or ecological considerations alone. Food thus became a visible and embodied sign of caste location, allowing ritual status to be read directly from everyday practices. As several ethnographic studies have demonstrated, food taboos served as mechanisms of social distance, limiting intimacy and reinforcing the hierarchical nature of caste relations.

B. R. Ambedkar's intervention into caste theory further emphasised the role of cultural practices, including food, in the formation and reproduction of caste. In *Castes in India* (1916), Ambedkar drew upon Gabriel Tarde's "Law of Imitation" to argue that caste boundaries were historically produced through processes of imitation and exclusion. According to Ambedkar, endogamy, the defining feature of caste, was sustained by the imitation of upper-caste practices by lower castes seeking to elevate their social standing. While Ambedkar's focus was primarily on marriage and kinship, his broader argument underscored the importance of everyday cultural practices as sites where caste hierarchy was both desired and enforced. Food practices, in this framework, were not neutral habits but aspirational markers through which caste status was negotiated.

M. N. Srinivas' formulation of "Sanskritization" built upon these insights and provided one of the most influential conceptual tools for understanding caste mobility in India. Based on his ethnographic work among the Coorgs, Srinivas defined Sanskritization as the process by which lower castes adopt the rituals, customs, ideology, and lifestyle of the upper castes, particularly Brahmins, in order to claim a higher status within the caste hierarchy. Food practices, especially the adoption of vegetarianism and the renunciation of alcohol and meat, were identified as key elements of this process. Sanskritization offered a powerful corrective to static views of caste by highlighting its dynamic and negotiated character.

However, the concept of Sanskritization has also been critiqued for its theoretical limitations. One major criticism concerns the implicit assumption of voluntarism and agency on the part of lower castes, who are portrayed as rational actors freely choosing upper-caste practices. Such an account underplays the structural constraints, moral pressures, and symbolic violence involved in ritual change. Furthermore, Sanskritization is largely conceptualised as a bottom-up process, focusing on how subordinate groups imitate dominant norms, while neglecting the active role of upper castes in defining, policing, and enforcing ritual legitimacy. The question of how ritual authority is maintained, especially in changing social contexts, remains insufficiently addressed.

These limitations become particularly evident in urban and contemporary settings, where caste practices are reshaped by migration, media exposure, and new forms of cultural interaction. In such contexts, the reproduction of caste hierarchy cannot be understood solely through face-to-face interactions or localised ritual authority. Instead, new institutional and cultural mechanisms must be examined to understand how caste norms continue to exert moral force. This paper argues that food practices provide a particularly revealing lens through which to examine these transformations, as they lie at the intersection of ritual ideology, everyday life, and symbolic power.

Media, Ritual Hegemony, and Cultural Power

To understand contemporary transformations in caste-based food practices, it is necessary to move beyond classical formulations of Sanskritization and incorporate insights from theories of hegemony and cultural power. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is particularly useful in this regard, as it draws attention to the ways in which domination is secured not merely through coercion but through consent. Hegemony operates by naturalising the worldview of dominant groups, presenting it as common sense and moral truth. In the context of caste, ritual norms surrounding purity, pollution, and food acquire hegemonic force when they are internalised by subordinate groups as ethical ideals rather than experienced as external impositions.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence further sharpens this analysis. Symbolic violence refers to the subtle and often invisible forms of domination that occur when social hierarchies are misrecognized as natural or legitimate. Food practices are particularly susceptible to such misrecognition, as they are deeply embodied and emotionally

charged. When vegetarianism is framed as morally superior, spiritually pure, or culturally refined, non-vegetarian practices come to be experienced as shameful or inferior, even by those whose historical food cultures included meat consumption. This internalisation of hierarchy through everyday practice exemplifies symbolic violence at work.

In contemporary India, electronic media have emerged as a critical site for the production and circulation of ritual norms. Television serials, devotional programs, religious discourses, and social media content increasingly shape popular understandings of Hindu religiosity and moral conduct. These media forms do not merely reflect existing social values; they actively participate in constructing normative frameworks of piety, discipline, and respectability. Food occupies a central place within these narratives, often presented as a domain where devotion must be enacted through restraint, sacrifice, and self-regulation.

Religious television serials frequently portray vegetarianism as an essential component of moral life, associating it with divine favour, spiritual progress, and ritual correctness. Devotional talk shows and festival programming emphasise fasting, abstinence, and dietary discipline as markers of true devotion. Similarly, social media platforms disseminate messages that associate food practices with moral worth, often through simplified and emotive narratives. The repetition and normalisation of these messages contribute to the formation of a moral commonsense in which vegetarianism appears as the natural and desirable standard of Hindu religiosity.

Importantly, these media narratives are deeply caste-coded, even when caste is not explicitly mentioned. The moral universe they construct draws heavily on upper-caste ritual norms, particularly Brahmanical conceptions of purity and discipline. By presenting these norms as universal Hindu values, media discourses obscure their caste origins and render them hegemonic. Non-dominant caste groups encounter these norms not as external impositions but as aspirational ideals embedded in everyday media consumption.

This paper conceptualises electronic media as a form of ritual infrastructure through which caste hegemony is reproduced in contemporary urban contexts. Media operate as a soft yet pervasive mechanism of cultural regulation, shaping desires, anxieties, and moral self-evaluation. In doing so, they enable dominant caste values to travel across social boundaries and become embedded in the everyday lives of non-dominant groups. Food practices, situated at the intersection of ritual ideology and bodily habit, emerge as a key site where this hegemonic process unfolds.

Methodology and Fieldwork Context

This study employs a qualitative research design combining ethnographic fieldwork with media content analysis to examine transformations in food practices among the Thigala community in Bangalore. The methodological approach is guided by an interpretive sociological framework that seeks to understand how social actors make sense of everyday practices within broader structures of power and meaning. Food practices are treated not merely as behavioural choices but as socially embedded actions shaped by ritual ideology, moral discourse, and symbolic authority.

Fieldwork was conducted among urban Thigala households residing in different localities of Bangalore city. The Thigalas constitute an intermediary caste group with a historical association with pastoral and agrarian occupations. While traditionally classified as Shudras, the community has experienced significant social and occupational diversification in recent decades, particularly in urban contexts. Bangalore, as a rapidly expanding metropolitan city with high media penetration and diverse caste interactions, provides a particularly suitable site for examining the contemporary dynamics of caste, food, and media.

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the Thigala community across different age groups and genders. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with men and women, including younger adults, middle-aged individuals, and elderly participants, to capture generational differences in food practices and ritual attitudes. Particular attention was paid to women and older adults, given their central role in managing household food practices and ritual observance. Interviews focused on everyday dietary habits, perceptions of vegetarianism and meat consumption, experiences of ritual pressure, and sources of moral influence.

In addition to interviews, the study draws on qualitative content analysis of electronic media consumed by participants. This included religious television serials, devotional programs broadcast on vernacular channels, and social media content shared or discussed within the community. Media materials were selected based on their popularity and

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frequency of mention during interviews. Transcripts and posts were analysed thematically to identify recurring narratives related to food, purity, devotion, and moral discipline. The aim was not to quantify media effects but to understand the symbolic and moral frameworks through which food practices are represented and normalised.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and care was taken to ensure that their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Given the sensitivity of caste and food-related discussions, interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed participants to articulate their ambivalence, contradictions, and uncertainties without judgment. The researcher's positionality and social location inevitably shaped access and interpretation; reflexive attention was paid to how these factors influenced the research encounter and the analysis.

By combining ethnographic insights with media analysis, this methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of how caste-based food norms are both lived and mediated. It enables an examination of the interplay between everyday practices and broader cultural discourses, highlighting how ritual authority is reproduced through both intimate and institutional forms of power.

Transforming Food Practices among Urban Thigalas

Food practices among the Thigalas have undergone significant transformation over the past decade, particularly in urban Bangalore. Historically, the Thigalas were a predominantly meat-eating community, with dietary practices shaped by pastoral livelihoods and ritual traditions that included animal sacrifice and meat consumption during festivals and life-cycle ceremonies. Meat was not merely a source of nutrition but an integral component of sociality, ritual exchange, and collective celebration. Older participants recalled meat consumption as a routine and morally unremarkable practice, embedded within both everyday household practices and ceremonial contexts.

"I was eating non-veg from my childhood. I liked mutton a lot. My mother used to make the best mutton curry. When I went to my village, she would always cook it for me. Even while returning to Bangalore, the smell would stay on my hands," (Female, 55, Bangalore).

Such recollections situate meat consumption as an emotionally charged and socially embedded practice, rather than as a marginal or transgressive habit. They provide an important baseline against which contemporary transformations in food morality can be understood.

In contrast, contemporary urban Thigala households exhibit a marked shift towards vegetarianism, both in everyday meals and during ritual occasions. This shift is uneven and contested, varying across age, gender, and religious participation. While meat consumption has not disappeared entirely, it is increasingly regulated, restricted, and morally scrutinised. Several participants described reducing meat intake to specific days, avoiding it during religious months, or consuming it discreetly outside the household. These changes are frequently articulated in moral terms, framed as signs of discipline, devotion, and cultural refinement rather than as pragmatic or health-related choices.

A striking feature of this transformation is the central role played by women and older adults in regulating food practices. Women, particularly those responsible for cooking and ritual observance, often emerge as key enforcers of vegetarian norms within the household. Many women articulated vegetarianism as a form of moral labour, linking dietary restraint to family well-being, spiritual merit, and divine favour. Older adults, especially those with strong religious affiliations, were often described as exerting subtle yet persistent pressure on younger household members to adopt vegetarian practices, particularly during festivals and auspicious periods.

One woman traced her gradual shift to vegetarianism to the intensification of ritual obligations following domestic transitions:

"After we built our new house, we did Ganesha homa. The priest said we should not eat non-veg for 48 days. Then I started celebrating Varamahalakshmi festival. During Shravana and Karthika, I stopped cooking non-veg. Slowly, I stopped eating completely," (Female, 55, Bangalore).

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This narrative illustrates how temporary ritual abstinence associated with specific ceremonies gradually extends into permanent dietary renunciation, transforming food practices through repeated moral discipline rather than through a single moment of religious conversion.

Among younger Thigalas, food practices reveal a complex negotiation between preference, obligation, and social surveillance. While many young adults expressed continued enjoyment of meat, they also reported instances of what can be described as ritually forced vegetarianism. During religious festivals, temple visits, or periods of fasting, the consumption of meat was often explicitly prohibited, not only within the household but also in public and peer settings. Deviations from these norms were associated with feelings of guilt, anxiety, or fear of social sanction. Vegetarianism, in these contexts, functions less as a voluntary lifestyle choice and more as a ritual requirement tied to moral legitimacy.

These transformations are accompanied by heightened anxiety surrounding food rituals. Participants frequently described concerns about pollution, ritual contamination, and the consequences of dietary transgression. Meat consumption was increasingly associated with moral risk, capable of undermining prayer, nullifying ritual merit, or inviting misfortune. As one participant explained:

"Non-veg is impure. You cannot do pooja if you cook it at home. If I want to do pooja daily, it is better not to eat it at all," (Female, 55, Bangalore).

Such anxieties were not always grounded in localized or historically specific ritual traditions but appeared to draw upon broader discourses of Hindu morality circulating in the urban public sphere. Food thus becomes a site where caste, religion, and respectability intersect, producing new forms of self-regulation and social monitoring.

Importantly, these changes cannot be understood simply as outcomes of increased religiosity or personal belief. Rather, they reflect a broader restructuring of moral authority in which food practices are increasingly evaluated against dominant caste norms of ritual purity. Vegetarianism emerges as a symbolic marker of cultural legitimacy, aligning Thigala households with upper-caste models of Hindu respectability. In this process, traditional food practices are not only abandoned but re-signified as backward, impure, or incompatible with urban religious life. The transformation of food practices among urban Thigalas thus reveals the subtle yet powerful ways in which caste hierarchies are reproduced through everyday moral discipline.

Media, Moral Regulation, and Ritual Discipline

Electronic media play a crucial role in shaping the moral frameworks through which food practices among the Thigalas are evaluated and transformed. Participants frequently referred to television serials, devotional programs, and social media content as sources of religious knowledge and moral guidance. These media forms are deeply embedded in everyday routines, often consumed collectively within households, thereby amplifying their normative influence. Rather than functioning as neutral entertainment, they operate as pedagogical spaces where ideas of purity, devotion, and discipline are repeatedly articulated and normalised.

Religious television serials and devotional programs were particularly influential in constructing vegetarianism as a moral ideal. These programs often portray abstinence from meat as a prerequisite for spiritual progress, divine favour, and ritual efficacy. Food is presented not merely as sustenance but as an extension of moral character, with vegetarian diets symbolising restraint, sacrifice, and spiritual elevation. Such narratives rarely acknowledge the historical diversity of Hindu food practices, instead presenting a homogenised and upper-caste model of religiosity as normative.

Participants' narratives indicate how these moral frameworks are absorbed and rearticulated through engagement with organised religious discourses that circulate widely through media.

"I started attending ISKCON pravachana and bhajans. There I learned that food controls the body and mind. Meat is tamasic, it makes the mind dull. Sattvik food is good for consciousness. That is why I stopped eating meat," (Male, 59, Bangalore).

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This account illustrates how caste-coded food hierarchies are translated into a universalised moral–scientific language, in which vegetarianism is framed not as a caste practice but as a rational and ethical choice linked to bodily and mental well-being.

Social media platforms further intensify these moral discourses by circulating simplified and emotionally charged messages about food and devotion. WhatsApp forwards, Facebook posts, and short video clips frequently link dietary restraint to auspicious outcomes, framing vegetarianism as a pathway to personal and familial well-being. These messages often adopt a prescriptive tone, urging viewers to avoid meat during festivals, fasting periods, or religious observances. The repetition of such content across platforms contributes to a pervasive moral atmosphere in which food practices are constantly evaluated and judged.

Importantly, media-driven moral regulation does not operate through explicit coercion but through subtle processes of internalisation and consent. Participants described feeling compelled to alter food practices not because of direct pressure from religious authorities, but because of a growing sense that vegetarianism represented the correct and respectable way to live. Media narratives provide a shared moral vocabulary through which dietary choices are interpreted, making deviations from vegetarian norms appear as personal failures rather than structural impositions.

These processes are marked by uneven and negotiated compliance within households. As one participant noted:

"Only I don't eat non-veg. My wife and children eat. When they cook non-veg, they make separate food for me. I want to stop onion and garlic also, but they say it becomes tasteless," (Male, 59, Bangalore).

This partial adherence highlights both the reach and the limits of ritual discipline, revealing how caste-based food morality is accommodated, resisted, and negotiated in everyday domestic life.

These media discourses are implicitly caste-coded, drawing heavily on Brahmanical ritual values while presenting them as universal Hindu norms. By erasing the caste specificity of vegetarian morality, media representations obscure the power relations underlying food hierarchies. Non-dominant caste practices, including meat consumption, are rendered morally suspect without being explicitly named as caste practices. This process enables the reproduction of caste hierarchy through cultural means that appear inclusive and apolitical.

For the Thigalas, engagement with these media narratives produces a form of ritual discipline that reshapes everyday life. Households reorganise meal patterns, restrict food choices during religious periods, and monitor consumption in relation to ritual calendars disseminated through media. Youth, in particular, encounter conflicting moral regimes, navigating between peer cultures that normalise meat consumption and mediated religious discourses that stigmatise it. The resulting tension often leads to compartmentalisation, where meat consumption is displaced to private or hidden spaces, further reinforcing its moral marginalisation.

In this sense, electronic media function as a crucial mechanism through which ritual authority is extended beyond traditional institutions such as temples and caste councils. They enable dominant caste norms to circulate widely and acquire legitimacy without overt enforcement. Food practices become sites of symbolic domination, where compliance is secured through moral persuasion rather than force. The regulation of meat consumption among urban Thigalas thus illustrates how caste hegemony adapts to contemporary conditions, operating through mediated forms of cultural power.

Rethinking Sanskritization: A Two-Way Process of Ritual Hegemony

The empirical material presented in the preceding sections necessitates a re-evaluation of Sanskritization as a theoretical framework for understanding caste mobility and cultural change. Classical formulations of Sanskritization conceptualise it primarily as a bottom-up process in which lower or intermediary castes voluntarily adopt the rituals, values, and practices of upper castes in order to claim higher social status. While this framework remains useful in highlighting the dynamic and negotiated nature of caste, it falls short in adequately capturing the power relations that structure contemporary ritual transformations. The case of the Thigalas demonstrates that Sanskritization in urban contexts operates not merely through imitation, but through a complex interplay of aspiration, moral regulation, and hegemonic enforcement.

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Among the Thigalas, the shift towards vegetarianism cannot be understood simply as a conscious strategy of caste mobility. While some participants articulated vegetarian practices as expressions of devotion or cultural refinement, these narratives coexist with experiences of pressure, anxiety, and constraint. Vegetarianism is frequently encountered not as an optional marker of upward mobility, but as a normative expectation tied to moral legitimacy. The regulation of food practices thus extends beyond individual choice, embedding dietary behaviour within a broader moral regime that defines what it means to be a proper religious and social subject.

This suggests that Sanskritization functions as a two-way process, involving not only the adoption of dominant norms by subordinate groups but also the active maintenance and circulation of ritual authority by dominant caste formations. Upper-caste norms of purity, particularly those surrounding food, are not merely available for emulation; they are continuously reproduced and normalised through cultural institutions that shape everyday moral life. Electronic media, as this study has shown, play a central role in this process by transforming caste-specific ritual values into generalised standards of Hindu religiosity.

In this two-way process, dominant caste groups retain control over the symbolic economy of ritual legitimacy. They define the terms of moral respectability, determine which practices are considered pure or impure, and establish the criteria through which religious authenticity is evaluated. Subordinate and intermediary castes, in turn, encounter these criteria as ethical imperatives rather than explicit instruments of domination. Compliance is secured through moral persuasion, affective appeal, and symbolic violence, rather than overt coercion. The result is a form of ritual hegemony in which caste hierarchy is reproduced through consent.

Reconceptualising Sanskritization in this manner also helps address long-standing critiques of the concept. By foregrounding power and hegemony, this approach moves beyond voluntaristic accounts of cultural change, highlighting the structural conditions under which ritual practices are transformed. It recognises that the desire to adopt upper-caste practices is itself shaped by unequal access to symbolic capital and moral authority. Food practices, situated at the intersection of body, belief, and social status, provide a particularly revealing site for observing these dynamics.

The role of media is crucial in enabling this hegemonic form of Sanskritization. Media narratives detach vegetarianism from its specific caste origins and reframe it as a universal moral ideal. In doing so, they obscure the historical and social specificity of Brahmanical ritual norms, presenting them instead as timeless expressions of Hindu culture. This process allows caste-based hierarchies to be reproduced in a form that appears inclusive, modern, and culturally neutral. For communities like the Thigalas, participation in this moral order involves both aspiration and subordination, as traditional practices are re-evaluated and often devalued in relation to dominant norms.

This re-theorisation also has implications for understanding resistance and constraint within caste processes. While the Thigalas do not uniformly or uncritically accept vegetarian norms, their capacity to contest these norms is limited by the moral authority they carry. Meat consumption is increasingly relegated to private or concealed spaces, indicating not the disappearance of older practices but their marginalisation within the dominant moral order. Such forms of accommodation and concealment reveal the uneven and contested nature of hegemony, where compliance is partial and negotiated rather than absolute.

By framing Sanskritization as a two-way hegemonic process, this paper contributes to broader debates on caste, culture, and power in contemporary India. It highlights the need to examine not only the practices of subordinate groups but also the institutional and cultural mechanisms through which dominant caste values are maintained. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention from cultural imitation to ritual governance, emphasising how everyday practices such as food consumption become sites of symbolic domination and moral discipline. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of caste transformation in urban, media-saturated contexts, where traditional hierarchies persist through new and seemingly benign forms of cultural regulation.

Conclusion

This paper examined the transformation of food practices among the Thigala community in urban Bangalore to rethink the concept of Sanskritization in contemporary caste contexts. By focusing on everyday dietary practices and their mediation through electronic media, the study demonstrated that changes in food habits cannot be understood solely

as expressions of individual choice, religiosity, or cultural aspiration. Instead, they must be situated within broader structures of ritual power and symbolic domination that shape moral norms and social legitimacy.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and media content analysis, the paper demonstrates how vegetarianism has become increasingly prevalent as a moral ideal among urban Thigalas, particularly among women, older adults, and ritual participants. While meat consumption has not disappeared, it has become subject to heightened regulation, surveillance, and moral anxiety. These transformations reveal how food functions as a key site where caste hierarchy is reproduced in everyday life. The moral valuation of vegetarianism and the stigmatisation of meat consumption reflect the continued dominance of upper-caste ritual norms, even in ostensibly modern and urban settings.

The central contribution of this study lies in reconceptualising Sanskritization as a two-way hegemonic process. Rather than viewing Sanskritization solely as a bottom-up strategy of cultural imitation, the paper demonstrated how dominant caste values are actively maintained and disseminated through media infrastructures that shape everyday moral sensibilities. Electronic media play a crucial role in this process by presenting caste-specific ritual norms as universal Hindu values, thereby obscuring their historical and social origins. Through repetition, affective appeal, and moral persuasion, media narratives secure consent to dominant norms, thereby enabling the persistence of caste hierarchy without overt coercion.

By foregrounding the role of media in ritual regulation, this study extends existing scholarship on caste and culture in several ways. First, it highlights the need to move beyond localised and face-to-face models of caste reproduction and attend to mediated forms of cultural power. Second, it demonstrates how food practices, as deeply embodied and emotionally charged activities, serve as particularly effective sites for symbolic domination. Third, it underscores the importance of examining intermediary castes, whose experiences reveal both the possibilities and limits of cultural mobility within the caste system.

The findings also invite reflection on the nature of agency and constraint in caste transformations. While Thigala households actively negotiate food practices, their choices are shaped by moral regimes that privilege dominant caste values. Resistance, where it occurs, often takes the form of concealment or compartmentalisation rather than open contestation, indicating the subtle but pervasive force of ritual hegemony. Such dynamics complicate celebratory narratives of cultural change and highlight the need for greater attention to the unequal distribution of symbolic authority in Indian society.

This study has certain limitations. It is based on fieldwork conducted in a specific urban context and focuses on a single caste community. Further comparative research across regions, castes, and media environments would deepen understanding of how ritual hegemony operates in different settings. Future studies may also explore how counter-discourses, such as Dalit, Bahujan, or anti-caste media, challenge dominant food moralities and offer alternative frameworks of cultural legitimacy.

In conclusion, the paper argues that food practices provide a crucial lens for understanding the contemporary reproduction of caste power. In an era marked by rapid urbanisation and media expansion, caste hierarchies persist not despite cultural change, but through it. By tracing how ritual authority is reconstituted through everyday practices and mediated moral discourses, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of caste as a dynamic yet enduring system of social domination in modern India.

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