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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

"Man is what he eats" is possibly one of the well-known sentences of German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. This phrase was highlighted in his review of physiologist Jacob Moleschott's book in 1850. (Turkoldo et al., 2021, p. 762)

A common reference in the study of food and medicine, the above statement finds relevance till date as the relationship between food and humanity continues to be examined. While Feuerbach's assertion emanated from a materialistic standpoint, often interpreted within the area of health and nutrition, it raises broader questions about the symbolism of the food we consume and how food practices shape our identities. These inquiries delve into the symbolic and cultural significance of food, moving beyond limited nutritional considerations.

Despite its health implications, nutrition seems to play only an insignificant role in our food choices (Fox, 2002). According to Barthes, our understanding of "food" goes well beyond nutrients, calories, and minerals. It represents more than just its nutritional components; but also embodies what he describes as "a system of communication, a collection of images, and a set of customs, contexts, and behaviors" (Barthes, 1961/2013, p. 24). Moreover, taste, memory, accessibility, cultural values, religion, and social influences often exceed nutrition in one's food choices as they serve as a powerful symbol and a fundamental aspect of identity. Eating is not solely driven by biological needs, as Mintz argued, but rather a social practice that is "always conditioned by meanings" (Mintz, 1996, p. 7). Similarly, Murcott also wrote, "Eating is undeniably a biological necessity, but the practical definition of food is unavoidably social and cultural" (Murcott, 2019, p. 18). These assertions emphasise that eating is imbued with cultural, social, and symbolic meaning, making it far more than just a physiological necessity. This perspective invites a deeper exploration of how our food choices are influenced by traditions, social norms, and identities, highlighting the profound relationship between universal human needs (nutrition) and meaning in our daily lives.

Food and eating play an intrinsic function in people's daily rituals, yet these activities are often overlooked, rendering their deeper socio-cultural implications unexplored. For Kikon (2021), food and consumption practices reflect sociocultural and political orders that stem from class and caste hierarchies. A study of food practices reflects valuable social interpretation when examined in its context – the food we eat defines and re-defines us in various ways, thus

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