



# The Edible Palimpsest: Food Practice as Strategic Ritualization

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**Abstract.** This study examines how ritualization and normative construction in food through myths lead to the development of complex taxonomic schemes that organize meanings, identities, and social boundaries. Through analytical exploration of Ira Mukhoty's novel *Song of Draupadi*, the chapter navigates palimpsestic dimensions associated with food practices to reconsider the politicizing and hierarchical notions of marginalization through food. The analysis utilizes Catherine Bell's framework of ritualization and Colleen Taylor Sen's historical account of food practices in ancient India to demonstrate how food functions as both a site of epistemological authority and strategic power. The study reveals that food practices are not arbitrary but constitute intricate taxonomic systems that encode knowledge claims, sustain cultural continuity, and reinforce hierarchical social structures.

**Keywords:** food practices, ritualization, revisionist narratives, taxonomic schemes, cultural memory, sacred power, food palimpsest, social hierarchies

## 1 Ritualization and Normative Construction in Food through Myths

A superficial curiosity about how food practices are organized often overlooks the intricate systems that classify and structure these practices within cultures. It is well understood that food rituals do more than nourish; they create frameworks of meaning and identity. The connection between ritualized food practices and the classification of cultural knowledge has not been extensively explored. This section aims to address that

gap by discussing how ritualization and normative construction in food through myths lead to the development of complex taxonomic schemes that organize meanings, identities, and social boundaries. Myths help us understand why acknowledging them is crucial to grasping food as a ritualized practice. The narratives provided by myths frame food beyond mere sustenance. The mythical dimension embeds food within cultural memory and identity. Therefore, it is crucial to note how myths shape the practice of communities in ritualizing food. Because of their potential in giving meaning to acts of preparation and consumption. One example is how mythic stories often underpin food taboos and feasting rituals, which are not just arbitrary but carry deep symbolic significance that guides social behaviour and cohesion. The ritualization and normative construction within the edible palimpsest can lead to the orchestration of complex taxonomic schemes. These schemes classify and organize food practices, meanings, and identities into layered categories that reflect historical, cultural, and functional dimensions.

To grasp these meanings in the complex scenarios the revisionist authors in mythological retellings provides an alternative viewpoint related to the affective dimensions, which have been created by the dominant discourses. These established paradigms lead to stabilize the dynamic attributes inherent in the myths. Reading these demystifying narratives can help us better understand food as an edible palimpsest to develop the holistic understanding related to food practices. This aligns with the notion of Adrienne Rich who states, “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich, 1972, p. 19).

This chapter seeks to bring out how ritualization and normative construction in food through myths lead to the development of complex taxonomic schemes that organize meanings, identities, and social boundaries. Through the analytical exploration of the novel *Song of Draupadi* by Ira Mukhoty, the study navigates palimpsestic dimensions associated with food practices to reconsider the politicising and hierarchical notions of marginalisation through food practices. The chapter proceeds by first establishing the contextual appreciation of the broader powerful implication of Mukhoty’s project, then by using selected excerpts from the novel related to food the study analyzes the dimensions of ritualization inherent in the mythic discourse through the framework established by Catherine Bell (2009).

## 1.1 Analysis of the Prologue in ‘Song of Draupadi’

Ira Mukhoty, a renowned historicist, seeks to portray the influence of past depictions of food on the present cultural environment by highlighting the categories and hierarchies ascribed to food in Indian traditional texts. She opens her narrative with the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi, accompanied by a dog, embarking on their journey into

the Himalayas. The imagery she constructs evokes a renunciation of worldly materialism and a movement closer to nature, as suggested in the text: “New worlds have spun and coalesced out of nothingness and now, at last, her once incandescent rage has forged her into a shimmering, clean thing” (Mukhoty, 2021, p. xvii). Her first reference to food emerges here, describing “foraging for food and sleeping in the rough shelter of shallow caves” as part of their routine (p. xviii). This sets a clear tone for the values she intends to ascribe to food, further emphasized in the following passage:

They carefully gather fruits, berries, and roots which they eat raw, the taste a smoky earthiness that makes them feel light-headed. The dog disdains their leafy offerings and disappears on most days, returning triumphant and bloody with a scrawny hare or an indolent crow-pheasant in its deceptively lethal jaws (Mukhoty, 2021, p. xviii).

Humans gathering and eating “raw” food, and animal “disdaining their leafy offering” brings out the closest natural food habits of both the species. The texts use of “light-headed” feel and “returning triumphant” of dog after acquiring its food depict nature’s initial structure of providing food to everyone without depending on someone else. It can be seen from this passage that the best practices are those which are in consonance with the initial natural call.

While this instance occurs in Prologue whose title ‘Fire and Ice on the Last Journey Home’ suggest that this is the final revelation felt by the characters. The prologue shifts suddenly from this last journey to a memory of past described as “fire and heat of an older primal time” (Mukhoty, 2021, p. xx). This is done in juxtaposition to the icy imagery which depicts movement closer to nature to “fiery” image depicting the chaotic and rotten image which seemed of utmost importance to them.

## 1.2 Ritualistic Ceremony in the Palace Hall

The second part of the prologue opens with a scene of ritualistic ceremony being conducted by the priests in the ceremonial hall of the palace. After portraying the priests as “gaunt and sepulchral” whose eyes “are manic and vacant” (p. xx) creates a disturbing paradox. This evokes feelings of distress and breakdown in typical human experiences. This is further supported by the depiction of smoke: “acrid and greasy” and “like a malevolent thing”, flower garlands: “hang[ing] limply like disconsolate brides” (p. xx). After this depiction the reference to food occurs as:

“Heaps of offerings – rice balls, milk, yoghurt, honey, and fried barley balls – lie in rotting piles next to the flickering flames. No servant dares to step onto the consecrated grounds to clear up any anymore. Wispy rumours unfurl out of the hall and through the corridors of the unholy black-magic rites being performed by the vengeful king” (Mukhoty, 2021, p. xx).

In the darkest corner of the hall, the earthen floor is dark with the blood of the sacrificed goat, first smothered to death then butchered following explicit rules. Their excrements are buried in the ground and the animals are dismembered, with select parts offered up to the priests and the devouring re-god. The blood of the animals, collected in earthenware jars, is offered by a priest to the legion of baleful, evil spirits. The sharp metallic smell of blood mingles with that of the incense sticks, rotting flower and food, and it smells like carnage” (Mukhoty, 2021, p. xxi).

The portrayal in the novel draws extensively on the ritualization of food practices as described by Bell (2014). According to her, this a means of constructing sacred (or in this case, “unholy”) power, reflecting both the ancient Vedic Age of Ritual and the more transgressive Tantric discourses. The description of rice balls, milk, yoghurt, honey, and fried barley balls aligns with ancient Indian offerings known as *yajna*. In the practice of *yajna*, the food was placed into a sacred fire to be consumed by *Agni*. The fire-god was supposed to be acting as the “mouth” of the deities. According to Sen (2015) milk, yoghurt, and honey were considered pure substances with purifying powers. In the Vedic period, they were often used in *panchagavya* (five products of the cow). Fried barley balls described in the prologue are reminiscent of *apupa*, an ancient cake made of barley and honey. Rice balls (*pinda*) were central to *shraddha* ceremonies used to honour ancestors.

The second excerpt outlines shift to certain other form of food in rituals, which are in contrast to the Vedic depiction. The shift from these pure offerings to “the carnage of a smothered goat” reflect the more-bloody sacrifices associated with certain Vedic rites and later *Shakta* or *Tantric* traditions. The standard *jhatka* sacrifice in Vedic discourse involves a single swift stroke but the explicit rules for smothering and butchery mentioned here suggest a highly formalized, specialized knowledge possessed only by the ritual specialists (the priests).

## 2 Discursive Strategies of Ritualization

Both the examples from the novel illustrate several strategic patterns of ritualization, which can be understood as “Discursive Strategies of Ritualization”, according to Bell (2009). In this the chief function is attributed to “The Construction of a Structured Environment” necessary for the act of ritualization. The consecrated grounds that servants fear to enter represent a symbolically structured spatial environment. This environment differentiates these acts from daily life, which creates a ritualized body (Bell, 2009). The main purpose of this ritualised body is to internalize the power of king through fear and exclusion. The mention of explicit rules for butchery and the collection of blood in jars points to what Bell calls “formalism and fixity” (Bell, 2009). By following a rigid script, the king and priests attempt to validate the unholy rites as an authoritative and traditional act. It can be observed that the community perceives them as a deviation at this stage.

The thinking observers (the servants and the wispy rumours) perceive the black magic, while the acting king and priests perform the physical labour of the ritual to resolve internal vengeance of the king. Through Sen's (2015) account of food practices in ancient India and the depiction in Prologue reflects a time of religious and political tension where food is a marker of identity and a marker of power. Further it could be marked that the king is not using raw force but "ritualized power" to reconfigure the order of his world, where he is controlling several aspects of food. This reflects a sensibility where the "hegemonic social order" must be rendered personally redemptive through communal or royal participation (Bell, 2009). Through this analysis of strategic ritualization by King, provide us a clearer image of how communities create intricate taxonomies. The excerpts clearly depict the practice of distinguishing sacred from profane, pure from impure, edible from taboo, and insider from outsider. As has been demonstrated by the transition from the Vedic to Sakta or Tantric practices provide ample evidence about classification system, which is not static but dynamically negotiated and strategically deployed to sustain epistemic authority and cultural continuity. The edible palimpsest thus serves as a framework for understanding how complex taxonomic schemes emerge from the interplay of ritual, normativity, and epistemology, structuring social life through embodied food practices (Bell, 2009). Food practices are strategically ritualized to reinforce epistemic authority and cultural continuity. Communities deploy food rituals to demarcate boundaries, assert identities, and transmit values. Ritualization is therefore both epistemic and functional: it encodes knowledge claims while serving roles essential to survival and cohesion. The edible palimpsest illustrates how these dimensions converge, showing food as a layered text whose ritualization constructs norms, whose epistemic authority derives from functional origins, and whose strategic deployment sustains cultural continuity.

The attempts to orchestration of complex taxonomic schemes have been vividly established through the prologue. The next section seeks to analyse how this orchestration functions and perpetuated through mythic discourses. It also takes note of How Revisionist writing of Mukhoty tries to dismantle the structures which perpetuate them by providing an alternative viewpoint, generally lost in hegemonic discourses.

## 2.1 Hierarchy and Exclusion

Weiss (1999) notes that the way we interact with other people at everyday basis is not shaped by the immediate context or secret space, but they often tend to adjust their movements and expression in a social environment. This is highly stimulated by the rituals. The power that is shifting from the memory of community to a small group of experts (the priests) represents this shaping of ordinary people's experiences. Earlier public harvest offerings have now replaced by offerings to secret, dark rites for evil spirits because this is shown to suggest the time of religious and intellectual change. Further, making ordinary people "not clear up" the rotting piles terms them as outsiders. Boopalan (2017) notes this as "rituals of humiliation" (Boopalan, 2017, p. 52) This can be successfully related to show the unique impact of food in the formation of reality through its strategic use to legitimise power, leading to the shaping of communal

memory. Here, food serves two functions: as tangible nourishment and a profound vessel of symbolic significance. So, it can be said that food is more than just nutrition; it is a key part of identity and a way to make rituals more strategic.

The ritualization practice achieves this in the following ways:

### **2.1.1. The Internalization of Cosmic Order.**

In Indian philosophy, specifically the Upanishads, food is identified with the universal spirit (brahman). The blissful utterance “I am food! I am an eater of food!” illustrates that the whole of creation is viewed as a vast food chain where the eater and the eaten are one (Sen, 2015). In the consumption of Prasad (grace) When food is ritualized, the deity and the devotee become coextensive. This physical act of eating allows the participant to literally ingest a vision of the cosmic order, making the imagined world and the lived world the same (Sen, 2015). The physical act of eating allows the participant to “literally ingest a vision of the cosmic order” by collapsing the distinction between the biological body and the symbolic universe. This process operates through the theological identification of food with the divine (Sen, 2015) and the strategic moulding of the “ritualized body” (Bell, 2009).

This mechanism functions to make the imagined and lived worlds identical in the following ways:

#### *2.1.1.1 Becoming “Coextensive” with the Divine.*

The most direct method of ingesting cosmic order is through the consumption of Prasad (grace) in Hindu worship. Sen describes the consumption of Prasad as “the most exalted divine intimacy,” where the food, having been tasted by the deity, is returned to the devotee. This sharing leads to a moment when the saliva of the deity and the devotee mix. At this spiritual stage, the food, the god, and the believer become one. The participant not only contemplates the deity; they assimilate the deity’s grace, corporeally transmuting the perceived power of the divine into the tangible essence of their own being.

#### *2.1.1.2. The Microcosm Recapitulating the Macrocosm.*

Ayurveda says that the process of digestion is how the bigger picture (the universe) is always being made new in the smaller world (the body). Sen says that every substance in our universe is made up of five things: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The human body consists of doshas originating from these identical elements. Digestion is seen as a cooking process that turns food into the seven body tissues (blood, flesh, fat, marrow, etc.) with the help of Agni (digestive fire).

By eating certain foods, the participant effectively builds their body out of the basic building blocks of the universe. This keeps their internal biological order in sync with the universal order outside of them (Sen, 2015).

### *2.1.1.3. The “Ecstatic Utterance” of Identity.*

The philosophical foundation for this consumption is derived from the Upanishads, which assert that the self (atman) and the spirit of all beings (brahman) are unified. The Great Chain of Being explains this. Sen (2015) says that creation is like a big web of food where both the consumer and what is consumed are connected. The realisation of this eternal unity comes in the joyous statement: “I am food! I consume food!” In this state, eating is not just a normal biological process; it is the realisation of the true nature of reality. The imagined world, which is the unity of Brahman, becomes the world of reality through the cycle of consuming.

## **2.2 Food as a “Site of Memory”**

Food serves as a tangible “site of memory” by provoking intense attention and transforming into a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment. Rigney (2004, 2005) argues that cultural memory should be conceptualized not as a fixed storage but as a “working memory”. The next section looks into this dimension through practices related to food.

### **2.2.1 The Palimpsest Effect.**

Indian food is like a “palimpsest” because it has many layers of value (Vedic, Buddhist, Mughal, European) that are added without erasing what was there before. Milk, yoghurt, and honey are examples of “intrinsically pure” substances. Reinventing these with new meanings, even dark ones like the “rotting piles” in the novel, uses the power of tradition by making a new political reality seem unavoidable (Mukhoty, 2021). The process of accumulation and transformation, rather than simple replacement, gives “sites of memory” (like food practices, rituals, and symbols) new meanings.

This makes the palimpsest effect, where the “pastness of the past” is kept to prove the present, even though the meaning of the practice changes completely. This process works through a number of specific ways:

#### *2.2.1.1. The Transition from External Sacrifice to Internal Morality.*

The change in the Vedic sacrifice (yajna) is the most important example of reinvestment in Indian food history. During the “Age of Ritual” (c. 1700–1100 BCE), people gave food (including meat) to the fire god Agni to keep the universe in order and get material benefits. The Renunciant tradition (Upanishads, Buddhism, Jainism) gave these practices new moral and personal meanings. Originally, the word “heat” (tapas)

meant “sacrificial fire.” It became known as austerity and breath control to get rid of karma. Through the lens of ahimsa (non-injury), the practice of sacrifice was reimagined, turning vegetarianism into a high-status moral marker instead of just a dietary choice.

### *2.2.1.2. Mythologization and the Invention of Tradition.*

New religious movements changed the way people did things on farms by adding mythological stories to them. *The Annakuta Festival*: This “Mountain of Food” festival probably started as a way for farmers to give thanks to Indra, a Vedic god. The myth of Krishna, who convinced cowherds to give the food to Mount Govardhan instead, gave it new Vaishnavite meaning. This successfully moved the “site of memory” from the old Vedic pantheon to the Bhakti (devotional) worship of Krishna (Sen, 2015). It kept the ritual form (offering lots of food) the same. The cow, which was once a sacrificial victim in the Vedic age, was given a new role as a provider of “pure foods” (milk, ghee) that were important for rituals. By the 19th century, this symbol was reinvested again with political meaning, becoming a primary symbol of Hindu national identity and resistance (Sen, 2015).

### *2.2.1.3. The Strategy of Redemptive Hegemony.*

Catherine Bell (2009) argues that this reinvestment works because ritualization allows people to appropriate dominant schemes in a way that feels personally empowering. Ritualization does not simply “control” people; it allows them to construct a version of the hegemonic order that promises “personal redemption”. For example, by adopting dietary restrictions (fasting or vegetarianism), an individual reinvests their own body with the prestige of the pure, gaining a sense of “relative dominance” in the social hierarchy. This process relies on misrecognition. Participants do not see themselves as creating new meanings or inventing traditions; they see themselves as responding to the “ultimate organization of the cosmos” or the “pastness of the past”. This blindness to their own agency is what makes the new meaning feel authoritative and “natural” (Bell, 2009).

### *2.2.1.4. Textualization and Modern Re-validation.*

The “fixing” of practices into texts or modern categories allows them to be detached from their original context and reinvested with contemporary values. Traditional Ayurvedic food practices, once rooted in the balance of doshas (humors), are currently being reinvested with meanings derived from modern science. Turmeric and other traditional remedies are now investigated for anti-cancer or anti-diabetic properties, validating ancient memory sites through the new authority of the laboratory. Traditional “coarse grains” like millet, once associated with the poor, have been reinvested with the elite status of organic and health food by the urban middle class. The food item remains the same, but its symbolic investment has shifted from “subsistence” to “sophistication”.

### 2.3 Definition of Social Boundaries

Food is the ultimate tool for “the mutual construction of both an object for and method of analysis” regarding social groups. Distinctions between who can eat what, and with whom, are a “powerful act of subordination”. It helps to distinguish thinking elites from acting subjects as in the process of ritualization. The fear servants felt in the novel toward “consecrated grounds” is a result of a ritualized body. It depicts that the body has internalized the food-based boundaries of pure versus impure. According to Bell’s theoretical framework regarding the “mutual construction of both an object for and method of analysis”, combined with the historical evidence provided by Colleen Taylor Sen, food functions as the ultimate tool for this process because it simultaneously biologically constitutes the social body (the object) and provides the taxonomic categories (the method) by which that body is understood and hierarchized. In the Indian context, food does not merely reflect social groups; it actively generates them through the following mechanisms:

#### 2.3.1 Classification as Social Method.

Food serves as a primary method of analysis because the classification of edible substances is intrinsic to the classification of human beings. This depiction in the novel echoes Talbott (2021) idea that literary portrayals are “poetically realistic” than empirical historical research. The food stored in Kamini’s house depicts her social status in the novel.

“A few small terracotta pots against one wall contain the family’s groceries – short-grained rice, barley, a few condiments, salt, cloves, and peppercorns...” (Mukhoty, 2021, p. 03).

#### 2.3.2 The Homology of Food and Person.

Sen (2015) notes that the “classification of foods is essentially related to the classification of people.” As noted earlier the cow, which was once a sacrificial victim in the Vedic age, was given a new role as a provider of pure foods (milk, ghee) that were important for rituals. By the 19th century, this symbol was reinvested again with political meaning, becoming a primary symbol of Hindu national identity and resistance. The palimpsestic dimension of cow are worth noticing in Mukhoty’s narrative. The narrative shows this contrast in perceiving cow differently for Draupadi and her friend as:

As they eat their meal of boiled rice and mango pickle, Kamini tells her friend an important piece of news. Her father has gone to the market to buy a

cow for the household. Draupadi nods appreciatively. She knows the value of cows. The large herds owned by her father are guarded by cowherds with bows and arrows and men have fought and died over them (Mukhoty, 2021, p. 4).

The scene depicting Kamini and Draupadi eating rice and mango pickle while discussing cattle depicts the homology of food and person by establishing a structural resonance between dietary sustenance and social power.

### 2.3.2.1. *The Cow as the Nexus of Wealth and Identity.*

The conversation reveals that the cow is not merely a source of dairy products (food) but the primary unit of social currency and identity. Colleen Taylor Sen notes that in the Vedic period which this scene echoes through references to herds and arrows, people counted their wealth in cattle. The very word for “to fight” was *gavishthi*, literally meaning to search for cows (Sen, 2015). By discussing the “value of cows” and the “men who have fought and died over them,” the characters are not just discussing livestock; they are defining their fathers’ social status. Draupadi’s father, who owns large herds guarded by archers, is identified as a powerful chieftain or *Ksatriya*, whereas Kamini’s father, buying a single cow, occupies a different rung on the hierarchy. Thus, the “classification of foods” (or food sources) becomes “essentially related to the classification of people” (Sen, 2015).

### 2.3.2.2. *Bell’s Logic of Homology.*

Integration through division Catherine Bell argues that homology works by applying different symbolic schemes to a single practice to generate a unified and authoritative coherence. The scene homologizes the opposition of sustenance/consumption (eating rice) with the opposition of peace/violence (buying a cow vs. guarding herds with arrows). By nodding “appreciatively,” Draupadi validates the system where cows are worth dying for. This reflects Bell’s argument that ritualized behaviour (or traditional etiquette) produces a “ritualized body”. This body instinctively understands and accepts the implicit hierarchy of the social order. The violence of the “cowherds with bows” is not seen as chaotic but as a necessary structural support for the peaceful meal of rice they are currently enjoying.

The scene depicts the homology of food and person by showing that the cow functions simultaneously as a provider of “pure foods” (milk/ghee) essential for the meal and as a marker of political dominance requiring martial defense. The characters do not just eat; they consume and internalize a worldview where their identity is inextricably linked to the agricultural and military management of their food sources.

## 2.4 Natural Food Instincts and Artificial Hierarchies ‘The Fisherman’s Daughter’

Mukhoty again produces a contrasting imagery of natural food instincts and categories ascribed by the man-made political hierarchies in the chapter ‘The Fisherman’s Daughter’, dedicated to the characterisation of Satyavati. The constructed image of Satyavati’s place of birth and living is depicted as a pure natural world working in harmony between nature and humans. But with the advent of people from the city, this harmonious relationship is destroyed. The King’s arrival in the forest for hunting purpose seem as exploitation of their natural habitat, which for locals is a motherly figure. While the hunters see this as a place of recreation. Mukhoty first depicts the species other than humans sustaining their food habits in the most natural ways of their inherent dimensions. The example of sparrows and Kingfishers depicts this as:

The smaller warbles and sparrows peck at the seeds of the spear grass and perch, swaying on the soft white plumes of the kans grass, tiny funambulists. (Mukhoty, 2021, p. 54)

“Kingfishers swoop in an iridescence of blue and falcons hover over the banks, searching out the poppy-eared hares” (p. 55).

““Madhu saw a group of hunters when she went forging in the forest this morning. They were asking for food and we are to take them a meal. Your father says you must come with us (p.56).

“She goes over to her friends and help them collect food for the strangers, she roasted with salt and red peppers and barley flatbreads” (p. 56).

“In a small clearing between the rosewood trees, a handful of men have set up a makeshift encampment with bamboo posts, matting, and stretched cloth. But what shocks Satyavati is the air of careless carnage all around. The men have been hunting and there are broken partridges, soft-bellied hares, and gallant, erce wild boar lying in bloody heaps on the ground. Most shocking of all, a beautiful, honey-gold chital deer, white spotted fur like drops of rain, lies dead and bleeding on a structure of rough -hewn wood. Satyavati can see from the gently curving belly that the doe was pregnant and she feels a spike of hatred towards the men who has been so wanton. The doe is still bleeding, dark drops falling onto the loamy soil. The carcasses have been there a while and the men haven't even started dressing the meat so as to preserve it. Mixed into the glutinous smell of blood is something darker, a hint of decay, and Satyavati knows that the most of these animals will be left to rot. This inexplicable waste is a perversion. For the people of the forest and the rivers, the jungle is a mother and a goddess and no one is careless with a mother's gifts" (Mukhoty, 2021, pp. 56-57)

It should be noted that the passage is set in a forest where the strategic construction of power through hegemonic practice does not apply. It is evident from the statement of kinsmen who say: “The kinsmen are not pleased, they prefer it if the king restricts his excesses to the forest and jungles, where the laws of society are pliable and opaque” (p. 61). This contrast of norms applicable in forest and palace several relevance in mythological retellings for example Kane (2016) and Mukhoty (2017). The passage depicts the discovery of Satyavati in the forest. She presents the act of hunters as “careless carnage”. This depiction can be seen as a stark antithesis to the framework of ritualization seen in the earlier description of the vengeful King (Mukhoty, 2021). The excerpt from the prologue mentioned that the rites of King were dark and terrifying. Yet they were constructed as sacred because they relied on the “explicit rules” and “hierarchical orchestration”. This helped the actions to provide the characteristic of ritual to generate authority. In contrast, the hunting activity in the forest does not provide legitimacy through explicit rules. The activity is defined by informality, waste, and a lack of strategic differentiation. As the discovery of Satyavati brought out, the act represented a “perversion” of the sacred rather than a construction of it through ritualization.

#### **2.4.1. Strategic Formalism vs. Wanton Carelessness.**

According to Bell, specific acts are distinguished from mundane through formalism and fixity. This is the process of ritualization as a “strategic way of acting”. The King’s sacrifice, though “unholy,” adhered to a rigid script: the goat was butchered following “explicit rules,” and the blood was collected in jars on “consecrated grounds”. This fixity endowed his vengeance with the prestige of tradition. The hunters’ actions are characterized by “careless carnage” and a makeshift environment. There is no script or “explicit rule” governing the slaughter. Bell argues that ritual actions are designed to distinguish themselves from the “quotidian”. Here, the slaughter is treated with a profane casualness of “lying in bloody heaps”, stripping the act of the “privileged distinction” necessary for ritual power.

#### **2.4.2 The Economy of Sacrifice vs. The Perversion of Waste.**

In the Vedic and Hindu context, killing animals was traditionally legitimized only through the framework of sacrifice (yajna) or hospitality. In the King’s rite, the destruction of the animal served a specific cosmological function: feeding the “devouring fire-god” and the “baleful spirits” to achieve a result (vengeance). It followed the Vedic logic where the “eater and the eaten” are linked in a cosmic chain. Satyavati identifies the hunters’ scene as a perversion because it is “inexplicable waste.” The meat is not offered to a god, nor is it “dressed... so as to preserve it” for consumption. In the *Dharmashastras* and the *Mahabharata*, hunting was permitted for *Ksatriyas* (warriors), but killing without purpose or proper usage was condemned. Sen (2015) notes that traditionally, meat should be eaten only after being “offered duly and respectfully to the

gods and the ancestors”. By leaving the animals to “rot,” the men violate the “redemptive process”. This destroys life without generating the “spiritual capital” or social order that ritual sacrifice provides.

#### **2.4.3. Violation of Moral Categories (The Pregnant Doe)**

The specific horror regarding the “pregnant doe” highlights a violation of the specific classifications that govern the “ritualized body” and moral order. As noted by Sen (2015) that Emperor Ashoka’s edicts specifically banned the killing of “nanny goats, ewes and sows with young”. The *Dharmashastras* and other texts classified animals into complex taxonomies of clean and unclean, eatable and forbidden. Satyavati’s “spike of hatred” arises because the hunters have ignored these “schemes of privileged opposition” (such as fertile/pregnant vs. sacrificial victim). By killing a pregnant mother, they have failed to recognize the “sanctity of life” inherent even in the hunting codes of the time.

#### **2.4.4. Divergent Cosmologies: Consecrated Ground vs. Earth Mother.**

The two passages reveal conflicting visions of the cosmos. The King constructs a “ritualized environment” (the consecrated hall) to dominate the spirits. He views the supernatural as a force to be manipulated through the technical competence of the ritual. For the people of the forest, the jungle is not a resource to be exploited but “a mother and a goddess.” This reflects the indigenous or tribal perspective where nature is sacred in itself, not just when enclosed in a temple. The hunters’ failure to treat the “mother’s gifts” with care is a failure of “ritual mastery”, they do not possess the social instinct to navigate the forest’s sacred geography respectfully.

### **3 Conclusion**

The analysis of Ira Mukhoty’s *Song of Draupadi* reveals that food functions as a layered “edible palimpsest,” acting as a complex taxonomic system that organizes cultural memory, social boundaries, and epistemological authority. Far from being merely arbitrary sustenance, the classification of food is intimately tied to the classification of people. Hegemonic powers strategically employ ritualization and rigid formalism to internalize a cosmic order, thereby legitimizing their political dominance and enforcing strict social hierarchies that exclude and marginalize vulnerable groups.

The novel sharply contrasts these power-driven palace rituals with the organic reality of the forest. While indigenous communities revere nature as a sacred provider, the ruling elite’s intrusion into the forest is marked by wasteful, “careless carnage.” This

stark division highlights how artificial, man-made hierarchies pervert natural moral codes and use food practices to mask systemic exploitation under the guise of privilege.

The strategic orchestration of these food rituals sustains cultural continuity while obscuring the oppression they inherently create. This is where the power of revisionist narratives becomes crucial. By retelling these ancient myths, Mukhoty dismantles the established paradigms of dominant discourses, exposing the hidden, arbitrary rules of ritualization. Through this alternative viewpoint, the novel reclaims lost perspectives and encourages a more holistic understanding of how food has historically been weaponized to shape power, identity, and social reality

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