

# The Social Life of Ghee: Butterly Tales of Ghee-Making at Home and Everything Else in-between

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**Abstract:** Author explores food memories of her paternal grandmother making clarified butter (ghee in Hindi) to suggest what its cooking process and consumption can tell us about class, caste, and gendered eating in her home as well as in traditional Indian kitchens and culture at a macro level.

**Keywords:** food memories, ghee, Garhwali, social class, gender

The ubiquitous quote attributed to Freud, “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” may be applicable to a great many joys and ills of the world but food is definitely not one of them. Food is far bigger than the sum of its nutritive parts—it is as personal as it is political. Its appearance, flavor, aroma, and texture all tell diverse stories which are at once indicative of a culture, cuisine, region, and at the same time also deeply personal, like “secret” recipes passed down generationally in family kitchens.

For some time now cultural anthropology and food studies have both looked at the role that food history and consumption patterns have played in different cultures. Today more than ever, it is clear that as we consume food we are rarely ever just consuming “energy” or “calories,” we are also consuming a certain culture, partaking in a heritage, and creating food memories. Looked at more critically, food memories and food stories can be exceptional heuristic tools for understanding the ways in which a culture or a family organizes itself. Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), looked at the patterns of food consumption among French people and illustrated how distinctions in taste signified one’s class within French society. Foods of the lower classes, for example, were marked by larger-sized baked dishes and breads alongside heavier meats that would provide sustained energy for long work hours. Foods of the rich, on the other hand, featured more expensive cuts of meat, species of fish, and more investment in wines—all favored for their lightness and taste rather than heaviness and ability to satiate.

In this short piece I explore food memories of my paternal grandmother making clarified butter, or ghee as it is referred to in Hindi, to suggest what its cooking process and consumption can tell us about class, caste, and gendered eating in my home but also in traditional Indian kitchens and culture at a macro level. I broadly follow Bourdieu’s contentions, while focusing on intimate kitchen tales and the ways in which they are illustrative of larger cultural currents.

Amongst my most vivid but also polarizing food memories of childhood are fresh clarified butter or ghee being cooked at home and my grandmother busy managing the process. I call it polarizing because as much as I savored the taste and flavor of the final product, the process of it, especially the cooking of ghee, gave off a smell that made me want to curl up my nose. My grandmother, spearheading the ghee-making process, found my nostril pinching highly offensive and would give me an earful, reminding me endlessly how good ghee was for our health. Today clarified butter has become well known globally due in large part to its popularization in the health and fitness world, where it is touted for its nutritive benefits relative to regular butter. However, the work of making clarified butter from milk is an age-old routinized practice undertaken mostly by women in traditional Indian households, representing one of many ways in which milk is consumed and savored in Indian

culture. My grandmother (c. 1918-2004), like many other women of her generation, routinely undertook this task every few weeks with diligence. For her it became even more important as a practice that connected her to her own roots living in the hills where vegetables were scarce. There, food meant grains, lentils, and a whole lot of milk products—milk, fresh cream, churned buttermilk, yogurt and ghee.

I grew up with my parents and my grandmother, who must have been in her seventies when I was five or six. My grandmother had spent a large part of her life in Garhwal, the Himalayan region of North India in the state of Uttarakhand. It was only when my father and his elder brother decided to come to New Delhi for their college education did she witness the taste of metropolitan city life, a stark contrast to the quiet life of the hills. My grandmother was a quintessential Garhwali<sup>1</sup> woman, extremely active for her age and blessed with the sturdiest hands that I can recall. As a child, I often compared her to other non-Garhwali women and grandmothers around and wondered why she did not relax more and delegate domestic duties to my mother instead. However, she often reminded us of the hard life of the hills, where the day started by taking the cows for grazing and milking, to cleaning the house, collecting firewood and water, and also feeding the entire household. This routine, she opined, was the secret behind the coarseness and fine lines all over her palms and heels. As someone who had heard many stories of the life of the hills from my grandmother and my father but never having visited our ancestral house, I was often left to fantasize what this life may have looked like. I asked her and my father, “What did you people eat at home?” They typically responded “We didn’t have much food, but we had plenty of cows and sheep so we basically lived on milk, curd [yogurt], butter and ghee with rotis [thin flatbreads made of wholewheat flour and cooked on a pan] and rice.” Every time I heard this reply, the closest imaginary visualization I had of this life was of the cartoon Heidi and how she and her uncle lived in a small village in Switzerland, grazing cows and drinking their milk with cheese and bread.

The process of ghee-making was an everyday affair wherein the fresh cream (known as *malai* in Hindi; Photo 1) that rose to the top of freshly boiled milk was removed



Photo 1: Bowl full of *malai* ready for ghee-making. May 2, 2020, New Delhi.  
Photo: Annima Bahukhandi

and put in a separate bowl every day over the course of several weeks. When the bowl was filled with enough cream, up to the top after two or sometimes three weeks, it would be removed for the ghee making process. The five-year old me enjoyed watching and sometimes partaking in this step the most.

My grandmother sat on the floor, both feet shoulder-length apart, with a large stainless steel pot between her legs as she forcefully moved a wooden whisk, *mathani/madani* (in Hindi; Photo 2), back and forth in concentric motions between the palms of her hands. She did this for half an hour or more until the cream would separate into two components—a milky white freshly churned butter or *makhan*, and a slightly sour buttermilk. This movement now takes much less time and effort using modern-day food processors, however my grandmother for the entirety of her ghee-making life remained a purist and shunned our food mixer, choosing to spend her energy and time on her trusty *madani* only.



Photo 2: *Mathani* or *madani*, a common Indian kitchen tool used specifically for churning fat from milk or to make drinks like buttermilk frothy.

May 11, 2020, New Delhi. Photo: Annima Bahukhandi.

I often interrupted her churning sessions to get a chance to use the wooden whisk and try my hand at the process, however five minutes into the activity I found myself too tired and declared the activity a health hazard. She then carefully removed the freshly churned butter and put it in a wok for the third step, heating (Photo 3). Some of this fresh butter was often saved and enjoyed for the next couple of days on top of *paranthas* (thick flatbreads that usually have a variety of stuffing inside them like cheese, potatoes, cauliflower, for example, and are pan-fried making them crispy on the outside).

The rest of the fresh butter went on to cook slowly on the stove, the creamy white of the butter slowly changing to a faint beige shade, finally giving way to ghee's characteristic golden color. As more and more golden liquid emerged on top, the milk fats burned and stuck to the bottom of the wok. The golden liquid (Photo 4) was dutifully collected and stored away in a jar, its aroma filling the entire house. The smell of the clarified butter routinely traveled to neighboring apartments and neighbors knew which house had a share of fresh ghee made that day.





Photo 3: *Malai* boiling in the wok. Note the golden-colored *ghee* separating from the fresh butter on the edges. May 2, 2020, New Delhi. Photo: Annima Bahukhandi.



Photo 4: Freshly made *ghee* ready for consumption. May 02, 2020, New Delhi. Photo: Annima Bahukhandi.

I write about ghee in this detailed way not simply to celebrate its centrality to Indian kitchens but also to illustrate the ways in which this revered food was rationed among many groups and how its consumption was also highly divisive, indicating one's rank in social hierarchies, including caste. Within traditional Hindu society, upper castes have characteristically had access to ghee as cows were considered holy. The higher one's caste status, the greater the chances of owning cattle or receiving milk products for religious or consumption purposes. Lower castes, especially the Shudras castes and Dalits<sup>2</sup> were traditionally so poor due to systemic discrimination that they could neither afford vegetables nor milk products, especially ghee, which was always more expensive. Their cooking used lard or animal fat instead. Therefore, if you entered a traditional Hindu home and you were offered food cooked in ghee, you could recognize in the Bourdieuan manner the family's caste and class status. My father and my grandmother's memory of having ample milk products during their days in the hills also indicated that despite their modest financial background, they were rich in terms of caste status. They were born into upper caste Brahmin families and had plenty of cattle to rear and access to better food and educational opportunities than others in their village. But while my grandmother and her family had access to milk and milk products aplenty, I was still witness to how she rationed the amount that each person received, especially the ghee. She reserved ghee mostly for older male members of the family. While store-bought, commercially-produced ghee (a luxury available in cities back then but very common to find in commercially produced versions now) was used for cooking dishes, the home-made kind deserved only to be added on top of rice and cooked lentil dishes. She put out rice and yellow dal (cooked lentil stew/gravy) each afternoon for us children, adding a dollop of ghee on top. A "quintessential Garhwali meal," she'd call it. But for herself, she reserved the store-bought version which was considered inferior due to use of dubious ingredients like vegetable oils, animal fat, and colour enhancers.



Photo 5: Unclarified milk fats that stay at the bottom of the wok after the ghee is sieved out. May 02, 2020, New Delhi. Photo: Annima Bahukhandi.

One of the most striking memories that I have of her exhibiting the labor of love that is typical of women all over the world, cooking for the family, is how she used the unsaturated milk fat solids that were the burnt brown-colored remnants of the ghee-making process (Photo 5). Most often these remnants are thrown out as they have a



strong nutty and greasy taste consisting of unclarified milk fats that are very filling. My grandmother, however, put it to another ingenious use. She scraped off all the unsaturated milk fat stuck to the bottom of the pan to use as a stuffing inside a parantha. She then had for herself a large, very buttery, very nutty, often burnt but delicious parantha that she savored with a mango or lemon pickle, and yogurt on the side.



Photo 6: My re-creation of how my grandmother's stuffed paranthas appeared. Served here with yogurt and two kinds of pickle-lemon on the far right and mushroom on the left. May 3, 2020, New Delhi. Photo: Annima Bahukhandi.

I found my grandmother's paranthas too buttery and burnt for my palate then and often asked her why she ate the burnt leftovers instead of throwing them away. She told me that in the chilling winters of the hills even the leftovers as a form of stuffing were able to provide immense energy and warmth to the body. Since the ratio of ghee produced to that of family members to feed was always lopsided, eating the milk fats was her way, like many other women's, of sacrificing their share of food for the health and nutrition of their families. She further reminded me that since there were no cows in the city from which to collect large amounts of milk and butter, homemade ghee was all the more a luxury. Commercial brands were known to add lard and vegetable fats to enhance the life and appearance of their ghees.

Today in the West, there is much emphasis on sustainability and minimizing of food waste. However, sustainability has long been practiced in indigenous kitchens all over the world for generations where food has had to be rationed depending on the number of mouths to feed, the status of specific foods, and the social positions of the consumers. The use of burnt milk fats as stuffing for paranthas fits perfectly in today's narrative of zero food waste and sustainable use of food products. However, for my grandmother and other women like her, creating recipes like these was the one way of ensuring that they could enjoy ghee without guilt or reprimand from others. The stuffed parantha was my grandmother's way of bypassing the patriarchal

chain of food consumption and allowing herself the richness and taste of ghee albeit vicariously through its burnt remnants—without interruption and beyond judgment.

### References Cited

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> We use the spelling “Garhwali” and not “Garwali” to designate the region, because its pronunciation is a cross between “r” “h” and “d,” more like “Gardhwali” in Hindi and the local tongue.

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally Hindu society has followed a caste system which classifies people into four distinct groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Each group corresponds to a rank which not only includes one’s occupational status but signifies a set of qualities, color, class, and lineage. While the Brahmins were respected for their knowledge and intelligence, the Kshatriyas were revered for their bravery and fighting skills. The Vaishyas represented traders and merchants while Shudras were responsible for the majority of labor-intensive jobs such as agriculture and cattle breeding. There was also another group which was outside the four-rank caste system called “untouchables” or Dalits. Dalits were considered casteless and were responsible for carrying out menial jobs like cleaning and scavenging. They carried out the most fundamental jobs that ensured a smooth functioning of the Hindu society but bore the ire of all the rest of the castes who shunned Dalits in an effort to raise their own status. The Shudras were not discriminated against as much as the Dalits but did not enjoy the same privileges as the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. For instance, the Shudras who were agriculturalists and herders milked cattle and grew vegetables to provide for the needs of the upper castes.