



# Preparing Tiffin<sup>1</sup> for School-Going Children: The Problem of Feeding<sup>2</sup> Brilliance

Anjali Bhatia

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi 110024, India  
Email - [anjalibhatia@lsr.edu.in](mailto:anjalibhatia@lsr.edu.in)

**Abstract:** *This article is about the embeddedness of childcare practices in the milieu of neo-liberal India in an urban, cosmopolitan middle-class universe. I examine arguably the most important aspect of childcare from the standpoint of mothers or women—the practice of feeding children to understand the ways in which the socio-cultural conditions impinge upon the practice of preparing tiffin. This paper is based on interviews with 50 women respondents—mothers of school-going children. My research question pertains to the everyday planning and thought that goes into the preparation of children’s tiffin.*

*I argue that preparing tiffin for a school going child signifies the importance of education as symbolic capital. For the stages examined, the practice of preparing tiffin is a mother’s responsibility. She is involved in this directly as the person who expends her labour, or, indirectly as the person who supervises the house helps or cooks executing this task. Either way, mothers/women are the vanguards of a middle-class project; they play a vital role in imbuing food and eating practices relating to children with a scholastic significance. Preparing tiffin is a means to feeding brilliance to children. In the middle class universe, children’s education is a matter of grave concern that bears upon mothers’ responsibilities of childcare. The issue pertains to the practice of this responsibility and imperative.*

**Key Words:** *Tiffin, Feeding, Children, Mothers, Middle Class, Education.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

This article<sup>3</sup> is about the embeddedness of childcare practices in the socio-cultural milieu of neo-liberal India in an urban, cosmopolitan middle-class universe.<sup>4</sup> Conventionally, the primary social relationship implicated in childcare is that of mother and child. In this paper I examine arguably the most important aspect of childcare from the standpoint of mothers/women—the practice of *feeding children*.

In classical ethnographic accounts, the aspect of feeding children is discussed under the rubric of child-rearing. However, I employ the rubric of childcare<sup>5</sup> since it reveals the socio-cultural concomitants of childrearing work in the middle class milieu and thus, de-naturalizes the relation between childcare and mothers/women. In case of school-going children, feeding children includes preparing the school-going child’s tiffin box.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In context of South Asia, *tiffin* is a light meal or a snack.

<sup>2</sup> The term *feeding* is borrowed from Marjorie L. DeVault’s innovative study, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. See DeVault (1994).

<sup>3</sup> This article is based on my doctoral research on fast food eating out culture in a South Delhi locality conducted between 2002 and 2005.

<sup>4</sup> For the historical and conceptual underpinnings of the middle class (old and new) in India, and its representations and practices, see Misra (1961), Breckenridge (ed.), (1996) Butcher, (2003) Chaudhuri (1998); Deshpande (2004) Fernandes 2006; John (1998); Mankekar (1999); Rajagopal (2000) and Srivastava (2007).

<sup>5</sup> See DeVault (1994)

<sup>6</sup> The present study has an interesting parallel in Bugge and Almas’ study of the preparation of domestic dinner. See Bugge and Almas (2006).



I wish to understand the ways in which the socio-cultural milieu impinges upon the practice of preparing tiffin. This paper is based on interviews with 50 women respondents—mothers of school-going children. Most schools—all English medium—are located within a 15 km radius of the respondents' locality. My research question pertains to the everyday planning and thought that goes into the preparation of children's tiffin.

My analysis delineates two successive stages of childhood in the schooling system. The first stage is marked by the *inauguration* of formal education (kindergarten up to class III), the second by the *onset* of the pressure to excel in studies (classes III-VIII). The age-span of stage 1 and stage 2 children is 3-7 years and 7-13 years respectively. I argue that preparing tiffin for a school going child signifies the importance of education. For the stages examined, the practice of preparing tiffin is a mother's responsibility. She is involved in this directly as the person who expends her labour, or, indirectly as the person who supervises the house helps or cooks executing this task. Either way, mothers/women are the vanguards of a middle-class project; they play a vital role in imbuing food and eating practices relating to children with a scholastic significance. Preparing tiffin is a means to feeding brilliance to children.

## 2. CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOOD: CHANNELIZING ASPIRATIONS :

The scholarship on childrearing<sup>7</sup> assumes the standpoint of societal institutions and socializing adults. Seymour (1999), in her classic study notes that through a set of conventional practices, in every society, adults try to produce children who will fit either their society or the subculture of society. In this thinking, the responsibilities of motherhood (assuming the mother is the primary care-giver) are associated with a defined set of conventions and practices handed down by socialization agents/agencies; the goal is social and cultural reproduction.<sup>8</sup> Such constructions pre-empt and pre-configure childhood. Here motherhood and childhood, and the relation between them is constructed a class matrix; mothers/caregivers shape childhood 'top-down' as it were.

In the domain of childcare, the relation between motherhood and childhood is historically contingent; it challenges the conception of childcare as a top-down practice. In a remarkable reversal, childhoods too shape motherhood thereby complicating conventional templates of motherhood, and the reigning cultural blueprints of childhood.

Patricia Uberoi's pioneering work<sup>9</sup> — in the tradition of thinking about childhood as a historical and social category, traceable to Philippe Ariès<sup>10</sup>—historicizes and problematizes childhood in India. She argues that the child is not merely a 'natural' developmental stage in human life-course, but a *problematic conceptual category*, which is historically produced and must be contextually located.<sup>11</sup> Indian norms of family life and childhood are likely to have been transformed under the impact of colonial experience, post-colonial nation-building and the contemporary pressures of globalization. This explains the varied representations of the child as God-Baby, Welcome-Baby, Citizen-Baby, Hero-Baby and Customized-Baby.

Among these varied representations of childhood, the 'customized baby' is a suitable representative of the child protagonist in my thesis. The 'customized child syndrome'<sup>12</sup> is attributed to India's cosmopolitan upper middle classes.<sup>13</sup> This customized baby is fair and plump and pretty; wears beautiful and fashionable clothes; is surrounded by the latest toys, lives in palatial home in sylvan surroundings, and anticipates ownership of all the consumer items that money can buy. S/he loves electronic goods, watches, cameras, scooters, cars (all the dowry items, in fact). The latest and most prestigious toy being that fetishized symbol of India's entry into the global economy: the personal computer. The customized—middle class—child, reflects both the family's aspirations for upper middle class status and a diasporic location, and recognition of India's potential in the global economy as a market for computer goods and an exporter of IT professionals (Uberoi, op.cit.: 278).

<sup>7</sup> See Carstairs (1967), Kakar (1981), Minturn and Hitchcock (1966), Roland (1988), (Seymour (1999) and Whiting ed. (1963).

<sup>8</sup> See Bétéille (1991), Bourdieu and Passeron (1990).

<sup>9</sup> See Uberoi (2006).

<sup>10</sup> See Ariès (1962)

<sup>11</sup> Making a case for a centrally important role of visual culture in the writing of social history and ethnography, Uberoi (op.cit.) reflects on the 'meaning' of Indian childhood as refracted through the medium of popular (calendar) prints.

<sup>12</sup> Calling attention to the shared interface of calendar art and commercial advertising, Uberoi observes that in advertisement imagery, the customized child is portrayed as an object of desire, both metonymically associated with the goods of the market place, and increasingly, a consumer in his/her own right. (ibid.:277)

<sup>13</sup> See Raman (2003), Kumar (1993).



The customized child, may be regarded as a archetype of contemporary childhood; it is implicated in the historical process of class formation in neo-liberal India. It is entrusted with realizing the family's class-status aspirations. The institutional contexts of the contemporary childhood are family, school, media and market. As a serious pursuant of *educational capital*, it is entrenched in educational institutions.

In the middle class universe, children's education is a matter of grave concern that bears upon mothers' responsibilities of childcare. The issue pertains to the practice of this responsibility.

### **3. CHILDREN AND FOOD: FROM THE KITCHEN TO TIFFINS :**

In the realm of food, children are 'special'. The market offers a plethora of goods exclusively for children—featured in numerous television and print advertisements. They are prominent in the domestic kitchen by virtue of their needs, health, choices and demands that must be catered to by their families. This special attention is to ensure they are fed the right kind of foods that enhance their scholastic performance.

Feeding children is a source of preoccupation and anxiety for mothers. Mostly, the tiffin is prepared by mothers. Though most households employ part-time or full-time domestic workers as cooks or helpers, mothers are not absolved of the responsibility of preparing the tiffin. This is to do with the school-timings. The child must reach the designated bus-stop 5-10 minutes in advance to catch the school bus anytime between 6:45-7:00 a.m. In case the mode of commuting to school is a private car then, mothers/caregivers/ and children get an extra 30 minutes of reprieve in the morning rush.

Before setting out for school, the child must 'get ready' for school, a task in which the stage 1 child is not proficient or capable; so, getting the child ready for school is a responsibility befalling adults. In cases where this responsibility is shared between the child's mother and other members of the household—child's father, grandparents or live-in helpers—mothers are most likely to prepare the tiffin; but, if not-shared, she doesn't receive help from any quarter; and she must be 'done' with preparing the tiffin before she gets her child ready for school. Preparing the tiffin is an everyday practice that must be accomplished before the child sets out for school. The child's tiffin materializes not just an everyday task, but also the imperative of school education.

#### *Tiffin and Stage 1 Child*

For a stage 1 child, the moment of leaving home for school is preceded by the experience of waking up 'with great difficulty;' there is a small gap of time between these two activities. Most children are disinclined to eat breakfast—from the common pool—planned for members of the household. This could be due to any of the following reasons: 1). it is too early, 2). the child's mother does not have the time to cook and feed fresh and hot food; 3). the child does not want to eat hot and fresh food; 4). the child prefers something else—processed or readymade snacks—instead.

In the morning, most children are force-fed milk with or without the branded nutritional drink-mixes such as *Bournvita*, *Horlicks*, *Complan*, or processed cereals like *Chocos*. Breakfast in a few cases, comprises of sandwiches, egg, *paratha* (Indian bread) with jam. In general, a child leaves for school every morning having consumed minimal victuals. The tiffin is purposed for mid-day breaks or lunch breaks.

Respondent 7 said 'though she enjoys preparing the tiffin, it is a hassle to plan a new tiffin menu on a daily basis.' The breakfast prepared for adults is generally rejected by children. Respondent 32 said 'my son is delighted to discover potato fingers, chocolates, cakes and Maggie noodles in his tiffin.' Several respondents said that children find routine food boring, they want something special. Respondent 47 confessed that she has to bribe her son with a surprise food item of his liking: "...if I give him a chocolate, then he will eat the stuffed paratha...." A majority of respondents are aware that children should be given nutritive food; but they give into their child's demands for junk food, because children love junk food.<sup>14</sup> In a *quid pro quo*, parents raise the counter demand of securing good grades in examinations.

The inclusion of these surprise foodstuffs in the tiffin function as a sort of imperative. They cater to children's preference for variety and choice. Children's penchant for variety is their desire for *more*. The predilection for variety trumps the imperative of nutritive value of food. The tiffin menu materializes the struggle between the imperatives of variety, choice, nutrition and hunger. It dips selectively into the common pool to strike a balance between the contraries. On the one hand, this reaffirms the membership and status of the child in the household and family; on the other hand, it affirms the child membership and status in educational institutions.

Entering school is a rite of passage into a system that re-routinizes a child's life. It is about re-organizing interests, goals, time, activities and focus. It is normal for children to enter the new regime reluctantly, under coercion.

<sup>14</sup> See Bhatia (20018)



It is expected that children will cry and resist rising early morning for school. The transition inhering in this rite of passage is vital and must be negotiated with utmost caution. Any slip-up portends to jeopardize a life-project. 'Adjustment' to this routine is, therefore, the foremost concern.

Adjusting to the routine of going to school and the school environment, is crucial for the child. Parents can ill-afford to displease the child. Going to school entails encounters with so many other children, and their 'interesting' tiffins. Under these circumstances, if a child demands an interesting tiffin, then, his wish must be granted, notwithstanding the need to balance 'food for hunger' with 'food for nutrition' with 'food for desire' with 'food for comparison'. The tiffin is a lever for adjusting to the routine, and a technique for countering the calamitous consequences of a felt deprivation at the sight of attractive tiffins of others.

#### *Tiffin and Stage 2 Child:*

The stage 2 child has 'come of age' in the educational system. In stage 1, mothers rationalize her child's deviations from any expected behaviour because 'the child needs to be fed.' However, gradually and definitely, mothers surrender their reasons to experts of all manner. Concerns such as nutrition, health, mental agility, scholastic excellence and vigor are reflected in the child's tiffin. A vital role in catapulting these concerns into prominence and their incorporation into the tiffin is that of expert advice in women's magazines and talk shows on television; of advertisements and promotions of food; of doctors and medical advice.

Non-food facts such as scholastic achievement find their way into the tiffin from the side of mothers; but a stage 2 child is bound to bring in something of his own in his tiffin; he is not pre-determined. The stage 2 child is a food enthusiast compared to its junior predecessor. Furthermore, it expresses hunger, desire and resistance unequivocally. A ready reckoner of this is the child's say in the selection of a food item from the common pool. The common pool undoubtedly meets the hunger and nutritional criteria; however, it does not rule the roost; it must contend with the stage 2 child's remarkable advance in understanding on the subject of 'variety' in foodstuffs. This may be attributed to exposure to television commercials, weekend excursions to malls and food courts, an apprenticeship in buying groceries and confectionery under mothers and fathers, gifts from overseas relatives and friends, treats from parents, birthday parties of schoolmates and neighbourhood playmates, marriage ceremonies, visits to relatives' homes, a holiday abroad and tucking with school-bus buddies or classmates.

The stage 1 child's fetish for variety appears to diminish in case of stage 2 child on any random day. However, observations stretched over a week, reveal that the concern with variety hasn't waned. Variety functions anew as a principal thought behind the tiffin for a week rather than a day. Factors such as hunger, nutrition, health, and choice are judiciously complemented by the variety in the tiffin—displayed and consumed in the unit of a week. Thus, calendarized by variety, the tiffin consists of regional and global varieties: *puri-aloo*, *paratha-subzi*, pizza, burger, sandwiches, noodles, pasta, *pav-bhaji*, *masala dosa* or *idli*.<sup>15</sup>

Besides variety, another non-food fact that finds its way into the tiffin is a widening social circle comprising 'friends' who partake of their share from the stage 2 child's tiffin thereby fertilizing a consumptive adventure in different types of cuisines. While sharing of food is not objected to by mothers, there is a nagging concern that one's child is likely to get a raw deal; that their child is uncorrupted and innocent; that classmates and friends would eat up his tiffin unfairly. Hence, the need for 'extra' food in the tiffin is a compulsion of sorts.

Stage 2 children do not experience food-related deprivation. Despite this, they are inclined to buy food items—sandwiches, patties, samosas, chips, sweets, chocolates, muffins, chewing gum, soft drinks—from the canteen. The lure of the canteen is the big development in the life of the stage 2 child much to the anguish of their caregivers. As a result, the child begins to demand 'canteen money' from parents.

Faced with this anticipated and disturbing development, parents are in a catch-22 situation. This signals the child's pre-mature entry into the market resulting in wasteful expenditure. The lure of the canteen belies reason because parents, on their part, have fulfilled most of the demands raised by their children. However, they give into their child's wishes. They fear that their child might develop complexes if denied canteen money or if kept away from canteen food; more so because other children frequent the canteen. Psychological repercussions of this nature, it is thought, are assuredly hazardous to the child's mental concentration vital for a meritorious performance in school. An unprecedented premium is placed on concentrating on studies; the mind should be free of anxiety caused by the prospect of falling short of canteen money.

<sup>15</sup> *puri-aloo*, *paratha-subzi*, *pav-bhaji*, *masala dosa* and *idli* are regional foods of India.



Similar to the tiffin of the stage 1 child, the tiffin of the stage 2 child is replete with non-food facts. While hunger, nutrition, desire and comparison are common to both the stages, in stage 2 there are notable additions such as ‘friends’ (extra food), ‘money’ and ‘market’. Also, there is a heightened anxiety about excelling in studies and performing well in examinations. These anxieties place a premium on mental agility as a vital capacity; hence foods believed to enhance mental health and those nourishing to the mind, supplement the selection from the common pool for the child’s tiffin.

Respondent 28 said “studies dissipate mental energies; to nourish the mind, a child must eat heartily.”

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

The tiffin practices reveal that for a child in stage 1 through stage 2, the school is a context for inculcating values of excellence, friendship, and competition. These ideas pull scholastic life in contrary directions. One end is about ‘striving for excellence’ and ‘individual achievement’; the other end, is about ‘competing against friends’ and ‘successful careers’. Even as goals are set for children; they are simultaneously alerted to the potential threats to those very goals. These set of facts taken together instill a fear of failure and the risks involved in seeking success. Hence, the ‘imperative of brilliance.’ The practice of preparing the tiffin symbolizes the desperate bid for brilliance—chased in consumption through feeding of children.

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