

Why Do We Indians Eat with Our Hands?

“I heard Indian people eat with their hands, still,” said Oprah Winfrey, while visiting an upper-middle-class Indian family in Mumbai as part of her show in 2012.

This statement caused a lot of negative outbursts by many fans of Oprah in India as the manner in which it was said, suggested that it was something primitive and undesirable.

How did that notion arise?

The increasing use of cutlery can be mapped to rise of European Imperialism, American colonization, and African slavery. Eating with hands came to be associated with natives, laborers, and servants over time.

The usage of forks and knives is also an aspect of colonisation. We have seen that formal dinners at the Indian Army and Indian Government expect all officers to use cutlery. We still succumb to that notion of the West being better; we are still nursing a colonial hangover. So why blame Oprah? And why give in to that kind of colonisation when we have the best instruments – our hands – to eat our food with?

An interesting idea is that mothers always use hands to feed their little kids. Call it dramatic, but if you notice, one bite or morsel that your mother feeds you always tastes good, even if it is plain dal-rice. Call it the intermixing and juxtaposition of pheromonal senses of your mother with the food. Or just call it mother's love, it is just *maa ke haath ka khaana* – that ingredient that adds to its distinct flavour.

We believe that the art of using our hands to eat goes back to our ancient history and culture.

The practice of eating food with hands originated within Ayurvedic teachings and was derived from the ‘mudra’ practice – a hand gesture that is used during meditation and is very prominent in classical dances like Bharatnatyam.

Hands are considered to be precious organs of action and are linked to the Vedic prayer given below:

Karagre vasathe Lakshmi karamule Saraswati karamadhye tu Govindah prabhate karadarshanam.

I remember singing that prayer in music classes, but I understand its meaning now. It is interpreted as: “On the tip of your fingers is Goddess Lakshmi, on the base is Goddess Saraswati and in the middle of your fingers is Lord Govinda.”

Hence, the shloka suggests that all divinity lies in human effort.

The Ayurvedic texts teach that each finger is an extension of one of the elements. Through the thumb comes space; through the forefinger, air; through the mid-finger, fire; through the ring finger, water and through the little finger, earth.

Each finger aids in the transformation of food before it passes into the internal digestive system. The fingertips stimulate the five elements and improve digestion by bringing forth all the senses together. Thus, we become more conscious of the taste, texture, and smell of the food that we are eating.

I was by nature, a fussy eater. I wouldn't think twice before throwing something I didn't like. My parents would say, "Respect each morsel of the food that you are eating, do not waste it."

One day, when I went to a restaurant in Mysore, I came across a man who removed his slippers and sat down bowing his head in prayer before starting to eat. There I was, being fussy. That action touched me and I never took the food I was eating for granted, ever since. I started looking at food more spiritually. It was a new perspective.

The Indian tradition of eating with our hands is not just cultural, but it is more personal. We touch it, smell it, taste it, feel its texture in our mouths, and after a good meal, we lick our fingers. That is how food must be eaten – it should be felt, relished, and enjoyed which can only be done once we connect our senses with its physicality and involve ourselves whole-heartedly in the process.