

Original Paper

Covid-19 and the Politics of Gastronomic Consumerism in Pandemic India

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Abstract

Food culture has always been a definitive marker of identity throughout the ages, reflecting transformations social orders have undergone over time. Consumerism finds its most potent manifestation in food cultures, especially in terms of the type of food consumed (imported, ready-to-eat, frozen etc.) and the modes in which it is consumed (at restaurants, dine-ins, online ordering). The Covid-19 pandemic situation saw drastic transformations in the way Indians perceived and consumed food and drinks, with the gig economy and home-made food industry flourishing. The lockdown and associated restrictions led to a sharp decline in the number of people eating out at restaurants, hotels and cafes. Besides, the work-at-home culture made leisure possible for a significant section of the middle-class, propelling the subjects to cook at home, often leading to the emergence of local food-based start-ups. Domestic servitude declined due to the upper-class suspicion of maids and “lowly” domestic employees who came from “unclean” locales. As such, homemakers and working subjects, especially women, began cooking on their own, leading to innovative food cultures and novel modes of gastronomic consumerism. The paper attempts to explore the multifaceted modes in which the Covid-19 situation propels transformations in gastronomic consumer culture and the “culture industry” in India, as revealed through surveys, published reports and social media pages. The study would also engage with the modes in which gender, class and caste intersect with pandemic consumerism in the gastronomic arena, thereby developing a holistic perspective on how it affects consumer and food cultures across social groups in India.

Keywords

food culture, pandemic, lockdown, consumer culture, social media, gastronomy, gender dynamics, class, gig economy, consumerism

1. Introduction

After the first case of Covid-19 was reported in India on 30 January 2020, the country was caught in a gigantic wave that crushed lives and economies across the world. Developing nations such as India with limited health care and medical facilities are among the worst affected, especially in terms of their economic standing. The consumer industry is perhaps one among the best indicators of the economic status and stability of a country. Consumerism finds its most potent manifestation in food cultures, especially in terms of the type of food consumed and the modes in which it is consumed. This becomes significant in the pandemic situation, as food is “the” most important requirement for subjects, irrespective of the class or gender they belong to. Food culture has always been a definitive marker of identity throughout the ages, reflecting transformations social orders have undergone over time. As a country with a wide array of food items and food sources, with small dhabas co-existing with McDonalds and KFCs, with the innumerable supermarkets that are often accessible only to specific groups of people, and with food being a significant marker of identity, the situation in India merits attention.

“Goods are consumed not only for their material characteristics, but even more for what they symbolize” (Goodman & Cohen, 2004, p. 2). Among such commodities, food is of prime importance in that it is one of the most conspicuous markers of identity. It is symbolic and it represents dominant ways of a society. Consuming food is a ritual and a performance that showcases the nuances of the subject’s identity. The pandemic period witnessed drastic transformations in the ways in which we approach and engage with food.

2. Method

This paper attempts to analyse the modes in which consumers engaged with food during the pandemic and how a significant change could be observed in gastronomic consumer culture in India. Food cultures will be explored to analyse the transformation in food consumption patterns. The one-year period from 1 April 2020 to 1 April 2021 is taken as the “pandemic period” for the purpose of the study. A survey was conducted and a questionnaire was distributed online. The study draws from the survey as well as from various social media platforms which perhaps saw the highest traffic in terms of food- related posts during the pandemic period when most other modes of communication came into a partial halt. Google trends has been used to comprehend patterns through keyword searches and trending words. This will be an analytical study and information will be drawn from various online sources, especially social media,

including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, reports from reliable sources and surveys conducted by the researchers.

3. Analysis

The Covid-19 situation led to increased restrictions on the movement of people and hence a majority was forced to stay at home. Consumers went to small retail shops and corner stores near their house to purchase necessary food items with planned lists. The “Covid-19 Consumer Pulse Research Report” reveals that 90% of the Indian respondents are changing their consumption patterns and that the emphasis on branded products would decline. “Consumers are now focused on their most basic needs while cutting back on non-essentials” (Tandon, 2020). This meant that conspicuous waste, was not affordable anymore for a majority of the middle and upper middle classes. And where there were instances of conspicuous waste, it was censured by the social order, especially through social media. Celebrities were criticized for engaging in gourmet cooking and fancy vacations at a time when millions were starving. Here, social media functions as an ideological state apparatus, subtly ensuring adherence to group norms during times of crisis, with food as a central point of debate.

74% of the Indian consumers surveyed by Accenture said that they rely now on locally-sourced products and 80% prefer shopping in stores in the neighbourhood. The emphasis was on hygienic food. People preferred to go to relatively small shops to reduce person-to-person contact. This is evident from the 39% increase in grocery sales in neighbourhood kirana shops in India as documented in the McKinsey Report, 2020, which also found that 29% of the customers surveyed intended to continue purchase in such stores even after the pandemic period. Regular shopping at local stores provides venues for the emergence of personal connections, while supermarkets and malls thrive on impersonal relationships. The increased reliance on small stores for groceries and basic supply would establish new bonds and minor discounts and concessions, which might well continue into the post-pandemic period. The impersonality associated with the act of purchasing food in modern social orders might reduce with the increased reliance on local stores, taking us back to the period before the establishment of retail chains, supermarkets and malls.

After the pandemic set in, there was an increased demand for healthy, immunity-boosting food. METRO Cash and Carry reveals that there was an increase of 60% in the sales of immunity-boosters like honey, green tea, chyavanprash and neem and tulsi drinks. They also highlighted the huge jump in demand for items in the health and wellness sector—by April 2020, the sales figures had outgrown those of 2019 by 4%. Junk food and fried food declined in popularity and healthy alternatives were preferred (Anand, 2021).

The fear of being infected combined with strict restrictions on roadside dhabas and fast food joints led to sharp transformations in eating habits. Besides, the work from home culture led to increased bonding between family members, thereby facilitating the ritual of “eating together as a family”. Home food was preferred owing to safety and hygiene concerns. 92% of the respondents in our survey said that their habit

of dining out decreased considerable after the onset of the pandemic. Dining-out is a performance, laden with symbolic significations. It is one of the modes of conspicuous consumption and indicative of social status. In countries like India, it is only the upper classes who can afford to visit restaurants on a regular basis. Such visits are as much acts of “casual” dining-out as they are of assertion of their belonging in the leisure class. Customers expects restaurant to “satisfy deeper emotional desires for status and belonging” (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 105). However, the pandemic and the resultant loss of jobs meant that even the upper middle-class subjects had to be cautious with spending their money on leisure and luxury items. The use of half-processed items and ordering food online had become usual much before the pandemic. This trend continued during the pandemic and ensured that online orders remained steady or increased during the pandemic. According to the McKinsey Report , there was an increase of 11% in ordering from restaurants during the pandemic (Shashidhar, 2020). There was huge surge in the demand for food delivery and various apps were developed by groups in small towns in the model of Swiggy and Zomato after the lockdown. Amazon also made forays into the food delivery sector in 2020. The pandemic led to the flourishing of the gig culture in the gastronomic arena. However, we should keep in mind that the majority of the customers for these apps belonged to the middle and upper middle classes, who could afford to buy fancy food and pay delivery charges.

The demand for Ready-To-Eat (RTE), Ready-To-Cook (RTC) and frozen foods rose owing to the difficulty in visiting shops often. With people increasingly preferring to eat at home and the prices of fresh food rising drastically, the frozen food market grew by 40-50%. RTE and RTC food items, which during the pre-Covid times had been purchased only when exigencies arose, came to be in high demand during the pandemic period. RTC food items had the additional advantage of being “home-made”, which remains a fetish in the Indian household.

The August-October 2020 Newsletter of the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the demand for packaged food, especially pulses, dry fruits and sweets will increase during and after the pandemic owing to concerns over hygiene. As such, roadside merchants and gully markets have either already closed down or are on the verge of shutting shop. This is a huge advantage for globalized MNCs who make “Indian” foods and “export” it to India. Here again, the issue of class becomes significant. Only the upper classes could purchase packaged items on a regular basis. The pandemic served to exacerbate the “stigmatizing inequality” (Goodman & Cohen, 2004, p. 75) already existing in the Indian social order.

While the “mithai bhandar” was a common meeting place for many Indians, especially youngsters, the pandemic brought a halt to the culture as packaged sweets were preferred. The same pattern could be seen in the case of roadside tea stalls, most of which had to be closed down. By banning gatherings, the state spelled the doom of such traditional shopkeepers. It served the additional biopolitical purpose of bringing bodies under control, shaping them into docile entities. In many states, political discussions took place in these small roadside shops and stalls. The prohibition of gatherings also spelt the end of such

discussions by the common people. That the pandemic came at a time when the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were gaining momentum served to further the interests of the political regime.

Panic buying by consumers in the initial days of the lockdown led to food scarcity, making conspicuous the disparity between the rich and the poor. While the upper classes had consciously avoided going to the ration shops in order to assert their “distinction” (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, p. 5), the fear of scarcity of food and the reasonable quality of the items distributed propelled them to get the ration kits. In such instances, we see the class distinctions dissolving in the face of crisis and the emergence of a “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 15) situation.

The availability of ration rice, which is considered low quality rice in many states across India, led to a deluge of videos on YouTube and social media featuring dishes, including fried rice, biryani, and cake, made with ration rice. The last year, more than 40 YouTube channels uploaded videos on ration rice dishes. Everyone seemed to be “experimenting” with ration rice. Although a seemingly innocent act, this is an instance where we see the privileged asserting their distinction from the lower classes. By making, or rather, “experimenting” biryani and exotic dishes which require a lot of other ingredients with ration rice, the financially stable category attempts to mark themselves as distinct from the lower classes who cannot afford to use ration rice for “experimenting”. The desire to be “different” manifests itself conspicuously in the videos. For instance, in a popular cookery channel, the voice of the cook tells us: “I decided to make a biryani that *saadharanakaar* (the common masses) can make”. The word “*saadharanakaar*” in Malayalam is a euphemism to denote the lower classes. By asserting that the biryani is for “*saadharanakaar*”, the cook is subtly detaching herself from the category and asserting her class identity as someone who is outside and above the group labelled thus. There is also an emphasis on giving a “make-over” to the ration rice, indicating the “need” to change the class status that the rice symbolizes in the Indian psyche. Most YouTube videos featuring ration rice contain a clause: “Even though we are using ration rice...” In several videos, the cook tells us specifically that “there will be black coloured rice in the ration rice” and we see her picking up the black rice in her hands to show that the ration rice needs thorough cleansing, unlike the rice we buy from stores. This rarely happens in cookery videos featuring “paid” rice. The popularly held notion that ration rice is for “unclean” people, meaning the “lower” classes/castes, is propagated here. Another food trend that dominated social media was the Dalgona Challenge. Google Trends reveals that the search words “How to make Dalgona Coffee” was among the top three “how to” searches in 2020. Whipping it up was considered fashionable, as “high quality coffee powder” (Times Food, 2020), unaffordable to the poor, was essential to make it.

The work from home culture and the lack of jobs also led to a number of women turning to baking, either for leisure or for making a living. Many relied on YouTube videos to learn baking and some even launched business ventures of their own. In 2020, “how to bake cake” was at the top of the list of Google searches and around 59 million viewers had watched videos on making cakes in YouTube. Baking at

home had traditionally been the forte of the elite classes. Initially restricted to areas with a strong British presence, home baking percolated to the upper classes among Indians after the colonial period. However, during the pandemic, people belonging to the middle classes also took to baking. While the relatively wealthy pursued it as a hobby, others established small-scale business ventures to offset the household income. While baking items were mostly available in supermarkets and relatively large stores before the pandemic, the pandemic period saw even small, local shops selling bakery essentials such as baking soda, baking powder, cocoa and even regular baking trays and pipettes. Here again, we see the pandemic leading to the dissolution of class barriers. Facebook and Instagram posts and WhatsApp statuses of many women (and men) from various strata featured baked goodies and baking lost its exclusive nature. The gender dimension of food cultures during the pandemic merits attention here. Even in normal circumstances, women are among the most vulnerable to food insecurity in countries like India where patriarchy is deep-rooted. “Within the family, status and power differences according to gender can be reflected in the distribution of food” (Wood, 2004, p. 132). Whenever there are worries of food shortage, the women cut down on their food intake, leading to severe health consequences. This tendency becomes conspicuous during extra-normal situations like the pandemic period.

Since mobility was severely affected during the lockdown, many men who usually went out during their leisure time, were forced to sit at home. This meant having to share the domestic workload, including cooking. In a patriarchal society, a man who cooks is often termed “effeminate” and “not man enough”. As such, Indian men have traditionally been reluctant to get involved with cooking. However, the emergence of social media and the possibility of creating TikTok and YouTube videos and posting them on Facebook and Instagram served as motivation for a handful of men to cook at home. In many households, maids were not allowed due to the upper-class suspicion of those in the lower rungs of the social ladder by virtue of their class or caste; servants were believed to be potential carriers of the virus as they came from “unclean” locales. As such, the burden of household work on women increased. Besides, many men had to stay at home owing to sudden unemployment. Around 104 million men had lost their jobs in April alone. These factors together led to increased participation of men in household management, childcare and cooking. Nevertheless, women continued to devote a greater number of hours than men to household work. Besides, many men cooked to “experiment” or to post photos on social media, while the task of cooking “proper”, regular meals for the family fell on the women. Although the larger burden still falls on women, we can see a gradual shift in the gendering of household work, with men increasingly being involved in purchasing grocery and cooking.

4. Conclusion

Food has thus occupied a central place in the Indian imaginary during the pandemic period. There was scarcity and food insecurity on the one side and abundance on the other. Food was the cause of misery as well as celebration, depending on the subject’s class and social status. The What, How and Where of

eating became prominent issues with food and the act of eating functioning as performances and symbolic systems. Conspicuous waste has been replaced by conscious consumption, with customers increasingly focusing on mindful spending and healthy eating. During the Second Wave of Covid-19 that has hit India, there are mounting concerns regarding the availability of food. The future of the country seems unpredictable, and so does the consumer culture which has undergone radical transformations. The paper has offered a preliminary glimpse in to the patterns of consumption and food cultures in India during the first phase of pandemic and has located them within the socio-political contexts from which they draw significance. The question as to whether these changes are here to stay is debatable and nothing conclusive can be said in this regard till the pandemic is under control, and the country returns to “normal”, if ever there can be a “normal” after Covid-19.

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Declaration

This is to certify that the paper titled **Covid-19 and the Politics of Gastronomic Consumerism in Pandemic India** is an original work written by us and it has not been published previously.

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