Digital Food Consumer Citizenship beyond the Indian State

Merle Müller-Hansen

Introduction

Consumption theories and citizenship theories are two mostly separate lines of inquiry. However, thinking with them as complementary theoretic strands allows us to gain rich insights. Particularly, they shed light on highly relevant research topics in food studies, for the fact that the power inherent to consumption discourses and the agency inherent to citizenship discourses intersect resolutely in our digital age.

This extended abstract delves into the intersection of food consumption, citizenship, and the impact of digital spaces on shaping contemporary food cultures in India. I draw on literature and three phases of feminist ethnography in India in 2022, 2023, and 2024. This included semi-structured in-depth interviews in a face-to-face format in Hyderabad (n= 49) and an iterative process of transcription, coding, and further analysis. My original research question aimed at digital food consumer citizenship and its potentials to disrupt and eventually heal and transform colonial trauma. For the purpose of being able to cover all the corner stones of the argument within this abstract, I ask in what way aspirational eating leads beyond the boundaries of the national state and towards a digital food consumer citizenship.

In the following, I juxtapose the digitally translated aspirational eating with dynamics of class, caste, gender, and different age groups. Herein, I emphasize the role of internet mediation in the digital age as well as the role of certain foods, in particular outside foods, in bridging socio-economic divides. Furthermore, I explore how this bridging surpasses the boundaries of the state in local-global-local diversifying ways. Keeping in mind that the ways foods travel become increasingly intertwined with smart spaces that rely on artificial intelligence (AI), I foreground the importance of relational codings of Brown, South Asian, religiously diverse, and simply female life in order to mediate a plurally thriving food culture.

Food Consumer Citizenship

Amita Baviskar's (2018) exploration of the small-sized packaged Maggi noodles in Indian dietary changes highlights social stigmatization and the lifestyle-associated signifiers associated with certain food products. She thus foregrounds the aspirational nature of food consumption. Beyond that, Baviskar (2018) challenges simplistic interpretations of cultural assimilation and instead underscores the complex interplay between traditional values, globalization, and the power dynamics of food consumption. In contrast to the notion of a 'capitalist coup' of packaged foods, she points to decolonial struggles as central to India's resistance against foreign products in the sense of import substitution and the boosting of value chains, revealing the limits of globalization in shaping the nation's food culture.

The concept of consumer citizenship, as introduced by Ritty Lukose (2009), further explores the contested cultural politics of globalization. Lukose investigates the ways in which young people in India mediate their lives between states and markets, challenging traditional notions of citizenship. She argues for a nuanced understanding of consumption under the wake of globalization, emphasizing its participatory nature and its role in shaping market, political, and cultural changes.

Here, a contested question is whether it is young people in general who innovate food consumption or rather those consumer citizens of the middle class/classes. According to Deshpande (2003), Fernandes (2006), and Ray (2019), the singular middle class of the past has not delivered its promise of uplifting across socio-economic difference but has rather acted in its self-interest. This seems to be changing with the emergent plural middle classes "which reflect a far wider range of practices set against the dominant ideas of the role of this class in Indian economic, civic, social and political life." (Ray 2019: 209).

In light of these debates, I argue that the food practices that currently innovate food consumption are driven twofold. On the one hand, digitalized consumer citizens drive food practice innovations. Digitalized consumer citizens are particularly concentrated in younger age cohorts with their large proportional population ratio (Lukose 2009), cross-cutting class and caste differences. On the other hand, the broader emergent middle classes drive gastronomic innovation. This is due to the tendency that lifestyle projections are communicated and exchanged via digital media and inspire similar

aspirations when it comes to food as a signifier of lifestyle. The lifestyles of the elites were present in my interview partners' digital bubbles, but these were relativized as being less relatable and unrealistic to reach because of structural constraints. The lifestyles projected through digital platforms by friends, acquaintances, and local or regional bloggers and influencers who can be counted into the new middle classes were oftentimes quoted as a point of reference for exploring food choices. This characterizes what I refer to as aspirational eating.

The symbolic and physical materialization of agency in consumer citizenship holds opportunities for both the new middle classes and the young generations, including also marginalized groups. This has given rise to novel spaces and identities influencing the contemporary food culture in India. Research on spatial citizenship, as discussed by Gryl and Jewel (2012) and Dorsch and Kanwischer (2019), suggests that active participation in co-creating techno-social spaces provides individuals with a political and economic voice in the digital realm (Bork-Hüffer and Strüver 2022). In the next section, I delve into these digital aspects of food and the internet-mediated food cultures. Within these evolving digital spaces, food consumer citizenship is taking shape. It is challenging the conventional dichotomy between food economies and politics through digital food cultures.

Internet Mediated Food Culture

Recent scholarship on digital spaces has highlighted that "the digital and physical spheres are now inextricably interwoven" (Bork-Hüffer and Strüver 2022: 12, own translation). Hence, it is imperative to reconsider and reconceptualize the fundamental notion of space in geography, recognizing that "the digital is progressively permeating, interconnecting, and generating space, spatiality, and socio-environmental relationships" (ibid.).

This relational approach to the digital foregrounds its dynamic and hybrid character, allowing for the continuation of old realms of experience of food in physical settings, for hybrid experiences, and new spatial (re)productions of food that actively engage with and operate through digital platforms. George Ritzer and Steven Miles (2018) explore the implications of the McDonaldization thesis in the digital age, contending that the digital realm not only expedites processes of rationalization but also intensifies levels of consumption.

The ongoing evolution of food consumption sites spans from traditional „brick-and-mortar" locales (Miles 2000) to hybrid "bricks and clicks" establishments (Belk 2013) and fully digital "spaces of flows" (Castells 1996, Goodman et al. 2009). Latest trends point towards the development of what I call "smart food spaces", drawing from Casey Lynch and Vincent Del Casino's work (2020). The concept extends the continuum to encompass such physical

spaces that are orchestrated by AI, as exemplified by Amazon Go and similar entrepreneurial projects by the Alibaba Group. These grocery stores enable checkout-free shopping via sensors that recognize customer's faces and automatically bill the selected products to their accounts.

This evolving continuum, perpetuated by the relentless force of intensified consumerism, aligns closely with the foundational principles of the digital McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer and Miles 2018) . The emphasis here lies on hyperconsumption, "the process by which the consumption of non-essential goods is supercharged so that consumers are encouraged to select items they did not know they needed or wanted" (ibid.: 8). In the context of the food industry, hyperconsumption can be linked to specific ingredients that are typically unnecessary and not deliberately sought after. A pertinent example is evident at franchised fast food chains, where the potential to ingest excessive amounts of calories, fat, sugar, and the like is acknowledged. Despite the rationality principle guiding retailers in opting for cost-effective, non-perishable ingredients, consumers are expected to follow divergent logics. For example, the discounts oftentimes offered on certain cooking ingredients via the grocery app Swiggy Instamart prompted one of my interview participants to straightforwardly say: "You don't need it but you'll buy it. You'll have 1000 rupees budget and 2000 rupees spendings". Hyperconsumption is not confined solely to ingredients; it permeates specific items, particularly what is termed as "outside foods" (Müller-Hansen et al., 2025). These are characterized by their ready-to-eat nature and commercial preparation outside the confines of consumers' homes.

In the decision-making process concerning outside foods, factors such as taste, aesthetics, and price often take precedence, relegating considerations of nutrition, ecological impact, and societal consequences to secondary positions. Due to their often small portion sizes and a converging marketing grammar (Khare 2012), many of these outside foods are accessible to both less and more privileged consumer citizens. Therefore, particularly the digitally mediated outside foods can bridge socio-economic divides through shared digital food cultures that cross class, caste, and spatial boundaries.

Furthermore, this paradigmatic shift in food consumption is not solely a consequence of food industry advancements but is deeply entwined with internet-mediated food cultures. These digital food cultures play a contradictory role in promoting and normalizing outside food choices as well as educating on health and sustainability. Despite the prevailing awareness of the adverse long-term effects associated with hyperconsumption, facilitated by digital platforms, the appeal of these choices persists. This illustrates the complex interplay between technology,

culture, and consumer citizen behavior in the contemporary digital foodscapes.

Digital Food Consumer Citizenship beyond the Hindu Nationalist State

When two young Indian men met coincidentally in a restaurant in London in the early 2000s, they connected over the "to their taste unimaginative and bad food in England" (Deininger and Haase 2021: 135, own translation). Back in India, they founded a cloud kitchen platform whose name firmly reveals the kind of foods it promoted and the kind of food it did not stand for: Fanatic Activism Against Substandard Occidental Shit (FAASOS). This counter space to imperial food culture, in direct reference to the former colonial power England, rose quickly in popularity. Not much later, however, it was branded Rebel Foods to cater to the diverse globalizing and hybridizing food cravings of their customers.

This example opens discussion for the globalization and hybridization of cuisines, and counter spaces of plurally thriving food culture, both of which must currently be discussed in the light of food cultural politics of the Hindu nationalist government in India. During my last research stay in Hyderabad, only two months before the 2024 general elections, the tension with the latter was aggravating at least temporarily.

A profound analysis of the globalization and hybridization of cuisines from a South Asian perspective was at the heart of the book Curried Cultures (Ray and Srinivas 2012). The book shows the manyfold foodways through which Curried Cultures continue to influence palates and cuisines over the globe and vice versa. Gupta concludes in the book's seminal article that "the last quarter of the twentieth century, [...] might better be understood as a particular crisis of 'high sovereignty' for the nation-state form" (2012: 42). In addition to that, the editors Ray and Srinivas

"denote a sense, or a structure of feeling, at least among urban dwellers, and especially among the middle classes, that people from all over the world have been pulled together in sharper and more proximate juxtaposition to each other. In that sense, cultural globalization is new. It is a new thing in urban middle-class conceptions of self and other, and food plays a central role in that imaginary." (2012: 26).

More than ten years after the publication of Curried Cultures, internet mediated food culture has contributed to the acceleration and of these trends. The sentiment of social belonging that surpasses the national state and is connected to shared food practices as part of defined lifestyles, as Ray and Srinivas assess (ibid.). This was also reported to me by my interview partners and it became salient through our common ground of cultural and particularly culinary understanding and the ease of building rapport. It would turn into a topic of conversation that interview partners brought up on several occasions. For example, one over sixty years old woman reflected that nowadays people are faster in relating to people from other cultures because they've had some digitally mediated experiences already before the actual encounter and that knowing foods of that other culture played an important role in it. Moreover, my interview partners coincided in their food, health, fitness, and beauty references from Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube. I could strongly relate to them from my own experiences and from those narrated or digitally projected by my peers from Germany and other countries.

In continuity with the ease of building cross-cultural rapport over foods, some participants who are considered minorities in India felt more at ease talking to me alone - without the project team members from a collaborating Indian government institution. This wish did not have anything to do with them personally, but the participants were more confident talking about some of their food practices without feeling like they were under the aegis of someone who, in their eyes, represented the Hindu nationalist government that actively contributes to stigmatizing some food practices of minorities. A Christian shared with me how the situation had become more tense during the times of election. For example, neighbors were much more observant towards their cooking. They would search for traces of meat preparation and look down on the cooking of a Christian festive meat roast. Muslims also noted that the official acceptance of their food culture was being refined to the margins of Indian society. This is the case even though Hyderabad has a larger Muslim population than many other cities in India. They reported, for example, the exclusion criterion of meat preparation in rental contracts, or the negation of rental contracts altogether for themselves and Muslim friends and family members, because of the religion-associated meat-cooking. The availability of food products beyond the rice, pulses, vegetable, plus possibly egg, chicken, or mutton based South Indian diet was another issue. Some would need to travel over 8 kilometers to reach supermarkets with a more international profile to find the foods specific to certain minority food practices. Moreover, these foods were then much more elevated in price and oftentimes out of stock.

The online services available in Hyderabad, again, drew some of those nuanced lines between the diverse food cultures within one place differently. Over the popular delivery app Swiggy, for example, I was able to find an ample offer of different variations of the local Muslim festival food Haleem - as a vegetarian version or with chicken or mutton. Because of the official ban on beef, the underground-cultural beef version of the dish was not available online. The restaurants serving Haleem or Shawarma were mostly located in the somewhat segregated

Muslim neighborhoods of the city. Food delivery radiuses, nevertheless, reached to the other side of town, indicating a demand for these foods also elsewhere. Besides the promotion of these local favorites via Swiggy, the platform also promotes all kinds of culinary fusions. With fusion foods promoted via online platforms, the hybridity of food culture gains an additional dimension. Some popular hybrid foods at the time of my research went from Paneer Pizza, to Dosa Quesadilla, and all sorts of regionally and internationally fused Namkeen (savory snack) flavors. Caveat to this, however, are the monopolizing and economic-interest driven dynamics behind platforms such as Swiggy. Besides paying little to drivers and small businesses and not giving any kind of financial securities or insurances, the platform also acts differently in the less Muslim influenced parts of India. There, people would hardly find any other-than-Hindu foods, and much less any other festival foods.

Counter spaces of plurally thriving food cultures through feminist digital disruptions

Counter spaces of plurally thriving food cultures come into focus when looking at digital disruptions in the sense of Sarah Elwood's (2020) feminist relationality. The author highlights that the digital divide aligns with established intersections of social inequalities, such as class, race/ethnicity, and gender. However, she underscores the positive impact of people-centric digital platforms and practices in fostering social prosperity. Her examples focus on the U.S. American context and are originating from "Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and queer forms of life, thought, and action" (Elwood 2020: 210) that persist despite the multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence against these communities.

In the Indian context, an example of disrupting monopolistic practices through internet mediated food is the early years of FAASOS that aimed at a thriving South Asian food culture. Another example is the Masala Podcast by Sangeeta Pillai that aims at boosting Brown people and especially South Asian women in India and in the diaspora by exploring intersectional feminism through the topic of cultural taboos. Food plays a role in almost every single one of the over 50 episodes that are available on a variety of music and podcasting platforms so far. A third example are the community kitchens that some Muslim communities in Hyderabad have established. Poorer families pay a smaller fee and richer families pay a larger fee for everyone to get fresh cooked food deliveries from the cook of the community on a daily basis. Daily food rations can be adjusted via an online booking system a day in advance. This guarantees the necessary flexibility for occasions when a family prefers to cook by itself, when a family member is not going to eat at home, or when additional portions for visitors are needed. A fourth and last example is the freeware NutriAIDE app, coded by a Sikh developer

from Chandigarh. It features camera vision similar to the Google lens, except its AI was trained to recognize mainly Indian dishes with a high accuracy and safety protocols for the sensitive nutrition data base.

All of these examples are people-centric digital platforms that are embedded in practices that use individual agency for persisting to foster social prosperity through foods. In India and its projections beyond, the multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence in face of which people persist lies in intersectional inequalities. The ones that became salient here are a race/ethnicity bias entrenched in caste and class orders, classic patriarchal structures, and a governing organism that incorporates the previous points in Hindu religious principles with little tolerance for diversity. Therefore, it is essential to highlight and advance a plurally thriving food culture at this point in time - when the digital has covered much more importance over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic and AI is still being primed by the early inputs we introduce to its networks. These inputs, mainly in form of code, are heavily influenced by their creator's positionality and resulting biases. Here, counterspaces as feminist relational disruption are key. My study of the Indian context extends Elwood's (2020) learnings on communities of thriving otherwise and applies them to digital food culture. In order to retain diverse food cultures, there is an urgent need for representing and coding Brown, South Asian, religiously diverse, and simply female forms of life, thought, and action. This is a necessary step in order to balance out the dominant and over-represented food cultures. The Hindu government's neglect and selective marginalization of subaltern culinary traditions on the one hand, and, as articulated by my interview partners, the wish for "cosmo" gastronomic practices on the other hand, contribute to an expansive food consumer citizenship that transcends national boundaries. This phenomenon is accentuated by digital dynamics.

Conclusion

In this extended abstract, I explored the intersection of consumption theories, citizenship, and digital spaces in shaping contemporary food cultures in India. By considering consumption and citizenship as complementary, I outlined the dynamics of aspirational eating, driven by digitally mediated consumer citizens of the young generations and of the emergent middle classes. This highlighted how internet-mediated food cultures challenge conventional norms, fostering a plurally thriving food culture and bridging socio-economic divides.

My examination of globalization and hybridization of cuisines within the context of the Hindu nationalist state revealed tensions and opportunities. I emphasized digital disruptions fostering counter spaces of a plurally thriving food culture, exemplified

by initiatives such as community kitchens and innovative digital platforms. These people-centric efforts (aim to) challenge structural inequalities, advocating for a more equitable future in the digital food landscape. I conclude by urging the recognition

and amplification of plural voices, including Brown, South Asian, religiously diverse, and female perspectives, as irrevocable for shaping a thriving and diverse digital food culture.

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Contact Information

Merle Müller-Hansen
University of Augsburg
Universitätsstraße 12
86159 Augsburg, Germany
merle.mueller-hansen@uni-a.de