

## A study of globalization and modernity as an engine of changing food habits: A shared process of an exclusive experience

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### Abstract

Globalization is a process which has been much talked about, debated and deliberated upon and its impacts on all spheres of life has been comprehended by many in divergent and convergent ways. The idea of this work is to highlight the ways in which this process has touched upon culinary cultures and how it has led to subsequent changes in food habits.

The world becoming a global village has in more than one way brought the world together and hence has led to exchange of not only labour and capital, but also a plethora of ideas, knowledge, skills and culture. The exposure to practices and general lifestyles of people and communities from various places leads to a gradual process of formation of a broader global culture, which brings under its umbrella the various local and regional traditions.

Each region has its own specific culinary culture, its distinct cuisine and ingredients which are found locally. The food habit of a particular region therefore develops over a long period of time and through a historical process, where the geography and climatic conditions play vital roles. It is hence very interesting to observe how new cut across trends these age old cultures and gain strong grounds swiftly. The idea is therefore to trace these changes and understand the underlying social, political and economic developments with the intention of gathering a holistic understanding of the issue at hand, simultaneously also briefly examining the exclusivity of it.

**Keywords:** globalization, culinary culture, global village, global culture, cuisine, food habits, exclusivity

### Introduction

What is it that in the most explicit way, keeps one bound to the roots of one's homeland? If food is to be the answer of the question just posed, it might invoke responses of complete or partial agreement or disagreement, but in all probabilities not that of total dismissal, and this is because none can deny the physical and emotional significance of food in people's lives, even though not everyone may have spared a moment to give it much thought. We can begin by looking at what determines one's food habits or what forms a basic framework upon which one's eating patterns are rested. The primary factor is of course availability, but moving beyond it, we can perhaps safely attribute the factors of time and tradition<sup>[1]</sup> to it. What is interesting is the interplay of these factors and how ultimately our food patterns are shaped and altered in due courses of time. If one were to take a pair of psychological lenses to examine it, one could perhaps attribute various emotional causes and consequences of this interplay on the lives of the people involved, but that, right now is beyond the purview of this discussion. The interplay is probably the most obviously given part of our living, as much that we do not even take that into serious notice; based on the time that one can devote to cooking each day, one makes use of the available ingredients to make something that one is familiar with and prefers the taste of or something that is a necessity health-wise or which invokes nostalgia or custom. But what if the available ingredients do not exactly suffice to prepare that

to which one is traditionally accustomed? And this situation is encountered by specially those who relocate to places which are geographically and climatically different from their places of origin. In circumstances like these, one changes and reshapes one's eating patterns, not totally giving up the older ways, but definitely incorporating the new, and in this arrangement, retaining the old becomes a way to significantly stay connected to one's roots. This discussion was just to show how food patterns are bent and restructured by people with regards to space and time, our main idea in this paper is to understand the changes that culinary cultures undergo due to reasons like the one briefly mentioned above, under the broader phenomenon of globalization and how eventually, a composite culture develops, keeping into account the entangled capitalist economic processes which explain the larger picture in the background better.

Before we proceed further it becomes customary for us to make an attempt to comprehend the central term 'globalization'. The Cambridge dictionary defines Globalization as a 'situation in which goods and services, or social and cultural influences, gradually become similar in all parts of the world<sup>[2]</sup>', there is a certain degree of ambiguity in this definition, but it can serve as a useful starting point for venturing more into this term. It is basically a process of integration, whereby economies, industries, markets and cultures around the world come together, through a network of trade, communication, immigration and transportation<sup>[3]</sup>. This

<sup>1</sup> The term 'tradition', has essentially been used here to indicate particular eating habits that run down in families for a few generations and become either a daily item on the plate or sometimes a delicacy reserved for special occasions.

<sup>2</sup> <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/globalization>

<sup>3</sup> Financial Times Lexicon, <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=economic-globalisation>

integration leads to an exchange of not only capital and labour, but also culture and lifestyles, as has been suggested by the first definition, and as a subsequent development we see a nascent culture emerging, one which takes elements from all that it comes across and contributes to the world becoming a global village. It is the impact of this process on general food habits of people that will be our focus here; as people and ideas flow from one place to another, culinary cultures change in interesting ways, and at times these changes are manufactured and packaged for the sake of business and profit, eventually leading the 'manufacturers' into becoming giant capitalist houses.

Therefore, it will be indispensable to understand that food patterns and eating habits of a group or community of people is a variable dependent on a host of factors, primarily the climatic, weather and regional conditions of the location they are situated in, which determine the type of its soil, fertility and the vegetation supported by it and the animals for which it provides a natural habitat. The climatic condition of an area also determines the food requirements of the human body and this in turn has an impact on the ways in which a particular ingredient is treated, resulting in vast varieties of preparations of the same raw food and their derivatives.

The culmination of these factors over generations crystallizes in the formation of culinary cultures and food habits, which become an integral part of the daily living of people. Besides, the impact of globalization also becomes apparent when we analyze other things, for example employment opportunities, income levels, availability and prices of commodities and all of these have a direct bearing on the eating patterns of the populace involved, which bring about alterations and innovations in the different food practices which is otherwise based on the geographic and climatic determinants mentioned above.

With globalization and liberalization of the economy, employment opportunities, especially in the tertiary sector have come up in a significant proportion, and we hence have large numbers of people relocating in search of better opportunities in this world of the free market. Anita Mannur, in her article on culinary nostalgia, paraphrases Ketu Katrak, an Indian American cultural critic, '*...culinary narratives, suffused with nostalgia, often manage immigrant memories and imagined returns to the homeland*'. This is exactly where we see the prominence of food habits in the process of globalization in the context of employment and subsequent movement of people across various regional and national boundaries. She further talks about an interesting concept of 'culinary citizenship', which allows people to claim and hold on to certain positions through their relationship with food. It is therefore food, which helps the emigrant population to retain their ties with their homes and birthplaces and they therefore try to reproduce their eating patterns in an alien land. The case becomes stronger when we talk of the diasporic married women, relocating with their husbands, for whom preparing their ethnic food becomes a mean of retaining their national or regional identities, also the preparation of a dish local to their homelands, demonstrate their longing for that place and the people. It is in such situations, especially in cases of international migrations, that people like Madhur

Jaffrey come to the limelight as key players. Madhur Jaffrey is one of the most prominent culinary experts in the South Asian diasporic circles and her cookbooks and recipes prove to be an essential guide for the retention of homeland roots in this era of globalization.

Shameen Black in her article on the cosmopolitanism through food, writes how cookbooks play certain vital roles for the diasporic population by giving them the recipes of distinct ethnic culinary practices which act as sites of negotiations with surrounding cultures while keeping the ethnicity intact and hence helping in growth of assimilation. However, the contribution of such books is more than just this, while allowing the Indian Diaspora to be attached to their origins, these books also introduce a plethora of new eating practices and scope for innovative treatment of the same ingredients for the others as well, which Black puts as the provision to the others for 'transnational engagement' which contributes to the process of growing cosmopolitanism in the urban centres of the world. Hence, when members of a particular community move to new place, they carry with them their practices which eventually merge into their current settings and become a part of the cosmopolitan culture.

To look at the effect of the increasing cosmopolitan nature of the urban centres, across the globe, on food habits, perhaps the best way is to look at the street food culture and the variety of dishes that are made available there, providing perhaps the most evident and affordable example of impacts of globalization and the subsequent exchange of cultures on culinary practices. There is an astounding degree of innovation and assimilation of food on the streets, and one does not even need to venture far, a look at the streets of our country is enough to prove the point. Right from noodle dosa to south Indian pancakes and paan flavoured ice cream, and from Manchurian Biryani to strawberry firni<sup>[4]</sup>, there is no dearth of creativity here. A certain Vaidya family, selling aaloo vadas (potato cutlets) in their tiny stall near Dadar in Mumbai was asked by a customer for a bun with the vada, and thereby we see the birth of vada pau. This interregional and international character of food comes essentially from the whole process of globalization induced exchange of culture and exposure, and street food, with regard to its low price is generally more accessible to people, which makes this cultural interaction a part of the everyday lives. It is this cultural exchange which transforms eventually the initial patterns of consumption and makes an amalgamation of various items a regular occurrence. George Ritzer and Elizabeth L Malone, in their work on new means of consumption, explore and elaborate the much talked about concept of Mc.Donaldization, which, of course, is not only the process of establishment of McDonalds as an extremely successful franchise, but is a whole paradigm development in itself. It is a manifestation of globalization and is a quintessential example of the new consumer patterns, thus Mc.Donaldization can be understood as a 'wide ranging and far reaching, but distinctive process of social change' (Ritzer and Malone, 2000)<sup>[4]</sup>. It is a study of the ideas that work their way through, across the globe and get successfully established, and the vital question here is what is it that makes certain ideas, much like the fast food restaurants, example McDonalds, gain strong grounds in no or little time all over

<sup>4</sup> Indian Street Food Past and Present, Ziyafat Foods, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCOgnARoyk>

the world? If one had to put it simply, it could be said that it is the projection of these ideas and institutions as reliable, acceptable, trendy and efficient that make them irresistible. Hence how firmly these would be established depends upon their practical application of course, but before that the ground that is created through information dissemination for their establishments. It is a matter of creating consumer aspirations and expectations at the first place and then of course meeting these expectations in practical terms. Since the focus of this paper remains the impact of globalization on culinary cultures, let us look particularly at the literal process of McDonaldization and see how after all McDonalds, now a global brand, affected the culinary scene in the places it became a part of. One of the key features of this franchise is its adaptability, how it molded its structure to allow the assimilation of local cultures in order to become acceptable. Ritzer and Malone describe how the operation of the outlets is also adapted to suit the local behavioral patterns, for example in Beijing, McDonald's is not a go to place for proper meals, rather the food in the menu is treated more like snacks, and the outlets therefore there do not function as takeaway points, instead they provide adequate provision for customers to casually spend some time there while enjoying their food. At times the inclusion of a local term in the menu also contributes in popularizing it more, for example the Mc Maharaja Burger in the Indian McDonald's outlets, while the ingredients are not Indian and it is purely the huge dimensions of the burger which gives it the name, the Mc Maharaja instantly hit popularity among the Indian crowd. Another interesting observation made by Ritzer and Malone is that in China, many of the former employees of KFC or McDonald's, after learning the basic techniques there, eventually go on to start their own ventures with the McDonaldised style of preparation for local cuisines. These are indicators of a gradual change in the eating practices of the urban areas induced by globalization, however for a section of the population, the upper files of the class divisions. For most of the lower class populace, do we really see a shift in food habits where they barely manage two square meals a day?

The effects of globalization have never been uniform or even in any situation, while the story remains rosy on one side, there is always the other darker end to it, the story of the deprived lot, who have had nothing to gain from the process. The question here is while culinary cultures and food habits have been reshaped with globalization, does this process but ensure food security for all? With better and more accessible health facilities, the mortality rates have gone down across the world, leading to a phenomenal growth of the world population. This ever rising population and the globalization induced dietary patterns are leading to an increased demand of food, so much so that so that scientists predict by 2050, the world will need 50% more food than what is being produced now, for which there will be rising pressure on the forever shrinking energy resources, which eventually will lead to shortage of produce and further inflation of food prices, ultimately leading to civil and political turmoil, and this is certainly not something that has not happened before. What makes the situation grimmer is the deprivation of the farmer in this whole process, who is ultimately left with only a

miniscule proportion of the profit incurred through the highly uneven distribution of the scarce food supplies, with the middle players in the market siphoning off much of it, to add to the misery, coupled with that is the import of food grains for a lesser price in spite of the same grain being produced in the country, and all this while there is little or no intervention for protection from the government, in accordance to the ideals of free market and neo-liberalisation. The farmer, left with very less means to further invest into agriculture therefore goes through a vicious cycle of poverty and shortage. Left with almost no other alternative to make ends meet, the farmer then moves to an urban setting nearby with expectations of better income opportunities, however in the world of laissez faire and competition, is left alone somewhere in the background, excluded from the gains of a globalised economy. It is here that one could quote Megali Ray Rosa, an environmental activist from Guatemala, 'If you are importing maize for a better price than what is produced by the farmers in Guatemala who can barely survive, you are in fact killing that maize production at best, and at worst the farmer himself too.' The farmers, especially in the developing countries, usually fail to put up a stiff competition to the imports due to the lack of machinery and the lack of money to invest in the machinery, left only with manual labour and thereby producing less and having to claim a higher price for the produce. The emphasis under globalization is therefore food production only and not a combination of that with farmers' welfare and sustainable development, given that under a system of free markets the main drive is the maximization of profit by the capitalist houses,<sup>5</sup> For the urban poor, the class which mostly consists of the diasporic small scale farmers displaced by globalization, it hence is not an experience of innovation and creativity in terms of culinary culture (and everything else), nor can they hold on to food as a nostalgic link to their birth places as we had discussed previously in the paper, in the absence of the means to afford two square meals a day. For them it is an experience of deprivation and poverty, of starvation and disease.

While it is globalization that has led to much exchange of knowledge and culture, leading to a widening of horizon and development of newer habits and lifestyle, its effects have but been put under close scrutiny. Culturally it leads to assimilation and integration, which has been argued by many to be a prime factor for the loss of the original essence of any culture, however as a matter of personal opinion, any custom, habit or practice cannot survive for long under rigid boundaries of static retention, in order for anything to endure, it must first be adaptive and flexible, the more the elasticity, the longer the life span, and this well applies to culture and its derivatives. Globalization has led to enormous level of exposure and has democratized knowledge of the 'alien' to a great extent. However, this process has its losers and serious fallouts, and this list stretches to such extents that it well goes beyond the capacity of our discussion, therefore sticking to our theme strictly, globalization has led to the widening of the gap of the rich and the poor, the consumption capacities and thereby the demand of commodities. While it comes to its impacts on culinary cultures one can see how the context assumes its significance with respect to the income and

<sup>5</sup> The Last Farmer, documentary by Giuliano Girelli, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DcBMNQ9G\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DcBMNQ9G_Q)

consumption levels of the people. When we look at those placed within the bracket of higher income groups, we can comprehend how the changes brought about in the eating patterns actually become a prominent component of lives all across the world, however among the lower income groups this question seems non pertinent and relatively valueless, as the primary concern is never of how a particular ingredient has been treated in a recipe, but a more fundamental and relevant question of what can be afforded for a meal so that body is at least kept alive and functioning. Nonetheless, this is an extremely interesting arena to delve into and understand the dynamics, given the fact that none can deny the absolute importance of food and food habits in our lives.

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