

Potsdam University
MA Anglophone Modernities in Literature and Culture
International Research and Exchange
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10 May 2020

Stories at the Esstisch

As part of the exchange programme, I participated in the seminar – ‘Edible Écriture: An Exploration of the Representations of Food in Literature, Media and Popular Culture’ at the Delhi University. Coincidentally, a similar course was also, included in the list of courses for winter semester 2019-2020 at the Potsdam University. This seminar facilitated the interpretation of food beyond its ingredients and deciphering the literary, diasporic references and suggestions.

For what is Food? It is not the only collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.

(Barthes, Roland. 1997)

Food is not a fixed pre-discursive element. It tells stories and anecdotes of long-standing authentic practices including the naturalized migrated compositions; they bring an applecart of memories and moments occupied in a place or a thing. Being an epicurean, the practice to decode a culinary cultural ritual goes beyond the physical nature of the cuisine. A meal is the concluding outcome of a complex process that layers an entire process of choices, consumption and memories. For that reason, the congested streets of Old Delhi packed with oriental condiments, bring me close to ‘home’ after a series of experiences of ‘in-betweenness’ in Berlin and Potsdam. The incredible Parathe Wali Galli reminds me of the moments I spent with my Indian parents at this food paradise when I visited Delhi for my German student visa procedure. The taste of deep-fried parathas, the smell of sweet lassi and ambience of colossal heritage that is distinct to this lane brings back memories, emotions and comfort of home. Therefore, tasting is sensory in nature and it is not just consumed with food. It is also found in the reflections, emotions and flashbacks of the choices and consumption of food that concludes a culinary experience. It is created with experiences while ordering, seeing, tasting the meals and building memories. The pseudo familiarity with this nature of dietary compositions reassured the sense of ‘home.’ In addition to the pungent smell of food, the hearty conversation with the attendant there mirrored the tradition of storytelling I grew up with. Similarly in Berlin and Potsdam, as I mentioned in the first report, the presence of uncertainty, anxiety and dilemma, along with fear was the part of my first advent to this country. Frequent visits to mediocre, German-influenced Indian restaurants partially mitigated the feeling of dislocation, longing for ‘home’ food and alienation. These restaurants are driven by economic betterment and modes of cosmopolitanism and thus, prefer a coalescence of host and home practices in their preparations, serving and ambience. This fusion of culinary engagement and connections with German palate constructed a new understanding of food. I viewed food was the vehicle through which I could connect with and embrace my surroundings. Being a food-centric person, food was my first introduction to German culture, which also compelled me to reflect on my home traditions. As I ran out of the Indian treasure trove of spices, pulses and dry snacks that I had brought along with me from home, I began to learn new traditions of

cooking. It included an amalgamation of German cuisines with Indian spicy condiments – chilli powder, turmeric, among others, but later, learned to retain the authenticity of German food. The lemon golden colour in food owing to the turmeric spice was enough to invoke a feeling of nostalgia. With time, I realised that culture integration, particularly in the context of food, is a two-way affair. As I walked through the streets of Berlin, I saw Indian restaurants at every nook and corner; with almost every neighbourhood boasting of one haunt. As I have learned to integrate with the dietary traditions of Germany, the locals have also, acknowledged the presence of the culinary heritage of faraway lands. Despite, the adaptation of new culture, new ideas and lifestyles, I retained the equilibrium between the past and present; rather than letting my old self overshadow my new identity and perspectives. Emotionally, food has been a key anchor in this struggle to find the right balance rather than compartmentalizing these diverse cultural heritages and overpowering the familiar sense of smell and taste.

The nature of succinct memories in a diasporic manner is internal and conflicting. It often overlaps with desire, time and landscape. In a distant land, the preparation of homely cuisines to feel closer to homeland implies merely “reflectively nostalgic gestures” (Mannur, 2007). The degree of alienation and longing navigates through a temporal length of time and relegates sooner or later with the passage of time. The first few meals in the ‘second home’ may recreate a sense of familiarity and an imaginary homeland, as attachments are strong. However, this temporary nostalgia becomes the symbol of national identity in terms of culinary choices and practices. How one operates within this sense of nostalgia defines the diasporic preferences and the subject’s distance from its homeland. To bridge these gaps of divergent practices, I took each day slowly. The transitory nature of my sojourns in New Delhi and Berlin didn’t bear on me substantially. A matter that may sound unworthy and ineligible to mention, allowed me more time to adapt to my new surroundings- cooking several meals together and storing them. I am reluctant to even store my leftovers in the refrigerator, while German culinary traits constitute the practice of cooking in advance for several days and settling on frozen food.

I will draw another relevant example to demonstrate familiarity and foreignness in both my host (New Delhi and Berlin) cultures to purport my position of discomfort, strangeness and longing. The cultural diversity and the fractured feeling of nostalgia were pushed to the foreground when I received series of pictures of Christmas celebrations in Berlin from my German foster-mother while I was sipping India’s most popular beverage *chai* at a local shop. The brief exchange of messages between us transported me to the close-knit conviviality I had checked into the previous year. It was my first Christmas celebration in Berlin and I had been invited by a German woman for a feast with her seven-member family. Constituted primarily of Germans, Italians, two pseudo French-Iranians and one pseudo German-Portuguese, it made for a diverse evening with an Indian in the mix. The dinner table was represented the epitome of culinary diversity with homemade vegan, vegetarian and meat delicacies from nearly seven countries. The language also transitioned from German to Italian to French, but stayed the course for English. The visibility of diverse culinary practices and traits truly highlighted the ‘openness’ of the Germans towards foreign taste compositions

with no fear of contamination of their native food culture and legacy. The system of tastes and traits operates in a parallel fashion. Nevertheless, this culinary experience and narrative bring me a sense of longing for this Christmas dinner, a tradition that brings people together and connects them.

Culinary Heritage of New Delhi and Berlin

India and Germany affirm the cultural dichotomy between two continents in the context of culinary practices - as diversely 'regional' and inclusively 'global.' As the internal migration make the culinary landscape of India varied and local, the presence of intercontinental eateries manifests Germany as a trans-global society when it comes to its gastronomy practices. Over the course of time, I understood that the perfection of New Delhi lies in its imperfections. It is generous, assertive and broad-minded but, it is impossible to miss that its people do not suffer fools gladly. This capital city, the crux of political movements in the nation, is crowded, loud, unapologetic and aggressive. Whenever it is challenged or hurt, it erupts like a volcano and disperses chaos and unbridled anger. On the contrary, as I journey around Berlin and Potsdam, I find that the streets are wider and people are fewer; the city where cultures collide and loaves of sweet breads may seem akin to the aroma of spices, curry powders and herbs. A melting pot of modern and cosmopolitan cultures, Berlin also has its faults, much like New Delhi. The prevailing mindset of the East and the West is still embedded in the culture of the city. Much like New Delhi, a flood of immigrants and refugees have made this growing metropolis their second home. This mobility is one of the characteristics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and these associated cultures have redefined the representation of nation and identity.

Food and migration have deep-seated relationship, be it taste of the Turkish 'Donner' in Berlin or the steaming hot Tibetan 'Momos' in New Delhi. It was intriguing to learn and understand about these long-established culinary legacies and their narratives. Having said that, this intertwining of dietary compositions and the proliferating interest among the millennial populace to taste something 'new' can be ascertained as a threat to the preservation of culinary heritage. Although I appreciate the variety of assorted cuisines in New Delhi and Indian restaurants in Berlin, as they symbolize the presence of migrant culture and inclusivity. While in New Delhi striking a conversation with the chef, attendant or at times the maître d'hôtel is not difficult, with people being quite approachable there. However, I found it tough and unmanageable in Berlin, as an outsider with little knowledge of the native language. Hence, my introduction to the culinary tradition remains limited to empirical and consumption-based experience.

In India, the component 'taste' varies according to the household food budget, religious beliefs, geographical location and social standing of an individual or family unit. The disparity between the rich and poor is high; diversity in terms of traditions, customs and beliefs are indescribable. People with lower levels of income consume economic foods such as pizza, spaghetti and noodles, high-income groups indulge in fancy 'health breads' and fine-dining in Germany. On the other hand, India's very complex food consumption

hierarchy may seem quite similar to Germany but, it is very complex. The existence of food is further compartmentalized based on religion, region, caste and tribe and this majorly configures the culinary heritage of India. Picture a cauldron where diverse cultures, identities and preferences assimilate. During my time in New Delhi, I was often asked a barrage of questions regarding my food choices and I heard many more passively - You are a Jain by religion, why do you eat onions?' 'You are a Tibetan, do you eat Momos with all your meals?', 'You are a Brahmin, you probably do not eat meat', among others. These statements have embedded themselves in the identities of the concerned groups and cultures. Brahminism and vegetarianism are indivisible. As the famous Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who was also a panellist at the RTG Minor Cosmopolitanism 2018, said, "Food is a social construct." In today's conflicting times, with globalization, cultural homogenization and insistence on a national identity, these so-called 'identities' pigeonhole individuals and compel them to follow the conventions of this long-standing 'rules.' It is what Indians popularly call 'to draw a Lakshman Rekha' which essentially means the establishment of a boundary that restricts any or all actions. These assertions or the concept of culinary cultural continuity further subjugates plebeians and marginalized communities who strive for upward mobility (a popular concept in understanding the Indian caste system) in the social stratification.

Moreover, the slaughter of cow for food preparations is a national political issue as the animal is considered sacred by Hindus. Therefore, the consumption of beef is illegal and prohibited in several Indian states. Ayurvedic and Satvik food (wholesome plant-based traditional diets) habits have become fads with a growing community of followers all across the globe. Besides, dry states are not strange in India, where selling, buying and consuming alcohol is against the law. Whereas, Berliner Weisse, a popular beer consumed in Berlin, resonates with the image of people local to the city. Along with rudimentary pubs, beer gardens are part of the city's tastescape and lifestyle. One of the German terms that stuck with me is 'ersatz' that translates as 'substitute;' a subjugating tradition which has been part of the genealogy of German culinary institution. I didn't have direct interaction with this taxonomic category or compartmentalization on the grounds of food and economy, and the affiliated inferiority in my everyday encounters, but I recollect its mention from my German foster-mother who is my window to this new culture and its history.

To conclude, the exploration of Indian and German cultures through the vehicle of food has enlightened me with critical understanding beyond their self-explanatory associations. In the era of globalization, modernization and cultural homogenization, the culinary cultures have transitioned from 'fixed' interpretations to 'new' constructs. While health food has shrunk appetites, episodes of migration have changed the tastescape of metropolises. Time has shown me that, regardless of situated culinary traditions food is susceptible to change over time. The fusion of various flavours with native ingredients metamorphoses the existing rituals and the transition becomes the new reality or culture. For instance, the influence of the Mughal, Israeli and Persian cultures is noticeable in the contemporary understanding of the culinary heritage of New Delhi. Americanization is another perpetrator in the preservation of culinary conventions with the insurgence of fast-food in the Indian and German markets

having the proliferating need for so-called ‘modern’ life and western influence. The cultural continuity of these inexpensive go-to meals like McDonald's inflict foreign cultural images on local people and the topic continues to interest academic scholars and researchers. However, through this academic sojourn at New Delhi, I have learned to adapt to the changes and uncertainties of metropolises and ways to mitigate the feeling of alienation, belonging and dislocation to a greater extent. The everyday realm, food has been the channel to delve deeper in these horizons of understanding, analyze their figurative meanings and construct new identities.