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Introduction

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Never has food been such a fodder for controversies and debates as it has been in the present conjuncture of India. The last few decades in India have seen a rise of cultural politics that have revolved around issues of identity where food, given its potent symbolic significations, has been deployed as a strategy of boundary differentiation and marker of distinction. Food is deeply implicated in notions of community be it caste, ethnicity, region or nation. The controversy surrounding cow slaughter and beef-eating or meat-eating, and the subsequent focus on vegetarianism, is one such signpost of our times. The adoption of liberalization, globalization and privatization programmes and policies has opened India to a great range of shifts. The global networks and flows, aided by communication technologies, have made the world more connected than before and made India a node in this connected world such that the global and the local nourish each other. Modern media technologies and mass migration have produced an increasing insatiability in culture and social arrangements. The flows and interconnections, and global processes and changes are destabilizing the thraldom of 'habitus' where culture and social structures are typically reproduced through embodied dispositions (Bourdieu 1977). In this new conjuncture, constructions of self, identity, and community, among other things, become slippery, implicated as they are by global flows. The ideas of national cuisine, what constitutes ethics of food, self projects of well being, agrarian choices are all subject to global forces and processes. Culinary and gustatory 'imaginary', to use Appadurai's (1996) term, have overtaken the public space in India of late. This can be gauged from the public cultures of eating and drinking – seen in the rise of restaurants, takeouts, and packaged food, cookbooks, cooking shows, dieticians, food and wellness related enterprises, new technologies of cooking, eating, and dining. Seen too are global flows of commodities, images, ideas, and discourses about food.

This glut of culinary desire and imaginary is one of the many strands in the multi-layered food culture in India. Hunger, malnutrition and increasing food insecurity are the other realities. A vast majority of Indians are reeling from rising food prices, undermining the food security and livelihood of the poor by decreasing their already limited purchasing power. Poor people spend 60 to 70 per cent of their income on food and they have little capacity to adapt as prices rise while their wages remain stagnant. India ranks among the countries with the highest rate of malnutrition among children. Despite India's increase in GDP since 1991, more than one-third of the world's malnourished children live in India. Among these, half of them under three are underweight and a third of the wealthiest children are over-nutriented [1]. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme in government schools in India is meant to supplement nutritional deficiency; however, in practice the Scheme is riddled with malpractices of various kinds, which not only affects the usefulness of the scheme, but also raises questions over the implications of institutional feeding and on nutrition and eating habits in general. While government schemes are under a cloud, the length and breadth of India is taken over by little packets of *Maggi* noodles, which are a favourite among children, raising further questions on the role of food corporations in influencing nutritional levels. *Maggi* noodles are a product of Nestlé, the world's largest food corporation. It has been powerfully argued by Marion Nestle, author of *Food Politics* (2013), that food industry is a threat to the safety of children and consumers, and that the food corporations co-opt governments and other agencies. The entry of big corporations, whether foreign or Indian, with their market driven interventions – GM crops, BT seeds, chemical fertilizers, retail food chains – is upsetting the production process, and in extreme cases, becoming a major reason for increasing number of Indian farmers committing suicide. There are, however, feeble resistances to this market regime, witnessed through rising advocacy, consciousness, and activism associated with organic farming, slow food, locavore concerns, and indigenous/community knowledge preservations.

While everyday life in contemporary India is being transformed by food practices, there has been no effort to capture these shifts and changes in a comprehensive way. This edited anthology – *Farm to Fingers: Culture and Politics of Food in Contemporary India* – attempts to fill this gap.

It is a truism to say that production, consumption, and distribution of food is socially determined. 'Necessity, taste, social distinction, opportunity, and values all intersect at the table, dictating who sits where, what is on the plate and whether there is one, who prepares the food and who serves it' (Grew 1999: 2),

not to mention who grows it. Eating and drinking are not mere physio-biological acts; they are culturally embedded in their social contexts, shaped by changing social structures, processes, and material and ecological interventions. It is a recognition of this axiomatic reality that food in all its aspects has been the subject of study from variety of vantage points and disciplinary orientations. The link that food has with 'body and soul, self and other, the personal and political, the material and the symbolic provide limitless grist to the scholarly mill' (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013: 2). Food therefore becomes a powerful lens through which society can be analyzed. No wonder then that there is a surge in the number of books being written on a range of themes and issues that involve food.

A quick scan of books on food reveals a wide array of themes: food as a social system (Lévi-Strauss 1965, 1966, 1975; Barthes 1975; Douglas 1966); gender and identity politics (Counihan 2004; Van Esterik 1999a, 1999b; Innes 2001; Abarca 2006; William-Forson 2016); nationalism (Wilk 2006a, 2006b; Ichijo and Ranta 2016); corporatization of food (Nestle 2013; Schwartz 2004); body and health (Mennel et al. 1992; Lupton 1996); class and power (Goody 1982; Schlosser 2002; Thomson and Wiggins 2009); colonialism and food (Mintz 1985; Walvin 1992, 1997; Crosby 2003); food and ecology (Harris 1998; Goodman and Redclift 2002); food and agriculture (Tauger 2010; Brown 2012; Paalberg 2013); globalization (Le Heron 1994; McMichael 1994; Fine et al. 1996; Ritzer 1998); media (Rousseau 2012a, 2012b). The list is a mere sample and not exhaustive.

If we were to make a heuristic categorization of writing on food in the Indian context, we see a predominance of the following orientations: a section of the writings comes from agro-sciences that address issues and aspects of crop production. Some of the early reports and writings on food and agriculture arose from the Indian state's effort to increase food production and address landholding issues (Indian Council for Agricultural Research, 1998; Sinha and Swaminathan 1991; Swaminathan 1999). There are writings from a nutritional and public health point of view, in particular on reproductive and maternal health of women and child health and nutrition (Patwardan 1961; Paul et al 2011). There is noticeable scholarship on colonial engagements on famine and hunger (Arnold 1993; Sharma 2001) that set off debates on the political economy of hunger and the role of state. The political economy engagement continues, albeit from a developmental slant, in modern India with writings largely from the discipline of economics. (Sen 1982; Dreze and Sen 1991; Patnaik 2007). Some scholars have examined food practices through the Indological eye by examining

the classical ancient texts (Zimmerman 1988; Smith 1990; Malamoud 1996). An array of writings that examine food practice in its cultural aspects emanate from variety of vantage points, frames of reference, and disciplinary backgrounds. The themes and concerns range from commensality (Khare 1992; Marriot 1968); memory, nostalgia and diaspora (Mannur 2009; Ray 2007); identity – whether of self, ethnicity or nation (Appadurai 1988; Donner 2016); colonial culture (Ray 2015); symbolic significances of food (Khare 1976, 1992). The list is merely illustrative of the ocean of themes that have become the focus of food studies.

As is evident, there is a long list of delectable array of themes under food studies; the present volume joins this menu of writings by presenting a mere canapé, with savoury bits of substantive details that serve to whet one's appetite. The anthology seeks to situate food and its analyses squarely within social, political, historical, and economic inter-sectionalities and contexts. Social differences and boundaries, somatic anxieties, political compulsions, technological innovations, economic imperatives, environmental and agro-climatic considerations – all are important grounds upon which research and writing about food have rested and to which this volume attends in a focused way.

The sequestered nature of discipline-oriented study of food practices has often resulted in streams of scholarship being isolated from each other. We believe that to develop a deeper and comprehensive understanding of food culture, in all its complex modalities and inter-sectionalities, it is important to bring in an interdisciplinary approach. Such an approach is more than the sum of its discipline-oriented parts; we believe that by taking an interdisciplinary approach, we highlight how food mediates the social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental systems and processes. The volume is interdisciplinary in its bearings although from the social sciences and humanities vantage point. In that sense, this volume is not limited to focusing on the symbolic and semiotic aspects of food that are more familiar in the repertoire of writings on food practices. The volume attends to the materiality of food production and distribution as well, although we have to confess this aspect is not covered in as detailed and expansive a manner as we would have liked it to be.

The entry point for capturing food in all its contextuality is contemporary India. In order to attend to the contemporaneity, we focus on the specific contexts of the present, which are shaped by social structures, larger global processes, material conditions, and ecological interventions. To present the contextuality in its discursive depth, it is therefore imperative that we explore the various issues around food in substantive details. This volume is a collection of essays that brings into sharp focus the elements of food practices by presenting

them through field-based research. To examine the vast canvass of contemporary India's food-ways would be a mammoth task; consequently, we have chosen vignettes, which do capture the crisscrossing influences and confluences of social structures and processes at play.

Contemporary India: shifts and continuities

The terms 'contemporary' and 'India' here are not meant to be limited in their chronological and spatial sense. The simple derivative to understand the contemporaneity of society is to locate it in the present. The present is not a frozen moment in time but a flow that carries with it the residues of the past, so while we concentrate on the present we take cognizance of the past. Yet, there are shifts and departures that were previously inconceivable. We intend to take a quick look at some of the salient shifts that one has witnessed to get a sense of contemporary India.

Whatever may be the debates on globalization, there is an agreement that the global age is characterized by flows (Hannerz 1996), connections, and networks (Castelles 2011). Appadurai (1996) terms these multi-dimensional interconnections as ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. In these amorphous states of flow and contacts, 'the local is globalized and the global localized' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). In this connected world of movement, India is no more contained within its territories. It is a part of the deterritorialized world, of several 'Little Indias' that become part of the diasporic experience, as much as the diasporic and the global becoming part of the local. Thus India needs to be seen not only as a territorial entity but one that is influenced by global transactions and as influencing the globe. As Ashis Nandy (2004: 10) points out, 'the crucial issues that have come to dog Indian cuisine are not radically different from the questions that dog Indian cultural life in general. The contours of this life are increasingly defined not merely within the geographical boundaries of India but by, what most Indians consider, the less familiar territory of Indianness as a form of ethnicity that is being re-imported from the diaspora into India to reshape many domains of life, including the cultures of food within the country.'

Some of the changes we capture here have their antecedents not in the recent past alone. State interventions, such as land reforms, and Green Revolution in agriculture, along with the modernization process of industrialization and urbanization, produced new socio-economic formations. The backward classes, especially after the implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations,

became politically active, and demanded recognition and rights (Jaffrelot 2003, 2010). Post 1980s witnessed a rise in mobilization of various ethnicities and social groups – tribes, Dalits, farmers, caste groups, and women. 'The issues and demands they raised could not be easily understood within the dominant paradigm of that time that is the welfare oriented notion of development.' The question of community and identity became important political issues of our times, writes Jodhka (2001). The incident of sati in Rajasthan, and the case of maintenance for a Muslim woman Shah Bano privileging the community over women's rights, are instances of this (Agnes 1994). Caste or community or ethnicity consciousness has produced its share of narratives on what constitutes one's culture. In the context of '*changing popular culture of Indian food*', Nandy (2004: 10) writes that 'new self-awareness is introducing new subcultures of food, status games among culinary traditions, and a new political economy of public and private dining'. He adds that the self-awareness creates 'politics of authenticity' in the culinary traditions, as a way to freeze ethnic boundaries. However, historical records belie narratives of authenticity. He cites the example[2] of the *idli* – the pride of South Indians of all hues – that has acquired its present form from Indonesia (Nandy 2004: 11). Regional movements and separate statehood movements have concretized the narratives around food and boundary creations. A fitting example of this can be seen in the way the newly formed state of Telangana has embarked on creating culinary traditions that differentiate itself from its Andhra neighbours who, it feels, marginalized its culture and heritage when it was a part of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. The Telangana government has thrown its might behind the celebration of culture and tradition. Narratives of cuisine that encapsulate and embody communities are acts of imaginings and it's the discursive practices of everyday reality that can throw a light on the discrepancy and disjuncture between the two. This discursive aspect of culinary practice is worth noting and it informs this volume.

Along with the growth of caste consciousness and mobilization among lower castes and upwardly mobile backward castes, one notices a concurrent rise in Hindu community consciousness in India. The extreme form of this Hindu consciousness is militant Hinduism[3]: 'Hindu extremists demanded an end to Indian secularism, and recognition of India as a Hindu state. Militant Hinduism seeks to capture the ethos of Hindu religion and culture and demands that "Hinduism become the anchor of Indian inheritance and civilization"' (Shani 2000: 272). The notion of this civilization excludes Muslims and Christians from its fold. These groups and others, who may challenge the Hindutva version of the civilizational ambit, then become the 'other'; they are also marked by their

culinary otherness, among their many features of separation from the Hindu civilization. Peter van der Veers argues that religious and cultural symbols are routinely deployed to mark out symbolic boundaries between Hindus and Muslims (1994). The recent electoral rise of Hindu nationalists has further added an impetus to the emotive and compelling call for tradition, culture, and Hindu pride. And in this context, the aphorism of Brillat-Savarin 'you are what you eat[4]' has never been more persuasive and gripping.

As India enters the age of globalization, the Indian economy has become one of the fastest-growing in the world. A major change that the country is experiencing is in the growth of the service sector – from 19 per cent of GDP in 1955 to 66.1 per cent in 2015-16, according to the Economic Survey of India 2015-16. Globalization with its attendant ICTs, liberalization policies has transformed production processes, and nature of work and work relations, leading to new formations, networks, and transnational connections (Xiang, B., 2002, 2007; Khadaria, B., 2001). A concomitant result of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) is the growth of a robust and demanding middle class. This phenomenon and its social implications have been well debated and documented, as well as the details of the middle class' consumptive lifestyles (Deshpande 2006; Lakha 1999; Osella and Osella 2000; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Saavala 2010). The post-liberlization middle class bears the historical trajectories and internal differentiation of caste, ethnicity, gender, and religion. What make them distinct are their aspirations and strategies to gain entry in the restructuring Indian economy in the transnational global context. The strategies of mobility and entry into transnational economies can be both material and symbolic, which are then converted to create, as Bourdieu (1984) argued, 'classificatory practices' that mark their social position and status.

It is in this context that consumption and lifestyle of the upwardly mobile middle class, which is spatially distributed within and outside the nation, becomes significant, expressed both in subjective dimension of actor's agency and objective dimensions of larger globalising forces. The middle class stands at the cusp of global-local flows, and therefore the consumptive practices of food is of particular interests to us. We believe that the intersecting worlds of home-abroad bring transformations in food cultures that reveal newer expressions of identity articulation, mediated as they are by new technologies and the globalising market.

The community consciousness – whether religious, nation-based, or for that matter, caste-based – gets an impetus with the aid of ICTs that make communication possible across spaces and nations, adding a transnational dimension to ethnic community-forging. The transformations due to media

technologies and transport, which Van der Veer terms as 'death of the distance', brings migrants closer home: 'Instead of forming singular migrant communities that try to keep in touch with home they become diasporic networks with a multiplicity of nodes. Moreover, there is a global production of the imagination of "home" in media like television and cinema, which affects both migrants and those who stay behind' (Van der Veer 2010: 2). The transnational Indian diaspora thus is as much a locus of the production and imaginings of home as is the India in its territorial sense – a transnational public sphere, as it were. The 'affiliative desires of belonging' (Srinivas 2006), be they of caste, region, ethnicity or nation, are experienced through the prism of nostalgia for home that often centres on dietary habits and culinary traditions, which are seen as an inherited cultural heritage that need to be inculcated.

To move away from the symbolic aspects of cultural politics to material consideration, one can clearly discern that the globalization of economies has had a huge impact on the food culture and practice. Notwithstanding the fractured nature of globalization, what comes forth with singular force in the recent studies on food is the commoditization of food, in which transnational corporations have a major role. Heffernan and Constance (1994) argue that 'if the research question is, "What is the driving force behind the restructuring of the global food system?" the unit of analysis has to be the TNC' (1994: 29).

The Indian economy has been one of the fastest growing in the world in the post-liberalization period; at the same time there is an agrarian crisis, the severest expression of this is the rising tide of farmers suicide, and malnutrition, which is particularly acute in rural areas. The Green Revolution, which started with great promise, proved to have disastrous consequences. It did deliver higher food grain yield, but had devastating effects on the environment due to the use of chemicals and pesticides, and unsustainable irrigation practices. Besides that, it benefitted only the top layer of farmers. By the 1980s, the growth in agrarian sector in the Green Revolution administered states reached a plateau. While the situation is contingent upon many regional variations, agrarian and class relations in rural areas, state governments and central policies and so on, there are certain salient features of the crisis that are very palpable, particularly so with the adoption of liberalization policies and opening up of the economy to larger market influences.

Globalization does have a huge impact on the agricultural scenario in India. While there are arguments for and against globalization, even those who are arguing for its benefits suggest that there is vulnerability in the agriculture sector. 'The growing integration of nations worldwide into the international economy has intensified competitive pressures from actual and potential rivals

elsewhere' (Bhagwati 2004: 12). Reddy and Mishra illustrate this point rather well: 'Opening up of the economy has led to certain cash crops like cotton and pepper among others being exposed to greater price volatility. Excess international supply of cotton at a lower price is also because of direct and indirect subsidies, leading to dumping by the USA. Domestic policies in India have led to the removal of QRs and the subsequent reduction of import tariff from 35 per cent in 2001-2 to 5 per cent in 2002-3 has increased our vulnerability to the volatility of international prices' (Reddy and Mishra 2009).

International food regimes have been arguing for removing protective barriers, such as subsidies in agricultural sector. Free trade regimes and liberalization policies essentially mean barrier-free foreign capital flows and export market-oriented agriculture. It is assumed that trade and market would mean increase in income and thereby food security. This assumption is challenged on examination of the ground realities in India as argued by many (Krishnaraj 2006; Patnaik 2007; Shiva 2016). While exports are on the rise, food prices have increased even further, taking food beyond the reach of the poor, which is impacting on the nutrional levels of the poor. Nutritional levels are generally low and abysmally low among the poor (Meenakshi and Vishwanathan 2003).

> 'The globalization of non-sustainable industrial agriculture is evaporating the incomes of Third World farmers through a combination of devaluation of currencies, increase in costs of production and a collapse in commodity prices' (Shiva 2000).

These economic and social transformations mark the present, which becomes the context and background in which we examine the variety of expressions and formations on the food front. In the following section we examine some of the central arguments and explanations that set the stage for introducing the chapters that are part of this anthology.

Community and identity: essentialising narratives around food

Any discussion on identity is a complex, tangled yarn of explanations. We do not intend to unravel it or come to a conclusion; we do, however, present the main threads of explanations that are particularly pertinent for a discussion on the social practices of food. It is therefore justifiable that we capture the myriad ways in which food becomes a potent signifier and marker of community membership and attachment, such as religion, nation, ethnicity, region, and caste.

Often, there is an essentializing tendency on discussions of identity and its relation to food. Numerous examples illustrate the fact that we define a people or a group by what they eat or think they eat, and often stereotype them on the basis of dietary habits and give them names. Such monikers are meant to evoke some amount of disgust or irony. South Asians are called 'curry munchers'[5] in Britain, for the French, Italians are 'macaronis', the English 'roastbeefs' and Belgians 'chip-eaters'; for the English, the French are 'frogs'; Americans call Germans 'krauts' (Fischler 1988: 13). In India, there is often a simple association of beef-eating with Muslims or Dalits, besides numerous stereotypical associations with various ethnicities in India. Appadurai sees in the ethnic and regional cookbooks 'images of ethnic other … rooted in the details of regional recipes, but creating a set of generalized gastroethnic images of Bengalis, Tamils, and so forth. Such representations, produced by both insiders and outsiders, constitute reflections as well as continuing refinements of the culinary conception of the Other in contemporary India' (1988: 16).

It is the 'principle of incorporation', a term used by Fischler (1988: 275), that makes food a powerful item of consumption that separates the in-group from the out-group. In fact research seems to reveal that migrants tend to cling to their culinary culture even when language or other cultural forms have been lost (Bell & Valentine 1997; Scholliers 2001). Food therefore seems to be the last bastion that groups seem to cling to as a way of identification with their culture. It often becomes a representational archive for nations. Spiering's article, *Food, Phagophobia and English National Identity* (2006), illustrates this aspect by tracing the English nationalist associations with beef-eaters. Spiering says the link between beef-eating became intense during the rivalry between the English and the French in the eighteenth century, when the hardworking Protestant virtue of the English was contrasted with the elaborate and ornamental Catholic French. He writes that the 'English have considered beef as the commodity that best expresses their perceived national characteristics of common sense, love of liberty, manliness and martial prowess. Even today beef remains a popular emblem of nationhood, as witnessed in the deep national indignation when the product was declared unsafe in the 1990s' (Spiering 2006: 31). Nutritional and dietary standards instituted under the Meiji Restoration in Japan to turn out healthy supply of soldiers (Pyle 2006) produced, in effect, a dominant national cuisine and contemporary solidarity around the new traditional food, writes Hiroko (2008). Ferguson (1998), in a similar vein, contends that gastronomy provided nineteenth-century France with a distinct identity.