

Circuits of Authenticity: Parsi Food, Identity and Globalization In 21st century Bombay

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Food is an important marker of identity for any culture – its processing, preparation and consumption being sites of multiple meanings. Levi Strauss located food as a symbolic transition from Nature to Culture, with the process of cooking enabling this transition. Cooking becomes the diacritical mark of civilization – distinguishing human from animal, civilized from barbarian and more generally the Self from the Other (Levi Strauss 1969). Jack Goody and R.S Khare demonstrate the various ways in which food becomes a powerful manifestation of ethnic identity, caste purity, gender difference, of desire, abundance and of the sanctity of domestic space (Goody 1982; Khare 1976).

However, food in its material form as a supplier of nutrients and energy to humans is incapable of becoming a carrier of these multiple meanings and identities. As Priscilla Ferguson argues, food can be intrinsically individual for its consumption is an individual act and its sensory experience and enjoyment subject to the varying tastes and demands of individuals. To become a mediator between the individual and society, food must be lifted from these material moorings and be placed in the realm of the symbolic. This requires two strategies – firstly a formalization of food which involves a categorization of acceptable and non-acceptable foods, ‘ideal’ methods of preparation and rules for social consumption of food (feasts, family gatherings, weddings, death rites etc.). Secondly, it involves an intellectualization and aestheticization of food whereby food is associated with specific religious rituals, emotions, affects and so on (Ferguson 2006, p-16).

These strategies then enable food to transform into cuisine – a cultural-symbolic product. Just as the written word fixes to some degree speech, similarly tastes and sensory experiences are fixed by the cuisine. This cuisine, as Appadurai demonstrates can be harnessed to the project of community and nation-building (Appadurai 1988). But this symbolic product is unique as it is constantly pegged to a material dimension. That cultural dimensions of food are dependent on the availability of ingredients and raw materials, equipment and tools and the means of transportation between geographic locales is undeniable. Thus, geographic and market forces and the politico-economic location of a community will shape its gustatory identity (Ferguson 2006, p-18).

In a globalized and networked world, food becomes a site of making and contesting identities. In a world of porous markets and high speed transport networks, the material dimensions of cuisine are undergoing rapid change. This change can be viewed in three aspects – firstly, the availability of novel ingredients hitherto unavailable or the drastic reduction in cost of luxury products (such as chocolate, or vanilla in the form of vanilla essence). Secondly, the availability of technology to ease cooking processes (blenders, mixers, electric cookers and so on). Thirdly, the availability of new foreign cuisines. These material changes have been accompanied by a new aspirational discourse on food, which Tulasi Srinivas calls ‘Gastro-adventure’. Gastro adventure may be seen as the desire of the affluent middle class to explore new cuisines and ‘try

out' new restaurants (Srinivas 2007). Gastro-adventure then is a critical sign of a globalized citizen – with a knowledge of different cuisines standing for appreciation of different cultures.

All this has meant, that on the hand the gastronomic identities of various communities are destabilizing. There is rapid change seen in the tastes of individuals, in the preparation of various dishes and in availability of the more elaborate dishes (which more often than not disappear from the domestic space). The transmission of traditional food is jeopardized by the seductive pleasures of fast food restaurants. Further, as cuisine enters the market, its form and shape gets distorted by market forces such that it often is unidentifiable by the representative community.

Yet, as Srinivas points out, globalization has also lead to 'gastro- nostalgia' – a move towards the local and the regional. As food enters the market through restaurants and catering services, as it gets packaged and sold as a lifestyle through television shows and blogs, individuals and communities pay increasingly more attention to 'their own food'. The emphasis then is on preservation of recipes, food memories, old restaurants and eating styles. Thus, a globalized gastronomic market place sees the existence of contradictory yet balancing forces of the new and preservation of the old.

Extending this argument, Krishnendu Ray argues that the processes of globalization are accompanied by a simultaneous process of localization. As globalization destabilizes established identities, it also makes possible a remaking of these identities (Srinivas and Ray 2012, ch-1). The global and the local are then interlinked and are simultaneous in their production. In a different context, Tim Edensor argues that 'places' emerge by means of multiple rhythms and flows of commodities and people. Places he argues are not opposed to transition and flow, even modes of transportation such as buses can becomes places of emotion, identity and negotiation (Edensor 2010, ch-1). Similarly, globalization does not work to eclipse or superimpose identities, but reworks identities by linking together markets, locales, people and commodities.

Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to study and delineate the foodways, symbolic exchanges and globalized networks that make possible the emergence of a Parsi gustatory identity in 21st century Bombay. The study attempts to extend Tulasi Srinivas' concept of gastro-nostalgia and gastro-adventure by studying the ways and means by which a regional gastronomic identity emerges. This paper will argue that 'authenticity' becomes the locus of the making and re-making of regional gustatory identities in a globalized context.

Studies in food anthropology in the South Asian context have tended to privilege the domestic hearth as the site of community identity and culinary 'authenticity' (Appadurai 1988; Khare 1976). This paper attempts to challenge this notion as it seems to assume that the identity of the community emerges from within it and can be neatly separated from other identities. A study of Parsi foodways in Bombay would show that culinary identity emerges through circuits of authenticity which traverse many sites such as households, philanthropic organizations, commercial restaurants and caterers. These circuits cannot be neatly placed within the Parsi community. This goes on to show that community identity emerges through interaction with other communities and through an exchange of meanings and symbols both global and national.

The study was conducted across four weeks in June, and proceeded mostly by means of semi-formal and casual conversations. We conducted fieldwork in three types of sites. Firstly, commercial establishments which included restaurants, bakeries and caterers. Most prominently we conducted extensive fieldwork at the Britannia Restaurant, a Bombay landmark. Apart from this we conducted fieldwork at the Yazdani Bakery and the Kayani Café, both of which famous eateries. Secondly, philanthropic institutions dealing with food which included the Ratan Tata Institute and the Time and Talents Club. And lastly, two South Bombay households. Apart from these sites, we also conducted interviews with two experts on Zoroastrian religion namely – Phitroza Punthakey Mistree and Marhzban Dadachanji.

To identify these sites we attempted to understand how a Parsi foodscape would look like. A possible approach could have been to study the various ways in which food is interwoven with the Parsi community and its life in Bombay – where they eat, what they eat and why they eat the things they do. But that would only be one side of the picture. Parsi cuisine has a life outside of the community itself – this is the world of restaurants, bakeries, cafes and caterers all of whom serve non-Parsis, and increasingly, non-Indians. This then becomes a study of Parsi cuisine as it gets packaged and re-packaged by the market, and acquires new form and meaning for both Parsis and others. The protagonist then is the cuisine itself.

Situating Parsi cuisine: A social history

Modern Parsis are one of the two Zoroastrian community settled in western India. The other community being the Irani who are a minority compared to the former. Both communities are descendants of the Persian Zoroastrians. The distinction between the two communities can be traced to the different periods of migration to the Indian subcontinent. A historical reconstruction of the Quissa e-Sanjan story has lead historians to estimate the date of arrival of the Parsis in Sanjan, Gujarat to around 936 A.D. These Zoroastrians, fleeing the expanding Muslim caliphate, came from northern Iran (a region called Pars). The Iranis migrated to the subcontinent between the 18th and late 19th centuries from the famine stricken central Iran (the region of Yazd) (Balsara 1969).

The Parsis describe themselves as being ‘Indianized’ Zoroastrians having adopted the Gujarati language and many Hindu and Muslim religious customs and food practices. Most importantly, as Hinnels notes, the Parsis were able to establish themselves as successful traders, moneylenders and toddy plantation owners under the Mughals in the 16th and 17th centuries (Hinnels 2008, ch-1) . Luhrmann notes that the community was relatively free of caste sanctions and restrictions on occupation. The Parsis were a diasporic community without a rootedness in the conception of a ‘homeland’ – there was little longing to return to Iran though they recognized themselves as Iranian by descent (Luhrmann 1996).

This social freedom allowed the Parsis to become adventurous entrepreneurs under the British in the 18th century. Parsis such Rustom Maneckji were some of the earliest commercial agents of the English and Dutch East India Company in the 18th century. By the 19th century, the Parsis had expanded their entrepreneurial networks to shipbuilding, opium trade and cotton exports. Merchants such as Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy were among the wealthiest Indians in the 19th century. As

distinct from other colonial comprador communities such as the Marwaris and Chettis, the Parsis enthusiastically adopted Victorian manners, customs and etiquettes (Luhrmann 1996, ch-2)

The English saw them as 'progressive and intelligent' and distinct from all other 'degenerate natives'. The Parsis were among the first communities to support female education. Parsi men adopted the English dressing style, their language, and other gentleman like manners. Wealthy Parsi merchants adopted the Victorian traditions of philanthropy by financing the construction of several hospitals, old age homes, colleges and art schools. A visit to Bombay would leave anyone with adequate evidence of the importance of Parsis to the city with some of the most iconic institutions having the imprint of their Parsi founders – the Taj Mahal Hotel being an example.

Luhrmann observes that the community today is under siege. There is a clear threat to community's existence interpreted through factors such as low infertility rate, high marital age, an increase in mixed marriages and emigration, the impoverishment of the middle class, an increasing dependency on charitable institution and a lacuna between status aspirations on one side and socio-economic realities on the other (Kulke 1979). Verifiably so, the twentieth and the twenty first century has been witness to the community declining so rapidly such that it loses 10% of their population every decennial census. The Ministry of Minority Affairs, Govt. of India reported that as per 2001 Census of India, the Parsi community population in India was only 69,601 ; with the elderly far outnumbering the young population. As of now, Parsis are only 0.0058% of Indian population & 0.0017% of World population. Considering a 12% decrease per decade, the figures are projected to fall as low as 36,730 by 2050 and 19,382 by 2100.

Parsi food in Bombay is a like a palimpsest which records the inscriptions made by various historical actors. The food shows there distinct influences – Persian Zoroastrian traditions, Gujarati cuisine and a European influence.

The Parsi attitude to food and sensual pleasure is critically shaped by their religion. Zoroastrianism can be contrasted with other religions in India in one important respect – its attitude to the body and to sensual pleasure. The sensual world and its apprehensions through the various senses of sight, smell, touch and taste are variously held in suspicion by Indic religions such as Buddhism and also by the Abrahamic religions such as Islam. Food as one of the primary sensual pleasures in any society then particularly comes under sanctions – this takes the form of some foods being marked impure (beef and pork), certain times in the year marked for abstention of food (such as Ramadan) and the 'over-consumption' of food being marked as morally suspect (the idea of the 'tamsic' in Ayurveda or the sin of gluttony in Christianity). Zoroastrianism, however, places emphasis on sensory pleasure and the enjoyment of the body. Pain to the body is explicitly forbidden.

In keeping with this, fasting is strictly prohibited (even though the Parsis do abstain from meat on certain days). Parsis do not have any religious sanctions on the consumption of any type of

food, even though many Parsis have taken to avoiding beef after Independence (to avoid offending conservative Hindu sentiments). Eating all meat and consumption of alcohol are both recognized as distinguishing markers of the community from Hindus and Muslims. In a pamphlet on Parsi religion drafted by Dadabhai Naoroji he writes “He who fills his body with nourishing food is filled with good thoughts which lead to good deeds.....the tenets of our religion” (Naoroji 2005).

The striking absence of strict gustatory sanctions allowed the Parsis to adopt food as a central means of acculturation with the English. M.M Murzban in his 1917 monograph on the customs of the Parsees notes how the wealthy businessmen of Bombay had enthusiastically adopted various culinary customs – food was served on metal plates and eaten with fork and knife, the meal was often served course wise and ended with cakes, sweetened bread and pastries all of which were adopted from the British. Imitating the customs of the Sahibs the Parsis employed Goan cooks and nannies. Several Goan dishes such as the prawn curry rice have become an intrinsic part of Parsi cooking (Murzban 1917, p-322).

By the end of the 19th century, a distinct Bombay Parsi cuisine emerged. Bombay Parsi food consists of distinctive dishes such as the *Dates nu ghari*, *lagan nu custard* and *doodh nu puff*, all of which show the influence of Gujarati and English cuisines. A cuisine of the rich and affluent, it makes extensive use of expensive ingredients such as saffron, cardamom, vanilla, and nuts such as walnuts, dried fruits such as dates and apricots and meat. The preparations tend to be fairly elaborate involving multiple processes of cooking and several ingredients. The Parsis commonly describe their food as ‘rich’, in reference to the high content of fat and the extensive use of meat. Meat plays a central role in the cuisine so much so that some of the informants would simply say “Parsi food is non-vegetarian food” upon being asked about their cuisine. There is however a marginal sect of Parsis in Bombay (the Ilm e-Kushnoom) who subscribe to the view that non-vegetarianism is forbidden by the religion. Regardless, Parsis tend to consider vegetarianism an aberration. As an informant put it jovially “A vegetarian Parsi will face ostracism”.

In our interactions with Parsi informants we found a unique association of food to identity. This came through the category of ‘maja’- a Gujarati and Hindi word which broadly denotes light hearted fun. Most of our informants described the Parsis as being ‘Majedar’ (fun loving), ‘bindaas’ (carefree) people. Further questioning revealed that food was a critical component of being ‘fun-loving’. One informant, the manager of a Parsi eatery put it this way –

“Us Parsis, we love the good life. We eat and drink without much concern. We are not like these other people (a reference to other communities in Bombay). We don’t fight over food. In our religion, we cant give any pain to the body. If you are in this world, you must enjoy it fully”

Thus, food becomes a moral and ethical symbol of a community that that is willing to change and adjust to the needs of the time; of a peaceful community that goes about its business without hindrance to others. This attitude to food can be seen even in the enthusiastic re-telling of the Sugar and Milk story that most Parsis, of all generations, recounted for us. In this story, the Head Priest of the Parsis convinced the ruler of Sanjan that they be allowed to take refuge in his lands through a demonstration. He put sugar in a bowl full of milk to show that even though the

King's lands were full of people, they would simply dissolve among them. Even in this story of origins, food becomes a symbol for the Parsis and their qualities of peace and non-antagonism.

Luhrmann in her psycho-social study of the Parsis argued that a deep sense of displacement and identity crisis haunted the community in Bombay. This she argued was due to the diminished position of the Parsis in the economic and political spheres after Independence and the unwanted marker of having been a colonial comprador class. Added to this, their diminishing numbers in recent times, has meant that the community has become increasingly bitter and critical of its young men who are seen as being impotent, un-ambitious and/or homosexual. In contrast to this, we found that in the domain of culinary traditions, the Parsis are a proud community. They are proud of their elaborate and complex dishes, their 'refined tastes' and most of all 'their love of good food'. One informant, the owner of an Irani café, put it thus -

"These days there are all these fast food places – McDonalds and those Udipi chains. Lots of janta (masses) goes to them, but when they want quality food they come to us. They know we have the best food. We may be slow, but you can't beat the taste".

Circuits of Authenticity: The Registers of Parsi-ness

Our exploration of Parsi cuisine in Bombay revealed that Parsi culinary identity emerges on multiple registers. A traditional location of culinary identity in the space of the household is no longer tenable in a globalized world. There are three circuitous foodways we were able to identify in our study. The first, is a religious-domestic circuit which includes Parsi households in the everyday and during specific religious rituals, and various communal religious observations and celebrations including weddings, navjotes (initiation ceremony) and ghambars (seasonal feasts). This circuit is not sequestered from the market, but is made possible by the mediation at various points by market entities.

The second circuit is the commercial circuit which includes Parsi restaurants such as Britannia, cafes such as Kayani and popular bakeries such as the Yazdani bakery. This circuit caters mostly to non-Parsis, both residents of Bombay and tourists. The claims to authenticity in this circuit are markedly different from the first.

And lastly, there is an intermediary circuit which we have located between the first two circuits. This circuit addresses itself to both non-Parsis and a younger generation of Parsis. It includes Parsi food blogs, Parsi cookbooks and caterers. In this circuit, there is a distancing from both the other circuits as there is a focus on modernizing 'traditional Parsi cuisine', yet at the same time a moving beyond 'cliched Parsi food' towards the 'authentic'.

Circuit 1 – The Religious-Domestic

The religious domestic foodways traditionally involved two types of preparations – preparations meant for the house, both for daily consumption and household centred religious observations and preparations for communal gatherings and celebrations. In both cases food was associated with a strongly religious symbolism.

Food is a crucial component of all religious rituals and ceremonies. As Phitroza Mistree explained 'Food is an invitation to divine beings and to our ancestors. Almost every single ceremony of ours uses food'. The preparation of religious food must be in accordance with certain strictures. Key among them is the prevention of contamination by bodily fluids – menstrual blood and spit. In some orthodox households, the list would extend to include hair. Women of the household would wear a headscarf or *mathabandh* and a mask on the face while cooking. Additionally care has to be taken to prevent any liquid from spilling over into the fire – a symbol of the divine.

The second crucial aspect is the smell of food. It is the smell which is seen to attract the divine beings to individuals. Parsi rituals thus always include the use of incense called *loban* (frankincense) which is lit in a silver vessel called the *afrighaniyu* and used to fill the house with vapours (often Parsi women perform this ritual twice a day).

Food is not only an invite to the divine, but is considered to be a vehicle for medicinal and holy properties. Dates and pomegranates are auspicious symbols, included in most religious ceremonies along with which the betel nut, and sugar have been adopted from the Hindus (these are not symbols used by the Zoroastrians in Iran). Fish similarly is auspicious and is used symbolically (a fish made of silver) or is included in the menu of most auspicious events. Thus, in the *sagan nu ses* – a ritual performed to remove the evil eye – a silver plate with fruits and sweets is accompanied by a silver fish.

Food is closely intertwined with the entire life of a Parsi, beginning with childbirth. In the special in the month of pregnancy, the *agernee* ceremony is performed to remove the influence of the evil eye on the expectant mother. Central to this ceremony is food – an *agerni no larvo* (a conical shaped sweet made of gram flour) along with almonds, dates, *batasas*, pomegranate and rice are placed in a headscarf which is then used in the ceremony. The *larvo* is eaten first by the expectant mother and then given to the unmarried women in the belief that this would help them find husbands. This is followed by a feast (a certain follow up to all ceremonies) which includes *ravo* (sweet semolina), *sev* (sweet vermicelli), *tareli machhi* (fried fish) and certain special dishes made only for the occasion such as *mava na khaja* (clotted cream encased in puff pastry).

On the fifth day of childbirth, close relatives and friends are called for the *pachori nu bhonu* (*bhonu* is a generic term used for a feast). Several dishes with minimal spicing are cooked such as *kharu gosht* (savory lamb), *khari murgi* (savory chicken), *bheja* cutlets (brain cutlets) among other things. This custom is seen as an invitation to *Vermi*, the guardian angel of new born, to bless the child. Other ceremonies include the *Besavanu* (a celebration of the child eating its first morsel) and the *Puglavra* (a celebration for the child taking its first steps); both of these prominently include food.

Conversely, the death rites of Zoroastrianism also involve food. Three days after the death, relatives observe a *parhizi* or abstinence from meat. This custom we were told was borrowed from the Hindus, and was not present earlier. Mourning is observed for four days, in which all days are marked by the consumption of specific foods. One all four days, breakfast must include a *poro* or parsi omelette, *malido* (a sweet dough) and *bhakra* (a cake made with toddy). The afternoon meal would generally include the favourite dish of the departed one. On the fourth

day, *dhansak* (meat coked with lentils) is eaten to remember the dead. Thereafter, *dhansak* must be eaten each Sunday to commemorate one's ancestors. On specific days of commemoration such as the *Amardad Roj* (marked a few days before the Navroz or vernal equinox) a large *thali* is prepared with foods such as *papeta ma ghosht* (meat and potatoes) to invite the *fravashis* or guardian angels to the house.

Apart from lifecycle rituals, specific days and months of the calendar are marked by the food that is meant to be consumed on those days or abstained from. The days of each month are named after various divine beings (*Ameshas Spentas* and *Hamkaras*). On *Hormuzd Roj*, when Parsis believe it is auspicious to visit the fire temple, most households will prepare fish. On *Bahman Roj*, named after the protector of cattle, orthodox Parsis will refrain from eating meat. During the *Adar Mah*, on the *Daepdar Roj*, the kitchen is cleaned and turmeric paste is applied to the stove. On other auspicious days such as *Sarosh*, *Daepmeher*, *Daepdin* among others, *dhun dal ne patio* (a sweet and sour rice dish) is cooked.

Apart from this rather long list of rituals, there are also *jashans* – prayer rituals performed by priests on occasions such as birthdays or for remembering the dead. The ceremony again makes use of various food items such as the pomegranate, and more specifically in this case alcohol. In the traditional *Baug*s or Parsi residential colonies of South Bombay, the six *ghambers* or seasonal feasts are still celebrated. These feasts mark various important points in the agricultural year including summer, winter, spring, harvest and so on. More commonly, the *ghambar* is organized after the death of a family member. These are strictly meant for Parsis. One informant told us that *ghambers* are a complete social occasion with families travelling from the corners of the city to meet their friends and eat good food. In some cases, *ghambers* become holiday occasions. A family told us of *ghambers* organized in the cities of Gujarat such as Surat and Bharuch which were known for the unique and delicious food. Near *Sanjan*, a *jangalvaasi ghambar* is organized which a number of Parsi families from Bombay attend. Among other dishes, the *papeta ma ghosht* is considered a *ghambar* speciality.

While this was a rather traditional recounting of the various food related religious customs among the Parsis, a study of Parsi households and religious celebrations revealed that several changes have emerged. These changes cannot be seen as simply the corrosive influence of globalization upon a pristine Parsi culture but must be seen as the result of the specific interaction between the social history of the Parsis in Bombay and the forces of globalization.

One specific change associated with the religious-domestic circuit is the diminishing importance of religious value associated with food. As the Parsis became affluent they began to employ house cooks and maids which meant that the women of the households became divorced from the kitchens. Most of our older informants learnt cooking by attending cooking schools and some claimed to not even remember their grandmothers entering the kitchen. Thus, even by the late 19th century, the specific domestic values associated with the kitchen as the site of religiosity, purity and motherly love had begun to unravel. This process has simply been exacerbated after globalization as most Parsi women are working women and thus find little time for preparing

elaborate meals and dishes and preparing the detailed month wise menus prescribed in the religious texts.

Unlike what Tulasi Srinivas observes, gastro nostalgia is not always associated with “as my mother made it” (Srinivas 2007). It could very well, as in this case, involve a complex of food memories associated with childhood most of which would not involve either the mother or the domestic hearth. Mrs. Zarine put it rather vividly

“ in my childhood, I remember getting cakes from the Ratan Tata Institute on Malabar Hill. They were such an important part of any Parsi household. My ayah was Goan and I loved her vindaloo and prawn curry. And our maharshtrian cook made the best Sunday dhansak”

In this recounting of childhood memories, authenticity is not located in a given site or within the community but emerges through transactions between various market sites and individuals. Often we observed that the idea of authenticity could be divorced from the domestic context altogether. Some dishes, which are considered difficult to prepare, have become entirely associated with catering at large events. Dishes such as *patrani machhi*, a fish preparation is associated mostly with marriages. Parsis will commonly discuss which caterer makes the best *macchhi*.

Further, tiresome preparations such as the *Malido*, *dates nu ghari*, and *bhakra* all of which are used in religious customs are rarely prepared in the house. Most households purchase such items from Parsi philanthropic organizations such as the Ratan Tata Institute which makes these items in bulk and sells them in vacuum sealed bags. Earlier these dishes would have evoked a special religious value, as they would have been prepared at home and on specific occasions. However, the easy availability changes its significance. A young college going- informant Noosheen put it thus – “I love *bhakra*. I can purchase it anytime from RTI. I even pack it as a snack item for my friends in college”.

At both households, what was rather striking was the clear assertion of the importance of food for the Parsis. All members of both households emphasized their love for Parsi food, frequented Parsi weddings and “*ghambers*” and ate Parsi food at least once every day. Studying the food habits of both households it seemed clear that at least two meals in the day were entirely non-Parsi in character. Thus, Breakfast would generally mean eggs, fruits and toast. As all members of the household were either working or went to university, lunch would be eaten outside the house (and this would invariably be a non-Parsi meal). As a consequence, dinner seems to have acquired a special significance for both families. Further, Sundays and holidays are two important occasions for the reiteration of ‘Parsi-ness’. “On Sunday, we must have our *dhansak* and prawn curry – Sunday seems incomplete without it” said Noosheen.

The *ghambers* which were traditionally seasonal feasts have now become occasions for the gathering of the community. Some of the older members of the community were rather resentful of this change. A priest of a prominent fire temple observed “they go to eat and make merry, but they have forgotten all rituals and customs”. Another Parsi youth told us “whenever I come back

from college, me and my friends make it a pint to attend a ghambar. We miss Parsi food so much in the hostel”.

What seems rather clear is that the intersection of Parsi cuisine with identity in the household is undergoing change. Food is associated with a ‘Parsi-ness’ that is disjointed from Zoroastrianism or associated only tangentially. The religious symbolism associated with food is gradually being replaced by a more secular gustatory identity. ‘The Parsi-ness of the home is associated with specific times during the year – a Sunday, Pateti (Parsi New Year) or Navroz become some of the privileged points for the performance of Parsi-ness.

Circuit 2 : Commercial Establishments

Restaurants and Cafes

Frank Conlon in his seminal essay on commercial foodways in Bombay identified the Iranis as being one of the pioneers in both the restaurant and commercial catering business in India (Conlon 1995). The Iranis were the first to establish cafes in Bombay, serving mostly mill and dock workers. Established at the corner of commercial buildings in South Bombay, one informant estimated that there were at least 50 such cafes in South Bombay in the 1950s. Today the number stands at around 20, with many of them closing their doors permanently. Parsi cuisine entered the commercial scene only in the 1970s, when the Britannia Restaurant began to serve *dhansak dal*, *berry pulao* and *Sali boti*. These dishes are now served at almost all Irani cafes. However, this was not the earliest instance of the commercialization of Parsi cuisine. That can be traced to the 1930s with the establishment of bakeries such as Monginis’s and philanthropic institutions such as the Ratan Tata Institute which sold pastries, cakes, and specific Parsi delicacies such as *dal ni poli* and *bhakra*.

Today one can identify three types of commercial institutions dealing with Parsi cuisine – cafes and restaurants (with the latter serving more elaborate meals and the former focusing on tea and snack items), philanthropic institutions selling Parsi snacks and sweets at nominal prices and lastly caterers who cater to both Parsi and non-Parsi events.

Parsi cafes (both restaurants and cafes are called by this term), though called cafes, are far away from the world of the European café, which in Habermas’ analysis was a site of leisurely conversation and debate for bourgeois society (Habermas 1989). Located on the side walk, these spaces served food only as an occasion to the ambience itself. The converse is true for the Irani cafés – quick service and prompt clearance and turning of tables. There is usually no reservation of tables, and all tables have explicitly placards admonishing customers to not use laptops and sit at the table without ordering. Most such cafes are elaborately furnished with wooden panels and inlaid mirrors. The waiters at both Britannia and Kyani were entirely impatient and perturbed at the sight of three researchers occupying a table even after having eaten their meal.

At the iconic Britannia Restaurant located at Ballard Estate, one finds an atmosphere entirely non-conducive to a long leisurely meal. The Restaurant, is entirely open to the street such that one feels entirely a part of the din of the road. The restaurant is not air conditioned, and the dining area wears a dilapidated look – with peeling paint, rusty fans, and creaky old chairs. Yet at

both Kyani and Britannia, we found that it was a certain sense of history that was key to their marketability. As a customer put it aptly “It’s not really for food that we visit this place (I have had better food at the houses of Parsi friends), we visit it for the ambience”. This ambience is the performance of Parsi history, an immersion into old world Parsiana - literally embodied in Mr. Baman Kohinoor, the 92 year old co-owner of the restaurant who takes orders and personally serves all customers. As we sat down in the restaurant, Mr Kohinoor enthusiastically narrated the history of the restaurant and recommended the famous *Berry Pulao*. Several other antiquarian elements such as the use of an old billing counter, the non-acceptance of credit cards and so on add to the ‘charm’ of the restaurant. It seemingly becomes a ‘piece of history’ in a technologically driven world, but it is this ‘quaint charm’ that enables it to package itself uniquely in a globalized marketplace.

The restaurant consciously packages an old colonial nostalgia – with cut out portraits of Queen Elizabeth, Kate and William. On one wall hang three flags – an Iranian flag, a British one and an Indian flag. These flags epitomized the hybrid identity of the Iranis, and of the Kohinoor family in specific. Mr. Kohinoor explained “The Iranian flag represents my roots, the British flag represents the patronage given to the Parsis for which reason we are affluent today and the Indian flag, represents my country”. Hanging beside the portrait of the English Queen is the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi – the imperial crown and the native anti-imperialist both sharing the same space. Further, the menu shows a starkly different image of the restaurant. Almost all dishes have vegetarian variants and the menu clearly states that beef and beef products are not sold at the restaurant. This Mr. Kohinoor informed us was a strategy he adopted immediately post-Independence to avoid inviting the wrath of inflamed Hindu sentiments in the aftermath of the Partition. The restaurant thus is a zone of multiple temporalities – evoking various moments of colonialism, independence and contemporary times.

The food at these commercial establishments is rather distinct. Specific Parsi dishes such as the Dhansak, Sali Boti and Patrani Machhi are packaged as ‘authentic’ Parsi food. Most Parsis we interviewed said they rarely visit these establishments. One young Parsi said “we don’t eat Dhansak everyday. Its meant for Sundays. These things are so rich and fatty, no one could have it everyday”. At some other establishments such as Jimmy Boy, located in Bank Street, the elaborate wedding meal called the lagan nu bhonu is packaged as authentically Parsi.

Despite the increasing competition from newly opened restaurants serving cuisines from across the world, fast food joints and cafes, these old Parsi restaurants continue to make profits. While most owners claimed to be facing financial troubles as a result of the corruption of government bureaucrats and rising prices of food, but none complained of a declining consumer base. The discourse of gastro-nostalgia has meant that there has been a boost in interest in regional cuisines. Each of these places has been awarded by several popular food guides including among others the Times Food Guide and the Miele food guide. They have been featured in several food programs on television and lately have been featured on international travel guides such as the Lonely Planet.

These various forms of media coverage, from blogs to guides to newspaper articles, place restaurants and cafes such as Britannia and Yazdani in the culinary map of Bombay. They imagine the city by means of points of gustatory experience. The Miele Guide for instance called Britannia “a gastronomic landmark.....a culinary pilgrimage for all foodies”. The shutting down of two iconic cafes B. Merwan on Grant Road and the Sassanian in Dhobitalao lead to a sustained coverage of Irani cafes by various national dailies such as the Times of India and photoblogs. The news network Al Jazeera in an article on B. Merwan –

“The battle is lost. To adapt and change our décor and menu is only way in which these cafes have survived. This café is no longer anyone’s cup of tea”

The language is one of nostalgia, regret and a sense of loss of tangible history and cultural memory. Thus, even as some cafes shut down and others are threatened by increasing competition, others saw an increase in footfall.

Philanthropic Institutions: A marketplace for the Parsis

A counterpoint to such conventional forms of public interface with the market rests with philanthropy. One example is the Ratan Tata Institute whose roots can be traced to the late 19th century. It is well known amongst the older generation of Parsis, who fondly remember the catering services and food retail wing of the Institute which would sell various delicacies such as cakes, pastries and the more traditional dishes such *Dal-Ni-Poli* and the *White Pumpkin Murabba*.

The Institute began as the Stri Zarthosti Mandal in 1903, established by Naoroji Patuck, a wealthy Bombay industrialist to alleviate poverty and dire circumstances faced by the poor Parsi women in the aftermath of the Bubonic Plague in 1899, after which many had lost their husbands. The Institute received generous funding from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust in 1928, which donated the current building in which it is even today located. The Institute then took its present name. Presently, it has four departments – Cookery, Hand Embroidery, Tailoring and Laundry. Zarine Adajania, Treasurer of the Rattan Tata Institute was of the opinion that these were skills that the housewives already possessed and thus could be skilfully used for commercial ends. “We believe in fostering self-reliance and dignity of labour in our women. Anyone today who knocks at our door will be given work.

The culinary and food division of the Institute has diversified significantly in recent times. The early *Dabba Service* or packed lunches now take up a very small part of their business. A significant section of the business is the supply of packed foods, snacks, chutneys and other such retail-able food items, not only at their own store in Malabar Hill, but across 8 other outlets (franchises) across the city. These are mostly located in South Bombay, in posh areas such as Colaba and Fountain, which have a large Parsi population settled in the vicinity. In 1984, they also opened the Landmark restaurant, which serves Parsi dishes. They also run canteens for some corporate firms such as Deloitte, and the Tata Group and also for some schools such as The Cathedral and John Connon School. Here the menu does not include traditional Parsi snacks, but includes items of a nature best described in India as ‘Continental’ food which ranges from

sandwiches, to burgers, to pastries and cakes. Recently, they have begun supplying snack items to the Taj Mahal Hotel, which includes *Chiwda* and *Khari* Biscuits, both of which are popular Gujarati snacks.

The RTI figures prominently in the culinary memory and imagination of the Parsis in Bombay, much more than the Parsi restaurants and cafes. The ready-made Parsi snacks such as *dal-ni-poli* and pastries were fondly remembered by several informants. Zarine Adajania herself recounted as to how all birthdays meant a special trip to the RTI where she was given candies and cakes. Thus, the gastronomic geography of the city seems rather different for a Parsi compared to a non-Parsi.

The commercialized foodways for Parsi cuisine in Bombay are largely segmented and aimed at two different customer bases. The restaurants and cafes aim to attract a largely non-Parsi and tourist clientele and actively position themselves as part of Bombay's heritage. Organizations such as the RTI aim to attract a largely Parsi clientele. They do not rely on advertisements, reviews or any form of active positioning. Their clientele is built on word of mouth recommendations.

Both make differential claims to authenticity. Restaurants such as Britannia claim to be serving 'authentic' Parsi food, which they claim is better than their competitors. The reference point of this authenticity is not the Parsi household but the establishment itself. Dishes such as the Berry Pulao were invented by Mr. Baman Kohinoor and he sees no contradiction in marketing it as authentic Parsi food. The keema pao at Kayani Café has become associated with the Iirani café and not with the Parsi household. However, in the case of the RTI, there is an explicit reference to the household in the claims to authenticity. The RTI is seen to have replaced the space of the domestic hearth by supplying various dishes that are no longer prepared in the home.

Circuit 3 – The Mediating hybrids

Krishnendu Ray notes that globalization cannot be conceived as a polar process of transposing the global against the local and the regional, it also involves a process of hybridization. Global and local influences merge to create new cuisines and palates which can't be located within any community identity (Srinivas and Ray 2012, ch-1). One notices this in the case of Parsi cuisine as well. The third mediating circuit consists of some high end caterers such as Kaizad Patel, Parsi food blogs such as bawibride.com and Parsi cookbooks such as the Time and Talents Millennium Recipes book and Cuisine For A Cause compiled by the NGO Parzor.

This circuit aims to reach both Parsis and non-Parsis. Their claims to authenticity rests on a return to a forgotten past by unearthing old recipes and collecting lesser known variations of popular dishes. However, simultaneously a claim to modernizing these dishes is also made. Parsi food is sought to be made suitable for a globalized context.

The Time and Talents Recipe books provide a case in point. The Millennium Recipe book was published in 2004, by the Parsi housewives club – the Time and Talents. An old club, it traces its roots to the 1920s when wives of Parsi industrialists decided to start a club to play cards and engage in philanthropic work. A concern for the dwindling numbers of Parsis in Bombay promoted them to compile a book of old recipes. An old member Viloo Mehta told us

‘Parsi chokris (girls) hardly learn how to cook. They don’t have any time for the kitchen. Who will preserve our heritage?’

The recipe book includes recipes from as early as the 1930s. What is interesting to note is that each of these recipes has been modified rather consciously to suit modern tastes and demands. Thus, the recipes which made use of extravagant quantities of ghee, butter, or oil are accompanied by variations that use lesser fat to suit modern dietary restrictions. Elaborate dishes with multiple steps are circumvented by using ‘shortcuts’ and modern appliances such as blenders and microwaves.

Another example is the popular food blog bawibride.com which is written and managed by the caterer Perzen Patel. In her blog she writes

“Six months into my marriage, living in a foreign country, I decided to shed my ‘Continental cook’ tag and learn Parsi cooking. But there were hardly any online resources to do the same. So I decided to put together a portal that would restore Parsi food to its glory”

The blog has entires such as ‘Dhansak in 8 easy steps’ and ‘a simple Parsi bhonu for two’. It also has an entire section called ‘International Favorites Bawa-fied’ where the author claims to have put a Parsi twist to European dishes such as crepes, nachos and pizza. Some of these fusion dishes include ‘chutney falafel’, ‘Sali boti pizza’ and ‘gher nu ricotta’.

Kaizad Patel, trained at the Cordon Bleu in Paris attempts to similarly ‘modernize’ Parsi cuisine. He claimed

“Parsi cooking in Bombay has become inferior. Places like Britannia and Jimmy Boy have no respect for ingredients. They use stale things. Their kitchens are dirty. That’s not how you make good food”

He claimed to have adopted the ‘highest’ standards of European cooking and fused that with ‘traditional Parsi recipes passed down in his family for many generations. His ‘famous’ dishes such as the Sali boti and the kid gosht were popular, he claimed, as he used ‘elite’ imported ingredients such heirloom tomatoes, extra virgin olive oil and imported lamb meat. Expanding the boundaries of the traditional he said that he was often asked to serve dishes using lobsters, clam and game meats.

A study if this circuit then reveals a culinary identity in flux. As the global interacts with the local, it creates new hybrids. These hybrids could on the one hand remain as hybrids recognizing their ‘in-between-ness’ or on the other hand these hybrids make claims to authenticity or originality as in the case of Kaizad Patel.

Conclusion

A study of globalization cannot be about the pitting of identities against each other. Appadurai and Breckenridge challenge the idea of an Americanization of culture as a result of globalized consumption patterns. Globalization if anything allows for the emergence of multiple registers on which identity is constructed and contested.

This study of globalized Parsi foodscapes in Bombay shows firstly that a gastro-nostalgia is not rooted either directly in home or in the community itself. The idea of a colonial past could become the site for nostalgia, or the restaurant itself could fulfil that role. Secondly, authenticity and nostalgia can be constructed through multiple disjunct and partially linked circuits. In this case, the authentic foodscape for a Parsi would be very different from that of a tourist visiting Bombay. In the case of the Parsi cuisine, it can be argued that the Parsi cuisine of the Parsi community is different from the cuisine for non-Parsis. And lastly, globalization allows for a merger of the global and the local leading to the emergence of hybrid new culinary forms.

Thus, it may be argued that globalization does not simply lead to dual processes of Americanization and localization. It remakes and reshapes the meaning of both the global and the local. Both become floating signifiers with no referent and therefore become ripe for capture by various agents in society. In this case, 'authenticity' becomes the floating signifier, hollowed of any intrinsic meaning. Yet it is authenticity that is sold and packaged in the market place and the households. It emerges not at any one site, but at multiple sites and through the interaction of various processes of which market forces are one.

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