

A postcolonial study of the systemic disappearance and exoticization of local food produce in India as one of the consequences of Globalization

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Abstract

Globalization has fulfilled its promise of satisfying and sophisticating food palettes around the world. One of the effects of this complex process of integration into a global food system is seen in the systemic disappearance and simultaneous exoticization of local food produces in India. This not only affects the nutritional intake, consumer patterns and indigenous culture in the country but also upholds colonial-industrial trends that have contributed to a capitalist world economy but are detrimental to Indian agricultural practices and its communities. The effects of the pandemic on food unearthed multiple such unsustainable practices. From the disappearing Vasaiwale Kawaadis (produce sellers) in Maharashtra to native food scarcity in South Indian states, this paper addresses how Covid-19 has allowed for a renewal of discourse around these practices and why we should be talking about it in the first place.

Keywords: *postcolonialism, globalization, farm laws, agriculture, indigenous, food, culture, cultural studies, scarcity*

Globalization is a multi-dimensional social reality, whose contributions to the sophistication of our palettes, the integration of the world food system and the creation of jobs in the culinary sphere has been immense. Due to its complexities and the very fact that this process is not passive but a two way recipient of growth and change, it's interesting to study the effects of this kind of large scale progress on developing countries whose local and diverse industries tend to suffer more and thrive less with regards to the changes introduced. This paper argues that Globalization has led to the rise of unsustainable industrial agricultural practices in developing countries such as India, the direct impact of which has caused the scarcity and exoticization of its own indigenous produce and knowledge.

This, however, is not a recent phenomenon and the growing awareness in the younger generation about what they eat, how it affects them and their immediate surroundings (newswire.com) has illuminated pathways for further research on where our produce comes from and why it is important. 25-year-old Chennai based food designer, Akash Muralidharan noticed the evident disappearance of local and naturally grown food produce from South Indian kitchens. He found that earthy air potatoes, versatile pumpkins, country cucumbers and many other local items mentioned in his grandmother's copy of the *Samaithu Par* cookbook, grown since ancient times, now faced a rapidly fading footprint on India's food industry. To bring this occurrence to the youth's attention, Muralidharan curated a 100 Day Cooking Challenge on Instagram, where he cooked dishes with 100 forgotten vegetables. During this period, he found many South Indian chefs, vendors, farmers were themselves distanced from the information about these indigenous vegetables' sudden disappearance (thenewsminute.com). The researcher builds upon the question of these foods' disappearance and stresses on it being a systemic process; one that arises out of many factors that can be traced back to Globalization.

South India, however, is not the only one facing these mysterious and sudden shortages. Karmal and false olive in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, kheep in Rajasthan and gumma consumed in West Bengal and many other local produce across India are also missing in action. The foods' disappearance is not an end

in itself but is attached to some frightening consequences for India and its citizens, in terms of the GDP, the consumers' purchasing power as well as the agro-industrial pressure on our farmers and our lands.

In lieu of the constraints imposed upon this research due to Covid-19, this paper will take a qualitative route to analyze the disappearance and its unique effects, thereby utilizing the record keeping method and dividing the research material into two sections. The first section attempts to historically contextualize colonial trends within 2 distinct time frames relevant to India, which gave rise to the current unsustainable farming practices and caused the subsequent erasure of its local produce. The second section covers the after-effects of this disappearance as well as its wide scale exoticization.

A survey conducted by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India under the Union agriculture ministry tested random samples of vegetables in markets all over India. They found that the vegetables contained very high, toxic levels of banned pesticides, and the permitted pesticide levels were more than 1000 times the permissible levels. So how exactly did we reach here?

Globalization is often regarded as colonization's brainchild. Back in 1989, two sociologists, Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, coined and developed the concept of "global food regimes." They defined Globalization as the product of two key periods where the structure of the global food system enabled the uptake of Western-style capitalism and consumerism. These were the diasporic-colonial food regime of 1870–1914 and the mercantile-industrial food regime of 1947–1973. Friedmann went on to describe a potential third regime that we might find ourselves in now: the corporate-environmental regime.

The current WTO agreement reduces trade barriers comes under the guise of interconnectivity but its implementation can lead to stifling effects for Indian agriculture. Soon enough, Indian market will be taken over by subsidized farm products from countries such as Australia and Canada where farming land, government agriculture provisions are unparalleled.

Similarly, the Green Revolution in India was introduced in the 1960s due to the shortage of food grains in the country, which was partly a result of its colonization in the past. The post-independence Indian government strove to make India self-dependent in this regard and as such introduced high yielding varieties of seeds (of wheat). The introduction of these seeds onto Indian soil demanded the addition of fertilizers and greater use of irrigation. By the second wave of The Green Revolution which took place in the 1980s, the detrimental effects on the environment, and onto the people and animals dependent on them was clear. Furthermore, these seeds were one time use only and as such created a dependence on multinational corporations after every harvest season. The seeds from the local produce on the other hand grew naturally and were in sync with the land's biodiversity whose seeds could be used multiple times during farming season as is the case with most organic produce. A resource intensive agricultural method, the Green Revolution has been kinder to those with the ability to make capital investments and a deathblow to the marginalized. Water shortages, reduction in genetic diversity, greater vulnerability to pests and finally the creation of scarcity of local nutritious crops for the indigenous population.

As a result, what we are currently experiencing is the McDonaldization of the world (Ritzer, 2000), wherein western (particularly American) influence has spread like wildfire through multinational corporations, homogenizing and micromanaging everything in its way. This has led to the superimposition of a single culture in recipient nations, many of them in the developing world – using technology to grow more, gain more profits often done at the cost of those on the lower strata of the food chain who can neither keep up with the changes nor refuse to partake in them. (Rubdy and Alsagoff, 6). The direct effect of this is felt on the unavailability of resources to promote natural vegetation and the parallel shifts in diets and consumerism across India. This statement is established in the example given by Margaret Visser in her Food and Culture: Interconnections:

A change of diet will change the culture. Introduce hamburgers into China, and you will among other things, compel the Chinese to import meat (they would not have enough land to raise the huge cattle herds necessary for all of them to eat ground beef), and some other part of the world will have to give itself to supporting what might seem an innocent new food choice. It's been done before; our century has specialized in such devastating adaptations. The Chinese will also start eating alone more and probably eat less variety. These are very crude hunches of what might happen. All that can be said for certain is that the Chinese will certainly not receive hamburgers into its food system and remain unscathed.

- (Visser, 129-130)

Today, much of what India consumes and exports, has been introduced by the first world countries and mimics their eating patterns, which have been historically different than ours. The fact that they are cash crops, can be stored for a longer period of time and have high export value make them an impossible rival to compete against. Subsequently, the local produce which is more nutritious, oftentimes retains medicinal qualities, requires less financial and timely maintenance and have historical roots seemingly does not matter. There are various studies emphasizing this lack of diversity and nutritional intake, one of them being published by the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in 2006, for example, which correlated the prevalence of malnutrition to lower consumption of traditional food in Medak district in Andhra Pradesh.

Another consequence felt by developing countries like India is in the form of “exotic” foods like white bread which often fall short as a side dish in meeting the requirements of the traditionally cooked, time consuming dishes that all of India (irrespective of religion and class) is known for. Furthermore, as already established, exotic produce requires unsustainable farming practices, such as using more water in places where its availability is already scarce (link currently unavailable).

This exoticization is experienced by Indians on two levels, one is at a conscious level where indigenous people exoticize themselves/their produce to earn their livelihood. The second works unconsciously, where national consumers such as ourselves are slowly and quietly distanced from all that is grown in our collective backyards. *Vasaiwale Kawadis*, for example, are vegetable sellers who used to guide Mumbaikars buyers about the best local and “exotic” vegetables that they could buy from them. They are rarely seen now and assumed to have moved on to less volatile and better paying work (Koli, Indianfoodnetwork.in). An example of the unconscious exoticization would be the ragi, a historically important foodgrain that was initially marginalized in favour of the cereal and other grains but is now being reimagined and repurposed for urban consumers due to its sudden comeback as a trending worldfood (Finnis, 109). Like the current golden milk fad (turmeric milk) in America or the acceptance of curry in the UK - the problem with this kind of exoticization and integration is that it is done at the expense of the Other (Narayan, 1).

An important conclusion that the researcher drew during the course of this study is the direct link between natural produce and prestige. In metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, it is very common to see French patisseries claiming to sell organic items or Burmese restaurants providing an authentic taste of Myanmar but fewer and fewer Indian chain of restaurants or cafes committed to the sole use of local produce. On the off chance that one stumbles upon something of the kind, the prices are ridiculous and far from what those ingredients stand for - versatility, affordability and simplicity. Therefore, the instilling of prestige for indigeneous produce however, is only possible through the creation of awareness of the same, which is something that this paper was motivated towards.

Roland Barthes writes that so inherent are the treasures of connotations they carry that each and every food item can be considered as a unit of communication. A change in these units of communication then causes a change in the language and culture of the place where the change occurs. That in mind, how long before a child in India is given an aspirin as a first resort instead of turmeric milk when they catch a cold? How long before we exoticize our vegetables, fruits and grains to a point of absolute where we barely recognize them as our own produce anymore? The world cannot sustain 7+ billion US style consumers and as such our diversity in food production, preparation and consumption aren't important in a solely cultural context but works as a call for some serious changes on the agriculture and cultivation front.

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