

Platter as a Platform: Scrutinizing Food Blogs by Women from India.

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Abstract

Language of food is the language of appetite. One among the basic requirements for human existence, food is to be worshipped and approached with reverence. With the furtherance of internet, preparing an Indian mattar paneer or Mexican tacos is no more a laborious task. Myriads of food blogs are accessible in the online media with detailed recipes and illustrations. Traversing the boundaries of a hobby, women into food blogging perform a crucial role in creating a network of cybernauts for whom internet is a gateway to knowledge and learning process. Using the never ending appetite for good food that people share universally, women food bloggers spearhead a culinary revolution that enables them to transcend the geographical demarcations and create a global circle that encompasses flavors and tastes, disregarding the power hierarchies. This paper attempts to re/read food blogs by Indian women who seek to connect with their homeland, with the rest of the world by way of a simple recipe. The role of food blogs in the democratization of food, women's empowerment and dissemination of knowledge will also be addressed.

Key words : Food, Blogging, Multi Cultural, Women, Online media

Within the social fabric of India which is highly regarded for its unity in diversity, hospitality has always been acknowledged. We exhibit a firm adherence to the implications of the Sanskrit verse “atithi devo bhava”. As per the Vedas, giving food is more blessed than receiving it, and the act of feeding a guest is equivalent to serving God. The act of cooking food by using fire is

considered equivalent to a sacrifice (Colleen Taylor Sen 31). Indian food culture is endowed with a heterogeneous and variegated identity. Needless to say, the staple food, the ingredients, the cooking, eating, and serving style exhibit considerable diversity on the basis of the ethnicity and cultural overtones of specific geographical terrains. The differences in regional tastes are so conspicuous that they show striking difference which keeps alive a gulf between different culinary cultures within the country. The Mughal influence along with the British, French and Portugal rule have also contributed to a varied food culture in India. Myriads of culinary styles within India validate the fact that the food culture differ profoundly from one locale to another. But at the same time, there existed a wide social gap between the Brahminical castes who abstained from non vegetarian and the Dalits and other backward communities who ate meat. Many a time, it is perceived that the eating habits and preferences are conditioned by the occupation, age and social position of the individual. There was a time when widows had to follow a plain diet so as to stay serene and avoid any iniquitous inclination towards life and its pleasures. In the current scenario, prejudices and misconceptions corresponding to food and eating are becoming less, thanks to the intermingling of multiple cultures; an implicit outcome of colonization, migration etc.

In an era taken over by the digital revolution, the cultural mechanism and its operation too is mediated by the new media. Social networking, blogging, twitter etc have influenced the transfer of culture throughout the globe. A portmanteau of the words web and log—blogs as a virtual substitute for a

diary or a private-turned public space gained popularity in the late 1990s. The transformations brought in by the proliferation of the electronic gadgets and the internet led to new methods of knowledge production. Philip Howard in his work *Castells and the Media* points out that:

New communication technologies seemed to be extending our global consciousness, changing our creative processes, and generating new forms of knowledge. The electronic revolution decentralized, integrated, and accelerated social interaction, and resulted in technological convergence. (18)

The history of cooking and serving in India is a highly gendered arena. The linkage of food with maternity and femininity establishes the heterosexual family with fathers as diners and mothers as unpaid domestic labourers. As a legacy which the mother passes to her daughters, culinary knowledge was a prerequisite to conjugal life. On the other side of the spectrum, it is the generosity of the man to enter the domestic kitchen, which is not a prerequisite to married life, but a hobby or pastime. Kate Cairns et al. in the article “Caring about Food: Doing Gender in the Foodie Kitchen” observes:

Dominant ideals of femininity and social reproduction emphasize the maternal practice of "feeding children and socializing them into culinary competence" (Hollows 2003a, 186), and research indicates that women's memories of their mothers often serve as a reference point for their own dinner practices (Bugge and Almas 2006; Lupton 1996).

Women food bloggers subvert this gendered perspective of cooking when they shift the venue of the whole process to the public sphere —blogosphere—a soot-free, sweat-free, heat-free zone which facilitates a wider audience and recognition. In the space

offered by food blogs the creative genius is recognized, applauded and promoted, unlike the private space in one's own kitchen. The liberty of blogging lies in the authority of the blogger to decide and shape the style and substance that appear on the blog.

Another potential issue is the biased attitude towards the participation and involvement of women in the field of technology and the new media. Along with other patriarchal constructs, the label of technical incompetence too was forced upon the women folk. Exploring women's position in the blogosphere, it is observed that they outnumber men in the list of top rated food bloggers and they rarely give up in between. The once sidelined, taken for granted presence of women in blogging has changed over course of time. In a survey conducted by Rediff.com to find out the ‘Top 30 Food Bloggers of 2013’, 29 were women. Another intriguing observation is the presence of blogs born out of collaboration. Spicytasty.com and cheenachatti.com are such blogs formed by a group of women with similar interests in cooking and blogging. It is interesting to note that these blogs are diverse and unique in their own ways, some exclusively meant for vegetarian recipes, some for baking experiments and others representing a particular state or ethnicity. But what binds all these bloggers together is their passion for cooking and blogging which is proven by the fact that most of these bloggers have been active for about five to ten years. A turning back to the pre-digital era shows that food was region-specific, which crossed borders only with migration and invasion. But the exchange of culture that occurs as part of its existence in a public space—a blog—has a wider reach which make various food cultures mobile and overlap. The monopolization of food culture particular to certain community or caste gets dismantled on its getting popularized and circulated on the web. The autobiographical narrative pattern followed in the blogs

encompasses the history, evolution and timely changes of the recipes. When a Dalit blogger recollects her memories of having eaten a delicacy, it is poles apart from the description of the same dish by a caste –Hindu. Due to the castiest nature of food, publishing cook books were exclusively meant for the affluent upper class and the Dalit tastes were often left officially unrecorded. Blogging with its transparency and user friendly mechanism helps to connect with the global audience. Here the caste dynamics and hierarchy is interrogated and challenged by the appearance of Brahmin and non – Brahmin dishes on the same blog. Consequently, the supremacy of aristocratic food culture is disrupted and food traverses the borders of class and caste.

Uma Narayan in her *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third-World Feminism* observes the gradual changes from a caste based food culture trapped in the labyrinth of “food parochialism” to a liberal, welcoming of other food cultures. This democratization of food owes a great deal to food blogs. Food blogs also helps remove the fear of ethnic food culture of others. She also talks about the difficulties confronted by the “western eaters” who wish to mitigate their “food colonialism” by acquiring deeper knowledge of the cultural contexts of the ethnic foods they eat. (180-181)

As part of this paper, the researcher interviewed five women food bloggers with a diasporic identity via telephone, Facebook, Whatsapp, Gmail making the whole thing a technological activity. A majority of the food bloggers responded and was warm and cordial enough to cooperate with the interview. Rajeswari Vijayanand, a blogger famous for her vegetarian delicacies through the blog Raks Kitchen says, “Blogging sure keeps me active and brisk throughout the day and apparently keeps me young, enthusiastic. Some days I even feel bored to enter kitchen, but blogging pushes me to try new dishes, thus making me interested towards cooking new

dishes in my kitchen for my family”. A Chennaiite who moved to Singapore, Rajeswari turned to blogging to make use of free time in the best possible way. Seven years of experience as a food blogger has sharpened her talent as a gourmet, a food photographer and also as a person who is instrumental in bringing up a trans-cultural diffusion. She further says, “Blogging connects me to all my relatives, new people, people with similar cooking taste, cooking culture etc. This sure makes me feel like home every day when I read numerous mails and messages as feedbacks. They do share their family events, experiences and some keep in touch for a long time more than a reader, they even become friends.”

A yearning for homely food, an urge to connect with the native place ushers the connoisseur of good food into food blogging. It is a way of feeling at home and marking a place of one’s own in the cyber space. This further helps to mitigate the feeling of non-belongingness as experienced by the blogger in a foreign land. Here the virtual world substitutes the real, sometimes more appealing than the original. The subjective ideas of the blogger when encountered with the collective ideas of the followers set a multicultural platform. Here the private becomes public. With a basic understanding of internet, the blogger is introduced to the virtual space where she can demonstrate her culinary knowledge without being deterred by the limitations of time and space.

The gender bias and marginalization of women in the professional culinary field is one immediate reason for women’s increasing presence in the blogosphere as food bloggers. The convenient and user friendly pattern of the new media in contrast to the strenuous procedures of publishing and editing a recipe book draw these women to the digital media which offers them a wider reach. Catherine O’Sullivan in her article, “Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or,

Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them” points out that, “Personal computers and internet access, the “blogosphere”, or on-line community of “bloggers” actually constitutes a wider-reaching and more diverse group than do previous generations of diarists” (65).

The monitory benefits gained through blogging in most cases provide women a sense of financial independence and security that comes to them by pursuing their passion. But for another group of bloggers, money-making side of blogging has never beguiled them. A food blogger from South India felt offended when asked about the profit part of food blogging. Her response goes like this, “I think I may not be the right person to answer your queries. The reason I created the blog was to store all my recipes in one place as well to share it with others. I don’t look at it as a medium of earning money. Sorry”. In such cases, food blogging serves the purpose of self expression and knowledge sharing in the virtual world.

From a gendered perspective, blogs render spatial freedom to women by acting as “a room of one’s own” without any external interventions and restrictions. In “Women’s Time, Women’s Place,” Elaine Showalter asserts that “female space is the alternative linguistic and imaginative place from which women can speak”(37). Thus the blogs turn out to be a virtual room for women to be creative and liberated subjects. Using the same material that kept her oppressed for centuries, ‘the Kitchen’, women find a way to empowerment through food blogging. The sense of power experienced through blogging grants the blogger an authority and agency, which she controls and manipulates with the help of simple language, culinary expertise, food photographic skills etc. With this sharing of culinary bits in the blog, the blogger achieves an audience, providing a feeling of community, mutual sharing and cultural exchange.

In the article “Does Blogging Empower Women? Exploring the Role of Agency and Community” the significance of blogging as a tool to empowerment is explored:

Through their “publicness” bloggers’ thoughts and emotions become visible to others and can attract attention, sharing, and participation. Witnessing the impact of their self-expression, bloggers may not only experience increased psychological well-being but ultimately a deep sense of empowerment. (370)

The blogosphere is replete with extremely personal narratives of native dishes, spices and memories. For the food bloggers with a diasporic stamp, food with its deep running roots to ‘home’, ‘family’, and ‘mother’ binds the individual to his native identity with a nostalgic under tone. Keerthi, a connoisseur of good food and a budding food blogger from Kerala now settled in California says:

I believe my blog helps me to connect not only with my home, native people, ethnic food but also with all the foodies around the world. It eliminates the alienation and makes me feel as a part of a bigger global community... that it keeps me occupied all the time and helps me express myself and connect to people.

In this context, it may be pertinent to mention that the diasporic identity of the Indian blogger contributes to bridging the gap between ethnic food and its cultural context; this keeps the foreigner informed and ready to attempt the ethnic food of the ‘other’ with a good knowledge of its cultural context which no ethnic restaurant or recipe book can explain. The role of food blogs in weakening the xenophobic tensions with regard to ethnic food is creditable.

For women who spend their entire life in the domestic sphere, creativity remains

closed within a few experiments in the kitchen. The birth of a blogger also witnesses the birth of a creative writer. The success of food blogging lies in keeping the recipes brisk, straight forward, and less complicated. The clear message that emerges from this is that food blogs and the entries within are nothing less than a literary creation that requires imagination and creative vigour. In such a way, recipes can be considered as a literature of resistance that women uses as a mechanism to fight back the age long oppression and subordination suffered by women as cooks and waitresses in their own families without recognition and appreciation.

The functioning of food blogs as carriers of multiple cultures can be related to the philosophical concept of the 'rhizome' developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The recipes appearing on the blogs are multiple and non-hierarchical. They get modified and transformed with every single attempt to reproduce the recipe in individual kitchen. With every entry in the food blog, the history, culture, ethnicity and personal elements and memories in relation to the particular dish moves forward, perforating the boundaries of caste, class and race hierarchies.

In his article entitled "Alimentary Agents: Food, Cultural Theory and Multiculturalism" Ben Highmore observes that:

The importance of food for thinking about the psycho-social subject is seen most vividly (and most often) in relation to forms of disgust, abjection and other forms of rejection. In these, it is the role of the subject to police the borders of the self, and it is the potential of food to upset and unpick the borders of that self. Crucially, disgust will be the major negative affect for intercultural exchanges involving food consumption, a

xenophobic riposte to the invitation to share the food culture of others. (386)

Philip N. Howard in his *Castells and the Media* has explicated the ways in which the digital media keeps one's multiple identities active. From a feminist perspective, women had always been coerced into accepting multiple identities of oppression as obedient wives, fertile mothers and objects of physical pleasure. The virtual identity as a blogger extend a constructive identity to women, a reinvention, thereby making them known around the globe.

On a concluding note, food blogs serve a huge cultural responsibility beyond the notions of a hobby or profession. It would be an overstatement to claim that blogging empowers women from all strata of the society. Food blogging involves only a particular class of women who have access to the possibilities of the new media and technology. The idea of experimenting new recipes springs up only in a kitchen where there is over supply of food grains. Still, the functioning of the blog as a platform that provides the women food blogger a power and existence in the virtual space cannot be neglected. Food blogging promotes subjectivity, creativity and freedom of expression and opens up better possibilities in the culinary domain. The food blogger intentionally and sometimes fortuitously becomes an envoy of multiculturalism. Remembering the fact that 'we are what we eat', the food culture extends its hold to multifarious fields of human life and society. To this end, food blogs are sites of knowledge production and proliferation that spearheads social constructivism.

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