

Food in a Globalised World

A Cultural Perspective

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The twentieth century world economy has been witnessing an incessant movement of people, commodities and information propelled at first by technological progress and later by the globalisation of trade, commerce and labour. The last few decades have seen a vivid expansion of diverse pathways of global exchanges and an intensification of interconnectivity among people all over the world. Today, global connectivity exerts its impact on the everyday life of the people in various domains all over the world.

The expansion of western capitalism has had a critical impact on recent developments in the globalised world. The political, economic and cultural inter-relations of western imperialism have been well documented¹ and its consequences are clearly revealed by the changes in lifestyles in many societies of the modern world. This is hardly a one-way process. Assimilation of influences from the periphery to the centre is an outcome of globalisation, and assimilation is regarded as an important source of innovation in the contemporary world.² Hence, the twentieth century may be generally characterized as a period of intensified flows of inputs of culture, largely asymmetrical, between the dominant West and the rest of the world, leading to an increasing interconnectedness³ and food has come to be used as a significant index of such a connectivity.

Food is a primary element of our social relations. The physiological immediacy of food serves as a foundation for incredibly diverse and complex cultural relations.⁴ Eating habits have been a social pursuit for centuries as food was considered to be a symbol of social status. Its ostentatious display articulates social conflicts, conspicuous consumption being a typical example.⁵ Consumption patterns of the people express even their national identities.⁶ Food also mirrors the self⁷ as our eating habits reveal our attitudes. The variety of social functions and cultural formulations that food brings

as it is produced, distributed and consumed, makes it one of the necessary means to observe local lifestyles.

Despite a gradual diffusion of foods and food producing methods, the variety of foodstuffs worldwide and the large-scale movement of people across continents in the course of many millennia, most human beings until recently subsisted on food produced or acquired within a day's travel from home.⁸ Thanks to the intensified expansion of the relationships between places and localities all the world over, the movement of foods and culinary cultures has got accelerated leading to what may be described as culinary globalisation. This expansion is a key to the development of world cuisine⁹ in terms of a study of the globalised system of the food and food habits of people in a changing world economy. It also seems necessary to unravel the areas of cultural connectivity between the global economy and the localities in each of their social domains of complexity and diversity.

So, this paper mainly focuses on the dietary globalisation in a cultural perspective of the world economy. It explores the multifaceted impact of globalisation of food on the everyday life of people, in the developing countries of the world. In the study, we address issues of food from different angles such as, the historical process of globalisation of food, food as the epitome of culture, food as an economic achievement and food as business in the hands of the agri-business communities. The present scenario of the food system in the developing countries will also be reviewed and the observations drawn will be presented in concluding remarks.

*Globalisation of Food: A Historical Process*¹⁰

Globalisation is a process of reducing barriers between countries and encouraging closer economic, political and social interaction.¹¹ It necessarily implies diminishing the importance of national borders and strengthening identities that stretch beyond those rooted in a particular region or country.¹² Globalisation is a process of intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and *vice-versa*.¹³ Modern communicative devices worldwide have facilitated it further. Giddens holds that the space increasingly dislocated from place is getting networked to other social contexts across the globe as the old modes of time (say, seasons or sun up or sun down in agrarian societies)

become separated from space and open up various possibilities of recombination.¹⁴

The cross country flows of food or what we call culinary globalisation, form the core of refined cookery. It also evolves a mind set and a trend of change in dietary appreciation which impact a large number of people all over the world. Unlike in the past, many people now share the same kind of food everywhere and always in the world.

This form of global integration of foodstuffs, culinary techniques and eating habits is by no means a new phenomenon. In fact, history reveals that the major components of many traditional diets originated at places other than where they were eventually adopted and put into use.¹⁵ The Greeks refined their cooking by learning from Persians and provided food for the ancient Romans.¹⁶ Likewise, cooking in the European Middle Ages was greatly influenced by the Arabian cuisine.¹⁷ Apart from that, the worldwide expansion of food plants like tomato, chilly, peppers, maize, etc. has had an impact on the dietary behaviour of almost the entire human population.¹⁸

Cultural relationships that flourished among nations in the past were invariably related to food. The cultural interdependence between England and France from the later seventeenth century was especially marked in the field of food.¹⁹ The food products of the Mediterranean such as grape, the olive and wheat for making bread, and wine for sacred and profane pursuits were enjoyed by major civilizations in the past. The Germanic people of the North cultivated other cereals less intensively than they produced large quantities of beer and meat.²⁰

The French diet was profoundly influenced by the advent of Romans from the Mediterranean, first as traders, then as conquerors, bringing about substantial changes in consumption patterns. Wine was first introduced by the Greeks to Marseilles from where it was traded, together with drinking vessels, to the tribal areas, mainly for consumption on auspicious occasions. The political economy of that penetration was, in Dietlar's words, 'driven by drink'.²¹ Wines came from Italy and Spain. Romans also introduced shellfish, oysters, anchovies, prunes, sauces, spices and aromatic plants along with the plants such as those bearing cherry and peach. In return, the South-east, for example, exported cheeses, salaisons and other agricultural products to Rome.

Foreign food goods have been easily available in all regions through time and the regional societies used to adopt and domesticate

foreign consumption practices, all over the world. During the twentieth century, the speed, intensity and the variety of worldwide culinary systems have increased successively. In fact, before the development of modern modes of transport, people separated from each other by geography could hardly get in touch with the foodstuffs produced in distant lands. Only the richest people were able to procure such expensive foods that were scarce and not made available locally. Even if climatic situations allowed the production of an exotic food in large quantities outside its place of origin, as in the case of potato and capsicum native to the Americans, it usually took two to three generations for it to become a part of the domestic diet.²²

With the exception of certain foodstuffs such as potatoes and maize and certain condiments such as black and red pepper, which also reached the lower segments of the population worldwide, a growing interest in foreign food could be observed among the ordinary people only since the dawn of the last century.²³ These interests were evident among the urban rich in Europe and the U. S. The mass media used to feature the eating habits of foreign nations and many cookbooks on western cuisine were produced forthwith. The middle class in non-western societies also evinced interest in western cuisines. But such interests did not change their consumption pattern. In fact, many dishes that appeared in restaurants and in cookbooks were not actually foreign. They surfaced from the imagination of their producers. However, this trend favoured culinary globalization by the end of the twentieth century. The growing importance of cross-cultural dimension in food during the last decades were invariably related to the global flow of goods, information and the people.

Food as an Epitome of Culture

Globalisation influences the production and processing of food as well as its sales, preparations and consumption. As local cultures are invariably integrated with their practices, they are well knit to shape social landscapes along with cultural and national identities of the citizenry. Consumers around the world now find in their supermarkets the same foods produced by the same corporates. This globalised phenomenon, facilitates the proliferation of western food industries in different parts of the world. As the dietary patterns and attitudes toward food form an integral part of the local cultures, the foreign goods, catering technologies and consumption practices tend to become indigenised as they arrive. Global practices are

increasingly attaining global dimensions in the process. In the present circumstances of transnational connectedness, the locals cannot escape the global implications even as the transnationals find it difficult to manage its local articulations. As global brands become increasingly available in the world the importance of local cuisines is slowly getting diminished. It also entails the arrival of new hybrid varieties of cuisines and new identities are growing as a result of the acceptance of new cuisines and the avoidance of the older ones.

In the past, people solely depended on local producers for meeting their food requirements. Later on, as society developed, they were able to acquire access to new varieties of foods, as well as modern technologies for producing and processing them. Seasonal variations were always reflected in the food structure of the earlier societies. But today all varieties of foods are available in all the seasons in the world.

Though regional ecology has its role in evolving culinary traditions and food preference in all the societies, socio-cultural and economic factors are also important in maintaining dietary differences among communities. Food is now considered to be an expression of social manifestation. Douglas thus laments: 'If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries.'²⁴

The inter-relationship of the culinary cultures was not a case of one-way movement from West to the non-West. Many of the Asian habits were positively emulated by the Westerners as well. From 1950 onwards, Asian food items like rice, sago and spices have been familiar to the people in Europe and the U.S. The popularisation of Asian food in the West has in fact a colonial memory. Indonesian food in the Netherlands and Indian food in the U.K., for example, is a reflection of their age old colonial relationship.

The increasing interests in foreign food in the West and in many of the Asian countries have been promptly stimulated by the expansion of tourism. As western lifestyles are promoted through process of globalisation, the cross cultural spread of western food industry products such as breakfast cereals, condensed milk, fizzy drinks and ketchup became the order of the prevailing food options. The contemporary culinary globalisation is also influenced by a cultural phenomenon called 'social imaginations'. Appadurai has asserted that imagination *per se* has become an organized field of

social practice, a form of work (both in the sense of labour and of organized cultural practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ('individuals') and globally defined fields of possibility.²⁵ So, food has now become a meaningful investment, creating the world of new imagination a desirable entity. It has been aptly said that 'now a days foods do not simply come from places organically grown out of them'; it even makes places into "symbolic constructs" and deploys them in the "discursive construction of various imaginative geographies".²⁶

Food as Economic Achievement

Food is a daily matter of man. It is also a manifestation of love, health and happiness and, having the "right" food is often the great achievement. Though prestige plays a key role in formulating a food choice, it may be possible only when economic conditions find favour with such a choice. As has been pointed out: 'a comprehensive desire for social prestige is to be found as the primitive motive of actions only among members of classes whose income under normal circumstances is substantial and perhaps even growing, and at any rate, is appreciably over the hunger threshold. In such cases, the impulse to engage in economic activity is no longer a simple necessity of satisfying hunger but a desire to preserve a certain socially expected high standard of living and prestige.'²⁷

The social prestige of any class is determined by the available and accessible economic resources at their disposal. Economic growth, infact, leads to an improvement in nourishment and advancement of culinary systems whereas economic deterioration affects them adversely. The removal of hunger and an improvement in the living standards of the people in industrialized societies resulted substantially from the economic growth following the Industrial Revolution. The advancement of science and technology have created greater efficiency in agricultural farming and animal husbandry which in turn have increased production and improved dietary qualities. New cooking apparatus brought diverse varieties and helped in reducing the workload for cooking. The advanced food processing technologies have made the preservation of food easier and brought new varieties of food to newer areas in abundance. Food processing technology has also helped in providing cheap substitutes for luxury food items such as margarine as a substitute for butter and condensed milk as a substitute for fresh milk The

advancement of transport facilities together with the food processing technologies which reduced the cost of supplying distantly available food in the local market eventually encouraged the diffusion of innovations. The cross cultural flow of foods, cookery techniques, and consumption patterns, which accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century brought variety to daily nourishment and broadened the culinary horizons of ordinary people in the industrialized societies.²⁸

Although economic progress and technological innovations generally took the freedom of choice of the people in food to new heights it has also posed many nutritional problems for them. For instance, the chemical additives and other harmful substances used in the production and processing of food are considered to be the cause of diseases of various forms. Excessive consumption of sugar and saturated fat have also led to eating disorders and obesity, which forms one of the most pressing health issues of the days.²⁹

Food as Business

Food is an indispensable component of our daily life. It is an essential means of life: it keeps us alive. But food also becomes business - the business of industrial enterprises as it is intricately linked to profit. The very meanings and understanding of food as biological necessity and its everlasting presence in human life makes its domain fit for exploring its globalisation. As globalisations spreads its tentacles, commercial interests become the major driving force in the process. The universal need of food necessarily induces the producers of food to market their product all over the world. Kikkoman attempts to sell soy sauce in the Netherlands, the Dutch confectioner Verkode motivates Japanese to buy their cookie and McDonald's and KFC set up their outlets in India. Food is, thus, targeted for commercial ventures wherever one goes, not only because it is a daily necessity, but also because of the common human desire for variation and the general proclivity to shape one's own life through the medium of food.³⁰

A careful reading of food as an elemental part of modern living is now receiving attention and its impact is seen in common acceptance of the largess economy currently generated by the manufacture, processing and distributions of food stuffs. This is seen in mass produced -, pre-cooked -, pre-packaged -, processed - and fast-food, and the gimmicks in advertising them. All these have significant

influence upon their popularity leading to a rapid growth of corporate capitalism and agri-business and their increasing domination of the world marketplace.³¹ The widening popularity of fast foods clearly reveals that the food systems are intricately intertwined with the macro social framework of the political economies of all the modern societies.³² A pattern of homogeneity now pervades over the food and food preferences across the world.³³

As the tastes transcend the national boundaries, the profit seeking, corporate agri-business capitalists of the West mastermind food industries worldwide and reap the gains. But the increasing expansion of transnational corporate ventures in food has had a disavouring effects on the local systems of 'third world' countries. As transnational corporates tend to expand their businesses in food in developing countries the livelihood of the local populace persistently gets affected.

The agri-business corporates have been penetrating into all segments of the food system in developing world. The agri-business corporates are the vector linking regional economies and crop sector in developing countries of the world to the global system of production and consumption.³⁴ New products and modes of integration have emerged which complement and often eclipse traditional agricultural exports. The virtual presence of agri-business corporates is also significant in agri-crops, commodity marketing and catering.

The Present Scenario

Culinary globalisation has today grown into a new phenomenon of internationalization of the agri-food system. This phenomenon made an extremely corrosive impact on food security in many developing countries, including India. Staple food sectors have been undermined simultaneously on several fronts, including shifts in domestic consumption induced by a cheap-food policy and discriminatory modernization programmes that promote import substitution, notably of food grains and export crops. These bear little relation to local needs.³⁵ For instance, Mexico was once epitomized as an exemplary model of third world agricultural development. But it turned into a food deficient nation as the fulcrum of its agri-food system shifted decisively towards the livestock complex and export crops. The output of basic food grains (wheat, corn, rice) and beans declined in per capita terms as the acreage, previously devoted to those crops in

rain-fed regions was switched to oilseeds, principally soyabeans, and forage crops (sorghum, barley, alfalfa). Corn, the staple food, suffered particularly from crop displacement in the rain-fed regions.³⁶ In India, the fertile rice lands along the east coast have been bought or leased by transnational corporates for farming shrimps, which may be exported to Europe, Japan and the U.S. In fact, export-led agriculture affects food security as it encourages a shift from sustainable small-scale farming to non-sustainable large-scale industrial production. Peasants are getting displaced from farming as commercial interests takeover land for industrial-scale production of export commodities such as shrimp, flowers, vegetables and meat.³⁷ Internationalisation of the food system, thus, pauperizes the local fishing and farming community who have lived on rice paddies and fishing for ages.³⁸ Another illustrative example is from Bikaner, Rajasthan. The *Bikaneri bhujia* is a traditional snack produced in cottage industries in Bikaner. The U.S. based transitional corporations, Pepsi, is now mass producing its new version using the same traditional name in its advertisements, underbidding local producers and destroying their markets. This is an example of sheer appropriation of common knowledge and the traditional method of food preparations of millions of local people and thereby destroying their livelihood.³⁹ Likewise, in other parts of India farm land used in farming to feed the local population is now being used for export oriented food products, such as tomatoes for ketchup in place of rice in Punjab; sunflower instead of rice and millet in Karnataka; strawberries and fruits for exports instead of basic food stuffs in Maharashtra.⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

Globalisations of food is invariably a part of globalisation of cultures—the culture of a globalised village. Nevertheless, there are two aspects of this culinary globalisation. One is homogenization, where by, bread, for example, comes to play a dominant role in cultures worldwide or coca-cola comes to dominate the world markets of soft-drinks. The other aspect refers to global-differentiation in which adoption of local food systems assumes a pattern of multiculturalism.⁴¹ The process of globalisation has gradually taken a route to western domination, eroding cultural diversity in food stuff including goods, ideas and identities. The food cultures are now becoming more and more homogeneous as western food

conquers the world.⁴² Although cultural assimilation with a wider ramification has become a truism in the modernizing world, the traditional food and food systems in the developing world are getting destroyed at the instance of the transnational corporates under the guise of 'development'. Food is a means of life but it has become a meaningful investment for the business. Business is always for seeking profit, and profit seekers now aspire to appropriate the lives and the livelihoods of the 'other' world. Food has now become a tool for appropriation rather than the means to feed the teeming millions. What is the way out? It is a question imperative to be addressed not by governance but by the people.

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