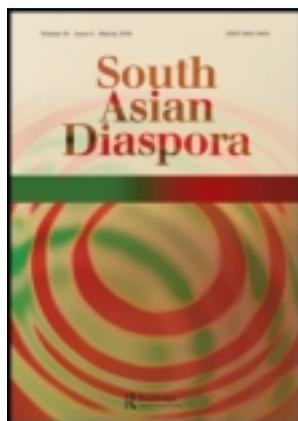


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### Food blogs and the digital reimagination of South Asian diasporic publics

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## Food blogs and the digital reimagining of South Asian diasporic publics

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Using the vivid appeal of photographs and text, South Asian diasporic bloggers present the pleasures of traditional recipes of regional Indian food. While the bloggers offer individual reminiscences about home, homeland and the comfort of home-cooked meals, the blog serves as a cultural form that works within a circulatory matrix where new configurations of cosmopolitan sociality are being constituted. In the transnational intimacies of the virtual kitchen, the bloggers create a culinary archive that mines regional details and local origins only to go beyond and forge broader culinary publics. Building linkages within prescribed templates, the blogs signify a new moment in the globalization of Indian regional food and a digital turn in the formation of networks of sociality and a strategic distribution of diasporic publics.

**Keywords:** South Asian; diaspora; women; digital; Indian food; food blogs; publics; transnational

Evoking the aromas of Indian cooking, food blogs written by South Asian diasporic women indulge their readers with culinary tales and techniques. The blogs which are steadily gaining visibility, present the pleasures of traditional cooking from the homeland through multimodal interweaving of text, video, links and images. Blending details about recipes with personal anecdotes, the bloggers seem determined to secure a digital presence for themselves and give Indian food, parsed regionally, a new global visibility. While these blogs circulate specific types of culinary knowledge in mediated transnational space, they also provide a space for building transnational lines of connection and reimagining diasporic identities.

Culinary secrets and family recipes, now reworked for transnational consumption, are shared with a growing networked public (boyd 2010). These food blogs serve as a storehouse of information about the preparation of Indian delicacies and offer streamlined versions of traditional procedures suitable for the demands of global living. The reminiscences about home, homeland and the comfort of home-cooked meals emerge within a circulatory matrix<sup>1</sup> where new forms of consumption and configurations of cosmopolitan sociality are being constituted. In the intimacies of the virtual kitchen, the bloggers recapture distant locales through food, actively mediate connections between tradition and modernity and negotiate new and remembered milieus. In the

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process, they establish rhizomatic connections with others in the diaspora and beyond, thereby disrupting older notions of diasporic alienation and insularity. Diasporic women use blogs as private memory objects (Van Djick 2007) and form a digital repository of regional flavors that leverage local origins in order to forge new transnational culinary publics.

Through the publishing of private versions and visions of domesticity, the blogs fulfill the meticulous work of cultural reproduction which has always been highly gendered in most diasporic contexts and in particular, within the South Asian community (Hegde 1998). These ‘mediated microworlds’ (Thompson 1995, 233) held together by common affective ties to Indian food, reflect the continuation of feminized spaces of food preparation. The blogs enable the diasporic authors to establish intimate social networks, and ‘different forms of dwelling, not necessarily circumscribed by geographical parameters’ (Mannur 2013, 589). The blogging templates offer a highly stylized form of self-representation along with the connective possibilities offered by nested applications and platforms. Theorizing about blogs, Dean (2010, 2) argues that contemporary communication media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of production, enjoyment and surveillance. While the bloggers talk about a diasporic community evolving organically from the practice of posting, commenting and sharing, these publics are, in fact, both strategically steered by the blogging templates and defined through algorithmic calculations of the marketplace.

The blogs contribute to a shift in the manner and form in which Indian food circulates globally. At the moment when Indian food is trying to secure its identity and place as global haute cuisine in the West, the blogs are claiming a cosmopolitan status for home-cooked Indian food. Through their virtual kitchens, the bloggers strive to introduce a more differentiated picture of regional Indian food. The food practices described in the blogs capture the complex levels of interconnections between locales (Ray and Srinivas 2012). Culinary knowledge from the homeland via the voices and expertise of family and friends are routinely incorporated to establish standards of cultural authenticity. By creating a dynamic and ongoing dialogic bridge to India, the bloggers reshuffle the ways in which the nation, its diaspora and globality intersect in the neoliberal context.

While the composition and content of the blogs suggest a digital oasis for ruminations about home-cooked food, the cultural work of the blogs needs to be contextualized within a broader global narrative that connects India, its food and changing diasporic formations. The blogs index a particular articulation and moment of South Asian diasporic mobility which coincides with the visibility of India and Indians in the global digital economy. The mediated world of the bloggers is related to recent flows of economic migrants from India and arguably in some instances, to the exclusionary limits of immigration policies that prohibit dependents of skilled migrants (most of whom are men) from participating in various domains of public life (Parker 2013). The bloggers, many of whom self-identify as computer professionals, have all lived and emigrated from India post liberalization. Relocated in the West, these tech savvy women now negotiate their minoritized locations through digital evocations of home and food. While there appears to be a sense of gendered community among these diasporic bloggers, a strong neoliberal ethos of individualism pervades the digital environment of food blogs in general. Overall blogging provides an opportunity to turn food into a social project through the practice of authoring and negotiating the circulation of the text.

Provincializing digital media, Coleman (2010, 489) argues, will allow for ‘a consideration of the ways these media have become central to the articulation of cherished beliefs, ritual practices and modes of being in the world.’ By mapping how South Asian women use blogs to emplace themselves and Indian food in the circuits of global modernity, this essay speaks to the particularities of digital and gendered diasporic ways of being. Through critical examination of 13 popular blogs and interviews conducted with the bloggers, I analyze the blogs as an evolving visual and textual archive about Indian food and the diasporic everyday. The blogs signify a new moment in the transnationalization of Indian regional food engendered through the home labor of diasporic women building culinary linkages to the nation. Finally, I read the blogs as emergent, interactive spaces anchored to the materiality of diasporic locations and used to produce networks of sociality and build transnational culinary publics.

### Techno publics and affect

Communication technologies and synchronous transnational participation in everyday life have radically altered the diasporic experience (Brinkerhoff 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012). Unlike earlier migrant experiences, for the bloggers, home is always accessible via the screen and the blogs serve as a platform for recipes, reflections and networking. As archetypal sites of media convergence, the blogs enable the inclusion of videos, Twitter feeds, photographs and links and blogrolls. With the cross-referencing and the flow of content between and across media, blogs open into an ever-expanding social universe along niche interests. A personalized form of social exchange, marked by collaborative rituals of turn-taking, have become customary within this digital proscenium stage. The social networking that emanates from the blog leads to the contrived formation of a ‘community of sentiment, a group that begins to imagine and feels things together’ (Appadurai 1996, 8). With the South Asian bloggers, the exchanges and linking occurs around Indian food and its transformations.

Blogs, according to Lovink (2008, xxii), are the proxy of our time – ‘a techno-affect that cannot be reduced to the character of the individual blogger.’ While personal reflections remain the centerpiece of most food blogs, it is mainly the strategic use of links and other functionalities that draw in the readership or followers. Many view blogs as digital journals, extensions of self-representational writing characterized by reflexive, diachronic accounts of self (Serfaty 2004). Diasporic food blogs could be seen as reworking epistolary forms of writing that have always sustained immigrant connections to lost homes (see Naficy 2007, xiv). Using a diaristic tone, bloggers actively invite readers to engage with their posts. There is a very self-conscious connecting through text and visual display mainly with others in the diaspora but at the same time, the bloggers are clearly mindful of how and when they are recognized by the larger food blogging community at large. Some scholars emphasize that it is not useful to talk about blogs in terms of writing alone (Rettberg 2008) or in terms of genre, like journaling (boyd 2006). As Dean (2010, 48) notes, the focus on content alone fails to look at the practice of blogging and does not keep multiply intersecting modes of communication in view. In the case of these blogs, solely focusing on authorial style or genre will elide the material politics of diasporic life. Here I examine how diasporic women use digital media forms to inhabit a culinary space as transient participants in a common public (Warner 2002, 8) organized around the sociocultural world of food.<sup>2</sup>

The desire to blog hinges precisely on the possibilities enabled by an individually branded space and the pleasures of recognition by an expansive digital audience. The ongoing circulation of the blog text and its recursive journey through a carefully chalked out map of posts, responses, rolls and hyperlinked space sets the conditions for the creation of networks and the sharing that bloggers routinely celebrate. However, sharing in this digital space is synonymous with drawing in traffic to one's page. If as Lovink (2008) argues blogging is a process of massification, then how do these shifts in scale redraw the borders between communities, especially in this case, the diaspora and its digital neighbors?

The particularities of cultural context and the nature of transnational publics that emerge in the blogosphere merit close examination (Russell and Echchaibi 2009). Recently research attention has focused on various global diasporic contexts where issues of digital media, everyday life and transnational forms of affiliation intersect (Panagakos and Horst 2006; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Due to the proliferation of open source blogging websites, setting up a blog requires no specialized technical skills. Despite the uniformity of preset templates, the diasporic food blogs are, by and large, well customized and maintained.<sup>3</sup> As one of the bloggers told me during an interview, her blog site is always tidy and uncluttered like her kitchen. The well-designed virtual spaces are indeed treated like kitchens ready for the unexpected visitor. Through tales of spices and cultural narratives of food, the blogs connect localities in the West to ones in India.

### Digital domesticity and diaspora

South Asian women entered the world of blogging in the early 2000s, but the spurt in numbers seems to have occurred in 2005, around the same time that several blogging platforms were launched (Lovink 2008). The blogs have creative names such as Pan-fusine, Holy Cow, Indian Food Rocks, Collaborative Curry. Most of the blogs on Indian food are written by women of the diaspora living mainly in the USA but also in other parts of the world including the UK, Canada and UAE. While the blogs showcase a feminized world of domesticity, these diasporic bloggers speak to their transnationally mobile forms of belonging, in registers that are at once nostalgic, traditional, cosmopolitan and at times, post-feminist, as will be discussed later. The blogs represent a historical moment, in both the textualization and the circulation of Indian food, in terms of its global travels, identity and connections to a more flexibly defined, diasporic experience.

The economic and cultural potential of the Indian diaspora is very influential in the social life of the nation. Koshy (2008, 33) argues that the non-resident Indian offers 'a crucial vehicle for reconstructing a globalized Indian identity' especially for the rising middle class who associate diasporic Indians with affluence and cosmopolitan cachet. The rising number of food blogs written by non-resident Indians has caught the attention of the Indian media press. For example, an illustration in a national English language daily represents the diasporic blogger in her modern kitchen wearing Western clothes and wafting the aroma of Indian food across continents (Challapalli 2006).

The bloggers, in turn, assume an ambassadorial role with regard to Indian cuisine and react sharply to stereotypical representations of Indian food as laborious, spicy and strange. They echo 'the crusade against curry' (Roy 2010, 159) carried out by earlier cook book writers who sharply critiqued the continued presence of curry

powder in the West. Curry, the reductive moniker – ‘a king of misnomers’ (Banerji 2007, 38) – has raised the ire of Indian chefs who have described it ‘as degrading to India’s great cuisine as the term “chop suey” was to China’s’ (Jaffrey 1975, 5). Concocted for the Victorian kitchen (see Narayan 1997; Zlotnick 1996), this all-in-one powder continues to stand in for the diversity of India’s cuisine. The bloggers renew the mission to rectify these misconceptions by speaking back to the Orientalist representations of Indian food.<sup>4</sup> Armed with local knowledge, they introduce regional home cooking made accessible for the cosmopolitan palate and lifestyle. While on the one hand, the blogs claim to present authentic home style cooking, they also establish the malleability and adaptability of the cuisine to fit with global lifestyles. This nexus of regional and global, the leitmotif of the blogs, extends the earlier dialectic of regional and national which framed the circulatory cultures of Indian cuisine.

In an elegant exposition on the construction of a national cuisine in postcolonial India, Appadurai (1988) discusses how the twin developments of regional and national logics framed the discourse of Indian cookbooks that catered to urban cosmopolitan tastes. He argues that since the 1960s, the emergence and popularity of English-language cookbooks in India were fueled by spread of the print media, the rise of the middle class and diversification of consumption patterns. With regard to the specialized, regional cookbooks, Appadurai (1988, 16) writes that they represent ‘a kind of “ethnoethnicity”, rooted in the details of regional recipes, but creating a set of generalized gastroethnic images of Bengalis, Tamils, Kannadikas and so forth’. Building on this same tradition, the food bloggers enact their sense of national belonging through the articulation of a regional gastronomic identity. A sense of Indianness arises, as Appadurai (1988, 16) notes, ‘because of, rather than despite’ the focus on the regional.

Food has played an important sensory role in the bonding of diasporic communities and continues to serve as a place-making practice (see Ray 2004). Cookbooks written by authors living outside of India typically evoke themes of nostalgia and memory of the homeland. It was the recipes from the cookbooks of 1960s and 1970s, described by Appadurai (1988), that were used by immigrant women who arrived in the late 1960s to the USA, when the Hart Cellar Act opened the doors very selectively to skilled professionals and students from Asia (Leonard 1997). I also interviewed six South Asian women, who emigrated between the late 1960s and 1970s when long distance communication with India was neither easy, affordable or fast. They used to exchange information with other immigrant women to learn how best to incorporate ingredients like pancake mix, cottage cheese, cream of wheat or ricotta cheese into Indian recipes. Some recall home-made folders with recipes that would arrive by mail from India. The immigration narratives of the food bloggers, however, emerge from a different migratory flow – one more recent and closely connected with India, the flows of globalization and a more mobile sense of identity.

Since the 1990s, a large pool of Indian workers have come to the USA on temporary non-immigrant visas (H-1B visa) sponsored by specific employers, to fulfill job demands in the information technology sector. While balancing their status as members of a malleable workforce for the global economy, these new migrants, also remain tightly connected to a globalized India through communication technologies unlike their earlier counterparts (Gajjala and Gajjala 2008; Mallapragada 2006; Mitra 2008). The diasporic experience of the food bloggers is unfolding at a time when the South Asian presence in the West has been well established by previous waves of migration and Little Indias exist in most major cities in North America. With the growing popularity of Indian food, the restaurant industry is actively refashioning an

identity for Indian cuisine as global haute cuisine. Discussing the shifts in the global Indian restaurant industry, Buettner (2008, 897) notes that there has been a recent trend for restaurants to move away from clichéd names like *Taj Mahal* or *Passage to India* and instead choose names such as *Cumin*, *Tamarind* or *Cinnamon Club* to demonstrate their ‘knowledge of sophisticated gastronomy’. The cultural work of the food blogs is both enabled and sustained by these shifting patterns of South Asian mobility and the global visibility of Indian food.

### **Cosmopolitics of flexible taste**

‘They are mushrooming,’ ‘there’s a new one every time I look’ – this is how the bloggers describe the growth of blogs on Indian food. While it is difficult to gage the number of diasporic food blogs, they clearly have a visible presence in blog aggregators. One blogger has launched an aggregator of popular diasporic blogs which lists close to 200 blogs.<sup>5</sup> I wandered into this world of blogs when faced with my own culinary dilemmas. In the liquid virtual worlds bloggers inhabit, this type of serendipitous discovery is indeed the very model of interaction that bloggers thrive on. Guided by blogrolls and hyperlinks that connect a dense world of recipes, I read the blogs closely, then interviewed 13 popular bloggers on the phone or via Skype. All the bloggers interviewed grew up in India and emigrated within the last 15 years. Seven identified themselves as information technology professionals; six others had graduate degrees in fields that included biochemistry, English, communication and management. I asked them about their initiation into the world of food, motivations for blogging and the types of cooking they write about. The bloggers seemed ready to share their experiences of blogging and living in the USA and in one case, in the UK.

The diasporic bloggers are part of a growing social world of women who are situating themselves and their food blogs within the digital space of other Indian food blogs and within the greater world of food blogging at large. I examine how the bloggers shape the textualization of Indian food by highlighting its diversity and flexibility. The blogs posts construct diasporic gendered culinary publics through (1) remembering culinary textures of localities (2) promoting the global malleability of Indian cuisine and (3) navigating the politics and materiality of gendered transnational lives.

### ***Places lived and remembered***

#### *Homeland*

The turn to region and locality is very central to the bloggers in their contextualization of food practices. In the vignettes that emerge about themselves and their blog sites, diasporic bloggers establish their commitment to representing the foods of specific locales associated with their past. Instead of the stereotypical representations of Indian cuisine, the bloggers strive to showcase regional food within its relational and social context. Affective involvement and identification with regions are conflated with Indianness. Consider, for example, the sensory details and relational framing of regional cooking offered here:

My blog ... is a collection of Bengali Recipes representing the Bengali Cuisine as I know it. It also has those recipes that are non-Bengali but which we loved. The measurements are not always exact as I do not treat the kitchen as a lab but as a place where I follow my heart and rely on my senses and instinct. (Datta 2008)

Sharing culinary knowledge is linked to the desire to recreate the natural foods associated with the uncontaminated simplicity of distant localities.

I grew up near the beautiful banks of the river Godavari . . . one of the most fertile lands present and is rich in Coconut trees, Mango groves and Paddy fields . . . I have always had a great passion for cooking and enjoying food. I like to experiment and flavorise my dishes with a touch of Indian spices. After my marriage I moved to USA and came across lots of new kinds of veggies and fruits that I had never seen before. This gave much thrill and excitement to my cooking as I learnt to Indianise these Western veggies. (Jay, n.d.)

Another blogger highlights nature, antiquity and places in India that have endured.

Mahanandi is a beautiful temple town close to Nandyala, India and at the foothills of Nallamala forest range. Surrounded by lush forest, fresh water pools and gentle streams, the centuries old temple Mahanandi has a great influence on me. I grew up in Nandyala, and visited Mahanandi many times with my family and have memorable experiences of a life time. The name Mahanandi always evokes calm, content and happy feelings for me. We are made of the places where we lived, the food we ate and the people we interacted with. This website, Mahanandi, is a way for me to show my gratitude to all those what I am made of, the places, the food and the people. (Indira, n.d.)

The evocation of rivers and tranquility, restores a cultural context to the family meal in a transplanted context. One blogger honors the traditions of the Kongu region and its hospitality where now the waters of the river Cauvery runs polluted. In contrast, she celebrates the clean, majestic Potomac and the energy of the new location.

The Cauvery river and its slow deterioration has shaped my views on the environment. With ancestors who were farmers my mind is never farther from the river. From a vibrant clean river that I was familiar with during my childhood to the dirty polluted river of today, Cauvery is a fine example of environmental degradation. Today, I am fortunate to be living near another majestic river – the Potomac. The Potomac river and the Chesapeake Bay continues to remind me everyday of how clean waterways and healthy fish populations are intertwined with the health and wealth of the people who populate the region. (Indosungod, n.d.)

To the diaspora, India emerges as both pristine and overwhelming.

Familiar smells ranged from the aromas of different regional cuisines that wafted from open kitchen windows, to the grimy sweat of the relentless crowds, to the lingering metallic odor of trains and buses on my hands and my clothes, to the fishy rotting stench of the bay. I have not missed any of these smells except for the first. I make it a point to have those endearing aromas fill my kitchen on a regular basis. (Manisha 2011)

Delicate aromas and smells of revulsion mingle as regions are recalled through the senses. As Seremetakis (1994, 29) writes, ‘ . . . no smell is encountered alone. There are combinations of smells that make up a unified presence’.

### *Of places, borders and segues*

Food blogs use the strategy of sharing stories and posting personal preambles to transition into the recipes. Used skillfully by seasoned bloggers, the smooth segue is where questions of difference and identity are introduced and continued in the reader

responses. The bridging narratives capture the ways in which diasporic negotiations with food connect regions, memories and cultural borders.

Two years back, when I reached Uncle Sam's country, I was really nervous just like anybody who lands in a new place. I knew there won't be many Indians in the place we were going to live. For the same reason, I thought there won't be any Indian groceries either. It was a great relief when I saw spinach on our first trip to the grocery store. Like a flash of lightning this idea struck, 'Why not make spinach thoran instead of cheera thoran'. (Namitha 2009)

The subject of parenting in the diasporic context take center stage as preamble material, eliciting the most responses from readers. The complexity of making the contents of school lunch box acceptable to 'other' children is the subject of much tension in South Asian homes. One blogger launches on the diasporic politics of the school lunch in order to introduce a recipe for a sandwich that can beat the test of ridicule:

Yeow. That stinks. Whats that green stuff? It's disgusting. What's cauliflower? Why is it yellow? That's just gross . . . The disgusting green stuff is usually cilantro chutney or baby spinach. The result? She stopped taking chutney-cheese sandwiches – which she simply adores – for lunch. (Manisha 2008)

The writer continues that since then, the only lunch-worthy Indian foods, to her daughter, are only those without any trace of turmeric, ginger or garlic. A recipe for one such sandwich follows. A steady stream of responses followed from women who commiserated, and shared their own stories about crisis over Indian lunches relating it to local parochialism and prejudice.

Also, the other children's responses are based in their ignorance, due to lack of someone (parents) teaching them that it is not okay to make remarks like that about what someone is eating. I always have to wonder about the parent's attitudes toward people who are different, not like them. Even though you live in a cosmopolitan area, not everyone is cosmopolitan. (Reader comment 2008)

The bloggers suggest that due to their global relocations, they have acquired a sense of cosmopolitanism which stands in for gastronomic openness. Some of the preambles in the blogs echo the sense of advocacy that Appadurai (1988) saw in the cookbooks of the 1970s. A blogger from Canada uses the common complaint that Indian food is complicated as a segue to a series of recipes and collected tips:

Now before you roll your eyes at me and say, 'Yea sure, easy for you, you're Indian!', just hear me out. True, I was born Indian in an Indian household with a Mom who cooks the most delicious Indian food I know. But truth be told, and as much as I would like to believe, I wasn't born with Indian culinary instincts in me. Yes, like any of you not familiar with the South-Asian cuisine, I too started off without much knowledge . . . Try as I might, somehow, I can't convince people enough on just how simple and quick and not to mention, healthy, Indian food can be. So here is where my mind got to work. (Meena 2007)

This popular series of critical posts, *Intro to Indian*, has been picked up as a monthly column in a local Canadian newspaper. Another author Manisha Pandit of a very popular and long-standing blog describes her 'pet peeves' about misrepresentations of India and Indian food with alerts such as *dal* is not a soup, or people of India are

Indians not east Indians (Manisha 2012a). There is a strong sense of borders and boundaries which extends into the digital world and sets apart the subculture of the South Asian food blogosphere from the food blogosphere at large.

While the main goal of the bloggers is to reclaim regional integrity of Indian food, and most write for others in the diaspora, it is clear that many want their blogs to circulate widely. In the next section, I present some who strive to reach beyond the diaspora. Overall the recipes and posts about domestic and diasporic themes are gaining visibility in the digital space at large. The social traffic enabled by widgets, blog rolls, memes and the powerful logic of the algorithm accelerates the constitution of this mediated global collectivity.

### **Culinary flexibility**

The blogs which are read and linked by a broader audience in the greater digital domain are the ones offering recipes attuned to the so-called modern palate. I next discuss three blogs whose presentation of the cuisine through the modalities of fusion/adaptability and speed/precision, wins the endorsement of wider food circles

### ***Fusion and adaptability***

Hybrid recreations of Indian food like the *tandoori quesadilla* or the *curry naanwich*, are the trendy newcomers in global Indian cuisine. To Niv, who specializes in innovations, fusion was a natural extension of the melding of regional cuisines that she had experienced growing up in urban India. The experimentations arose from finding compromises and adaptive shortcuts for Indian food in her American kitchen. For instance, she used a waffle iron to make a south Indian *vadai* and while, the end product might look and feel different, she vouches it is 100% authentic. Incorporating fillo pastries, wonton wrappers, waffle irons and ricotta cheese, Niv has added 91 recipes to the popular website Food 52. As she told me, ‘it’s my way of taking Indian food to mainstream America’ (Nivedita 2012a). Her recipe fusing an Indian carrot *halwa* (Nivedita 2012b) with a blondie bar was accepted by the Cooking Channel and, according to Niv, with the telling comment: ‘We never expected to pick a dessert in the Indian category.’ Her fusion recipes, which respond to the stereotypical criticism that Indian desserts are too sweet and lack visual appeal, have drawn varied traffic to her blog.

Framing the image of Indian food in registers of activism, the blog *Holy Cow* offers Indian vegan food with a global twist and includes

... lots of fat-free, low-fat and gluten-free recipes, and some chatter about the wonderfulness of animals (especially mine:)). Most of my recipes are ideal for those of you who, like me, juggle home and a full-time career but love a delicious and nutritious meal that’s also easy to prepare at the end of a long day. But don’t just expect a recipe – I like telling you the stories behind the food I serve up. (Vaishali, n.d.)

With the playful title and chatty style, the blog constructs a flexible image of Indian food, one that is cosmopolitan and adaptive to current trends in healthful eating. To this blogger, her vegetarianism is a life style choice and not prescribed by tradition or religion. There is an easy mingling of regional, vegan Indian fare with other global cuisines. These images of Indian food, as being amenable to innovative

transformations, revise its stereotype of being laborious and moves it into the threshold of global modernity and digitally revised cosmopolitanism.

### *Speed and precision*

Terminologies such as the pinch, a handful or a smallish cup are now translated into cup measures and forms of precise reproducibility that ‘other’ readers would appreciate. Grandmothers in India are made to sit in front of laptops and video cameras and go through the steps of traditional recipes. Visiting mothers and mothers-in-law are routinely asked to prepare dishes which are then recast using precise measures and steps – the language of gastro modernity. To UK-based blog, *Quick Indian Cooking*, the chronopolitics of bringing Indian food up to the speed of modernity is a passionate project.

I started the blog after getting really quite frustrated and annoyed at people’s perception about Indian food and curry. Culturally it was quite abhorrent to me ... because I’m Indian and have lived in the west for a very long time. Unlike a lot of second and third generation Indians, I have grown up in India and my connections with India are very strong. It is a misnomer, – there is no such thing as Indian food ... much of what is known as Indian food in London is really Pakistani or Bangladeshi. (Basu 2012)

The blog, written with panache, showcases a global Indian woman who ‘you know, can bake the cupcakes over the weekend and is ready to roll out a presentation for Monday morning’ (Basu 2012). Confessing that she has never cooked till she came to London to study, her mantra is you do not have to slave over a hot stove to cook an Indian meal. In the book, which emerged from the success of the blog, *Miss Masala* describes herself as ‘a 30-something girl about town, corporate superbitch and keen Indian cook’ (Basu 2010, 9). To her large following of young professionals (mainly in the USA), she notes that Indian cooking is, in fact, blindingly easy and can be a regular part of frantic lives. To this she adds a few cautions: ‘I would rather eat my shoe than make a samosa from scratch. And that making round, fluffy rotis plays havoc with manicured fingernails’ (Basu 2010, 8).

*Ms. Masala*, hailed by the media in the subcontinent as a sort of Indian Bridgette Jones diary (NDTV, Just Books 2010), offers a discourse about food, consumption, postfeminism and diaspora lite. ‘Daily slaving over a steaming pot simply wasn’t for me. The goddess in me needed shortcuts’ (Basu 2010, 32). *Ms Masala* does not identify herself with the curry houses and the insularity of South Asian immigrants but projects herself as the new global Indian woman – ‘a far cry’, as she writes from ‘handloom-cotton image I had of aunties and seasoned cooks back home’ (Basu 2010, 7). Her blog and now book have a following in India, signaling new connections between the nation and its non-resident citizen blogger. Using the neoliberal registers of a trendy cosmopolitanism, she effectively inserts the culture of Indian food into the demands of a fast paced global lifestyle with playful tips on how to ‘juggle your masalas with your mascaras’ (Basu 2010, cover notes).

### **Gendered politics and mobile texts**

While these diaristic reflections circulate in digital space, they are also tethered to the materiality and gendered politics of transnational diasporic life. Many mentioned how friends help with the ‘tech’ stuff and spouses routinely get involved in the photography and tasting. Others talk about their compulsive checking for responses to their posts.

... I check blog comments on my phone when I actually should be finger-painting with the littlest one. Yes, the last one clearly proves I am a blog addict. So to be a better Mother, **I need to become calmer** – count from 1 to 100 when irritation strikes, **fitter** – get exercise to build energy and **get over my blog addiction** – How? Blogging gives me a high like few other thing does and is the only thing I do in my free time (which btw is after 10pm on weekdays and some days at lunch in work). I get immense happiness putting together a post, photo-shopping and writing. I get to be creative by my own rules and often think my life would have a big void if I did not blog. I also love just fleeting from one blog to another and nosing around in total stranger's lives. Sounds like a crack addict? Well almost. (Datta 2011)

These gendered expressions and interactions in the blogs are shaped by the particularities of the digital space or the socio-technical assemblage from which they arise (Van Doorn 2011). The diasporic performances are being constructed within predominantly entrepreneurial enclosures of the blog space where various media forms converge. In my small sample of 13 bloggers, two are published authors and one has signed a book contract (Basu 2010; Datta 2013).

During the time I was conducting my interviews, a blogger in India, *R*, who wrote under the name *Miri*, died after a long illness. The diasporic culinary blogosphere went into mourning and pledged to cook her recipes in her memory. One of the bloggers actually helped *Miri* moderate her comments during her illness.

So I think *R* actually almost symbolizes a lot of us, where we develop relationships over the internet and we are not bogged down or held back ... in *R*'s case the internet allowed her to be who she was although her body was not letting her. She was in India, this support system is all over the world, we are talking on Facebook, we are sending each other emails, there are some who did not know she was ill. ... One of the reasons we connected was because we grew up in Bombay and loved street food. (Manisha 2012b)

The death of *R* became a focal point, a catalyst for the community to mourn, connect and renew their commitment to digital activity. While they lamented that they had just learnt that her real name was *R*, they celebrated the fact that she blogged about recipes from all over the world while still in India. While most of them had never met her in real life, there was a shared understanding that they knew her well through her blog and recipes. *Miri*'s food in turn perpetuates the cultural work of remembrance.

While locations and geographies shape these blogs, so too does the economy. While the bloggers repeatedly note that the blogs are hobbies or activities that they engage in for fun, their closely tracked content produces value for the digital economy (Terranova 2000, 35). In addition, the material conditions of their lives are dependent on the demands of economic globalization for the flow of labor from India. As a result of outsourcing, globalization and the postcolonial emphasis on technical education, Indians account for a very high number of skilled foreign workers in the West. Some bloggers themselves attribute the explosion of food blogs among young women in the USA to be a backlash of immigration policies and nested systems of local and global patriarchy. While many of the bloggers self-identify as software or information professionals, the global circuits of information workers are highly gendered. It is mainly men who come to the USA as skilled economic migrants (H-1B visa), whereas their dependent spouses (H-4 visa) are not permitted to work, get drivers licenses or even in some states a social security number as identification (Uma Devi 2002). There is much anecdotal conjecture from the media (Challapalli 2006), from the diasporic community and my own respondents that many women who are on a H-4 visa and do not have

authorization to work begin to blog. The visa issue is typically not discussed but here is one exception:

While there is a strong lobby for illegal immigrants, the general populace is unaware of what an H4 spouse undergoes in terms of isolation from society: can't work, can't drive, is totally dependent. Winter is a daunting prospect when the days are cold and dark. If the Indian food blogs that are emerging are a fallout of this situation, then that is something **very positive** that is happening. Because even if the women are physically alone at home, they are virtually connected or are connecting with one another through very strong bonding agents, **culture and food**. That is very comforting. (Manisha 2006)

Predictably, the cuisine has gained more global visibility than many of the women bloggers who move with their families following the pathways of capital.<sup>6</sup> The blogs, by and large, avoid political discussions and choose instead to remain as stylistic spaces of culinary display and domestic reflections

### Conclusion

Mobilizing the familiar and banal through the use of image, text and algorithmic possibilities, the food blogs examined here reflect and shape diasporic life and identifications in the global neoliberal context. The digital practices of place-making create diasporic environments that are both 'privately public and publicly private' (Papacharissi 2010, 142). Using interactive modalities and synchronous communication across borders, the blogs fill the spatial gaps and temporal disconnects that have historically clinched the isolation of the diasporic experience. Instead, the bloggers establish a transnational circuit of exchange, a dynamic connection with their country of origin which is no longer a lost homeland, consigned to nostalgia, but represents 'a generative living source of knowledge and history' (Kun 2004, 744).

While media technologies are influential, they work within the parameters of the normative social order. Gender roles and social hierarchies that frame the diasporic locations are reaffirmed, for the most part, with conviviality. The blogs construct webs of affiliation between women but within a tiered system of popularity and visibility. Collectively, the bloggers actively attach the cuisine with a diasporic brand of cosmopolitanism and in the process, recalibrate the regional politics of Indian food for consumption in the global context. This tethering of cuisine to the cultural lives of diaspora is significant, given how cultural products from India circulate in the global marketplace delinked from their quotidian cultural contexts.<sup>7</sup>

The food blogs reveal a mediatic shift in the nature of diasporic culture, community and connectivity. The interesting fact is not that diasporic groups are using new media but rather how the very conditions of connectivity are transforming the meaning of how communities are formed. First of all, the blogs with the affordances of converging media technologies enable a sustained connection with India and the enactment of a flexible mode of cosmopolitan nationalism. Next, this cultural work occurs within an entrepreneurial frame of communicative capitalism (Dean 2010), where every recipe and post is likely to be counted or rated for its popularity and circulatory muscle. A steady filtering of content and community occurs through both authorial and automated processes. While on the surface, a vibrant likeminded diasporic community seems to emerge organically, it is to a large extent coaxed into formation (Lampa 2004) and regulated by aggregators and other technical manipulations. The blogs capture the digital reimagination and

production of a strategically distributed version of diasporic public, embedded within the market logics of a digital economy and a culture of individuation. This merging of a neo-liberal ethos and technology shifts the register of discussion both about food and diaspora. While publics, as Warner (2002, 8) argues, exist only by virtue of their imagining, global mobility, media and market logics set the context for transnational communities to be actualized. Both in terms of food practices and community, the blogs represent the active work of consolidation by diasporic bloggers who are tastes networking and keeping track of each other's tastes, texts and digital movements.

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### Notes

1. On the notion of circulation, I draw on Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003) and am indebted to the work of Breckenridge (1995) and Appadurai (1996).
2. Warner (2002, 8) writes that we recognize people we do not know as members of our world because we are related to them as 'transient participants in common publics'. Through the circulation of text and digital maneuvers, smaller communities of affect emerge. Here, I make a scalar and affective distinction between publics and community.
3. More recently, there is a shift towards microblogging, as noted by Lenhart and Fox (2006).
4. On the reproduction of racial politics in the food blog space, see Mannur (2013).
5. *Foodworld*, a food blog aggregator, maintained by one of the bloggers, lists blogs on Indian food written mainly by South Asian bloggers. Accessed October 17, 2012. <http://foodworld.redchillies.us/>.
6. In the Indian context where dining across caste boundaries might be a delicate matter, Appadurai (1988, 7) writes recipes move where people may not. Here, we see a global variation. See also Mannur (2005).
7. On the disconnect between exoticized perceptions of cultural products and the life of immigrants, see Rubin and Melnick (2007).

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