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Exploring the Popular Culture of Street food: A Journey into the World of Taste

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ABSTRACT:

Food, one of the most essential necessities of human life often tells the story of human history, its culture, economic and social conditions. Food is a marker of class and an instrument of socialization. Eating together plays a great role in building up human relations and spreading the culture of taste. Street food that are usually sold on the streets by hawkers and vendors in portable stalls and carts is one of the much sought after choice among the current generation. Street food culture is closely linked with road travels and has become a fashion statement for the riders who are on a mission to discover new tastes and to get in touch with unfamiliar places.

India with its rich culinary tradition and diverse cuisine offers a wide range of tastes that stirs the appetite of a food lover. A revival of the traditional food that caters to the needs of the modern taste is noticeable in such small streetshops and this enables the passing on of dietary wisdom from generation to generation. However, the migratory flows in this globalized era has brought about a mixing of cuisines and tastes too. A coexistence of tastes; old and new is the highlight of such food points. The finger-licking good food provided in the streets are often a mélange of exotic spices and ingredients that satisfy our olfactory senses too. The climatic conditions influence the choice of food. The hot, ready-to-eat street food being much cheaper and affordable attracts a large number of the lower- middle income group. The advantage of being freshly cooked also invites a lot of people to savour the delicacies. A carnivalesque celebration is a characteristic feature of all these stalls. They become symbols of local identity and popular culture – a culture which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people. This paper attempts to examine the interconnectedness of street food and popular culture and its impact upon the life of modern generation.

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Food, one of the most vital needs of human life often tells the story of human history, its cultural, economic and social conditions. Food is a marker of class and an instrument of socialization. Eating together plays a very significant role in building up human relations and spreading the culture of taste. Street food that are usually sold on the streets by hawkers and vendors in portable stalls and carts is a much sought after choice among the current generation. Street food is closely associated with popular culture. Raymond Williams observes that popular culture is a culture which is widely favored or well-liked by many people. Culture suggests “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group”. Street

food culture has seeped into the lives of people and it has opened up new avenues in the food industry. It caters to the food demands of the urban dwellers mainly the middle income and the low income groups. Street food is closely linked with the road travels and has become a fashion

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Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

statement for the riders who are on a mission to discover new tastes and to get in touch with unfamiliar places and cuisines.

Popular culture as Stuart Hall claims is a site where “collective social understandings are created” (Storey 4). It is a culture “lived and experienced by people in their day-to-day existence in a particular place and at a particular moment in time” (Storey 46). It carries within its definitional field connotations of inferiority: a second best culture for those unable to understand, let alone appreciate real culture (Storey 8). Raymond Williams agrees with Hall when he observes that popular culture is the culture that is left over after we have decided what high culture is. Popular culture is a residual category that accommodates texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. In other words, it is a definition of popular culture as inferior culture. Nevertheless its inferior status has been glossed over now as the current generation accept it as a part of their culture. This paper attempts to examine the interconnectedness of street food and popular culture and its impact upon the life of modern generation. The paper also looks at some of the major cities of India which provide the best street food in the country.

India with its rich culinary tradition and diverse cuisine offers a wide range of tastes that stirs the appetite of a food lover. A revival of the traditional food that caters to the needs of the modern taste is noticeable in street food stalls and in this way the dietary wisdom is carried on from generation to generation. The migratory flows in this globalized world has created diasporic identities and this has led to the development of hybrid varieties of food which involves a mixing of cuisines and tastes. Food items like noodles and pizza of foreign origin are appropriated in a local manner. Local varieties of such foreign cuisine find currency these days. A coexistence of tastes; old and new is the highlight of such food points.

The “finger-lickingly” good food provided in the streets are often a mélange of exotic spices and ingredients that satisfy our olfactory senses. The climatic conditions influence the choice of food. Each country has different food patterns that provide them with ample nutrition and health to cope with their climatic pattern. The hot, ready-to-eat street food being much cheaper and affordable attracts a large number of the lower-middle income group. The advantage of being freshly cooked also invites a lot of people to savor the delicacies. A carnivalesque celebration is the characteristic feature of all these stalls. Today, roughly 2.5 billion people around the planet eat street food. (Colleen Taylor Sen xix).

Social networking sites play a great role in spreading news about street vendors who sell good food. Stories and blogs written in their favour by those who relish street food and the word of mouth advertisement are the only affordable sources for spreading information about the presence of such street food stalls. The stalls which come alive in the late evenings are illuminated in such a way that no passerby can escape the glance of delicious food items stacked in the glass cupboards. The mobility of the stalls act as a great boon to the street vendors as they can assemble their improvised stalls in accordance with the demand and number of customers. Street vendors who usually sell food from an open-air stand, cart or truck place their stalls in places where the people congregate in large numbers. Bus and train stations, vicinity of schools and colleges, carnivals, fairs and athletic events are their usual venues. They also focus on the routine commuters, slum dwellers and labourers who cannot afford expensive restaurants run by the corporates. People belonging to the low income group derive a surrogate pleasure consuming similar food items served by the street food vendors. The shanties and stalls which may not be officially sanctioned continue to cater to the needs of common man and win their appreciation. A subversion of power is observable when they enjoy a carnivalistic pleasure relishing the delicacies provided in the food stalls.

Street food stalls provide income to a large number of illiterate as well as less educated people. Entrepreneurs look upon it as a source of employment. Setting up a stall requires minimum start up investment and little training; one just need to possess cooking skills and expertise in management. The unused labour of the family members who may be veterans in culinary art can be profitably made use of in the business which will add on to the income of the family.

The lack of hygiene in some stalls becomes a problem that needs to be addressed when the street food culture is

growing tremendously. Health hazards posed by the street food stalls remain a matter of grave concern. A major factor is the insufficient availability of clean water. As the stalls often shift from place to place, a permanent wash basin with pipe system cannot be installed. The water containers need not always be clean and there are chances for germs to grow inside the stored water. The utensils used for cooking and serving may not be cleaned properly. All these increase the chance for the spreading of epidemic diseases like diarrhea and dysentery. Exposure to flies and rodents and poor personal hygiene and cleanliness during food preparation and handling are certain drawbacks of such food points. The food items like snacks that are taken home as parcels are often wrapped in newspapers, this can lead to the carbon content in the newspaper mixing with the food items. The lack of proper storage facilities may lead to the spoiling of food. In tropical countries with high temperature and humidity, the problems are intensified, especially if the ingredients or the dishes are kept at a room temperature for a long period of time which turns it into an excellent habitat for bacteria to thrive. One of the most effective ways of killing dangerous microorganisms is by proper cooking. Serving at or reheating food to 160°F (71°C) may eliminate many of the bacteria. As street food plays an important role in the eating patterns of people in many developing countries, international organizations have been working to develop guidelines for its production and regulation. The two most prominent are the Food and agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), both divisions of the United Nations (Colleen Taylor Sen xxix)

Eating street cooked food regularly may invite health problems as the majority of the stalls re-use the same cooked oil to deep fry the food items. This reduces its nutritional value and invite stomach diseases. Waste management is quite hazardous for the street vendors and this often ends up in heaping the waste at some places without any management. Rules and regulations regarding street food need to be made stringent as it is the source to pacify hunger to a very large number of people. Even though authorization and licensing is required to conduct the sale and production of food items, only a very small number of vendors take the license issued by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI).

FSSAI has introduced a “clean street food hub programme” which involves identifying street food hubs and auditing these for cleanliness and hygiene. A “clean street food hub certificate” will be issued to those who meet the criteria put forward by the FSSAI. Ahmedabad’s Kankaria Lake Area with nearly 66 vendors became India’s First Clean Street Food Hub. Ensuring standard by implementing such programmes give a sense of assurance to the large number of people who depend upon street food. Such initiatives will also boost the tourism prospects of street food industry. FSSAI CEO Pawan Kumar Agarwal said to the Economic Times that their aim is to bring sustainable change and improvement in street food hygiene and to raise health and safety standards of street food. They propose to train the individuals and to provide them with gloves, aprons etc. and to work with different authorities to give better street lighting, drainage, garbage removal and safe water to the vendors.

Street food is mostly made of fresh ingredients rather than the ones that are stored in the refrigerators for days. Lack of storage facilities is sometimes a blessing in disguise since they focus on preparing the exact amount of food that can be sold in one day. Lively street food stalls are the main attractions for the night riders. Most of these stalls start in the evenings and are owned by persons who do certain other jobs in the day time. The enticing aroma of the freshly cooked and fried food items attract the people who are out after their job, or are just walking around to enjoy a pleasant and stomach-full night. Unlike the restaurants which provide food after a long wait, the serving of dishes is quite quick to cater to the needs of the fast-life. Families often buy food from stalls and eat from the cars which are parked nearby.

Street food stalls were the hangout places for men right from the early days and it continues to be so even now. Savoring the authentic delicacies of a region from its local street food stalls has become a major attraction for the tourists also. During the earlier days, street food vendors sold their products in man-made baskets or portable stands. Later on, they upgraded the same and resorted to vehicles of various kinds such as tricycles or push-carts. Now, the street food

industry is flourishing at a faster pace and the vendors have started using food trucks which enable them to expand the business.

The preparation of street food is done in an inviting way making the process of cooking transparent to the customers so that they can enjoy a live cooking experience also. The snacks are fried on the spot in deep-frying pans sizzling with oil and sending out enchanting aroma. Fried food items are the most popular among the street foods and they are in great demand during festivals, fairs and evenings. *Pakor*s or *Bhajis* are usually made by frying cauliflower, potatoes, eggs, onions or paneer coated in a flour batter. Stuffed *samosa* also is a very popular snack. The marinated red chilly smeared pieces of chicken, duck, mutton, beef and other meat ready to be hung on open grills to make *kebabs* and the like are mouthwatering sights. They are usually served with naan or parathas. Fresh tender corns smeared with salt and chilly paste are roasted and sprinkled with lemon juice and seasonings. Roasted meat and dishes made out of it like *shawarma* have become popular in the country with the arrival of Arabian cuisine. Thinly minced meat is rolled into a *kubbos* smeared with mayonnaise and is presented along with salted vegetables. Boiled eggs and vegetables are used in different ways mixing it in accordance with the preference of the customers. Steam cakes and various varieties of *appam* which are prepared in front of the customers are served along with *kurumas* and curries of different tastes both veg and non-veg and it has become the most preferred food of the health conscious food lovers. Soups made of meat and vegetables are also major attractions. Toasts made of various ingredients with bread as the base is one of the cheapest and the most sold out street food. Sauces mainly tomato sauce, chili sauce and chutneys green or red are the usual accompaniments to the delicacies. *Chaats* of different flavours which are a mix of fried dough, boiled potatoes, chickpeas, coriander leaves, spices and watery sauces with mixed tastes are also available in plenty. Its variants *gol gappa* in Delhi, *pani puri* in Mumbai which have originated from North India are well acclaimed across the world. Steamed *momos* filled with meat or vegetables often served with spicy sauces attract the youngsters. It originated in Tibet and became popular across India. Food is mainly cooked upon kerosene or gas stoves. Fire wood and charcoal are also used whenever possible.

Stalls that provide steaming coffee and tea are a common sight to see. *Nimbu pani* or lemon juice and mint juice top the list of freshly made juices. Tender coconut water which is a great source of vitamins and minerals are also of great demand. *Lassi* or cold yogurt is best suited to beat the heat. It is either sweet or salty and is mixed with fruit pulps according to one's taste. Freshly pressed sugarcane juice is of high demand during the scorching summers.

Indian street food industry offers a wide range of sweet delicacies too. Of these crispy yellow and orange *jalebis* oozing with sugary syrup that have travelled all the way from Arabia to India during the 14th or 15th the century remain as a delicious choice. Sweet *kulfi*s with its pyramid shape attract children and the grownups alike. Seasonal fruits and vegetables like cucumber, carrots, radishes, mango, pineapple, and water melon are sliced, spiced and served in stalls. It is estimated that in India alone, there are more than 10 million street vendors (Colleen Taylor Sen xxi).

A journey through the world of taste of the major metropolitan cities of India reveal that street food vendors have carved a niche for themselves in every city. To begin with let us have a look at Delhi, the capital city of India, renowned as the "food capital" The street food stalls of Delhi buzz with a variety of immensely popular and tasty food items. *Kebabs*, juicy *gol gappas*, sugary *jalebis*, crunchy *chaats*, *chole bhatura*, *rajma chawal*, butter chicken, *parathas*, *lassi* etc are to name a few. Roadsides of places like Chandni Chowk, Connaught Place, Purani Dilli, Karol Bagh are furnished with an array of stalls which offer sumptuous dishes and have become food heavens for foodies. The Mughal empire left its imprints on many of Delhi's signature cuisines.

Kolkata, "the City of Joy" is renowned for its relishing culinary delights. The city provides tasty and wholesome street food at a cheaper rate. Kolkata has several cuisines to mark its presence in the world. According to the survey "Taste

of Travel” mentioned in a report in the Times of India, Kolkata won the title of India’s Best Street Food Hub. The sweet delicacies like *rasgullas*, *sondesh*, *thandai/kulfi*, the spicy *chanachur*, *jhaalmuri*, cheese *kebabs*, mutton chops, cutlets, *kathi* rolls, *ghugni*; the fish varieties *bhakti*, *macher jhol* all add to the tasty menu of the food lovers of Kolkata. The streets of the city like Park Street or New Market, North Kolkata will introduce you to the most tasty food hubs of the city.

Lucknow brings forth an overwhelming list of food varieties which carry over a legacy of the Nawabs who ruled the land centuries ago. The city is known for the Awadhi cuisine. *Galouti kebabs*, *tunday kebab*, *kormas*, *parathas*, *sheermaal*, *Lucknawi biriyani*, *nihari* and *kulcha*, *malaaidar kulfis* take the foodie on a celestial tour. In Lucknow street food is very cheap. The lanes of Hazratganj, Old Lucknow or Aminabad are filled with umpteen eateries where the customers visit again and again.

Mumbai known as “the city of dreams” is the most populous city in India. It is a veritable heaven for foodies and offers exciting varieties of street food. *Vada pav* and masala tea, *pav Bhaji*, *misal pav*, Bombay sandwich, *panipuri*, *bhelpuri*, *sevpuri*, *dahipuri*, ice *golas* and *kulfis* are the typical Mumbai street food. Juhu Chowpatty Beach, Nariman Point and Bhendi Bazar are well-known for its plethora of food vendors.

Hyderabad offers limitless treat to the non-vegetarian foodie. The cuisines are a blend of the Mughul, Turkish and Andhra cuisine. Hyderabad biriyani and Hyderabad *haleem* which are rich in flavour and spices are world famous. *Bolti kebab*, *seekh kebabs* Hyderabad chicken 65, *lukhmi*, *nihari*, *gosht pasinde* are some of the dishes exclusive to Hyderabad. Irani tea and Osmania biscuits form a great combination.

Ahmedabad is a vegetarian’s favourite place. *Khakhra*s, *fafdas*, *theplas*, *mathari*, *dhoklas*, *basundi*, *chaats*, *khamans*, *gotas* or *pakor*as, *jalebi* are some of the delicacies which attract the people to come and savour these repeatedly. The old Ahmedabad caters to the needs of the non-vegetarians and offers tandoori chicken, roasted mutton, *nihari* and amazing mutton samosas.

Indore is considered as “the food capital of central India”. *Gulab jamuns*, *rabdi*, *kalakand* and *malpuas*, *poha* with *namkeen*, *jalebis*, *kachoris*, *tikkis*, and *bhutte ka kees* are the much sought after delicacies in Indore. Stalls at Chappan Dukan, old Sarafa Bazar offer authentic Indore cuisines.

Chennai provides an array of South India’s signature dishes of which *Idli*, *dosa* along with sambhar and varieties of chutneys top the list. *Uthappam* a thick dosa with vegetables toppings, masala *dosa* with a thick gravy of potato masala inside the wrap are the variations of *dosa*. Poori masal, *vada*, *samosa*, *atho*- a Burmese dish consisting of noodles with vegetables, *bhajis* of different vegetables, *puttu*, *sundal*, *idiyappam* are some of the must try street food. *Kothu porotta*, different *murukkus*, *kulfi*, *jalebis* etc. attract people towards the stalls. Fish varieties are available at the famous Marina Beach.

Kerala known as “God’s Own Country” offers a wide variety of spicy and tasty food items that satisfy any food lover. *Puttu* biriyani, *kappa* biriyani, *neypathal*, *appam*, *idiyappam*, *pathiri*, *dosa* along with roasts of beef, chicken, duck, mutton, mussels or vegetable *kuruma* is the main food combination that attract the youth. The lush green backwaters of Alleppy is known for the fish varieties and the dishes made out of it. Crab fries, *karimeen* fry, squid roast, grilled prawns etc are the masterpieces made of fish. Malabari cuisines offer an extravaganza of dishes that are rich in aroma and taste. *Chattipathiri*, *arikadukka*, *mutta mala*, *mutta appam*, chicken *pola*, *samosa* etc are to name a few.

Bangaluru city offers a wide variety of cuisines from all over the world. Variety of *chaats*, *pav bhaji*, *vada pav*, different varieties of masala *dosa*, paneer sweet corn *dosa*, butter masala *dosa*, gobi Manchurian, tikka roll, banana bun, bobbatlu or *puran poli*, *idli vada* and crispy dosas, chicken *kathi* wrap, mutton *bhuna*, mutton *tikka* and *reshmi kebab* are some of the main attractions, Food stalls at V V Puram Food Street, Shivaji Nagar, Frazer town etc provide the best of Bangalore’s street food.

Street food was initially meant to be served to the factory workers who did not have proper spaces to cook and to those who could not afford restaurant food daily. Now, it has become a part of the popular culture. The consumers enjoy a vicarious pleasure while eating street food which is much cheaper compared to the other food points; one could eat to one's full and still pay a very small amount.

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