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Meat Eating and the Transition from Plant-Based Diets among Urban Indians

Tani Khara, Matthew B. Ruby

India has one of the world's highest proportions of plant-based consumers relative to its total population (Sawe). However, the view that India is a predominantly vegetarian nation is likely inaccurate, as recent findings from the 2014 Indian Census indicate that only three in ten Indians self-identity as vegetarian (Census of India). Other studies similarly estimate the prevalence of vegetarianism to range from about 25% (Mintel Global) to about 40% (Euromonitor International; Statista, "Share"), and many Indians are shifting from strict plant-based diets to more flexible versions of plant-based eating (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). When it comes to meat eating, poultry is the most widely consumed (USDA Foreign Agricultural Service; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Some claim that the changing consumer landscape is also eroding traditional taboos associated with beef and buffalo meat consumption (Kala; Bansal), with many tending to underreport their meat consumption due to religious and cultural stigmas (Bansal).

This change in food choices is driven by several factors, such as increasing urbanisation (Devi et al.), rising disposable incomes (Devi et al.; Rukhmini), globalisation, and cross-cultural influences (Majumdar; Sinha). Today, the urban middle-class is one of India's fastest growing consumer segments (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania), and the rise in the consumption of animal products is primarily occurring in urban India (National Sample Survey Office), making this an important market to investigate.

From a global perspective, while many Western nations are increasingly adopting plant-based diets (Eswaran), the growth in meat consumption is predicted to mainly come from emerging markets (OECD/FAO) like India. With these points in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore contemporary eating practices in urban India and to understand how social structures, cultures, and traditions influence these practices. The findings indicate that the key reasons why many are transitioning away from plant-based diets are the rise of new and diverse meat-based foods in urban India, emerging tastes for meat-based cuisines, and meat becoming to be viewed as a status symbol. These factors are further elaborated upon in this article.

Method

A key question of this research was "What are eating practices like in urban India today?" The question itself is a challenge, given India's varied cultures and traditions, along with its myriad eating practices. Given this diversity, the study used an exploratory qualitative approach, where the main mode of data gathering was twenty-five unstructured individual face-to-face interviews, each approximately sixty minutes in duration. The discussions were left largely open to allow participants to share their unique eating practices and reflect on how their practices are shaped by other socio-cultural practices. The research used an iterative study design, which entailed cycles of simultaneous data collection, analysis, and subsequent adaptations made to some questions to refine the emerging theory. Within the defined parameters of the research objectives, saturation was adequately reached upon completion of twenty-five interviews.

The sample comprised Mumbai residents aged 23 to 45 years, which is fairly representative given about a third of India's population is aged under 40 (Central Intelligence Agency). Mumbai was selected as it is one of India's largest cities (Central Intelligence Agency) and is considered the country's commercial capital (Raghavan) and multicultural hub (Gulliver). The interviews were conducted at a popular restaurant in downtown Mumbai. The interviews were conducted predominantly in English, as it is India's subsidiary official language (Central Intelligence Agency) and the participants were comfortable conversing in English. The sample included participants from two of India's largest religions—Hindus (80%) and Muslims (13%) (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India), and comprised an even split of males and females.

The Market Research Society of India has developed a socio-economic classification (SEC) grid that segments urban households into twelve groups (Market Research Society of India). This segmentation is based on two questions: level of education—from illiteracy to a postgraduate degree—and the ownership of eleven items that range from fairly basic (e.g., electricity connection, gas stove) to relatively sophisticated (e.g., refrigerator, personal computer). As previous qualitative work has found that education levels and disposable incomes can significantly impact one's ability to make informed and deliberate food choices (Khara), and given meat is a relatively expensive commodity in India (Puskar-Pasewicz), the study focused on the most affluent segments—i.e., SEC A1 and some of SEC A2.

It is said that researcher values and predispositions are to some extent inseparable from the research process, and therefore that potential researcher bias must be managed by being self-aware, looking for contradictory data, and being open to different interpretations of the data (Ogden). As the interviewer is a vegan of Indian ethnicity, she attempted to manage researcher bias in several ways. Triangulation of data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, product analysis) helped provide a multi-faceted understanding of the topic (Patton). The discussion guide and findings were also discussed with researchers from different cultural and dietary backgrounds. It is also argued that when a researcher shares the same background as the participants—as was the case in this study—participants may remain silent on certain issues, as they may assume the researcher knows the context and nuances in relation to these issues (McGinn). This arose in some instances as some participants said, "it's standard stuff you know?" The interviewer hence took an "outsider" role, stating "I'll need to know what standard stuff is", so as to reduce any expectation that she ought to understand the social norms, conventions, and cultural practices related to the issue (Leckie). This helped yield more elaborate discussions and greater insight into the topic from the participant's own unique perspective.

The Rise of New and Diverse Meat-based Foods in Urban India

Since the early 1990s, which marked the beginning of globalisation in India, urban Indian food culture has undergone a significant change as food imports have been liberalised and international food brands have made their way into the domestic market (Vepa). As a result, India's major urban centres appear to be witnessing a food revolution:

> Bombay has become so metropolitan, I mean it always was but it's
> so much more in terms of food now … and it's so tempting. (Female,

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> age 32)

The changing food culture has also seen an increase in new dishes, such as a lamb burger stuffed with blue cheese, and the desire to try out exotic meats such as octopus, camel, rabbit, and emu. Many participants described themselves as "food obsessed" and living in a "present and continuous state of food", where "we finish a meal and we've already started discussing our next meal".

In comparison, traditional plant-based foods were seen to have not undergone the same transformation and were described as "boring" and "standard" in comparison to the more interesting and diverse meat-based dishes:

> a standard restaurant menu, you don't have all the different leafy vegetables…It's mostly a few ***paneer*** and this or that—and upon that they don't do much justice to the vegetable itself. It's the same ***masala*** which they mix in it so everything tastes the same to me. So that's a big difference when you consider meats. If I eat chicken in different preparations it has a different taste, if I have fish each has a different taste. (Male, age 29)

> If I'm going out and I'm spending, then I'm not going to eat the same thing which I eat at home every day which is veg food ... I will always pick the non-vegetarian option. (Male, age 32)

Liberalisation and the transformation of the local media landscape also appears to have encouraged a new form of consumerism (Sinha). One participant described how an array of new TV channels and programmes have opened up new horizons for food:

> The whole visual attraction of food, getting it into your living room or into your bedroom and showing you all this great stuff … [There are now] kiddie birthdays which are ***MasterChef*** birthdays. There are ***MasterChef*** team building activities … So food is very big and I think media has had a very, very large role to play in that. (Female, age 40+)

In a similar vein, digital media has also helped shape the food revolution. India has the world's second largest number of Internet users (Statista, ***Internet***) and new technology seems to have changed the way urban Indians interact with food:

> We are using social sites. We see all the cooking tips and all the recipes. I have a wife and she's like, "Oh, let's cook it!" (Male, age 25)

> I see everything on YouTube and food channels and all that. I really like the presentation, how they just a little they cook the chicken breast. (Female, age 42)

Smartphones and apps have also made access to new cuisines easier, and some participants have become accustomed to instant gratification, given

> delivery boys who can satisfy your craving by delivering it to you … You order food from "Zomato" at twelve o'clock, one o'clock also. And order from "Sigree" in the morning also nowadays … more delivery options are there in India. (Male, age 30)

This may also partially explain the growing popularity of fusion foods, which include meat-based variations of traditional plant-based dishes, such as meat-filled dosas and parathas.

Emerging Tastes for Meat-based Cuisines

Many highlighted the sensory pleasure derived from meat eating itself, focusing on a broad range of sensory qualities:

> There's the texture, there's the smell, there's aroma, there's the taste itself … Now imagine if chicken or beef was as soft as ***paneer***, we probably wouldn't enjoy it as much. There's a bit of that pull. (Female, age 32)

Some discussed adopting a plant-based diet for health-related reasons but also highlighted that the experience, overall, was short of satisfactory:

> I was doing one week of GM Diet … one day it was full of fruits, then one day it was full of vegetables. And then in the third day, when it was actually the chicken part, frankly speaking even I enjoyed … you just cannot have veggies everyday. (Female, age 35)

> Only eating veg, I think my whole mouth was, I think gone bad. Because I really wanted to have something … ***keema*** [minced meat]. (Female, age 38)

Plant-based foods, in comparison to meat-based dishes, were described as "bland", "boring", and lacking in the "***umami zing***". Even if cooked in the same spices, plant-based foods were still seen to be wanting:

> you have chicken curry and soya bean curry made from the same ***masala*** … but if you replace meat with some other substitutes, you're gonna be able to tell the difference … the taste of meat, I feel, is better than the taste of a vegetable. (Male, age 32)

> The thing is, vegetarian dishes are bland … They don't get the feeling of the spices in the vegetarian dish ... So when you are eating something juicy, having a bite, it's a mouthful thing. Vegetarian dishes are not mouthful. (Male, age 25)

> At the end of a vegetarian meal … I think that maybe [it is] a lack of fullness … I'm eating less because you get bored after a while. (Female, age 32)

Tasting the Forbidden Fruit

In India, chicken is considered to be widely acceptable, as pork is forbidden to Muslims and beef is prohibited for Hindus (Devi et al.; Jishnu). However, the desire for new flavours seems to be pushing the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable, as highlighted in the discussion below with a 25-year-old male Muslim participant:

> Participant: When I go out with my friends then I try new things like bacon.
>
> Moderator: Bacon?
>
> Participant: Yeah... when I went with my colleagues to this restaurant in Bandra—it's called **Saltwater Cafe.** And they had this chicken burger with bacon wrapped on it.
>
> Moderator: Okay.
>
> Participant: And I didn't know at the time that it's bacon … They didn't tell me what we are having … When I had it, I told them that it's tasting like different, totally different, like I haven't had this in my life.
>
> Moderator: Yeah.
>
> Participant: And when they told me that it's bacon then, I thought, okay fine. Something new I can have. Now I'm old enough to make my own choices.

Similarly, several Hindu participants expressed similar sentiments about beef consumption:

> One of our friends, he used to have beef. He said this tastes better than chicken so I tried it. (Male, age 30)
>
> I ended up ordering beef which I actually would never eat ... But then everyone was like, it's a must try ... So I start off with eating the gravy and then it entices me. That's when I go and try the meat. (Female, aged 23)

Although studies on meat eating in India are limited, it seems that many prefer to consume meats outside the home (Suresh; Devi et al.), away from the watchful eyes of parents, partners and, in some instances, the neighbours:

> My dad would say if you want to eat beef or anything have it outside but don't bring it home. (Male, age 29)
>
> One of my friends … he keeps secret from his girlfriend … he come with us and eat [meat] and tell us not to tell her. (Male, age 26)
>
> People around have a little bit of a different view towards people eating non-veg in that area—so we wouldn't openly talk about eating non-veg when somebody from the locality is around. (Female, age 32)

Further to this point, some discussed a certain thrill that arose from pushing social boundaries by eating these forbidden meats:

> feel excited ... it gave me confidence also. I didn't know ... my own decision. Something that is riskier in my life, which I hadn't done before. (Male, age 25)

Meat as a Status Symbol

In urban India, meat is increasingly considered a status symbol (Roy; Esselborn; Goswami). Similarly, several participants highlighted that meat-based dishes tend to be cooked for special occasions:

> non-vegetarian meals [at home] were perceived as being more elaborate and more lavish probably as compared to vegetarian meals. (Male, age 34)
>
> **Dal** [a lentil dish] is one of the basic things which we don't make in the house when you have guests, or when you have an occasion … We usually make biryani…gravies of chicken or mutton. (Female, age 38)

Success in urban India tends to be measured through one's engagement with commodities that hold status-enhancing appeal (Mathur), and this also appears to apply to eating practices. Among meat-eating communities, it was found that serving only plant-based foods on special occasions was potentially seen as "low grade" and not quite socially acceptable:

> It's just considered not something special. In fact, you would be judged…they would be like, "Oh my God, they only served us vegetables." (Female, age 32)
>
> If you are basically from a Gujarati family, you are helpless. You have to serve that thing [vegetarian food] ... But if you are a non-vegetarian … if you serve them veg, it looks too low grade. (Female, age 38)

In fact, among some families, serving "simple vegetarian food" tended to be associated with sombre occasions such as funerals, where one tends to avoid eating certain foods that give rise

to desires, such as meat. This is elaborated upon in the below discussion with a Hindu participant (female, aged 40+):

> Participant: So an aunt of mine passed away a little over a year ago … traditionally we have this 13 day thing where you eat—We call it "**Oshoge**"*...* the **khaana** [food] is supposed to be neutral.
>
> Moderator: The **khaana** is supposed to be vegetarian?
>
> Participant: Yeah, it's not just vegetarian … You're supposed to have very simple vegetarian food like boiled food or you know **dahi** [plain yoghurt] and puffed rice … after a day of that, we were all looking at each other and then my cousin said, "Let me teach you how to fillet fish."

Similarly, a Muslim participant mentioned how serving certain dishes—such as dal, a common vegetarian dish—tends to be reserved for funeral occasions and is therefore considered socially unacceptable for other occasions:

> I'm calling a guest and I make **dal chawal** [lentils and rice] okay? They will think, **arrey yeh kya yeh mayat ka khaana hai kya?** [oh what is this, is the food for a corpse or what]? ... I can make it on that particular day when somebody has died in the family ... but then whenever guest is at home, or there is an occasion, we cannot make **dal**. (Female, age 38)

Conclusion

Urban India is experiencing a shift in norms around food choices, as meat-based dishes appear to have become symbolic of the broader changing landscape. Meat is not only eaten for its sensory properties but also because of its sociocultural associations. In comparison, many plant-based foods are perceived as relatively bland and uninteresting. This raises the question of how to make plant-based eating more appealing, both in terms of social significance and sensory enjoyment. In view of the attachment to familiar customs against the backdrop of a rapidly changing urban culture (Sinha; Venkatesh), perhaps plant-based foods could be re-introduced to the urban Indian as a blend of Western novelty and traditional familiarity (Majumdar), thereby representing the "the new along with the old" (Sinha 18), and hence enhancing their status. Given the growing body of research calling for a global shift to a heavily plant-based diet for reasons of health and sustainability (Hertwich et al.; Willett et al.), it is clearly important for future research to examine how to best encourage sustainable consumption via an emphasis on plant-based eating in both the developed world, where meat consumption is currently high, and in the developing world, where meat consumption is rising slowly in some countries—such as India—and more rapidly in others, such as China, Brazil and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (FAOSTAT).

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