KHANNA KHAZANA: FOOD LABOR IN COSMOPOLITAN INDIA

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Abstract

This work aims to understand the relationship between food workers, gender norms, and class dynamics within economically and culturally diverse Indian cities. While food workers, specifically chefs and line cooks, inhabit a central role in urban food economies and cultural systems, their labor and positionality transcend the spatial confines of a restaurant. However, present research solely focuses on food workers as laborers, rather than considering how their positionality shapes local and regional sociopolitical processes. This gap has manifested in both the subjugation of food workers to the boundaries of the restaurant and a dearth of insight into their perspective regarding the experiences, principles, and values that govern their work. The physical space thus provides ethnographic glimpses of restaurants in India; the consumers and food workers present in a restaurant interact with the spatial boundaries of the eatery in significant ways. Interviews with the food laborers reveal wider implications about social values from their position in both local and global political economies.

I contend that the experiences of food workers display characteristics of broader sociopolitical frameworks, where food workers contribute to the creation of sociopolitical cleavages within domestic and professional spaces. This research bridges these gaps through the triangulation of participant observation, qualitative interviews, and menu analysis at four eateries in Mumbai conducted over a week. I find that occupational limitations and systemic inequity of urban India faced by chefs have contributed to their views on gender, language, and westernization, thus impacting the larger political economy. The research suggests that Western ideals and influence shaped how some food workers in the Mumbai restaurant scene approached their work, while fiscal necessity motivated others. My study suggests important findings about the interplay between political economy and social factors—such as class, gender, and westernization—for food workers in major cities of the Global South. Through this project, I hope to highlight the agency of food workers: rather than viewing them through their occupation, this paper endeavors to view their occupation from the perspectives of food workers themselves.

Introduction

Through the air floats a myriad of sights, sounds, and smells. Many of them are pleasing, but the combination of them all sticks to my skin, overwhelming me with its magnitude. The sheer amount makes each individual indiscernible from the other, pulling me in all directions. I take a sharp, deep breath and ground myself in the moment. As I parse through everything around me, the picture slowly becomes clearer. In front of me stands a street of food stalls, each with a bustling crowd around it. The people wear work uniforms and sweaty foreheads, calling the employees to their attention. I see food being passed around, from *vada pav* to *bakharvadi*, all accompanying steaming glasses of brown chai. Loud music from the latest Hindi films fills the air, clashing with the speakers from each of the vendors. I hear a cacophony of conversations, dialects, and languages, all overlapping one another. Behind me, the busy street screams with fast cars and even faster auto rickshaws, where the cars communicate in honks. I smell no less than twenty dishes, all made with red chili powder, turmeric, asafoetida, onion, and garlic, as the air swirls with vapors of flavor.

Just five miles away: cut to standing in the middle of a grand, opulent hall, where the ceiling, stretching as far as the eye can see, drips with sparkling diamonds. As a live pianist plays music by artists from Coldplay to Billy Joel, the air permeates a sense of calm. Uniformed workers walk around with straight backs and soft smiles, politely approaching guests in every corner of the lobby. They speak in low tones, asking seemingly international guests for their needs first, stretching out from there. The conversations I hear, albeit limited, speak in accented English from every corner of the globe, laughs escaping behind manicured hands and the clicks of expensive shoes. All I smell is the luxurious cleaner the pions frequently scrub every surface with, fearing that a smudge should ever be visible. While food is whisked around, no dish looks distinguishable—the immaculate plating makes it difficult to discern the exact offering.

India's diversity is one of its most notable aspects, and its culinary diversity is no different. Food lays the foundation of any community, nation, or culture. From building camaraderie between groups of people to carrying forth tradition, food forms the cornerstone of Indian culture, both providing meaningful differentiation between various food traditions within the nation and uniting these very traditions through fusing cuisines. As such, the food culture of a given region in India provides insights into that region's history as well as its daily life.

The rise of globalization and the prominence of food culture within cosmopolitan cities have fundamentally changed how we view food. Restaurants have become social spaces that reflect and reinforce class differences instead of simply

functioning as taste-driven spaces.[1] Furthermore, consumption culture has undergone a notable transformation in the post-COVID era. Food now occupies an increasingly central position in the labor market as the sector devoted to food consumption outside the home continues to expand.[2] Restaurant owners and "food makers" profit from class divisions by tailoring service and dish selection accordingly.[3] While food is essential for survival, eating at restaurants has historically been a sign of luxury.[4] Nowadays, with the rise of fast food and casual dining establishments, eating out has become more accessible to people from across socioeconomic classes. The impact is twofold: on one hand, dining out is no longer as restricted; on the other, access to particular restaurants remains shaped by social cleavages.[5] At the same time, food consumers approach the food they eat outside of the home with a degree of self-awareness: they assess the perceived class designation of the restaurant, and through actively choosing, attempt to establish their own class designation through their choice of restaurant.[6]

The commodification of ethnic food for Western tastes is a global phenomenon and occurs because of the colonial nature of markets under globalization.[7] Food authenticity in frequented tourist destinations within non-

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[1] Thomas Lund et al., "Eating out in Four Nordic Countries: National Patterns and Social Stratification," *Appetite* 119 (June 2017). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.06.017; Sohrab Rahimi and Mallika Bose, "Social Class and Taste in the Context of US Cities: Validating Bourdieu's Theory of Distinction Using Restaurant Reviews," *Proceedings of the 2nd ACM SIGSPATIAL Workshop on Geospatial Humanities* (New York, NY, USA), GeoHumanities 18, Association for Computing Machinery (November 6, 2018:7, https://doi.org/10.1145/3282933.3282938.

[2] Lund et al., "Eating out in Four Nordic Countries: National Patterns and Social Stratification."

[3] Rahimi and Bose, "Social Class and Taste in the Context of US Cities," 8; Qi Yao et al., "The Impact of Social Class and Service Type on Preference for AI Service Robots," *International Journal of Emerging Markets* 17, no. 4 (2022): 1053, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS); Heewon Kim and SooCheong (Shawn) Jang, "Restaurant-Visit Intention: Do Anthropomorphic Cues, Brand Awareness and Subjective Social Class Interact?," *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 34, no. 6 (2022): 2373.

[4] Khondoker A. Mottaleb et al., "Consumption of Food Away from Home in Bangladesh: Do Rich Households Spend More?," *Appetite*, vol. 119 (December 2017): 59.

[5]Ibid.; Claudia Giacoman et al., "Vegan on a Low Budget: Enacting Identity through Cuisine in an Internet Community," *Food, Culture & Society* 0, no. 0 (2023): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2023.2191102; Rahimi and Bose, "Social Class and Taste in the Context of US Cities," 8.

[6] "Eating out in Four Nordic Countries: National Patterns and Social Stratification - ScienceDirect," accessed March 28, 2024, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666317308735?via%3Dihub; Anita Mannur, "Easy Exoticism: Culinary Performances of Indianness," in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Temple University Press, 2010), 185.

[7] Annisa Mardatillah et al., "Riau Malay Food Culture in Pekanbaru, Riau Indonesia: Commodification, Authenticity, and Sustainability in a Global Business Era," *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 6, no. 1 (2019): 8. Mannur, "Easy Exoticism," 182.

Western countries is often proclaimed as a marketing tool for tourists, regardless of the authenticity of the food itself.[8] The identity of the food laborers becomes justification for perceived authenticity, contributing to Western myths of the "Orient."[9] Western interactions with ethnic cuisines thus influence how restaurants choose to present themselves—their décor, menu items, and choice of servers all cater to a false authenticity that feeds into an orientalist view of culture, food, and people.[10]

Hierarchies within restaurants and food establishments mirror capitalist hierarchies in the broader political economy.[11] Modern social structures, including labor hierarchies in industries like food service, are influenced by historical systems of colonialism that imposed racial and cultural hierarchies.[12] These enduring structures continue to shape contemporary occupational roles and reinforce systemic inequalities. As Acker's seminal work underlines, the intersecting identities of race, class, gender, and caste are integrated within the workplace.[13] Food laborers, like servers and chefs, are also subject to discrimination based on their identity.[14]

The rise of food-based social media content and the aestheticization of food have turned food consumption into a performative act where food becomes a symbol of status.[15] Through social media, the consumption of ethnic food has become

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[8] Vishal Chauhan, "CULINARY IMPERIALISM AND THE RESISTANCE: A CASE STUDY OF MCDONALDIZATION AND MICRO-RESISTANCE IN DELHI, INDIA," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 75 (2014): 1287."The 'Ethnic' Restaurant," *China Perspectives*, no. 131 (2022): 63.

[9] Wendy Cheng, "Strategic Orientalism: Racial Capitalism and the Problem of 'Asianness,'" *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (2013): 152.Author?"The 'Ethnic' Restaurant," 62; Lisa Heldke, "'Let's Eat Chinese!': Reflections on Cultural Food Colonialism," *Gastronomica* 1, no. 2 (2001): 78.

[10] TUXUN, "The 'Ethnic' Restaurant," 64; Heldke, "Let's Eat Chinese!," 79; Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1995): 535; Elizabeth Buettner, "'Going for an Indian': South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain," *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 4 (2008): 872.

[11] Sarah E. Dempsey, "Racialized and Gendered Constructions of the 'Ideal Server': Contesting Historical Occupational Discourses of Restaurant Service," *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 5 (October 2021): 3.Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 443.

[12] Buettner, "'Going for an Indian,'" 868; Zachary W. Brewster and Sarah Nell Rusche, "Quantitative Evidence of the Continuing Significance of Race: Tableside Racism in Full-Service Restaurants," *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 4 (2012): 361.

[13] Acker, "Inequality Regimes," 449; Dempsey, "Racialized and Gendered Constructions of the 'Ideal Server,'" 5.

[14] Brewster and Rusche, "Quantitative Evidence of the Continuing Significance of Race," 365; Buettner, "'Going for an Indian,'" 871.

[15] Pascale Joassart-Marcelli, "The Taste of Gentrification: Appropriation and Displacement in the Cosmopolitan Foodscape," in *The $16 Taco*, *Contested Geographies of Food, Ethnicity, and Gentrification* (University of Washington Press, 2021), 163. Judith Williams, "THE MANGO GANG AND NEW WORLD CUISINE: White Privilege in the Commodification of Latin American and Afro-Caribbean

commodified into small, bite-sized visual formats.[16] The aestheticization of food, particularly through high-end dining experiences or fusion cuisine, often forces the labor and histories behind traditional food practices into the shadows while catering to an elite consumer base. While certain "acceptable" ethnic food establishments are advertised, embraced, and amplified, others receive racial backlash.[17] This phenomenon commodifies ethnic food to package it for elite audiences. As food becomes increasingly commodified through digital platforms and global markets, the distinction between "authentic" and "commercialized" cuisine is often dictated by privileged consumers rather than the communities that originally produced these culinary traditions.[18]

Current literature, however, fails to address the proliferation of food-based social media content as instances where representations of food spills outside of their physical spaces—restaurants—and instead confines food workers to their place of occupation. While scholars agree that an establishment itself can be influenced by sociopolitical dynamics outside the restaurant—and that owners, in turn, can influence an establishment—chefs and workers are reduced to mere functions of their labor. Scholars place food laborers within their place of work as products of sociopolitical cleavages, rather than recognizing them as autonomous, agentive figures in their own right. Therefore, this work seeks to analyze chefs as independent contributors to processes of dynamics, such as westernization and the construction of gender roles, rather than as passive subjects.

Case Selection and Methodology

My research is based on one week of fieldwork in Mumbai, India, where I conducted interviews with five chefs, each at a different restaurant. Each of them worked in kitchens that prepared North Indian food, even if they were not responsible for the preparation of the exact same dishes. Because I was interested in studying gender and age as relevant sociopolitical dynamics, I did not restrictively select participants based on either. However, all my participants ended up being men between the ages of 25 and 65. Out of ethical consideration, I use pseudonyms for the

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Foods," in *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, ed. Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 271.

[16] Joassart-Marcelli, "The Taste of Gentrification," 172; Williams, "THE MANGO GANG AND NEW WORLD CUISINE," 252; Raúl Matta and Padma Panchapakesan, "Deflated Michelin: An Exploration of the Changes in Values in the Culinary Profession and Industry," *Gastronomica* 21, no. 3 (2021): 47.

[17] Joassart-Marcelli, "The Taste of Gentrification," 174.

[18] Robert Lemon and Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Making Sacramento into an Edible City," in *The Taco Truck: How Mexican Street Food Is Transforming the American City* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 58; Williams, "THE MANGO GANG AND NEW WORLD CUISINE," 270.

chefs I interviewed and will not mention the names of the restaurants where they work. Instead, I will also refer to the restaurants through pseudonyms.[19]

Additionally, I use the terms "food workers" and "laborers" to refer to the chefs and anyone else working in the restaurant. However, I use "laborer" specifically when referring to the relationship between restaurant owner and worker—since, under capitalism, workers are treated as primarily objects to produce labor. While I discuss domestic labor, primarily performed by women, the sociopolitical dynamics that both govern hierarchies within the restaurants and are reproduced by food workers who do not consider domestic labor as equal to labor that produces capital.[20] I define urbanism similarly to Sheth, who characterizes an urban area by the concentration of population and way of life.[21] Mumbai falls squarely within this designation and is especially relevant for this topic since my analysis focuses on the social dynamics of an urban, cosmopolitan city. Mumbai is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, with about 73,000 people per square mile.[22] Because of the wide range of industries located in Mumbai, as well as its wide international impact, many people across India migrate to Mumbai for work. Most migrants relocate to the city for employment opportunities.[23] However, the city is gentrified and segregated, containing pockets of both immense wealth and extreme poverty. India faces extreme income inequality, and Mumbai is a prime example: over 60% of the population lives in slums without access to affordable housing, while some of India's wealthiest families also reside in the same city. Thus, Mumbai provides an ideal setting to analyze various sociopolitical dynamics such as wealth, gender, caste, and the role of westernization.

Mumbai was also the most accessible city in India for me as a researcher. Hindi is my native language, and I can also understand Marathi. Along with English, Hindi is an official language of India—accordingly, much of Mumbai's population speaks Hindi.[24] Furthermore, Hindi and English are the dominant languages of the workforce and are emphasized for all laborers across industries, as both have become tools of neoliberal capitalism.[25] Since Mumbai is located in the state of Maharashtra, where the

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[19] See Appendix A for a table of the names of interviewees, restaurant names, and descriptors of each restaurant.

[20] Eileen Boris and Jennifer N. Fish, "'Slaves No More': Making Global Labor Standards for Domestic Workers," *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014): 421.

[21] N. R. Sheth, "Modernization and the Urban-Rural Gap in India : An Analysis," *Sociological Bulletin* 18, no. 1 (1969): 19.

[22] "Mumbai Population 2025," accessed March 19, 2025, https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/india/mumbai#.

[23] Sheth, "Modernization and the Urban-Rural Gap in India," 19.

[24] Robert L. Hardgrave, "The DMK and the Politics of Tamil Nationalism," *Pacific Affairs* 37, no. 4 (1964): 402.

[25] Mehtabul Azam et al., "The Returns to English-Language Skills in India," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 61, no. 2 (2013): 339.

primary language is Marathi, effective communication requires a working knowledge of all three languages. Given my knowledge of all these languages, I knew I would be able to effectively communicate with all the chefs I would interview. My knowledge of colloquial phrases in the languages also helped me ease chefs into our conversation, allowing them a comfortable space in which to express their opinions. From a data interpretation perspective, my near-fluent knowledge in Hindi ensured that what the chefs expressed was preserved the way they meant it. Translation requires some adulteration of the initial phrase, and by interpreting the interviews in the original language, I was able to avoid most adulteration.

A prominent part of my research is the politics of access to restaurants and chefs. While I spent several weeks attempting to contact restaurants across Mumbai, I was met with resounding refusals all around. None of the chefs I interviewed agreed to participate based on my own outreach. The political circumstances within which this research was conducted also shaped my access to the research itself—I have family connections within the Indian government, all of whom have jurisdiction over the neighborhoods in Mumbai I was attempting to access. As a last resort, I contacted my family members to see if I could use their connections. The next day, I had three interviews lined up at expensive restaurants. I was also able to interview workers from a streetside eatery, or dhaba, and mid-range restaurants as a result of my grandfather's personal relationships.

To explain my access to the restaurants and chefs in question, I draw upon Cunliffe and Alcadipani's work on the politics of access. Cunliffe and Alcadipani posit the idea of "gatekeepers"—those at the top of some hierarchy who restrict access to members of a given space—these people tend to be at the top of the hierarchy and prevent anyone from the lower rungs from accessing from the outside. Applying this idea to my fieldwork, the gatekeepers of the restaurants were administrative, as the owners or managers of the restaurant were suspicious of the research activity and thus restricted access to their chefs and spaces for participant observation.[26] Cunliffe and Alcadipani's recommendation is to negotiate between pre-existing social dynamics and the result-driven nature of interviews by forming trusted relationships with both the intermediaries and the informants themselves.[27] In this case, I had to build trust after gaining access. By starting each interview with a conversation, only recording interviews if agreed by the interviewee, and conducting interviews in the interviewee's chosen language, I was able to build a rapport with the chefs. In fact, India's political system made that necessary: many scholars describe India's current government as a neofascist system controlled by a majoritarian party riddled with corruption, where

[26] Ann L. Cunliffe and Rafael Alcadipani, "The Politics of Access in Fieldwork: Immersion, Backstage Dramas, and Deception," *Organizational Research Methods* 19, no. 4 (2016): 550.

[27] Cunliffe and Alcadipani, "The Politics of Access in Fieldwork," 552.

top-level government connections provide access to a variety of spaces.[28] Government connections open most, if not all, doors in Mumbai, and I had to resort to mine to complete this research. Notably, I only discussed my government connections with the restaurant owners or managers—who then passed my message down the chain until they found a chef who was willing to sit for an interview. In some cases, like Badsha and Hotel Blue, I directly spoke to the restaurant owner and manager, respectively.

My process of accessing Badsha and Darshan more closely resembled the process recommended by Cunliffe and Alcadipani. In Mumbai, local stores and restaurants pepper every street, with no shortage of people to talk to. Yet, due to a rise in social media posts targeting local restaurants, workers in those establishments are reluctant to speak with outsiders.[29] I went to three different streets, asking to speak with every establishment, but all of them turned me away at the door. I told this to my grandfather's driver, Amir, who then took me to the neighborhood in which he lives—a predominantly Muslim neighborhood in the center of the city, where he has lived for his whole life. There were streetside stalls, or *dhabas*, in every lane. Amir took us to a dhaba named Badsha, which he visits for dinner every week with his family, and has been a regular since childhood. He spoke to the cashiers at the register and asked them to bring out the owner of the dhaba, Ali, with whom he went to school. As a result, I secured this interview. I was able to build initial trust with the informant because of his relationship with my grandfather's driver, with whom I already had a connection. Ali, the owner of the dhaba, consequently felt comfortable having a recorded conversation with me. Similarly, I conducted my interview with Surya at the middle-class establishment through my grandfather's relationship with the owner—my grandparents have lived in Mumbai for ten years and have built relationships with the businesses in their locality. My grandfather called the owner of the restaurant and helped set up the interview for the next day.

From a gender standpoint, all the people who facilitated my interviews were men, all the restaurant owners were men, and all the chefs were also men. As a woman, I had to rely on the men around me for access; the politics of access disproportionately impacted women in these spaces, often forcing researchers to resort to other means of access. In my case, that included government relationships. My privileges as an American with government connections, in many ways, outweighed my gender, so

[28] Maya Tudor, "Why India's Democracy Is Dying," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 125.

[29] Teenagers and young adults had been releasing rodents and insects into the kitchens of these restaurants under the guise of conducting interviews. They then made videos of these kitchens, posting them on Instagram Reels, and thus impacting how many customers came to the restaurants.

while I do not believe my gender impacted the interviewees' answers, my positionality is still important to keep in mind while reading the remainder of this paper.

Gender Roles within Labor and Capital

The role of women, or the lack thereof, in commercial kitchens speaks to the entrenched expectation of women to remain within the domestic space. I was not able to interview or speak to a single woman at any of the establishments that I visited. When I asked about the presence of women in the kitchens at Badsha and Darshan, the chefs reacted with both surprise and disdain. The owner of the dhaba, Ahmed, was confused about why women would be in close quarters with men, and said, "Well, there is touching in the kitchen." Meanwhile, the chef at the middle-class restaurant, Surya, looked to his boss for guidance. He laughed nervously before shaking his head no, indicating there were no women in the kitchen. At both restaurants, however, women were employed as peons and maids.

Members of the higher-range restaurants displayed no such hesitation in answering the same question. Ali, the executive corporate chef of Hotel Blue in Mumbai, made clear that he does not consider gender when hiring a chef. Instead, the hiring team looks for graduates of hotel management schools, like the International Institute of Hotel Management in Pune (IIHM Pune), and candidates with at least six months of experience at a 4+ star restaurant. Ali said, "gender does not come up—only talent." As he spoke, his maid came in with two cups of tea. He nodded at her and then waved her out of the room. This act of dismissal also emphasizes an act of allowance; not only was I the only woman in the room, I was also the only woman allowed in the room. The location of Ali's office within the restaurant's premises further contributes to the framing of gender. Ali's office was far from the kitchen, but it acted as an extension of it—to bring the tea, the laborer traveled up three flights of stairs. Ali, being the head of the kitchen, controlled who was allowed in and what role they would play. His office, then, acts under the same rules. Barring her from his office points to how female laborers are relegated to and suspended in an in-between space; female laborers are not allowed a space of their own but must stay in a transitional state.

Customers at every establishment also spoke to broader gender dynamics in India's social culture. At Badsha, which is in a bustling neighborhood full of local stores, I only saw one female customer, and she was accompanied by her husband and children. While he ate, she fed their children. There was no substantive communication besides the children speaking to each other. Other than this family, all the other customers were men, mostly eating alone, with some scattered groups of two or three people. They spoke amongst each other, mostly about work. Since I went after dinner on a Saturday, it is reasonable to assume that many were local shop owners, especially

because of the restaurant's location. None of the men interacted with the women cleaning the store, and the laborers serving the orders were all men.

Darshan had significantly more female customers, though none were alone. Located near a busy bus stop, this establishment becomes especially crowded after 5 pm, when people are coming back from work. Most women were with male partners, all of whom were dressed in business attire, while the women wore casual clothing. There were also men eating alone, similarly dressed in business attire, and often watching Instagram Reels or scrolling through Facebook on their phones. Most, if not all, conversations were in Hindi or Marathi, with household matters, like family, children, and cleaning, being discussed. Again, all the servers were men, while all the maids were women.

At all three of the higher-range establishments, there was a shift in the gender dynamics of customers; men and women were both seated alone and in groups. These groups included men and women together, groups of only men, and groups of only women. However, topics of conversation varied amongst the groups. Each of the groups made up of only men were discussing business, and I saw no less than three pitches to potential customers at Mahal. None of the groups of only women included South Asian women, and their discussions revolved around their plans for the day. The mixed groups of men and women ranged in ethnicity but were all tourists. Finally, the solo diners were guests at the hotel connected to Mahal and spent the meal on their phones.

Synthesizing all five experiences yields an important insight about women as laborers and consumers: women remain vital to the workplace as laborers yet are rarely placed in central positions. As consumers, they occupy space in the restaurant but are not the primary audience, as shown by who was observed at the restaurant. By not centralizing women in both labor and consumption, restaurants effectively reproduce patriarchal dynamics. Mannur's work on the invisibility of female labor within restaurants is instructive here; while all food laborers are, in some way, confined to their occupations—almost restricted from existing outside the four walls of their employer—this confinement is especially pronounced for women.[30] At Badsha and Darshan, the vital work that women performed was largely overlooked because it didn't exist in the kitchen. This work does not receive praise or acclaim—it is invisible. In the upper-class restaurants, women were not given opportunities to leave their roles or occupy space outside of their occupation by engaging in the interview. Although Sajid reassured me that restaurants use gender-blind hiring, I did not see a single woman during my tour of the kitchen. Mannur's work underlines how women struggle

[30] Anita Mannur, "Red Hot Chili Peppers: Visualizing Class Critique and Female Labor," in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Temple University Press, 2010), 129.

to retain agency as laborers: entrenched gender roles within the workplace confine them spatially and in terms of responsibility.

When I asked each chef what they preferred to eat when they were not on shift, all responded that they only ate at home-cooked food outside of work. As a follow-up, I asked who cooked in their homes. The chefs who were married said their wives, and those who were not said their mothers. Only one chef lived with roommates and cooked for himself. Across restaurants, male chefs retained authority over women in domestic spaces. Regardless of whether the women in their houses participated in the labor market, the male chefs, by not participating in domestic food-making, ensure that women continue to be restricted to the physical and figurative space of the kitchen. When restaurants receive praise, the male chefs are celebrated for their genius, while female laborers are kept to the domestic cooking space without the same recognition: their labor remaining invisible.[31] Since being paid to cook situates men within the capitalistic workplace as "providers," performing work that women conduct at home is not a concern. The validity of work or labor remains in connection with the exchange of capital. A person making food for the purpose of serving at a restaurant engages in a profession, while a person making food for the purpose of domestic consumption does not. The intersection between gender roles in the domestic space and within capitalistic frameworks lies here, where male chefs rely on the invisible and unpaid female labor in the domestic space after they return from their acknowledged occupation.

Both the labor and consumption dynamics of restaurants reveal the same trend: the higher the class designation of the restaurant, the more integrated women are. This demonstrates the innate desire to protect an image—more specifically, through the facade the restaurant seeks to portray to the visitors it caters to. The invisibility of female labor and its delegation to front-of-house spaces, like cleaning roles, helps present a more acceptable image to those visiting the restaurant, especially when considering Ali, who repeatedly reassured me of gender-blind hiring.

The role of women also raises questions about access to space, including the space of the restaurant. When I asked to tour the kitchen of the dhaba, I was immediately denied. However, when my grandfather later made the same request, he was allowed to view the kitchen from the entrance. My identity as a woman restricted me from accessing back-of-house spaces, just like the female laborers in the establishment. The exclusion of women from designated spaces is a product of the

[31] Katharina Vester, "'Wolf in Chef's Clothing': MANLY COOKING AND NEGOTIATIONS OF IDEAL MASCULINITY," in *A Taste of Power: Food and American Identities* (University of California Press, 2015), 72.

restaurant's reproduction of the chefs' patriarchy, where chefs and other male food workers act as both active agents and reproducers of social norms.

Westernization within the Establishment

Note on Westernization

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to establish how I use the loaded term "westernization." Many scholars, like Shirin Deylami, make clear that westernization and modernity are neither interchangeable nor necessarily correlated.[32] I do not contest this and reaffirm that the role of the West has not necessarily contributed towards the modernization of other states and peoples, and has often hindered growth. Nevertheless, I still believe the concept of westernization is vital in understanding how sociopolitical cleavages within post-colonial states are exacerbated by looking at the role of Western hegemony on political economy, language, and more. To expand, India uses significant characteristics of the West to establish similar systems of racial capitalism and neoliberalism within their own government, such as English education and relationships with foreign governments (i.e., Israel).

Perceptions of Authenticity

Westernization within the Indian food industry can be traced back to colonial foodways, where the British Raj greased cartridges with beef and pork fat that the majority of Indian and Muslim soldiers would have to bite, thereby forcing soldiers to ingest a religiously and culturally forbidden food. The primary difference between this occurrence and modern manifestations of westernization is the large-scale anticolonial movement the former triggered, while the latter remains largely unnoticed. The British Raj influenced food culture in India through inducing famines, exploiting resources, and neglecting its South Asian subjects. Throughout the British Raj's regime, South Asians were drained of both wealth and food as heavy taxation redirected local revenue to Britain and its settler colonies.[33] Manufactured famines affected rural laborers and low-caste workers the most, as they did not have access to grain storage or traditional food patterns; the Raj forced farmers to produce only certain goods for export, stripping agricultural workers and local communities of their traditional goods and

[32] Deylami, Shirin S. "In the Face of the Machine: Westoxification, Cultural Globalization, and the Making of an Alternative Global Modernity." *Polity* 43, no. 2 (2011): 244.

[33] Dylan Sullivan and Jason Hickel, "How British Colonialism Killed 100 Million Indians in 40 Years," Al Jazeera, accessed December 2, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/12/2/how-british-colonial-policy-killed-100-million-indians.

farming practices.[34] From the colonial empire forcing communities to consume restricted foods to strategically eradicating traditional food and produce, the authenticity of Indian foodways has been chipped away. Claims of authenticity by food producers must be assessed.

I draw from David Grazian's work on how marginalized communities manufacture authenticity for outsider audiences to analyze authenticity. Similar to how Black blues performers once sought to give white audiences the "Black experience," upper-class restaurants in Mumbai seek to give the global upper-class a constructed, stereotypically Indian experience.[35] While scholars define authenticity as being derived from recognizable cultural markers, I take those markers to be artificially created by food workers as both a voluntary act and an act of labor.

The perception of authenticity of food among both laborers and consumers is influenced by class perception: local practices and visual indicators of class, like cutlery, cleanliness, and physical size of the eatery, influence food laborers and prompt consumers to prove the authenticity of the food and restaurant to justify their food choices. I refer to Saren et al.'s theory of market exclusion for my analysis of authenticity. Saren et. al suggest that artificial forces, like decor, seek to exclude certain groups from accessing parts of the market; these divisions are created based on race, ethnicity, gender, and class.[36] Similarly, all restaurants supposedly cater towards any demographic with the capacity to consume, but actively screen and select who among those are fit to consume at their establishment. The poor are allowed in the market at the "mercy of the upper classes and how, with no laws to protect them, the underprivileged live under threat of the essentials of everyday life being seized from them by the dominating upper classes."[37]

The question of forced authenticity can be answered using Benz's analysis of the conflation of poverty and authenticity.[38] Her discussion of poverty tourism closely aligns with my analysis of the fetishization of lower-class restaurants as markers of authenticity. Where poverty and stereotypes of Indian poverty are immediately associated with cosmopolitan Mumbai, dhabas are automatically heralded as the most authentic representations of Indian food, regardless of their menu offerings.

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[34] Urmita Ray, "Subsistence Crises in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Bihar," *Social Scientist* 41, no. 3/4 (2013): 7; Kundan Kumar Thakur, "British Colonial Exploitation of India and Globalization," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 74 (2013): 407.

[35] Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 44.

[36] Michael Saren et al., "Dimensions of Marketplace Exclusion: Representations, Resistances and Responses," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 22, nos. 5–6 (2019): 475–85.

[37] Saren et al., "Dimensions of Marketplace Exclusion: Representations, Resistances and Responses," 481.

[38] Terressa A. Benz, "Urban Mascots and Poverty Fetishism: Authenticity in the Postindustrial City," *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 2 (2016): 465.

Meanwhile, upper-class restaurants strive for that same designation while continuing to exclude those from whom they attempt to take the title.

Mumbai is colloquially known as the city of "dreams," appearing in pop culture as India's beacon of opportunity. Notably, MasterChef India, the leading cooking reality TV show in India, is hosted in Mumbai; 800 people in Kolkata alone auditioned to be on the show.[39] Vikas Khanna, a Michelin-star chef and judge on MasterChef India, also owns two restaurants in New York City, but he does not own a restaurant in India. My research uses westernization as a prime analytical framework to understand the workplace dynamics within the restaurants, the interactions between the participants and the restaurant, and the role of the chefs outside their occupation. Mumbai's relationship with westernization is exemplified by Vikas Khanna's prime role in India's top cooking show: Mumbai, the city of dreams, hosting a celebrity chef who owns restaurants in the West, reinforces the perception that "making it" in the West is the ultimate success.

Through interactions between western culture and restaurants in Mumbai, the "exoticism" of the food and establishment is highlighted, while footholds of traditional cooking may be overlooked (i.e., the type of stove).[40] The upper-class establishments seek to demonstrate their authenticity to Western audiences by making their menus more palatable to Western tastes and orientalizing their decorations to align with Western views of South Asia. It is important to emphasize that Western taste is not limited to consumers from the West; restaurants also attempt to prove their authenticity to India's cosmopolitan upper class.

On TikTok, Facebook, and other social media platforms, the dominant imagery of Indian food, especially in cosmopolitan cities, is street food. Influencers and other social media users popularize videos of food workers preparing dishes at streetside stalls. They focus on the dirt and grime, often creating an unhygienic scenery for content. Many dhaba owners refused to entertain an interview for this reason: restaurants on their street had been targeted by content creators, who released rodents in the restaurants to create content. For example, one of the longest-running eateries on the street was shut down because the video became incredibly popular. As a result, the global perception of restaurants in India becomes conflated with stereotypical images of poverty. Mumbai is where the Dharavi slums are located—poverty tourism runs rampant in Dharavi, where non-Indians act as voyeurs into the daily lives of the residents of the slum, and online portrayals only exacerbate the fetishization of poverty

[39] Jaismita Alexander, "MasterChef India | Culinary Dreams on the Table for MasterChef Season 8's Kolkata Auditions - Telegraph India," accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/events/culinary-dreams-on-the-table-for-masterchef-season-8s-kolkata-auditions/cid/1958808; Mallika Khurana, "7 Shooting Locations Of MasterChef India Season 7," Curly Tales, accessed March 15, 2023, https://curlytales.com/7-shooting-locations-of-masterchef-india-season-7/.

[40] Heldke, "Let's Eat Chinese!," 78.

within Mumbai.[41] In order for restaurants in Mumbai to differentiate themselves from this international image of Indian cuisine, they turn towards Western imagery instead.

While settling in the West may be the ultimate goal, restaurants within Mumbai employ marketing tactics to artificially create a "target audience"; menus contain "fusion" items, anglicize dish names, and restaurants serving Indian fare will combine traditional recipes with dishes popular in the UK and the US. Decorations include cultural markers that are easily recognizable to Western audiences, like mandalas and Devnagari-style fonts. Taftoon, located in the Bandra-Kurla Complex (or BKC), is comparable to the five-star restaurant I visited. With opulent decorations and steep prices paired with the upscale location, Taftoon targets a specific population: Mumbai's elite. The restaurant's description reads, "regional Indian food paired with outstanding cocktails."[42] Moreover, all chefs employed there have studied at an IIHM and have had prior experience at premier restaurants. Notably, the website is completely in English, and there is no option to change the language. English thus becomes not only the ideal language, but the sole language of access, barring those who are not fluent from existing in the online or physical space.

When I asked Benjamin, the chef at Mahal, which restaurants he aspired to work for, or which restaurants' style he attempted to emulate in his own work, he quickly responded with a UK-based restaurant featured in the Michelin guide, Fallow. Fallow is one of London's busiest restaurants, boasting sustainable and creative recipes with an extensive contemporary menu. Currently, Fallow serves not only cold dishes such as mushroom parfait and venison tartar, but also hot dishes such as stone bass Goan curry and tandoori cauliflower. Benjamin specifically noted their unique techniques and the ingredients they work with.[43] I find it interesting that he chose a restaurant based in the UK serving Indian fusion food to aspire to, while his specialty within the restaurant he works at now is western cuisine, with his signature dish being roast chicken. His clear preference for Western food and cooking directly correlated with how restaurants in Mumbai frame their desire to be "Western."

Language as a Tool of Division and Exclusion

I conducted three out of five interviews in English, deciding which to use either by asking the interviewee's preference or adjusting based on the trajectory of the conversation. All interviews at the higher-range establishments were conducted in English: Ali the Hotel Blue, Shyam at the Rani, and Benjamin at Mahal. Shyam initially indicated that his preference was Hindi but proceeded to speak in English for the remainder of the interview. Even though I would ask him questions in Hindi, he would

[41] Dharavi is also the backdrop of the internationally acclaimed film, *Slumdog Millionaire*.

[42] "Taftoon," Taftoon, accessed September 15, 2025, https://taftoon.in/.

[43] "Menus - Fallow," accessed June 21, 2022, https://fallowrestaurant.com/menus/.

respond in English. The chef grew up in the state of Bihar, the state with the lowest literacy rates in the country and did not attend an English-medium school.

Bihar's contentious history with the Indian state includes systematic casteism and classism, where low rates of literacy correlate with governmental negligence.[44] Women and low-caste individuals are restricted from accessing English education, which also coincides with class divides.[45] Lower-caste communities have mobilized to fight ongoing oppression within Bihar, often culminating in violent conflict. Due to these confrontations, upper-class and upper-caste Indians, particularly Hindus, developed prejudice against Bihari migrants. Many people from Bihar migrate to cosmopolitan cities like Mumbai and New Delhi in search of work; a large portion of migrants are unskilled laborers. In Mumbai, the founder of the alt-right regional Hindu nationalist party Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, Raj Thackeray, stated that migrants must go back to Bihar because they are "destroying the city."[46]

The history and political situation of Bihar are relevant to contextualize Shyam's insistence on speaking English. His choice of language separates him from the migrants the city's government discriminates against. Both Hindi and English are viewed as languages of status, where the imposition of Hindi nationally is a tool used by nationalist parties to exacerbate caste- and class-based hierarchies; the spread of sanskritized Hindi education is linked to caste-based education systems, where education is linked to the occupation of a child's parents, which forces the perpetuation of caste-based duties, most of which favor the upper-class North.[47] However, English is both the language of success and the language of privilege in India: English-medium education, or English as the medium of teaching and learning, is the standard in college-level education, and is primarily used in private schools.[48] Thus, English is reserved for upper-class individuals who can afford private schooling and higher education.

The two other English-language interviews were with Mumbai locals educated in private, English-medium schools. While the bulk of the interviews were conducted in English, they would switch back and forth between Hindi and English with ease, choosing their language based on the sentiment they wanted to convey. Neither of these chefs were new to the area or to the hotel industry—both had family connections within restaurants worldwide. A notable difference between Ali and Benjamin's

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[44] Amarendra Das, "How Far Have We Come in Sarva Siksha Abhiyan?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 1 (2007): 22.

[45] Christophe Jaffrelot, "Caste and Politics," *India International Centre Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2010): 105.

[46] "Respect Local Culture or Suffer: Raj Thackeray | India News - Times of India," accessed March 17, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Respect-local-culture-or-suffer-Raj-Thackeray/articleshow/2770188.cms.

[47] Hardgrave, "The DMK and the Politics of Tamil Nationalism," 402.

[48] Peggy Mohan, "Hindustani, Hindi and English in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 19 (2000): 1673.

interviews and Shyam's interview was their locality to Mumbai—Ali and Benjamin lived at home with their families, while Shyam lived with coworkers from the restaurant. I argue that their unconstricted approach to communication can be attributed in part to their comfort with both the language and the city itself. Whereas Shyam is perceived as an outsider to the city by virtue of his status as a migrant and his identity as a Bihari, Ali and Benjamin do not face this barrier to entry into the workforce.

Shyam's choice to use English instead of Hindi speaks to the entrenchment of caste- and class-based hierarchies in professional environments within cities of migrants. His conscious effort to present himself as fluent in English indicates how companies and employers within cosmopolitan cities emulate and reinforce discriminatory perceptions, where language usage influences how laborers are seen. Capitalism, education, and caste designations are thus intrinsically related. While the neoliberal usage of English in India in terms of consumption is important, English as a tool to control workers is also fundamental. Companies spend resources training workers to speak in English, especially those servicing upper-class Indians and westerners.[49] Since the chef works at one of the richest restaurants in the country, catering to celebrities and global clientele, English becomes not just a tool of communication, but an affirmation of the status of the restaurant itself.

Hindi also operates as a tool to carry out the neoliberal agenda. Hindu nationalists, who aspire towards whiteness in many ways, carry out the imposition of Hindi across India, despite linguistic diversity holding cultural significance. In Tamil Nadu, these policies have received major backlash and protest.[50] The National Education Policy was introduced in 2020 and acted as a major upheaval of the current education system; the policy seeks to enforce a "three-language" requirement, where students must learn two languages native to India in school. Tamil Nadu's leadership has fiercely pushed against the policy, lauding it as the latest in a long line of efforts to enforce Hindi over regional languages. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist majority party in India, has frequently boasted about its goal to establish a "Hindu Rashtra," where its ideal state is rooted entirely in Hindu ideology. To the BJP, this includes standardizing Hindi and Sanskrit as the main languages of India. Hindu nationalist ideology is quite similar to white supremacy, as both acts as ethnoreligious economic agendas that aim to fundamentally change the workings of a state.

Although located in Maharashtra, Mumbai's residents aren't only Maharashtrians. Internal migration, which follows the promise of a "better life" in a big city, has led Indians from all over the country to settle in Mumbai. Migrants from Tamil Nadu live across Mumbai, including in the slums. For example, Dharavi has a

[49] Sazana Jayadeva, "'Below English Line': An Ethnographic Exploration of Class and the English Language in Post-Liberalization India," *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (2018): 585.

[50] Tamil Nadu is the southernmost state in India, where the most commonly spoken language is Tamil.

thriving population of residents of Tamil origin and Tamil speakers.[51] Maharashtra has begun the process of enacting the NEP 2020, with Hindi now as a mandatory third language in all schools in the state.[52] Where anti-ethnic sentiment already seeps through Mumbai, and the conflation of Hindu identity and national identity, the imposition of the Hindu Rashtra onto Tamil speakers in Mumbai is emblematic of a larger push towards homogenizing the city.

Surya, at Darshan, was born and brought up in Tamil Nadu, and moved to Mumbai as an adult after marriage. His children were born in Mumbai and attended a government school near his house. While I interviewed Surya using Hindi, he switched into Tamil a few times, nervously looking at his boss after every slip. His boss sat with us the whole time, watching Surya answer questions and jumping in to translate occasionally. I reassured them both that I had a working knowledge of Tamil and did not need a translator, but his boss stayed seated. Surya explained that he was hired to cook South Indian food, even though he did not know how to cook at all before arriving at the restaurant. He also had never traveled to any South Indian state other than Tamil Nadu. In the kitchen, he worked with two other chefs—a South Indian chef and a Punjabi chef. Notably, he did not clarify where in South India the former was originally from. When asked what the chefs refer to each other as, he simply said "Bhai," which is a colloquial way of saying "brother" in Hindi.[53]

Surya, as a laborer, was offered no autonomy as he was constantly surveilled by his boss in terms of both his responses and the language in which he answered my questions. The oppression of regional languages within the workspace was helmed by his manager, reflecting how the imposition of Hindi acts as a neoliberal tool of control. Even in back-of-house settings, where workers only interact with each other, the chefs use a Hindi term of endearment to refer to each other. "Bhai" is the replacement of "Chef" in this setting; Hindi replaces English as a tool of capitalism. Notably, Bhai is less formal than Chef and transcends contexts—Chef is only used in a kitchen

[51] Amrita Abraham, "Violence in a Bombay Slum," *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 44 (1979): 1789.

[52] Snehal Mutha, "Hindi Now a Mandatory Third Language in Maharashtra for Classes 1-5 as It Rolls out NEP 2020," The Hindu, accessed April 18, 2025, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/maharashtra/hindi-now-a-mandatory-third-language-in-maharashtra-for-classes-1-5-as-it-rolls-out-nep-2020/article69459520.ece.

[53] For those not familiar with Hindi, Hindi speakers use the term "Bhai" or "Bhaiya" to refer to men of similar age to themselves in everyday settings. For example, customers wave down rickshaw drivers by calling "Bhaiya" and rickshaw drivers refer to their male customers as "Bhai" as well.

producing food, while Hindi speakers use the term Bhai to refer to people in various situations, including non-labor contexts.

Conclusion

Food workers and laborers are often confined to their occupations, not allowed to occupy space outside of capitalist frameworks. This study seeks to view chefs as reproducers of knowledge in their own right, not just in relation to their work. The implications of this research lie in interrogating daily interactions within the restaurant, rather than their positions within larger food structures. From their role in reproducing language-based divisions, whether from internal or external pressures, or the invisibility of female labor, this set of interviews offered insight into chefs as reproducers.

Future studies should develop a comprehensive set of data regarding the class breakdown of restaurants in relation to the wealth distribution in Mumbai. There is a significant lack of census data related to the lack of transparency from the current majority government. However, researchers should continue to investigate the relationship between urban geography and food pathways. With frequent changes in internal migration, researchers should study the impact of these demographic shifts on changes in restaurant labor and organization.

Notably, future studies should study domestic labor as food work. Although gender is an important framework of this study, examining the chefs behind the food that the interviewed food workers eat during their days off would provide important insights into the invisible labor that drives the labor market. It is imperative that researchers continue to engage in dialogues with local communities to examine their relationship with labor, capital, and food, instead of only relying on larger frameworks of political economy, race, gender, class, and caste.

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APPENDIX A

Restaurant Strata
Pseudonym (Name)
Pseudonym (Restaurant)
Descriptors
Dhaba
Ahmed
Badsha
North Indian, Mughal, family seating
Mid-Range
Surya
Darshan
Predominantly South Indian cuisine, family seating, two floors
Four-Star
Ali
Hotel Blue
Large chain, 4 restaurants, trained in Western cuisine
Five-Star
Shyam
Rani
Cafe style menu
Seven-Star
Benjamin
Mahal
Mixed cuisine, bar seating, mostly Western

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