



Covid 19 and Culinary Narratives

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Abstract

Covid 19 and the lockdown it entailed, pushed people indoors, denying them, at least for a while the freedom of relishing food from restaurants and eateries. In the metropolitan spaces, ordering of food online, to some extent, satisfied the urge to eat from people's favourite food joints. A plethora of literature on food, nutrition, healthy eating and cuisine too came out, indicating that food as a primal urge continues to be infected by the Covid 19 threat. Another form of culinary dynamism was the trying of new dishes and sharing their recipes with the fellow gastronomical enthusiasts.

This paper is an attempt to examine a few culinary writings such as features, blogs and recipes which have come out during the pandemic days to show how they represent culinary identities and creative affirmation. It also analyses how food and food writing have been modes of tiding over the viral anxiety. Also within the purview of the paper is the scrutiny of home and internet as transformative culinary spaces. The paper analyses the selected narratives from the vantage points of Culinary Studies, Culinary Semiotics and Identity Studies.

Keywords: food studies, food practice, culinary experience, pandemic.

As defined by WHO (World Health Organisation) pandemic is “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” (Kelly. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>). The rise in the number of Covid-19 cases, compelled nations across the globe to declare lockdown. It forced people to shut themselves in their homes. In the initial phase of

pandemic, all the eateries and even pick-up restaurants were closed. Even ordering food online was not possible, which forced people to enter in kitchen and cook. In the initial stage, with everyone at home and work from home, balancing work and domestic chores led to chaos, but eventually, people got used to this new normal. Cooking helped people to regain the control of their lives. As there was extreme uncertainty outside, the aroma coming from the kitchen, provided a much-needed comfort to the people. The smell of hot home cooked food proved to be the smell of safety and security. With a compulsion of cooking at home and some extra time at hand, people started getting involved in culinary experiments. This situation created space for culinary literature on social media. Many food blogs which were already popular and some started functioning during pandemic, food podcasts, YouTube channels dedicated to culinary experiments, Instagram, twitters were overflowing with tricks and tips on cooking. People using the Instagram handles and Twitter were publishing their new found talent as chefs and were involved in exchanging recipes.

In this research paper, the researcher has analysed online culinary literature like blogs, newspaper articles and research papers published during pandemic. Hisham AD, from Lebanon in his food blog, “The Spill: Post-Pandemic and Online Foodies”, states that, the pandemic made him realise how much we are depending on boxed and ready-made food.

This pandemic made people learn about food again. It helped people to find the joy in cooking, baking and preparing things from scratch. “It is beautiful to see Facebook groups asking about making preserves and jams and pickles again from their homegrown produce.”

(Hisham AD. <https://cookin5m2.com/>). He also comments about the shortage of the supplies and high prices of the ingredients, making people more creative on how to make many dishes out of minimum ingredients. He also criticizes the certain trends online: “The overdone cheese pulls. The burgers drowned in cheese. The confectionary soggy-soaked in syrups. The horribly neon-coloured foods. Ultra- processing and excessive sugars. The fake abundance. The pretentiousness of food. The disgusting sloppy munching. The horrible photos of food, emphasized by atrocious sharpening and saturation” (Hisham). He urges his readers to reconsider their food culture. He feels we all should be thankful for the food availability. He also suggests to use locally available ingredients, reduce food wastage and to limit the show-off of excessiveness.

Aditi Ahuja in her article, “Covid 19: 5 Ways the Epidemic Will Change the Way We Eat”, emphasise that this pandemic is going to have a lasting impact on our eating habits. She also analyses different ways how this virus will impact our food choice. The impact created by corona virus has created ripples in all the

nations across the globe. Covid-19 has made many changes in our lifestyle, which has affected our physical and psychological well-being to a great extent. Ahuja states that:

Quarantine and self-isolation imposed on people has got them shifting back to local, homegrown ingredients with minimal risk involved in eating. With little or no options to eat out, the trend of cooking at home and eating home-cooked food is clearly growing.

All these indicators point towards one direction - the fact that food trends and eating habits will never be the same even once Covid-19 subsides. The impact

of the virus is here to change the dynamics of food for a reasonably long time to come.

(Ahuja. <https://food.ndtv.com/>)

Ahuja suggests five ways, in which corona virus has affected our diet. The first way is, though in the current time, eating home-cooked food seemed compulsion, in the coming times, eating home-cooked food will be a preference. Second is to boost the immune system people started eating healthier food. Third way is people will become more aware about food safety. People will prefer packaged and canned goods. The fourth way is, since the 'wet market' of Wuhan was the origin of virus, there will be less demand for exotic meat. Fifth way is people will start caring about what is the origin of their food. They will prefer hyperlocal fruits. Ahuja insists: "Whether the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic lasts a year, or even more - the one thing that can be said for sure is that eating habits will not be the same. Food preferences and the culture of eating food will probably see a huge transformation in the times to come" (Ahuja <https://food.ndtv.com/>).

The top three food bloggers of India reveal to Mithila Chakravarty of the Free Press Journal, that how experimenting in their kitchen is helping them to sail through this period. Sagar Rupani and Parth, Karthik Gandhi and Shivesh Bhatia advice the new bloggers how to master Insta marketing and hashtags in order to get noticed online. They also talk about how they got into the medium of culinary communication and how they try new recipes every day. Karthik Gandhi's Insta page, Gastro Hogger, is more of a cultural page. He is also known as biryani blogger. These bloggers also share about the cuisines that keep them on toe, and how the technology is helping them to spread their passion for good food.

Alex Gevers, in his blog, "How our relationship with food evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic", analyses the behaviour of UK consumers towards food throughout the different stages of pandemic. He carried out a semantic analysis and systematic study of all the food related labels the UK citizens visited during pandemic. By carrying out this activity, he tried measure their interest in the topics such as "dining out",

“healthy eating”, “vegan diets” etc.

Gevers states that throughout the three months of March, April and May, the demand of groceries remained constant. Through the content and graphs, the blogger maintains that, the search for “Healthy cooking and eating” increased in April compare to March. This can also hint towards that people started using lockdown period to improve their diets and cooking skills. He concludes his blog by making an observation that like many industries food industry also got impacted because of the behavioural changes of human. People developed more interest in areas like healthy cooking, vegan diets, organic, locally produced food and baking: “Clearly a new phase in our relationship with food has begun” (Gevers <https://www.comscore.com/>).

During the pandemic, two distinctive trends were observed on social media that is traditional recipes and recipes with minimum wastage. Tanushree Bhowmik in her article “The Cult of Food” published in The Hindu states that: “....but social media is still abuzz with traditional recipes as we struggle to find comfort in food that is close to our roots, food that stokes familial memories during this time of social isolation.” (Bhowmik <https://www.thehindu.com/>).

As India was going through the pandemic, the lockdown made people aware of the stark reality of its unequal impact of Indian society. The rich people were stocking up exotic ingredients and drinks. Their tables and social handlers were overflowing with exotic dishes. The middle class were stocking up essentials like lentils, rice, potatoes, onions etc. The poor were struggling to have their ends meet. Ipsita Chakravarty in her article, “Will the coronavirus crisis change how the Indian middle classes think about food?” states that:

Everyone’s been thinking about food lately. For thousands of migrant workers set adrift by the nationwide lockdown, food means violence, food means absence. Some have lived on salt and water, as if to simulate the taste of whole, cooked meals. Some faced blows as they tried to reach community kitchens or essential supply stores. Others queue for hours to return with a small

bowl of rice and dal, not enough to feed a family of famished children. Already, in Jharkhand, an elderly woman is said to have died of hunger.

Meanwhile, social media is flooded with images of food. Perfectly baked cakes. Curries with tender chunks of meat and herbs. A quick stir fry with some wine or a cocktail on the side. Ingenious one-pot meals. As restaurants shut down, recreational eating must be done at home.

(Chakravarty <https://scroll.in/>)

Vegetables were getting rotten in the field. Farmers were not able to arrange for transport. Prices of vegetables were crashing. Mandies were deserted and the supply chain got completely disrupted:

Daily wage workers who kept the supply chain running – loading vegetables on trucks, packaging food, delivering them to shops or buyers – have fled factories and cities. Those who remain are without work and food. The lockdown and social distancing did not account for them. It worked for those with higher incomes and spacious homes, who only had to step out for occasional grocery runs or ordered food online. But the systems that starved workers are now starving without their valuable labour. (Chakravarty <https://scroll.in/>)

Ms. Roshni George and Dr. Anjali Parasnis in their article COVID-19 and nutrition: How the pandemic induced a much-awaited behavioural change published in **teri** (The Energy And Resources Institute) insist that a positive behavioural change in our eating habits will help us from COVID-19 infection. The authors state the importance of Ayurveda and traditional medicine. The newness of this disease forced people to look for traditional and age-old recipes and remedies. The Ministry of Ayush released guidelines to boost immunity:

Along with Yoga, the Ministry in its official guideline released to help citizens with tips on beating the coronavirus recommended several Ayurvedic recipes such as kadha i.e. herbal tea/decoction made from basil, cinnamon, black pepper, dry ginger, and golden (haldi) milk. The use of turmeric, cumin, coriander and garlic in cooking has also been recommended by the Ministry of Ayush. Although there haven't been any confirmed studies yet, one of the reasons India has seen a lower mortality rate due to Covid-9 could be due to ample usage of these immunity-boosting herbs and spices by Indians in their traditional food. (George and Parasnis <https://www.teriin.org/>)

Sam Danley in his blog, "Eight in ten consumers changed their eating habits due to COVID-19", maintains that, according to the International Food Information Council's (IFSC) 2020 Food and Health Survey, 85% of Americans made changes in their food habits and how they prepare food. The risk of coronavirus leads the American to view food safety, with respect to food handling and preparation.

As the lockdown was relaxed, people started looking for eateries to order food online which will take care of health and hygiene. The home chefs came to their rescue. During the pandemic many people had lost their jobs. As a way out many started their culinary business on a small scale, taking orders from friends and

relatives. This pandemic gave them scope for expanding their business. The online platforms like The Yummy Idea, FoodCloud are discovering such home chefs and giving them an opportunity to establish themselves on a bigger social platform. Aditi Shrivastava, in her article “The rise of home chefs in India amid the pandemic” published in The Economic Times, states that more than 2500 home chefs have registered themselves with The Yummy Idea and The FoodCloud since April 2020. Along with these, other platforms like Foody Buddy, Home Foodi and Ghost Kitchens are helping these home chefs in building brand, using technology, implementing standard operating procedures and raising capital.

As stated in the article by Vedant Kanoi, founder, FoodCloud, “There is a lot of room in the food business in India... with lower overhead costs, the unit economics... along with the growing awareness in consumers with respect to health and hygiene, this business will grow much faster in the coming years,” (Shrivastava <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>).

As there seemed to be a dimmed possibility of unlocking, people started finding different ways of engaging themselves in quarantine. Cooking was one of the most entertaining, creative way to engage, enjoy and sustain during this period.

Samin Nosrat, cookbook writer and a host of Netflix’s Salt Fat Acid Heat launched a podcast, Home Cooking during lockdown. She and her co-host Hrishikesh Hirway, answers the questions about how to cook creatively at home with the available ingredients. She states: “Our goal with the podcast is simply to spread a little joy, perhaps a little cooking knowhow, and to ease some anxiety for people who might be lost in the kitchen..... and it just feels right to share some positivity and warmth with the world in a time of global crisis” (Chittal <https://www.vox.com/>). During the lockdown, as the other forms of entertainment were not available, people found new joy in the kitchen. As Jenna Golden, a consultant in Washington DC, feels, cooking and baking is her slice of normal, amid the abnormal time. For many people cooking provided a distraction where they could think of what to cook for the dinner and the next day. This helped them to reduce their anxiety level and helped them to get the feeling that at least something is under their control, when everything else seems to be out of control. Jenna Golden also argues:

I’m also a highly anxious person, and there are a lot of uncertainties with the coronavirus pandemic. If I’m idle too long, it’s easy to start ruminating and go down a panic spiral. But when I’m cooking, I can’t do that, simply because I’ll mess up the recipe.Cooking forces me to focus on the task at hand instead

of watching cable news or scrolling through the infinite loop of increasingly horrifying updates on Twitter. (I mean “force” in the most literal sense; my hands are covered in flour, so it physically prevents me from touching my phone.) In a way, cooking serves as a form of mindfulness: You can only focus on one thing, and you have to be fully present to get it right. (Chittal <https://www.vox.com/bread>).

Also, cooking created a sense of community while we are isolated. When we share recipes, food and food experiences, it gives us the feeling of togetherness and unity. Maya Kosoff, a freelance writer in Brooklyn says, as we are not able to leave our homes and meet our friends, family, we can gather virtually on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to discuss and exchange recipes.

Many bloggers, Twitter members, Instagram users started a new trend of going live during this lockdown. Helen Rosner, a New York based Food writer, asked her Twitter followers to post their questions related to cooking and groceries and answered them in her new quarantine cooking column. Emily Stephenson, a Cookbook writer asked her Twitter followers to submit their ideas about party-friendly recipes. Vivian Lee, a Freelance writer started a food-blog, in collaboration with many of her friends, who are basically writing about what they are cooking during this isolation period. For her, this new blog turned out to be a way of becoming more creative, suppress her nervousness and also a way to keep in touch with her friends and family and support them in this difficult time. Maya Kosoff went live stream on Instagram and she did receive an overwhelming response of gastro-enthusiast who interacted with her and also shared what they are planning to cook.

Saransh Goila, a celebrity chef, came out with an interesting digital initiative #MorningwithGoila. Goila call different celebrities from various fields and cook with them. Having positive discussion and a good breakfast recipe help people start their day on a very positive note. He feels, cooking is a survival skill and is a therapeutical like music. Goila’s mantra is “Isolated but not alone” (<https://www.thehindu.com/>). Through his show, he tried to spread positivity and hope in this time of gloom and despair.

Through various forms of social media, people have ensured that they help people to keep their spirit up and high. Though this pandemic is challenging, people are able to go through this period with the help of their creative cooking.

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