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Disrupting Colonial Trauma Through the Hyperconsumption of Outside Foods in India? A Digital Food Consumer Citizenship

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Abstract
This article addresses the understudied intersection of digital food cultures, consumer citizenship, and colonial trauma within the context of India. While existing scholarship has examined food cultures in India and their colonial legacies, the role of internet-mediated practices in reconfiguring these dynamics remains understudied. This article bridges this gap by conceptualizing digital food consumer citizenship and analyzing how digital spaces mediate aspirational eating of outside foods as both a continuation of socio-economic inequalities and a potential disruption of colonial trauma. To begin, the article examines the global history of Indian cuisine, exposing how colonial culinary politics shaped enduring inequalities and cultural hierarchies. Secondly, consumer citizenship debates open perspectives on participation in the era of economic liberalization and food cultures crossing class and urban-rural boundaries. Third, the analysis of digital food economies introduces the concept of smart food spaces to describe digital and sensor-driven transformations in food consumption settings, critiquing their role in hyperconsumption alongside their disruptive possibilities. The article moves on to explore aspirational eating in internet-mediated food cultures among India's heterogenous urban middle classes, particularly younger generations, as an expression of participatory global food citizenship that challenges post-colonial classifications. By foregrounding subaltern agency and diverse innovative practices, such as adaptive digital platforms of local community kitchens, the article explores the potential of digital food cultures to de-center global power structures, disrupt colonial legacies, and create counter spaces that thrive otherwise. Finally, it proposes empirical research directions to further understand digital food consumer citizenship and its implications for food justice.

Keywords consumer-citizenship, digital food cultures, smart food spaces, aspirational eating, colonial trauma

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1. Introduction

My interest in food consumer citizenship and its entanglements in colonially conditioned thinking was sparked during my first research visit to the Indian megacity Hyderabad in September 2022. I was surprised by the possibilities of paying via a smartphone Quick Response (QR) code at almost every mobile vending place on the street. When I shared my experiences of buying a coconut from someone who exclusively sells coconuts—exclusively via QR code—afterwards with friends and family in Germany, their reactions were marked by disbelief. Many expressed surprise that such digital conveniences were available in India, revealing persistent imaginaries shaped less by technological advancement than by associations with poverty and hunger.

This vignette illustrates the enduring impact of colonial legacies on perceptions of food culture and technological progress. It also introduces the central question of this article: Can the consumption of certain socially coded foods disrupt colonial trauma, and what role does digital technology play in this process? The example of ubiquitous QR code-enabled street food purchasing in India subtly undermines colonial legacies in food cultures, since the technically advanced digital mobile food payment system in India challenges and destabilizes the presumed superiority embedded in colonial and Eurocentric imaginaries.

At the same time, the vignette may have already revealed parts of my positionality as a feminist and queer White European academic whose research is shaped by curiosity and a commitment to critical reflexivity. I acknowledge that this perspective may appear naïve or partial to readers from different epistemic and cultural standpoints. Nonetheless, I embrace the vulnerability of this position as part of an open, situated research practice that privileges listening, reciprocity, and long-term engagement.

This article draws on participant observation conducted during three periods of fieldwork in Hyderabad—in September and October 2022, July 2023, and February 2024—alongside a literature review. The observation focused on lived food experiences, daily food-related activities, and the spatial and socio-cultural context of people's food consumption. Literature was reviewed via snowballing, prioritizing qualitative content leads over quantitative exhaustion.

The article is organized into five sections. First, I examine colonial trauma in Indian food cultures, tracing the historical and socio-political development of Indian cuisine through power and inequalities entrenched in colonial culinary etiquettes that shape enduring cultural hierarchies. This sets the stage for discussing food justice and the resistance to culinary imperialism in modern India. Second, I review literature on food consumer citizenship, with a focus on the consumption patterns of India's urban middle classes and younger generations. Their aspirational food practices exemplify a participatory global citizenship that redefines cultural, political, and market-driven transformations. Third, I delve into the digital food economy, introducing the concept of smart food spaces to describe the integration of technology in food consumption settings while critiquing the homogenizing tendencies of neoliberal digital platforms. This discussion reveals contradictions between hyper-consumption as dignity-symbolizing participation and its perpetuation of capitalist logics. Fourth, I explore internet-mediated food cultures, drawing on theoretical insights to highlight the diverse practices that could be facilitated by digital media. Finally, I examine the role of relational feminist digital disruptions in reimagining food worlds that thrive outside imperial and capitalist frameworks. By foregrounding examples like the ethnic food delivery service Fanatic Activism Against Substandard Occidental Shit (FAASOS), the Masala Podcast, digital Muslim community kitchens, and the NutriAIDE app, the article showcases how Indian tech-savvy innovators contribute to de-centering global hierarchies. Overall, I shed light on digital food consumer citizenship in India as a site of agency, resistance, and transformation, while highlighting gaps for future empirical research.

2. Colonial Trauma in Food Cultures

The section delves into the intricate interplay of culinary cultures, globalization, and colonial legacies within South Asian foodways, as examined in the book "Curried Cultures," edited by Krishnendu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas (2012). Drawing on these authors' historical lens and complementary sources, the section navigates through the complexities of colonial encounters, elite culinary exchanges, and the socio-political dimensions of subaltern food consumption. It sheds light on how colonial trauma continues to reverberate in contemporary culinary landscapes, prompting discussions on reconciliation and justice within

critical ethnic and specifically food justice studies. Through a tapestry of participant observations and interdisciplinary perspectives from literature, the section unveils some intricate threads that weave together patches of the past, present, and future of South Asian culinary cultures.

2.1 Curried Food Cultures

In the book "Curried Cultures" (Ray & Srinivas, 2012), the authors trace South Asian food and its globalizing foodways from the 12th century onwards. Its seminal paper by Akhil Gupta (2012) contributed to understanding a different history of the present through the movement of crops, cuisines, and globalization not only by trade, but particularly by traveling or migrating people. The paper outlines two broad narrative strains on foods crossing boundaries. One is displaying the "imperial centrality" (Gupta, 2012, p. 30) of narratives locating the onset of globalization only in time-spaces of the colonial conquest and "the expansion of neoliberal capitalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century" (Gupta, 2012, p. 30). The other engages in the above-implied cultural-historic criticism that there was "nothing new about globalization" (Gupta, 2012, p. 30) in the sense of food and culinary exchange existing in South Asia beyond the 13th century colonial conquest and the 1990s market liberalization. Overall, Gupta concludes that

> the last quarter of the twentieth century, rather than heralding a new age of globalization, might better be understood as a particular crisis of "high sovereignty" for the nation-state form of the [so-called] First World. [… W]hat changed since 1250 was not the fact of globalization, but the forms [… of] monopolistic practices, mass deportation of slaves, and enforced subjugation of people through colonialism. (Gupta, 2012, p. 42)

Therefore, Gupta proposes to read "'ethnic' or 'fundamentalist' identities" as counter spaces and threats when looked at from the perspective of current-day "dominant states in the West" (Gupta, 2012, p. 43). He raises the finger at academic literature that pays little attention to more subtle questions of identities and power dynamics when analyzing cuisines and crops in cosmopolitan consumerism. In current cosmopolitan food consumption, Ray and Srinivas

> denote a sense, or a structure of feeling, at least among urban dwellers, and especially among the middle classes, that people from all over the world have been pulled together in sharper and more proximate juxtaposition to each other. In that sense, cultural globalization is new. It is a new thing in urban middle-class conceptions of self and other, and food plays a central role in that imaginary. (Gupta, 2012, p. 26)

2.2 Culinary Violence and Culinary Socio-Politics in Indian History

Foods playing a central role in cross-national identity formation is highly intriguing. I see a necessity to discuss it anew in light of further developments in digital technologies and possibilities of creating participation in terms of diversity and equity of marginalized food cultures. To this end, it is necessary to first trace what kinds of food consumption and culinary cultures play into the dominant elites-led cosmopolitan food consumption imaginary and how this came about cultural-historically.

Edward Said (1993), Angama Jhala (2012), Jayanta Sengupta (2012), R. S. Khare (2012), and Colleen Taylor Sen (2015) offer important leads. For the purpose of this paper, a rough thread can be spun through their work to touch on some central points of the transformations of Indian food culture.

Said (1993) eloquently depicts the global West that carries on the logics of colonialism through the symbolic imaginaries and the material solidifications of cultural imperialism. It socio-culturally exoticizes or belittles and thereby inferiorizes the global East.

Jhala (2012) argues that this vision is short-sighted for the culinary encounters between the heterogeneous and multivalently modern Indian Princely States and the British colonizers. The study reconstructs an exchange of foods, recipes, and cooks between the ruling elites before and during colonial times that was based on relationships of reciprocal rapport. This exchange was mainly cultivated among royal women, complemented by inland and overseas travels and inter-ethnic marriage, as a "diplomatic game of gastronomic power-sharing," as Jhala (2012, p. 72) puts it. Besides the discussion of power imbalances and appropriations among the ruling elites and whether this can truly be called power-sharing on equal terms,

the main caveat of this account is that it leaves out the history of the ruled. It does not account for the ones who were forced to subdue to unequal power relations and thus leaves out a large part of the people who had to submit to the regulations and manners of the respective territorial rulers.

Sengupta (2012) conveys insights that fill some of the blind spots regarding the food cultures of the ruled with a case study from colonial Bengal. The study's focus is also on the elites and does not directly touch on the subaltern "who have stayed in place for thirty thousand years" (Spivak, 1999, p. 402), but it gives way to some subaltern realities. While most princely states were religiously and socio-culturally relatively inclusive—compared to the state of the art of European forced assimilation ruling at that time—there were particular tensions in the "civilizational attributes" of hierarchical colonial cooking and eating practices. They had "a strong ideological-pedagogical content that continued to inhabit the discursive space of nationalist thought through the late colonial period" (Sengupta, 2012, p. 85). On the one hand, the meat-centered gluttony of British officials was ridiculed by Indian elites. The European colonizers claimed to be physically superior, but they displayed what the Indian elites perceived as the embodied unhygienic grossness of the West. On the other hand, British colonizers portrayed vegetarianism as an effeminate practice with arguments that followed that time's racial distinctions regarding Brown men. Overall, Indian cooking and eating practices that involve the fingers' sense of temperature and texture were getting frowned upon and preferably kept invisible in the kitchens. Therefore, adapting British table etiquette and mixing in British cuisine was key for everyone who could somehow do so, in order to maintain favoring relationships with the Indian elites and European colonial society. Especially on the side of subaltern food cultures—so marginalized that they mostly need to be searched for between the lines of historic recounts and in the unwritten—I interpret this as a form of subjugating violence that entailed sacrifice and suffering rather than a voluntary and amicable exchange. In one of the largest and richest Princely States, Telangana-Hyderabad, for example, the ruling Nizam was known to be cruelly exploitative and punitive towards his subordinates. "The splendor of his court has its corresponding cost in human blood and human dignity" (Gidla, 2017, p. 47).

Hence, the ruled depended on the ruler's goodwill to reduce the repressions. Adopting the ruling elites' etiquettes in food practices was an effective way to garner socio-political advantages. This chain of adopting food practices as socio-political tools of relation-building can be observed from pre-colonial to present times. As Gupta highlighted, the "enforced subjugation of people through colonialism" can be read as just one more form of globalization, "albeit an unhappy form for the hitherto flourishing civilizations around the Indian Ocean" (2012, p. 42). Nonetheless, or rather, precisely because of the continuation of the culinary socio-politics into globalizing spaces, "the culinary legacy of the Raj [Indian people and territory under direct British rule during the late colonial period] still lives on in postcolonial India and is often mimicked by subordinate classes" (Jhala, 2012, p. 71).

This is visible, for example, in the colonial legacy of members–only social clubs. The first British social club in India was founded in 1827, exclusively for the British ruling elite (Sen, 2015, p. 225). The clubs became an important part of almost all Indian cities where colonizers reproduced British life with all sorts of diversions and additional colonial amenities in a nutshell. Only until the 1920s, the Wellington in Bombay became "the first really elegant club that was open to both Indian and English, and where the elite of both societies mingled on equal terms" (Devi, 1995, p. 135; as cited in Jhala, 2012). Today these clubs remain an integral part of every decently sized town in India. Many people of the middle classes see club membership as obligatory for building social, political, and business relations which finally serve aspirations for social mobility or for maintaining prestige. Clubs preserve a British colonial style and serve a mix of European and Indian foods and drinks (Sen, 2015). Tea and biscuits, or beer and club sandwiches, are often savored on the clubs' lush green lawns—in the afternoon shade after a round of cricket, tennis or golf, or under floodlights and with music and dance entertainment in the evening.

Recent developments in Indian food culture reflect deep-seated transformations rooted in colonially infused culinary politics (Khare, 2012; Sen, 2015). These shifts can be traced through food cultural milestones: the famine among Bengal's rural poor in the 1940s; the White Revolution of milk-producing cooperatives in the 1950s; the Green Revolution of expanding mono-cropped agriculture and its many downsides for smallholders from the 1960s to today; and

the present multiple burdens of malnutrition. Today, one fifth of the Indian population is faced with acute hunger (Ray & Srinivas, 2012), simultaneous to rising obesity levels, nutrient deficiencies, and diet-related diseases (Aiyar et al., 2021; Popkin et al., 2012). These developments illustrate how food practices continue to be shaped by—and respond to—the socio–political legacies of colonialism.

2.3 Colonial Trauma and Food Justice

While these points mark central transformations of Indian food culture, they also mark how colonial legacies continue to shape—and are sometimes subverted through—culinary practices. Building on this, the following section shifts focus toward epistemologies of specific colonial and broader historical trauma in order to address interpretations of disruption from the viewpoint of academic disciplines that deal with colonial trauma as critical ethnic and food justice issues within and beyond state governments.

Colonial trauma can be understood as a specific form of historical trauma that is not only tied to the historical moment of colonial conquest but continues until the present day. Some scholars criticize the distinction of colonial trauma from other historical traumata as a self-perpetuating and self-historicizing narrative that centers on Western states without embedding colonial trauma in larger contextual and historical frames (Lee & Johnstone, 2021). This contributes to a construction of victims subjectified by supposedly benevolent Western governments of the present that, however, do not assume the perpetrations of colonial governance. This objection to naming and framing colonial trauma is important and fruitful in many contexts; nonetheless, it is important to specify the kinds of historical trauma when it comes to food culture. This prevents the "conflation of disparate forms of violence by emphasizing presumptively universal aspects of trauma" (Kirmayer et al., 2014, p. 299). Analogies between oftentimes strikingly different forms of historical trauma have obscured the specific forms of ongoing structural violence in the case of colonial trauma (Kirmayer et al., 2014). It is thus important to recognize the aspects of colonial trauma that are in effect in food culture and its embodied materialities at the present time.

In the interdisciplinary field of critical ethnic studies, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2016) highlight that reconciliation has to grapple with dominant notions of justice that follow a colonial temporality. As such, justice is "always desired and deferred, and delimited by the timeframes of modern colonizing states" (Tuck & Yang, 2016, p. 6). These timeframes are applied to "specific injured, living bodies (lives), and linear notions of past harm and present reconciliation and future irreproachability" (Tuck & Yang, 2016, p. 6). The authors conclude that colonial trauma is rooted in the specific forms and targets of violence and extraction of the initial colonial conquest phase, but contemporarily these structures are split among the strongest economic and military powers and their entrenchments in patriarchal pacts with political and religious institutions. This analysis calls for people in the present time to actively deconstruct, resist, heal, and transform colonial trauma both personally and structurally.

In the equally interdisciplinary field of food justice studies, Rachel Slocum and Valentine Cadieux (2015, p. 34) find that "thinking through the concept of trauma could be part of a politics that places the multiple traumatic injustices along the food chain in the forefront." Thinking through multiple traumatic food injustices can create alliances and community and foregrounds the affinities of struggles for food justice. Hence, also Tuck and Yang (2016, p. 3) address "resistance to the constant re/production of injustice" in terms of the catalysis of shared desires of community and nonstate actors, "which exceed those of the State, and their movements toward and away from the State" (Tuck & Yang, 2016, p. 5).

3. Food Consumer Citizenship

In this section, I focus on reviewing Amita Baviskar's (2017, 2018) and Ritty Lukose's (2009) work on consumer citizenship and the two authors' takes on the groups of people who drive changes in consumption in India (see Deshpande, 2003; Dorsch & Kanwischer, 2019; Fernandes, 2006; Gryl & Jewel, 2012; Ray, 2019). These perspectives are complemented by the argumentation on citizen–consumers and technology in literature beyond India (viz., Davies, 2014). Overall, consumption and citizenship theories serve distinct roles within the diverse realm of academic literature. Yet, viewing them as the complementary political–economic power of consumer–citizens—analogous to the left and right biceps—provides valuable insights. Together, they illuminate crucial aspects of the continuously evolving research on food choices—

since the purchasing power aspects highlighted in consumption theories (viz., Bourdieu, 1987; Veblen, 1899) and the power of agency highlighted in political citizenship theories (viz., Mouffe, 1992; Balibar, 2017) intersect significantly both in on- and offline food purchasing. In this context, thus, the concept "food consumer citizens" emphasizes both individual and systemic power aspects. This is of central importance in processes where individuals meet the evolving food system. Therefore, the concept food consumer citizens offers far more than simply referring to either "consumers" or "citizens," to "people" more generally, or, somewhat oddly, to "eaters."

3.1 Food Consumption as Participation

Amita Baviskar ended her lecture on the case of instant noodles in India as a prime example of Consumer Citizenship at the 2017 SOAS Food Studies Center's emblematic annual lecture series with an intriguing reflection. This serves as an ideal starting point for introducing themes that drive the discussion of food consumer citizenship in contemporary India:

> For the younger generation, … food is not only about nutrition and biological needs, it is about cultural desires, … they confront the challenge of a generational shift in what is considered good to eat, moving away from [only] local, more nutritious diets, to branded industrial foods of low nutritional value, basically junk foods. At the same time, the poor people stigmatized by cast and rurality, eating these foods signifies participating in a desired modern lifestyle, or being as good as everyone else. So these foods play an important yet contradictory part in claiming social belonging and equality. (Baviskar, 2017)

Here, Baviskar, who published the content of her lecture in 2018, mentions the salient generational ambivalence in dietary changes, social stigmatization, and the food–, eating–, and body–related signifiers of lifestyle. The significance of food consumption as an identity and status symbol is further contrasted by the socially acquired pleasures of taste for certain foods that are "considered 'good to eat'" (Baviskar, 2018, p. 9).

Intertwining these ideas gives way to reading certain foods as signifiers of aspiration and belonging. Baviskar contrasts foods as social signifiers with the differences of class and caste, and the rural–urban divide, which outline and define unequal eating practices. These inequalities, she argues, are partially bridged through foods like Maggi's instant noodles. The instant noodles are an example of processed foods with low barriers of participation in India. They have a low cost, a long shelf life, they trigger taste buds intensively with relatively high contents of salt and additives, and they require very little input, for example, only hot water, before final consumption. Therefore, they can be consumed across class-caste statuses and rural-urban divides. Marginalized individuals can participate in consumption trends perceived as modern and desirable. Moreover, the consumption of these foods has the power to mark those who can adopt such eating habits and to suggest upward social mobility.

This could be read as a successful infiltration of marketing strategies into the pulse of food culture, "a capitalist coup in which India succumbs to globalization" (Baviskar, 2018, p. 3). But Baviskar points to the pre-liberalization era decolonial struggles of Indian society against foreign products as a central element of nation-building to indicate the limits of the former interpretation. During this era, the state promoted an economic import substitution industrialization strategy, led by indigenous producer-patriotism and protective tariffs or import quotas, particularly during the period of the 1950s to the early 1980s. Within this economic nationalism, a religious class-caste system imposed Brahminical values and shed customary cuisines, particularly beef and pork consumption, into stigmatization. This set the tone for "an environment where food prescriptions and prohibitions are internalized as well as imposed widely and often violently" (Baviskar, 2018, p. 5). Into this ambiance came the 1990s market liberalization. The liberalization era's transitions involved privatization, reducing trade barriers, opening up the economy to foreign investment, and integrating more with the global economy. In line with these developments, the wide availability of inexpensive small portions of packaged and branded foods grew. They became very popular due to the fact that they "are distinctive in that they appear neutral, floating above older classificatory schemes, tethered only to modernity" (Baviskar, 2018, p. 5). These new kinds of foods found resonance among the marginalized and granted access to an eating lifestyle that had been claimed only by the elites. It allowed for "eschewing food saturated with oppressive social meanings and eating

foods free from ascriptive identities" (Baviskar, 2018, p. 5). This can be understood as the development of emancipatory cultural politics, which many Indians have embraced in recent times.

3.2 Food Consumption as Cultural–Political Transformation

The particular dynamics of claiming belonging by navigating one's consumption lie at the heart of the contested cultural politics of globalization that Ritty Lukose refers to in her book "Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India" (2009). Her empirical analysis focuses on the gendered aesthetics of fashion, the commodification of romance, as well as privatization politics and opposing student movements. She examines this with an intersectional approach to gender, caste/class, education, and globalization. Based on this analysis, she foregrounds the contestations between "the normative citizen-subject within India" and the "transnational imaginaries and horizons" (Lukose, 2009, p. 199). The epilogue of the book distills the key insights from the preceding 200 pages into a concise six-page summary on consumer citizenship, offering a synthesis that facilitates the transferability of its concepts to areas such as food studies.

In Ritty Lukose's exploration of consumer citizenship, she examines the "larger cultural and political transformations in liberalizing India," showing how young people navigate the interplay of state and market forces (Lukose, 2009, p. 200). She contrasts her analysis with a widely circulated global discourse that claims young people are becoming less civic-minded and patriotic due to their excessive consumerism—thus once again framing consumerism as the opposite of responsible citizenship (Lukose, 2009, p. 203). Lukose challenges this view by arguing that these "older narratives of patriotism and sacrifice" risk obscuring how contemporary efforts to reclaim citizenship—especially by youth—are actively reshaping what citizenship means in new and different ways (Lukose, 2009, p. 203).

Lukose examines the cultural, political, and economic shifts in globalizing India by "highlighting everyday experiences and negotiations" and "tracking the ways they are both structured by and transformative of the legacies of colonial and postcolonial modernities" (Lukose, 2009, p. 203). In her view, globalization in the wake of economic liberalization is not merely a top-down imposition of market-driven change that threatens local cultures. Rather, she identifies globalizing dynamics embedded within local discourses and practices themselves. Adhering to anthropological vocabulary, Lukose suggests that these discourses should be understood as people's "own 'folk' category" which is "invoked, deployed, and mediated in a variety of ways" (Lukose, 2009, p. 205). To illustrate this, she turns to a popular Bollywood blockbuster from the 2000s. Her interpretative focus lies on the seamless intermesh of cultural elements, showing how the movie characters embody a fluid fusion of global and local sensibilities. The movie characters blend

> a global cosmopolitanism and their local contexts … in ways that are understated and cool without overtly trying to brand them as globalized. They move between spaces indexed as "global" (such as a five-star hotel) and the food stands of a local street. They effortlessly weave English, Hindi, and a very local … slang. (Lukose, 2009, p. 202)

The characters' ability to consume food from a variety of, at times, upscale venues, along with their fluid use of hybrid, educated language, marks them as metropolitan and at least middle-class. This representation leads Lukose to argue that, for the middle-class generations prior to economic liberalization, self-understanding was shaped by an urban middle-class led reformist ethos. According to Lukose, earlier middle-class generations believed that "India's problems are rooted in the rural masses, which must be modernized and uplifted by the middle class" (Lukose, 2009, p. 202). In this framing, they positioned themselves as reformers in the service of the nation.

3.3 Food Consumption and the Middle Classes

Lukose's identification of the urban middle class's self-positioning as agents of national reform reveals three principal problems that merit closer examination.

First, the urban middle class's framing reduces the highly diverse Indian rural population to a singular, undifferentiated mass—one that is implicitly constructed as backward and threatening to the supposedly progressive, one-class show of urban modernity. This framing not only others and excludes a substantial part of society but also undermines inclusive, participatory ways of nation-building.

Second, as Raka Ray (2019, p. 209) observes, "the middle class is a notoriously elusive concept." In European contexts, it is common to distinguish between the educated and the affluent middle classes, often grouped as "bourgeoisie." In the Indian context, where class intersects with caste and colonial legacies, a more nuanced differentiation is necessary to analyze the plural social groups that comprise the economic median of society. According to Ray, notions of old/new and singular/plural offer critical analytical leverage:

> The singular refers to the idea of the middle class, which reflects thinking about the dominant fraction of this class, and the plural to the emergent middle classes, which reflect a far wider range of practices set against the dominant ideas of the role of this class in Indian economic, civic, social and political life. (Ray, 2019, p. 209)

Following this, the old singular middle class often asserts dominance over the emergent plural middle classes and the cultural forms they express. As scholars such as Deshpande (2003), Fernandes (2006), and Ray (2019) argue, this hegemonic dynamic has, in practice, exacerbated social inequality rather than achieving the projected uplift or societal amelioration.

Third, the middle class's self-conception as the executor of state-led development agendas is deeply problematic. This perspective reinforces a top-down model of progress, in which development is imposed rather than co-created. It overlooks the need for critical engagement with state-centric paradigms, as highlighted by scholars such as Escobar (2012), Nandy (2009), Shiva (2021), and Ziai (2016). While the old middle class aligned with state visions of modernization rather than leveraging their relative privilege and access to power to advocate for participatory, grassroots-driven development, there is, in fact, an interesting momentum within the plural and increasingly diverse middle classes that holds the potential to catalyze such transformative change.

3.4 Food Consumption Remaking Citizenship

This leads back to Ritty Lukose's interpretation of how understandings of a singular middle class from the pre-liberalization era continue to shape present-day dynamics. She reflects on how the plural middle classes emerging in the post-liberalization context engage with these inherited narratives and notes "a wide-ranging discourse" in which "liberalization's children critique the postcolonial state" (2009, p. 203). According to Lukose, this shift in attitude marks the rise of renewed ideologies that are more economy-centric. Yet, she argues that "the fashioning of new consumer identities" (Lukose, 2009, p. 203) has generated another shift—one that seeks to remake the Indian state itself, along with its vocabularies and repertoires of politics and citizenship, to align with the aspirations of the diverse emergent middle classes.

The emergence of consumer citizenship among new middle classes and marginalized groups has opened up new spaces and diverse identities that shape contemporary Indian food culture. Scholarship on spatial citizenship (Gryl & Jewel, 2012; Dorsch & Kanwischer 2019) suggests that individuals who actively engage in the collective co-creation of techno–social spaces can gain greater political and economic agency within digital cultures. Consumer–citizenship studies from other regions, such as Davies (2014) in Ireland and England, highlight the central role of information and communication technologies in shaping imaginaries of food futures. Notably, Davies' research reveals that consumer–citizens tend to be cautious about the role of technologies in sustainable food futures, foregrounding that they only contribute as long as they are a community-embedded participatory tool. Building on these insights, the following section turns to the digital dimensions of food and internet-mediated food cultures in India. It explores how food consumer citizenship is taking shape within digital spaces—where it both evolves and contests food economies.

4. Digital Food Economies

The former section elicited that social identity, status, and political agency are central to food consumption choices and that this is not restricted to the elite urban middle class, considering the tendency that other social classes often aspire to similar lifestyles. At the digital intersections of consumer-citizenship, consumption performances of identity and status are amplified by online media, and citizenship takes on new forms as individuals engage in political agency (e.g., ethical food choices, advocacy for food justice) both on- and offline.

In contemporary India, these dynamics are increasingly entangled with digital media, which has become widely accessible across social strata. India is now one of the largest mobile internet markets globally, with over 950 million subscribers—approximately 400 million of whom reside in rural areas (Ministry of Communications India 2024; Nokia 2024). The data indicates that 95 percent of Indian villages now have internet access, a development driven by a sharp reduction in data costs—from over ₹260 per GB a decade ago to an average of just ₹10 per GB today (Nokia 2024). This widespread digital connectivity is reshaping spatial boundaries: the urban mode of consumption is no longer strictly defined by geography, allowing for forms of consumer citizenship that extend beyond urban centers and are deeply embedded in digital spaces.

4.1 Digital Spaces

A central entry point in digital geographical inquiry lies in examining the extent to which the pervasive digital dimension introduces new characteristics to, or challenges, established frameworks of spatial (re) production. Scholars such as Tabea Bork-Hüffer and Anke Strüver (2022), as well as James Ash and colleagues (2015), have contributed significantly to this evolving debate. They trace the development of four spatial concepts that dominated until the late 2000s. The first is the geoinformatic model rooted in spatial science, which emphasizes two-dimensional mapping (e.g., Goodchild, 2009). While foundational, this approach offers limited insight into the complexities of digital spatiality. The remaining three conceptualizations, however, foreground the relational character of space and are more pertinent to digital geographies. These include: space as both symbolic and material resource (e.g., Werlen, 1995), space as socially produced within the framework of political economy (e.g., Belina, 2013; Harvey, 2009; Lefebvre, 1991), and space as materialization of performances (e.g., Bauriedl, 2009).

These relational approaches provide the theoretical flexibility necessary to explore how digital technologies dynamically shape and transform spatial configurations. Nonetheless, many prevailing spatial concepts still fail to adequately incorporate the digital dimension and require substantial revision. In response, Bork-Hüffer and Strüver argue for a fundamental rethinking of space as geography's core subject, emphasizing that "the digital increasingly permeates, connects and produces space, spatiality and socio-environmental relationships," and stressing that "the digital and physical spheres are now inextricably interwoven" (2022, p. 11). From the mid 2000s onward, newer spatial theorists have begun to address this nexus more explicitly. The hybridity of digital and physical realms not only marks our worlds of experience but also informs the epistemological and methodological practices of geography itself. Present-time spatial (re)production, therefore, inherently operates through and with the digital.

4.2 Digital Food Spaces

In the field of foods, as well, the digital dimension increasingly permeates established spaces, intertwines with them, and generates new spatialities. George Ritzer and Steven Miles (2018) extend a political-economic perspective on space into the sphere of digital consumption by revisiting the implications of the "McDonaldization thesis" in the digital age. Originally introduced by Ritzer in 1993, this thesis used the global success of the fast-food chain McDonald's as a metaphor for the dominance of Western consumer culture and the spread of rationalization processes—in Max Weber's sense (1921/1968), the increasing organization of social life around principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control—as cited in Ritzer and Miles (2018). In their updated analysis, the two authors argue that digital technologies not only accelerate these processes of rationalization but also intensify patterns of consumption: "The digital speeds up processes of rationalization while intensifying levels of consumption" (Ritzer & Miles, 2018, p. 3).

The McDonaldization thesis in the digital realm traces the development of food consumption sites (see Talamini et al., 2022), from locational "bricks and mortar" vendors (Miles, 2000) to mixed "bricks and clicks" selling spaces (Belk, 2013), and eventually to fully digital "spaces of flows" (Castells, 1996; Goodman et al., 2010). This typology should be understood not as a linear trajectory, but as a set of overlapping and coexisting spatialities shaped by both continuous and new spaces of food consumption. Building on these frameworks, I propose the concept of smart food spaces—physical sites of food consumption that are dynamically (re)configured through digital technologies such as sensors, data analytics, and artificial intelligence.

The meaning of "bricks and mortar" sites is fairly straightforward—these are classic restaurants with in-house dining. These sites are visibly accessible for clients, and most of their processes are anchored to a clearly identifiable physical location.

"Bricks and clicks" sites are similarly easy to conceptualize. They refer to hybrid sites such as restaurants with a fixed location that diversify income by offering delivery through external websites or apps, enabling customers to select restaurant food online and receive it on demand.

The third category, "spaces of flows" in food consumption, is more abstract and less intuitively grasped, as these vending places typically lack a visible, consumer-facing presence. An example of such spaces is the "cloud kitchen"—a commercial kitchen that prepares food exclusively for online delivery, with no dine-in option or on-site customer interaction. The idea is that customers can "download" ready-to-eat and freshly cooked meals on demand from digital, not clearly place-based, kitchens. Cloud kitchens oftentimes do not appear on conventional maps, because they are often multi-brand, commercial kitchens that operate online only. In line with the logic of economic rationalization, part of the business concept of cloud kitchens is to minimize direct contact between business and consumer; interaction is mediated entirely by delivery personnel, mostly third-party gig economy workers.

My epistemological extension to the three established conceptualizations of food consumption sites—"bricks and mortar," "bricks and clicks," and "spaces of flows"—is inspired by Casey Lynch's work on artificial intelligence and his theorization of "smart spaces" (Lynch & Del Casino, 2019). I adapt this to the context of foods by proposing the concept of smart food spaces. In his keynote speech at the 2023 meeting of the German Digital Geography Specialty Group in Mainz, titled "Feminist Geographies of Artificial Intelligence," Lynch examined Amazon Go stores as a case study. These grocery outlets function like conventional retail environments but are equipped with highly sophisticated sensor systems, facial recognition, and algorithmic tracking, enabling a checkout-free shopping experience. For users with a registered Amazon account—including a billing method and biometric photo—no interaction or digital "clicks" are required to complete a transaction. For those without an account, the site becomes inaccessible or the process of registration transforms their access to the site from a "bricks and clicks" model into a smart food space: characterized by locatable physical infrastructures, yet functioning without the need for conventional manual actions such as clicking, scanning, or checking out.

While Amazon Go targets primarily the US American market (Statista, 2024), similar technologies developed by companies such as Alibaba are increasingly prevalent in Asia (see Junsawang et al., 2020; Shankar, 2018; Shankar et al., 2021). China and India, in particular, are highly sought-after markets in this food industry sector (Bharti et al., 2020). From an economic perspective, smart food spaces offer market prospects due to their efficiency and automation. Their proliferation is driven by the continued acceleration of technological innovation, particularly as global tech corporations such as Amazon and Alibaba advance increasingly sophisticated rationalization processes within the food sector. Unlike "spaces of flows," which are decoupled from physical location, or "bricks and clicks" models that rely on user input via digital platforms, "smart food spaces" maintain a physical presence while almost eliminating manual consumer interaction, thereby redefining the nature of food consumption in the digital age.

4.3 Digital Hyperconsumption

This developing continuum of on- and offline food consumption sites is spurred by the "rampant consumerism" with which Lukose (2009, p. 203) labels the "wide ranging and globally circulating discourse" that is linked to young people and new middle classes in India and beyond. While this discourse can be read as stigmatizing, it does reflect the broader reality of intensified consumption patterns in the digital age. This digitally intensified consumer behavior forms the foundation of the revised McDonaldization thesis. Although Ritzer and Miles acknowledge that "Amazonization" could now be seen as a more fitting emblem of contemporary consumer culture, they deliberately retain the term McDonaldization to emphasize continuity in the critique and to highlight the persistence of core principles. One such principle, particularly salient in the realm of digital food consumption, is what Ritzer and Miles (2018, p. 8) describe as the

> irrationality of rationality associated with Amazon … [and] its tendency to lead to and promote hyperconsumption, the process by which the consumption of non-essential goods is supercharged so that consumers are encouraged to select items they did not know they needed or wanted.

Applied to the field of foods, hyperconsumption manifests in the purchase and intake of ingredients or products that are neither essential nor deliberately sought out. At McDonald's, for instance, "it certainly is possible, even likely, to consume too many calories, too much fat, too much sugar, and so on" (Ritzer & Miles, 2018, p. 8). Similarly, during my fieldwork, a tech-savvy senior remarked that the frequent discounts offered through the Swiggy Instamart grocery app, which, according to her, cultivated a mindset of overspending: "You don't need it but you'll buy it. You'll have 1,000 rupees budget and 2,000 rupees spendings" (Field Note, February 22, 2024).

This dynamic illustrates how rationalization principles function differently across actors in the digital food economy. While it is pertinent to the retailers who strategically promote inexpensive, non-perishable ingredients—consumers are often driven by a logic that subordinates health-conscious decision-making to convenience, affordability, or perceived value. This divergence underscores the "irrationality of rationality," wherein the health consequences of hyperconsumption and excessive fat and sugar intake are knowingly disregarded in favor of digitally mediated consumption norms.

4.4 Outside Foods in Digital Hyperconsumption

In addition to ingredients, the overall hyperconsumption of food can also be associated with specific items. Outside foods is an umbrella category I have conceptualized together with Kiran Addu and Markus Keck (2025), based on empirical evidence from India and Mexico. Outside foods is a popular expression in India that had hitherto not found its way into academic discourse. Outside foods are defined

> by the setting in which the food is prepared. "Outside foods" are ready-to-eat meals and snacks that need no further preparation before consumption and that are prepared for commercial ends outside of consumers' homes. Our conceptual definition thus prioritizes preparation settings over consumption settings, allowing for the analysis of a greater variety of consumption settings that have emerged from eating practices linked to the rise of digital food platforms. (Müller-Hansen et al., 2025)

The foods that fall under this category are predestined for hyperconsumption. Most of the outside food choices seem to be oriented primarily by considerations of price, aesthetics, and taste. These priorities leave values such as the nutritional, ecological, and social impact of food consumption in secondary positions in decision-making processes. Moreover, the sum of taste–aesthetics–price in the decision-making over outside foods excludes a significant portion of society from accessing the available healthy and sustainable products. Prices and the relative affordability of foods are often the main factors in food choice and are closely inter-related with the availability, accessibility, and accommodation of products in different locations—especially for people on the societal margins (see Konapur et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2013). It is also worth noting that healthier products may offer less stimulation to the palate compared to items with high sugar and fat content, particularly when the palate has developed a path-dependent appetite for such foods through habituation or distraction during eating (Abeywickrema et al., 2023; Glendinning & Williams, 2023; Razzaghi-Asl et al., 2023). Although taste and pleasure are pivotal elements in the culinary experience, it is well-documented that a high saturated fats and added sugars intake is crucially detrimental to physical and mental health (EAT-Lancet, 2019; Popkin et al., 2012). Despite the broadly available and accepted knowledge that a personalized nutritional balance with respect to the healthy ranges is key to long-term physical and emotional well-being (Popkin et al., 2012), food businesses are able to effectively market and sell unhealthy products as desirable outside foods.

5. Internet-Mediated Food Cultures

Shared desires in communities that transcend state boundaries offer a compelling explanatory lens for why and how people are drawn together through food, which Ray and Srinivas have attested (2012, p. 26). I understand this dynamic as aspirational eating. The aspirational eating of broadly available outside foods offers community beyond nation states. By aspirational eating, I mean the desire to be part of

a social group and to be loved and accepted therein by consuming outside foods. Outside foods function as unifying canvases for aspirational projections of culinary socio-politics and social mobility, precisely because contemporary consumers increasingly navigate diverse on- and offline consumption settings.

As "local-regional convenience foods" and "international fast foods" compete over the Indian market, they are compelled to strike a "culturally and aesthetically convergent balance" expressed in a shared "'grammar of quality product, authentic taste, and inviting packaging management' in all such businesses today" (Khare, 2012, p. 251). Since the rise of internet-based business communication and digital McDonaldization, these food business grammars are largely communicated through seemingly neutral digital platforms and marketing languages that contributed to the "loosening of caste-kinship rules in eating and food sharing" (Khare, 2012, pp. 248–249). Like linguistic grammar, the grammar of food marketing is dynamic and evolving with the food products it promotes. Today, digital platforms play a central role in translating such "local-to-global-to-local" marketing cycles of outside foods (Khare, 2012).

In spaces of digitally mediated food cultures, sociospatial boundaries that persist in physical space can be transcended, redefined, or reimagined. Thus, I argue that the consumption of outside foods does not have to be a top-down, culturally imperialistic process in contested digital food cultures. Instead, the digitally mediated local-global-local translations of consuming outside foods can offer room for disrupting forms of food-related colonial trauma. As counter spaces in terms of diversity, equity, and integration, food-related stigmata may indeed be disintegrated as local food cultures translate into global food grammars.

5.1 Platforms of Digital Food Practice

Internet-mediated food cultures have amplified both the pressures and motivations for and the mechanisms through which people engage in the hyperconsumption of outside foods. Deborah Lupton, a leading scholar in the field of digital food cultures, highlights the long-standing and evolving relationship between media and food practices. She writes:

> For centuries, media portrayals have made a major contribution to the generation and reproduction of cultural meanings and knowledges associated with food: … digital media have offered a host of novel opportunities not only to represent food cultures, but also to create and share content. (Lupton, 2020, p. 1).

The internet has become intertwined with the cultural ethos of the American Dream, reinforcing a powerful ideal: everyone can make it digitally and "pick the symbolic apple" of success through sheer effort and creativity. Much like the American Dream itself—which has proven to veil social inequalities and disguise structural inequalities as a symbolic ladder of those who succeed to "pick the apple" and discourses of meritocracy. This digital iteration similarly obscures disparities in access, opportunity, and positionality while often blaming those excluded from success on digital platforms for laziness or lack of ambition. Yet, the internet and the World Wide Web do offer new, still-evolving horizons. As Lupton (2020) argues, there are opportunities not only for continuing and extending the status quo in digital spaces; there are also opportunities to discontinue and reinterpret, to project and create, and to connect and share.

A myriad of new possibilities has emerged through digital food cultures, generating a wide array of novel spaces, practices, and aspirations. A jungle of mobile apps now mediates everything from food delivery and dining options to dietary advice and health monitoring, mapping and ranking sites of food consumption, educational content on the socio-ecological sustainability of foods, and communities to share food-related content online or join initiatives with political or leisurely goals in person. In India, platforms such as the popular delivery apps Swiggy and Zomato have reshaped everyday food consumption, while interfaces like HealthifyMe offer data-driven tools for personalized nutrition and fitness plans. The edited volume Digital Food Cultures (Lupton & Feldman, 2020) explores the expanding terrain of food cultural soft- and hardware, examining platforms such as food blogs and vlogs, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, self-tracking devices, promotional media, and online forums.

5.2 Limits of Digital Platforms

Despite the opportunities for changing the status quo in and through digital spaces, there have been many critical challenges to this idea. In her book "Artificial Unintelligence" (2018), software developer and data journalist Meredith Broussard raises critical concerns about the built-in biases in technology—particularly artificial intelligence (AI)—and its limitations when it comes to real socio-ecological problems. Her critique becomes particularly salient when these technologies are deployed in tandem with corporate business strategies that masquerade as socially innovative while primarily serving economic growth. One such strategy is related to the ideological engine behind Clayton Christensen's (1997, 2006) disruptive innovation theory.

Clayton Christensen's theory of "disruptive innovation"—the idea that new technologies can displace established systems through greater efficiency—underpins the current wave of global smart city initiatives. Following earlier paradigms such as colonial planning, urban renewal, and creative city models, the smart city represents a new phase in urban transformation—one driven by digital infrastructures, platform technologies, and AI (Wilson & Wyly, 2022). In India, over 100 dedicated smart city developments have already been developed, characterized by high-speed internet to better reach and connect citizens with information and communication technologies, a comprehensive internet of things, and AI and algorithmic governance to rationalize and reduce human intervention in favor of presumed efficiency and accuracy (Datta, 2018; Chatterjee et al., 2018). However, as with past models of city building, the smart city follows historically contingent pathways that privilege particular forms of capital, aesthetics, and behavior. Drawing from Neil Smith's (2002) concepts of gentrification and revanchism, smart city frameworks can be seen as overtly hostile and punitive toward all that does not fit the model perfectly—that is, not tech-smart, not efficient, not normatively beautiful, not abled and healthy, not growth-oriented.

To veil these mechanisms, smart city "governances strategically deploy the materiality and discursive terrors of decline to advance their projects" (Smith, 2002, p. 1)—justifying exclusionary redevelopment and reinforcing urban inequalities under the guise of innovation. Specifically platform urbanism, the phenomenon where digital platforms play a significant role in governing and mediating various aspects of urban life using technology and data, exacerbates the prioritization of economic interests over the well-being of urban communities. The critique of digital platform urbanism by David Wilson and Elvin Wyly (2023) and like-minded authors is concerned with the exploitation of personal data, exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities, punitive surveillance technologies, sidelining participatory and democratic processes, and environmental degradation due to its amplification of hyperconsumption. In this context, the disruptive innovation theory appears increasingly unconvincing, serving more as a rhetorical cover for the unbridled prioritization of economic interests than as a genuinely shared digital platform mechanism for just urban transformation.

In academic discourse, Christensen's tech-business-oriented theory of disruptive innovation was debunked from within the field of economics and across disciplines by Kim and Mauborgne (2019), Lepore (2014), and Watters (2018), to name just a few. These authors refer to it as the "disruptive innovation myth" in economic theory. Audrey Watters, in particular, critiques the hyperbolic framing of technology-driven economic innovation as disruption, observing that "in this vein, almost every app, every new startup, every new tech—if you believe the myth-making-as-marketing at least—becomes a disruptive innovation" (Watters, 2018, p. 51). While she acknowledges that businesses "might well be innovative—in their technologies and their business models," she argues that "that's beside the point if you're looking for disruption" (Watters, 2018, p. 51).

6. Digital Disruptions of Colonial Food Trauma: Thriving Otherwise

Digital disruptions can have many forms and meanings that extend beyond the economic realm. Feminist perspectives on digital space interrogate the social inequalities embedded within digital infrastructures and contribute to the creation of counter spaces that challenge dominant, heteronormative, and socio-technological regimes of knowledge and truth (Datta, 2018; Elwood, 2020; Valentine, 2007). These counter spaces resist and elude hegemonic market logics and governance structures, while striving to overcome them.

Within Sarah Elwood's (2020) framework of feminist relationality, digital disruptions can give reference to other futures and worlds. To start out with, it becomes obvious that not everyone can make it digitally. Rather, "digitality is deeply implicated in socio-spatial processes of exclusion, adverse incorporation, impoverishment and enrichment" (Elwood, 2020, p. 209). While the author points to the fact that the digital divide follows established intersectional lines of social inequalities (i.e., class, race/ethnicity, gender), she emphasizes how people-oriented digital platforms and practices offer ways for communities to socially "thrive otherwise" (Elwood, 2020, p. 209).

General examples of practices of thriving otherwise include the Jornaler@ app, which allows day laborers to track wage theft (Robbins, 2016; as cited in Elwood, 2020), the Equitable Internet Initiative, which provides internet access to marginalized neighborhoods (Slager, 2018), and the use of digital news and media by unsheltered people selling for personal security and to sustain livelihoods (International Network of Street Papers, 2025). These cases share that they reject the capitalization of their forward-thinking horizontal models (see Carraro, 2023) and instead mediate, often also code, their own pathways of resistance and resilience. Emerging from "Black, Indigenous, Latinx and queer … forms of life, thought and action" (Elwood, 2020, p. 210), these digital thrivings "persist in the face of multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence." They are, in a patchwork of Elwood's and other scholars' words, "always already writing possibilities of other worlds and relations (Crawley, 2016; McTighe & Haywood, 2018)" (Elwood, 2020, p. 210).

6.1 Digital Counter Spaces of Thriving Food Cultures in India

In the context of Indian digital food culture, practices of thriving otherwise are also taking place in diverse and creative forms. Below, I briefly introduce four examples of projects challenging dominant market narratives and hegemonic food systems, constituting counter-spaces and digital practices of thriving otherwise.

One notable example is the early phase of FAASOS. It has its origins in two young Indians who met coincidentally in a London food outlet and shared their complaint about the, in their view, unimaginative and bad food in England (Deininger & Haase, 2021). Back in India in 2011, they founded FAASOS, which stands for Fanatic Activism Against Substandard Occidental Shit. This bold statement aimed to re-center Indian cuisine as the culinary standard, subverting the long-standing hierarchy that often places Western food norms at the top. Through digital platforms that linked consumer-citizens with restaurants and cloud kitchens, FAASOS soon became a successful business model as an online, on-demand food ordering app. While the initiative corporatized—thereby losing its original countercultural ethos—its early years planted a seed of possibility for writing other worlds and relations for creating Indian digital food services beyond colonial culinary legacies.

Another instance of thriving otherwise can be seen in the Masala Podcast hosted by Sangeeta Pillai, available on most music and podcasting platforms, which aims to uplift Brown voices—particularly Indian women in the diaspora—by exploring themes of intersectional feminism through the lens of South Asian cultural taboos. Food features prominently in nearly all of the podcast's 50-plus episodes, symbolizing care, resistance, memory, and identity. Pillai's work is an example of digital storytelling that fosters belonging and visibility in a media landscape still largely dominated by Western, male-centric narratives.

A third example is community kitchens established by Muslim communities in Hyderabad. These kitchens operate on a sliding scale payment system, where poorer families pay less and wealthier families pay more for daily fresh-cooked meal deliveries prepared by the religious community cook. The system is supported by an online platform that allows families to adjust daily portion sizes based on need—accommodating situations such as families occasionally preferring to cook their meals by themselves, some family members eating elsewhere, or requiring additional rations for visitors. This blending of digital infrastructure with communal ethics reflects a deeply rooted model of food justice and care, rather than commercial efficiency.

A fourth and last example is nutriAIDE (www.nutriaide.com), a freeware app developed by a Sikh programmer from Chandigarh with funding from the German federal government. Owned by a Punjabi tech start-up, nutriAIDE employs camera vision technology akin to Google Lens but is specifically trained to accurately recognize Indian dishes with precision. This is

unique in a technological world that is predominantly built on Western realities. Currently, only about five percent of AI databases are sourced from and reflective of the Global South, which has been critiqued as data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; UNESCO, 2024). NutriAIDE not only makes Indian food more legible to AI systems but also highlights the urgent need for more equitable participation in the datafication of everyday life, ensuring that communities in the Global South are not merely data providers but active beneficiaries and co-creators of technological futures.

These examples of thriving otherwise in digital food culture illustrate how people-centered digital platforms are used to foster cultural sovereignty, community care, and feminist resistance, persisting against multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence embedded in intersectional inequalities like race/ethnicity, caste and class, patriarchal structures, and religious majoritarianism. In a digital landscape shaped by data colonialism and AI-creator-biases, such counter spaces of practicing thriving food cultures are vital. Building upon Elwood's insights on participatory digital communities, there is an urgent need for coding Brown, South Asian, religiously diverse, and female-centric forms of life, thought, and action to counterbalance hegemonic food cultures.

7. Conclusions

This review article has argued that digital food consumer citizenship in India offers a powerful lens for understanding how everyday acts—such as paying for coconuts via QR code—can simultaneously reinforce and challenge dominant power structures. Digital technologies, often celebrated as signs of progress, are powerful but not inherently liberatory; their impact depends on how they are embedded in social contexts. When harnessed primarily for economic extraction and platform growth, these tools tend to reproduce exclusion, surveillance, and homogenization. Yet, when situated within community-led, culturally rooted practices, digital infrastructures can foster agency, cultural sovereignty, and new relational futures. What appears at first as mere technological novelty becomes, upon closer examination, a contested space where the legacy of colonialism meets the potential for decolonial, feminist, and people-centered reimaginings—juxtaposing imperial narratives with vibrant, emergent realities in the Global South.

Rather than reproducing dominant logics of digital capitalism or technological determinism, some parts of India's digital food cultures exemplify what feminist theorist Sarah Elwood calls "thriving otherwise"—the creation of counter spaces that resist homogenizing forces through relational, people-centered, and community-based practices. The article foregrounds how South Asian, Brown, religiously diverse, and gender-inclusive actors reclaim both culinary meaning and technological power in ways that unsettle the hegemonies of the platform economy.

The core argument is that digital food practices in India are not merely sites of consumption but arenas of negotiation, resistance, and culture-making beyond national boundaries. From smart food spaces to aspirational eating, and from algorithmically mediated tastes to the Indian standards in the ethnic food delivery service FAASOS, the feminist Masala podcast, community-run kitchens, and the nutriAIDE app—these practices illuminate how digital infrastructures can be used to build alternative futures rooted in justice, care, and self-determination. Those examples reflect the broader role of India's tech-savvy citizens and its booming tech sector in reconfiguring global hierarchies.

Together, the literature and concepts discussed throughout—the historic violence and socio-politics in marginal colonial culinary encounters, the aspirational hyperconsumption of outside foods, particularly by the new middle classes and young generations nowadays, and emerging digital infrastructures in light of both the disruptive innovation myth and relational feminist disruptions that contribute to food justice—show that digital food consumer citizenship is a dynamic and politically potent terrain. It challenges colonial residues, unsettles postcolonial power structures, and asserts diverse ways of being and eating in the world. It is not only about who gets to eat, but who gets to decide what is desirable, dignified, and culturally valuable.

This opens critical avenues for empirical inquiry. As digital food platforms grow more influential, key questions arise: Who profits from controlling visibility and access in popular digital food spaces? How are local foods being transformed or erased there? What new solidarities and strategies are emerging among those who seek to code, curate, and care to thrive otherwise? And what strategies effectively resist inequitable foodways while promoting locally embedded

just foodways? Addressing these questions will further illuminate the evolving interplay of food justice, technology, and citizenship in India and beyond.

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