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## **Temporality and Spatiality of Food: How Community Kitchens Write Food Narratives Amidst Pandemics**

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### **Abstract**

Food often causes recollections of the past by which a historical consciousness is created. The Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown in India that followed it saw the rise of community kitchens in the state of Kerala, organized by the state government and other organizations. A Community Kitchen is a name given to a group of people who prepare and share healthy meals with people, at an inexpensive rate. Taking the case of Kerala as an example, this paper will look at how physical places where food is prepared and shared are filled with food memories and become a factor in the creation of people's cultural memories. It will look at how communities react to the stigma caused by a pandemic in the form of mobilization through food. The paper will study how food forms the basis of the shared experience and collective memory of the lockdown and the pandemic. It will do a holistic culinary analysis of how food becomes a mediator between public history and personal memory by becoming an 'edible memory', where food leads to actions that create cultural memories. Other aspects that the paper will study include the questions of how food, and memories associated with it creates a poly temporality, and how a food system created and driven by politics and the government construct the way in which a pandemic is remembered as a historical event.

**Keywords:** Community Kitchen, Food, Memory, History, Pandemic.

### **Introduction**

Food often causes recollections of the past by which a historical consciousness is created. The Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown in India that followed it saw the rise of community kitchens in the Southern state of Kerala, organized by the State government in corporation with local governing bodies and NGOs, as well as Kudumbashree, the women empowerment program of the state. A Community Kitchen is a name given to a group of people who prepare and share healthy meals with people, at an inexpensive rate.

Food is a necessity for the human body to survive. But beyond that, it has various other connotations that are materialistic and symbolic. Food is often used as a mnemonic mechanism to compartmentalize significant and different layers of memory, and such food memories play a significant part in the narrativization of historical, political, and social events. This study will focus on how a pandemic such as Covid-19 is altered in memory by food, in this case, provided by the community kitchens in Kerala.

Memory is something that is formed with the aid of the five senses, that is, vision, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Food memory is often associated with primarily three of these senses. The vision or how it is seen, the taste of it, and the smell of it are the three senses that trigger food memories. In the case of food, the memory of any one of these senses can trigger the memory of the whole, that is the memory of where the food was had, how it was had, and

with whom it was had. Food memory is often individualistic, the memory of a singular person. But in the case of community kitchens during a pandemic, it becomes a collective memory, as the life experiences through the pandemic and the lockdown are about the same, as is the experience gained through participating in a community kitchen. Here food memory is not shared through articulation or narrativization but through similar sensory experiences.

Food is not the only aspect or object that invokes food memory in a person. Physical places can also cause food memories to resurface in a person. The 'place', in this case, is the community kitchen where food is prepared and shared. Hence, it is these community kitchens that have helped in the creation of social and cultural memories of the pandemic. 'Memory space' or 'lieu de memoire' is a concept proposed by French historian Pierre Nora. He noted that space is not just a site of memory but also a creation of memory (Nora, 1989). When the space of a community kitchen is recreated by memory, the memory of preparing and sharing food goes into the process and invokes nostalgia. Nostalgia is a positive term associated with memory, which is ironic when a pandemic comes into the picture. Hence, the power of community kitchens in making the narratives about the pandemic, as well as the memory space of the creation of this narrative happier in nature should be commended. This study will look into how such community kitchens in Kerala, during the Covid-19, helped in creating a varied memory about the pandemic among the population that engaged with them.

### **1. History of Community Kitchens**

Community kitchens have a history that goes long back. It used to be a traditional form of organization in the rural areas of the country of Peru that helped its population in overcoming hard times. It has its roots in the 'olla comun' or the 'common pot', which was prepared by the people of the countryside during the time of festivals, to support the out-of-work workers of mines and factories in Lima (Andreas, 1989). In later times, community kitchens have been opened to support daily wage workers who were on strike or were out of work during economic recessions and other political, social, natural, or any other forms of calamities. This is a factor that shows that the idea of a community kitchen is not a new one and that it has always emerged and reemerged during trying and hard times. The modern-day community kitchen is said to have its roots in Latin America. In some of the countries on the continent, a community kitchen is the sole way in which populations survive. It has then branched out into different forms known by names of popular kitchen, cooperative kitchen, etc. The notion of a community kitchen indicates a place where people get together and cook for themselves and their families, sharing the cost.

In most cases, such a cooking group will not contain more than ten people. A community kitchen is also sponsored by various different groups. It could be religious institutions, organizations, or government agencies. It is these groups that then provide a space and place for operating the kitchen and who often provide staff and support for them. The frequency of organizing a community kitchen differs from one group to another. Normally, such a kitchen is organized during the time of a need, which could be anything from a natural disaster, pandemic to mass unemployment.

The concept of the "pleasure of eating" has been described as the direct sensation of satisfaction of a need, and the "pleasure of table" has been explained as being a reflective sensation formed from various circumstances that surrounds a particular food or the act of eating like the place, time, people, etc. (Brillat-Savarin, 2011). But this idea of place is a tangible concept since it has a stable meaning of a particular location. They also carry memories that are attached to them. Since they have multiple forms of memories associated with them, food is among them. Food is one of the only objects that can invoke a feeling of home in others.

There are different kinds of memory, namely episodic, cognitive, embodied, and habit. Episodic memory is the general sense of memory where various episodes in past life can be recalled. Cognitive memory indicates the knowledge that one has about the world without

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having experienced it in real life. The episode related to the acquisition of this kind of memory may be forgotten, but the knowledge acquired from it remains. Embodied memory refers to the transfer of an experience into another form, like language, as a way of understanding it further. The memory, or the experience, is embodied here, in another form. The final type of memory is habit memory, which is social in nature. It keeps alive those memories that society thinks it should not forget. Here, the past is reenacted, not necessarily reminding others of the origin of that particular act. Paul Connerton (2010) says that such memory is “retained within the body”. (pp. 124-125)

Food memories can create all these four kinds of memory. This is so because food has both symbolic as well as mnemonic qualities. Practices related to it are also significant. Roland Barthes (2018) says, food “sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies” (p. 15). Objects like food items can be used to remember, archive, and index events of the past. (Peterson, 2013)

### 2. Need for a Discussion

This study attempts to understand the way in which community kitchens work as a location of the creation of food memories during a pandemic such as the Covid-19. It tries to understand how such a community activity and experience alters the memory and how these memories about a negative event such as the pandemic and how it produces a space for the creation of assurance and bonds. It will do a case study of the state of Kerala in India, where community kitchens were opened by the state government during the time of the national lockdown, feeding five hundred thousand people per day. The study will be using a qualitative method, which Cook and Reichardt (1979) explain as the method that includes “ethnography, case studies, and participant observation”. (p. 7)

Research regarding community kitchens is sparse. This study explores how the memories of an event, in this case, a pandemic, are altered through created spaces such as a community kitchen. It talks about how the nature of memory that is associated with food changes in the case of a community kitchen and how such a group helps in the self-sufficiency of people as well as creates a space for sharing not only food but also problems and their solutions. These are a few notions that cannot be understood through quantitative form since the primary reason being that not a lot of people get to experience such a group during a period of social distancing. Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong state:

When knowledge is sketchy or when there is little theoretical understanding of a phenomenon, it may be impossible to develop precise hypotheses or operational definitions. In such cases, researchers often turn to qualitative research because it can be more exploratory in nature. The research can be very descriptive, possibly resulting in the formulation of hypotheses rather than the verification of them. (p. 82)

Quantitative methods are almost always concerned with confirming a truth through logical views. Qualitative methodology, in its turn, is concerned with coming to an understanding of a particular topic. This study aims at exploring and understanding the nature of community kitchens and the food memories that are created there and how this created space helps the people who are associated with it in a time of a global pandemic like Covid-19 and the lockdown that follows it, locating it within the Indian state of Kerala. It tries to create information that can be used later as a reference point in understanding more about the matter. The qualitative method is more effective in this regard as per Knafl and Howard:

As the raw material of theory, qualitative data are important as a means to an end. The raw data are translated into concepts and, in turn, used to illustrate the concept . . . the investigator uses the raw data primarily as a catalyst for conceptualization. (p. 18)

Patton (1980) differentiates the two methods:

Quantitative measures are succinct, parsimonious, and easily aggregated for analysis;

quantitative data are systematic, standardized, and easily presented in a short space. By contrast, the qualitative measures are longer, more detailed, and variable in content; analysis is difficult because responses are neither systematic nor standardized. (p. 28)

This paper uses the case study of the state of Kerala and the community kitchen instituted in it during the Covid-19 lockdown by the government, instead of using other strategies like surveys or experiments. Yin (2013) claims:

In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. (p. 1)

The research looked at several community kitchens located in Kerala. Yet, it is hoped that this research and its analysis would be applicable to all community kitchens and such group experiences had during times of a pandemic.

The historical, psychological, social, and political realities of people become lived histories by defining them through food (Carolan, 2016). In this sense, it is important to understand how food becomes a mnemonic cue. The term “neurogastronomy” was coined by Gordon M. Shepherd to posit that the brain creates a flavor as part of a mnemonic process. (p. 1)

‘Synesthetic memory’ is a process by which the senses in the human body toil towards converting a sensory experience into a cultural and social experience that later gets stored in the human memory (Sutton, 2001). Similarly, another form of memory called ‘palate memory’ has also been proposed to showcase how sensory aspects of food (taste in this case), causes the reminding of social and cultural experiences, that are often collective. (Larson, 2015)

## **Analysis and Outcome**

After the declaration of the national lockdown in India on March 24, as a precautionary method against Covid-19, the government of Kerala asked local governing bodies to set up community kitchens to endure food security and safety for all people. As a result, over 1255 community kitchens were set up across the 14 districts of Kerala, maintaining social distancing and healthcare practices. The mission of the initiative was to make ensure a hunger-free state. The primary consideration was given to homeless people, migrant workers as well as the daily wage workers who had lost their jobs due to the lockdown. The project also involved women volunteers from the Kudumbashree, a women empowerment program in Kerala.

Most memories are intertwined with nostalgia. Nostalgia and pandemic are two words that need not necessarily go well together, as the memory of a pandemic is often stressful and challenging. But in the case of community kitchens and the food memories created here during the times of a pandemic creates a sense of nostalgic feeling about the pandemic. The idea of cooking together, feeding each other, feeding the poor, and helping the others, etc. lend factors to this feeling of nostalgia. In the case of Kerala, and its community kitchens established during the pandemic, politics, and especially the communist party gets to become a part of the creation of this nostalgia. It paves way for the pandemic to be remembered in a completely different way. While nostalgia regarding food is often related to a particular taste or flavor value, here the nostalgia becomes intertwined with the location as well as a specific time.

Food memories are socially grounded, even though they function within single individuals. Memory might mean recollecting experiences that have been archived in the brain in the past when it comes to personal memory. But when collective memory is concerned, this idea of memory gains a different level of meaning, entering the realm of symbolism. Cognitive memories about food are acquired through practices like reading or watching already documented narratives about food and food histories. But this memory only concerns the facts about food and history and does not concern the experience of the person engaging with these documents. But in turn, these documents are generated through the sensory interactions with food, by the author or the creator of the document. Hence, the memory of the food is passed

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on, and the acquisition of this knowledge about the memory of food transmitted to hundreds of others slowly begins to lay the bedrock of an emerging cultural memory regarding that particular food or practice of cooking or consuming.

In the case of the community kitchens of Kerala, this food memory is reiterated through repetition. Since the pandemic and curfews surrounding it lasted for more than a year, the act of cooking and serving becomes a habitual memory that is confined within a particular location and a particular time period. Hence, this kind of food memory also becomes a performative memory, as the repetition of these acts later in life leads to the remembrance of the past experience and the knowledge acquired there. While preparing food for hundreds of people, various skills are also developed like kneading, dicing, etc. which carry on and add value to the later events of life. The memory of acquiring these skills is recollected again while performing these actions, adding a sense of nostalgia to the pandemic times. Thus, the collective memory about food that originated from the community kitchens of Kerala is sensory, performative, and cognitive in nature. All these different types of memories, then lead to the formation of a cultural memory which is then handed down to different generations, in that particular community, in this sense, Malayalees. This sharing of cultural memory takes the shape of different narrative forms among the various individuals. They can be in the form of stories, oral memory narratives, documentaries, movies, news, books, etc. The term 'edible memory' is coined by Jennifer Jordan (2015) to indicate how these stories about food lead to the creation of cultural memories (p. 2). She defines it as a memory that shapes the 'social and material world' of people that pushes them to take up actions like eating meals and telling stories (p. 11). In this particular case, the edible memory is that of cooking together and eating together. So the same actions are caused, with the addition of telling stories about these memories. While food memories, the act of preparing it, serving it, and having it becomes the symbolic context, the narrativization of it becomes the political, social, and cultural sites for the dissemination of the shared identity that is formed as a result of it.

Cooking as a group, preparing food in bulk benefits in saving money. Cost-efficient food is prepared in these kitchens and shared out to different families and individuals in need of food. Sharing does not pertain just to the food items, but also the food recipes and the different techniques and skills in cooking. It also offers a form of camaraderie to people who live alone, who have to experience a particular social situation all alone. Kerala is a state in India that has almost twenty-five percent of its population working in foreign countries, in various posts. Unemployment being one of the major global effects of Covid-19 and the lockdown that followed it, a lot of emigrant Malayalees lost their jobs and returned home. The same happened within the state, where a lot of daily wage workers lost their jobs. In a state of difficulty to feed their family and themselves, it was these community kitchens that helped them. They lend a sense of security, at least in the case of food, to the people.

The main focus of the community kitchen is not on helping a particular social group or gaining the organizing group fame and recognition. It is on cooking and serving that these groups focus on. Spending time with other members of the society during trying times such as a pandemic can be very helpful in relieving stress and can work as a therapeutic measure. The community kitchens, thus offer a resource to their members that is non-bureaucratic, non-judgmental, and non-threatening, where they can share their worries and seek solutions. Glasser & Suroviak says:

The concept of both the classes and food clubs does not imply that anybody has a "problem" that needs "treatment." Rather, they embody the spirit of self-help by beginning with the assumption that guests have the ability to share and learn important information and help each other. . . (107)

With the communist government of Kerala taking the lead and making sure that at least t lakh people in need of food receive their meal packages every day, these community kitchens in Kerala remained a hope and consolation for the people in the trying times of pandemic. It is also important to note that the community kitchens are not closed off to any particular sects of

society. Anyone is welcomed in, erasing the socio-economic boundaries between people. Thus, community kitchens offer people emotional support, tangible support, as well as informational support. Reliance on each other, Attachment, and Reassurance that forms in the bond between people, etc. are the factors that lend a hand in the formation of emotional support. Being a member of a group and feeling belonged somewhere and loved are the basic emotions that help in forming an emotional bond. Tangible support can mean the direct help or service that such a kitchen provides, and here it is primarily food, a necessity for survival. Informational support is the way in which people participating in such a kitchen help out each other through the sharing of information, whether it be in the form of recipes or in the form of solutions to each others' problems.

Food is also a starting point for community development. The production and sharing of it lead to the creation of communication, and group formation, through which collective, as well as personal needs, receive support.

Kippax (1998) considers memories to be one of the various methods used by people to "appropriate the world around them" (20). Hence, food memories can also be understood to have connections with socio-cultural events and meanings. Food memories from childhood normally are linked to relationships with family. Food is essentially related to being part of a group or a community, in the case of childhood as well as adulthood. While the food memories surrounding the community kitchens can remind one of the pandemic and of difficult times, they also provide an alternative memory of having camaraderie with others, trying to overcome hard times collectively. Thus, in Kerala, food starts to write a different narrative of the pandemic.

## Conclusion

Food memories often exhibit a sense of poly temporality. Memories of food can take us to the past, experience the presence and look forward to the future. The experience of a certain type of food can trigger the memory of the past, even though the experience is taking place in the present. In the case of a pandemic, this memory can travel forward to the future, which is creating situations for recollection of the same memory in the future, which David Sutton (2001) calls "prospective memory" (19). In the case of a pandemic, it becomes the fear of it resurfacing and the hope that the same food experiences will take place again. This becomes a way in which a historical consciousness gets created that pertains to both the pandemic as well as the food culture. The population gets to know about what should be done.

A holistic culinary approach is a new form of paradigm that tries to state and prove that the relationship between people and food is dynamic and that it is never static (Abarca, 2016). It is continuously changing, often through the practices of remembering, narrating, and recreating. It gains new heights of meanings when read together with the relevance of it during the times. This is an approach that helps in understanding the power dynamics vested in food. It looks at food and food memory from private, public, personal, collective, and local aspects.

Food memories often create and unfold a new relational identity between people, that is often tied down to a particular community. The food here becomes a rhetorical device and symbol within 'personal memory' and 'public history'. Since this juxtaposition between memory and history has the ability to destabilize a past experience, the time of the pandemic and the memory regarding it acquires the ability to change, from something that invokes terror into something that evokes nostalgia.

In this particular case study, even though the 'public history' is that of a pandemic and its different impacts on health, society, economy, culture, etc., the 'personal memory' of the people will remain enveloped in the goodness that they experienced through preparing and serving food. The memory about food here then becomes one that of consolation, reassurance, and happiness. Hence, a certain sense of nostalgia gets created around the food of the pandemic, which is poly-temporal and has a 'lieu de memoire'.

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