



The migrant suitcase: Food, belonging and commensality among Indian migrants in The Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

The Migrant Suitcase is a metaphor to understand how social remittances are taken, brought back and transformed. Migrants bring with them different cultural norms, food and eating practices. In this paper I review the concept of social remittances in light of material culture, food and eating practices and examine the linkages between food, belonging, commensality and care and then provide empirical examples from the suitcases of Indian migrants. This paper is based on 30 in-depth interviews conducted among Indian migrants living in The Netherlands. The main themes from the data included food from home, cooking practices, food sharing and family relationships. Migrants' sense of belonging was intrinsically related to the food they brought from home and the memories it generates. The practices of cooking and sensorial experiences surrounding them demonstrate the place and home making processes. Commensality with co-ethnics led to a sense of community and stronger community bonds. Commensality with other non-Indian groups was perceived to be problematic. The exchanges of food, eating practices, and care create a sense of 'co-presence' in lives migrants and their transnational families.

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1. Introduction

Can you recollect which food item(s) you miss the most when you are away from 'home'? Do you carry this food or ingredients for the food with you when you leave on a long-distance trip? Do you feel happy to eat something from home while living in a foreign country? The smell, the taste, the texture may bring back memories of times past or simply the normalcy of the sense of home. On the contrary you may also bring back food from your travels to share with family and friends the experience of the time spent in a different cultural setting. As a migrant, you may also bring food from home to reconnect fellow immigrants with the sense of home. In this paper I review the concept of social remittances in light of material culture, food and eating practices and examine the linkages between food, belonging, commensality and care and then provide empirical examples from the suitcases of Indian migrants in The Netherlands. The central research question is to examine

how the travel of food, food practices and commensality reflect the flows of norms, practices, identities and social capital between India and the Netherlands.

The Indian Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs indicates that nearly 25 million Indians constitute the Indian Diaspora. More than 4% of the tertiary educated leave India for other countries (Bhargava, Docquier, & Moullan, 2011). In the Netherlands the flow of Indian migrants increased considerably with the introduction of the Kennismigrant visa (highly-skilled migrant visa) at the end of 2004. The Kennismigrant visa can be granted to 'labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earning an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance' (ACVZ, 2004). Indian diaspora has grown considerably with traditional destination countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Gulf. The Netherlands is relatively a new destination, with most flows linked to highly-skilled migration (Kōu & Bailey, 2014). Reports from the Immigration and Naturalization Department (IND) show that India, USA and Japan were the top three countries, in that order, applying for the Kennismigrant visa from 2005 onwards (IND, 2012). According to the population projections of Statistics Netherlands, the inflow of labour migrants from Asian

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countries will continue and increase, from India and China in particular, as they will remain the largest pools of highly-skilled migrants in the world (Nicolaas, 2009).

1.1. Social and reverse remittances

Up to now, studies examining the exchanges between migrants and their family have only used the lens of economic remittances (Jayaraman, Choong, & Kumar, 2012; Lakshmi, 2011; Singh, 2010). I am not undermining the importance of economic remittances: it is currently much more than the development assistance being offered, and forms less than 10 per cent of the gross domestic product in India. Kapur (2004) terms this change as the new development mantra that national governments are using to pursue diasporic investments (Dekkers & Rutten, 2011). Events such as Pravasi Bartiya Divas are initiatives by the governments both at the state and central levels to attract diasporic capital and investments (Dickinson & Bailey, 2007; Mani & Varadarajan, 2005). India is now one of the top recipients of economic remittances: the change has been remarkable – in 1990 India received \$2.1 billion and two decades later, nearly \$69 billion (World Bank, 2012). Financial remittances have surpassed both foreign direct investment and foreign aid to India (Afram, 2011). Kapur (2004) observes that social remittances are playing a larger role in reshaping Indian economic policies. Levitt (2001), who coined the term social remittances, calls attention to the fact that in addition to money, migrants also export ideas and behaviours. She observed four types of social remittances: norms, practices, identities and social capital. Much of the work examining the flow of social remittances has seen it as being unidirectional towards the sending countries. Extending the work on social remittances, Mazzucato (2011) introduced the concept of 'reverse remittances'. In her study on Ghanaian migration to The Netherlands, she finds reverse remittances in terms of services rendered, such as child care, investment in properties and specifically the organization of the papers for regularizing stay in The Netherlands. Suksomboon (2008) notes that for non-migrants in Thailand, social remittances bring changes in their social values and lifestyles. She also argues that investment of remittances into family rituals and ceremonies leads to greater social capital for migrants and their families. Social and reverse remittances are inherently cultural and are marked by power relations (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). These power relations determine who are able to send, who is to receive and what needs to be reciprocated for the remittances received.

As part of this project we also explore the use of economic remittances (Mahapatro, Bailey, James, & Hutter, 2015) at the household level in India. Analysing data from National Sample Survey 64th round-2007-08, we find that households receiving international remittances use it mainly for food, education and health care. From a purely economic perspective these expenditures can be seen as unproductive investments, but from a social remittances perspective it is investment in human capital and improvement in the living situation of the family left behind. Economic remittances and gifts act as a measure to substitute care that the migrant could have provided if he/she had co-resided with the family. Care giving and receiving are also the new motives for international migration. Indian parents often migrate internationally to provide care for their new born grandchildren (Deepak, 2005; Glick & Van Hook, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005). Thus is this paper the focus is largely on reverse remittances in the form of norms, practices and social capital as reflected in the food, food practices and commensality which generate a sense of belonging among the Indian migrants in The Netherlands.

1.2. Food and belonging

Immigrant foodscapes (following Appadurai, 1996) need to be examined not just from the consumption perspective but from a globalized perspective where the connections between producers and consumers are recognized, the varied positions of the people involved in the chain are critically understood and the multiplicities of location are mapped. Building on Appadurai's work, Ferrero (2002: 196) defines foodscapes as 'an analysis that deals with transnational food practices and their dynamics that usually characterise and potentially subvert consumer societies'. Such foodscapes allow immigrants to reconstitute their identity by importing, preparing, selling, sharing and consuming food from the 'home' land. In their study of South Asian immigrant women in Canada, Dyck and Dossa (2007) found that the women used their food practices to delineate a healthy space for their families. Poros (2001) observes how family ties and migration networks extend across continents and aid in bringing families and foodscapes together. The different meanings given to migrant foodscapes also change with time. Thoms (2011) documents how Italian cuisine in Europe went from being known as a migrant food to more of a lifestyle cuisine in Europe and North America. Similarly Asian food has also moved from being the food of the 'other' to be widely accepted as speciality cuisine in the western world. In his work in Belize, Wilk (1999) found that globalization actually produces local cuisines, as the concept of 'Belizean food' was created by the transnational flows of ideas and people between Belize and the USA: the migrants came back to set up restaurants where they served the food they remembered from their childhood.

Anthropological and sociological literature has already acknowledged the importance of food and consumption with regard to identity constitution. More recent work that links food with the immigrant space examines the representation of food and diaspora. In her book *Culinary Fictions*, Mannur (2009) studies the representation of food and the cultural production of the South Asian American Diaspora through cookbooks, short stories, film and television. Black (2010) examines the work of Madhur Jaffery to reveal how the cookbook has become a genre that aids in the translation of not only food but also the cultural practices of diverse cultural groups. Both Mannur's (2009) and Black's (2010) work highlight how Indian food and food practices were presented in palpable form to a western audience thus reducing the potential for a culture shock.

In an extensive review of immigrant entrepreneurship, Rath and Kloosterman (2000) find that nearly 60 per cent of the businesses are in the field of wholesale, retail and restaurants. In her study on Chinese restaurants in Germany, Leung (2003) reports how the migrant entrepreneurs relied on the Chinese community for support to optimize their businesses. The concentration of immigrants in ethnic food and restaurant business is also an indicator of discrimination immigrants face in the job market. In many instances lack of access into the formal labour market pushes immigrants to turn entrepreneurs with small and medium scale enterprises. Various studies have also documented the cultural role of the migrant shops as places where information is exchanged, social ties are maintained and strengthened and a sense of home is imagined (Caldwell, 2002; Mankekar, 2002; Visser, Bailey, & Meijering, 2015). In her ethnography on undocumented workers, Kim (2009) observes the emergence of fictive kinships to overcome loneliness and marginalization during the course of working in an immigrant restaurant. Mintz and Du Bois (2002) further emphasize how food and eating practices have both inclusionary and exclusionary effects on groups. Food is also used as a mechanism to connect to the immigrant identity with a purpose of maintaining and furthering links with the 'home' land (Bajic-Hajdukovic, 2013;

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