

FOOD AND IDENTITY AMONG MIGRANTS LIVING IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

The present paper examines how Asian migrants living in Slovakia (re)construct their identity through food and accommodate in a new cultural food settings. For conducting this qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are used, transcribed and analyzed. While analyzing the collected data, religion, marketing and socialization seem to have a greater influence along with other cultural and gender factors in shaping food patterns of migrants after moving to a new cultural setting in Slovakia.

Key words: Food, Cultural accommodating process, Food patterns, Identity, Asian Migrants.

JEL Classification: Z00

1. INTRODUCTION

Food is an essential element of human life to fulfill the basic human need of hunger. However, the patterns to fulfill the hunger by food vary from culture to culture. Specific food items and appropriate use of food (etiquette) symbolize the identity of a group. Food habits/behaviors of a particular cultural group are often shaped by cultural, ethnic and religious beliefs that are learned from childhood and thus hold special value to a person. These distinguished patterns that people learn are deeply embedded in their cultural behavior and hence are sustained by them even when they move to faraway places, where they are exposed to a different set of cultural (among others food) patterns. While settling into the new conditions of life after moving to a new place, migrants usually use food as one of the tools to practice their cultural traditions in order to maintain their distinguished identity. After exposure to a new cultural pattern, whether immigrants do or do not try to accommodate into the host culture (in terms of food), the accommodation process differs depending on various conditions. This study is an attempt to look into the process of Asian immigrants' accommodating in the new cultural food settings that vary from person to person depending on

various factors of age, gender, marketing, social status, socialization and religious beliefs.

1.1. FOOD AND IDENTITY

People do not eat all kind of food even they are omnivores. Every social group has different classification of edible and inedible items in everyday diet and even the manners to eat food are considered to be very culturally specific. (Prescott, 2003: 5-6) For that reason, many cultures seem to go to considerable lengths to obtain preferred food rather than just consuming what is available. The basis for food preferences by a culture seems to be dependent on a wide variety of factors ranging from “convenience, availability and nutrition” (Belasco, 2008: 7-16) to “cultural and social influences, taboos, myths, customs and manners associated with food, religious beliefs, social status, etiquettes and marketing etc.” (Stanton, 2003: 449-52) That is why, Fox, (n.d) argued that the relationship of food and identity is functionally combined in by two directions: from individual to collective (psychological to social) and from biological to cultural (nutritional to symbolic activity) about our place in the society.

Since every society has its own food patterns and dietary laws; what people of one particular group eat becomes a symbol of who they are – their identity. Food preferences reveal distinct identities based on age, sex, status, culture, religion and even occupation. Contrasts between the identities of one’s own group (e.g. our food) and those of other group (their food) become apparent through interaction between cultures when individuals move or migrate. Food in the context of migration plays a vital role as immigrants no matter where they go keep practicing their homeland food ways and use food as an icon to set and maintain these boundaries between homeland (us) and new land (them). Rowe (2009: n.p) argues that it is observed in migrants’ communities that food acculturation takes place quite longer even immigrants have acculturated in other spheres e.g. language acculturation. And it is claimed that immigrants do not practice homeland food ways as a reminder of home only but they try to maintain their connection to homeland and also to sustain their homeland identities through food. (Belasco, 2008: 16 & Bell, 2003: 513-14) But this relationship that migrants establish between original and new home places through food is not straightforward and varies how different immigrants practice this process of reconstructing their identity through food in a new cultural setting depending on multiple factors such as age, gender, religion, generation, characteristics of homeland and new land etc.

Since Slovakia has a low number of Asian migrants as compare to other neighboring countries, there are not many studies on this issue. However, some recent researches show that food has been one of the earlier cultural shocks for migrants after arrival to Slovakia and food has been one of the dilemmas in cultural accommodating process as few years back migrants did not have much access to international ingredients in Slovakia. (Hlinčíková, 2009: 63-65) The author, therefore, conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to explore various identities Asian migrants demonstrate with relation to food and try to assess the factors contributing in the process of accommodating and (re)constructing identities after migrating in new cultural food patterns in Slovakia.

2. METHOD

This qualitative research is being processed by using one of the primary tools of the social sciences - semi-structured interviews. The target respondents (total no = 14) for this study are immigrants from Asian origin (Pakistan = 5, India = 6, Other = 3) who are now living in Slovak republic. Those immigrants are preferred who are legally resident, employed or doing business in Slovakia. Participants of this study are both male (n = 7; married = 6) and female (n = 7; married = 4) adults (Age: 25 – 45). All the respondents have their belongings to two religions (Islam = 9; Hinduism = 5) of the world. Snow ball sampling technique is used to access the immigrants. Oral data and field notes are sources of collecting information about the research topic that are transcribed and analyzed later.

3. ANALYSIS OF COLLECTED DATA

The data collected from respondents generated extensive material about the interaction between food and identity of Asian migrants. The main themes that emerged are that of religious, cultural, gender, marketing and socialization and their relevance towards food identity. Therefore, the results are analyzed and presented according to these factors that have a greater influence on the accommodating process of Asian migrants in Slovakia.

3.1. RELIGION AND FOOD IDENTITY

Every religion provides dietary rules for its followers (Prescott, 2003: 6) and has guidelines for the preparation, eating, serving, sharing and offering of foods. All the respondents, except two participants who claim that they have totally accommodated into Slovak food patterns, emphasized that migrating to Slovakia

has mostly influenced these food practices with reference to their religious identity.

3.1.1. Selecting Food items:

Respondents mentioned that the major problem encounter when they are outdoor for eating because their religion restricts them to consume certain food items and they are left with few choices in terms of selecting food. For example, one respondent of my study stated:

“I have to be very careful in choosing what I can take. I need to be careful not only about pork but even other meat because they are frying or spreading bread crumbs in the same pot. . . . and if they have fried or put pork in the same pot, it will make the other food, not just meat but also other food like fried cheese, also uneatable; so, it makes even “Halal” (permissible by Islamic law) things “Haram” (prohibited by Islamic law).” (Sh – Unmarried Indian Male Muslim)

Respondents asserted that they prefer to choose food according to their religious doctrine. Whereas, some respondents claimed that in certain situations, sometimes they have to defy some of religious rules e.g. one Muslim girl from Indonesia claimed that she may sometimes take a sip of alcohol when her Slovak friends insist her to take it because she is with them at some party though she tells them that it is prohibited in her religion.

3.1.2. Giving/Sharing

Female respondents (both Muslim and Hindu) enormously mentioned that sharing food with neighbors and giving food to poor is a basic teaching of their religions and is a part of their everyday culture.

“...but in Slovakia, this part is missing. I miss to send food to my neighbors because it is not common in Slovakia to send food to your neighbors on frequent basis and people do not like it very much. Even when I tried, my neighbors did not appreciate” (Kw – Married Indian Female Hindu)

“ . . . I feel so bad when I have to throw the leftover out because I cannot give it to anyone. In India, when you have extra food, you send it to your neighbors or give it to poor but I do not have this possibility here because nobody knows who their neighbors are.” (Mm – Unmarried Indian Female Hindu)

They claimed that this tradition has changed after coming to Slovakia.

3.1.3. Fasting/Refusing Food

As sharing food strengthens the relationships with others, similarly, refusing food could damage the relationships as it is considered as an insult in some cultures. Another form of food refusal is practiced by people to create a link between them and God by keeping fast.

Respondents who associate themselves with Hinduism claimed that in Hinduism also, people construct association between them and deities through refusing food. They keep fast to please the deities, to show them respect and to get rewards and blessings by them in return. They keep fast for a particular purpose also, and ask deities to fulfill their wish as a reward.

“We relate every day of the week to a particular Bagwan (God). We believe that every Bagwan possesses a unique ability to grant a particular thing. We keep fast accordingly what one wishes to get. For example, Males keep fast on Tuesday that is linked with the “Hanuman Bagwan”. On that day, they can eat fruit and can drink water and milk but they should not eat any meal and especially should avoid salt. My husband is keeping fast on this day for the last 16 or 17 years. This is believed that “Hanuman” will help in overcoming the difficulties and bring happiness in the family.” (Bn – Married Indian Female Hindu)

All the Muslim respondents mentioned that refusing the offer of food from somebody is not only to make angry that person but it is also a disliked act in the eyes of God. They (except one male who has fully accommodated into Slovak food pattern) also claimed that they keep fast for one month of *Ramadan* to get closer to God and are still practicing it even being in Slovakia away from families.

3.2. CLTURE AND FOOD IDENTITY

It encompass a whole process of preparing the meal to bring the proper taste such as, cutting the vegetable or meat, marinating, quantity of ingredients, cooking way and using appropriate utensils etc. The preparation and cooking of *cuy* meal among Jimenos in Ecuador is one example how they invest their time and efforts in the preparing and cooking process to develop original taste. (Abbots, 2011: 208-10)

Those participants who are not married more emphasized that they miss the taste and odor of food from their home countries. Though they claimed that they had tried to cook sometimes by themselves but the taste is not the same as they were used to eat in their home country.

“The food that is cooked in “Matti ki handi” (clay/mud pot), on “Chulha” (earthen stove made of clay/mud) and at the wood fire is much more delicious and tasty. It has a distinguished aroma and odor. It is also more healthy food. When you eat, you do not just fill your stomach but you feel good and a sense of pleasure. But here we do not have such opportunity to have such food. Here, fresh vegetables are not available and we have to use tin food also because it is easy and quick to cook. But it does not taste good and is also not healthy. . . . Whenever someone goes to India, I make a special request to bring “saag¹” that is cooked in clay pot and on the clay hearth.” (Sh – Unmarried Indian Male Muslim)

Respondents expressed that they had to change their cultural way of eating a meal because some manners are not considered nice in Slovak society.

“In India, we usually sit on the “dastar khawan” (ground mat for eating) for eating and mostly eat with hands not with forks and spoons. When you eat bread (Roti), you automatically want to eat with hands; it feels more good and comfortable. But here we have to be conscious when eating out with friends because people do not like to eat with hands here . ” (Sh – Unmarried Indian Male Muslim)

Some of the male respondents from Pakistan claimed that their wives, who are Slovak, learnt to cook Pakistani food for them because they cannot eat Slovak food daily.

“Before getting married, I was living alone here but I never cook by myself. I was eating out some junk food all the time and then came one point that I felt like hitting my head in the wall when I see junk food . . . After marriage, when I start eating food cooked by my wife, I was back to life. She is good enough that she learnt to cook some Pakistani dishes also. . . Now, I feel like heaven knowing that I can eat my food again even though I am not in Pakistan.” (Ai – Married Pakistani Male Muslim)

Mostly respondents expressed that it is very important for them to eat typical Asian home food like *roti* (round flat cooked bread) and other kind of food cooked with special Asian spices.

¹ “Saag” is a mustard based curry-leaf dish eaten in Pakistan and India eaten with bread or rice.

3.3. MARKETING AND FOOD IDENTITY

3.3.1. Selecting food items

Availability is one of the core factors that contribute in the process of selecting food. (Belasco, 2008: 16) All the participants discussed about this aspect.

“I am vegetarian and also in Asia we eat more lentils and fresh vegetables. We have special spices for our cuisine. There were not many vegetables available when I came here. It was communism and we could not go to any other country. So we were kind of force to eat what was available here and that was why we gradually started eating chicken and other Slovak food.” (Bn – Married Indian Female Hindu)

Another respondent, who also came to Slovakia during communism regime, claimed to experience the same phenomenon.

“I came to Košice (smaller city) and it was even worse there. We were used to Asian food². We went to the mess (jedaleň) and we had to eat the things which we would never have thought of eating like kapusnica, pork and different sausages etc. . . . Before some years, it was more Slovak food that was cooked in our house because there were not much international ingredients available. . . . But now it’s more international food.” (Ka – Married Pakistani Male Muslim)

They argued that limited availability of different food items of their preference made them force to change their eating ways because they had to choose whatever was available.

3.4. SOCIALIZATION AND FOOD IDENTITY

3.4.1. Social Inclusion/Exclusion by Food

Food plays a central part in socialization. Food can be a significant factor in determining your inclusion or exclusion from a group of people around you (Scholliers, 2001: 5-33).

“In my religion, we do not eat “Jiva” (any living thing - meat or any other product from living things), even some do not eat eggs or drink milk. . . . After coming to Slovakia, I followed my rules from homeland for a long time but gradually, I started to eat chicken because whenever I went out with friends they were insisting me at least to try it. I still cannot and do not eat other meat except chicken . . . but I have not told about this to my family because if I will tell my

² The respondent explained the Asian food as spicy food that consists of rice, roti (unleavened flat bread) and salan (cooked meal/dishes, eaten with rice or bread).

mother, she will not feel good about it. . . . Some other Indian friends here eat meat too but we cannot talk about it openly in the family or in Indian community here in Slovakia because they will not like it and maybe we would not be welcomed there anymore.” (Mh – Married Indian Male Hindu)

While, another participant who has fully assimilated into Slovak food patterns claimed that he had to changes his traditional home food ways in result of social inclusion – to be a part of Slovak culture.

“When I came to Slovakia . . . there was not a single person other than us (me and another student) from Pakistan. I wanted to have good relations with the natives and I did not want to build the walls. And for this, I had to eat with them. . . . When friends or colleagues invite you to their homes or anywhere else and offer you some food, they do it with respect and love. So you cannot say no to everyone and everywhere. And if you do so, you are creating a distance and I did not want this.” (Ka – Married Pakistani Male Muslim)

All the participants expressed that socialization has a major impact on their food patterns in Slovakia.

3.5. GENDER AND FOOD IDENTITIES

3.5.1. Selecting food items

It is a general concept that women are the “gatekeepers” who are responsible for what food comes into the kitchen of the house, though, the dominant factor in this food selection is to satisfy and please the family members. (McIntosh and Zey, 2005: 135-38)

In my research findings, all the respondents who are married and have families claimed that it the duty of women to decide what to cook for daily consumption in Slovakia. Whereas female respondents emphasized they have to take consideration what their family members, especially husband, children and if living in joint family system then elders (mother-in-law and father-in-law), like or dislike eating.

3.5.2. Division of Labor

It is argued that women exert considerable power in all cultures by their control of meal planning, cooking and serving (p, 136) whereas, men employ this power through their economic status by providing economic resources for food purchasing. (McIntosh and Zey, 2005: 136 & Bynum, 2008: 129) Respondents claimed that in their home countries, women have the power over kitchen and

men play only passive role in all activities except eating. Men usually help in buying or providing the means to buy food stuff e.g. by giving money.

“In India, food related activities like buying, preparing, especially cooking is governed by women. We (males) only eat and sometimes help in buying food stuff that is asked by them (women). I did not and still do not know much about the name of all the ingredients used in our meals and the proper recipe to cook the real Indian dishes. . . . I have to call to my mother to ask for the recipe” (Mh – Married Indian Male Hindu)

During the interviews, it was expressed by all male respondents and also by married females that women are the ones who have the responsibility of cooking.

“. . . but to cook for myself is something I do not want to do. In my country, food is always prepared when we get home after work or when we leave for work by the females of family. . . . Now, it is not about taste. It is just about filling your tummy. Taste does not matter, anymore. I just eat to fulfill my hunger - my stomach. . . . When you are alone and you are at work or after work, you do not have much time or interest to arrange some tasty food. You just buy some available food or cook something that is easier and quicker.” (Sh – Unmarried Indian Male Muslim)

These gendered role differences in food influence migrants’ (men’s) lives in the destination place while adapting there, by taking the “roles of women” and they are seemed to make compromises over tastes.

3.5.3. Transferring knowledge to next generation

All married respondents asserted that they consider it very important to transfer their home food patterns to their next generation and consider the mother in charge of this responsibility.

“Our children like to eat Indian food. We always cook Indian food at home so that children learn what Indian food is. My daughter does not know yet how to cook Indian food but my children really like to eat Indian food. They eat Slovak food too as they go to the schools and eat lunch there but they do not eat beef and pork . . . it is the duty of all mothers to try their best to teach them our Indian traditions and beliefs.” (Bn – Married Indian Female Hindu)

All Muslim respondents, except one, claimed that they strive to get their children accustomed to only Islamic food pattern and Hindu married women expressed that they feel obliged to teach their home traditions including food patterns to their children.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study examined the process of Asian immigrants' accommodating in the new cultural food settings by conducting semi-structured interviews. The paper provided insights into the role of various factors such as religion, culture, marketing, socialization and gender in the process of accommodating and their relevance with food identity. According to the data analysis, influence of religion, marketing and socialization are well documented as major factors in constructing food identities of all the respondents during the process of accommodating. However, there are variations in accommodating into new food patterns depending on the gender and marital status of participants.

This paper is a part of preliminary analysis of collected data and is still in process of more exclusive analysis and synthesis for final dissertation writing.

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