



Community Building and Exclusion: The Role of Food in University Hostels in New Delhi

Rituparna Patgiri¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I seek to explore the social nature of food in university hostels in India's capital city of New Delhi. With the increasing migration of students from smaller cities and towns to bigger cities searching for employment and education opportunities, hostels have become a preferred choice of accommodation because of their affordability and security. For many marginalised and economically poor students, these hostels are the only spaces where they can afford to live and eat. At the same time, hostels and university campuses have recently been in the spotlight as sites of resistance and social action. Discussions and debates around hostel fee hikes and food politics mean that there is a need to understand what hostel food represents for migrant students. While there is an attempt by universities to use hostel food to promote togetherness and belongingness, hostel food is also met with counter meanings. A study of hostel food offers us a lens to better understand the sources of contestation within the university and the reasons for protests by migrating students living in hostels.

Keywords Food · Migration · University · Student · Hostels · Community · Exclusion · India

Introduction

When we think of food, diverse images pop up in our minds. Increasing digitisation and the presence of social media in our lives mean that there has been extensive visual coverage of all kinds of food — from the finest restaurants to our own kitchens. Be it fast food, healthy food or gourmet food — representations, images, stories, videos, blogs and vlogs — are everywhere. Food has occupied a central place in public discourse even during the COVID-19 pandemic — from being a suspect of the cause (bat meat) (Patgiri 2020b) to a distraction for the upper and middle classes who have engaged in cooking/baking as a leisure activity (Patgiri 2020a). Of course, even before the pandemic, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu had argued that one's taste in food is determined by one's social position (Bourdieu 1979). Therefore, one could comprehend "creative" cooking practices and uploading images on social media during the pandemic as an upper- and middle-class trend. Dishes like Dalgona coffee and banana

bread became very popular as "quarantine recipes" among the wealthy.

Some sociological works have explored the relationship between food and educational institutions across cultures. For instance, in the UK, the school meal is seen as a symbolic occasion that builds unity and cohesion among students (Lalli 2020). There has also been a study of the German *Mensa* (canteens) in universities and how they impact one's food choices and patterns (Einhorn 2020).

What, however, is missing from these discussions and representations is hostel food — that is, the food served in student residence halls. In this paper, I seek to explore the social nature of food in university hostels in India's capital city of New Delhi. The term "social" is sometimes used to indicate those manners of acting, thinking and feeling that are seen as external to the individual and that contribute to collective solidarity and integration (Durkheim 1982). Here, I use the term "social" to mean both the community building and coercive character of food that creates interactive, inter-relational, cooperative, and sometimes conflictual, relationships between people. Food is a social process from production to consumption (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Taylor Sen 2015; Patgiri 2016). Since the hostels explored in this paper are primarily cosmopolitan, it becomes vital to look at the intersection of food with the diverse social identities of their residents.

✉ Rituparna Patgiri
missrituparnapatgiri@gmail.com

¹ Department of Sociology, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, New Delhi 110057, India

Importance of Hostels as Public Spaces for Students

With the increasing migration of students from smaller cities and towns to bigger cities searching for employment and education opportunities within India (Mcduie-Ra 2012a, b), hostels have become a preferred choice of accommodation because of their affordability and security. Universities institutionally operate hostels with a provost, a warden, a caretaker and a mess. They are often located on university campuses, and the mess food is provided at subsidised rates.

In fact, for many women, it would be very challenging to come to a new city and set up residence if not for hostel accommodations. Many families may not allow independent staying arrangements. Hostels thus play a crucial role in building relationships in young people's lives, particularly migrant and women students. Although hostels have also been critiqued for regulating women's freedom through their strict rules about timings and visitors (Zaidi 2019), one of the significant demands of student groups during the pandemic has been to loosen the regulations (Ara 2021). This is because many students, particularly women, perceive these hostels to be spaces that offer them a chance to live independently.

In recent years, hostels from two premier universities in India — Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI) — have been in the limelight for multiple reasons, notably the proposed fee hike and the resulting students' protests against the decision (Roychowdhury 2020). Hostels are seen as sites of resistance and social action (Arunima 2017; Pathania 2018). Both universities are located in India's capital — New Delhi. One of the reasons JNU saw large-scale student protests in 2019 was the proposed fee hike specifically for hostel accommodation and food. For many marginalised and economically poor students coming from smaller cities, towns and villages, these hostels are the only spaces where they can afford to live and eat. We will see that the story of hostel food is also the story of migrating students and their relationship with the city of New Delhi.

The role of food in integrating individuals into the community has been much discussed in sociological literature. The functionalist school of thought looks at how food contributes to the continuity of a social system. Durkheim, for instance, has looked at the various cultural and social meanings that food conveys in simple societies and how food helps in developing a communitarian attitude (Durkheim 1912). The social significance of food lies in its role in maintaining social relationships and organisations through various prohibitions and prescriptions. Food-related rituals and taboos are seen as facilitating the individual's socialisation within the community (Beardsworth and Keil 1997).

The food served in their hostels is among their first encounters with the food of a new place. Pre-existing studies

tell us that migrating individuals or communities make firm attempts to hold on to their traditional food habits. Food becomes an instrument to maintain and display their ethnic and national identities (Srinivas 2006; Saunders 2007). How does one understand the position of the heterogeneous and diverse migrant students living in hostels where they are served a universal, standardised menu? What is their relationship to existing ideas of community and identity? I argue that a study of hostel food in New Delhi helps answer these questions.

The Setting and Methods Employed

New Delhi — the capital city of India — is considered to be an educational hub as it houses many premier institutes like the University of Delhi (DU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), South Asian University (SAU) and All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). Students from all across the country move to the city to study in these institutions (Kawoosa 2019) and then live in various kinds of accommodation — university hostels, private hostels, paid guest (PG) arrangements, rented apartments etc. Among other things, they also have to adjust to the food in a new city. The food served in their hostels is their first initiation to new social habits, thereby being a perfect entry point to understand questions of community and migration. In this article, the hostel is treated as an extension of the university as a public space (Pathania 2018; Gundemeda 2020).

My experiences of having lived in multiple hostels in Delhi for almost 11 years shaped my academic interest in understanding the various meanings of hostel food. Thus, auto-ethnography is the first method I have used to frame this essay to make sense of my own personal experiences and academic pursuits (Mills 1959) and connect the self to society (Chaudhuri 2020). The two field sites — Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the University of Delhi (DU) — are not random selections but chosen based on my lived experiences. These two universities are also located in two opposite parts of the city — JNU in South Delhi and DU in North Delhi (the main campus).

The two universities have many outstation students (those coming from outside Delhi) residing in their hostels, cutting across caste, class, ethnicity, religion and region. There are currently eighteen hostels in JNU and seventeen hostels in DU, while a few others are being constructed. While JNU is a residential university with all its hostels housed on one campus, DU's North campus is relatively scattered. The latter cuts across other neighbouring residential and business areas.

Having spent 2 years of my student life at DU and six in JNU's hostels, I had an insider's access to what happens

within these premises. Choosing these familiar spaces as field sites gave me easier access to many areas. The knowledge of local histories and backgrounds aided in choosing the field sites. It is essential to spend sufficient time in the field to understand it. As I was already familiar with the field, it was easier for me to “exploit” it (Goffman 1989). My hostel life in DU began in August 2012 and continued until March 2020 in JNU.

However, at the same time, being an insider meant that there were challenges. Often, I struggled with what is data and what is not (Barua 1999). What seemed like everyday and mundane things needed to be re-understood from a sociological vantage point. The balance between being a fieldworker and being a part of the field at the same time is not the easiest to maintain and comes with its share of benefits and burdens, advantages and problems. There are “methodological, ethical and interpretive consequences” of researching familiar sites (Rapp 2000: 14).

Little things that had otherwise seemed insignificant now suddenly seemed interesting, revealing patterns that had been earlier invisible. Additionally, most of the people I interviewed were friends or acquaintances or were contacted through them. They were people whom I may not have personally known, but had co-existed with in the hostels for a long time. In a way, it made the task simpler and more complex (Author 2021). Simpler because it was easier to reach intimacy in conversations more quickly. More complex because it meant there was a need to be subtle in my approach, careful with what to ask of whom, given that I would continue to meet these people after the research was over. Thus, one had to balance between being a researcher and an acquaintance or friend.

Apart from auto-ethnography, the other methods that have fuelled my study are participant and non-participant observation, and interviews and conversations with students living in these hostels. While auto-ethnographic experiences and observation can be put in the timeline from 2012 to 2019, most of the interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020. During this period, I spoke to sixty people — out of which thirty-six are women, and twenty-four are men. These were students, mess managers and hostel committee members. The disproportionate ratio of women to men was because I had easier access to women and was not intentional.

While some of these conversations — thirty — were in person, twenty of them were telephonic. Apart from gender, the respondents are diverse in caste, class, religion and age. The sample population also has considerable regional diversity as they come from different states like Assam, West Bengal, Manipur, Nagaland, Rajasthan, Kerala, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. This was a conscious choice as I had felt that speaking to people of different geographical regions would enrich my findings.

Ideas of Community Building and Hostel Food

The communitarian role of food, as earlier described, is stressed by universities that believe that a common mess and eating together can promote social interaction between students. It is not just university authorities but even students who believe that. Most undergraduate students living in hostels argue that having a common dining hall helps develop relationships as they get an opportunity to meet and interact with fellow students. For instance, Roshni,¹ an undergraduate student at the University of Delhi, was the only student from her school in Madhubani, Bihar, to study at DU. She did not know anybody else in the hostel, and it was during meal timings that she “met people” and “made friends”.

When I had come to Delhi, I did not know anybody. I was allotted a double-seater in the hostel, but my roommate had not been assigned yet. So, for the initial month, I was very alone in the hostel as my friends in college are mostly from Delhi. It is only in the mess during meal times that I would meet people. I gradually started eating together with two girls from my floor, and we became friends.

Roshni stresses the importance of “eating together” in creating new social relationships and friendships. Another student in the undergraduate hostel at DU, Kiran, says that spending time and eating food together has become an integral part of her life. “I do not even drink tea but still go to the mess during evening tea time because I get to meet my friends and talk.”

The significance of the shared meal can be found in sociological literature. It is argued that a shared meal helps families maintain their affection and bond (Douglas 1972; Counihan 2004). Hostel authorities themselves emphasise the relationship between food and community building. There are strict rules in many hostels that food cannot be taken to the rooms and eaten; hostellers have to eat in their respective mess. It is believed that eating together helps in building a hostel community. The essence of the community or the *Gemeinschaft*, as defined by Ferdinand Tönnies, lies in the social bond that stems from it (Tönnies 2001), and food plays a critical role in creating and maintaining that social bond. Food is a metaphor for friendship and harmony in hostels (Pathania and Tierney 2018). At the same time, the idea of community is a variable construct that holds a variety of contradictory meanings around which diverse social practices and understandings take place (Hill Collins 2010).

¹ The names of all respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. Also, consent was sought to include their quotes in this paper.

Hostel Food and Special Occasions

The integrative role of food, scholars have observed, is particularly important during festivals and rites (Conlon in Breckenridge 1995; Dube 1998; Taylor Sen 2015). University hostels, too, promote this idea through “festival special” foods. For instance, almost all hostels of both DU and JNU serve *gujiya* — a sweet made with suji or flour stuffed with a mixture of sweetened khoa and dried fruits — during Holi. Similarly, during Lohri, a bonfire is lit, and students are given special snacks. Since many students coming from nearby places leave for their hometowns during festivals, there is an attempt to celebrate them in the hostels to make those who cannot or choose not to go back feel “like family”. Says Purva, a postgraduate student at JNU:

I have spent almost every lohri in the hostel as the semester begins in January, and I cannot go back home [to Himachal Pradesh]. But I enjoy the lohri here. We light a bonfire every year after dinner, and it is a lot of fun. We get special lohri snacks like popcorn and peanuts and enjoy the bonfire.

The hostels also pay attention to providing special foods during those festivals when many residents might be fasting. For instance, most hostels in DU would provide *brat ka khana* (fasting food) on Navaratri, a festival celebrated by Hindus in many parts of India. Students who celebrate Navaratri fast for 9 days and have specific food requirements. They have to avoid eggs, meat, garlic, onion, wheat and lentils and hence need specific *brat ka khana*. The idea is to avoid “hot” and “spicy” food items (Taylor Sen 2015). Therefore, they are given food items that they can eat, like *sabudana*, and fruits.

Similarly, hostels also take care of dietary restrictions during the month of Ramzan, when many residents who are Muslims fast. They can pack food during dinner to have it in the morning. Items like dates, fruits and sweets are given during iftar. Alam, a PhD student at JNU, says:

It is not difficult to fast during Ramzan even when staying in the hostel. Although we do not get food in the morning for sehri because it’s too early for the workers, we can pack food during dinner time and keep it in the room. We can then eat it during sehri time. When the month of Ramazan comes to an end, the hostel has an iftar party in which even those who do not fast can join.

Both during Navaratri and Ramzan, fasting students have to register their names in advance for their special dietary requirements. Not all (the ones not fasting) are given special food or allowed to pack food, but only students who are fasting. By reworking their menus and meal timings, hostels

try to create an environment where students feel they belong to a community that cares for their needs. Celebrations and festivals are integral ways in which this feeling of belongingness is created and maintained.

Students also appreciate some of the measures that hostels take to make them feel at home. For instance, almost every hostel has a “special dinner” every month. The special dinner has an elaborate menu with starters, main course and dessert. Residents eagerly look forward to these special dinners. They can also invite guests from other hostels, and the price of the guest meals is included in the respective residents’ mess bill. To cite another instance of authorities making students feel at home, they would keep tea and coffee dispensers outside the mess during exam time in some hostels. The hostel authorities are aware that students stay up late to study and hence provide tea and coffee.

Similarly, there is also the provision of “sick food” for unwell residents. While it can be seen as a basic amenity that should be there in every hostel, it plays a role in enforcing the feeling of belonging to a family and/or a community (Appadurai 1981). The boundaries of a community are not just physical — they are also symbolic in that they represent inclusion and integration (Azzopardi 2011), and food plays a significant role in it.

Identity and Exclusion: Whose Idea of the Community?

However, many would argue that this idea of the community is exclusive and does not include them. In a country like India, food has had deep associations with questions of identity (Khare in Khare and Rao 1986, Kikon in Bhushi 2018) like caste, class, ethnicity, gender, religion and ethnicity. Food scholars have argued that there is, in fact, nothing called a “national cuisine” or a “national dish” in India (Appadurai 1988). Every region has its specific cooking style and spice template. In this context, food from the northeastern² region becomes significant, as many stereotypes are attached to its food. It is seen as a food that most other communities do not eat (Mcduie-Ra 2012b: 72) and seen as far closer to food from countries like China and Myanmar (ibid 73). What does the relationship between food and community mean in the hostel of a public university?

For many students from northeastern parts of India, the hostel food is very different from what they generally eat.

² The northeastern region of India consists of eight states — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It is geographically located towards the far east in India’s map and has a specific history of marginalization because of its location and cultural differences from other regions. In fact, food from this part of India is often considered to be ‘gross’ and ‘stinky’ (see Mcduie-Ra 2012a, b, Kikon in Bhushi 2018).

The hostels of these institutes offer food mainly from the northern and central Indian regions with occasional servings of food items from the Southern, Western and Eastern parts of India. Food from India's northeastern region finds no place on the menus. It is difficult to adapt to a new diet (Pathania and Tierney 2018).

For many students from the northeast, the food served in these national hostels becomes a source of alienation and exclusion. Many of them resort to either cooking on their own or ordering food from outside. "I fall sick if I eat hostel food. It is too spicy for me. Hence, I either cook or eat from outside," says Maheta, a postgraduate student from Manipur in DU. Prakriti, another postgraduate student from Assam who lives in a JNU hostel, says that the hostel food has been a big part of her adjustment to another environment. "I had to struggle to eat the hostel food after I had come to Delhi. I am still struggling even after two years. It is not what we eat at home; this food is very different." Tenzing, a Naga student from JNU, says that the hostel food is a "constant reminder" of her difference. "Food, like the other things, only reminds me again and again that I am different."

"Smelly" Food as a Means of Exclusion

Food is a central way of otherisation of people from the northeast. Northeasterners find it difficult to get rented houses in metro cities like New Delhi as their food is seen as "smelly" and "dirty" (Mcduie-Ra 2013). Bamboo shoot, akhuni and fermentation — some of the essential ingredients and techniques of food of several communities from the northeast — become tools to otherise and exclude them. Their pungent smell is seen as something that can be "disgusting" to others.

Keeping in mind this context, excluding northeastern food from hostel menus makes many students feel different. Thus, although there is no national or Indian cuisine per se, excluding food from the northeastern region from hostel menus pushes the idea that only certain dietary practices are "Indian" (Appadurai 1988; Kikon in Bhushi 2018). It is no surprise that the homogenous idea of the community is challenged. For students like Maheta, Prakriti and Tenzing, the "no cooking rule" in hostel rooms does not make much sense. They see it as "an unnecessary rule" which makes their lives difficult. "If I don't cook, I will have to keep ordering from outside. Neither can I afford it, nor is it good for my health. Hence this rule makes no sense. Our food is different from the food given here," says Maheta. "Although we still cook in our rooms, there is also a fear about someone objecting or complaining. If the matter reaches the warden, we can be fined", says Tenzing. They recognise that bamboo shoot and akhuni have "strong" smells but expect "tolerance" and "inclusion" from others. Says Maheta:

I know our food can be different and smelly, but it cannot be a reason for discrimination. Even when we are cooking, I can see some people making faces and covering their noses in the corridor. That is insensitive and makes us feel excluded. We are not even asking them to eat our food.

Fermented foods create conflicts and disputes in neighbourhoods and university campuses, including hostels (Kikon in Bhushi 2018: 96). For those students from different parts of the northeast, hostel food signifies exclusion and difference.

Meat as a Means of Exclusion

This feeling of exclusion is not limited to students from the northeast. Most hostels have primarily vegetarian menus with occasional servings of non-vegetarian food. Meat and fish are served twice a week during dinner, although eggs are given during breakfast and once a week for dinner. The meat that is served is mostly chicken and sometimes mutton. This decision is influenced by majoritarian taste and adherence to upper-caste Hindu religious beliefs (Pathania 2016). It indicates a propagation of a singular identity through food even in cosmopolitan settings like university hostels.

Meats like pork and beef — consumed and preferred by students from the northeast and south India — are excluded from the hostel menus (Pathania 2016; Gundemeda 2020). Since universities are public spaces, it is not surprising that hostel menus reflect majoritarian socio-cultural choices (Gundemeda et al. 2012). While beef is considered to be inedible and impure by upper-caste Hindus (Srinivas 1995), pork is categorised as "dirty". A correlation is drawn between Muslims and beef and tribals and pork (Gundemeda and Ashwin 2018). Both beef and pork are ranked lower in the hierarchy of meat, and hence their eaters are lower in caste and social status (Srinivas 1995). Hostel menus play it "safe" by only including "acceptable" non-vegetarian items like chicken and fish, with occasional servings of mutton. These decisions seem exclusionary for students who prefer to eat pork and beef regularly. It is considered fallacious to look at India from a "common gastronomic, cultural" (Appadurai 1988) perspective as many variations exist.

Intersections of Food, Gender and Class

The idea of the community is also challenged at another level — that is, on the question of gender. The relationship between food and gender has been extensively discussed by feminist scholars who have shown that from production to consumption, food is gendered. While public universities like JNU and

DU are perceived as egalitarian spaces, there are ways to understand the impact of gender on hostel food. All the thirty-six women interviewed for this study said that different rules exist in boys' hostels than in girls. There is no restriction on the quantity of food that boys can take, and there is also a general agreement that the food quality in boys' hostels is better. Rupali, an MA student at JNU, says:

In my hostel, during breakfast, the day idli is served, I can only take two pieces. In fact, if I want an egg with it, I have to sign the register and pay for it. No such restrictions or rules exist in any of the boys' hostels.

These restrictions and rules on the quantity of food for women are congruent with dominant representations of women's bodies in popular culture that idealise a type of femininity based upon diet restriction (Cairns et al. 2010). There are also prohibitions on what to eat and what not to eat that are gendered across cultures. Certain food items like meat, particularly red meat, and milk are often made selectively available to men in various cultures (Dube 1998; Adams 2010). Almost twenty women out of the total of thirty-six women interviewed felt that there is also discrimination in terms of meat in the hostels. Says Shilpa, a postgraduate student at DU:

We do not get mutton in our hostel. The reason given is that it is expensive and our mess bills will go up. But it is not the same case in the boys' hostel. They get mutton and much better food than us.

Interestingly, even the boys agree that the food served in boys' hostels is of "better in quality and quantity". There is also an agreement that there is no "portion control". But they do not think that there is discrimination in terms of meat. Mohit, a PhD student at JNU, stated:

I have eaten in many of the girl's hostel mess in JNU. There is no doubt that the food in my hostel is better, be it the daal or the raita. But we also do not get mutton regularly, maybe twice a month sometimes but mostly on special dinners.

While mutton is not served once a week, even in boys' hostels, they get it at least twice a month in many hostels. For girls, it is on the menu only during special dinners. However, not everyone thinks that this constitutes discrimination. Students feel that not everyone eats mutton, beef and/or pork; hence, chicken and fish are "safe choices". Others see mutton as expensive and feel that its more regular inclusion might raise their mess bills. Food served in spaces like hostels is thus dependent on various factors.

In fact, students who have served on hostel committees state that making a hostel menu is the "most difficult job in

the world". Purva (quoted earlier in the paper), who has served in the mess committees of the hostels in DU and JNU, says that committee members are under tremendous pressure when making menus. Preference for food is a subjective choice and influenced by one's social background (Bourdieu 1979). Indian food habits are influenced by caste, class, religion and regional identities. Students on the committees feel that it is very challenging to satisfy everyone. What constitutes satisfactory and non-satisfactory food in public spaces like university hostels has always been a contentious issue (Gundemeda 2020).

The girls also feel it is easier for boys to pressurise and complain about food in the hostel because the managers listen to them. "They [mess managers] know that boys can be hot-headed, so it can become serious if they don't listen to their grievances. You know, I had heard this story of a boy throwing the plate full of biriyani directly at the manager because it was not good. Girls don't do that," says Rupali (quoted earlier in the paper). According to mess managers, there is some truth that boys' hostels generally have better food. Francis, who has been working as a caterer in two hostels of DU for almost 10 years, says that boys "complain much more" and it is not easy to "deal with a big group of boys". "As caterers, we take care so that we can provide the best possible food in the hostels; they are students – young people – who should eat good food. The girls don't complain much but the boys are slightly difficult to deal with. They can complain too much, and dealing with a big group is not easy. Hence, one has to take extra care."

While hostel authorities and students alike focus on building a community through food, there are several fault lines and divisions in this idea of the community. The social meaning of food is not the same for everyone. One cannot understand hostel food without looking at regional, ethnic, gender, caste and class diversity. In universities like JNU and DU, known for their diversity, students from various backgrounds live in the many hostels. They often come from economically marginalised families, and hostel food is their only food source during their stay in the hostel. Thus, when exploring the relationship between community and hostel food, one must also look at the class question.

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic entered India, JNU saw heavy protests by students and teachers alike as the administration proposed a hostel fee hike. It was seen as an exclusionary and discriminatory move that would further alienate students from marginalised backgrounds. There were several protests between October and December 2019 against the administration's decision (The Indian Express 2020). The students interviewed for this study feel that the fee hike is unjust since it is a public university and students cannot afford a rise in bills.

While there are complaints about the food served in hostels, many students also agree that hostel food functions

adequately as their main source of meals. In fact, most complaints about food quality are from students who hail from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds. This is similar to what Nagaraju Gundemeda's study of Hyderabad Central University revealed (Gundemeda 2020). For students from lower-class backgrounds, hostel food is affordable, varied and of good quality.

In fact, in hostel meetings, students from economically poorer backgrounds constantly voice their concern that there should not be a hike in the mess bill “in the name of improving food quality”. For many like Alam, Roshni and Kiran, hostel food is “quite good”. They are aware of their economic backgrounds and cannot afford to pay more than they already do. This contrasts with students from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds who “would not mind” spending a “little more” if they get better food in return. This is why, perhaps, members of mess committees feel that making a menu in a hostel is a “very, very tough job”.

While an occasion like the “special dinner” is eagerly awaited, not everyone is excited about it. Students from economically poorer backgrounds feel that they can sometimes create unnecessary financial strain because of peer pressure. Saroj, an undergraduate student in Delhi, for instance, says that her friends from other hostels invite her to special dinners in their hostels. While she appreciates the gesture, she cannot pay and often declines these invitations.

When my friends invite me for special dinner at their hostels, it's nice; but also creates pressure. The special dinner is expensive for me, and if I say I cannot pay, they offer to pay on my behalf. I appreciate their kindness, but I don't feel good about it. At the same time, there is also the expectation that I will invite them to the special dinner in my hostel. But I cannot because since they offered to pay for me, how can I ask them to pay?

Others like Shilpa and Rupali (quoted earlier) also feel that while occasions like special dinners are organised with a “good intention”, they can unintentionally create these financial and social pressures. There is an obligation to reciprocate (Mauss 1966) the invitation to a special dinner that students can find obligatory and pressurising. This is not limited to special dinners alone but is also visible on hostel nights and food festivals.

Every hostel has an annual event called the hostel night, for which preparation begins almost a month earlier. Usually, hostels have it in the months of February–April, and it consists of various cultural activities like singing, dancing and poetry and a grand dinner. Residents are permitted to invite guests to these hostel nights, and the cost of the meals is added to their respective mess bills. Thus, occasions like hostel nights create both obligations to invite and accept invitations (Mauss 1966).

Similarly, both DU and JNU also have various forms of food festivals that are organised on their campuses. While JNU has an international food festival, DU has a northeast food festival. Both of these are organised by students and are ways to come together to eat and celebrate. These are also ways in which students are introduced to food from different cultures. However, for many, these are “exclusive” events. An MPhil student at JNU, Vignesh, said:

I will not say that I do not enjoy special occasions like food festivals that the hostels organise. But I never eat much because I cannot afford the food. For instance, since my MA, I have lived in JNU but have barely gone to the [international] food festival. The food that is sold there is very expensive.

Vignesh argues that he realises the need for organising such food festivals but still thinks that they are just for “privileged students”. For students like Saroj, Roshni and Alam, occasions like food festivals are luxuries that they cannot afford. They are associated with privilege and upper classes as status markers (Bourdieu 1979).

In fact, there has been significant debate around food festivals on university campuses across India. The Dalit student's union of the University of Hyderabad had planned on serving beef in its annual food festival, *Sukoon*, a decision that was scrapped by the university authorities. It was met with protests from the Dalit students union, who saw it as “arbitrary” and “hegemonic” (Gundemeda 2009). Similarly, in JNU, a group called The New Materialists (TNM) wanted to organise a beef festival on 17th September 2012. After opposition from right-wing organisations and interference from the Delhi High Court, the planned event was cancelled (Pathania 2016). Meats like beef and pork were systematically pushed out of public events like food festivals in universities, rendering the events exclusionary and discriminatory. Thus, the idea of the community is challenged.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have tried to explore the relationship between food and migrant students who reside in hostels of two premier public universities of India — the University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University. In the past few years, hostels and university campuses have been in the spotlight as both sites for resistance and protest. Discussions and debates around hostel fee hikes and food politics mean that there is a need to understand what hostel food means and represents for migrant students.

For many, hostel food is closely tied to the concept of belonging to a community. Sharing meals, eating the same food, celebrating festivals, and special occasions like special

dinners and hostel nights make them feel a sense of belongingness to the campus community. Students enjoy eating together and building relationships. At the same time, a study of hostel food shows that the notion of the community is not fixed — it is fragmented and exclusionary. There are different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion within the community. The message at play here is “inclusion yet exclusion” (Douglas 1972: 61).

From IIT Madras deciding to have separate dining halls and washbasins for vegetarians and non-vegetarians (the decision was later scrapped after criticism) (Susan 2018) to universities like JNU and the University of Hyderabad trying to host beef and pork festivals, campuses are public spaces where both hegemony and resistance operate. The homogeneous idea of the community is challenged at several levels — caste, class, ethnicity, gender, region and religion. For Dalit and tribal origin students, hostel menus signify ideas of exclusion and difference. For those from economically marginalised backgrounds, availability and reasonable rates are key rather than quality and variety.

While there is an attempt to promote togetherness and belongingness through hostel food, it is also met with resistance and counter meanings. A study of hostel food offers us a lens to understand the different meanings of a community as well as the relationship between migrating students and new places.

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Declarations

Consent to Participate The names of all respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. Also, consent was sought to include their quotes in this paper.

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Rituparna Patgiri teaches Sociology at Indraprastha College for Women (IPCW), University of Delhi. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). She is also one of the co-founders of [Doing Sociology](#), an academic blog dedicated to promoting sociological consciousness among young students and scholars, and a host with [New Books Network](#), a consortium of author-interview podcast channels dedicated to raising the level of public discourse by introducing scholars and other serious writers to a wide public via new media. Dr. Patgiri is passionate about making academic knowledge accessible to the public and her research interests lie in exploring questions of culture, food, media, gender and pedagogy.