

Hostel Plate: You Are What You Eat

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ABSTRACT:

The college hostel mess is generally seen as a utilitarian dining hall, but it is actually a significant site where regional and cultural identities are daily negotiated. This ethnography of a South Indian hostel mess explores how 50 students from diverse backgrounds negotiate their identities through food and language. This ethnography, based on the works of Bourdieu, Appadurai, and Anderson, reveals how the hostel mess is actually a "micro-nation" where the concept of diversity in India is actually lived. Some important findings are as follows: food preferences express regional identity, eating habits express cultural conditioning, code-switching facilitates belongingness, and nostalgia expresses the emotional essence of identity. Survey results reveal that 84% of students have eaten food from other states, but 56% still find hostel food "very different" from home food. This shows that the hostel mess is actually a site of continuous negotiation. The hostel mess actually performs the role of informal nation-building.

KEYWORDS: Hostel mess, food identity, gastro-politics, habitus, code-switching, nostalgia, imagined communities, cultural negotiation, South Indian hostel, micro-nation.

1.INTRODUCTION:

The Mess as a Site of Inquiry

The space of the hostel mess is normally considered a space that is purely utilitarian in nature—it is a space for the consumption of meals for the students. However, if one were to look at the space in a more intimate manner, one would realize that there is much more to the social reality of the space than meets the eye. Every evening, as students from different parts of India assemble in the space to have their meals together, the space assumes a completely different character. Metal plates

would function as a canvas for the inscription of personal as well as cultural histories. Rice and curry would not be consumed; they would either be placed in a certain order, mixed, or consumed separately in accordance with deeply ingrained personal as well as cultural traits.

The paper proposes the idea that the hostel mess represents a "micro-nation" and is a tangible concept—a place where the concept of the Indian nation is being negotiated on a daily basis. While the paper is not descriptive in nature, it attempts to analyze the manner in which such seemingly mundane acts represent a concept of great importance.

LITERATURE SURVEY

In order to place this research in the context of existing literature, the following four main themes were reviewed: food and identity; gastro-politics; habitus and embodied practices; language use in multilingual settings.

Food and Identity: Many researchers have shown that food is never just about nutrition. Counihan & van Esterik (2013) state that “food practices carry cultural memory” and convey a sense of social identity. In the case of India, Khare (1992) has discussed in detail that food in India is very much linked to caste, place, and community affiliation. In recent times, the relationship between food and regional identity among urban Indian youth has been investigated by Ray & Srinivas (2012). In this particular study, we try to contribute more to their research on engineering college hostel messes.

Gastro-politics: The seminal essay by Appadurai (1981) on gastro-politics in South Asian Hinduism highlighted the politics of food consumption and the way it is used as an expression of hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion. In later studies, it has been applied to school canteens (Baumann, 1996), immigrant kitchens (Mankekar, 2002), and student hostel settings (Gundemeda, 2020). There is a limited number of studies that apply gastro-politics to the context of the Indian hostel mess, where students from all the states come and share their meals every day.

Habitus and Embodied Practice: The concept of habitus formulated by Bourdieu (1984) is the one of an embodiment practice acquired through socialization. According to Warde (2016), taste and eating practices reflect class and regional habitus. Within the Indian scenario, whether someone eats with hands or with cutlery and how food is mixed or separated in his plate can be considered as indicators of regional socialization. This study extends the concept by focusing on more than one habitus working within the same setting.

Languages, Code-Switching, and Multicultural Spaces: Language choice within multicultural spaces has been studied extensively by linguistic anthropologists as a performance of identity (Gumperz, 1982; Heller, 2007). Code-switching involving English, Hindi, and other local languages within Indian hostels has a purpose beyond utility but also involves affect (Kothari &

Snell, 2011). This paper makes an important contribution to existing research in the area through the study of food language (such as “dosai” and “dosa”) and code-switching during mealtime.

Research Gap and Contribution: Despite several existing studies on food, identity, and language individually, there have been no empirical studies examining the relationship between these phenomena within the particular setting of an engineering hostel mess of South India. This research bridges this gap by presenting empirical evidence of how 50 students construct their regional identities and nostalgia through food and talk.

2. METHODOLOGY:

An Ethnographic Lens

The study has been carried out with intense ethnographic observation in a common mess of a large public university hostel in [Coimbatore, India], spanning an academic year. The research methods used are primarily participant observation, with some unstructured talk with other students. The focus has been on the mundane and unscripted aspects of student culture - food choices, food habits (using hands, utensils, combinations of both), code-switching in language, and nostalgia. It was not the intention of the researcher to have formal interviews, but to grasp the lived reality of diversity in a common space.

2.1 Research Design

In this study, an ethnographic research method was used wherein participant observation was integrated with structured surveying during the period from August 2024 to April 2025 in the common mess facility for about 200 students at an engineering college in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

2.2 Participant Observation

Participant observations were done by the first author for 120 hours on the following areas of food choices, eating techniques, food combinations, language usage, and nostalgia. These field notes were made within two hours of conducting each session. Unstructured interviews with 25 students were recorded with pseudonym identity protection.

2.3 Survey

Paper surveys were administered among 60 students and the data analysis included 50 completed surveys (response rate: 83.3%). The surveys consisted of 18 items divided into four sections that included basic information, eating behavior, language usage, and cultural interactions, consisting of multiple choice, Likert-type, and open-ended questions.

2.4 Participants

The sample size consisted of 50 participants who were first-year engineering undergraduates having stayed at their hostels for between 3 and 18 months. The regional representation of the sample size is summarized in Table 1.1 below.

2.5 Data Analysis

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 26:5 May 2026

Ayush Arun and Dr. Sreejana S.

Hostel Plate: You Are What You Eat

Quantitative data was subjected to descriptive analysis (percentages and frequencies), while qualitative data collected through field notes and open-ended questions were analyzed through thematic analysis with coding categories derived from the data.

2.6 Limitations

The sampling was highly biased towards Tamil Nadu hostels (72%), thereby limiting its generalizability to other regions of hostels. Biasing due to the author being one of the students was likely minimized because of extended periods of interaction with participants.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This research study is based on three important theoretical perspectives, which include habitus by Pierre Bourdieu, gastro-politics by Arjun Appadurai, and imagined community by Benedict Anderson. In combination, these three frameworks help us analyze why and how eating in the hostel mess performs a much deeper function for its members.

3.1 *Habitus (Pierre Bourdieu)*

The term habitus denotes the ingrained way of performing actions, which is internalized within us. In the chaos, whether the individual chooses to eat using their fingers or a spoon, and whether they like eating coconut food or spicy food, are determined by habitus based on their geographical and cultural background.

3.2 *Gastro-Politics (Arjun Appadurai)*

The term gastro-politics refers to the politics of food as an expression of identity. There is no neutrality in the choice of food. When the plates are laid out, choosing a dish that one recognizes and avoiding another that is strange becomes a subtle form of politics.

3.3 *Imagined Communities (Benedict Anderson)*

According to Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities," nations emerge out of shared beliefs rather than physical encounters. It is suggested that this paper illustrates how the chaos allows for such an abstract concept to become concrete. Individuals who come from all corners of India meet daily, learning about their own differences.

4.1 The Plate as Biography: Performing Regional Identity

The first performance of identity occurs at the serving counter. The choices made in terms of food are a declaration of the student's biography. The student from Kerala, in his quest for coconut, does not merely eat in response to his hunger; instead, he re-creates a culinary memory of his place of origin. This aligns with Appadurai's gastro-politics, in which the selection of food is a "statement" about who one is. This is not necessarily articulated; it is an unvoiced declaration of a certain geographical and cultural provenance. This leads to a "geography on a plate," in which the diversity of India comes together in a common space.

4.2 The Hands that Speak:

Habitus Made Visible

The act of eating itself is an unstated expression of habitus. As Bourdieu's theory would suggest, the manner of eating, the manner of mixing food with one's hands as opposed to separately and then eating with a spoon, is not arbitrary. It is an acquired manner, an expression of tradition, class, and region, shaped in childhood. In this mess, there is an unstated conflict of habitus, an unspoken dialogue of what it means to eat, and by extension, what it means to be from a particular place in India.

4.3 The Babel of the Table: Language, Code-Switching, and Intimacy

Language is a living, breathing concept of identity and belonging. The use of neutral, functional English as a lingua franca, interrupted by the use of regional dialects ("Dei," "Yaar"), is indicative of a move towards a more intimate, affective form of communication. Code-switching is not seen as an impediment to effective communication but as a means of articulating a complex self. Talking about food, about the dish from one's region, is a form of biography, a challenge to stereotype, and a demand for recognition, as is seen in the case of the Nagaland student. The "imagined community" of the nation is replaced by an imagined community of recognized individuals.

4.4 The Tenderness of Nostalgia:

The Emotional Core

Finally, there was the essential but often neglected emotional aspect: nostalgia. The simple words "I miss home food" are an act of unguarded vulnerability. They tell everyone in the room that, despite all the acts of identity and all the negotiations of diversity, there is a human experience at the core of all. This human experience is one that brings everyone in the room back to their respective parts of the nation.

HOSTEL FOOD & CULTURE SURVEY REPORT (N = 50)

Section 1: Basic Background

Table 1.1: Regional Distribution of Respondents

| State/Region | Number of Respondents |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Tamil Nadu | 36 |
| Kerala | 7 |
| Karnataka | 3 |
| Telangana | 2 |
| North East | 1 |
| Other (North India) | 1 |

Table 1.2: Duration of Stay in Hostel

| Duration | Number of Respondents |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 3–6 months | 21 |
| 6–12 months | 16 |
| More than 1 year | 12 |

Section 2: Food Habits

Table 2.1: Perceived Difference Between Hostel Food and Home Food

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Very different | 28 |
| Somewhat different | 14 |
| Slightly different | 6 |
| Not different | 2 |

Table 2.2: Most Missed Home Foods (Open-ended Responses)

| Region | Commonly Missed Foods |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tamil Nadu | Fish kolambu, Chettinad biryani, curd rice, home-style meals |
| Kerala | Mutton stew, appam, puttu, coconut dishes, parotta, beef curry |
| Others (Karnataka, Telangana, North East, North India) | Roti, biryani, spicy home curries |

Table 2.3: Eating Style

| Eating Style | Number of Respondents |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Mostly with hands | 36 |
| Mostly with spoon/fork | 4 |
| Both depending on dish | 10 |

Table 2.4: Food Mixing Behavior

| Behavior | Number of Respondents |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Mix everything | 26 |
| Mix some items | 18 |
| Keep items separate | 6 |

Section 3: Language and Food Terms**Table 3.1: Word Used for "Dosa"**

| Term | Number of Respondents (N=50) |
|-------|------------------------------|
| Dosai | 32 |

| | |
|-------|----|
| Dosa | 15 |
| Other | 3 |

Table 3.2: Language Used When Talking About Food with Friends

| Language Preference | Number of Respondents (N=50) |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Mostly native language | 18 |
| Mix of both | 23 |
| Mostly English | 9 |

Table 3.3: Awareness of Pronunciation Differences Across Regions

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| Yes | 31 |
| Sometimes | 14 |
| No | 5 |

Section 4: Cultural Interaction

Table 4.1: Tried Food from Another State After Coming to Hostel

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|----------|-----------------------|
| Yes | 50 |
| No | 0 |

Table 4.2: Agreement That Food Helps Students from Different Regions Connect

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly agree | 24 |

| | |
|----------|----|
| Agree | 18 |
| Neutral | 8 |
| Disagree | 0 |

Table 4.3: Agreement That Food Habits Show Cultural Identity

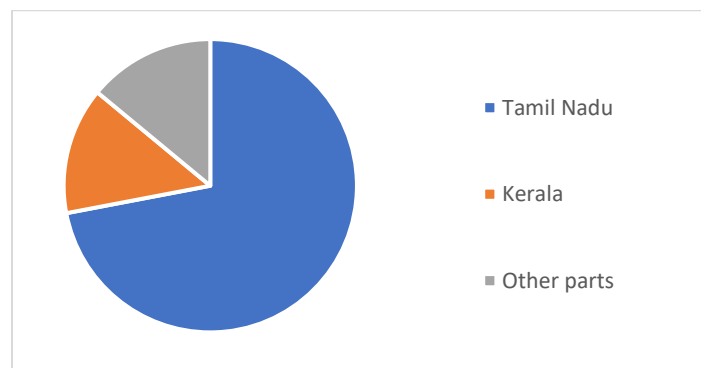
| Response | Number of Respondents |
|----------|-----------------------|
| Yes | 33 |
| Maybe | 12 |
| No | 5 |

5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION:

This section presents the analysis of survey data collected from 50 hostel students, highlighting patterns in regional distribution, food habits, language use, and cultural perceptions. The findings reveal clear trends that support the conceptualization of the hostel mess as a space of cultural negotiation.

5.1 Regional Composition and Demographic Trends

The respondent pool was heavily dominated by students from Tamil Nadu (72%, n = 36), followed by Kerala (14%, n = 7). The remaining 14% (n = 7) consisted of students from Karnataka, Telangana, North-East India, and North India.

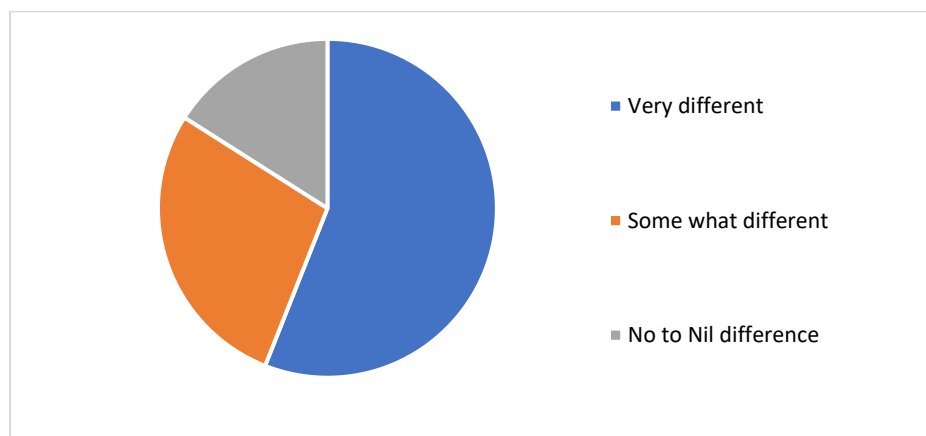


Interpretation

This skewed distribution reflects the geographical context of the institution while still maintaining a meaningful level of diversity. The dominance of Tamil students also explains the prevalence of certain linguistic and food practices observed in later findings.

5.2 Food Difference and Nostalgia Patterns

A significant majority of respondents (56%, $n = 28$) reported that hostel food is “very different” from their home food, while an additional 28% ($n = 14$) found it “somewhat different.” Only 16% combined reported minimal or no difference.



Interpretation

This indicates a strong sense of culinary displacement, where students perceive hostel food as lacking familiarity. The open-ended responses further reinforce this, with students expressing a longing for region-specific dishes such as:

- Fish kollamb, Chettinad biryani, curd rice, home-style meals
- Kerala students → Mutton stew, appam, puttu, coconut dishes, parotta and beef curry

This supports the idea that food is deeply tied to memory and emotional identity, forming what can be understood as a “nostalgic attachment to home.”

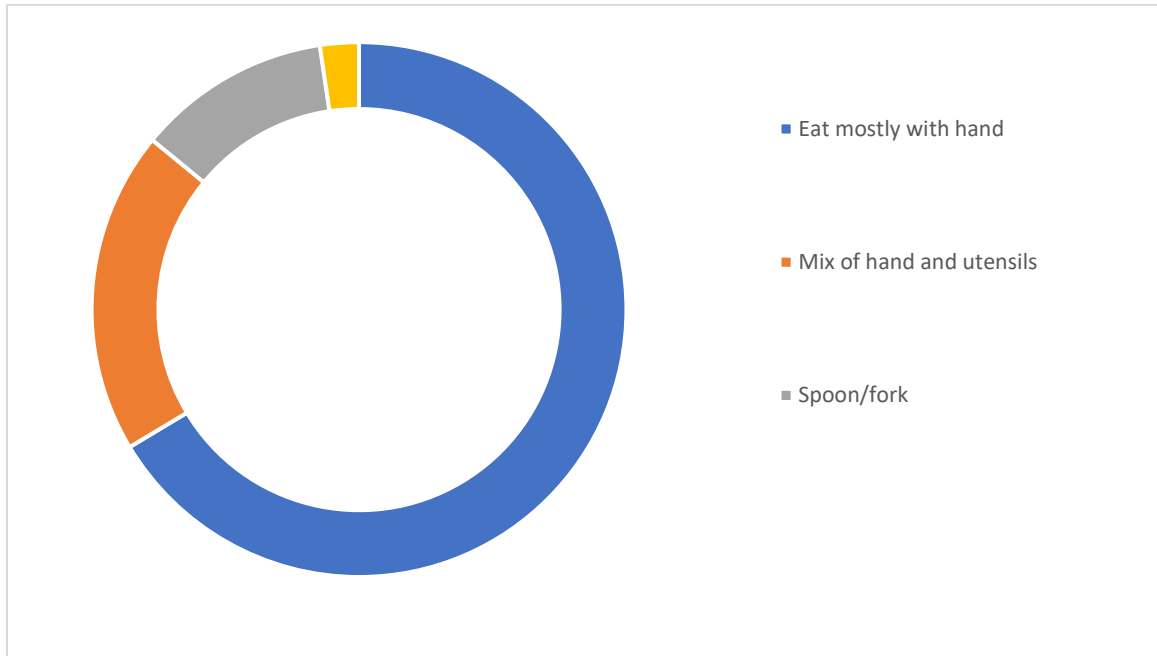
5.3 Eating Practices and Habitus

Eating styles showed a clear pattern:

- 68% ($n = 34$) eat mostly with hands
- 20% ($n = 10$) use a mix of hands and utensils
- Only 12% ($n = 6$) rely primarily on spoons/forks

Similarly, food combination habits revealed:

- 52% (n = 26) mix all items
- 36% (n = 18) mix selectively
- 12% (n = 6) keep items separate



Interpretation

These findings strongly align with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, where everyday practices such as eating are shaped by long-term cultural conditioning. The dominance of hand-eating and food-mixing practices reflects South Indian culinary traditions, particularly among Tamil students.

The variation, however, indicates the coexistence of multiple habitus within the same space, reinforcing the idea of the mess as a site of embodied cultural diversity.

5.4 Language Use and Code-Switching

When discussing food:

- 46% (n = 23) reported using a mix of English and native language
- 36% (n = 18) primarily used native languages
- Only 18% (n = 9) used mostly English

Additionally, 62% (n = 31) of respondents reported clearly noticing pronunciation differences in food terms, while 28% (n = 14) noticed them occasionally.

In terms of terminology:

- 64% (n = 32) used “dosai”
- 30% (n = 15) used “dosa”
- 6% (n = 3) used other variations

Interpretation

The dominance of mixed-language usage highlights the prevalence of code-switching as a communicative strategy. English functions as a neutral medium, while native languages introduce familiarity and cultural specificity.

The variation in pronunciation (e.g., “dosai” vs. “dosa”) demonstrates how language becomes a marker of regional identity, even in casual settings. This aligns with Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, where shared linguistic practices contribute to a sense of belonging.

5.5 Cultural Interaction Through Food

A large majority of respondents (84%, n = 42) reported trying food from other states after joining the hostel, while only 16% (n = 8) had not.

Regarding food as a social connector:

- 48% (n = 24) strongly agreed
- 36% (n = 18) agreed
- Only 16% combined were neutral or disagreed

On food as a marker of cultural identity:

- 66% (n = 33) responded “yes”
- 24% (n = 12) responded “maybe”
- 10% (n = 5) responded “no”

Interpretation

These findings indicate that food plays a significant role in facilitating intercultural interaction. The high percentage of students trying other regional cuisines suggests openness and adaptability within the hostel environment.

At the same time, the strong agreement that food reflects identity confirms Appadurai’s concept of gastro-politics, where food becomes a medium for expressing and negotiating cultural belonging.

5.6 Overall Trend Analysis

Across all sections, three major patterns emerge:

- **Cultural Persistence**
Students retain core elements of their regional identity through food preferences and eating habits.
- **Adaptive Interaction**
Exposure to diverse peers leads to increased experimentation and cultural exchange.
- **Hybrid Communication**
Language use reflects a blend of English and regional dialects, enabling both functionality and intimacy.

5.7 Synthesis

The data suggests that the hostel mess is not a space of cultural homogenization but one of continuous negotiation. While dominant cultural patterns (particularly Tamil) influence the environment, minority practices remain visible and active.

This dynamic supports the central argument of the study:

The hostel mess functions as a microcosm of India, where diversity is not erased but lived, expressed, and constantly reinterpreted through everyday practices.

Conclusion:

The hostel mess is not just a dining room. It is a vital social space in which the grand narrative of India plays itself out on a human scale. It is a space in which the abstractions of region, language, and culture acquire flesh and blood through the simple act of eating and talking. The conflicts and compromises of the nation are not resolved in the mess. The boy from Kerala does not give up his coconut, nor does the speaker of Tamil alter his pronunciation of "dosai." Instead, they are negotiated. They are lived.

The mess instructs us in the ways of a diverse nation. A diverse nation is not a space of perfect harmony. It is a space in which differences are continually, and often peacefully, negotiated. The real work of being Indian does not take place in the parliament or in the textbook. It takes place, quietly and daily, in a long, crowded room.

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