

Communication

In the Name of Hygiene & Beyond: Food-work & Food-space in Restaurants

Rajeshwari Chennangodu

In India, “no admission” boards are quite common at the doors of the restaurant-kitchens. They have been keeping both the kitchen space and kitchen workers out-of-sight from the consumers who eat the food cooked in these kitchens. In November 2019, Gujarat state government has directed hotels, restaurants and canteens in the state to have open kitchens to enable those who eat the food made in these kitchens to see how they are made (“Food Safety Check”, 2019). Thus, according to the notification issued under Food Safety Standard Act (FSSAI) 2006, there should be either transparent walls through which the eaters can see the kitchen or the “no admission without permission” signs be removed so that consumers are no more stopped from seeing the kitchen (“Explained: Why Gujarat is letting customers walk into restaurant kitchens”, 2019). Government officials have claimed that it is a method to ensure food safety by bringing transparency in food processing in these hotels, as the number of food security officers in Gujarat is insufficient to check

Rajeshwari Chennangodu (E-mail: rajeshwaric@iima.ac.in) is a Doctoral Student in Organizational Behavioral Area, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad

and ensure hygiene and safety (“Explained: Why Gujarat is letting customers walk into restaurant kitchens”, 2019). As per the above-cited news reports, associations of hotel owners have welcomed this order. We explore this development from the perspective of food-work - the work related to cooking and serving food- and in the spaces like restaurants and canteens, where food is cooked, served and consumed.

We argue that the new order to open the kitchens for the visibility of the consumers has at least two implications: first, it opens up a discourse about having a closed kitchen, which has the potential to shed light upon the work and employment in the restaurant industry. On the other hand, it can also bring the workers and their workspaces under the gaze of consumers, making their already precarious jobs even more precarious as now they will come under the surveillance of the consumers round the clock, if the order is followed. We also discuss the recent practice of ‘cloud kitchens’, where consumers and kitchen remain apart. In such restaurants, the kitchen and the work in the kitchen can still remain hidden from the consumers and even the

stated goal of the order of maintaining hygiene through consumer gaze is difficult to be met.

Visibilization & Invisibilization

Indian eateries are made of two kinds of spaces: the dining space that is created for the customers to eat food, and the kitchen space which is usually hidden from the customers and created for cooking and cleaning activities. The dining space often becomes a stage for performances of creativity and art. For example, some restaurants decorate their dining spaces according to a theme that represents a region or culture, which complement the claims of authenticity made through the food being served in these restaurants. In addition, the work of preparing a plate of food and serving it as an aesthetic performance in the dining hall are also part of the valorized food-work. Thus, the work that happens in the dining hall is often performed like a choreographed art form. However, the work involved in cooking is not brought into this performance, although cooking is traditionally seen as a form of art. Most of the times, the process of preparing food and those who prepare the food are hidden within the closed kitchen. Customers see the individuals who bring the food from the kitchen to the dining tables, but not the ones who are involved in the stages of preparation before the food is being brought out from the kitchen. In addition, the work of cleaning the plates and the tables are usually not as valued as decorating the physical space for eating 'artistically'. Thus, some parts of the food-work in these restaurants are valo-

rized and visibilized and some other parts are de-valorized and hidden (Hammond, 2008). Usually, the cleaning and kitchen help work are taken up by migrant workers. The issues in the lives of migrant workers in this field, who come from economically weaker sections and are employed in these kitchens remain outside the discourses around the restaurant business. Their employment, working hours, salaries and conditions of their workspaces deserve both scholarly and policy attention, given that the objective and potential effect of the current policy is to increase the consumers' visibility into kitchen work.

'Open Kitchen'

Although the government order is framed around the maintenance of hygiene, it draws attention to the 'closed' status of the kitchen. A 'closed' kitchen refers to the invisible work happening in the kitchen, limiting the interactions between the consumers and the kitchen workers to the experiences of taste by the consumer. Consumer interaction, beginning from the discourse on restaurants on media and food-apps, is usually limited to the experiences of taste and space through theming of restaurants, interactions with the restaurant staff, and speed of serving. For example, the food-apps like Zomato and Swiggy contain images of the restaurants put up by the restaurant owners and consumers. But these images include only the dining space, not the kitchen. The media reports around 'the best restaurant in a city' or 'new restaurant spaces to be experienced' also include the colorful images of the dining

spaces in the restaurants. These images and discussions construct the image of a restaurant as the dining space alone, without even acknowledging the existence of a kitchen in a restaurant. Now, the media reports on the order to 'open' kitchens and make them visible for the eaters have brought the 'kitchen' into the discourse by acknowledging that restaurants include the kitchen space as well.

However, it is arguable that whether this way of acknowledging the kitchen can lead towards paying attention to the kitchen work and workers. Moreover, a visible space like the dining hall still has work and workers who are yet to be paid attention through the academic and policy discussions: their work, employment status, working hours and working conditions still remain precarious. Therefore, the call for open kitchen can be a good occasion to think about kitchen workers and the visibilization of their work.

Opening for Whom & How?

The order, as reported in the media, asks the restaurants to allow consumers to see the kitchen, so that consumers can be sure that what they eat is going through hygienic processing. The officials have also made statements regarding the state having less number of staff to make hygiene check in the increasing number of restaurants in the state. The claimed intention seems to transfer the responsibility of ensuring hygiene from the hands of the state to the consumers. Here, the consumers are becoming the judges who decide the acceptable levels and degrees of hygiene. On the other hand, the kitchen

workers, along with their work and the kitchen space become objectified and exposed to the gaze of the consumers, which might be continuous, intruding and more intense as compared to the previous mechanism where this responsibility was assigned to experts who had formal training to conduct the hygiene checks. In the process of visibilizing the kitchen space through opening it up for the gaze of the consumers, hygiene is also becoming a performance staged for the gaze of the consumers, and now kitchen workers have the additional responsibility of making this performance a success. This way of exposing their work thus can put them under more pressure and add to the precarity that they already experience in their work life.

'Open Kitchens' in the Era of 'Cloud Kitchens'

The cities like Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, within the jurisdiction of the new policy, are already going through another wind of change in food-spaces and food-work; these cities already have restaurants that do not have dining spaces. They only have food delivery services and thus are called 'cloud kitchens.' In the case of such restaurants, the unidirectional visibility that the new order is aiming at becomes meaningless, as the customer never comes to the restaurant. In this case, the policy cannot even meet the stated objective of the maintenance of hygiene by exposing the kitchen work to the eyes of the consumer. The pace with which the policies are being updated seems to trail behind the pace with which the food serving industry is transforming.

Concluding Remarks

Food-work occurring in the restaurant industry needs more academic and policy attention in order to deal with the issues faced by the workers in this space: most of the restaurant kitchen workers in the cities are migrants from the economically weaker sections and the mechanisms to ensure employment security is missing in this sector. On the other hand, their work and workspace remain hidden and unattended. The recent order to 'open' restaurant kitchens in the state of Gujarat to allow the consumers to see them brings attention to the workspaces of the food-workers. It can open up avenues to have discourses around the work of the food-workers, by drawing attention to the 'closed' status of these work-spaces. On the other hand, it can also add to the precarity of the restaurant workers by bringing them, their work and their workspaces under the direct gaze of the consumers, making their

work a staged performance. This latter issue warrants serious attention of students of labor relations.

References

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