



Accidental Commensality

Eating, Belonging, and Mazaa on the Streets of Jaipur

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by

Rini Singhi
Nature-Culture-Sustainability Studies
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Approved by:

Advisor
Namita Dharia, Associate Professor
Nature-Culture-Sustainability Studies

Reader
Avishek Ganguly, Associate Professor
Department of Literary Arts and Studies

Guest Critic
Harini Nagendra, Professor
Azim Premji University, Bangalore, India

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Abstract

Commensality is more than just eating together at a shared table. "Who can eat with whom and what" is a divisive issue in India, where food and eating serve as functions of inclusion and exclusion. In this paper, I examine street food stalls in Jaipur as sites of eating together with strangers and ask, What forms of commensality do street food stalls enable? Can eating together on the street expand ideas about eating together in public? As part of my fieldwork in Jaipur, I observe the surroundings of street food stalls, participate in heritage food walks with guides, and document oral histories of street food vendors to demonstrate how accidental commensality emerges around these stalls. Using this research, I argue that the features of accessibility, belonging, and cultural memory, coupled with the affective dimensions of street food stalls, create intimacy and a feeling of maza that compels us to imagine an unexpected form of commensality through food.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A mashup of vegetables slowly cooking on a big *Kadai* (wok), surrounded by people unafraid of hot oil droplets, *aloo* (potatoes) extensively fried, sometimes as a patty and often inside a casing of dough as *kachoris/samosa*. *Bhel puri*, a lighter snack, with puffed rice, tossed vigorously in a steel container topped with condiments like coriander-mint chutney, a tamarind relish, and some crunchy bits of *bhujia* and *puri*; fried but airy balls of dough, perfectly punctured to make holes on top, revealing the hollow inside, filled with *aloo*, *moong*, or *chana* and doused in sweet, spicy water. The air was impregnated with the aroma of food, the sounds of water hitting the hot pan, the sizzle of frying, the constant chatter, and the ooh, aahs of people eating the same spicy unputdownable dish.

This is a sensorial experience of street food stalls that I have grown up with in Jaipur, India. Street food stalls are surrounded by people on all sides; some stand in front, a few sit on the makeshift pavement seating, and others use the hood of their cars as tables. Young adults on their scooters, couples holding hands, families in their cars, and some pedestrians all line up at the stall to order. Just like the variety of different people, offerings on the street are varied too, a combination of highly customized and adaptable versions of a dish as per the taste of each customer. A *bhel puri* can be mild, hot, extra hot, or sweet. *Golgappas*, too, are so delicious that waiting for the vendor to come back to you after serving a line of customers (who customize on each turn) is a tough task.¹ My father and I reserve Sunday mornings for an *aloo-filled samosa* (a triangle-shaped rolled dough filled with potato filling); biting into its crisp edges, he exclaims,

¹ *Golgappas*, fried balls of dough with holes on top are filled with potatoes/lentils/chickpeas and then filled with a spicy coriander-mint water. Vendors now have varied offerings when it comes to water, the 4-5 types of flavored water include tamarind, sweet-sour, hing (asafoetida), cumin and what not. The vendor usually has a line of customers in a semi-circle around the stall. Each customer holds a paper bowl and the vendors serve them one after the other. Often, a single customer tires different fillings of a mix. There is no limit to customization, every turn is a surprise for the vendor, the customer and his palate.

"*Mazaa aagaya (what fun!)*," and I look at people around, engrossed in their own food, agreeing, without words.² My father's *mazaa* (pleasure) is shared by many around him who eat their *samosas* with him, and it is the collective enjoyment of street eating that leads me to this thesis on collective eating in the city of Jaipur, in the Northwestern state of Rajasthan, in India.

A center of tourism due to its grand architecture, Jaipur's local street food-eating culture is defined as the food of the city. Street food stalls in Jaipur are widely advertised in listicles titled "Best Street Food in Jaipur,"³ "Must-Try Food in Jaipur," or "The Famous Street Food of Jaipur,"⁴ but they are more than just the title of a blog post. Street food stalls in Jaipur are collective eating public places brimming with cultural nuance and should be explored using the lens of commensality. A lens that considers street food stalls in Jaipur as the center of collective eating and demonstrates its value and position in the literature of commensality.

The argument I put forward deconstructs our understanding of commensality, complicates our preconceived ideas of eating together, and highlights how eating around street food stalls is filled with affective intensities. I ask, what forms of commensality does a street food stall enable? And answer it by making eating at street food stalls the epicenter of my research, foregrounding the act of eating together rather than being together while eating. That is, people come to street food stalls to indulge in eating and experience an unanticipated sense of togetherness. This unanticipated sense of togetherness while eating on the street food stalls enables a certain kind of *accidental commensality*: a commensality, I argue, where accidental eating together with strangers in a shared street takes place.

² Anjaria, Jonathan Shapiro, and Ulka Anjaria. 2020. "*Mazaa* : Rethinking Fun, Pleasure and Play in South Asia." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43 (2): 232–42. *Mazaa*, a Hindi-Urdu word that can mean fun, pleasure.

³ "Best Street Food in Jaipur." n.d. Wanderlog. Accessed September 23, 2022. <https://wanderlog.com/list/geoCategory/82905/best-street-food-in-jaipur>.

⁴ The Famous Street Food Of Jaipur | JPR Bikers." 2022. March 9, 2022. <https://jprbikers.com/the-famous-street-food-of-jaipur/>.

1.1 Literature Review

Commensality is the act of eating together. The act, the eating, and the togetherness are all embedded with their own meanings. Before we dive into street food stall commensality, in the following paragraphs, I review the literature on the act of eating together, unpack the functions of food, and how it creates inclusion/exclusion while defining togetherness. The goal here is to highlight the valuable literature on commensality and understand how it is more than a mere act of eating together. As a result, I find street food stall commensality in the gaps of my literature review, a type of commensality that is unexplored and could be a way of imagining eating together.

Commensality is a popular analytic in food studies. In the words of Estertik, commensality is "one of the most striking manifestations of human sociality: humans tend to eat together or, to put it more exactly, to eat in groups" (Chee-Beng 2015, 44-65). Eating together is a routine act; people gather around meals daily with family, friends, and colleagues, or food finds a way to be present wherever most people gather. "In its literal sense, commensality means eating at the same table (*mensa*). In its broader general meaning, it describes eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting" (Kerner and Chou 2015, 12–22). Then, food becomes a medium through which commensality is encouraged (Andersen 2015, 58-65), i.e., food is a reason for people to gather together. That means food stalls on the streets also fall under places where people collectively gather to eat in a city. But, before I discuss street food stalls as a collective eating place, it is imperative to look at "eating" as a component of commensality and how the type of food dictates the act of eating together.

Food in India is interspersed with the complexity of its dietary rules, stigma, and discrimination that vary across castes, religions, and regions (Baviskar 2012;2018). It plays an

intrinsic role in making a collective or lack thereof. "Food Serves two diametrically opposite functions in South Asia: to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or, it can serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation" (Appadurai 1981). For instance, *Langars* (the communal free meal service) offered in Gurudwara was started 500 years ago by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in 15th century Punjab and even today, not only in Gurudwaras but in areas of riots, distress, and famine, Sikhs are often the first to set up langars and *pyaus* (makeshift setups that offer drinking water and chabeel – a rose flavored summer drink) to aid people. The thought behind langar was to encourage people from all walks of life to sit on the floor and eat together in a shared space (Bruise 2020). During the year-long farmers' protest in India in 2020, langars took many forms and became a mainstay for the food, the community of farmers, and other people that gathered around.⁵ Enabling protestors to eat together while fighting for the same cause embodies feelings of equality, intimacy, and solidarity. Here eating together evolved into varied forms to satiate the needs of farmers by organizing pizza langar, golgappa langar, and almond langar.⁶ As protestors gathered on the street for a cause, food became a way of showing solidarity and generating community. However, if food is powerful in drawing people together, it also serves to "sustain segmentation." For example, in "The Sri Parthasarathi Swami Temple, a Vaisnava shrine in Madras city, a complex political upheaval took place in the 1940s and 1950s, which had as its central issue the proper distribution of *prasadam* in worship."⁷ The movement was organized by a relatively poor

⁵ Farmers protest in India started in September 2020 following the Central Government's announcement of changing agricultural reforms in the country. The Farm laws proposed less governmental control, no minimum support price, hence, no security for farmers and more control by private investors/companies. Protesting against this proposal, farmers from the Northern part of the country, mainly Punjab and Haryana gathered around the periphery of the capital city of Delhi to protest. The site of protest became a hub of protestors for a year (after which the laws were repealed), it led them to cook and eat together.

⁶ "How 'Langars' Became The Life Force Of Farmers' Protests." n.d. Accessed October 30, 2022. Lachmi Deb Roy elaborates on the varied forms langars took during the Farmers protest in India.

⁷ Food offered to the deity and then to worshippers as food touched/tasted by god.

and disenfranchised group of non-Brahmin worshipers. They claimed that they were being systematically humiliated and deliberately excluded from the community (goshti) of worshipers through the manner and context of the redistribution of *prasadam* to the congregation" (Appadurai 1981). In the above examples, sharing of food is a consequence of the restrictions of place, a temple which sanctions inclusion/exclusion. Then, the act of *eating together or not* is "both inclusive and exclusive: it creates and/or sanctions inclusion (even transient inclusion) in a group or community, as well as the exclusion of those not taking part. It can manifest equality (around the fire or a round table) or hierarchy (who gets served first or sits at the 'high table'). It provides the script or a template for many or most of human eating occurrences" (Fischler 2011).

When we look at the literature on commensality, the template of human eating occurrences takes multiple forms. According to Van Esterik's circle of commensality, what she calls "embodied commensality" is sharing of food internally between a mother and an infant. According to her, "This first act sets up a social relation between an infant and mother (Esterik 2015, 44-65)." This act of sharing food establishes relationships and solidifies a sense of taste of culture, and establishes a profound sense of togetherness through eating.⁸ That means the act of eating together begins much before we are born. The other, more commonly understood form of commensality is "enculturated commensality," in which "individuals learn food sharing through group culture, experience, observation and instruction" (Esterik 2015, 44-65). Enculturation is learned culture passed down through family traditions, caste, hierarchies, and established norms of gender. In my understanding, this kind of food sharing is adopted and learned. Often, culture,

⁸ Esterik 2015, 44-65. Penny Van Esterik also writes, "The commensal circle is a space where people share food, eat together, and feed each other. These circles are pre-constituted culturally before any individual guest or newborn enters them. Another example of the intensity of the interconnection between mother and infant concerns the shared taste of foods. Colostrum and breastmilk contain the flavors of the maternal diet and act as a "flavor bridge" between the maternal diet and the flavors experienced later in household meals. Recent experiments confirm that dietary learning begins in utero and continues through the flavor cues in mothers' milk. Flavors such as vanilla, garlic, carrot, and caraway can be found in breastmilk, and exposure to these and other flavors facilitates the acceptance of novel tastes in complementary foods."

traditions, caste, and established norms restrict food sharing, conveniently answering the complicated question of who should be worthy of sharing food. For instance, in my case, growing up as an upper-caste Jain, I was told by my grandmother to avoid onion, garlic, and root vegetables in my diet. She was also extremely strict when it came to eating any meat-based dish. For me growing up in an upper-middle-class Jain joint family of 13 people, I, too, have experienced the exclusionary quality of eating. Women of the house used to eat dinner after serving the men, a practice so ingrained in our daily lives that women's labor was rendered invisible, and their seat at the table was taken for granted. As the example of my family's daily habits illustrates, defining commensality means asking who is considered to be a part of this togetherness and who is excluded, requiring that we pay attention to both who is considered part of the collective "together" and "who is not." It is not surprising then that because of its public nature, eating at street food stalls is an interesting way into commensality; it blurs the lines of "togetherness" and compels us to look at and redefine the act of eating with people.

Important to note is that, usually, the act of eating together in the circle of commensality by Esterik highlights sharing of food with known people, family, friends, and community or during feasts and political events. Literature on commensality barely acknowledges sharing food with strangers, let alone valuing it. Thus, making accidental commensality an uncommon exploration. This commensality where one eats together with strangers is not that rare of sight, right? It can be seen in restaurants, cafes, events, official gatherings, office canteens, etc. But eating with strangers is not the kind of eating together that is passed down by families; it is learned through cultural experiences of eating on the streets. I believe eating on the street with strangers is a substantial part of eating out. That said, some instances of strangers sharing food with strangers are depicted in popular media. The way sharing food with strangers becomes a

sort of social currency is often highlighted through advertisements, like a masala ad that shows how a Chinese woman who moves to Pakistan offers her neighbors a quintessential biryani (made using the masala), which then becomes a reason to welcome her into their community, "Dil ka darwaza khula hai khaane ki khushboo se" (the aroma of food opens the doors of one's heart).⁹ Often the prospect of kinship and connection through food is used to sell a product, assuming that everyone relates to it. Through this advertisement and many more, food is shown as a medium through which commensality is encouraged between strangers too. However, in all the instances above, sharing food with strangers or eating with strangers in a shared space comes with its own filters and is often missing in the discussion of commensality. A fancy restaurant, a hip cafe, a wealthy neighborhood, or an office building already dictate the kind of people that could occupy the space where food is eaten. Then, the conversation around eating with strangers is designed to accommodate certain selected strangers in many places. Consequently, street food stalls are a unique place for people to eat together because they can accommodate unanticipated, unstructured gatherings.

It is similar to a potluck dinner, a collection where individual characteristics are not diluted but enhanced. Street food stalls manifest eating in a shared setting. If we pull apart commensality and "deconstruct the commensal elements, we find varying degrees of sharing—shared food, shared spaces or tables, shared time, and shared social interaction" (Esterik 2015, 44-65). By looking closely at all these deconstructed elements of commensality and imagining them positioned on a street food stall, we find out that all these varying degrees of sharing happen when people eat on the street.

Sharing food also creates a sense of intimacy (Chee- Ben 2015). "The primate and human impulse to share food" (Esterik 2015, 44-65) manifests uniquely on the street because it

⁹ Shan Foods, dir. 2017. #KhaanaWithParosi. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7Hf-kU-Rj8>.

encapsulates varied degrees of simultaneous sharing, i.e., sharing food, sharing space or table, sharing time, and sharing social interaction. The multiple kinds of sharing fill the street with intensities, adding an affective dimension (section 2.3) to the street food stalls. The liveliness, chaos, and functioning of street food stalls are often taken for granted. Hence, it never assumes the importance it deserves to imagine "*alternative modes of togetherness*" through accidental commensality.¹⁰ By accidental commensality, I mean the unexpected and unconstructed ways of eating together that challenge the basic definition of commensality by expanding on the idea of eating "together" to include strangers, settings, and spaces that encourage eating with people one doesn't usually know.

To elaborate on accidental commensality in this thesis, I examine street food stalls in Jaipur as collective eating spaces and decipher the accidental commensality enabled by them. The following parts of my thesis are divided into three sections that broadly cover a brief overview of the street eating culture in Jaipur (section 2.1), the accessibility of eating on the street that produces belonging and cultural memory (section 2.2), and lastly the affect of eating on the streets especially those of intimacy and *mazaa* (section 2.3). The latter half of the literature review briefly summarizes the aforementioned sections of the thesis to establish the context and foundation of the research.

As we saw in the first half of the review, street food stalls become collective eating spaces because of their public nature, which they embody because of being on the streets. The mood of the street is not made of just its tangible elements- the width of the street, the buildings, their architecture, and the spaces around; there is also something intangible, made of several

¹⁰ The idea of "Alternative ways of togetherness" is borrowed from Amira Mittermaier who in " Bread, Freedom, Social Justice", writes about how during the Occupy Movement, Egyptians took over the street to fight and the protests and sit-ins offered alternate modes of togetherness. Mittermaier, Amira. 2014. "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma." *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (1): 54–79.

layers, one upon another, so that many elements and activities coexist on the street (Srivatsa 1997, 50-51).¹¹ "As arteries of movement, streets are places where people work, live, love, dream, and voice dissent. Streets are sites of the distinctive public culture of a city which is the most generative urban commons" (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011). Hence, studying commensality on the streets was a deliberate choice. Both Mannur and Baviskar emphasize human coexistence that is enabled through food.¹² Streets enable human coexistence. The open spaces of the streets lure inhabitants who are walking, loitering, or commuting to have a bite, stop for a snack, and drool at the sight/smell of delectable street food. This characteristic of street food cannot be replicated in any restaurant, café, or even food court where eating engagements are usually constructed, intentional, or planned. Accessibility, I believe, makes street food stalls act as a relative equalizer by design.¹³

This accessibility of the streets enables a large section of the city population to access street food stalls which creates a larger collective. Eating the same food while being part of a larger collective creates a sense of belonging. Similar to Baviskar's example of Maggi noodles, which describes the packaged product with no visible cultural ties as an instrument that accords "belonging to a modern and affluent world to the poor, low-caste people who are discriminated against and agency to young people who aspire to challenge notions of patriarchy" (Baviskar 2018), I argue that street food stalls as accessible places of eating can also make people feel a part of a larger collective.

¹¹ Srivatsa, Sarayu. 1997, 50-51. *Where the Streets Lead*. A vivid description of Bombay streets that seems appropriate for streets of Jaipur too.

¹² Mannur on human coexistence, "Intimate Eating gestures to the possibility of understanding citizenship and human coexistence in new ways" and Baviskar says, "In the politics of social inclusion and exclusion, eating the same food creates a semblance of equality, a moment when one is as good as anyone else." Mannur, 2022. Baviskar 2018

¹³ By accessibility, I mean the ability to reach the availability of street food stalls around the city. It is important to mention here that I am primarily talking about accessibility and not affordability. The food on the street, although accessible to most, is not affordable to all.

The sense of belonging generated while eating at street food stalls can be a form of sociality that operates on many levels- with the self, among strangers, and across generations (Mannur 2022, 9-10). The process of eating, let alone eating on the streets, rarely happens in isolation; when one eats alone on the streets, one is engaged with the world and the food, and eating happens to face the world (Rosenbloom, 2018). Eating on the streets is usually among and with strangers that are present on the street. In my view, eating on the streets surpasses time and space (across generations) because it is the food that is etched in the memories of city inhabitants across generations. For instance, Nichole Khan, in her seminal paper *The taste of freedom: commensality, liminality, and return amongst Afghan transnational migrants in the UK and Pakistan* identifies commensality as an important symbolic means through which Pashtun taxi drivers in the UK assert identity and build friendships in the UK. She says, "They play cards, the board game carrom, and may cook, infusing the dawn with redolent smells of traditional dishes such as sherwa, shola, borani, Kabuli pulao, or spicy biryani and karahi influenced by Pakistani cuisine – lamb dishes, particularly when cooked in ghee, having the best' taste' (khwand) and most prestige" (Khan 2014, 473). Then, the food of the city, does enable a sense of collective identity that features in the memories of people who consume the food. It is the "stuff of nostalgia and longing, a beloved comfort food and cultural good, a taste of the city, and a taste of childhood is sold on the streets" (Baviskar 2018). This characteristic of food, according to Baviskar, is etched in the cultural memories of people who have eaten the same food. It affirms a sense of identity. Section 2.2 explores the aspect of cultural memory associated with street food culture in Jaipur.

The features of accessibility, belonging, and cultural memory make street food layered with meanings that bring out varied dimensions of street food stalls. But that's not it. It is not

only the accessible characteristics of street food stalls or the attractiveness of belonging to a collective that makes them ideal places to eat together. "There is a value exchange that takes place when eating occurs in the realm of public: social worlds are formed, mediated and sustained through forms of eating with the recognition that different forms of sociality structure the experience of eating" (Mannur 2022).¹⁴ "Whom we eat with, how we eat, and how these rituals are imagined are important, particularly in the worlds that consciously rework how we think about the connection among eating, intimacy, and the public." Every act of eating, according to Mannur, is an act of intimacy. The last section of the thesis explores the intimacy one experiences around street food stalls as a part of the affect generating intensities. I look at street food stalls as spaces of intimate eating publics that are hybrid spaces functioning amidst the perpetual chaos of the streets.¹⁵

Streets generate intensities by creating and manufacturing transient moments. No two moments on the street can ever be the same. The intensity of the street, coupled with the intangible exchange of commensality, lends an affective dimension to street food stalls. The streets of Jaipur, for instance, were swarming with life despite the 120°F heat, as small carts were selling branded ice cream and rarely kulfi, hawkers sold face masks at traffic signals, four-wheeler carts with makeshift plastic roofs adorned with Jamuns and mangoes, a cobbler repairing shoes, a balloon seller, a small mandir at the end of the road, and two men sitting under the shade of trees. The street, although static in its layout, is always moving, creating, and

¹⁴ Borrowing from Anita Mannur's question, "What happens when eating occurs in the realm of public?" and "How social worlds are formed, mediated and sustained through forms that structure the experience of eating?" Mannur uses Michael Warner's work on public and counter-public to define publics; she says, "In our heavily mediated worlds, many activities are oriented to the public. Whether they appear in the form of television, movies, or other visual and print media, texts can not make meaning without their publics. A public, therefore, is at once familiar, intimate, and strange. I build on Warner's logic to ask what happens when eating occurs within the realm of the public."

¹⁵ According to Mannur, "The intimate eating publics are therefore vexed and contested spaces that are hybrid and evolving; they highlight the fact that how we eat, consume, and distribute food requires a reconfiguration of how we think about communal relationships." Mannur, 2022, 5.

manifesting transient moments. It is common for dining together to have a purpose, whether it is sustenance, ritual, celebration, meeting, or leisure: it is an act of sustenance, habit, routine, or celebration. Apart from these tangible exchanges, there is an invisible, intangible exchange of space, the air, which adds to this shared experience. This ineffable experience of sharing space with strangers who have gathered to experience the same food is an extended form of intimacy. This intimacy that is generated on the street makes a core feature of accidental commensality.

This extended form of intimacy is enabled by another ineffable intensity called *mazaa*. The pleasure and the fun of eating on the streets are unparalleled because even when there are concerns regarding hygiene, sanitation, and unfit drinking water, street food stalls still attract people. This intense *mazaa* is a consequence of the flavourful, lip-smacking, finger licking food, the energy of the streets, coupled with a live kitchen, where one can see the food being made. It is as if the street is alive with its constant happenings. The constant liveliness impregnates the surroundings with energy that's contagious. This viscerality of the street food stalls is explained in the last section of my thesis, which elaborates on the affect that generates intimacy and *mazaa* in order to explore the liminal environment of street food stalls that provides a fertile ground for accidental commensality.

The literature review section traced some literature on commensality while thinking about functions and meanings of food and togetherness to find where and if street food commensality found space in the literature. The idea of accidental commensality originated from viewing street food stalls as places of eating together with strangers as a way of imagining alternative modes of togetherness through food. To substantiate this idea of accidental commensality on the streets of Jaipur, I explore features like accessibility, belonging, memory, and the affect of specific street food stalls in Jaipur and demonstrate my argument. The following

section lays down the methodology and bias involved in the research and acknowledges the routes I needed to take as a researcher to conclude as such.

1.2 Methodology

For my research on commensality in street food stalls in Jaipur, I traveled to Pink City (Jaipur) in the summer of 2022. The field research was two weeks divided between June and July. The areas and stalls were chosen on the basis of my past street food experiences and that of my family and friends from the city which also made it to the listicles on the internet. A lot of street food stalls were established in the old walled city of Jaipur so that inevitably became a site. In the relatively newer part of the city, I chose familiar areas like Raja Park, Moti Dungri Temple, Birla Mandir, and Statue Circle. The areas selected are in no way the only ones that attract street food eaters. As a kid growing up in Jaipur my experience to these famous street food places add context to my research.

Furthermore, these areas had multiple stalls to choose from, and my way of shortlisting or choosing the stalls was the presence of a crowd, the suggestions by tour guides, and the listicles with top places to eat on the street. Starting from the walled city of Jaipur known for its street food, the stalls that were 50+ years old and sold famous food of Jaipur, Takht-E-Shahi marg was famous because of Birla Mandir and Moti Dungi Ganesh Ji's Temple and had multiple chaats and pav bhaji stalls. Raja Park had hints of Punjabi food stalls, like Radheshyam Bhatia Paneer stall, Hanuman Dhaba, Chawla's, Nand, Chole Kulche, and more. My last site was Statue Circle, a junction in the middle of the city, spreading out into four main roads and having stalls interspersed with food stalls all around.

I went to multiple stalls in the walled (old) and the new parts of the city at different times of the day, frequenting some a few more times than others. Early mornings were allotted to shops

that opened early for breakfast/tea, like Gulabji Chai Waala, Sahu Chai, Samrat, Shankar Samosa, Khunteta Namkeen Bhandar, Sampat Kachori, Puran Ji Kachori Waale, Sweet House, Mahaveer Rabri Bhandar, and, Sethani ka Dhaba. Evenings and nights were for all kinds of street food; every stall started getting crowded in the evenings, Pandit Pav Bhaji Stalls, Famous Bhel Puri Waala, Sanskriti Chaat, and others. For the purpose of research, I visited some stalls more than once. Gulabji Chai wala was open as early as 4 am; some others in the walled city started selling fried food as early as 8 am and were open till late in the evening. At different times of the day, the crowd differed, and as an audience, I noticed these differences by visiting the same stall multiple times.

A large part of my research was sitting behind the stalls and observing the streets, the food on the stalls, and the movement of vendors and customers: their demeanor, interaction, and engagement with the food, the vendors, the streets, and with other people. I took photographs of the street at different times of the day. And made notes of all conversations and observations of street food stalls. Additionally, as a solo eater and observer, I collected oral histories from the street food stall owners and workers to connect the dots on their history of street food in the city.

Because of the dearth of research on street food in Jaipur, a substantial part of street eating culture in Jaipur was made by these oral histories of vendors, stall owners, and regular customers who saw these eating places across time and space. Also, the newspaper archives generously shared by Rajasthan Patrika's journalist Jitendra Singh Shekhawat helped to understand a little bit of culture and food studies in the city. I also relied on tour guides who organized heritage walks and food walks in the city, where they acquainted people with the food culture of the city. [Vineet Sharma](#) and [Vinayak Agarwal](#) organized food walks in the walled city and helped extensively in my research.

Finding people who worked at the intersection of food and heritage was interesting too. Hosts of food walks and heritage walks/tours in the city took me to their favorite street food stalls, where they shared a rapport with the vendor. I used to hurry to take notes and photos, in case I missed important information. Often, feeling the need to be a part of the audience, I felt excluded without a paper plate in my hands. And because street food stalls are fully of attraction, energy, and lip-smacking food, I too became a part of the audience who not only observed but participated too.

I also studied the existing literature on commensality, street food, and eating. But fieldwork, observation, and collection of empirical evidence were an important part of my primary research as they helped me focus on forms of commensality that street food enables and ask how eating together on streets expands the definition of commensality.



Figure 1. During fieldwork. Photography by Author

Chapter 2: Accidental Commensality

2.1 Street eating culture of Jaipur

Growing up, early morning drives for breakfast meant carrying stainless steel dabbas, hoping to bring the family a delicious street food breakfast. My father and I dropped stacked steel boxes at the Amritsari Chole Kulcha stall to be filled while we wandered off to avoid waiting in the queue. The nearby *samosa* stall beckoned us. While we waited, my father and I detoured and indulged in watching *aloo masalas* (spiced potatoes) being filled in a cone-shaped dough, sealed with the pressing of the fingers, and fried in hot oil. Like us, many gathered early in the morning to get Shankar Samosa's first batch of the day. The steel containers were carried home but eating the hot samosa with hari chutney on the street was a father-daughter guilty pleasure.

Cut to the summer of 2022, the purpose of visiting street food stalls has evolved into research. The interest in collective street food eating on the streets felt strange and familiar all at once, a collective that I have been a part of but never stopped noticing its presence. Standing with strangers around a street food stall while eating seemed usual before. Now, walking into the gates of the old walled city of Jaipur is like walking into the past: the pink paint chipped off the walls exposing the red bricks, shops on the street sharing walls with other shops and roofs with houses above, electric autos suddenly visible driving people within the old city, broad main roads and extremely narrow *gullies* (streets) only meant for walking or two-wheeled vehicles, and the heaviness of fried food in the air, and the crowd. Somehow, the old walled city is still protected from the newness of the city outside of the walls; one can still notice the grandeur of architecture, the hand-painted murals on the walls, and the old type form on the marquees of the shops. This section on the evolution of street eating culture in Jaipur follows the path of the streets. Here, I lay out snippets of the history of the city in the background and also use the oral

histories of the vendors, interspersed with my personal experiences of street food in the city to form a blueprint of a street eating culture that developed in the city. Apart from that, this section begins to trace the experience street food stalls in order to observe the possibilities of accidental commensality on the streets.

Considered the first planned city in India, Jaipur's old walled city was constructed and conceived in a single phase.¹⁶ "Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh, the founder of Jaipur, with the help of architect Vidyadhar Bhattacharya designed Jaipur with a grid-like system, dividing the city into nine-squares and with broad streets criss-crossing at right angles. The ends of the street were marked by gates, Chand Pol on the west side and the Suraj Pol on the east mark the ends of the main west-east route through the city, about three km in length" (Sachdev and Tillotson 2002, 48). "On the north side, protecting the road to Amber is the gate now called Jorawar Singh Pol. At intervals along the southern front are four gates. From west to east, these are the Ajmeri Gate, the Naya Pol (or New Gate), the Sanganeri Gate, and the Ghat Darwaza. This southern side, earlier presented as a face of the city to the outer world and is now a link between the old and the new city of Jaipur" (Sachdev and Tillotson 2002, 48).

The streets in the walled city, protected by gates on all sides, weren't inhabited. "In an effort to establish a vibrant economy and to secure bragging rights as India's most exquisite court, Sawai Jai Singh invited the country's top craftsmen and merchants to set up shops within the walls of his new city, offering perks like free land and guaranteed royal patronage" (Gross 2009). These craftsmen and merchants, most adept with a specialized skill, and varied class and caste were allotted specific areas within the old city. Hence, the "division of the city into wards and their subdivision into sub-wards, by different scales of the grid, was more than a matter of mobility and geometry." It was actually a system of social distribution, the pattern of settlement

¹⁶“The First ‘Planned’ City in India.” 2019. Text.Article. NASA Earth Observatory. August 24, 2019.

of people according to caste or *jati* (Sachdev and Tillotson 2002, 50). The wards were composed of a wider social group tied by *jati*, forming a community with professional and social bonds. These communities were separated from each other by smaller roads of gullies.¹⁷ Markets were divided and allotted according to the profession of a community, and this still persists even today. "*Johari Bazaar*, as its name implies, is the market for costly goods such as jewelry and fine cloth. The local tie-and-dye cloth is sold especially in *Kishanpol Bazaar* and studded lac resin bangles in *Maniharon ka Rasta*. The sculptors of murtis (images of deities) still live and work in *Khajanewalon ka Rasta* in the western part of the city. Dealers in ground spices are to be found in *Jhalaniyon ka Rasta* off *Kishanpol Bazaar*, metalworkers in *Thatheron ka Rasta* off *Chaura Rasta*, and sellers of kitchen utensils in *Tripolia Bazaar*" (Sachdev and Tillotson 2002, 50).

The design of the old city in a way that it was laid out according to *jatis* or professions might have given way to the concentration of certain communities with street food that's familiar to them. Then walking the gullies mingling with each other for the exchange of goods and services was inevitable. For example, for jewelry, one would go to Johari Bazaar, and for kitchen utensils to Thatheron ka Rasta increasing the possibility of unplanned bumping into other inhabitants. "Shops on the streets of the walled city were constructed uniformly by design, with a continuous open veranda in front, enabling shoppers to pass along in a sheltered space" (Sachdev

¹⁷ "This division of the city into wards and their subdivision into sub-wards, by different scales of grid, is more than a matter of mobility and geometry. It relates to the system of social distribution, the pattern of settlement of people according to caste or *jati*...A group or cluster of havelis constitutes a mohalla, a wider social group, tied not necessarily by blood and marriage, but by *jati*. The members of a mohalla form a community with professional and social bonds." Sachdev and Tillotson 2002, 50.

and Tillotson 2002, 50). The upper story of the building line was kept back so that the roof of the verandah was clear and could serve as an upper circulation space which was accessed by flights of stairs from the street level. This upper space could also function as a viewing platform for royal or sacred processions taking place in the streets. A further aspect of the uniformity of the shops is the pink wash on their façades. This design of the shops gave space for pedestrians and inhabitants to spend time comfortably on the sheltered sidewalk. A common sight in the walled city is people sitting on the edge of the sheltered sidewalk and consuming food. During one of the "food walks" in the walled city, our group took *pakode* (lentils dough fried with spices and herbs) to the roof and ate them, watching the streets from above.

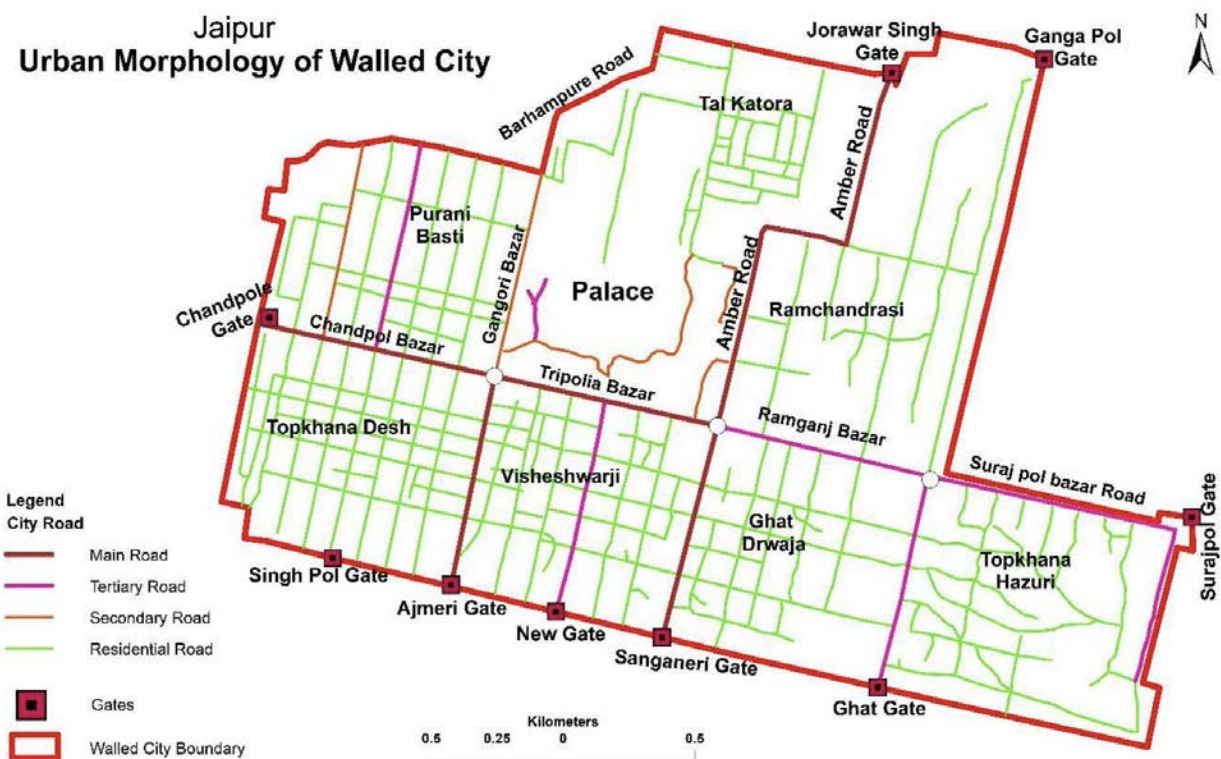


Figure 2. By Avinash Kumar Singh in *Morphological and Demographic Characteristics of a Planned City: A Case Study of Jaipur City*

As people walked through the streets, it became a place for social interaction where inhabitants wandered with purpose or without, always open to the possibility of stopping to eat. Migration meant the movement of food practices, traditions, and rituals, making the city a pot brimming with culinary possibilities. For instance, *kachori*, now a beloved street food in the city, is a product of migration and the movement of people on the street. Likely to be invented by Marwari pioneers of trade and commerce, *kachoris* originated from the need to drink and eat while the businessman carried business out of homes and on the streets.¹⁸ The movement of *kachori* from the adjacent Marwar to Jaipur was a marker of migration, making visible the eating culture of those inhabitants. *Kachoris* eventually became a major part of the culinary repertoire of the city, so much so that in 1708, during the coronation of Sawai Jai Singh (the founder of Jaipur), guests were served *kachoris* (Shekhawat 2018). This act of *meheman nawazi* (taking care of guests) became a ritual; serving guests the specialty foods of the city was an essential part of welcoming them. As a stuffed, fried food sold on the streets, *kachori* was put on a pedestal, claiming its position on the streets and in the royal courts. Even today, the old shops in the walled city and the much newer ones on the other side of Jaipur serve *kachoris*.

The old traditional food shops faced and opened into the street, creating a vibrant street-eating culture. While some shops found spaces in the city's architecture, others established themselves on and around the street. My field research in the summer involved documenting various types of street food establishments in the walled city: *Khunteta Namkeen Bhandar* on Kishanpol Bazaar Road, at the edge of *Khunteta marg* is one such shop embedded in the architecture of the old city. Occupying the space that can barely accommodate three customers over the counter, the crowd around the shop gathers in these constructed, sheltered verandas,

¹⁸ “From Nagori to Banarsi Kachori: An Ode to One of India’s Most Loved Snacks | Lifestyle News, The Indian Express” n.d.

making space for each other to order. Famous for its *aloo kachori* and *namkeen* that are prepped, shaped, and fried at the back of the shop is a sight for customers to take part in the process of making. Just opposite Khunteta's Namkeen Bhandar, at the other end of the junction, Nomi Devi has been serving a meal of *parantha*, *kadhi*, and *mirchi ka achar* (bread, spiced yogurt curry and chili pickle) to pedestrians and workers who work in and around the area for 70 years now. Unlike other shops, Nomi Devi's *Sethani ka Dhaba* is structurally supported by the Museum of Legacies' wall on one side and a dilapidated make-shift roof on top. The front of the stall opens directly on the street. As a passerby, one can drool over the sight and smell of freshly cooked *paranthas*, and that lures you to stop and enjoy the food.

Another famous shop in the walled city, Mahaveer Rabri Bhandar (MRB), located in Chandpole Bazaar has two outlets facing each other. One outlet only offers *rabri* (a thickened milk dessert flavored with saffron and pistachios), and the other outlet offers *Bajra* (sorghum) *roti* and *aloo pyaaz ki sabzi*, and many other main course dishes. The shop has some seating space inside, but my family used to get takeaway from MRB and never sat at the outlet. During my fieldwork, the second-generation owner of this 175-year-old stall offered to show me the kitchen, which was located on a narrow street adjacent to the eatery, and as I entered the kitchen filled with large utensils, I noticed women cooking *bajra roti*, peeling vegetables and working the famous *aloo pyaaz ka masala* with loads of garlic and onion over a low flame. The aroma of the MRB's food took me back to all meals with my family fighting over the last piece of *aloo* in the curry. As it was my first time at MRB, I joined the line of customers who were getting parcels of food to carry and asked the server to put enough pieces of *aloo* in the curry.

Close to MRB, there were other *rabri* stalls that lined the street, but none of them were as famous. Every two steps, one can find a stall serving some food or the other. Such as, a

two-minute walk from MRB led me to Sampat Kachori. Established in 1932, Sampat Kachori is adjacent to a government school on one side and its own prepping station on the other. I have been told that it's the only kachori shop in the city that makes the stuffing without removing the skins of the potato (*aloo ke chilke waali kachoris*). Apparently, no one else in the city does it. The third-generation owner of the stall, Anil Maheshwari, tells me that they don't need to serve a condiment (like a side of chutney) with their kachori, a characteristic that makes their kachori so flavorful and unique that people line up as soon as the shop opens at 8 am to get a taste of their offerings. Standing in front of the shop in the middle of the crowd, waiting for my turn to order, I notice another kitchen behind, people coming out of a dark abyss carrying packets of packed *namkeen*. Some people order kachori, eat it in front of the stalls or sit on the stairs of the school and leave carrying two plastic bags of namkeen. This distinct kachori is what makes people from generations still seek Sampat's kachori to get a taste of the city.

The architecture in front of the stalls is laid out in a way that opens on the street, giving customers enough space to find a place to stand. But the ways stall owners have used the space available are unique. For instance, Shree Ram Chaat Bhandar's kitchen is not inside some dark room behind, but out on the streets. The wonder of the shops sits at the edge of the entrance, and all the big *bartans* (utensils) are filled with *Kanji vada*, oil, and *aloo masala* for *Tikki*, and the equipment needed for cooking is placed outside the stalls. Interestingly, the space inside has three tables pushed against each other where people can sit and eat. Similarly, Shree Prajit Chaat Bhandar, another well-known chaat place, offers the most delectable *aloo tikki* (fried potatoes patty served with coriander and tamarind chutney), *golgappas* and *dahi patashe* (fried, airy balls of wheat doused in yogurt, chutney and topped with a sour spice and coriander) to crowds of customers. The vibrancy of the crowd outside each stall is similar, the sight of devouring food,

indulging in the pleasure of the lip-smacking flavors, without even needing to sit down and eat is palpable around these stalls. Here, customers' focus is mostly on eating, an act so pleasurable that the chaos of the streets and the sharing of space with other people whom they might not know is not only welcome but also adds to the experience of eating.

Even though the old city is a destination for locals and tourists to try the best street food in Jaipur, the newer part of the city has a certain charm too. The New Gate, on the southern front of the walled city, connects to Jawahar Lal Nehru Marg (JLN marg), a road that runs through the old and the new parts of Jaipur. Both Birla Mandir and Moti Dungri Ganesh temple are located on one side of a busy two-way road. An attraction for tourists and locals alike, the area around Birla Mandir is a hub of liveliness and activity. On Wednesdays, an auspicious day for Lord Ganesha, inhabitants come to the Moti Dungri temple from all over the city as early as 4 am to pray. Usually, the area is lined with tourist buses, but on Wednesdays, locals in large numbers come to pray, eat and shop. The first 18 years of my life were spent living in close proximity to these temples. As a kid, I wasn't interested in the temples as much as I was interested in the incentive of a plate of pav bhaji that I would get post prayer. Even when I was growing up, there were innumerable stalls called *Pandit Pav bhaji*, but my mother claimed to know the original one: the one which served garlic chutney. As a participant of the street eating culture, I, too, noticed it evolving.

It was the joy of eating pav bhaji on the streets, the flavors that couldn't be replicated at home or in a restaurant. I enjoyed a plate of pav bhaji with extra butter, deeply engrossed in the experience and the five-star view of Birla Mandir. After 25 years of experiencing the same city, the same locations became more crowded, flooded with more Pandit Pav Bhaji stalls and many more that weren't there when I was a kid. One could find stalls selling *bhel puri*, *Sev puri*, *dahi*

puri, *golgappas* filled with six types of water from tamarind to asafoetida, ice-creams, *kanji vada*, *kulfi*, and sugarcane juice. Now the roads are broader; people park their cars on the side, stand in front of the vendor and enjoy the street food with people who get off work from nearby offices, people who park their two-wheelers right in front of the stall and place an order without getting out of their vehicles or people who just loiter on the streets. Streets are sites used by everyone who lives or visits a city, which makes street food stall sites for a wider audience too. Broader roads accommodate more people, vehicles, and vendors to set up shop. The possibilities of bumping into people are endless and often unplanned. The chances of this accidental commensality are rarely seen in any other eating place. As the street eating culture of the street evolved, the eating habits of people in the city evolved too (more cafes/restaurants). But amidst this evolution, street food remained a constant site of the unfettered joy of food.

Subsequently, my childhood was spent in a house close to Birla Mandir and Raja Park (a locality established to accommodate the migratory population of Punjabis and Sindhis after partition and later). Raja Park possesses completely different characteristics than any other part of the city, the smells of *tandoor* waft through the lanes, spreading the aroma of marinated *paneer* (cottage cheese), *chicken*, and *chole kulche*. Its the only area in the city where I caught a whiff of meat sold on the streets, skewers with chicken, kebabs made of out muttons, and people enjoying a different kind of food.¹⁹ The streets are narrow, overcrowded with cars, and potholes that flood with few drops of rain, but none of that stops people from enjoying a plate of *aloo tikki* at Sanskriti chaat, *golgappa* at Nand, *lahsooni* paneer tikka at Radheshyam Bhatia Paneer, *Chole Kulche* from *Amritsari Chole kulche* or *samosa* is one of my favorite Shankar Samosa. This part of the city has also evolved into a somewhat modern street. Stalls sell momos (dumplings), wraps, sandwiches, pizza, noodles, and many more dishes that exemplify the street food of

¹⁹ I say different food because as a vegetarian, I didn't grow up eating "non-vegetarian" street food.

modern India. Raja Park is famously known for its food, shopping experience and a shop stop for all one wants to buy or consume. And it has also evolved into a street food destination that accommodates more palates than any other area in Jaipur.

There is something unmissable about the experience of eating on the street that attracts local and global audiences alike. For a local like me, street food was an intrinsic part of growing up; the craving, the drooling every time I passed by a stall, sniffing when I couldn't stop eating, and mostly stopping to eat were all ordinary things. Although the city is currently being flooded with new cafes, restaurants, and bars, the charm of street food is still irreplaceable. According to a whole host of guides, journalists, and food connoisseurs, and as mentioned earlier, migrants brought street food culture to Jaipur; people moving into the capital city of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh borrowed from the cultures of nearby places and the places they drew from. Together they fundamentally transformed street food culture, and street food found its home in Jaipur.

Street food in Jaipur is so coveted that the state government felt the need to establish hubs of street food stalls throughout the city so that street food lovers and tourists can get all kinds of street food in one place. In order to make it convenient for tourists and a niche local audience, a new initiative by the Rajasthan government, Masala Chowk ("Jaipur Chowpatty") is an al-fresco food court with all famous street-food stalls of the city in one place. Its first iteration opened in 2018 in Ram Niwas Bagh, situated near the walled city, which included a lot of eateries from the city such as Sethani ka Dhaba, Samrat, Gulabji Chai, and many more. As of June 2022, Masala Chowk has opened in three locations throughout the city, with famous street food stalls of the area, a ticketed entry, and premium parking space. Manish Kesharvani, the owner of Sanskriti Chaat in Raja Park tells me that to have a stall at Masala Chowk vendors have to pay a premium and even though he was asked to set up a stall, he would rather invest that capital in building his

already established stall. Other vendors, such as Sethani ka Dhaba were proud of making it to the list of stalls shortlisted for Masala Chowk. An initiative like Masala Chowk functions as formalizing the unorganized street food sector in the city. At the same time, this highlights the popularity and unique experience of street food in the city over other kinds of food. It also attempts to establish a derivative of street food stall culture in a closed setting by giving incentives of convenience (like parking, ticket etc), which automatically takes it away from the street. Undoubtedly, these kinds of initiatives mean that street food is valued, but it somehow takes away the features of what made street food stalls : the fact that they were on the streets.

Standing in the queue with strangers waiting to order, being a part of a group/collective, division of the old city according to caste but intermingling with people accidentally, increased invisibility of backgrounds, accommodating more people by designing the shops in the old walled city in such a way that enabled inhabitants to stand in a sheltered space and eat together. All of this for the purpose of eating on the street unknowingly enabled one to experience this unanticipated togetherness. Then, it is valuable to decipher that food on the streets paves way for accidental commensality, a facet of eating together that cannot be replicated in any other setting.



Figure 3. Crowd outside Samrat Sweets on a rainy day. Photography by Author



Figure 4. Shree Ram Chaat, with a kitchen on the streets. Photography by Author



Figure 5. Takht-E-Shahi Marg Pav Bhaji Stalls, opposite Birla Mandir. Photography by Author.



Figure 6. Famous Bhel Puri Waala. Photography by Author



Figure 7. Birla Mandir, Jaipur. Photography by Author



Figure 8. Street food stalls overlooking Birla Mandir, Jaipur. Photography by Author



Figure 9. Besan ke ladoo stall on Wednesdays. Photography by Author



Figure 10. Behind the scenes of kachori making, Khunteta Namkeen Bhandar. Photography by Author



Figure 11. Sampat Kachori .Photography by Author



Figure 12. Puran Ji kachori waale. Photograph by Author.



Figure 13. Shankar Samosa, Raja Park. Photography by Author

2.2 The Accessibility of Eating on the Streets: Belonging and Cultural Memory

In this section, I aim to unpack the fact that eating street food in Jaipur enables accessibility and produces feelings of belonging. I do so by observing the stalls described in section 2.1 of street eating culture in Jaipur and contextualize the following section in the literature of exclusion/inclusion around eating by elaborating on street food stalls as accessible places of eating. And continue building up on access by moving to belonging that eating the same food in a shared space inherently creates. This sense of collective eating the same food in a shared space then is embedded in the cultural memories of people which come to define a collective identity through street food.

The practice of eating on the same table/shared space is built on the basic principle of the number of people that the table/room accommodates, the socio-economic background and, often by a group's cultural preferences.²⁰ However, food and not only the place of eating plays an important role in defining who one can eat with. As mentioned previously, food serves two...functions: constructing social relations characterized by equality, intimacy or solidarity or serving to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance or segmentation (Appadurai 1981). These functions of food are a consequence of particular food substances, the actors involved and the context and audience of their transaction (Appadurai 1981). So, in the definition of commensality, accessibility or the lack of it, is a consequence of food substances, actors involved in the sharing, and the nature of the space. All three of these characteristics then define who makes it to the group of "together" and who doesn't. Commensality engenders conviviality through food; but it also brings to light the deep rooted exclusivity in commensal acts of eating, especially those around a table. I argue that inclusion enabled through accessibility has the

²⁰ Eleven Madison Park, a three Michelin Star restaurant charges \$365 per person for a meal. Charging a substantial amount does filter who will dine at the restaurant. <https://www.exploretock.com/elevenmadisonpark/>

potential to expand a sense of belonging and construct a larger community. This idea of belonging to a larger community, I will later argue, creates an accidental commensality, a way of eating together with strangers around street food stalls that is often unconstructed and unanticipated. Here, accessibility is the possibility of street food stalls creating a sense of openness in its structure that enables people to gather around them with ease.

To elaborate, streets, as stated in the literature review , are “arteries of movement, places where people work, live, love, dream and voice dissent”...they are also places where people eat. The public nature of the street dictates access to street food stalls. The fact that most street stalls in Jaipur (other than the ones in the masala chowk trying to impersonate street food stalls culture) are directly placed in a public space of the city allows them to be open access to most inhabitants of the city. Take this example from my past life: While I worked in a food tech/delivery company for two years in Bangalore, dosa became my favorite daily breakfast. During my field trip in Jaipur the summer of 2022, I took a week off and traveled to Bangalore. For breakfast , I went to a *dosa/vada/idli* (25 INR/ 30 cents for a plate of two *dosas*, *sambar* and three types of chutneys a block away from my friend’s house. The stall was crowded at 8 am in the morning and surprisingly I was greeted by my old vegetable vendor who frequents this joint for this daily breakfast. I was surprised to see him after a year, not because it was unexpected but because the possibility of two people, with different gender, class, and likely caste backgrounds eating in the same shared space was close to none. I mean where else will this accident of eating together happen? Where else would it be possible for us to eat together?

Similar to my experience of eating dosa from the same stall as my vegetable vendor in Bangalore, there are multiple instances when streets literally and figuratively level the playing field. That is, street stalls allow people of different class, castes, gender to intermix and access

food. This is unlike a restaurant or domestic space in Jaipur where class and the caste hierarchies are often strictly maintained.

The 94-year old owner of Gulabji (with an eponymous brand name), starts his day by giving the first tea of the day to homeless people who stop by his stall in the morning. The repeated pouring of chai into the pan, a chunk of ginger crushed with some cardamom, flavors waiting to be absorbed in the water, is a common sight at Gulabji Chaiwala. For the last 75 years, at 4:30 am, this stall has served tea to workers, college students, travelers and families, all of whom found this spot to be open beyond the structured hours of other tea stops. When I visited the stall at 5:30 am, it was crowded with people who like me and my friends spent the night catching up , still in our fancy party clothes, sharing the space with people who were starting their day as workers, all had a glasses of chai in either in car and some stood around the stall waiting for their buttered *muska bun* (a sweetened bread bun with a layer of butter). So many people from all walks of life mingle at the tea stall, their mingling enabled by the publicness of space and the low price street food offers. From 20 paise to 20 INR (Curly Tales 2019), many inhabitants of the city, pedestrians, office goers, laborers, domestic and international tourists found this caffeinated beverage's presence on the street accessible. It is not only the convenience of tea on the streets that has made it the drink of the masses, but also what it has come to denote; a drink of conviviality. Places like Tapri, Tea Connect, Chai Point, Tea Affair, Tea Star (to name a few) are establishments that opened up on the basis of the accessibility of tea as a beverage of the masses (much like coffee in the United States of America). Tapri, one of my favorite chai places in the city, opened in 2012 serves everything from street style cutting chai to a fancy hibiscus tea. The advent of tea spots in the city are a testimony to the acceptance of tea as a beverage deeply enmeshed in the culture of Jaipur, a culture that most of the people of Jaipur

relate to. Maybe then the conviviality and commensality around tea assumed a position of a common link between people of the city, a link that binds them together.

Inhabitants of the city, especially women and girls who often need a purpose and permission to roam around in the city let alone participate in some pleasure (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011), are also found indulging unabashedly around street food stalls in Jaipur. Four teenage girls dressed for an outing, giggled in front of Sanskriti Chaat (Raja park), two middle aged women walked towards the stall as soon as it opens at 4 pm, one woman drove her two wheeler scooter to the front of the stall, ordered and went to park it. Unfortunately, public spaces in India are gendered spaces, women who are assigned the role of housework hardly roam around on the streets without purpose, but street food stalls seem to be a place to let loose, indulge in pleasure of eating and grab food that takes away the pressure of cooking. Raja Park and the area near Birla Mandir was crowded with young girls who showed up alone, in groups, driving two-wheeler scooters, or being driven by chauffeurs. Women who are usually absent from the streets find liberation in front of the food stalls because they derive pleasure from eating on the street.

As a female solo researcher, the sense of togetherness on the streets was attractive. During my field trips, I used to sit behind the gaze of the street food stall vendor, usually occupying the same space as they did: behind the scene and behind the stall. With a notebook in my hand, I usually found a comfortable spot for observation in the shade of a tree, sometimes on the risen pavement on the sidewalk and mostly in the nooks and corners on a small makeshift stool. On the 5th of July, a Wednesday or Ganesh ji's day, I went to the area around the Moti Dungri temple at 8 am and found myself waiting for the rush to set in, for people to come in to pray before work. While I was waiting behind a *besan ke ladoo* (rolled balls of sweetened gram

flour, packed with ghee) stall, a *prasad* (offering to god) that devotees usually offer to god, the vendors from the nearby stall got a plastic polythene filled with tea and empty some paper cups. He soon found some place next to me and his arrival meant an invitation to other vendors to take a break and have some tea. As I was sitting next to them, observing and actively taking notes and photographs for which they posed, they offered me a paper cup filled with tea. The offer did not surprise me (people usually offer each other food/beverage out of courtesy) but I was still moved by this new kind of generosity. It felt like an invitation for me to feel included in their group, albeit momentarily. Throughout my endeavor to capture commensality in front of the stall, I was welcomed into this new kind of togetherness behind the stall. This extraordinary act reinforced my attempt to find similar experiences during my field trip. This small act filled me with hope to keep looking for small joys of eating together in unexpected places. In my opinion, I partook in an experience that was well beyond a cup of chai.

These small acts of kindness establish a form of kinship through food. Inclusion, then, seems so effortless. If food has the potential to bring people together in any capacity, then why is it so complicated to practice? Exclusion, to me, then seems deliberate and constructed. The idea of food sharing and commensality is not always idyllic, it is much more complicated than that, sometimes furthering the divide between communities. For instance, in some villages of Madurai, the two tumbler system is still prevalent where upper caste Hindu get tea in stainless steel cups and Dalits get the same tea in disposable cups. (Karthikeyan 2012). Exclusionary eating practices achieve the prospect of taking away agency, belonging and a sense of community from people. A parallel example to this could be a mithai shop that I visited in the walled city of Jaipur. Abhishek Jain, the 4th generation owner of Sweet house (located in the walled city), was a little skeptical about the origins of the outlet that was passed onto him by his

father. The shop is actually a two storey building that houses a huge kitchen set up in the back, with big *kadais* for cooking *besan*, machines for churning milk to separate the thick cream that makes the base of *mithai*, big cauldrons filled oval shaped balls of *roshogulla*, all made from scratch. As a member of an upper caste community, Jain, a strict vegetarian himself, does not cater in weddings that serve non-vegetarian/meat based food. Serving his *mithai* (sweets) only in the vegetarian community is a condition that he abides by irrespective of the revenue he might earn by increasing his customer pool (and including meat eaters) and serving at events in a community of meat eaters. This example embeds caste discrimination as he essentially declines weddings which serve meat. But the flip side of having a shop in the city is the fact that he cannot control the customers' eating habits. Most people are welcome as customers to stand and eat together in front of the stall and have a bite of their famous *rabri*, *ghevar* or *gulab jamun*. It also demonstrates the greater levelling of caste in urban settings: they are accessible to people on the street and can't/don't restrict the kind of people who might come to eat at his store. For a moment, the commensality created on the street makes the crowd seem like a collective. And this is exactly what I mean w.r.t accessibility, the street food stalls that open on a street don't deliberately practice exclusion, they seem open to all kinds of accidental mingling of people in the city.

Having access then is a necessary first step for belonging to a group or a collective. Eating the same kind of food in a shared space creates a sense of belonging to a larger collective, something bigger than yourself, especially in a country deeply embedded in cultural hierarchies. The example of chai as a beverage deeply enmeshed in the culture of Jaipur signifies a sense of the collective, a sense of belonging is a consequence of the accessibility of chai on the streets. "Belonging indexes fragile, uncertain, and often highly contingent human efforts to be part of

something larger. It is about possessing and being possessed by one another; it is about being a member of, or striving for membership in, larger social communities”(Gammeltoft 2018). This belonging extends to many citizens of Jaipur due to accessibility of the food. That is accessibility allows belonging to expand across class and caste categories. So, the more kinds of people that access streets for food, creates a common link amidst themselves and transforms into a larger collective. Then, the function of food in constructing social relations and solidarity rings true (Appadurai 1981). For instance, in the public sphere, in small-town restaurants and the takeaway joints, offering foreign dishes-not only Chinese and Western but unfamiliar specialities from other parts of India- the food served up in such places to some extent break free from the references to caste inherent in everyday domestic cuisine and enabled commensality based on other factors. Food items that sit outside usual classifications can enable sharing on equal footing with their relative status not defined by caste differences but by their shared capacity to partake in a collective (Staples 2014).²¹ This example highlights Baviskar’s idea of maggi as foods that “transcend cultural enclosures and enable consumption across class, caste, and religious hierarchies” (Baviskar 2018). That’s not it, food on the streets operates beyond the existing structures of capitalism. Often, street food stalls function beyond the standard meal times, making their own rules as autonomous entities. At 3 pm in the afternoon: a post-lunch, almost high-tea, and a few hours before dinner time when there is an afternoon slump for restaurant owners, peak time for tea shops, street food stalls who do not follow the standard time slots of functioning sell multiple fares. One can expect to enjoy a freshly fried *samosa* During my field trip in June 2022 on a scorching summer day, Shankar Samosa in Raja Park was crowded with

²¹ James Staples in “Civilizing Tastes: From Caste to Class in South Indian Foodways” in *Food Consumption in Global Perspective Essays in the Anthropology of Food in Honour of Jack Goody* talks about commensality in low-caste people he worked with in villages and small towns of South India where sharing “foreign-dishes” on the street provided eating on an equal footing, their relative status not defined by caste differences but by their shared capacity to partake of modernity and to consider themselves ‘educated’. Staples 2014

people devouring freshly fried kachori at 3 pm. A few customers standing in front of the stall have been regulars for as long as 20 years.²² Food on the street offers flexibility and space to eat whenever one gets hunger pangs or cravings. By not being defined by mealtimes, it makes food accessible to people at most times of the day.

The freedom to eat whatever, whenever one wants depends on one's identity, positionality and rules dictated by the society. Street by its feature of being accessible, often passes on those characteristics to street food stalls. Farooq reflects on the significance of celebrating festivals on the street, "It is nice to have Iftar in public, on the street, out in the open among people. Everyone is welcome to come and eat. In India, all people can partake in Ramzan, even Hindus. It is good that it is celebrated in Public" (Anjaria 2016, 87). By emphasizing on locality, Farooq underscored the uniqueness of this place and how sociality is embedded in street practice. Shapiro interprets this instance as a reflection on the potential of public space and the possibility of religious coexistence that might not be experienced anywhere else. Then, enculturated commensality (a process by which individuals learn food sharing through group culture, experience, observation and instruction) in the Indian street food context, is the kind of commensality that functions beyond the religious and caste hierarchies that seem to be ingrained in our nature. Another fascinating facet for me is Shapiro's presence on the on the iftar table, he says, "Not having fasted myself, and thus lacking the others' sense of expectancy, I still appreciate this small moment of peace; the people standing around the table create a comforting island of tranquility amidst the frenetic activity of the street." Simmel argues, the main point of sociability is for people to "feel sociated," to experience the connection to others—and with food, it is a more concrete experience since people partake in a shared experience (quoted by Alice P. Julier). Again tying it to the potential of accidental commensality, as an outsider,

²² Interview

Shapiro, I imagine, must have felt a sense of belonging while eating together with strangers on the street, becoming a part of a larger collective in a country not his own. Then, as spaces open to the public, street food stalls potentially become places for people to eat together through its ability of extending accessibility to expand class, caste and gender hierarchies.

When eating food on the streets expands across class, caste and gender hierarchies accommodating more people than less, eating the same food creates a semblance of equality, a moment when one is as good as anyone else (Baviskar 2018). Making one feel a part of a larger collective finds space in the cultural memories of eating together. Especially eating on the streets is much more than just eating with strangers in a physical shared space. According to a Michelin star chef, Gaggan Anand, “Eating in Streets of India is about chaotic memories, especially from my time growing here in Kolkata.. This is one of my favorites in this season of hot humid rainy monsoons...kanji vada or overnight soaked Mung beans fried with spices and then soaked in fermented sour pungent drink made with mustards...the honking, the rush, the madness, cooking with hands all become a part of this memory...” The features of accessibility and belonging that get created through food on the streets are deeply embedded in the memories of people but a memory becomes a cultural phenomenon or a cultural memory only when it accommodates a larger collective. What I mean here is that the more the people relate with something, the more it increases the scope of it being embedded in the memories of a generation.

A feature of street food that’s derived from the conversation between Shapiro and the *autowaala* (rickshaw driver) highlights the way food is enmeshed in the collective memory of the city. “Vada Pao!“, exclaimed the autorickshaw driver when Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria asked him, “What’s the monument of Mumbai?” The accessibility of food on the streets enables a gathering of a larger collective. This sense of belonging that is shared by a collective becomes

the basis of cultural memory. Then, elevating vada pao as one of the monuments of Mumbai adds a layer of complexity to street food. The *autowala* is suggesting a few important things using vada pao as synonymous to a monument: vada pao as a unique and distinct feature of the city, a narrative that has spawned across generations, an unmissable Mumbai experience and I believe, a thing that needs to be preserved. As monuments are unique to the city, possibly a feature that defines the city and makes it stand out, the food of the city also embodies this sense of uniqueness. Similarly, the food of the city in this context is usually the food sold on the streets, it is usually the food that is eaten by most people in the city. This feature of street food makes it food that's embedded in the memories of people who are inhabitants or people who come to experience the city. This cultural memory creates a sense of belonging for a larger community that spans across physical boundaries and generations.

When Baviskar describes maggi as the stuff of nostalgia and longing for Indian students abroad, Maggi is a beloved comfort food and a cultural good that consolidates and affirms their identities as young Indians (Baviskar 2018).²³ Maggi, in this way, creates a semblance of the taste of home (Baviskar 2018).²⁴ In the walled city, one of the customers outside Puran Ji kachori wale traced his own journey of being a regular customer for the past 50 years, mentioning how in the last 5 decades he has seen the shop evolve and passed down generations. Now handled by Vishnu, a third-generation owner of the kachori shop, carrying forward the heritage of his grandfather, proudly mentions that their way of cooking remains the same as it was when the shop was first established in 1963. For the past 60 years, the shop has seen regular customers, youth, and tourists who want to get the taste of the city. There is something unique about the

²³ The praxis of cultural memory can be explained through Nestle's Maggi noodles. Baviskar, 2018

²⁴ The idea of Maggi as a part of the cultural memory of Indian students abroad also originates from the notion that Maggi exudes consumer citizenship. This packaged product accords belonging to a modern and affluent world to poor, low caste people who are discriminated against and agency to young people who aspire to challenge notions of patriarchy. This consumer citizenship that it offers to many leads to becoming a part of memory. Baviskar, 2018

taste and value of Jaipur's street style kachori that doesn't escape memory and becomes deeply inhabited in the memory of inhabitants. To imagine that my grandfather, father and I have experienced the same taste is mind boggling to me. A food blogger in the city writes that kachoris have absolute and unwavering control over Jaipur's crowd. Another blogger captions a video of street *chaat*, "I'm sure just like me all of you have your childhood memories attached to this place." It is no surprise then that all my trips to Jaipur mean visiting Shankar Samosa at least once. It is the taste of the city, the taste of home that is similar to people who grew up in Jaipur. Then, the food on the streets is enmeshed in the culinary history of the city and in the minds of multiple generations of "Jaipurites".

It is believed that food is a universal language. A link that has the potential to unite us.²⁵ To use an example from pop culture, a widely popular term 'Comfort food' is different in all cultures, but assumes a common shared identity. You and I can have our own version of comfort foods, but we understand the essence of it. The accessibility of street and street food stalls hold in themselves the ambition to make us feel part of a larger community. Accessibility is enabled by design on streets which gets percolated into the street food stalls embedded in them. Zooming out and looking at the big picture often makes street/food stalls a space that is open, flexible and accommodating because (1) all inhabitants of the city, irrespective of their economic, social and caste status use the streets (2) in an urban setting, streets often become places where one can remain as anonymous as one wants. To belong to a certain community, we need at least have access. This section of my thesis tried to lay out potential in making food accessible to many through wall-less, street food stall like space. Places of eating like these enable people to gather as a collective and generate feelings of belonging. These feelings of belonging not only make

²⁵ "Does Food Actually Unite Us?" Makalintal, Bettina. 2020.

people who are physically present at the stalls feel part of a larger collective, but also those who associate street food stalls as places to eat. This also creates a common memory of street food for many in Jaipur, Embedded in the collective memory of a larger section of society, food of the streets has the potential to act as a link between strangers. Maybe the accidental commensality that street food enables holds a lot more potential than just enabling people to eat together, it enables communities to generate across time and space, creating potential alternative ways of togetherness.



Figure 14. Sanskriti Chaat, Raja Park. Photography by Author



Figure 15. Crowds of people outside Samrat early in the morning. Photography by Author



Figure 16. Women and girls eating golgappas. Photography by Author



Figure 17. Behind the stall, vendors shared a cup of chai with me. Photography by Author



Figure 18. *Bhutta* on the sidewalk. Photography by Author



Figure 19. Police officers enjoying an evening snack. Photography by Author



Figure 20. Evening snack opposite Birla Mandir. Photography by Author

2.3 The Affect of eating on the streets: Intimacy and *Mazaa*

In the previous sections, I lay out a brief history of the street eating culture in Jaipur while also demonstrating how street food is accessible and welcomes most people to be a part of a larger collective. A sense of belonging to a larger group, the embedded cultural memory of eating the same food also gets featured in section 2.2. However, as a part of the audience of street food stalls, I could not help but feel the energy, a kind of undercurrent that was not captured in my notes or documentation but could only be felt by participation. To make sense of this energy, I listed down the various factors that could have influenced it, such as the coming back to my favorite food stalls as an adult, the multi-sensory experience of being on the streets, or the food that the vendors have perfected after years of making, a blend of textures, flavors, consistency and the sense of belonging, accessibility and cultural memory that I recently discovered. It could also be the unanticipated, accidental togetherness and this shared collective experience, something I overlooked before. It was not one of these factors, but all of them, that made eating on the street generate a unique affect. In the following paragraphs, my goal is to showcase street food stalls as places of eating brimming with affect to establish how this affective dimension expands the definition of commensality. As affect can be tough to articulate because of its presence in the intangible, I look at scholars who work with it, and use their interpretations to contextualize my research. While unpacking affect, I also weave two important forms of affect: intimacy and *mazaa* that are intangibles feature that consecutively add to the the street eating experience.

Imagine, an umami flavour bomb in peoples paper plates, constant movements of hands and bodies, the rhythmic sounds of the vendors spoon hitting the steel bowl, the noise of the

streets, the unrecognizable voices all around, the sights of people eating, the view of the city, the random colour palette that somehow makes sense. The joy of consuming food, the uninhibited *mazaa* (fun/pleasure) of the palate waking up through the pieces of fried potatoes pushed from a hot iron *tawa* (skillet). The harmony of toppings: shredded ginger, coriander and chaat masala, yum. This seemingly unconstructed act of eating on the streets is a consequence of multiple intensities that play into making street food an experience unlike any other.

Like mentioned earlier, commensality engenders an invisible, intangible exchange of space between people who eat together. The air which adds to this shared experience of eating, an ineffable experience of sharing air/space with strangers who have gathered around to experience food, might be an affective dimension of street eating. Pulling from Maggie Doherty's reading of Berlant, "affect is a free-floating emotion one can sense in the air. It is not something that one necessarily feels as an individual emotion, it is a collective emotion that springs from structures, economy...that often affect individuals. Affect, then, is a collective emotional experience...springing from material conditions".²⁶ Maybe the feeling of being a part of a larger collective is felt throughout the group of people standing around a street food stall. Maybe the street's energy, and, energy itself add to this the experience of the street. It is the capacity of being part of street food stalls' audience that simultaneously establishes belonging, cultural memory and accessibility that are generated and, I argue, allow for affective states to arise. Affective states that help construct an accidental commensality

Collective emotion generated on stalls is a complex phenomenon. "Affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity but is produced by its circulation" (Ahmed 2014, 40-61).

²⁶ In the "Revolutionary Left Radio: Cruel Optimism: Affect Theory and the Structure of Feeling" Maggie Doherty talks to Brecht to discuss the work of Lauren Berlant on Affect.

Mankekar, contextualizes Ahmed's definition for her argument around affective objects of Indian grocery stores in the Bay area. She explains that "circulation of objects is mediated by history, memory, and by sociality and politics...the affect generated...is ambient, something that is experienced...in an intimate, embodied and often visceral way" (Mankekar 2015, 73) . In a manner similar to Mankekar, I use the concept of circulation of objects to fit food on street food stalls as objects highly mediated by history, memory, sociality, conviviality, and politics of eating. For instance, chai, as previously stated, is imbued with cultural history and memory. The fact that chai is sold on the streets and drunk by generations of Jaipurites was made possible by its circulation on the streets. Chai has become a symbol of conviviality and sociality so much so that it is the first beverage that is offered when guests visit home, or *chai tapri* (stalls) have sprouted in every nook and corner ,around offices, shops etc as places to gather and have conversations around this hot beverage. But before the advent of chai, the beverage seemed unfamiliar to people who were accustomed to milk and curd as breakfast. English tea companies, intent on selling tea, had also started distributing dry tea bags free of cost in the localities of the city in order to give the taste of tea to the people. In Johri Bazar etc. people set up camps to provide free tea and teach the method of making tea by putting up tents. The accessibility to a large number of people in the city and maybe due to its addictive nature found a permanent place on the palates of people in the city (Shekhawat 2018). This cup of chai at Gulabji chai wala does not only mean consuming the city's favorite beverage, this 75 year old recipe, represents history, conviviality and sociality that is embedded in the circulation of tea.

Circulation of objects or food on the street (in this case) are mediated by history, memory , sociality, conviviality and politics of eating because they are embedded with meanings that originate from the collective. As mentioned before, Mannur mentions how eating as a form of

sociality operates on many levels, alone, among strangers and across generations. Eating together on the streets then holds meaning because its circulation originates from the collective. The high circulation of street food is a testimony to the fact that it has been eaten by generations of inhabitants/people. Then the idea of accidental commensality doesn't only enable the unanticipated togetherness on a physical level, but it also encompasses generations, geographies and people that exist beyond the physicality of the stall. This circulation of food sold on the streets is generated through the cultural memories of people who have eaten the same food as someone present on the street, often functioning as a common link between them.

For instance, during my field trip, one hot summer day, I went to the stalls near Birla Mandir. After careful consideration of more than 10 stalls of pav bhaji, with the same name "Pandit Pav Bhaji", I sat in front of the stall overlooking the temple and the whole wide street. At that moment, sitting in front of one of the most famous monuments of the city while holding a plate of pav bhaji, like many others next to me, seemed grand. As a local of the city, I have crossed Birla Mandir multiple times, only been inside the temple twice, and eaten at surrounding stalls a lot as a kid. But I never stopped and felt the beauty of the city, a characteristic that I believe made my eating experience on the street more meaningful than I imagined. The grandeur of the city one experiences while eating on the street was a feature that wasn't considered in the beginning of my research. What made the experience of eating on the street so fascinating, fun and indulgent? To analyze this, I looked at another definition of affect "visceral forces that work beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion. It in many ways is synonymous with forces or forces of encounter." These visceral forces, I believe "often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra-". Street food stalls

are heightened spaces of affect because of the things that simultaneously happen on the streets, a place where commensality is unnoticed. These unnoticed molecular events and the ordinary and its extra-, I believe, can be understood by unearthing the visceral forces of encounters around street food stalls. I look at intimacy, solo eating and *mazaa* as three ideas that might bring to surface these affective encounters on street food stalls.

Intimacy translates to the state of having a close, personal relationship with somebody or it means a private and comfortable atmosphere. Intimacy as well as commensality is assumed to feature close, personal relationships. So, the possibility that commensality in shared spaces of street food stalls is intimate seems unheard of (It is important to point out here that belonging to a collective through being in a group or through a shared cultural memory are noted characteristics of eating the same food in a shared space) Intimacy here is derived from belonging but is an unnoticed, unexplored undercurrent that's often invisible to the eye around street food stalls. "Every act of eating with others, or alone, is a form of intimacy" (Mannur 2018, 5). In order to rework how we think about the connection among eating, intimacy and the public, Mannur suggests that "whether eating occurs in a restaurant, at an office desk, after a cooking lesson, or after cooking with others, it establishes a form of kinship. This established kinship holds the potential for intimacies to emerge" (Mannur 2018, 5). Street food stalls then have the potential to generate intimate eating experiences. "Being a part of this eating public comprising of strangers who do not know one another and will never likely to cross paths again is seductive because it speaks so cogently to the kind of intimacies we all have access to at one-point or another in our lives, when we find ourselves eating alone or eating in the company of others who are also eating alone" (Mannur, 2022). Then, the intimacies that are generated

between people by eating at a street food stall are accidents that hold in themselves the potential to create environments of intimate eating.

In Mannur words every act of eating, alone or with others should be considered an act of intimacy. If one eats alone, are they truly alone? Supriya Roychoudhury recounts her experience of eating on the streets, “Armed with my paper plate, just large enough to hold chop, a side of stringy salad and a dollop of sauce, I would settle down to enjoy my pre-dinner, post-work snack in the market square, against the steady hum of adda – conversation usually but not always of a political nature, over tea and snacks – by myself, but hardly alone”(Roychoudhury, 2020). What does it mean to be in the middle of the entangled web of vendors, other bodies, food and the grandeur of the city? I mean, eating alone in a restaurant is the most extreme form of feeling disconnected, it is almost embarrassing to go alone and dine in a restaurant. Indeed the only thing considered worse than eating alone has been eating alone in public²⁷. During my field trips, evenings were my favorite time to go out on the street, the air was cooler, the roads were calm before the beginning of the office traffic and it was an ideal time for a pre-dinner evening snack. Birla Mandir, adjacent to Moti Dungri Temple is usually a spot for tourists, but the locals for whom the monuments are a daily sight gather around through the prospect of street food. On Takth-E- Shahi road, opposite Moti Dungri Ganesh Temple, a self proclaimed famous bhel puri waala (the marquee on his cart read, “Famous Bhel Puri”) set up his cart for the evening. As the evening crowd starts to expand with sights of cars, two wheelers, pedestrians and travelers, the owner’s helper begins to rigorously chop tomatoes, *mise en place* before the stall is surrounded with people. Behind the four-wheeler cart, I place myself on a red plastic chair and put my bag on the other, occupying almost a quarter of the seating area and in my view the movement of the

²⁷ “Tables for One - the Rise of Solo Dining - BBC News” n.d.

helper's hand is set against the backdrop of the white- marble temple. The vendor, passing a suspicious look at me (vendors are curious of a solo woman figure with a notebook and a camera), asks the woman behind me if she would like medium *masala* (mild) *bhel puri*, as if he already knew her order. The woman came and sat next to me and asked me if she could also use the red plastic chair to keep her bag too. I observed her fidgeting with her scooter keys in one hand and scrolling through the phone with the other hand while waiting for her order . Both the keys and the phone disappeared when the vendor showed up with her plate, and asked me if I wanted a plate of *bhel puri* too; I nodded in agreement (and told him to make it hot for me). This reminds me of what Mannur says while dining alone in a restaurant, “The act of eating in restaurants is also a way to lay claim to making the public space feel intimate for a certain period of time.” We sat in the middle of the chaos, under a makeshift plastic roof, grand temples and a fleet of street food stalls in our view, a moment she and I devoured our plates of *bhel puri* all alone, but yet together?

In Goulding's words, a meal at a three Michelin star restaurant lacked nothing, except the fact that he was alone. “The meal detonated an explosion of diverse emotions—hushed reverence, brooding reflection, fits of wonder and whimsy and piercing nostalgia—as only the very best food can . In terms of a transcendent dining experience, dinner for me at Can Roca lacked nothing . That is, except someone to share it with” (Goulding 2012). An experience that is tough to articulate, eating on the streets alone, did not feel like I was alone. Maybe then, “when you're not sitting across from someone, you're sitting across the world because in finding a space on the streets to eat, one often finds themselves in the company of others who might be or might not be alone” (Rosenbloom 2018). In this alfresco setting then originates an intimate eating public without the mandate for verbal (non-verbal) communication. By extending the

notion of intimacy, the act of eating alone on the streets creates an intimate surrounding that expands our understanding of togetherness and of commensality, where one does not feel alone. This idea of including solo eating into the literature of commensality and of describing affect on street food is a derivative of a scene from the film *The Lunchbox*, where the protagonist (Saajan Fernandes), a middle-class, aged government official comments on his surroundings outside his office during lunch, “There are so many people in the city who eat only a banana or two for lunch...It is cheap and it fills you up”. Saajan looks at the other people eating bananas around him, some are laborers, others office goers, all standing around the cart on the street.

Like Saajan, people even eat alone on the streets. One guy had headphones in his ears, deeply engrossed in his music, he enjoyed his plate of bhel puri, not lifting his face even once from his phone screen. I believe he didn't care about the judgment that's usually attached to eating out alone in a restaurant. I think maybe it is the openness of the street, like Rosenbloom describes sidewalks in Paris, streets in India are also easy places...where anything goes; chappals, t-shirts, pajama, saree or a tuxedo..you never feel someone is missing because when you look around other people too are eating alone, taking the evening at their own pace. My analysis of streets as comfortable spaces for people to eat alone, in their own company and in the company of strangers is built on the notion that the street acts as an easy place for people that are accessible and allow them to be themselves in a collective of people who seems similar.

As Indian streets are defined by a profusion of personal encounters that seem intimate, the pleasure of eating gets enmeshed in the informality of the streets, where people come as they are, heighting the *mazaa* of street food stalls. Then, the commensality introduced through accidents of eating with strangers doesn't let one feel alone.

But it is not just that, eating on the streets is also highly motivated by a kind of pleasure that compels people of all kinds to come and enjoy street food and let go of their notions of togetherness. This unique sense of affect generated around street food stalls has *mazaa* at its core. *Mazaa*, a Hindi-Urdu word that can mean fun, pleasure and play is the core of accidental commensality. According to Shapiro, “Scholarly writing often treats fun and pleasure as either frivolous, and therefore irrelevant...researchers avoid *mazaa* because we are skeptical of things that have an embodied pull on us” (Shapiro and Anjaria 2020). In my words, *mazaa* means uninhibited joy, embodied pleasure, indulging all senses in the act and being present. To articulate *mazaa*, let’s look at this example of my conversation with the owner of Sanskriti Chaat in Raja Park during one of my field trips. Sitting cross legged on a makeshift stool, overlooking the stall, Manish Kesharvani proudly tells me about a frequent occurrence at his stall, “ On their way to weddings, functions, parties or work, customers stop when they catch a glimpse of the stall. They park their vehicles and ask me to prepare a plate of *aloo tikki* (fried potato topped with coriander and tamarind chutney, sometimes with chickpeas curry) *fatafat* (quickly). Impressed with his own statement, he explains the reason of this attraction. The secret is in the food, the quality of his ingredients and the fact that he still mixes everything by hand (even after having 7 employees) that even if people are not hungry, they want to eat. Sitting next to him, my mouth waters, I salivate at the site of fried potatoes, and decide to keep taking notes instead.

People come to street food stalls to indulge in eating. Here, somehow, the act of eating is beyond mere sustenance. There seems to be something about street food stalls that compels people to grab a bite, even if it's not for satiating hunger. The intensities generated by the street, by bodies in constant motion with the streets and with each other, creating a sense of collective, a memory, all of this make eating on the street full of *mazaa*. “The food sold on the street

embodies pleasure that people crave; its tangy, spicy mix of flavors and the mouthfeel of a jazz combo of textures” (Baviskar 2021). The embodied pleasure of the street is tough to replicate, no wonder there’s always something missing in the *bhel puri* that I make at home when I add the same diced onion, tomato, coriander, the same two sweet and sour chutneys with crunchy bits as garnish. The attempt to reproduce street style dishes in restaurants with quality ingredients often fails to reproduce the flavor, taste and maza of the food sold on the streets. Maybe it is the “*chaotic memory*” of the street, the sharing of space with strangers who indulge themselves in the *maza* of street food or it could be the “*synesthetic reasoning*” that street food vendors develop by making the same dish over and over again. There is an unspoken, inexplicable characteristic feature of street food that is tough to articulate. This feature embodies *maza*, and reinforces the notion that the taste of street food is an amalgamation of not just ingredients but a lot of other parts, hence making it a core feature of the affective dimension of street food.

“*Maza* is dwelling in the sensory experiences of food. It is not just a pleasure out in the world, but it captivates, entertains and draws us in” (Shapiro and Anjaria 2020). A lot of times food on the streets is considered unhygienic and unsanitary, a feature of informal set ups that might prevent a few people from consuming it. “But for a majority of individuals, especially young consumers, the sanitized snacks in an upmarket environment simply don’t measure up to the fun of eating on the street: the indulgence of an impulse without spending big bucks, the adventure of risking an upset stomach” (Baviskar 2021). It is as if there is a certain magnetic force that attracts people to consume the food on the street that compel them to let off some of the pre-conceived notion of street food. Then, maybe in the end *maza*’s embodied, unwieldy and seductive properties can generate new ways of togetherness (Shapiro and Anjaria 2020), which is held together through food that exudes features of access, belonging and memory.

It is in the intimacy and mazaas of street eating that we see the affective dimension of the street. Inherently, people find eating food to be one of the most pleasurable activities. On the streets, this pleasure is heightened by the simultaneous movement of people, the live cooking on the stalls, the sounds and aromas of the food, and the collective enjoyment of eating. It is my intention to conclude through this section that incidental, unplanned, and unplanned communality adds to the affective dimension of street eating, whether through intimacy or mazaas. The accidental eating together of people in the same social/physical setting gives rise to a form of informality that is tough to deliberately construct. Furthermore, the mazaas of eating on the streets is also at the core of accidental commensality because the food on the street is so delectable, unique and irresistible that people with pre-conceived notions, ideology and beliefs often let go of their opinion when a plate of sizzling hot *kachori* comes out of the big oil *kadai*. Hence, experiencing the pleasure of consuming the same food on the street in a collective generates intimacy between strangers...which adds to the affect of eating on the street.



Figure 21. A golgappa stall. Photography by Author



Figure 22. A Kanji wala stall on a cycle. Photography by Author



Figure 23. Colors on a street food stall. Photograph by Author



Figure 24. Behind the scenes of Famous bhel puri stall, overlooking the Moti Dungri Temple. Photography by Author



Figure 25. A vendor eating golgappa at a fellow vendor's stall for free. Photography by Author



Figure 26. Eating alone. Photography by Author

Conclusion

The idea of accidents or somewhat unanticipated, surprising, positive glitches in the system of eating together has been of interest to me. In addition to the suspense of not knowing what happens when people eat together, I was aware that commensality extended beyond mere sustenance. I started looking for instances of commensality in my own life. I found the act of eating together with family at home, friends in school, in a restaurant with a small familiar group and a larger unfamiliar group of people in a shared space, or at weddings. Street food stalls featured a lot in my dining out experience as well. Since street food stalls are often used for eating on the street, I was curious to see how they might be viewed as commensal places. As highlighted in the sections above, street eating culture in Jaipur defines the food of the city, the food famous and unique to the city is often sold on the streets. Accessibility, one of the most defining features of the street, bleeds into street food stalls. As one of the most accessible places to eat in the city, street food stalls open up possibilities of a larger collective gathering in a shared space. These places of eating then function as places that extend a sense of belonging by making people part of a larger collective. The ideology of cultural memory also originates from this collective. When eating is part of a larger collective, it becomes a sort of culture embedded in the participants' memories of this phenomenon of eating around street food stalls. My grandfather, my father, and I share the experience of eating a kachori on the streets of Jaipur. The memories of food eaten together function as a common link between people and extend the act of commensality that originates from the street food stalls beyond the physicality of being present in the space. However, that is not it; as we know from the last section on affect, street food stalls become places of *accidental commensality* because of their tangible features and the intensities

generated around them. It is these intensities that spark intimacy and *mazaa* on the streets. *Mazaa*, the intense pleasure derived from eating on the street), accessibility, and a feeling of belonging might be why people let go of the norms of eating together and generate forms of *accidental commensality* (on the streets). I introduce the term *accidental commensality* to state that this unconstructed, happenstance and pleasurable gathering around food might be an essential intervention in expanding the definition of commensality. However, the nature of *accidental commensality* to work beyond the structure allows for such eating places. Street food stalls are wall-less (mostly), provisional spaces filled with people that enable a form of *accidental commensality*, the unexpected and unconstructed ways of eating together through food. Nevertheless, studying commensality, including accidental commensality, is just a beginning in understanding how food influences social relations. By considering commensality from a new perspective, we can imagine new ways to create togetherness through food.

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