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Review: Indian Community Cookbooks Project

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Project

Indian Community Cookbooks Project

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Project Overview**Khushi Gupta, Muskaan Pal, and Ananya Pujary**

Arjun Appadurai's 1988 essay, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," cited the popularity of Indian cookbooks among the Indian diaspora as a textual form of heritage preservation. Currently, in India, there is no single repository, digital or otherwise, that makes community culinary history accessible. Thus, the Indian Community Cookbooks Project (ICCP) was created as an open-access archive of community cookbooks from across India—both those extant in print as well as handwritten forms. The website initially aimed to document a single community cuisine (the Tuluva community) but later expanded to include cuisines across India. This open-access archive exhibits multilingual, regionally specific community cookbooks and documentation of community food memories.

We are three undergraduate students from FLAME University in Pune, India: Ananya Pujary (B.A. in Psychology), Muskaan Pal (B.A. in Psychology), and Khushi Gupta (B.B.A in Marketing). Taking into account our collective passion for food culture, we created this project in April 2019 as a final assignment for our Introduction to Digital Humanities course. Under the guidance of our instructor Maya Dodd, a professor of literary and cultural studies at FLAME University whose research primarily looks into food cultures in digital domains, we expanded this digital archive beyond the classroom.

Currently, ICCP consists of an “[Archives](#)” section with food memories and traditional recipes from communities across India. This way, both textual and oral traditions can be archived for food histories to be re-narrated. We use tools such as Knight Lab’s TimelineJS to record cookbook publications across time in various cuisines. A chronology allows for the historicity of the cookbook to come to life, in a manner which demonstrates the changing socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions at the time of their creations. Likewise, ArcGIS’s mapping software documents contemporary cookbooks that were published after the 1990s industrialization of India (“[Modern Cookbook Story](#)”), featuring the densities of cookbook publication and lack of community representation.

The project is further enriched by contributions from its audience, especially for the “Archives” section. Convenience sampling is the primary mode of data collection, through websites, blogs, academic literature sites, and social media platforms. Our project was created with public interest in mind and the project has the potential to engage with and document lesser-known community cuisines. Additionally, it aims to reach specialists in digital humanities, food studies, women’s studies, and related fields to aid the generation of new knowledge. Eventually, we hope this project becomes a viable resource for many others and an agent in encouraging collaborative effort on further ventures into the field of Indian community cookbooks. In the future, we plan on using translation tools like Google Translate to increase its accessibility and reach.

References

Appadurai, A. (1988). How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30(1), 3-24. Retrieved February 12, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179020>

Project Review

Souvik Mukherjee

The Indian Community Cookbook Project (ICCP) is a collection of cookbooks reflecting the varied cuisine of India (and the subcontinent). Influenced by Arjun Appadurai’s essay “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,” this important student-led project combines a comparative approach to history, particularly oral histories and long-lost cultures. The project aims to contribute to food studies, women studies, and digital humanities. ICCP has far-reaching potential for postcolonial

studies and cultural studies in general, and it could be further enhanced by including other texts and cuisines.

This project, which focuses on archiving culinary culture, fills a major gap in studies on the Indian subcontinent, postcolonialism, South-to-South discourses, and, of course, cultural studies. As the project's creators note, there are currently no organized and curated digital archives on cookbooks and culinary practices in India. Further, as an undergraduate project in digital humanities, situated in the Global South and specifically in the Indian context where few undergraduate projects exist, this is a very commendable undertaking. Given the limited resources available to Indian undergraduate students, this huge achievement is made possible by a bricolage of available out-of-the-box digital humanities tools including Wix (where websites can be built without professional coding skills) and StoryMaps (where events and narratives can be geotagged). I see it as an important example of *jugaad*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as a “flexible approach to problem-solving that uses limited resources in an innovative way” in digital spaces.

As they continue work on the project, the creators should consider providing a bibliography, a basic requirement of such research projects, which would be useful not only to students but to other scholars. This would likely include readings on the subject, such as Utsa Ray's *Culinary Culture in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). Additionally, the creators should consider including key texts in the timelines, such as Kalyani Dutta's *Thor Bori Khara* (Thema, 2018) in the Bengali timeline. Another important addition would be a methodologies section detailing how these cookbooks were scanned, how the optical character recognition (OCR) process was undertaken, what metadata was added, what metadata conventions were used (e.g. Dublin Core), what percentage of the cookbooks were obtained from born-digital sources, and how digital humanities methodologies have been applied to this project. The creators might also consider whether some texts could be translated, such as the Portuguese cookbooks from Goa. They might also consider integrating cooking traditions from Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan as well as cuisines of marginalized communities (see Joseph Rozario's *Tribal Cuisine Cookbook* for example). The level of transculturation in Indian cuisine also needs some discussion.

This commendable student-led project has been publicized in the local media and has the potential to be relevant to academic research. It will benefit from additional funding and, more importantly, guidance. Engaging with scholars in the area of Indian culinary studies is a critical next step, as is articulating research methods *and*

methodologies. As it stands, the project offers a compelling look at Indian cuisine, and the fact that the three undergraduate students have built it with limited financial support and technical expertise is outstanding indeed.