

**FOOD CULTURE IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: EAST INDIAN IDENTITY
IN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION****Ranjana Kumari***** PhD Scholar, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi***Abstract**

Along with being a cuisine of the restaurant, food is also an identity of a culture. In Trinidad and Tobago, food is an important part of their culture. The colonial history of Trinidad and Tobago has resulted in ethnic and cultural plural societies. These different groups have brought along their traditional food and culture. Food plays an important role in the rituals and customs of East Indians and their diet became a source for identifying and distinguishing between groups. On the other hand, food culture has been globalized through the internet, media and other communication services. The food culture can be defined as practices, attitudes, beliefs, networks, institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Moreover, it also reflects part of the culture of mankind. The paper attempts to investigate the food culture and its' identity of East Indian in the era of globalisation in Trinidad and Tobago.



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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has not only produced many changes in our economy and politics but also changes in our society and culture. Food is a part of the culture as well as the identity of ethnic groups. The process of globalization has been changing the foods are eaten and the ways it's eaten. Further, due to globalisation food cultures are continuously evolving and consequently, these are transformed from their roots and often formed new hybrid food cultures; and thereby, food cultures have been globalized. Further, the globalisation of food has a long history which, began several centuries ago. It has been found that various cultures have incorporated foods that originated at distant places, such as, Sunflower originated in North America however, it



is also produced in Eastern Europe (Brahmam, 2016). Food consumption and its' culture reflect more meaning in the social contexts and individuals own identity through varied social processes connected with the identity, formation of class distinction and religious practice, cultural preferences and nationalism. The preference for culinary also indicates a persons place in society. Further, foods express identities by the creation and recreation of cuisine (Garth, 2013). Besides, food made up of words, memories, stories, people and relationships also represent an anthropological place, such as, *Briyani*, which is famous all over the world identify with Hyderabad *Briyani* from India.

The Caribbean history of colonialism and migration has encouraged a dynamic and diverse form of modernity, which continues to transform with the impact of globalization and migration out of the Caribbean. The people in the Caribbean align themselves with particular foods to claims their identities and thereby, foods are connected with historical, social, demographic and economic factors. The food identities were not so important till the later period of the 20th century however, after faster globalisation since the 1990s there is a rise of renewed curiosity about the food habits and lifestyles of other people.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Trinidad and Tobago due to colonizers, labourers and slaves from different places possess diverse people and varied cultures. This resulted from the many colonizers, as well as labourers and slaves, who were brought to Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean countries. In Trinidad and Tobago Indians, Africans, Amerindians, Europeans and Chinese affect the food culture. The cuisine in T&T is more inspired by the East Indians.

After the emancipation of West Indies slaves during 1834-1840, the British filled the supply of cheap plantation labour under the 'programme of Indentured labour', mainly from India. Most of the immigrants came from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of present-day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Manuel 2000: 319). The importation of East Indian indentured labour to the West Indies continued through the latter half of the nineteenth century, was interrupted in 1914, stopped in 1917, and legally abolished in 1920. During this period, the plantation of British Guiana, alone, received some 240,000 men, women, and children. Another 143,900 were brought to Trinidad and thousands more to other islands (Roberts 1957). The indenture system had retained several restrictive conditions. In fact, for all practical purposes, the Indian



migrants virtually entered into a system of bonded labour with its provisions of jail sentences for 'breaches of labour contracts'. Nevertheless, the majority of the Indian immigrants preferred to make Trinidad their permanent home after the completion of the contract period of indenture, (Brereton 1974: 32-33). Because, most of them decided to exchange the passage to India for a grant of land, for as Cudjoe observes with the experience of many East Indians people who exchanged their views that there was no home to which they could return (Cudjoe 1985: 19). The first few generations of East Indian labourers tended to remain concentrated in agricultural areas specific sugar belt areas even after indentureship. Living in their insular, impoverished rural communities and avoiding schools for fear of proselytization, most colonial-era Indo-Trinidadians less participated in the mainstream of social and political life (Manuel 2000: 319-320).

According to Kelvin Singh, "geographical and social distance from the other races gave psychological protection to the majority of the Indians (Singh 1974: 49). Morton Klass observes that the retention of cultural elements from India to Trinidad have been located in kinship system, village structure and religious rituals (Klass 1961), and in clothing, food and language (Lowenthal, 1972). On the other ways, they were maintaining their cultural heritage which was depended on the arrival of each new ship that has acquaintances, tidings from home regions, or knowledgeable individuals such as *pundits* or musicians who could enhance local culture and renew the gradually fraying ties to the homeland. But, end of the indentureship, these people faced lots of problems to renew their culture due to the absence of direct contact with India and unprecedented isolation, which led to even more committed to maintaining their cultural heritage.

Trinidad & Tobago's historic diet depended on natural grown less diverse foods in the small islands. However, comparatively more diverse vis-à-vis size of the islands. In early periods settlers imported food items such as plantains, pineapples, sweet potatoes, maize (corn), cassava (yucca), mangoes, papaya, bananas, coconuts and beans. Besides, here food options were few local animals and seafood in the area, including flying fish, bonito, kingfish, conch, lobster, and crab.

The first major change in the historic diet came with the arrival of the Spanish, who brought new foods, spices and animals. Thus, the Spanish introduced were their spices, animals



including cattle, fruits including breadfruit, oranges, and lemons, their vegetables, and rice. Later after the British took over the islands in about 1800 brought with them new spices, animals, fruits, and vegetables and continue to influence the diet. Besides, the British were more influential in other ways by expanding the slave trade. They tried to minimise their food expenses on slaves from Africa by more use of rice in the diet. Along with rice, maize, beans and potatoes were also important foods. But, later when the Indians arrived in the islands they brought their traditional spices, foods, varying East Indians local cuisine, complete with traditional seasonings and methods of cooking, such as curries. According to Singh, after the arrival of Indian Indentured Immigrants British realised that unless Indians provided the food that they were accustomed to in India, they may suffer malnutrition. Hence, large quantities of foodstuff reached in the colony, such as rice, split peas, ghee, and curry spices, all originally brought exclusively for the Indians and also found in shops. The Indian food soon formed a foundational part of the national cuisine.

At the depot for incoming Indians (up to 1917) at Nelson Island, provisions for the transients consisted of rice, pumpkin, freshly-slaughtered mutton, and chapattis. Most estates allowed the Indians provision grounds to supplement the rations. By the 1880s, East Indians settled on Crown Land after their contracts expired, frequently in swampy areas, especially not suitable for sugarcane cultivation, however, capable of supporting other crops, particularly rice. The immigrants grew an abundance of vegetables, root crops and milk in the island. Mangoes were a key ingredient, originating of course in India, as were several varieties of squash, including *jhingee* and *lowkie*. By infusing the bare ingredients of the commissariat issue with curry and adding the bounty of the vegetable gardens, wholesome *talkarees* were created. In Trinidad and Tobago, commonly Hindi words have been used, which indicates kitchen and food. In T&T over the period *roti*, *doubles*, *saheena*, *katchowrie*, *barah*, *anchar* and *pholourie* are consumed by a wide cross-section of the society and have become household names. In T&T East Indians dishes are part of their national cuisine. The popular East Indians sweet and spicy dishes, as well as common fruits and vegetables which are part of T&T, are *Khurma*, *Peera*, *Ladoo*, *Goolgoolah*, *Baigan*, *Aloo*, *Damadol* (Tomato) *Dhal*, etc. In U.P. and Bihar *roti*, *bhat* (boiled rice), *dal* (lentils), *bhaji* (spinach), *chatni*, *achar or kuchala* (pickles) are daily items of food; and vegetables like *jhingee*, *karaili*, and *sahijan* are widely used. *Karhi*, *dalpuri*, *khir*



(rice pudding), *dahi* (yoghurt), *sohari* and *tarkari* (vegetables) like *aloo* (Irish potato), *lauki* (squash), *murai* (radish), *baigan* (brinjal), etc., are special dishes. Mustard oil (*sarso tel*) and *ghee* are also used for cooking in affluent homes. In 1858 the use of biscuit in place of *chura* (flaked rice) and *chana* (gram) was said to be the cause of bowel trouble among Indian immigrants on the ships. Things have changed a good deal since then and *chura* is now available only in some villages in South Trinidad, but *chana* continues to hold its own. Old Indian sweets like *laddu*, *jilebi* (jalebi) *khurma* and *gulab-jamun* sell in some markets and there are a few *halwais* (makers of Indian sweets) of the old type” (La Guerre 1974: 16-17). “*Mashalas* (spices) like *hardi* (turmeric, called saffron in Trinidad), *jeera* (cumin seed), *methi*, *dhania* (coriander seed), long (cloves), *sonf* (aniseed), *elayachi* (cardamom), *dalchini* (cinnamon), *mangarail*, etc., are also sold in some markets. Utensils like *lota* (waterpot, usually of brass), *tharia* (plate), *bati* (cup), *kalasa* (pot), *balti* (bucket), etc., are even now used, but gradually china crockery is taking place of brass utensils and in many homes, some of these are needed in rituals and ceremonies only. Till recently a *lota* was needed for Hindu witnesses to take the oath in local courts. The *chulha* (earthen cooking furnace) is used on the occasion of *bhandara* (community feeding)” (La Guerre 1974: 17). Roti was brought to the islands by the East Indians contract labourers, as early as 1840 and it is very popular in T&T. Although roti is East Indians in origin, it has been localised as a Caribbean dish. Today, roti, doubles and other Indo-Trinidadian dishes have spread to Europe and America through the diaspora and remain as wildly popular as ever as well as Caribbean’s/East Indian’s dishes are quite different from traditional East Indians. The cultural fusion and the flagship of Indo-Trinidadian a food is the ubiquitous doubles, which was born in the 1940s when an enterprising vendor named Mr Ali combined curried chickpeas (*channa*) with two fried dough slices (*bara*) and gave Trinidad and Tobago its staple fast food.

Further, in the era of the internet, media, TV shows on food, etc. these foods have been integrated globally and linked to distant cultures of the world. However, in the past century, food has been continuously changed in multiple ways. In the process, Indian foods and other ethnic foods gained a larger market, while outside influence has altered the traditional foods. Today it is common to see a traditional fish or dish as a whole covered in an Indian curry sauce. Today many ethnic American, French, Italian, and Chinese foods restaurants can be found



along with Indian ethnic foods in Trinidad and Tobago.

FOOD CULTURE AND EAST INDIANS IDENTITY

Food shapes the identity of the people and gives meaning to the culture, like language. The nations such as Italy is associated with *pizza* and *pasta*, Korea with *kimchi*, Ireland with potatoes, Kashmir with *wazwan*. The foods and individual taste depend on the surrounding society, ecology influence and easily availability of commodities. Thus, national identity can be linked to food. Moreover, ethnic identities usually are maintained and expressed through the choice of diets. Also, the acceptance of food from other cultures strengthen ties with those cultures (Bell and Valentine, 1997). This can be easily observed in the Trinidad and Tobago cuisines, which are ethnically marked. In T&T stewed chicken, white rice, red beans, fried plantains, and homemade ginger beer are Creole dishes. Here, curry chicken, potatoes, *channa* (chickpeas), white rice, and *roti* are Indian food, and *chowmein* is a typical Chinese food. However, together all of these foods are regarded as national dishes of T&T. Thus, Trinidadians ethnically mixed-up like *callaloo*, typical Tobago meal a kind of soup made from dasheen leaves and containing crab. Thereby, food culture is related to many aspects which are defined as the identity of any ethnic groups. Here, this section deals with some aspects of the food cultural identity of the East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago.

Caste and Religion: The food expresses the pattern of social relations. It suggests the degree of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and relations across the boundaries (Andrew, 2016). In T&T as in India, Brahmins are generally vegetarians, many even don't eat eggs. The Shudras are usually non-vegetarian, such as eggs, mutton, pork, beef, etc. The pork is considered inferior to beef and therefore, lower castes among Shudras eat pork. The Beefeaters are generally the lowest among all castes (Srinivas, 1965). However, it has been observed that there was also flexibility in traditional relationships between caste status and dietary practices, such as Muslims and Hindus usually avoid pork (Debysingh, 1986). The lower castes due to acute poverty could not afford to be too choosy and thereby, polluted meat-eaters (Lowenthal, 1972). The Indian while crossing seas they had community dining on the boats. Also in the plantations, the same type of manual work done by members of all castes therefore, the Indians in the early period could not maintain the high and low status and 'touch-me-not' of the society of their origin (Jha, 1974). But, despite the dissolution of castes and religions, caste-based



discrimination, an ingredient of personality could survive (Lowenthal, 1972). However, the Hindu food taboos gradually relaxed in Trinidad, but many were still not eating beef, pork and chicken. The Muslims were also repugnant in consuming pork and alcohol (Niehoff, 1960). Despite these facts, substantial changes occurred in dietary habits due to overall integration into a Trinidad cultural milieu and environment. However, side by side, there has been the persistence of certain meat avoidances, especially beef and pork, which suggests the strong cultural distinctiveness of the Indians (Debysingh, 1986). Today, the caste and religions of East Indians are also affected by globalisation, mainly in urban areas. Many of the East Indians convert their religion and adopt the Christian's religion. Yet, the rural areas of Trinidad and Tobago maintain their castes and religions.

Rituals and Traditions: Rituals can create a sacred and meaningful space within an everyday space. The inclusion of foods into ritual fill the ordinary space with they have the potential to be extraordinary. Every day or ritualistic foods take new interpretations whenever they are taken out of their original context. The movement of these foods manipulates their use and meaning, as well as the identity such as, *kheer* and *puri*, which is very auspicious ritualistic food for East Indians.

In the era of globalization, a new global food system has emerged due to a combination of many forces. This system has better distribution capabilities and foods change contexts at a fast rate. The new foods in the modern world can be luxuries, curiosities, necessities, or status enhancers. Thus, modernization of ritualistic and everyday foods help in understanding the meanings of food change as they are distributed. Moreover, these can also be viewed as culinary nationalism which claims ownership of culture and promotion of national identity (Cwiertka, 2008).

In Trinidad and Tobago at ceremonial occasions, society-wide ethos valorised with foods. Here Hindu marriage ceremony has been the most important ceremony of the East Indians. The rituals start with "Friday night" or "*matikhor* night" and with the touch of five grains (rice, wheat, green *urad dal*, *channa*, *jow*) by five women which is used in a food ceremony. After this prepares for the "*hardi* ceremony" in which bride and groom are smeared with the paste of grated turmeric root and oil in their place, which cleanses impurities and makes skin glow for the wedding ceremony. The Saturday night is known as the "Cooking night." To bid



farewell to their single life, both women and men gather to cook dinner and also prepare for the next day. In the middle of dancing and festivity, young and old women chat with each other and also, they peel and chop potatoes, *chataigne*, *caraille* and pumpkin. The big *paratha rotis* are prepared onto enormous *tawahs*. Apart from food preparation, Lawa (rice paddy) is heated on a flame by a female relative, usually a sister of the father of the bride, which is an important ritual. Simultaneously at the groom's house also "cooking night" takes place. Rice is celebrated as a symbol of prosperity in Hinduism, since rice holds great spiritual and ritual significance in Hinduism as it is a staple food of Indians. Moreover, rice is revered as a potent symbol of auspiciousness, prosperity and fertility. Further, during a wedding, rice is often sprinkled over the newlywed couple to bless them with a prosperous married life. Also, it is poured into the wedding fire by the bride and bridegroom symbolically to ward off the demons. After the completion of the married couple also offer rice to their patron household deity and sprinkle it around the house by the new bride to secure blessings. After the wedding, the first meal is prepared *kheer-puri* by *dhulahan* at home.

In the Hindu ceremony of *Annaprashana*, rice plays an important role since it is the first solid food put into the baby's mouth when the baby grows sixth or seventh month. Simple boiled rice or a sweet rice pudding called *kheer* is prepared by the mother or grandmother of the child under the chanting of appropriate Vedic mantras by the priest.

The legacy from their place of origin has gradually disappeared due to westernisation and globalisation. However, some of the sixteen *samskaras* (sacraments) like those connected with birth (*chhathi* and *barahi*) and death (*shraddha*) and *pitritarpan* are observed in many Hindu homes. Even *mundan* (hair-cutting ceremony of a boy at the age of three or five), the *janeu* or *yagnopavita* (sacred thread or initiation ceremony) and *gurumukh* (giving of the sacred mantra by the *guru* to the *chela* or disciple) is performed (Jha, 1974). In every ritual of Hinduism, rice plays an important role, made a sacred rather than staple food. But other grains are also important like *channa* and *urad dal*. In *pitripujan* ritual, *barah* (made with *urad dal*) is a very important food. Therefore, East Indians made an identity in Trinidad and Tobago through its ritualistic food which is ordinary food made to extraordinary food.

Puja and Festivals: In Trinidad, as in Northern India, a few devotees of Shiva or Vishnu, usually of the higher caste, have the Shiva-linga (stone emblem of Shiva) or the marble image



of some God installed in the house and they worship these deities daily; special *pujas* are, however, done on the occasion of Shivaratri or in honour of the two most popular incarnations of Vishnu, Rama and Krishna.

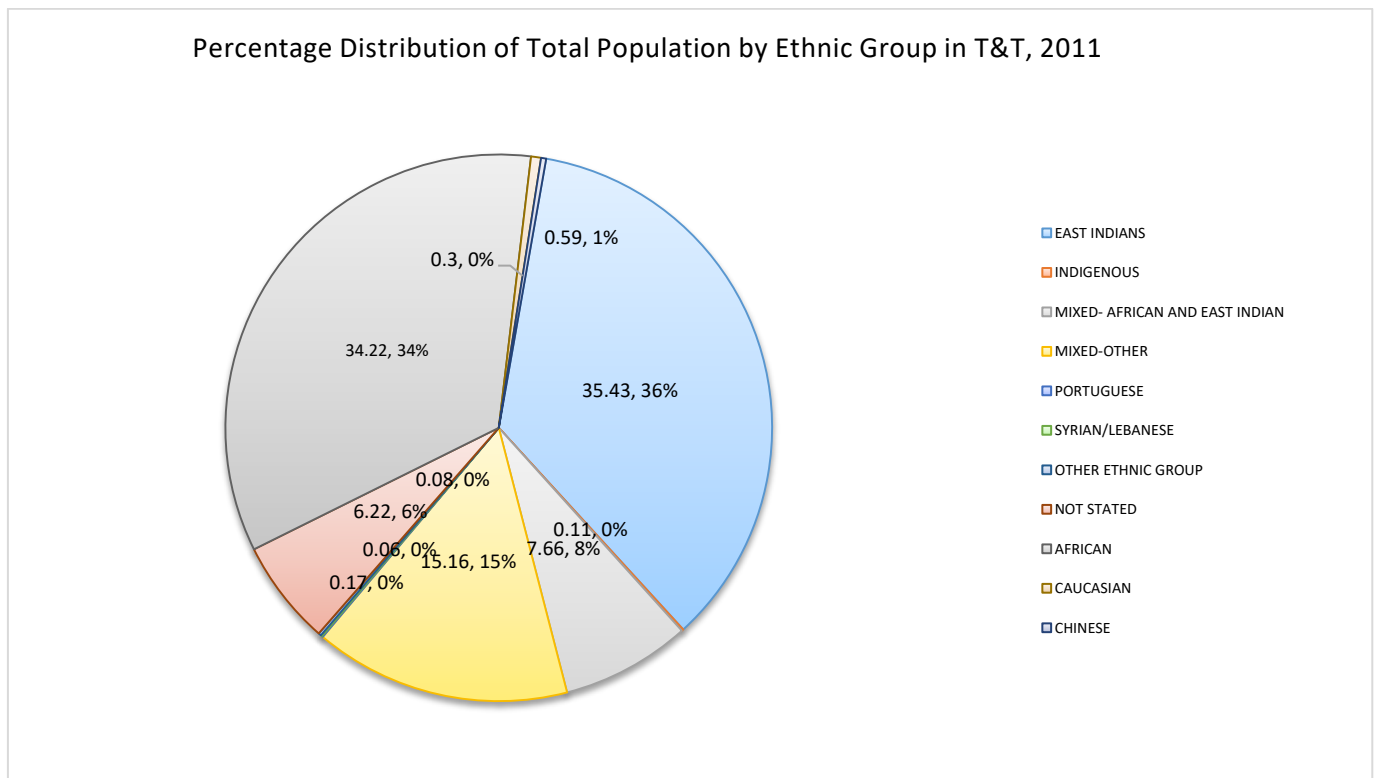
In Trinidad, Diwali is the most popular festival for Hindus. This festival symbolises a triumph of good over evil and light over darkness. The celebration of this festival has transcended beyond Hindus and usually celebrated also by other religions and ethnic population. The celebrations of Diwali have been also extended to homes and communities other than temples. Moreover, organizations have also embraced this festival with special events held. It is a national holiday and a great occasion for the exchange of Indian sweets and visits (Jha, 1974). The Hindu Community abstain from eating non-vegetarian foods during this festival since it is a sacred time for them. During Diwali they usually eat— *roti*, *channa* and potato, chataigne, pumkin, curried mango, curried bodi, spinach, rice, dhal. Appetizers foods like—*phoulorie*, *saheena*, *kachori*. Along with these foods, they also prepare sweets such as *khurma*, *gulab jamun*, *Barfi*, sweet rice, jalebi, and ladoo. Also, they use nuts, raisins, saffron, cardamom, nutmeg, rosewater, and dried fruits to add flavour. On this auspicious occasion, sugar and milk are considered *sattvic* food.

Phagwa, the festival of colours, is also an important Hindu festival in Trinidad. However, Africans are also involved with great enthusiasm in this festival. In this festival, they celebrate the same as in U.P. and West Bihar by playing *dholak*, *jhal* or *majira* and harmonium and singing *Hori* or *Kabira* songs. The Hindus in Trinidad also enjoy traditional foods such as vegetarian, non-vegetarian and sweets.

Ramanavami is another important Hindu festival of Trinidad in the month of *Chaita* (March-April) in which *rot* (made with wheat flour, jiggery and ghee) and *ladoo* is the main *bhog*. Janmastami is celebrated in *Bhadava* (about August) in which, *Makhanmishri* is the main *bhog*. Shivaratri is celebrated in *Magha* (February-March), in which milk with *Bhang* is the main *bhog*. In T&T the most popular *puja* is *Satyanarayan* perhaps as popular as in the rural areas of U.P. and Bihar in which, whole-wheat *halwa* used as the main *Prasad*. Thus, foods play an important role in Hindus' *pujas* and festivals, and through these celebrations, they maintain their ethnic identity and culture even in the globalised world. In Muslims' festivals foods play a vital role and through this, they also maintain their ethnic identity.

Social Power: Since the past few decades Indo-Trinidadian have started to participate much more actively in their countries’ mainstream economic, political, and social-cultural lives. Partly by virtue of high birth rates, they have also come to constitute the largest ethnic group in the country and the changing population pattern of the country. East Indians and Africans are the largest ethnic groups in T&T. The population of East Indians accounted for 35.4% and Africans 34.2%, and the remaining populations are other ethnic groups in T&T (Figure-1). After their long presence and large population on the island Indian eating habits recognised nationally.

Figure-1



Source: http://redatam.org/redtto/census/TT2011/TT2011_demog_report.pdf

Communications: Food play important role in somebody present himself and also as a means for cultural exchange. Moreover, it communicates a set of symbolic values such as economic, social, political, religious, ethnic, and aesthetic. Besides, food transports the culture, traditions and identity of a group. It sets the initial means to enter into contact with different cultures. In T&T during Carnival people meet with each other in the street and eat local foods such as Creole and curry dishes of deer, iguana, and opossum. In Holi festivals also Carnival



atmosphere is observed. On Christmas also people with their family go for dinner and eat a variety of foods, such as Ham, turkey, beans, pork, *pastelles*, and fruitcakes. Thus dining in T&T have the purpose of socialisation than eating. Food build relations, equality, intimacy, and solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Food is not only playing an important role in their country but also in the world. In Trinidad and Tobago, East Indian's food culture plays an important role in identifying and distinguishing among groups through their rituals, customs and festivals celebrations. Roti, *barra* and curry are the most popular East Indians dishes not only in the Caribbean but also in America, Europe and other countries where East Indians lives. Rice is the national food of Trinidad and Tobago. The food culture of Trinidad and Tobago has not only been greatly influenced by the Amerindians, African, Europeans and the Chinese but also by the East Indians. So, the food reflects part of the culture of any ethnic groups. However, in the globalization era, the bond between food habits and culture is continuously evolving and leading to the structural transformation of the country. There is a major role played by the internet, media, T.V. shows on food and other communications services. Therefore, East Indian foods do not lose their identity in Trinidad and Tobago; it merely changes sometimes for the better, including new and more different ingredients and practices. Last but not the least, food communicate different types of class through consumption.

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