



The migrant suitcase: Food, belonging and commensality among Indian migrants in The Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

The Migrant Suitcase is a metaphor to understand how social remittances are taken, brought back and transformed. Migrants bring with them different cultural norms, food and eating practices. In this paper I review the concept of social remittances in light of material culture, food and eating practices and examine the linkages between food, belonging, commensality and care and then provide empirical examples from the suitcases of Indian migrants. This paper is based on 30 in-depth interviews conducted among Indian migrants living in The Netherlands. The main themes from the data included food from home, cooking practices, food sharing and family relationships. Migrants' sense of belonging was intrinsically related to the food they brought from home and the memories it generates. The practices of cooking and sensorial experiences surrounding them demonstrate the place and home making processes. Commensality with co-ethnics led to a sense of community and stronger community bonds. Commensality with other non-Indian groups was perceived to be problematic. The exchanges of food, eating practices, and care create a sense of 'co-presence' in lives migrants and their transnational families.

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1. Introduction

Can you recollect which food item(s) you miss the most when you are away from 'home'? Do you carry this food or ingredients for the food with you when you leave on a long-distance trip? Do you feel happy to eat something from home while living in a foreign country? The smell, the taste, the texture may bring back memories of times past or simply the normalcy of the sense of home. On the contrary you may also bring back food from your travels to share with family and friends the experience of the time spent in a different cultural setting. As a migrant, you may also bring food from home to reconnect fellow immigrants with the sense of home. In this paper I review the concept of social remittances in light of material culture, food and eating practices and examine the linkages between food, belonging, commensality and care and then provide empirical examples from the suitcases of Indian migrants in The Netherlands. The central research question is to examine

how the travel of food, food practices and commensality reflect the flows of norms, practices, identities and social capital between India and the Netherlands.

The Indian Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs indicates that nearly 25 million Indians constitute the Indian Diaspora. More than 4% of the tertiary educated leave India for other countries (Bhargava, Docquier, & Moullan, 2011). In the Netherlands the flow of Indian migrants increased considerably with the introduction of the Kennismigrant visa (highly-skilled migrant visa) at the end of 2004. The Kennismigrant visa can be granted to 'labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earning an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance' (ACVZ, 2004). Indian diaspora has grown considerably with traditional destination countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Gulf. The Netherlands is relatively a new destination, with most flows linked to highly-skilled migration (Kōu & Bailey, 2014). Reports from the Immigration and Naturalization Department (IND) show that India, USA and Japan were the top three countries, in that order, applying for the Kennismigrant visa from 2005 onwards (IND, 2012). According to the population projections of Statistics Netherlands, the inflow of labour migrants from Asian

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countries will continue and increase, from India and China in particular, as they will remain the largest pools of highly-skilled migrants in the world (Nicolaas, 2009).

1.1. Social and reverse remittances

Up to now, studies examining the exchanges between migrants and their family have only used the lens of economic remittances (Jayaraman, Choong, & Kumar, 2012; Lakshmi, 2011; Singh, 2010). I am not undermining the importance of economic remittances: it is currently much more than the development assistance being offered, and forms less than 10 per cent of the gross domestic product in India. Kapur (2004) terms this change as the new development mantra that national governments are using to pursue diasporic investments (Dekkers & Rutten, 2011). Events such as Pravasi Bartiya Divas are initiatives by the governments both at the state and central levels to attract diasporic capital and investments (Dickinson & Bailey, 2007; Mani & Varadarajan, 2005). India is now one of the top recipients of economic remittances: the change has been remarkable – in 1990 India received \$2.1 billion and two decades later, nearly \$69 billion (World Bank, 2012). Financial remittances have surpassed both foreign direct investment and foreign aid to India (Afram, 2011). Kapur (2004) observes that social remittances are playing a larger role in reshaping Indian economic policies. Levitt (2001), who coined the term social remittances, calls attention to the fact that in addition to money, migrants also export ideas and behaviours. She observed four types of social remittances: norms, practices, identities and social capital. Much of the work examining the flow of social remittances has seen it as being unidirectional towards the sending countries. Extending the work on social remittances, Mazzucato (2011) introduced the concept of 'reverse remittances'. In her study on Ghanaian migration to The Netherlands, she finds reverse remittances in terms of services rendered, such as child care, investment in properties and specifically the organization of the papers for regularizing stay in The Netherlands. Suksomboon (2008) notes that for non-migrants in Thailand, social remittances bring changes in their social values and lifestyles. She also argues that investment of remittances into family rituals and ceremonies leads to greater social capital for migrants and their families. Social and reverse remittances are inherently cultural and are marked by power relations (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). These power relations determine who are able to send, who is to receive and what needs to be reciprocated for the remittances received.

As part of this project we also explore the use of economic remittances (Mahapatro, Bailey, James, & Hutter, 2015) at the household level in India. Analysing data from National Sample Survey 64th round-2007-08, we find that households receiving international remittances use it mainly for food, education and health care. From a purely economic perspective these expenditures can be seen as unproductive investments, but from a social remittances perspective it is investment in human capital and improvement in the living situation of the family left behind. Economic remittances and gifts act as a measure to substitute care that the migrant could have provided if he/she had co-resided with the family. Care giving and receiving are also the new motives for international migration. Indian parents often migrate internationally to provide care for their new born grandchildren (Deepak, 2005; Glick & Van Hook, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005). Thus is this paper the focus is largely on reverse remittances in the form of norms, practices and social capital as reflected in the food, food practices and commensality which generate a sense of belonging among the Indian migrants in The Netherlands.

1.2. Food and belonging

Immigrant foodscapes (following Appadurai, 1996) need to be examined not just from the consumption perspective but from a globalized perspective where the connections between producers and consumers are recognized, the varied positions of the people involved in the chain are critically understood and the multiplicities of location are mapped. Building on Appadurai's work, Ferrero (2002: 196) defines foodscapes as 'an analysis that deals with transnational food practices and their dynamics that usually characterise and potentially subvert consumer societies'. Such foodscapes allow immigrants to reconstitute their identity by importing, preparing, selling, sharing and consuming food from the 'home' land. In their study of South Asian immigrant women in Canada, Dyck and Dossa (2007) found that the women used their food practices to delineate a healthy space for their families. Poros (2001) observes how family ties and migration networks extend across continents and aid in bringing families and foodscapes together. The different meanings given to migrant foodscapes also change with time. Thoms (2011) documents how Italian cuisine in Europe went from being known as a migrant food to more of a lifestyle cuisine in Europe and North America. Similarly Asian food has also moved from being the food of the 'other' to be widely accepted as speciality cuisine in the western world. In his work in Belize, Wilk (1999) found that globalization actually produces local cuisines, as the concept of 'Belizean food' was created by the transnational flows of ideas and people between Belize and the USA: the migrants came back to set up restaurants where they served the food they remembered from their childhood.

Anthropological and sociological literature has already acknowledged the importance of food and consumption with regard to identity constitution. More recent work that links food with the immigrant space examines the representation of food and diaspora. In her book *Culinary Fictions*, Mannur (2009) studies the representation of food and the cultural production of the South Asian American Diaspora through cookbooks, short stories, film and television. Black (2010) examines the work of Madhur Jaffery to reveal how the cookbook has become a genre that aids in the translation of not only food but also the cultural practices of diverse cultural groups. Both Mannur's (2009) and Black's (2010) work highlight how Indian food and food practices were presented in palpable form to a western audience thus reducing the potential for a culture shock.

In an extensive review of immigrant entrepreneurship, Rath and Kloosterman (2000) find that nearly 60 per cent of the businesses are in the field of wholesale, retail and restaurants. In her study on Chinese restaurants in Germany, Leung (2003) reports how the migrant entrepreneurs relied on the Chinese community for support to optimize their businesses. The concentration of immigrants in ethnic food and restaurant business is also an indicator of discrimination immigrants face in the job market. In many instances lack of access into the formal labour market pushes immigrants to turn entrepreneurs with small and medium scale enterprises. Various studies have also documented the cultural role of the migrant shops as places where information is exchanged, social ties are maintained and strengthened and a sense of home is imagined (Caldwell, 2002; Mankekar, 2002; Visser, Bailey, & Meijering, 2015). In her ethnography on undocumented workers, Kim (2009) observes the emergence of fictive kinships to overcome loneliness and marginalization during the course of working in an immigrant restaurant. Mintz and Du Bois (2002) further emphasize how food and eating practices have both inclusionary and exclusionary effects on groups. Food is also used as a mechanism to connect to the immigrant identity with a purpose of maintaining and furthering links with the 'home' land (Bajic-Hajdukovic, 2013;

Johnston & Longhurst, 2012; Law, 2001; Raman, 2011). Raman (2011) reflects on the need to look beyond consumption and examine the linkages between home, home-food and belonging, in order to truly understand the constitution of the migrant self. The demarcation of 'home food' versus 'outside/other food' suggests the exclusionary effects of food practices. Pilcher (2016) in an extensive review of food studies and food history, references Mary Douglass's work on purity and contamination as drawing boundaries on what can be shared between groups. Similarly religion, caste, food norms and taboos can also lead to exclusionary practices with both co-ethnics and others leading to selective commensality.

1.3. Commensality and care

Commensality is broadly defined as "eating with others" or literally as eating at the same table (Fischler, 2011). In the transnational context these 'others' could be family, co-ethnics, friends, and colleagues. In this context eating and sharing food with others is seen as an essential part of feeling a sense of community. Gardner (2002) studying British Sylhetis, describes the commensal activities following the burial in Bangladesh provide the living kin with the social capital of having completed their duties towards the dead family member. Fog Olwig (2002) examines a wedding, on the Caribbean Island of Nevis, where transnational family members congregate and cook together and share this food during the wedding feast. This cooking and sharing is display of family solidarity among those who are globally dispersed. In addition to commensality, reverse remittances of material culture in the form of food, religious artefacts, clothes and other personal/familial objects reflect the objectification of norms, values and practices (Miller, 1998). Following this line of thinking from Miller, food and eating practices objectify norms of what food can be exchanged, and the values migrants and their kin attach to the process of making, sharing and consuming the food. Practices such as fasting, food avoidance and ceremonial consumption of foods in the transnational family space or in the communal space with co-ethnic migrants creates this sense of belonging to the country or even to specific regions. The celebration of Hindu festivals (David, 2012), participation in cultural festivals (Chacko & Menon, 2013) and initiatives to organize under a broader imagined diasporic identity (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Van Den Bos & Nell, 2006) are examples of a place-making process that helps to enhance the sense of belonging. Meijering and van Hoven (2003) report on how highly-skilled Indians in Germany used cooking Indian food as a way of socializing and retaining this bond with the homeland. In a recent paper (Visser et al., 2015) on Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands we see a gendered connection with food. Women in the study used the cooking and sharing of traditional Ghanaian food as way to help the less fortunate among the migrants. Men, on the other hand, saw food and cooking as way of socializing. Together with food, faith and a connection to the community were perceived to be central to their social wellbeing. In an earlier paper (Bailey, Channakki, & Hutter, 2009) I have discussed the place-making process of migrants from Karnataka in Goa through the use of language, sharing food, organizing communal events, material culture and building temples. The place-making process empowered the migrants and made them feel safe within the migrant settlements.

2. Data and methods

This paper is part of a boarder study, which examines the flow of norms, practices and social capital between India and The Netherlands. The project was carried out over two years (2013–2015). This mixed method study included first a

quantitative component where we analysed the use of remittances among emigrant households in India (see Mahapatro et al., 2015). In the second part we chose to do an in-depth-qualitative study among Indian migrants (from Kerala and Karnataka) living in The Netherlands. The empirical data presented in this paper come from the qualitative study and the focus in this paper is primarily on reverse remittances of food, food practices and commensality, which contribute to a sense of belonging experienced by Indian immigrants in The Netherlands.

2.1. Participant recruitment

Participants in this study were purposively selected to include a broad range of occupations and durations of stay. The two main groups included were migrants from the states Kerala and Karnataka in India. These groups were chosen as they have diasporic associations in The Netherlands. Kerala has a rich history of migration and is one of the front runners in skilled and semi-skilled emigration. Karnataka and specifically Bangalore is the hub for Information Technology and most migration takes place from this region. Participants were recruited from Groningen, Amsterdam, Amstelveen, Enschede, Eindhoven, The Hague, Rotterdam and Maastricht. Participant recruiting strategies included snowball sampling, advertisements on Facebook sites and through events of the diasporic organizations. The interviews were conducted between from June to December 2014. Participant recruitment continued up to saturation and in total 30 interviews were conducted. The age range was from 25 to 50 years, most of the participants were married and at the time of the interview six were un-married. Among the participants there were only two who had European spouses. We had a larger representation of men as primary migrants. Only six women in the group were currently employed. Those who were working had found work opportunities post-migration. The main occupational groups included IT specialists, Scientists, Engineers, Banking professionals and Nurses. A larger proportion of the participants were Hindus, followed by Christians and we had only one Muslim participant. At the time of the interview most of the participants had Indian Nationality except three who had stayed for more than 10 years and had taken Dutch citizenship. The Dutch law in the years 2013–15 stipulated a continuous stay of five years (in 2016 it was changed to seven years) and successful completion of the integration exam to be able apply for Dutch nationality. Few of our participants had completed the five years term and were in the process of applying for a Dutch Nationality. The years of residence ranged from two to 20 years. Among the married participants most of them had children in the age range of one year to 15 years. Except one participant most of the children in these families were born in The Netherlands. Migration histories also varied across participants. Some participants had lived previously for short periods in France, USA, Dubai, Germany and Japan. Most of the participants had come from middleclass families and had siblings also living outside India.

2.2. In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are best suited to explore participant's perceptions, migration histories, and relationships with family members and the exchange of remittances. Interviews also provided the space for the participants to reflect on their remittance behaviours. Interviews were conducted in English, Kannada and Malayalam. Participants from Karnataka switched between Kannada and English during the interview. Work related talk was always in English and home and personal life was in Kannada. Only one interview was conducted in Malayalam to check if there was any difference in the data gathered when interviews were

conducted in English or the native language. The interviews ranged from 40 to 90 min. Most interviews were conducted face to face and a few through Skype. The semi-structured interview guide included topics on personal background, family, remittances to India, and remittances from India, non-economic remittances in the form of norms, values and practices.

2.3. Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed and translated (where required to English). The analysis has followed the principles of grounded theory and derived a range of codes, categories and themes. The interview transcriptions were analysed using qualitative data software Atlas-ti™. The first cycle of coding involved identifying both inductive and deductive codes and in the second cycle the codes were grouped together in code families. The main code families discussed in this paper include: food from home, cooking practices, food sharing and family relationships. In addition to the interview data I also present a reflexive case study to describe the linkages between food and care giving.

2.4. Ethical clearance

The fieldwork was given clearance by Ethics Review committee at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences. All interviewees gave their consent for the interviews. In the face-to-face interviews a consent form was signed. In the skype interviews the consent form was read out to the participants. Most identifying information has been removed from the quotes presented in the paper. All names used for the quotes are pseudonyms.

3. Results

The main themes presented in his paper include perceptions towards food and belonging, food practices such as cooking and its linkages to belonging and practices of commensality with co-ethnics and others. Towards the end a reflexive account is presented as a case study of a food item that objectifies the emotions of care giving and receiving, the multiple actors involved and the meanings this exchange generates for the migrants and their family members. Empirical material is presented in the forms of quotes with a brief contextual introduction. The findings are then discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and linked to previous literature on the topic. The aim here is to examine participant's experiences in relation to food, food practices and commensality to get a deeper understanding of care exchanges between migrants and their families back home.

3.1. Food and belonging

The foodscapes of Indian migrants include discussions of what they brought from home, who gave it to them, the meanings they attached to these food items and family relationships involved in this exchange. The focus here is on the different perceptions of belongingness and the sense of home as experienced by participants. Food in different forms, cooked, preserved and uncooked (rice and pulses), was common feature in the things that were brought from home. Unaware of what was available in the Netherlands on their first journey from India participants recollected how they had brought many basic foods from home. Participants who have stayed in The Netherlands for more than a decade recalled travelling to neighbouring countries such as UK or France to buy spices and snacks. With the growing Indian diaspora there have also emerged many ethnic shops where participants can purchase different Indian spices. The burgeoning market has led to

online platforms where Indian foods, cereals, spices and pulses are packaged and sold both for daily consumptions and for festive occasions such as Diwali. As [Rath and Kloosterman \(2000\)](#) observe the expansion of the diaspora creates space for small entrepreneurs to create niche stores. In the Dutch context it has to be noted that some of the spices and products were still accessible through shops that catered to Indonesian, Surinamese and Chinese diasporic groups (see [Schrover, Mestdag, Otterloo, Van, & Zeegers, 2005](#); [Van Otterloo, 2002](#)). The quotes below from **Aruna** and **Vidya**, both originally from Kerala and have lived in The Netherlands for more than five years, show this change in what they brought from India in the past and how it has changed over a period of time.

Aruna: I won't say typical south Indian, but I like cooking very authentic food, South Indian food. For me, it is very important to have curry leaves in our cooking and that was never available. I used to go to London to buy curry leaves. Ya now we have like 4–5 Indian grocery shops. Everything is available. Those days even the spices, and all that was very, very difficult.

Vidya: I took all the dal and everything 5 kilos of rice; you know the typical Kerala rice. You can't find it may be everywhere so I took the rice. The bag was full. Then ya some pickles. Pickles always I think that still I take and then homemade pickles especially. Some dried meat sometimes. Ya pickles always. And ya the first time it was full groceries, and then it was so funny like all that chili powder and the spices, spices now are available here as well.

However spice preparations, pickles and snacks prepared by family members were more valued and could not be replaced by the food items commercially available. Food prepared by family which could be preserved over a longer period of time helped participants to conjure a sense of home. This sense of home would entail memories of eating the food as a child, or during short stays back home and the people with whom they shared this food. **Varun** is from Karnataka and lives with his wife and children in The Netherlands. As his spouse is Dutch they alternate between Indian and Dutch food. The spice mix his mother makes is central to his idea of food from India. The use of this spice in his cooking is his way of place-making in a household that combines two cultures and two different foodscapes. These spice mixes were also practical solutions for those men who could not cook. **Charan** in his quote talks about how the sambhar powder and the linked knowledge on how to use and prepare it was passed on to him by his sister before he left for The Netherlands. These spice-mixes and related intrinsically to the people involved and the emotional labour involved in this process. In line with Miller's (1993) work on the life of objects, these food items objectify the care norms and values remitted by family in the home country.

Varun: ummm some spices, some food, some very specific things of my family actually. My family uses specific types of spices, where they make specific chili powder and add different things and make this very specific spice, that is specific to my family, what else. I use (the spices) I do whenever, Indian cooking is very time consuming (..) Whenever I miss something (I cook), when I have the time and energy for it, yes definitely.

Charan: They had given food stuff and all saying you can eat for four five days ... apart from that what else they had given ... they prepared some nice food. Like snacks chakkli, kodbole like that they prepared and gave. They prepared sambar powder and gave.

I: did they teach you how to prepare sambar ? R: my sister told me everything. It is easy Take a cooker and put everything and keep for five minutes. Initially when I didn't know I used to call home and

ask how to prepare. Like that ... I did. yes it is easy to prepare if there is (pressure) cooker.

The everyday consumption of Indian food was very much part of the participants family rituals. Those participants who had families acknowledged that outside their domestic space it was difficult to maintain the practices of eating Indian food. The family meal was seen to be important and always involved the preparation and consumption of Indian food. The family meal can also be seen as intergenerational transmission of norms and values surrounding food and eating practices. [D'Sylva and Beagan \(2011\)](#) in their work on Goan woman in Canada, observe that a form of culinary capital is passed on from one generation to the other. **Radhika** who hails from Karnataka works for a multi-national company for her it is very important that her son gets socialized with the Indian norms and behaviours. She encourages him to participate in Indian cultural activities. For Radhika the importance of family meal and Indian food are a way of reconnect to the Indian identity both for her and her family.

Radhika: I would say whole day we are Dutch actually here we are eating bread and cheese sandwich, bread and chicken slice and in the night we make typical Indian food rice and dal, chapatti or something like that. It is a full-fledged dinner. In the night we three eat together we really would like to have Indian dinner.

In this study we also had participants for whom The Netherlands was the second/third country they had moved to after leaving India. These discussions often revolved around comparing the different countries on the ability to source different kinds of Indian foods. In countries with a larger Indian diaspora, such as USA and UK, the ability to continue both national and regional food practices was reported to be much easier as opposed to The Netherlands. [Ferrero \(2002\)](#) comments that foodscapes help immigrants to reconstitute their identity by preparing, buying, selling and consuming food from the 'home land'. In case of participants who had lived in other countries they find themselves comparing and evaluating relative advantages and disadvantages of each foodscape. The term 'home land' needs to be further problematized to make the distinction between Indian and regional food. However, with the growing Indian population and availability of regional Indian food their current location also offered them more opportunities in keeping alive these practices. **Rajesh** comes from Karnataka and in his region the staple food in Ragi (*Eleusine coracana*) a form of millet. He is happy that compared to Germany he and his family can still enjoy at least once a week the millet prepared in different forms.

Rajesh: R: ya when I was in Germany I could not get ragi flour. Ummm so that's not the case here (The Netherlands). We are very happy at least once in a week (here) we can prepare traditional ragi mudde.

I: Mudde?

R: But rice we used get rice in Germany I didn't miss that. But definitely ragi flour and ragi rotti and ragi mudde and those things.

From a [Mauss \(2002\)](#) perspective, the sending and receiving of these food items between family members reduces feelings of loss and distance on the part of all involved insofar as the sharing of food cultivates a feeling of being in each other's presence in each other's households. This is in line with [Campos-Castillo and Hitlin's \(2013\)](#) reconceptualization of 'co-presence': individuals' involvement with each other need not be restricted to physical proximity.

In this case, food has an agency that connects the households and the lives that are linked to them. The availability of shops or stores that sell Indian food and spices adds to the sense of self that migrants experience in the Netherlands.

3.2. Cooking, olfactory belongingness and othering

Cooking Indian food was central to the migrant's sense of belonging. They spoke of the 'Dutch' food as something that was to be had outside the domestic setting. Cooking helped the participants to also cope with the dislocation and reminded them of the daily rhythms they experienced at 'home' in India. The process of cooking aided the migrants to recreate the family bond. **Riyanna** from Mangalore lives with her spouse in The Netherlands. Her spouse though of Indian ancestry has lived most of his life outside India. So she does not have someone with who she can share the same sense of dislocation. She copes with this situation by trying to recreate the food and asking for recipes from home which she can experiment. She also acknowledges that her efforts may not be perfect but she gives herself credit that she has tried and this brings her satisfaction.

Riyanna: Yes, you do try to recreate (home food) what you miss and then of course it's not, it doesn't equal what you miss. But it at least it has satisfied you that you tried. Masala dosa is one of them, Pani Puri is another one. And there are some traditional things from Mangalore which my mother used to make. They are not made in (my) in-laws family. I do make them because ya its nice.

Ganesh is a researcher at one of the universities in The Netherlands and in his narrative he always compares his food and cooking practices to that of the Dutch or other Europeans in his research group. He lives with his wife (of European origin) and finds cooking to be therapeutic. Ganesh's personal interest in cooking motivates him to cook and share his culinary skills with other nationals. He compares also himself to other Indian men and finds himself to be better off in cooking Indian food. His observation is to a large degree justified as many men who either came on their own or where single at the time of the interview had difficulties dealing with cooking as they had never cooked in their lives. The strong gender division back home led to men having non-existent or very few skills in cooking Indian food. This group largely depended on readymade food or learnt basic skills such as making rice and lentils, which they could eat with pickles they brought from home. [Meijering and van Hoven \(2003\)](#) observed that cooking and sharing of Indian food among Indian IT professionals in Germany was an essential part of the socializing process.

Ganesh: most of them probably don't spend as much time cooking every day. I cook every other day almost. Ya, I mean every time I sit down I take it up to cook, it takes an hour or more so, its hour or more every time I cook and it's every other day you know. This is pretty fantastic, even for many of the Indians who are living abroad. I mean I love cooking. Since I have a personal interest in cooking I enjoy cooking it is like meditation for me. When I am cooking I forget about all worries. So cooking is a time to relax for me. It's just me and food and I am relaxing when I am cooking. Because of that, I love cooking I think I probably shared more of Indian culture through Indian cooking than anything else.

In the narratives surrounding cooking the focus was also on the sensory experiences of working with the spices, the utensils they had brought from home, the sounds and more importantly the aromas of home cooked food. The most common utensil that was

part of most migrant suitcases was the 'pressure cooker'. Every new migrant was advised to bring along this utensil. It was perceived to be essential to Indian cooking especially for rice, lentils and meats. The sounds of the pressure cooker whistles are part of every household in the Indian subcontinent. Pressure cookers were promoted in India as an energy efficient way of cooking and to reduce the long hours spent at the stove. In the early days it was seen as an essential accessory of a middle-class kitchen in India. Most of the participants in this study were born and brought up in middle-class households thus this practice was very much part of their daily routines and domestic soundscapes. [Miller \(1998\)](#) remarks that material culture objectifies cultural practices. In this case utensils from home objectify the daily practices and routines thus contributing to the sense of belonging. The following two quotes from **Manu** and **Karun** are examples on how the pressure cooker is seen as an essential utensil that connects the cooking practices between homes in India and The Netherlands. In Karun's case he had to stop using the cooker as his flatmates in the student house did not appreciate the sound. The latter is an example of how living in multi-cultural domestic spaces such as dorms makes it problematic to fully exercise your right towards food and cooking practices. In Karun's case it became more problematic as he had never cooked before in his life and this cooker was his only hope of making Indian food. Karun's experience further illustrates what [Mintz and Du Bois \(2002\)](#) term exclusionary effects of food practices. Immigrants who face similar situations have to adapt their food practices and adhere to the norms of the receiving cultural context ([Schrover et al., 2005](#)).

Manu: I brought the first thing always pressure cooker. (It) will always be there. That's the first thing. My mother said you should take this you can do almost anything with it; except don't blow the safety fuse. And the other things were some groceries.

Karun: For me I just bring six jeans six t-shirts and one cooker with me. Somebody had told me if you are coming here don't forget to bring a cooker for yourself. I bring a cooker with me. I have hardly used it. Because in the beginning when I used that cooker in the student house people were scared when it blows, when it blows whistle sssss. People were really scared.

The sensory dimension in terms aromas of cooking also conjured a sense of home. Many participants relished the aromas of food. Participants spoke about how the process of preparing the food transported them to their homes and families back in India. As **Ganesh** shares in this experience where he links the aromas of cooking to the rituals that his mother used to follow back home. He describes how each of these steps reminds him more of home and the aromas that were part of his mother's kitchen.

Ganesh: yes certainly yes, food reminds me of home a lot. Certain style of cooking reminds of home. Like when you start with a pan with some oil heated in it and you have mustard seeds splutter in it and then you add curry leaves and onion and you sauté them I mean this typical smell reminds me of home. Because that's how almost every dish begins when you cook. There are these typical things, which remind me of home.

Sanjay is banking professional and has lived with his wife for over a decade in Europe. His work takes him to different cities but he calls Amsterdam his home. For him the aroma of Indian food and cooking is unique to immigrant Indian households when compared to Dutch households. These aromas and olfactory belongingness is his way of perceiving a sense of home in the different locations where he and his wife had lived.

Sanjay: This is not something you would experience if you walk into a Dutch house for example. It is something very unique to an Indian apartment or an Indian household, that's very, very unique to us. Even when people walk into our house, whether it's our neighbours or Dutch friends the first thing they say, ha we smell Indian curry, Indian food. So ya its very unique to us.

Participants also realized that when they step out of their home then this aroma translated to become a foreign smell that did not translate well into the Dutch culture. **Sheela** one of the participants who had lived in the Netherlands for a longer period even advised people to check the smell before going out and being aware that other people would judge them for the smell of curry.

Sheela: See, we always cook three warm meals; all the expats when they come from home, they make breakfast and that is actually traditional, take bath, breakfast and so when they cook at home you get the smell. When you get into the bus, what is that smell they (the Dutch) ask? So then you have to tell them that is because of this. That they (the Dutch) don't understand. They ask why would you cook in the morning. You started explaining that to them saying that it is a tradition but on the other hand we have to tell our Indians hey guys you better make it a point that these people are noticing that. You know they never realize this. Now community is big, when you go into the bus in the morning they smell it. So that is something I really make sure that they (the Indian new migrants) understand.

Such kind of othering is both perceived and maybe silently also enacted by the host population. The participant here then feels the responsibility to inform/educate new Indian migrants on this olfactory identity and discrimination that maybe alien to them. It also brings into the discussion the role of senses in enacting othering. [Low \(2005\)](#) points out that people use the sense of smell to pass a moral judgment on others. Thus creating boundaries for social interactions. In the Dutch context, [Schrover et al. \(2005\)](#) discuss how the smell of food created boundaries for (immigrant and native) children to socialize in each other's homes. The smell of curry and othering has also been documented in other studies with South Asian groups (see [Rajiva, 2006](#); [Lobo and Morgan, 2012](#); [Mannur, 2009](#)).

3.3. Commensality: insiders and outsiders

The sharing of food in social situation was common among all participants. Such commensality extended to religious festivals, regional festivals and themed parties. In many of the interviews participants joked that there would not be an Indian event without an elaborate food on offer. The sharing of food at these events was either through placing an order with a co-ethnic chef or restaurant to cook for the whole group or part of the group coming together to prepare the food. Both Karnataka and Kerala migrants had their own cultural associations and often organized such festivals and events. **Aruna** is one of the founding members of the Netherlands Malayalee Association and in her quote narrates the role of the organization in bringing the community together and in recreating Kerala in The Netherlands.

Aruna: We get together four times a year. Like for Easter, Christmas, New Year all that. Then ya it was like being in India but still you have you know everything. The organization has grown into a huge number now. Last Onam (harvest festival) we organized in September it was around two hundred fifty people. Then ya like I said after like ten years back since we have NANMA (Netherlands

Malayalee Association) we have lot of people. We are very, very close to them and it's like a family. That way we don't miss anything right now. Lot of typical Kerala culture we try to adapt. We even did a Kallishap. Kallishap is a toddy shop which you have in Kerala. People go there and drink and have nice food and things like that. We organized a small event in our backyard invited all the mallu friends and then tried to adapt the exact thing what we used to do and that became a huge success. So we started organizing theme based parties in order to bring little bit of Kerala into Holland.

Both regional associations were catering to their own people and hardly anyone who did not speak Malayalam or Kannada was part of their events. In addition to regional events they also visited larger Indian events. The latter was open to all Indians and their Dutch friends and colleagues. [Fischler \(2011\)](#) views such sharing of food as a way of reestablishing identities and creating bonds between kin, though in this context it is largely fictive kinship ties. The commensality with the Dutch friends and colleagues was rare as both groups had different ideas of socializing and norms on what food could be eaten/shared. [Saunders \(2007\)](#), studying transnational Hindu families in the USA, observes how Hindus used the discourse surrounding vegetarianism to be associated with an Indian identity and non-vegetarian food to be essentially western food. These discourses helped them construct and perform their transnational Hindu identity. In this study participants experienced translating the meaning of vegetarianism difficult with their Dutch friends and colleagues. They were often served fish or were invited to barbecues in the summer with nothing much they could eat at these events. **Guru** is a strict vegetarian and does not drink alcohol, though very social and friendly, he found it difficult to socialize with his Dutch colleagues.

Guru: Usually parties are with a barbecue. So it does annoy me a little bit if there is already a charred meat on the grill and vegetarian stuff is put on it. Like that socializing becomes little bit difficult. Because either it has to be beer or barbecue if I don't partake both of these then it really becomes an issue, what am I going to do at the party? So in that sense it was kind of demotivating factor to attend the socializing events which involve these things.

During the analysis of the data most participants raised the issues of sharing food and spoke about how a community is formed by participating in such activities. In the code family on sharing food there was one case which stood apart which spoke about differences in commensality with regards to avoidance based on caste and religious hierarchies. The belief in black magic and food being a carrier of these evils was one of the reasons to avoid commensality. **Vijay** positions himself as a member of higher caste who does not discriminate and then explains why other people would not eat at his house or other houses due to the beliefs in food being contaminated with black magic.

Vijay: We don't like to touch any other lower caste people. Something like that it was there. I came from that family. I don't make such discrimination, I eat from your home, and I eat from any home. But these persons they are taught not to eat from any other especially from Hindu families, from Muslim families something like that. I don't know if you are aware about black magic. Kerala is seen as the source of black magic things. These kinds of negative things. Those kinds of things, evils, normally it comes through food, because I am envious with your growth if I want to put you down I have to give it something like that.

The quote above in a way critiques the amalgamating concepts of diaspora, community and ethnic grouping. It also shows how we need to look deeper within these concepts to examine the differences and disjuncture that are part of the migrant organizations but do not necessarily get reflected in the broader analysis on these topics. It is then necessary to take a more intersectional approach ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)) to studying immigrants and recognize the complex dimensions of inequality based on the characteristics such as age, gender, religion and ethnicity that underlie the lived realities of immigrant life.

3.4. Case study: *Anttin Undi* a reflexive account on food and care giving

Care giving and receiving is very much part of the transnational activities of the households ([Mazzucato, 2011](#)). Adult children travel back to take care of ageing parents and parents travel abroad to assist in childcare and providing support to new mothers ([Deepak, 2005](#); [Glick & Van Hook, 2002](#); [Purkayastha, 2005](#)). In this study participants also narrated of the help they had received from their parents and parent-in-laws after childbirth. In the following reflexive account I present a case study of a food item that objectifies the emotions of care giving and receiving, the multiple actors involved and the meanings this exchange generates for the migrants and their family members. This case study connects the theoretical concepts of reverse remittances, belonging, commensality and care. The reflexive account is presented as case study to show a typical experience of a migrant household. The case study format is best suited to go deeper into one experience and map the different actors involved in this process and the meanings their actions generate.

3.4.1. *Anttin Undi: the food*

The food item I have chosen is *Anttin Undi* to explain food and its linkages to care giving. In Kannada (a language spoken in Karnataka, South-India), *Anttu* means gum and *undi* refers to a round sweet (ladoo/ladu in Hindi). I take this example in line with the idea that it objectifies the emotion of care giving and receiving, insofar as it involves multiple actors who all invest their labour to produce, share and consume it. The timing is also an important factor in this case. The food item that was prepared to help my wife recover from childbirth. *Anttin Undi* in the North Karnataka region is given to new mothers to nourish them with essential oils, and the gum and the different seeds are supposed to be beneficial for the strengthening of the back and to produce heat in the body.

3.4.2. *The multiple actors: webs of reciprocity*

Traditionally the mother or the mother-in-law makes the *undi* for her daughter/daughter-in-law and the food embodies their care. In our situation, we did not have this cultural culinary knowledge as my mother, who had passed away few years back, and my wife's mother were not brought up in the cultural region of the food product. Hence, my father requested the sister of a family friend to prepare these *undi* for my wife's *Bananthana*¹ The person who prepared these *undi* comes from the cultural regions and has had the knowledge passed on to her from her mother. I should also add that such an *undi* can also be bought from sweet shops in the market. This was not preferred as the food was given at a critical

¹ The post-natal care period that ranges from 40 to 90 days depending on the religion, region, caste and importantly economic status. The first 40 days are seen as most critical for both the mother and the child. This practice is to protect them from illness and for the mother to recover from childbirth.

time and was required to be made at home and by a known person.

3.4.3. *The meaning from the exchange*

The home-cooked food and the care that is provided by a kin ensure that the mother and the child pass through this critical period safely and in good health. The emotional and physical labour the women of the household have put into making the *undi* within a domestic sphere are meant to be transferred to the new mother and then through her, to the new-born. Here the *undi* takes on multiple meanings: it signifies care from home, it is part of the cultural milieu and is culturally prescribed nourishment to the mother. In the local context, it carries the meaning of being one of the foods given to a young mother, but now in the transnational social field, the *undi* comes with more than its intrinsic value: it is now attached with the emotions of care, it brings the sensory experience of being at home in India, it symbolises the efforts made by family back home to connect with the mother, and contrarily also accentuates the existing distance between the homes. The value of the food in the transitional domestic space is heightened in terms of the emotional value attached to it.

3.4.4. *Care circulation*

The cultural connect through behaviours and practices are evident when objects move between transnational families but with food a physiological and a sensorial dimension is added to the process. In this instance of pregnancy and childcare the physiological dimension also comes to the fore and the norms of nourishment then get incorporated into the child rearing practices of the mother. In doing so, compared to other material objects, sharing of *undi* adds an inter-generational component where the unborn child receives care as part of its cultural heritage.

This case study links three crucial elements: reverse remittances, belonging and care as they are objectified in this food. The meanings ascribed to the food illustrate how food is connected to crucial life course transitions. [Hutter \(1994\)](#) in an ethnographic study in North Karnataka documents such practices where post-childbirth women are perceived to be in *hasi mai*, a state where the body has become cold due to the loss of fluids, thus women are advised to eat heat-producing foods, of which *Anntin undi* is one. There is a strong gender component as the culinary knowledge is transferred through women across generations. [D'Sylva and Beagan \(2011\)](#) and [Dyck and Dossa \(2007\)](#) observe similar transfers and link them to power and agency of women to create a healthy space for themselves and their families. The reciprocal relations highlight the social capital that is produced in the process of preparation, exchange and consumption of the food item. The norms and values that underlie these exchanges are subject to multiple interpretations as many of the migrants combine traditional and modern lifestyles to create spaces where intergenerational care and exchange is possible. The concept of 'co-presence' ([Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013](#)) best captures these reverse remittances between households where individual try to maintain links across geographically dispersed households. Similar to this case study, participants in the interviews in addition to food and care practices valued and cherished the possibility that their parents could be with them at these critical life events.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Food and its movements across borders and social groups have not been sufficiently incorporated into the theorisations and understandings of the migrant self. This paper examined how the travel of food, food practices and commensality, among Indian migrants, reflect the flows of norms, practices, identities and social capital between India and the Netherlands. Social ([Levitt, 2001](#)) and

reverse ([Mazzucato, 2011](#)) remittances as theoretical concepts aid in unpacking the norms and values that are inherent in the movement of people and their food practices. Social remittances both forward and reverse, give us the chance to examine how individuals and families build and sustain social and cultural networks across transnational spaces. The findings that emerge from this study centre on food and belonging, cooking practices and home-making, commensality with co-ethnics and the role of food in caregiving.

The literature on food and belonging especially in the immigrant context is clearly established (see [Buettner, 2008](#); [Ferrero, 2002](#); [Mannur, 2009](#)) and points to the role of food in reconstituting identities. The empirical findings in this study are in line with this stream of literature and go a step further to explain how, the travel of, food objectifies the norms and values shared between migrants and the families back home. The expanding Indian foodscape in The Netherlands is a reflection of the emerging Indian diaspora. Building on the work of [Rath and Kloosterman \(2000\)](#), [Van Otterloo \(2002\)](#) and [Ferrero \(2002\)](#) this study views the availability and acceptability of Indian food in the public domain, through ethnic shops and restaurants, a sign of entrenchment of the diaspora. The availability of this foodscape aided in reducing the sense of dislocation for new migrants. For older migrants this foodscape was a sign of acceptance of their cultural norms and lifestyles. Nevertheless participants had deeper emotional attachment to home-made food and food brought from home (in India). Thus by buying, preparing, sharing and cooking Indian food the participants are able to reconstitute their *sense of self* in a transnational setting.

The embodied nature of food and food practices has been extensively documented by cultural geographers ([Johnston & Longhurst, 2012](#); [Law, 2001](#)) and in the interdisciplinary field of food studies (see [Pilcher, 2016](#)). Migration is not just about moving away from material words but also from embodied sensorial environments ([Ahmed, 1999](#)). In this study the practices of cooking and sensorial experiences surrounding them demonstrate the home-making processes undertaken by the migrants. The use of material culture by migrants in the home-making process has been acknowledged in cultural studies and allied disciplines ([Blunt, 2007](#); [Ralph & Staeheli, 2011](#); [Walsh, 2011](#)). This study further extends this discussion to include sensorial experiences, such as taste, smell and sounds, which generate a sense of olfactory belongingness and aid in recreating the daily rhythms of home. The use of spices, utensils, the memories of home, the family recipes reveal the norms, practices and cultural capital that migrants bring with them and utilise in everyday life. Thus in the private sphere migrants in this study recreate a *sense of home* through cooking practices, material culture, memories and sensorial experiences. Conversely, this study also highlights the sensorial othering ([Low, 2005](#); [Schrover et al., 2005](#)) that is perceived and experienced by the migrants in the public sphere. Hence, theorisations on the sense of home should also recognize the power relations that underpin the spheres/domains in which migrants live.

Practices of commensality to a large extent lay the framework on who is considered as an insider and outsider ([Mintz and Du Bois, 2002](#); [Fischler, 2011](#); [Saunders, 2007](#)). In the transnational context the celebration of festivals, regional and national events give migrants the space to form social bonds and fictive kinship relations. The narratives of participants show that there are multiple ways in which a group or community is 'imagined'. For example Kerala migrants of all religions came together to celebrate Onam (originally a harvest festival), but celebrated Christmas specifically with fellow Keralite Syrian Catholics and then joined other Indians to celebrate Diwali. These practices also highlight the importance of taking an intersectional approach where not just nationality but region, religion and ethnicity play a crucial role for migrants to

imagine a *sense of community*. Commensality with the Dutch was problematic as some of the norms and values were not shared across cultures. Though the Dutch cuisine has incorporated many multi-cultural influences (Schrover et al., 2005; Salzman, 1986; Van Otterloo, 2002) it may not be able to assimilate food norms and taboos of newer waves of migrants. The experiences on commensality in this study suggest that there exists a cultural gap in understanding each other's norms, foodscapes and food practices. Increasing dialogue and awareness of Indian culture in The Netherlands and informing Indian migrants about Dutch food, food norms and practices of commensality will improve the relations between the host society and the Indian migrants.

The exchange of care between transnational families is essential to maintaining the ties across multiple locations. Mazzucato (2011) in her study on transnational childcare arrangements stresses that care giving is one of the main reverse remittances. Baldassar and Merla (2014) theorizing on transnational households emphasize that care circulation between family members is reciprocal, multi-directional, and asymmetrical and fluctuates over the life course. As we see in the case study, the ties become closer at crucial life course stages and events. The reverse remittance of food, cooking practices and culinary knowledge underscore the invisible care that the migrants receive from families in the country of origin. The exchange of food and care, as presented in the case study, create a *sense of 'co-presence'* (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013). At a broader level, such practices also highlight the role of the family back home in maintaining connections and supporting the cultural continuation of norms and tradition, which aid the wellbeing of the migrant and for the linked family members.

Thus the travel of food, food practices, commensality aid in creating four senses for the migrants and their families. These four senses: sense of self (food and belonging), the sense of home (cooking and food practices), the sense of community (commensality with co-ethnics) and the sense of 'co-presence' (food and care) reflect the flows of norms, practices, identities and social capital between transnational households.

This study also has its share of limitations; first, the perspective of the linked family members has not been studied. This perspective could have added another layer of knowledge on how people within one family differentially experience the four senses. Second, the focus has been exclusively on the migrants and their experience with food and not on the food and its intrinsic characteristics or its history. Future research could combine the experience and the history of the food item to provide a more holistic understanding of migrant foodscapes. Third, the focus was largely on Indian migrants and their commensality with co-ethnics and relatively less on the commensality with the Dutch and incorporation of Dutch food in the Indian diet. As a follow-up it would be very interesting to examine the incorporation of Dutch food and the meanings this generates for the migrants. The study was designed from a migration studies perspective and in this paper I use the food studies literature as a lens to embed experiences of the migrants. This inter-disciplinary exercise adds to the growing interest in examining diversity of migrant's lives.

The migrant suitcase – its contents and the people it connects – is of course shaped by various factors: the resources that the person has for travel, the nature of his/her migration, the social stratification, and the mobility regimes that govern travel, contact and return of migrants. One also has to accept the possibility that some migrants may not want to experience – or simply do not experience – the strong association with home that certain foods can evoke. Their pathways to integration into the host society may necessitate leaving behind some traits as they negotiate their identity in the new cultural setting. Conversely migrants, who wish to maintain strong bonds with the family back home, may not have

the resources to do so. Research on transnational families and family life should therefore also take into account the situational context in which the migrants and their families live.

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