Siegel (2010) Learning to eat in a capital city

Siegel, Benjamin

This article addresses the evolution of the restaurant culture in Delhi, India. The people of Delhi overcame the taboo of eating outside the home, and thrive from it. This new cosmopolitan culture helps bring wealth and success for this major city.

In Delhi, India, the concept of eating outside the home was taboo, it was said to be unsanitary as well as "un-pure." Meals were supposed to be private, and honorable. "...indeed, no food can be considered wholesome which is not dressed at home." (Bernier 1655. cited in Siegel 2010: 5) Not only was it frowned upon to eat in public, but also was difficult, especially for the middle class. There were street vendors for the workers and soldiers, and there were hotel restaurants for the elite. However, change was in the making. The evolution of the cosmopolitan culture that now exerts from the city was a slow one; but once it caught momentum, Delhi became India’s “New Boom Town.” (Seigel 2010: 13) The first real stab at restaurants came in 1932, when Connaught Place was built. Based off a European style market, it was a circular plaza, which contained a small number of “western eateries.” This became Delhi’s new “socializing space,” where young teens would come to the restaurants on dates. This was the beginning of the young cosmopolitan era (Seigel 2010: 4). Of course this change couldn’t have even begun without western influence. It was in the 1990s that the restaurant culture really began to take off. These restaurants consisted of everything Americans-,- are used to seeing at home. There is a host and a waiter/waitress, and the patrons are handed printed menus, which consists of relatively the same meals everyday. This flourishing restaurant society is mostly due to the increase in the city’s economic wealth and tourists. Even the street vendors started to be updated. Laws are trying to be put in place to create a more sanitary environment. "The break down of the food taboo and the reimagination of public spaces is changing Delhi...” (Siegel 2010: 13) However, is this new western Delhi a good thing?

This article makes a good point at highlighting all the good aspects of the new cosmopolitan Delhi; but I find it equally as important to address the negatives. Western influence has completely changed this culture; there has been an “…arrival of beefless McDonalds…Domino’s, Wimpy, Pizza Hut, Subway…” (Siegel 2010: 14) How can this be good if a city, which was once full of rich traditional culture, is now subsiding to a big Mac? Culture is free to change and expand, it is a way to adapt to the ever-morphing environment; but this is too much. One woman is quoted saying, “It breaks my heart to see my son relishing for burgers, for he will never know the glorious traditions of food which are now memories of the past.” (Siegel 2010: 15) The traditions should be thriving rather then in just past memories. Western influence can always bring wealth to an area, but it is important to consider the losses as well.

References Cited:

Francois Bernier, Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1655-1668)