



Changing Flavours: An Analysis of the Influence of Migration on the Flavours of Udupi Restaurant Food

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.7>

Abstract:

Udupi restaurants in Bangalore are a byproduct of colonisation and the lack of a stable economy in most Indian villages. Originating in the coastal region of Karnataka, Udupi cuisine emerged from specific religious, social, and economic conditions that shaped the culinary practices of the Shivalli Brahmin community. This history and heritage are influenced by people migrating from one part of the state to another to open restaurants and bring recipes developed in the private sphere into the public sphere. This research paper attempts to trace the history, heritage, and tradition of restaurant food in Udupi and the changes that migration has brought about. It also examines how Udupi restaurants have influenced food and food service in Bangalore. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the food that these restaurants prepare. It is necessary to track the changes that the pandemic has brought about in the kinds of dishes that are prepared in the restaurants. The pandemic also brings to light the kinship relations and the networks that migrant communities tend to have. These communities help people survive these drastic changes. Throughout the research, it becomes clear that most restaurant owners in Bangalore are from Kundapura. An attempt is made to trace the reasons for this change through history and to understand the identity politics that play into the migration.

Migration has a significant impact on a community's food practices. People from Udupi have traditionally migrated to Bangalore, Mysore, Chennai, and other cities in search of work. The Shaivalli Brahmin community is particularly known for its chain of restaurants. The study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on published scholarly literature and theoretical perspectives from food studies, migration studies, and cultural studies. It also aims to understand the importance of memory and orality in the transmission of these recipes from one generation to another. The study aims to understand how food becomes not just a marker of identity but also maintains cultural continuity while adjusting to new ecosystems of urbanization and commercialization.

Keywords: Migration, Identity, Restaurant Food, Kinship.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-16/06/2026, Accepted-27/06/2026, Published-30/06/2026.

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Introduction

Food has long served as a marker of cultural identity for migrant communities. Migrant communities since the time of Partition have relied on culinary practices to retain their cultural identity while adjusting to changing social and economic environments. Udupi cuisine originated as temple food or prasada, often culturally exclusive and banning the use of onion and garlic, along with other local vegetables. The arrival of Madhav Acharya, who brought his knowledge to the town of Udupi and built a temple to honour the child Krishna idol, led to the blending of Shivali Brahmin cuisine with traditional Udupi food. Temples were not only sites of worship in Udupi but also seats of cultural transmission. According to Madhulika Dash, culinary legend Jiggs Kalra stated that temples “back then weren’t only schools of learning, but catalysts that evolved a society – and its thoughts – and the best way to do so was through food” (Dash).

This paper explores how the sacred temple food that has its roots in the temple town of Udupi slowly made its way into the cosmopolitan culture of Bangalore. The paper seeks to understand how the traditional recipes were adapted to an urban taste palette and became a site of memory, heritage, and cultural preservation. The paper focuses on three central research questions: How did migration contribute to the emergence of Udupi restaurants as a distinct culinary institution? How were traditional recipes and food practices transformed in the process of migration? In what ways do nostalgia and oral traditions sustain cultural identity within migrant food cultures?

Drawing from the theories of food studies, cultural studies, and migration studies, the paper seeks to establish how Udupi restaurants are not merely commercial establishments but spaces where culture is preserved through constant negotiation between changing food palettes and market demands, while preserving the essence of the sacred temple food.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design that focuses on historical and textual analysis. Instead of depending on primary fieldwork, the paper examines published scholarly literature, historical accounts, and theoretical works from food studies, migration studies, sociology, and cultural studies. The goal is to explore how migration shaped Udupi restaurant culture and how food practices carry identity, memory, and heritage. The study also employs a historical approach to examine how Udupi cuisine grew from coastal Karnataka and became commercialised to suit the urban palette of present-day Bangalore and other metropolises. Additionally, the paper conducts a rigorous textual analysis to review and evaluate sources on food studies, migration studies, and cultural studies. Secondary sources are compared to find recurring themes related to migration and culinary culture. The study pays special attention to concepts like foodscapes, imagined communities, cultural memory, and cultural sustainability. These ideas help us understand how food practices persist and change over generations.

History of Udupi Restaurants

Udupi is a city in Southern India. It is located in the coastal belt of Karnataka. It has a population of around 12,000 people. The Hindus of the Kanara coast had been Shaivites for centuries until the teaching of Madhvacharya strengthened Vaishnavism (Ray and Srinivas 59). Madhvacharya was a Brahmin, and all his followers were exclusively Brahmins, divided into four categories: Madhava, Shivalli, Tulu, and Udupi Brahmins. Following the death of Madhavacharya, a Krishna temple was established in Udupi. (Ray and Srinivas 59). The Krishna temple has three kitchens that serve food to three different kinds of people. The *paryaya swami's* (Head of the temple) own kitchen, the *mristanna* for the guests, Brahmi scholars, donors, etc., and third is a

building known as the *bhojanashala*, which caters to pilgrims irrespective of caste. Three to four thousand people, including school and college students living in various monastic establishments attached to temples and mutts, eat their daily meals (Ray and Srinivas 59)

The Bunts and the Jain landlords owned most of the land. The Shivalli Brahmins remained a small and insignificant caste that did not migrate out of the village for education, employment, or trade. The Shivalli Brahmins were struck by poverty and had no means of escaping it. South Kanara, located in the extreme West of the Madras Presidency, was largely dominated by Tamil ‘*Revenue Brahmins*’ who held a monopolistic position on the Government in the Presidency. The Shivalli Brahmins used their skill in cooking and managing the temple kitchens to build restaurants. The cities had a dearth of Brahmin vegetarian restaurants, and they found an opening.

There are many similarities in the way Udipi restaurants and temple’s function. Vegetarian food dishes are cooked in large pots and served quickly and efficiently. The dishes are exclusively cooked by the Brahmin cooks working long hours. Some separate cleaners and servers work in tandem to feed a large group of people.

K. Krishna Rao was the first major hotelier from South Kanara with his chain of restaurants named Woodland. He started as kitchen help in a small restaurant in Madras. From there, in three years, he bought a restaurant and has since expanded it into a franchise with restaurants across India and abroad. His main customers were the “Sahib” who worked in George Town.

K. Seetharam Rao owns the Das Prakash group. He started with his brother to open a tiffin business in Mysore and built his franchise from there. There are many similarities between the two. They only served different demographics. The Das Prakash group expanded along the colonial axis of leisure from Madras to Mysore and the hill station Ooty (Ray and Srinivas 60).

Bangalore was an easy migratory destination. Due to changing political scenarios in the cities, they were forced to become secular and allow people from all castes to dine in their hotels. These hoteliers, however, sent a large part of their revenue back to their native villages. This led to the renovation and development of the temples, which further worked to keep the rigid caste divisions alive in the villages of Udupi, while the restaurants in Bangalore became secular spaces.

Migration of People and Food

The Shivalli Brahmins, like many other people, were forced to migrate due to poverty. They found greener pastures in the cities, but they had to depend on their kinship ties and their knowledge of their food to create a community around them.

Kinship relations persist when people migrate, and more often than not, they become the reason for migration. There are three important ways in which kinship relationships play a role: extended family ties persist in industrial society, and people tend to keep in touch with people of different generations. They help members of the family to leave the community of origin and also welcome them in the community of settlement. There is a strong affective tie among the members, and the members perform various activities for each other. Kinship ties are very important in migration. (Choldin 164)

The smell of familiar foods can instantly evoke a series of emotions and desires because food customs are carriers of identity, memory, and tradition, yet accessing recognisable foods is often difficult and challenging for migrants to the United States because of a lack of availability, cost, and a host of other factors (Osseo-Asare 50).

The author in that text, Osseo-Asare, is talking about Ghanaian culture and how migrants find it difficult to find their taste in a foreign land. This same phenomenon is replicated when

people migrate to different cities within the country and sometimes within the state in the sub-continent of India. For people migrating within the state, from Udupi to Bangalore, the geographical conditions change. Migrating from the coastal humid temperatures to the dry winds of the plains means that the people have to work hard to find the right ingredients to cook food that is reminiscent of home. Since a lot of the food in Udupi depends on the fermentation of batter, the cooking technique also changes to accommodate the change in temperatures. This means that it is difficult to get comforting, nostalgic food.

Restaurant owners had to strike a balance between bringing nostalgic flavour to their food and also catering to the tastes of their patrons, the Tamil Brahmins. This meant that there were changes made to the traditional flavours to pander to the new palate. This invariably leads to the food in Udupi restaurants of Bangalore no longer matching the food cooked in the villages of Udupi.

Oral Narratives in Food

Food is a significant component of cultural sustainability, as it is one of the many life rituals that help reinforce the norms we embody (Sutton 215). In order to understand how recipes are embedded in the memory of generations of people and transmitted through folk narratives, we need to understand how culinary narratives highlight cultural sustainability and the role women play in preserving them. Smells have a distinct feature in that they are capable of capturing a memory. Therefore, familiar food carries a sense of identity, tradition, and nostalgia. Food habits are part of our cultural identity, and they, like language, are among the markers of identity that are seldom relinquished. (Gabaccia 67)

Food has a major role to play beyond sustenance. More than food used in rituals and customs or ingredients that are an important part of traditional recipes, food talks about our racial and ethnic identities. Food serves as a symbol of nostalgia that is retained through the modernisation of traditional recipes. Food traditions, choices, and preferences are integrally tied to identity—to ethnicity, region, nationality, gender, class, politics, and economics. (Saltzman 823)

In the case of Udupi, the languages that are predominant in spoken culture are ‘Tulu’ and ‘Konkani’, which do not have written scripts. Hence, it becomes difficult to preserve recipes in written form. This is resolved through the women in the family orally transferring the recipes to the younger generations. This becomes an interesting factor in promoting family businesses when private recipes come out from the domestic spaces into the public spaces. In the restaurant culture, the alterations to the traditional recipes are made by men because women are not permitted to enter the public sphere of family businesses. This further reinstates the idea of foodscapes, which are constructed by various social factors. Foodscapes are the spaces defined by the interactions of geography, environment, ethnicity, economic status, gender, social organisation, and various cultural practices, including dress, religion, and language. They are dynamic environments, continually undergoing change, diversification, and homogenization, despite people’s efforts to define foods as traditional and/or authentic. Foodscapes interweave the body with society and culture, nature, and the world at large (Kenneally and LeBel 4). Cultural production and how food habits/foodscapes are influenced when one migrates from one place to another is a constantly changing process that evolves with time. This becomes an essential factor in understanding why the hotel industry established by migrants from Udupi has flourished far and wide.

Nostalgia and Women's Culinary Networks

Nostalgia is a powerful emotion, particularly for those who have been dislocated from their homeland or city. Oral recipes have shown that these recipes remind one of the past identities that may or may not have existed, but still evoke a feeling of belongingness. Some of the traditional recipes need to be practised regularly so that their identity and authenticity can be maintained. The tools, ingredients, and techniques used in making these recipes are what make them authentic and culturally relevant. The nostalgia can be found when we eat the modernised version of our home-cooked recipes being served in Bangalore restaurants. Benedict Anderson argues that communities are distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness but by the manner in which they are imagined (Anderson, qtd. in Parveen 20).

These recipes are told for cultural survival in a homogenized world wherein the recipes become an important part of carrying the legacy of the families originating from Udupi. The familiarity that people find when they eat these dishes in restaurants is what makes these businesses profitable and long-running. The shaping of this recipe is not an individual act (or decision), but the product of shared effort between teacher and student and many women's voices over generations. (Parveen 15)

It is this sense of nostalgia that evokes a sense of loss and romance, and wants one to create a small part of the home in the place that they migrate to. These dishes work as a communal thought between groups of people and bind them together. Food plays an important part in preserving the cultural heritage of many communities across the world, and also in India, particularly in the context of inter-city migration.

When it comes to restaurants, the primary reason why patrons return to certain places is the service they receive. A lot of times, this burden is placed on the staff that serves the food.

Customer service in Udupi restaurants is reminiscent of their temple origin. The prominence is given to quick service rather than emotionally connecting with the customers. The process seems distant and strictly utilitarian. Therefore, most Udupi restaurants have evolved to have self-service as their primary service method. Nostalgia is evoked only through the taste of the dishes made in the restaurants, not through the costumed service experience. In interactive job roles, it is impossible to draw clear distinctions between the worker, the work process, and the product or outcome, because the quality of the interaction is frequently part of the service being delivered. (Sharma 381)

Conclusion

There was an attempt made at understanding the current trends in Udupi restaurants through the history of Udupi, the reasons for migration and the migration patterns, the oral narratives that helped transfer the recipes from generation to generation, and a keen observation of the nostalgia that influences the food and its preparation. The history of Udupi restaurants demonstrates that migration is not merely a geographical phenomenon but is also a transfer of cultural practices, traditions, and rituals. The recipes that were developed in temple kitchens by the women of the family were transformed into modern-day recipes. The seasonal vegetables and methods of cooking are often included in the renditions of traditional recipes. The temple cooks were often the men of the family, but the recipes were created in the kitchens of Udupi Brahmins and have now traversed generations to reach a diverse audience. The analysis of oral narratives further highlights the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission. In communities where culinary knowledge has historically circulated through spoken traditions, recipes function as cultural archives. Women have played a key role in keeping alive the culinary heritage of the

sacred temple cuisine. Nostalgia is another important theme essential in understanding the popularity of Udupi restaurants. Similar tastes, aroma, and appearance often evoke a sense of belongingness, bringing them closer to the reinvented dishes. The busy life of metropolitan cities often creates a sense of isolation for people who have migrated for work. These restaurants bring them closer to feeling at home in an urban space. Udupi cuisine is also cost-effective while maintaining hygiene standards, which is another reason for its growing popularity amongst all classes of people. These restaurants also blur communal and classist boundaries, where a migrant labourer and an IT engineer eat in the same place. Ultimately, Udupi restaurants serve as important cultural institutions that preserve heritage while facilitating adaptation. They occupy a unique position at the intersection of migration, memory, commerce, and identity. Their continued popularity demonstrates the enduring power of food to connect individuals with histories, traditions, and communities.

It becomes important to note that the research undertaken has closely analysed history, heritage, and tradition in understanding the culinary cultures of Udupi hotels. The current trends in flavours and service can be easily traced. Therefore, it is clear that history, heritage, and traditions become important in understanding culinary culture and its contestations.

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