

Consumer Citizenship: Instant Noodles in India

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Abstract

Maggi, a brand of instant noodles introduced in India in the late 1980s by Nestlé, is now not only a popular snack, but the favorite comfort food of an entire generation of young urban Indians. What is the secret of Maggi's success? And what does it tell us about taste and desire in a consumer economy in a deeply unequal society? At first glance, the fast-rising consumption of such “industrial foods” seems to be a familiar story about the commodification of diets by multinational corporations. However, this article shows that the success of global capitalism is not a foregone conclusion when it comes up against nationalist politics. At the same time, the popularity of processed foods is a form of “consumer citizenship” as poor and low-caste people who are discriminated against, in part due to their food practices, aspire to eat fetishized commodities that allow them to belong in the modern, affluent world. And, for young people, instant noodles speak to their desire for agency and fun, challenging power relations in the patriarchal family. This article shows how Maggi noodles are a useful device for understanding how industrial foods transform the simmering broth of social relations that is India's cultural landscape.