

In the Age of COVID-19 - Indian restaurants and the Indian cooks in Japan

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Abstract: *This article explores the impact of COVID-19 on restaurants owned by Indian migrants in Japan as they struggle with financial and occupational risks. The owners try to balance their business interests with their relationships and with the Indian community in Tokyo and their desire to be good citizens by complying with pandemic guidelines. The cooks, who were brought to Japan by the owners, are in a more precarious position, having lost work hours and income, but without the ability to look elsewhere for work. Through the voices of both owners and cooks, I try to document these different experiences within a single ethnic community, and even a single enterprise, that has been tested by the virus.*

Key Words: COVID-19, restaurants, Indian Community, migrant labor

Introduction

“Now suddenly I have to sit at home. It is particularly stressful because there is no salary and no work,” one Indian migrant cook said, expressing his frustration in a telephone interview as he reluctantly stayed at home after the state of emergency was declared in Japan on April 8, 2020. As of June 12, there were believed to be 245 cases of bankruptcy nationwide due to the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, with hotels and restaurants amongst the most badly hit industries (Teikoku Data Bank 2020). “My restaurant business is the worst affected because people stop going there the moment

something like this happens,” shared Mr. Anil Raj, who runs a chain of Indian restaurants in and around Tokyo. He explained that, of his many businesses, which also include kindergartens and an IT consultancy, his restaurants were the hardest hit by the pandemic.

Social distancing has been encouraged around the globe as a way to contain the spread of the virus, which has led to the shutdown of financial markets, businesses, restaurants, events, travel and so on, devastating economies all over the world. While the shutdowns and encouragement of social distancing might help to limit the spread of COVID-19 cases and save lives, these measures also have a serious impact on people’s livelihoods — an impact that could end up being a bigger problem than the coronavirus itself. Small and medium-sized companies comprise 99.7% of all businesses in Japan. They support not only 77.7% of the working population, but also account for a large portion of Japan’s economic output (METI 2019).

As a resident of Japan and an Indian migrant doing research on my own community, I talked with the owners of Indian restaurants in Tokyo as well as cooks working in Indian restaurants, all of whom have lived in Japan for a decade or more, about the impact of COVID-19 on their businesses. The Indian migrant restaurateurs I interviewed either owned Indian restaurant chains, falling in the category of medium-sized businesses, or were owners of a single Indian restaurant. This group of Indian migrants plays a vital role as job providers to the Indian cooks in Japan.

The unprecedented challenges have affected not only the restaurant business but also the lives of Indian cooks in Japan, who rely heavily on these restaurants both for their livelihood in a foreign country and to support their families in India. The narratives of the restaurant owners and cooks reveal the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on restaurant owners and particularly highlight the vulnerability of Indian migrant cooks. Due to the state of emergency enacted across Japan, in-person meetings were impossible, so all interviews were conducted through audio or video calls. I spoke to nine restaurant owners, two of whom allowed me to use their real names. Some owners allowed me to use their restaurant names, but not their personal names, while others did not want me to use either. I also spoke to four cooks who also shared their situations and those faced by other cooks that they had contacted at my request or had been in touch with during this crisis. These cooks do not work in the same restaurants as the owners that I interviewed, and the cooks' names are not disclosed due to privacy concerns. My medium of communication with all the cooks was Hindi; with the owners it was English, Hindi, or a mix of both.

Indian restaurants in Japan and their Indian cooks - a background

There are many ostensibly Indian-style restaurants in Japan, but not all serve traditional Indian curries. Over the past two decades, there has been a rise in the number of curry restaurants that, despite being advertised as 'Indian restaurants,' are not necessarily run by Indians and might not even have Indian cooks. In particular, the number of Nepalese-run restaurants has surged, according to many Indian owners.

The proliferation of curry restaurants in Japan over the years has led to increased competition. Mr. Kumar, who is 55 years old and started his

restaurant in 1986, explained that "Things changed after the bubble economy, but also Nepalese people started running cheap restaurants and Indians also started moving in the direction of making curry houses rather than concentrating on a good atmosphere, good quality and good service." Due to this trend, some Indian restaurants were already barely scraping by before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, facing the constant challenge of balancing the desire to serve 'authentic' Indian cuisine with the need to maintain competitive prices.

COVID-19 Challenges

Owner Narratives

Ganesan Hari Narayana owns two restaurants in Tokyo's Edogawa Ward, an area that boasts a sizable Indian population. He expressed frustration with the current state of his businesses, saying:

This is a very difficult time — the customers are very much afraid, and they don't come out. Our service through Uber Eats is doing well, but our overall sales are down by 60%. It is going to be very difficult. Business already started suffering in March, but in April it has been totally flat.

One restaurant mainly dealt with lunchboxes for schools, outdoor catering and birthday parties, but as a result of the coronavirus, the demand for those services has dropped a lot. Due to the current situation there are no birthday parties, our Holi event got cancelled, as did many other events, and the schools are closed. So, I shut that restaurant. My other restaurant, Govinda (a vegetarian restaurant next to the Indian temple), is still going, but we reduced our working hours during the emergency as per the government request.

Anil Raj moved to Japan in 1998 with Credit

Suisse and worked for other well-known banks until starting his first south Indian restaurant in Tokyo in 2005 under his company Rajgroup, which he founded the same year. He later established four more branches in Tokyo and its vicinity. His sixth branch, in a new building, opened in June. However, because of the COVID-19 situation, there wasn't rush of customers this time, unlike the openings of his restaurants in the past.



An inauguration party of Nirvanam Kita Branch in 2018 - before social distancing. (Photo credit - Nirvanam Restaurant of Raj Groups)

One of his branches in Tokyo had to be closed due to the temporary shutdown of the building where the restaurant is located. His other four restaurants remained open, but in compliance with the government's request, he decided to close at 8 pm. He said, "Our sales are only 20% of what they were before the COVID-19 outbreak, and in some branches that figure is as low as 10%. The business started feeling the strain in March, but in April things got even worse. Even takeout isn't doing well, because the moment you say 'home delivery,' the first thing that comes to mind is pizza, not Indian food."

Mr. Narayana, Mr. Raj and other restaurateurs I interviewed emphasized that they had hardly any Indian customers these days, and their remaining walk-in customers were mainly Japanese. It seems that Indians have been mostly opting to use Uber Eats or purchase take-out, if they patronized restaurants at all. Overall sales, depending on the restaurant, varied between 20% and 40% of what they were before the coronavirus hit.

Consequences of Losing Revenues and Support from the Government

Some owners succeeded in negotiating deferred rent payments for their buildings, while others had no choice but to continue paying as usual. One owner expressed his concern in this regard:

One of the biggest problems as a result of less revenue is the rent. Many in my circle running a restaurant are trying to negotiate with the owners to either get a waiver or time for payment. A lot of owners are saying that a waiver is not possible, but they are ready to give time. Some of them have given 2-3 months to pay but then that is just deferring the payment. Once the payment is deferred, that means that this whole year we will not make a profit at all. Maybe we will start making a profit next year, but only if the situation starts getting better from this June.

After the rent, most of them commented on the salaries of the cooks being a major concern. The owner of Indoya restaurant explained: "I will be paying my cook 100% regardless of the situation, even if that means paying from my own pocket. We are living like a small family and I don't want them to be in any trouble."

A few are paying 100% of salaries to their cooks, while others have paid only 50% from

April. The amount they have decided to pay has more to do with their financial means than the size of their restaurants. In fact, many chain restaurants with a large staff were more likely to defer payment than solo shops with less staff. Another owner said, “To pay the staff salaries I had to bring in money through India. At present, I have deferred payment, giving only 50% now and the rest later.”

Those in the Indian restaurant industry, like many other small and medium-size business owners in Japan, rely on Japanese government support in the form of subsidies and interest-free loans both to individuals and businesses. Apart from the ¥100,000 handouts for all residents, the government has made provisions for a ‘Special Loan from Emergency Small Funds,’ which range between ¥100,000 and ¥200,000 with no interest and with possible exemption from repayment. It has also established a special COVID-19 loan program (on the scale of 500 billion yen) with a reduced or zero interest rate and no guarantor required to support micro, small and medium-sized business operators and others (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020).

Most of those I spoke to who have restaurants in Tokyo and its vicinity have applied for loans in these two categories. They also expressed frustration with the bureaucratic application process for the loans, and with the fact that there is no assurance regarding the amount they will receive or when it will arrive. Those with restaurants in Tokyo could also apply for a grant of up to ¥500,000 or ¥1 million if their company owns more than two shops (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2020). A condition of this, though, was that they follow the government’s request to shorten working hours and close their restaurants at 8 pm. Most owners were getting help from a Japanese acquaintance, or the company accountant in the case of chain restaurants, to assist with translating loan documents. They were expecting to receive some support by June, but

in the meantime, there was no way to avoid expenses such as rent, utilities, and personal living expenses. While some I spoke to had transferred money from India, others were already using up their savings in Japan.

The owners also expressed concern for the cooks due to their reduced working hours. Mr. Raj explained:

In the first week of April we started closing down for dinner and opening only for lunch. But the problem was that these guys all live together, so after lunch they started drinking heavily and fighting. So, in the second week I decided that whether I make money or not, it’s important to live a peaceful life, so I started opening in the evening as well. The government has asked us to stop serving at 8 pm, so that is what we are doing.

Mr. Narayarana started a *bento* box (lunchbox) service not only for take-out, but also for making donations. In collaboration with the Indian community, the restaurant is distributing the *bento* to hospital workers as a way of thanking them. Additionally, they also distributed it to support Japanese single mothers who are struggling as a result of the pandemic. While this effort has been in part for a noble cause, it also helped keep the restaurant in business and the cooks occupied with work.



Take out bentos by Govinda's - for sale and donation (Photo credit: Govinda's restaurant)

Those restaurateurs living in Tokyo scrupulously followed the government's request to close at 8 pm in order to fulfill the condition of the subsidy, despite the resulting loss of revenue, even while other restaurants in the area remained open past 8 pm.

Cooks' Narratives

According to official statistics, the number of Indians in Japan has risen from 7,478 in 1997 to 35,419 in December 2018 with the majority, 13,321, residing in Tokyo.¹ Those in the Technology/Humanities/International Services category, 7,753, comprise the largest number of working Indians. Next is Permanent Residents, 6,090, who are either involved in business or another category of professional work. After this are those with Skilled worker visas, 5,237, who formed the third-largest group.²

The IT boom has been the focus of Indian migrants in Japan that is given the major credit for the rise in the number of Indians in the country. Even though they are the largest working groups and their number has

increased by 93% from 4,017 in 2006 to 7,753 in 2018 the number of Indian migrants under the skilled labor category most of whom are thought to be cooks, has gone up by 170% from 1,938 in 2006 to 5,237 in 2018.³

The cooks who moved to Japan to work come from all over India. Most experienced domestic migration within India before they moved to Japan, and some have also worked in other countries. Their migration to Japan is often arranged by Indian restaurant owners, or sometimes comes via chain migration through friends or relatives who are already working in Japan. They are able to acquire a visa as a 'cook', which falls in the skilled labor visa category. Some of these migrants' risk being scammed by their agent, in most cases the restaurant owners, as they are asked to pay a lump-sum for visa documentation before their arrival to Japan. According to my informants, the price of this can vary with the usual minimum being around ¥1 million, approximately \$9,300.



An Indian Cook working in the kitchen of his restaurant in Tokyo. The photo was taken by the writer during fieldwork on Indian cooks in Japan in 2018.

The cooks' salaries generally range between ¥50,000 and ¥150,000 per month depending on their work experience and the discretion of the owner of the restaurant. Considering the

minimum hourly wage for Tokyo was ¥1,013 as of October 2019, many of these cooks are clearly being underpaid. However, most of them get accommodation in shared housing with other cooks, with the rent and utilities taken care of by the employer. They can also eat their meals at the restaurant at no charge.

Cooks work long hours, usually starting at around nine in the morning and finishing at around eleven at night, with two to three hours' break during their shift and one day off during the week. Their job not only involves cooking, but also cleaning the kitchen, the dishes, and at times the main restaurant dining area. Some of them are also responsible for shopping for ingredients and other items required by the restaurants, and there are also occasions such as parties where they end up working on their day off. Their life usually revolves around the restaurant, spending most of their waking hours there, eating there, and living in shared accommodation with their colleagues.

Many of the cooks have left families behind in India and send 75 to 90% of their salaries back home to support them and their children's education. Many Indians in different visa categories bring dependents, but it is relatively unusual for a cook to bring dependents. The life of the average Indian cook working in one of Tokyo's Indian restaurants was not easy, even before the coronavirus pandemic.

Cooks' lives during COVID-19

In audio-call interviews that were conducted between April and June, the cooks spoke of the hardships they have experienced as a result of the state of emergency in Japan. The cooks I spoke to were not working and were reluctantly staying at home. As one of the cooks put it:

This month the restaurant closed on April 10. Last month we got 50% salary, but this month we were only given ¥20,000. We

were told by our owner that we would be given ¥100,000 by the government, and we are waiting to get the forms so that we can fill them out and apply for that. The owner has said he's applying for a loan, and once he gets that, he might be able to give us money. We understand that he hasn't received the money to pay us, so there isn't much we can do.

He added,

I had to borrow money from a friend. He works for an Indian restaurant chain and they received full salaries. So, he helped me out. I can't send any money to my family, and I worry about that because my wife, parents and children are all dependent on my income, and at this time I don't have any, not even to support myself. I really hope the government can do a bit more to help. I've been surviving on whatever food I have. But it's a really tough time. I can't meet anyone, there's nothing to do at home. I mostly spend my time watching Hindi movies and playing video games, talking to friends, family and so on. But it's a really stressful time.

The situation has created a vacuum not only in their pockets but also in their lives. Many were not even aware of their legal rights, according to which, under Article 26 of Japan's Labor Standards Law, their employers must pay them equal to or more than 60% of their average salary in the event of business suspension (Foreign Workers' Handbook). Even those who were aware of their legal rights felt that as foreigners in Japan, whatever little support they had was coming only from their employer and they didn't have the strength to fight them, so they had resigned themselves to the situation. Their language skills in Japanese and even in English tend to be very limited, and at this time of crisis they felt there was nothing they could do but sit at home and distract themselves by watching YouTube, talking to

their friends and family in India, and waiting for things to return to normal.

Another cook described a similar experience:

I didn't receive any salary this month, but for March I received my full salary, and I've been surviving on that. My rent and utilities are paid for by the boss, so that's a relief. But next month they are offering me another, temporary place to stay as they are shutting down this restaurant. So, I will be unemployed from here on and will have to look for a new Indian restaurant to work.

The restaurant I work in is in a mall, and the building housing the mall is closed, so unlike some of the cooks I know, I can't have access to the restaurant and eat there. I have to rely on my own food supplies. The boss has told me clearly that he cannot pay me a salary this month. I'm waiting to get money from the government, but I can't send money to my family and don't know for how long, because we don't know how long the situation will last.

The cook was asked to move from his current residence, which is provided by the owner, because the restaurant is closing and the owner was planning to cancel the lease for the restaurant as well as the residence for the cooks. Due to the current situation, the owner is offering him a temporary place to stay elsewhere, but the cook wasn't sure how long he would be able to stay in this new place since he would soon be officially laid off from work at his current restaurant.

Despite the anxiety over infection, compounded by the housing and financial uncertainty, it is unlikely that any of the cooks would be able to move to a more secure job situation since no restaurants are hiring. In effect the cooks are in situation where they cannot make changes without making their situation worse.

Vulnerability

For some owners, it has been a challenge to maintain staff morale due to the economic crisis and fear of being infected with the coronavirus. Some of their cooks were in India when the government of India shut its borders on March 24th, restricting both outbound and inbound flights. With the emergency later announced on April 7 in Japan, these cooks stuck in India have had to take extended unpaid holidays until the situation can be resolved in both countries. When the cooks go on vacation to India, they are usually not paid a salary for the period they are away. They can take long unpaid vacations that last as long as a month. Some cooks had gone to India before the lockdowns in India and Japan were announced. Originally, they were to come back to Japan in April and start work, but now due to the coronavirus situation, their return has been delayed indefinitely. On the one hand, flights from India to Japan are limited because of the Covid-19 situation, and the re-entry ban imposed on foreigners by the Japanese government has also made it hard for not just cooks but all Indians to enter Japan (Wadhwa 2020) Lastly, because the owners have asked the cooks to extend their "vacations" to avoid having to pay them, the cooks are back in Japan. So, the cooks who are in India may not be able to return to Japan and work anytime soon, forcing them to lose out on months of salaries. On the other hand, some of those stuck in Japan without work and salary, or with their salaries sharply cut, are wondering whether going back home would be a better option for them. One of them commented during our interview on May 7th:

If there were flights running, I would have gone to India. At least I could have been with my family at this difficult time. Or I could do what little I can — like even open a small *dhaba* (a roadside restaurant).

This situation is quite severe for cooks, as there is fear both when they are working and when they are out of work as most now are. If they are still going to the restaurant, they run the risk of contracting the virus. If they are not able to work, they not only lose money, but also suffer in terms of their mental health. Going back to India is not an option at the moment because of the limited number of flights and restrictions on domestic travel in India, so they remain separated from their families without knowing when they can be reunited again. Furthermore, even if they do return to India, there would be no guarantee that they could find a job under these circumstances.

The cooks currently rely on the cash handout of ¥100,000 that the Japanese government announced it would grant to every resident of Japan. Those I spoke to were made aware of this by their restaurants' owners, but despite the fact that they applied in May, they did not get any money until July. 2020) They are not happy about not receiving their salaries, but felt that they had little choice but to wait things out despite realizing that ¥100,000 would not be enough to survive on, especially for those who have not received any salary since the declaration of the state of emergency.

Impact of India's shutdown on the larger Indian community

The restaurants get their supplies from Indian grocery shops in Japan, which import most of their products from India. The coronavirus shutdowns have hit sales hard, causing the restaurants to lose revenue and disrupt their cycle of payments, including rent, utilities, and salaries. If the lockdown situation continues in India, then grocery suppliers in Japan will not be able to import their products from the country. This would deliver a major blow to the entire Indian community in Japan, as not only restaurants, but also other Indians living in Japan rely on these grocery stores for the

products most familiar to them.

According to restaurant owners who had spoken to suppliers, they have enough stock to last about 2-3 until July/August. However, they were worried that if the lockdown continues after that, they will run out. After India loosens its lockdown, the country will likely prioritize its domestic needs over exports, which could lead to inflation of prices for items exported to Japan, adding another unwelcome extra expenditure for the restaurants and other community members.

Striking a Balance

In the early stages of the outbreak, Indian migrants in Japan – not just those in the Indian restaurant industry – anticipated that Japan would be able to handle the situation well, but over time that confidence has evaporated. As one restaurateur commented,

I think there are a lot of areas where Japan could have taken it seriously earlier. I think they could have done better by taking strict actions right from when the (Diamond Princess) cruise ship was here. Even now they have not enforced a lockdown. It would have been better if they had forced us to shut down our shops, at least for a month, and then we could have got back to normal life sooner.

Although the rates and numbers of infections and death in India far exceed those of Japan, India did introduce a lockdown at a very early stage. As of March 24th, there were only around 500 cases of COVID-19 in the country, but at that time Japan remained focused on the Tokyo Olympics; in fact, the government declared the postponement of the games the same day. Many Indian migrants feel that Japan should have taken stronger action much sooner as well, the common sentiment being that if the government had implemented a real lockdown

earlier, Japan would be in better shape by now. News of hospitals turning away patients with the virus and Japan not carrying out large-scale testing have been matters of great concern for many, but particularly for those in the restaurant industry, because the longer social distancing measures remain in effect — even if they are voluntary — the more challenging it will be for restaurants to survive.

As the coronavirus and the fear accompanying it has spread across Japan, so has the economic fallout for bars and restaurants around the country. Even though the nationwide state of emergency declaration was lifted for the whole country, many customers are likely to steer clear of restaurants for some time due to fear of contracting COVID-19, prolonging the economic pain. Right now, the people I spoke to, though frustrated, were trying their best to maintain a positive frame of mind and be hopeful that things can start to get better. However, if the situation worsens again in the fall, the consequences for many will be serious. Even by the time of this writing (August 2020), business was very slow and many of the cooks could not receive their regular salary again.

In their interviews, the owners expressed a sense of responsibility and concern toward the cooks – financially, psychologically, and in terms of the risk of contracting COVID-19. The cooks, on the other hand, though fearful of the virus, are eager to return to work. Being busy at their restaurants would guarantee their income and give them a sense of security, whereas sitting idle at home they brood over their finances and health.

One cook expressed his sense of insecurity as a foreigner in Japan:

At this point, it is very hard as a foreigner in Japan. Even in normal circumstances Japanese treat us as foreigners, and at this time of the coronavirus, they might treat us worse if we happen to get COVID-19. I had a cold and cough a couple of weeks

ago and I was really worried that it could have been COVID-19. I went to see a doctor and he gave me medicine and it seems to have been working so far, but I was really scared because I thought I might have been exposed while working in the restaurant.

These cooks really have few options, as their entire livelihoods in Japan depend on the restaurants. They are caught between a rock and a hard place, whether to work or not, and whether to stay in Japan or plan to return to India when flights resume. As of August, the latter is not yet available to them. If their employers do choose to close their restaurants for whatever reason, there is little the cooks can do. While they stay in Japan, their options are to either stay at home and do nothing or try to work (if their restaurant is open) and risk contracting the virus.

The Japanese government is applying the equivalent of a band-aid on the wounds of small and medium-sized businesses. The question remains whether restaurant owners have the means at their disposal to stem the bleeding, patch up the wound and, eventually, restore the health of their businesses, safeguarding their livelihoods and those of the cooks that depend on them.

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This article is a part of **The Special Issue: Vulnerable Populations Under COVID-19 in Japan**. See the Table of Contents [here](#).

Please also read our previous special **Pandemic Asia** on the impacts of COVID-19 in the larger Asia-Pacific region, edited by Jeff Kingston, delivered in [Part 1](#) and [2](#).

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Notes

¹ For more on Indian migrants in Japan refer to (Wadhwa forthcoming)

² The Dependent Visa, 8,547, is the most widely held. This category is comprised mostly of women who move to Japan after marriage, as well as their children. While the cooks fall under the skilled labor category, the owners could be permanent residents or Business manager/investor category visa which was about 396 as of December 2018.

³ The figures have been taken from official statistics of the Ministry of Justice.