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India Blog Series: Gastrodiplomacy: Winning Hearts Through Feeding The Stomach ^[1]

APDS Blogger: Hend Alhinnawi

LOS ANGELES --- Food has always been the epicenter of celebrations in my family. In Arabic, *iftar* is much more than a proverbial breaking of bread, it's a chance to connect with the community, an opportunity to bury the hatchet, and an excuse to eat until you sweat, my personal favorite. Growing up in a diverse community in California, I enjoyed home-cooked Indian dishes, courtesy of my mother's friends. I remember learning about India's history and subsequently falling in love with its diverse culture and folklore, all during dinner. In retrospect, that was gastrodiplomacy at work.

Blogger Paul Rockower describes gastrodiplomacy as a way to use "culinary delights to appeal to global appetites, and thus helps raise a nation's brand awareness and reputation." The Indian dishes served all around Los Angeles are a large part of India's public diplomacy because they are closely related to India's rich history, diverse regions, and religions. A single bite, robust with the different spices and flavors, captivates the essence of India's spirit and culture.

Food is a catalyst, not only for families to come together, but sharing a meal often creates an environment for business partners, co-workers, community leaders, and educators to exchange ideas for a purpose far greater than basic nutrition. It is an important tool in building cultural understanding, and in turn, breaking down traditional barriers by providing insight into a culture that might otherwise be unknown to a person. While many Americans may never experience the joys, sights and sounds of Incredible India, they can taste the culture through a culinary sampling at their local Indian market or restaurant. By bringing the food to their local communities, these outlets are great for engaging audiences through gastrodiplomacy, one palate at a time.

The India Times reported a story in March 2011 on how Indian students living in Melbourne, Australia began to use gastrodiplomacy to build "amicable relations and cultural understanding between Indians and Australians."

After numerous incidents were reported of violence against Indian students in Australia, the civil society in Australia decided to take their fight to the kitchen, and tried breaking cultural and social barriers, armed with delicious traditional Indian cuisine. In this instance, members of the Uniting Church in Australia used food as part of a larger public diplomacy campaign

aimed at creating an environment for dialogue of cross-cultural issues.

Uniting Church in Melbourne has started hosting monthly dinners for Indian students so they could talk about their fear and hardships in an attempt to make them feel welcome in Australia, said the visiting educator of Uniting Church in Australia, Robert Bos, while talking to TOI on Saturday. 'We are a multi cultural society and initiatives like hosting dinners will help build cordial relations ,' Bos said.

'Vindaloo Against Violence' was another initiative launched by a local Australian named Mia Northrop. The Facebook page she created became viral, with more than 17 thousand people signing on to be part of the campaign where Australians are invited to have dinner at Indian restaurants on particular days. The campaign was designed to curb hostility against Indians by exposing people to Indian cuisine.

The Indian students, in cooperation with local government, religious organizations, and citizens in Australia, used traditional Indian dishes to communicate a powerful message of friendship, understanding, and diplomacy. The overwhelmingly positive response by Australian officials and local citizens to the 'Vindaloo Against Violence' campaign was a good sign that there was an environment ready to welcome the Indian students into the Australian communities in which they lived.

Through the India: Inside Out trip, I am looking forward to speaking with Indian government officials in the Public Diplomacy Division on how food diplomacy will ease Indo-Australian relations. Has gastrodiplomacy been tried in other countries by Indian students, and if so, what were the results? Finally, I am looking forward to exploring India's street food, as part of my own immersion in Indian culture.

Hend Alhinnawi is a graduate student working on her professional Master's of Public Diplomacy at USC. In the past, she worked with the United Nations and AMIDEAST in the Middle East and Africa on international development and resource mobilization related issues. She is also participating in the India:Inside Out Project.
