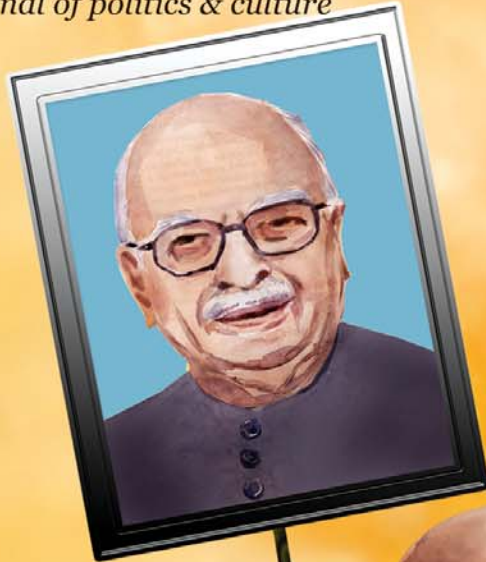


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**Punjab:
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allowed for those few days because of the city's synthetic disaster.

It's ironic that a month after the ban took effect, shop owners are still suffering the immediacy of the act – the Confederation of All-India Traders have been singing their woes: there is no reasonably priced alternative to plastic and no systematic solution offered by the government (paper bags can cost retailers five times more than plastic bags, and jute bags can sometimes cost 50 times more).

San Francisco became the first US city to enforce a plastic bag ban in 2007, but did so after a trial period of one year, during which a voluntary ban by retailers was widely ignored. While some estimated there were 127 million fewer bags being used in San Francisco a year later, a study of litter organized by the city (an environmentally conscious city) revealed that the number of bags on the ground had increased.

The official ban, however, didn't come as a shock to retailers. And showing foresight, the restrictions only applied to retailers that made more than \$2 million annually, which still led to the use of five million fewer plastic bags each month.

It seems, in an international scope, India's plastic industry has nothing to worry about. Their main concern at the PlastIndia 2009 convention, held in Delhi earlier this month, has been the impact of the country's recent import ban on Chinese toys. In fact, there has been little mention of how the gradual weaning out of plastic bags from India will be handled, other than the announcement by President Pratibha Patil that an effective waste management solution will be found to curtail the environmental impact of plastics.

One component of San Francisco's solution to their ban was risky: the production of thicker plastic bags. The intent of the thicker bag was similar to what Delhi has in mind for jute bags, a reusable yet relatively cheap alternative for retailers to distribute. For the plastic manufacturers that began producing the

thicker bags – durable, reusable and cheap bags that can carry five to six times more items – the ban actually translated into an increase in their profits in the initial year. But it seems that without the individual mindset or basic infrastructure in place in Delhi, a thicker bag may just end up in the gutter.

Yet, India's plastic industry already has their sights set years in the future and on larger markets (namely the US and China) while their home market is projected to become the third largest polymer consumer in the world by 2010 and one of the largest polymer producers just two years later, according to PlastIndia Foundation President Arvind Mehta.

As for Patil's hopeful words on waste management, they exist in a city that almost completely lacks a system of profitable recycling or garbage collection beyond that of rag pickers. Of course the solution is a complex one, but I'd imagine it begins with the introduction of trash barrels on every street corner and a more systematic garbage collection system.

Part of the government's hope was that Delhi's daily 800,000 shoppers would, from a mix of self-loathing and practical need, begin reusing the plastic bags they have. Surely this semi-voluntary version of recycling will take time. Bangladesh's high gross of jute made its transition relatively natural. Delhi's jute bag industry will undoubtedly see immediate increases in production, but the real test will

be how Delhi residents respond to paper bags.

Paper would be the logical solution if there was a recycling system in place – they are far more valuable to recycling plants and rag pickers, and are heavier than plastics, meaning far fewer paper bags are needed per kilogram (meaning more recycling profits). But paper bags require 40 percent more energy to produce, which may offer an answer to the previous question of whether Delhi had developed a sense of environmental responsibility. And unfortunately, unless recycling is adopted in Delhi as a necessary solution, the plastic on the ground will be replaced by paper, a far more hazardous pollutant to the environment, specifically the groundwater. Delhiites may no longer fear the rain, but let's hope they don't rely on it for clean water.

In my head, I can hear the refrain of a rather morbid song we were forced to sing endlessly in primary school. It begins:

There was an old lady who swallowed a fly

I don't know why she swallowed that fly

Perhaps she'll die.

So, panicked, the old woman swallows a spider to catch the fly, and then a bird to catch the spider, a cat, a dog, a cow and so on. Before she knows it, she's up to her neck in farm animals. Then it ends simply:

There was an old lady who swallowed a horse

She died, of course.

-Brian Dwyer

Taco Bell: The Arrival

Considering the epicurean dilemma of Mexican-American fast food in India

“Remember what I told you, Dave?” My grandfather always cackles when we drive past a Taco Bell. Grandpops is

90, wizened, but nevertheless sharp enough to mock me even as he drives his Buick down the interstate.

“Remember what I told you? This

one looks like the baby threw up! And that one looks like the baby went to the bathroom! Remember?”

“I remember, Grandpops,” I always frown, slouching a little, always hurt that he could say such cruel things about the food I love so very much. Of course I remember: I was 14. Grandma and Grandpops were taking me out to dinner. Against their protestations, I’d chosen Taco Bell, eagerly ordering what I always ordered: a Bean Burrito without onions, a Crunchy Taco, and a Chili-Cheese Burrito. My grandparents had nothing to say about the taco, but they exploded in disgusted glee as I unwrapped and unrolled my two burritos to douse their gooey greenish innards with salsa.

I remember chewing in sullen silence as my grandfather delivered his criticism; it’s hard to enjoy food that people are pointing at. But even then, I had to admit that they were right: as India is about to find out, aesthetics are not exactly Taco Bell’s strong point.

Taco Bell is one of the flagship properties of Yum Brands, the company that has perpetrated KFC and Pizza Hut upon India with so much success. In a few short months, they’ll open their first Taco Bell in Bangalore. For many Indians, this will be their first experience with Mexican food.

Taco Bell is to Mexican food, however, what Starbucks is to a Paris coffeehouse: a uniquely American derivative that has evolved to resemble its inspiration in name only. You can trace its pedigree back to Mexico, sure, but what Taco Bell serves today is a mutt: Mexican food crossbred with generations of focus groups, cost-cutting innovation, and manufacturing techniques to breed a beast far removed from the original. A Taco Bell taco, with its crispy corn shell containing ground beef (in India, it is likely to be chicken or mutton), lettuce, tomato, and cheese, is a remarkable feat of American engineering: the product of decades of research that have squeezed every spare cent of

material and every extra second of labour out of creating it.

Taco Bell has defined itself by its quest to lower costs. It introduced its K-minus program in the 1990s, ‘K’ standing for kitchen and ‘minus’ standing for subtracting as much of it from a restaurant as possible. After all, when your economy scales across 5,600 stores, 175,000 employees, and millions of tacos, a penny saved is millions earned. So cooking is a corporate-level concern: food is prepared at centralised processing facilities and delivered to restaurants in forms engineered to limit on-site labour to unpacking, heating, or assembling.

Take Taco Bell’s signature seasoned ground beef, which arrives at a store pre-cooked in an industrial-sized plastic bag. An employee heats the bag in a bed of hot water, empties it into a hopper, and then dispenses the beef using a specially-engineered trowel that scoops exactly 1.5 ounces of beef no matter how vigorously or casually the employee wields it. Taco Bell also has special portion-control devices for sour cream, guacamole, and other liquids, and strict guidelines for items that are applied manually, like cheese and lettuce.

Your meal is assembled with time and precision as benchmarks, not presentation. Which means that sometimes your burrito looks like the baby threw up or went to the bathroom; but even if the melted cheese gives a slightly mucousy sheen to your Chalupa Supreme, you’re still tasting a proportion of beef to sour cream to tomatoes to three kinds of cheese precisely calibrated for maximum flavour at minimum cost.

And it really does taste good.

Fast food occupies a far different role in the American culture than in the Indian culture. In India, fast food is a symbol of aspiration, and is priced and patronised accordingly. In America, fast food is priced to the low-end of the market and pitched to appeal to everyone. My Indian co-workers proudly tell me about taking their dates to McDonalds; my

American friends would have been horrified.

Most Americans are connected with the fast food industry as both patrons and cogs in the machine: a job at a fast food restaurant is a rite of passage for the upper-middleclass on down. My wife cooked Pizza Hut pizzas as a teen, and I manned the cash register at a Denver-area burger establishment until I was fired for unsanitary orthodontic practices. (Don’t ask.) Once you’re older, fast food is either a diet staple or a guilty pleasure, depending on your socio-economic status. It’s accessible to all palates and affordable by all classes.

Because of the ubiquity and uniformity of fast food restaurants, and especially because of the relentless global march of brands like McDonalds, fast food is a part of America that neatly symbolises the whole. The word ‘McJob’ entered the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2003 defined as “a low-paying job that requires little skill and provides little opportunity for advancement.” The prefix ‘Mc’ can be added to any word to evoke pejorative associations of cheapness, blandness, homogeneity, and lack of authenticity; it’s said vapid Americans live in sprawling, identically designed homes called ‘McMansions’ and worship in ‘McChurches’ (and vote for McCain).

But even within fast food culture, Taco Bell occupies a strange niche. While Subway is McDonalds for sandwiches, and KFC is McDonalds for chicken, Taco Bell is not McDonalds for Mexican food. Taco Bell skews its marketing towards an aspect of the American culture that’s less spoken of than McDonald’s family image but certainly just as pervasive: drunk diners who enjoy gastrointestinal discomfort.

Taco Bell is at its best after 11 PM, when you’re on your way home from being out with your friends. And Taco Bell’s advertising embraces this time, calling it “the Fourth Meal,” prodding you to “make your after-party sizzle” with a Crunchwrap Supreme.

Combined with its reputation for spiciness, Taco Bell's role in fast food culture is similar to curry vindaloo in the UK: you eat it when you're in an abused state, literally gleeful in the knowledge that it's going to burn coming out in the morning. (It's a macho thing, I guess.)

"The one thing that comes to mind at 3 AM after a night of drinking," says Craig Pullins, a Chicagoan currently living in Delhi (and as eagerly awaiting Taco Bell as I), "is a Chicken Grilled Stuff Burrito."

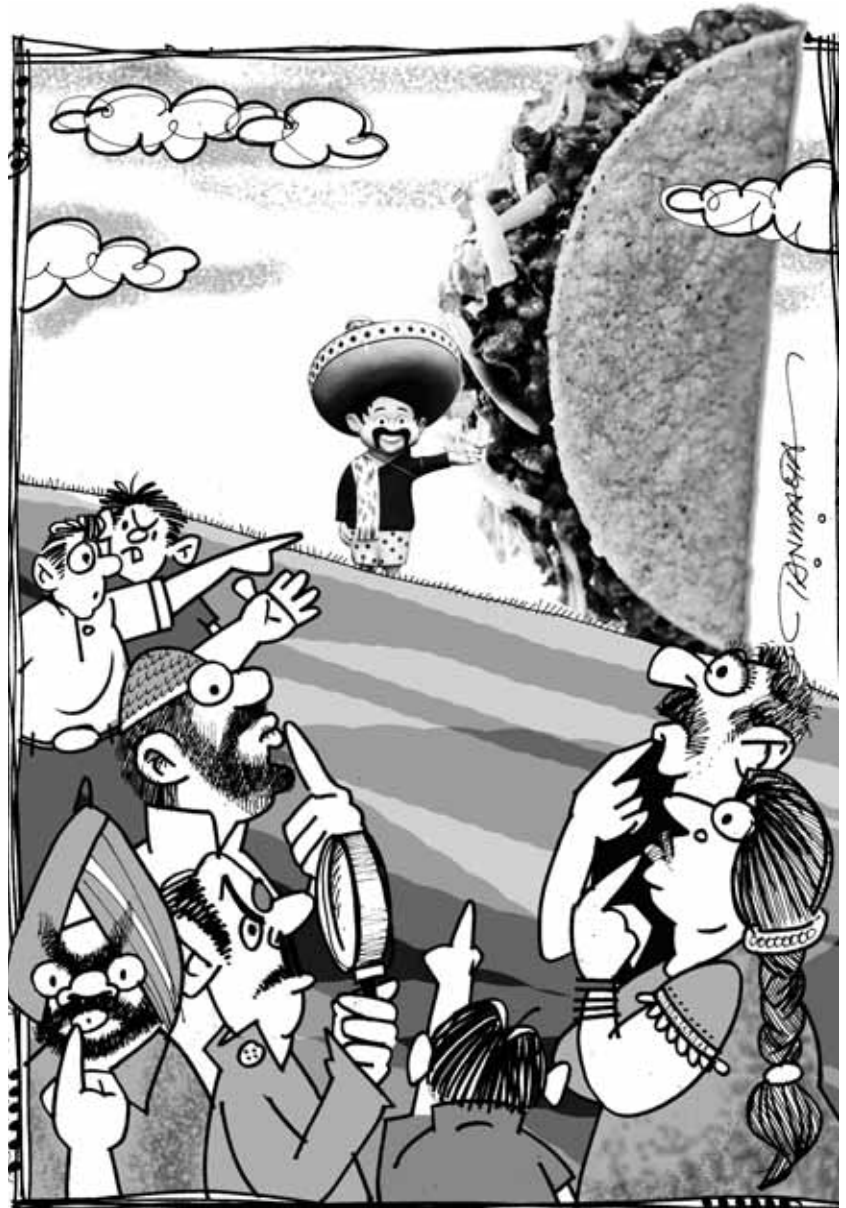
"Goes right in, comes right out," adds Jennifer Jordan Keeler, a 29-year-old illustrator from Denver.

"I love tacos," says 30-year-old Christie Clifford, a video editor from New York City. "I love everything about them and Taco Bell has the cheapest tacos around. They may be dog meat, but they're cheap."

I relate these sentiments to highlight the odd relationship Americans have with Taco Bell: we say negative things, but we say it with fondness, nostalgia, and a faraway twinkle in our eyes. In spite of her opinion of the food's quality, Christie and I and our other friends have spent countless evenings happily patronising a Brooklyn Taco Bell.

In India, Taco Bell will join an increasingly crowded fast food market aimed at the middleclass. Perhaps because of the competition the corporate group expects, their executives were suspicious and secretive with me, refusing to confirm even mundane when's and where's, much less engage in dialogue about the challenges of marketing ethnic food to an audience unfamiliar with that ethnicity. Aparna Chopra, marketing head of Taco Bell India, was audibly uncomfortable with me on the phone, finally agreeing to let me submit my queries in writing for clearance through her superiors.

Her response to my eight questions ("Do you think the average Indian is aware of what tacos or burritos are?" "Ground beef is a big part of Taco Bell in the US. How will you replace it in India?") was coldly cor-



porate. "Thanks for mailing your questions. We have discussed the same internally, and we don't wish to respond to media queries with details at this stage."

And so I'm limited to speculation about the status of Taco Bell India, as anticipation grows in my heart and my stomach rumbles nostalgically for a Baja Gordita. In some nondescript industrial area of Bangalore, I can only assume, a Taco Bell kitchen has been assembled in a stainless-steel clean room as big as an airplane hangar. A dozen men in white coats silent-

ly observe an 18-year-old trainee construct a Cheesy Double Lamb Burrito or a Paneer Enchirito, making notes on their clipboards, preparing for the glorious day when Indian teens will drag their grandparents into the restaurants in magnificent anticipation and chew in shamed silence as their grandparents laugh and point. But fret not, my young Indian brothers – it doesn't matter what it looks like. Because it really does taste good. Especially after 11 PM.

-Dave Prager