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## A STUDY ON INFLUENCING FACTORS IMPACTING CONSUMERS FOOD CHOICE WITH REFERENCE TO READY-TO-EAT SEGMENT IN SOUTHERN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to explore and study the determinants (demographics and psychographics) impacting consumers food choice towards Ready-to-eat in southern India. Food choice variables have been explored using literature reviews and exploratory survey of young consumers in the age group of 20-40. Data obtained from the reliable sources (e.g. the World Health Organisation, Euromonitor International and Datamonitor International) has been used to study the implications of consumer food choice and growing trend towards Ready-to-eat food. Based on literature reviews and exploratory surveys, the key determinants impacting consumers food choice are lifestyle modifications, socialize, quick cooking and taste for school and college goers and convenience for dual-income families in urban India. Findings indicate that Ready-to-eat segment companies can no longer rely on convenience as USP in India, unless the implications of same on consumers health is given equal importance in the years to come. Data obtained from the convenience sample and literature reviews has been generalized for inferring consumption patterns of Indian consumers (population). This study focus on growing trends towards Ready-to-eat food due to lifestyle pressure and dual income in India and also entry of multinational companies in food sector. This paper focus on determining a food choice model in wake of changing food and eating habits in India, using literature reviews, exploratory surveys and reliable data sources.*

### KEYWORDS

Ready-to-eat, Consumer food choice variables, implications, organic food.

### INTRODUCTION

Sixty three years after independence, Indian lifestyle has undergone many changes. Food and taste habits are no exception to this. Indian households today welcome food with convenience in cooking and purchase. The food corporates have been very successful in replacing fresh and healthy food from consumer's diet with Ready-to-eat or processed food. According to the English Dictionary "Ready-to-eat is a type of meal that is often preprepared and served quickly. According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary Ready-to-eat is "designed for ready availability, use, or consumption and with little consideration given to quality or significance". In data Monitor's (2005) survey the Ready-to-eat market is defined as the sale of food and drinks for immediate consumption either in packed form or cup model.

Ready-to-eat has become one of the fastest growing industries in world as well in India over the years. However, with rising global obesity, there has been a gradual demand for the food that is neither processed nor produced using genetically modified organisms.

Consequently, ethical consumerism involving human health, animal welfare, environmental safety and ethical trade worldwide, more so in the west has silently traced a market for fresh, organic and vegetarian food. Organic food is perceived as food without "chemicals" and "growth hormones", food that is "not intensively" produced and is grown as "natural" (Soil Association, 2000; Makatouni, 1999; Davies et al, 1995). The share of organic food sales amounts to 1-2% of the total world food market (Pazur, 2002). Western Europe is the largest regional market for packaged organic food. The market for organic foods is still in the embryonic stage in the most developing economies like India and China and is negligible in Africa and Middle East. Excellent analyses, published by international nongovernmental organizations in western countries has given insights on consumers food choice and healthy eating. However, there is a huge literature gap on consumers food preferences and its implications on health in Indian context. This study is an effort to explore consumer food choice variables in the wake of changing food and eating habits, its implications on health and a growing trend towards ready-to-eat in Indian context.

### METHODOLOGY

The study is basically an exploratory research to give an insight into the determinants of consumer food choices for Ready-to-eat. An empirical investigation has been done to study the implications of Ready-to-eat consumption on health and healthy eating habits of the consumers using reliable data sources. The research has been carried out in two stages. In stage I, literature review has been done to study variables impacting consumers food choice worldwide, more precisely in India. In depth interviews have been done using demographic variables like age, income, education, profession, gender, stage in family life cycle and psychographic variables like changing lifestyles and activities. An exploratory questionnaire has been designed on parameters concerning food choice and a consumer survey has been conducted to study the extent to which consumer demographics and consumer psychographics has an impact on Ready-to-eat choice. Data obtained from the convenience sample and literature reviews has been generalized for inferring consumption patterns of Indian consumers (population). Young consumers in the age group of 20-40 from Bangalore, Chennai, Pondy-cherry, Trivandram, frequently buying the Ready-to-eat products, like MTR, Nestle, ITC, Haldirams, Pepsico, Amul and many others represent the population of interest. This segment of population has been collected keeping in view the difference in food choice behaviour exhibited by school and college going children and families with and without dual incomes towards eating ready-to-cook food from home according to the amount of work pressure and adoption of western life-styles. The criteria of stratification is demographic variables-age, income, education gender and stage in family life cycle and psychographic variables-sedentary lifestyles, activities, interest and opinion have also been used. Sample of size 100 has been used.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Veck (1997) in her research "Changing Tastes: Purchase Choice in Urban China" has investigated food purchase behaviour on the basis of ten-month period of field study in Nanjing, China wherein the adoption of time related food purchase behaviour was studied including use of processed food, restaurant use and frequency of food shopping trips. The objectives of the study was to examine why and how food purchase choice changes in rapidly growing economy. Food

purchase behaviour are examined as part of a "cultural ideology," which, while influenced by material and social needs, relies more on history, habit, inertia, and an aesthetic sensibility to shape consumption patterns.

Nelson (1992) in his research titled "A model of factors affecting consumer decision making regarding food products: A case study of United States and Japan" examined there are many factors like values, eating habits, family structure, tastes and preferences affecting consumer food choice decision making between the countries and even within countries. Multiple regression model has been developed using meat expenditure and cereal expenditure as independent variables and age, average number of earners, female participation as dependent variables. Results have indicated that age is not a significant factor in predicting meat or cereal expenditure in United States. Average number of earners is not significant in predicting meat expenditure in Japan, but was significant in cereal expenditures. Female participation in labor force (US) was marginally significant in predicting meat and cereal expenditures.

Cullen (1994) in his work, titled "Time, Tastes and Technology: the economic evolution of eating out" interpreted that the increasing americanisation of eating out has traced a culture of Ready-to-eat and snacking, giving more importance to convenience and eating out behaviour. Christopher (1994) in his study "A taste of tomorrow's food" has analysed the significance of fusion cuisines in the times ahead. Further to this Brian (2000) in his research work, titled "The taste of tomorrow: Globalisation is coming home to dinner" has indicated that the food of tomorrow will include international dishes and fusion cuisines, blending many national cuisines. Kitchens will disappear from many homes in the future and the concept of purchasing food, with no wish to cook food at all will come. Alternative theories of globalization are examined to determine how food choices are influenced by global forces.

Stephens, M. Pollard and Wardle (1995) in their research work, titled "Development of a Measure of the Motives underlying the selection of food: the Food Choice Questionnaire" have developed a food choice questionnaire using Factor Analysis of responses from a sample of 358 adults ranging in age from 18-87 years. The authors have determined Health, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity and ethical concern as the prime motives of food choice and have also evaluated the differences in these motives with respect to sex, age and income.

Binkley (2006) in his research titled "The effect of demographic, economic and nutrition factors on frequency of food away from home" has used a model explaining visits to table service and Ready-to-eat restaurants that are estimated with nutrition variables added to standard demographic measures, wherein nutrition factors have less impact on table service. However the frequency of consumers very conscious of nutrition factors is significantly very less to table service and Ready-to-eat restaurants vis-a-vis others. Manchester and Clauson (1995) in their work titled "1994 Spending for Food Away from Home outpaces Food at Home" have analysed how food expenditure has significantly increased on eating out. Nayga and Capps (1986-1998) in their study titled "Determinants of Food away From Home Consumption: An Update" identified several socio economic and demographic characteristics of individuals who have consumed food away from home using 1987-1988 national food consumption survey. The analysis was performed using logit analysis. The significant characteristics have been race, ethnicity, employment status, food stamp participation, seasonality, household size, age, income and frequency of consumption.

Jackson and McDaniel (1985) in their research, titled "food shopping and preparation: psychographic differences of working wives and housewives" explores various psychographic characteristics exhibited by working wives as opposed to housewives in food shopping and food preparation by comparing responses of 246 working wives and 181 housewives to several food shopping and preparation related psychographic statements. Results have revealed that working wives have a greater dislike for food shopping and cooking and also exhibited a tendency to be less concerned with the impact of their food shopping and preparation activities on other family members vis a vis non working wives.

Roberts and Wortzel (1979) in their study, titled "New Life-style determinants of women's food shopping behaviour" have used life-style variables as predictors of food shopping behaviour. It has been concluded that women's participation in the labour force have significantly focused attention on changing life-styles and consumption patterns. Schroder and McEachern (2005) in their research, titled "Ready-to-eats and ethical consumer value: a focus on McDonald's and KFC" aims to investigate the effect of communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to young consumers in the UK on their fast-food purchasing with reference to McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). It has been concluded by the authors that Ready-to-eat has been perceived as convenient but unhealthy and therefore Ready-to-eat companies can no longer rely on convenience as USP unless the implications of same on consumers health is given equal importance.

Lowell (2004) in his work, "The food industry and its impact on increasing global obesity: a case study" has looked at the current crisis which is set to engulf both the developed and developing world using a variety of reliable sources like WHO (World health organization) and IOTF (International obesity task force). The author has plotted the global increase in obesity over the last two decades and points out the problems associated with childhood, adolescent and adult obesity with growing liking for Ready-to-eat and snacking. The author has also pointed a finger at the food industry particularly the "fast-food industry", which over the few decades has perfected various marketing techniques which have been designed to make us eat more food (supersizing) and targeting more on schools and children.

Despite huge obesity epidemic, fat consumption however is very high in the western world and is increasing in countries undergoing industrial development (Lands et al., 1990; Trichopoulou & Efstathiadis, 1989). A lot of international research on changing consumption patterns and its impact on the western world has revealed that there is a relationship between the consumption of food, particularly Ready-to-eat and the state of obesity. According to the US National Bureau of Economic Research 65% of obesity is caused by Ready-to-eat and snacks.

Jones & Sheers, Hiliier, Comfort and Lowell (2003) in a study titled, "Return to traditional values? A case study of slow food" outlines the origin of slow food and the challenges involved in pointing a finger at deeply rooted Ready-to-eat industry for global obesity.

According to the report of Euromonitor International IMIS database "The Changing Face of Eating Habits" Obesity has become a major global problem with changing food and eating habits and therefore a trend towards vegetarianism and organic food has come seen more in western countries. Ethical consumerism has become an issue in developed countries, as the media increasingly highlights issues of exploitation, food safety and environmental concerns.

Organic food consumption is expected to grow significantly in future. Western Europe is the largest regional market for packaged organic food. The leading markets for organic packaged foods in Western Europe are Germany, UK and Italy, with estimated sales of US \$1.9 billion, US\$1.6 billion and US\$1.5 billion respectively. The market for organic foods is still in the embryonic stage in the most developing economies like India and China and is negligible in Africa and Middle East. Many empirical studies on consumer perceptions towards organic food in UK, USA, Spain, Australia, Croatia, Greece and many more across the globe concludes gradual switchover of consumer demand from Ready-to-eat and processed to slow food and organic food.

Regmi and Dyck in their study titled, "Effects of Urbanization on Global Food Demand" have analysed how urbanization accompanied by economic development and income growth has not just drastically impacted consumption patterns in developed countries but significantly impacting developing countries as well. Huang and Howarth (1996) in their research titled "Structural Changes in the Demand for Food in Asia" have projected that Asian countries are undergoing transformations in their economies backed by rapid urbanization and this trend would continue in the years to come.

As a result changes in tastes and lifestyles backed by urban living will significantly impact food demand and consumption patterns. Goyal and Singh (2007) in their research work, titled "Consumer Perceptions about Ready-to-eat in India: an exploratory study" have explored that the young Indian consumer has passion for visiting Ready-to-eat outlets for fun and change but they feel that home made food is better than convenience Ready-to-eat. Their findings have revealed that consumer acceptability for Ready-to-eat in the future would be decided only by the quality of food and customer service.

According to the findings of the latest on-line survey from ACNielsen 96% of the urban Indian consumes food from take-away restaurants once a month and 37% of this is adult Indian consumers doing so at least once a week making India one of the top ten countries amongst 28 surveyed across the globe in terms of frequency of eating Ready-to-eat. Nichanjan (2005) in her article "Urbanities in India junk health, turn Ready-to-eat" describes how changing lifestyle and work habits decides consumers food choice for Ready-to-eat. India has become one of the most promising markets for the international food manufacturing and retailing sector. According to Delhi Diabetes Research center, there are 33 million people with diabetes and India is forecast to have 75 million people with diabetes by 2025.

According to the WHO, India has been dubbed as Diabetic capital of the world with 37 million diabetics out of 150 million diabetics in the world. Raghavan (2003) in his research, titled "Food in a Globalised World" has concluded that food is a means of life but it has become meaningful investment for business. There is huge gap in food and health related research in Indian context despite obesity almost being an epidemic in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai,



Bangalore, Kolkata and gradually rising in other urban areas too. It is an attempt of mine to analyse in Indian context the determinants and implications of consumers food choice particularly towards Ready-to-eat and discussing policy implications for the same.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

In view of changing food and eating habits in India and its implications on health and healthy eating among the consumers, the key objectives of my study are:

1. To assess the factors influencing ready to eat food choices among consumers.
2. To find out the influence of western culture in making decisions of ready-to-eat products.
3. To study the implications of consumer food choice for Ready-to-eat on health and healthy eating.

**THE READY-TO-EAT INDUSTRY IN INDIA AND CONSUMERS FOOD CHOICE**

Indian Ready-to-eat industry has been divided into two main segments-regional Indian Ready-to-eat and the MNC Ready-to-eat.The entry of multinational Ready-to-eat giants such as McDonald’s, Pizza Huts, Domino’s, US Pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC),etc. have brought a concept of burgers, pizzas, milkshakes and softdrinks which have been launched into the Indian markets as “Fusion cuisines” and Companies like HLL, ITC, Dabur, Godrej, Pepsico, Amul have pioneered processed food segments.

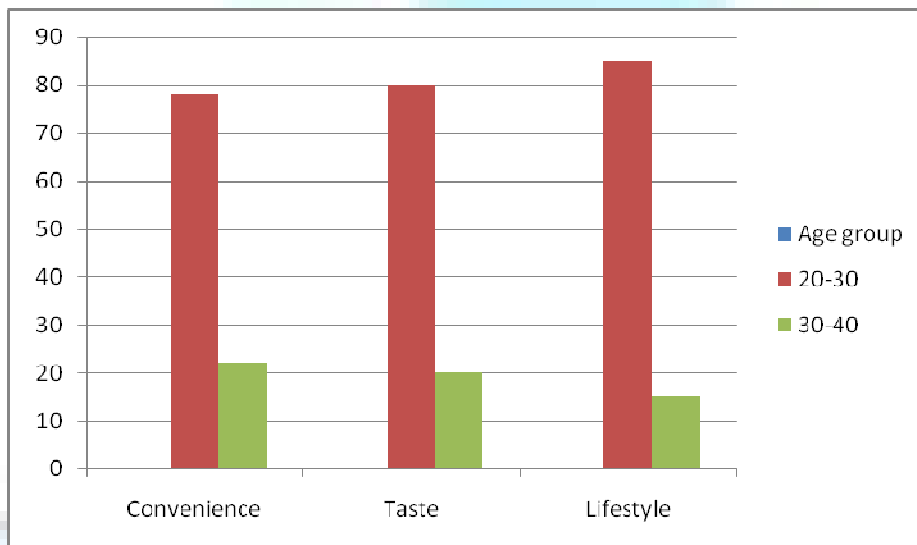
In the society with food combining lifestyle, trend for eating out and food away from home concept has emerged with Indian economy and culture going global in early 90s. Over the years global food giants like McDonald’s, KFC, Pizza Huts and many more have been able to construct a huge consumer base in urban India. People now-a-days are cooking less at home and members of the family are often eating out and depending on processed foods for their daily intake due to lifestyle changes. More so, the frequency of eating out and intake of processed food has been rising with relative importance of more snacks, sandwiches,burgers and American–style Ready-to-eat and a relative decline in traditional food and eating habits.This trend is more visible in young consumer. There has also been an increase in take-aways and home deliveries.

Consumers are switching towards modern eating habits. Over 70% of the urban Indians consume food from take-away restaurants once a month or frequently.24% of the Indians use quality of service as a decision criteria to eat Ready-to-eat and 22% does consider the health hazards associated with Ready-to-eat eating. The promotion strategies of the companies are infact targeting children,youngsters and small families in urban areas.As per ACNielsen’s Informal Eating Out (IEO) survey of branded food chains in India, McDonald’s was found to be the leader in Ready-to-eat chains.There are food chains like Haldirams,Bengali Sweets and many more in Delhi gradually expanding and competing with multinational Ready-to-eat chains. The local brands developed in India are also gaining a lot of ground such as Baristas and Pizza Corner. Some of the major homegrown Ready-to-eat brands who have successfully adopted western Ready-to-eat model in Indian markets have been HLL, ITC, Dabur, godrej, Pepsico, Amul atterjee’s mainline China group, Hot Breads, Sarvana Bhavan and many more. Some of the new entrants in the Ready-to-eat industry beinginfluenced by western Ready-to-eat model have been Amul, Mother Dairy, Nilgiri and many more in the process.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**FACTORS INFLUENCING READY-TO-EAT FOOD CHOICES**

The below table shows the people in the age group of between 20-30 responded that the key determinants impacting consumers food choice towards ready-to-eat segment are convenience,taste and lifestyle.



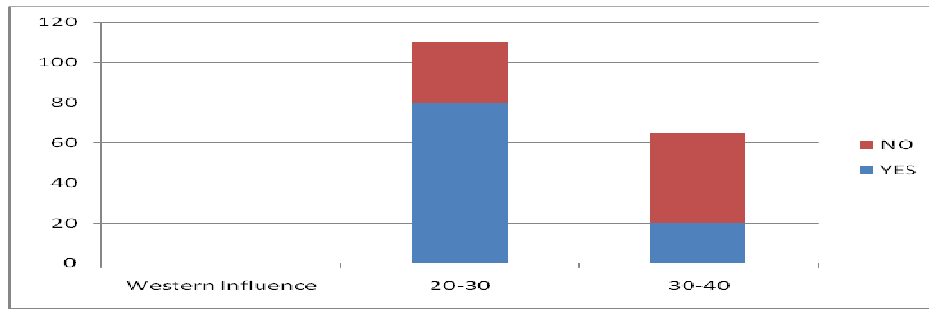
Food choice variables have been explored using literature review review and indepth interviews of young consumers in the age group of 20-40, eating Ready-to-eat.The criteria for stratification is demographic variables - age, income, education, profession, gender, stage in family life cycle and psychographic variables-changing life-style and activities. It has been observed that the Indian food sector is teaming with activity.It has been explored that Faster urbanization backed by sedentary lifestyles, rising dual incomes, growing affluence, and independence of young people in modern societies have been driving a gradual change in the food basket.

Globalisation has also influenced the production and processing of food as well as its sales, preparations and consumption. Consumers around the world now find in their supermarkets the same food produced by the same corporates.The concept of processed food consuming less preparation time came much later with the coming of multinantional food chains in the post liberalization period in early 90’s.And this brought a culture of convenience food in India.With convenience food came “Ready-to-eat culture” targeting youngsters and children with aggressive promos and tasty food. Eating out is perceived as a common way to socialize outside home with friends or a pastime or an outing with family in full service restaurant. People like eating out or purchase Ready-to-eat because it is cheap, convenient, tasty and above all heavily promoted.

The trend towards convenience is well evident in metropolitan cities and gradually seen in urban areas across the country.In a society with food combining lifestyles convenience, prestige, socialization, fun and ambience determines the food choice. Though this food combining lifestyles has not yet eroded in cities and town but does not exist completely as well. This declining traditionality in the food and eating habits with rising incomes and faster urbanization backed by socio economic reasons like reducing household size, increasing proportion of working women and increasing affluence has traced a market for Ready-to-eat culture and eating out. And the Ready-to-eat companies have successfully leveraged the opportunity with changing demographics and consumer’s psychographics.

**IDENTIFY THE INFLUENCE OF WESTERN CULTURE IN MAKING DECISIONS OF READY-TO-EAT PRODUCTS**

The below chart shows that many of in the age group between 20-30 agreed that the western culture influences to buy ready-to-eat food product.

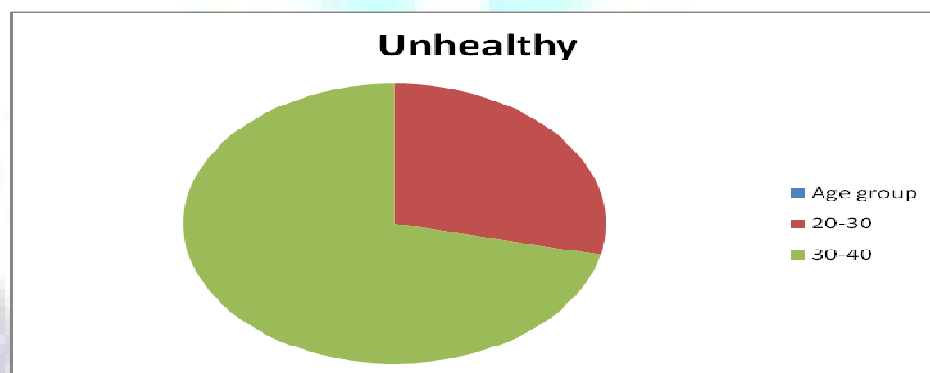
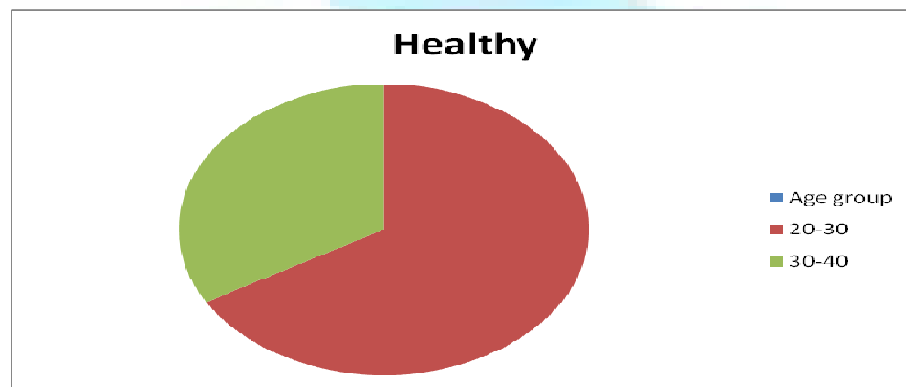


Undoubtedly the Ready-to-eat industry in India has been very successful in promoting fast food culture in India, more precisely in urban India. According to the players in the food industry “The Ready-to-eat industry is the fastest growing industry in India” and will be the world’s largest food factory in the times to come. However,with the faster expansion of Ready-to-eat chains like McDonald’s, KFC, Pizza Huts and others across the country, there has been an extremely rapid change in diet- not just in Delhi, Mumbai, but in smaller towns too. But here a large part of this shift in consumption pattern is driven by Ready-to-eat and the processed food marketers, thereby making people eat more and unhealthy. This is Pro-poor growth. They are currently tapping more than 30 million consumers. This trend towards Ready-to-eat,such as pizzas and burgers,and snacking on “junk foods”,such as confectionary, savoury snacks and carbohydrate drinks have led to consumption of more energy-dense,nutrient poor foods with high levels of sugar and saturated fats. This changing face of food and eating habits combined with reduced physical activity has sparked off epidemics of obesity and other life-style diseases leading to nutritional deficiencies, metabolism disorders, hypertension, diabetes and cardio-vascular diseases.

According to WHO an estimated 25 million Indians have diabetes and this would grow to 57 million by 2025. According to the statistics released by the Government of India tracing statewise health and nutritional status of men and women in India, with respect to BMI (Body Mass Index), year 2007 “Ministry of Health and family Welfare”, one can witness the country with over one billion population, millions of people are struggling hard for one square meal, people from urban, upper and upper middle-class are becoming obese like westerners. Neither of poor or rich is benefited.Policy implications of Ready-to-eat business in India needs immediate attention.Government intervention is required in addressing social dimensions of Ready-to-eat business in India.

**READY-TO-EAT CONSUMPTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

The below pie-diagram shows the people in the age group of between 20-30 responded that the ready-to-eat product is healthy and people in the age group of between 30-40 are responded unhealthy. (Refer another chart)



For decades, Indian food system has been focusing on fresh fruits and vegetables and imbibing food related lifestyle and culture.Eating home cooked food together in the family after exerting a lot in food purchase and food preparation has been the culture traditionally, whereas today quick meals outside the home have become as an essential part of our lifestyle. Traditional food and eating habits are being destroyed under the guise of modern food and eating habits. Eating out earlier was confined to occasional eating. Whereas now—a-days eating out is a growing phenomena of our changing society. Families now spend more than ever on eating out food away from home according to national survey report.

The matter of concern has been the increasing trend to eat away from the home, and also to use burgers, snacks for nourishment rather than to have set meals. In view of changing food and eating habits,children no longer take lunch-boxes to school and rely more on Ready-to-eat and snacks.These Ready-to-eat chains are pulling out all the stops of modern marketing,targeting primarily children and young consumers.This unbalanced and fat rich food, low in nutritive fibres is leading to obesity in children and is a matter of concern. Recent surveys conducted by Delhi Diabetes Research on 3800 children from over 30 government and private schools reflects that 17% children are overweight and 62% like eating junk food.According to a survey conducted by All India Institute of Medical Sciences 76% of the females in Delhi are suffering from abdominal obesity and the risk of obesity is highest in 20% of the population that consumes 80% of the visible dietary fat.

Nevertheless, Obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, with more than 1 billion people overweight and at least 300 million of them clinically obese and is a major contributor to the global burden of chronic disease and disability. Obesity and overweight pose a major risk for serious diet-related chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, and certain forms of cancer. According to the WHO, US has the world's highest obesity rate, with 34% of the population of over 15 years old recording a BMI of 30 or more in 2005, followed by Saudi Arabia and South Africa. Growing concerns over unhealthy food, fat content, exotic processing has widely addressed significance of food which is produced according to a set of principles and standards concerning food safety and quality. Recent food scares, as well as concern for the environment and animal safety and unethical practices has made consumers more aware of the origins of their food and led to growing demand for organic, vegetarian and additive-free food. According to the recent research on global organic food market segmentation regionwise (Datamonitor, 2008, Global-Food).

Americas global organic food market is leading with 49.10% market share, followed by Europe with 47% of the global organic food market value, revealing a significant trend towards organic food. The contribution of Asia-Pacific has been lowest with merely 4% market share of the global organic food market. The objective of the organic food industry is to bring "Green Consumerism in the Food Industry" and promote natural, additive free, fresh and organic food in the benefit of the consumer health, environment and animal welfare.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS ON READY-TO-EAT CONSUMPTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Development is not just expansion of food outlets and changing food and eating habits at the cost of consumer's health. There is a loss of identities in bringing uniform tastes and preferences. As a matter of fact, the country where millions of people are struggling for food, people from upper and upper middle class are becoming obese. Food is a means of life but it has become meaningful investment for business. Social dimensions of globalisation of food business deserve immediate attention. Rising global obesity and ethical consumerism concerning food scares, environment and unethical practices has put up a question mark on corporate social responsibility of food companies. Answer to the same lies in the organic food which is produced according to a set of principles and standards concerning food safety and quality, animal welfare and sustainability. Worldwide change in food and eating habits from processed food and fast to organic food and vegetarianism has forced the food industry to promote organic food. Therefore, organic food industry with a focus on "Green Consumerism" can be seen as a new business paradigm in the years to come in the food trade. Organic food in India is viewed as less harmful and more *saatvik* (promoting spiritual well being), and is expected to grow in importance over the long term. The future direction of consumer's food choice will largely depend on efforts by governments and the consumer awareness for fresh and healthy origin of the food. Policy implications of the Ready-to-eat business in India needs immediate attention.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is exploratory and has some limitations that however doesn't liquidate the purpose of study. Data obtained from the convenience sample and literature reviews has been generalized for inferring consumption patterns of Indian consumers (population). Young consumers in the age group of 20-40 from Bangalore, Chennai, Pondy, Trivandram, frequently visiting the Ready-to-eat outlets like McDonald's, Nirulas, KFC, Pizza Huts and buying processed food like HLL, PepsiCo, MTR, Haldirams and many others represent the population of interest.

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