

Indira Canteens, India

Mickey speaks to Abigail and Josie from Nourish Scotland about their experiences of Indira canteens.

Before moving to Scotland, Mickey grew up in Karnataka, India, where they spent the first 18 years of their life. They've been a student at the University of Dundee for 3 years.

A) What are Indira canteens?

M) Indira canteens are these government restaurants where you get just really cheap food. It's a place you can go to if you don't want to spend too much money on food.

A) Were you excited when they opened?

M) Oh yes, I definitely was. I remember being excited, and I'm still so bummed that I didn't get to go to one before I moved to Scotland. It was such a big initiative. It was going to be cheap, tasty food, and I was like, that's really convenient. Because back then, I didn't think about where I was going to go for university, so in my head I was like, if I go to College in Bangalore, then this is going to be so convenient for me. I can just show up for breakfast and I don't have to cook my own food.

A) What do you think has been the biggest impact or ease created by the canteens?

M) I think it's great for working people because we have insane working hours back home. We don't do 9 to 5's, we do 8 to 6's, 8 to 8's sometimes. So a lot of people don't have the time to eat at home before they go to their offices. We also only get like 20 to 30 minutes of lunch break during our working days. So a lot of workers go to Indira canteens where it's like, you know, it's all prepared and it's a good filling meal.

A) How much is a meal and what would that be equivalent to?

M) Breakfast is 5 rupees and lunch is 10 rupees. That is approximately 5 pence and 10 pence.

A) Wow. That's insane affordability. What kind of meals would you be getting?

M) Very authentic South Indian meals because Indira canteens are a Karnataka-specific initiative. We get Kannada meals which are the local cuisine.

A) So every canteen wouldn't be serving the same meals; they're serving meals that are specific to where they are set up?

M) Yes, definitely.

A) What would be your ideal meal at one of these canteens?

M) There are usually two to three options. For breakfast, they have idli and pongal. Idlis are steamed rice cakes with a spicy curry and a couple of coconut chutneys. Pongal is like rice and lentils. And there is Vada, which is like a little doughnut fried lentil thingy. For lunch, there's rice and sambar, which is just another spicy curry that is a very South Indian thing. It can be made with different lentils and different vegetables. I think they also offer multiple different kinds of sambar because there are vegetables that people don't like.

J) It's nice you get that choice.

M) It's limited choice, but there is choice.

A) When we talk about public diners in Scotland, a lot of people worry that they'll put private restaurants out of business. What do you think? Has there been any tension? Where do Indira canteens fit into the landscape?

M) I think in India, specifically, no. There's not much competition just because there are a lot of people, especially in the capital city of Karnataka where Indira canteens are most popular. We have like 14 million people. So it's really hard to put things out of business over there. A lot of people also have places that they're loyal to for breakfast. But I do know that other low-cost kitchens did increase the size of their idli's and portions of pongal.

A) What other experiences do you have of Indira canteens?

M) My dad's been to these canteens a lot, and his employees have as well. Just because they used to start work really early, and they didn't have time to eat a proper breakfast at home. The Indira canteen was very close to their office, so they would just get breakfast over there. I remember them telling me that it was good quality for very cheap prices. There's a low-cost kitchen in Bangalore called Udipi, which is a private thing. I remember my dad telling me that the breakfast in this Indira canteen tastes exactly like Udipi. When someone from Bangalore says something tastes that good, they mean it.

A) Wow, that's really interesting. So if you're walking into an Indira canteen, who do you expect to see? Is it a mix of ages and people?

M) Yeah, definitely. In India, there's like such a big gap in income. There's really rich people and people on low income who don't mix because it's a very classist country. In Indira canteens, you see everyone, and that was really like a cool thing to me because we need more spaces like that. So yeah, we do see people of all ages, and educational and employment backgrounds.

J) Are these canteens conveniently located? You mentioned that there was one near your dad's office?

M) They're very conveniently located. It's not just high streets as well. They also have canteens in rural areas. A lot of people who live on the outskirts of Bangalore [capital city of Karnataka], for example, have to travel further into the city to work. They can get breakfast from one of these canteens as they travel in.

A) Do you think people appreciate them as a public service? Is it seen as like, oh, this is nice that the government is stepping up for food?

M) It definitely is. It's such an important part of the political debate in Bangalore at the moment. People are actually really upset with the current government for not taking care of these canteens as well as they were before. And a lot of governments from surrounding states are bringing in similar initiatives, and they're working better. So a lot of people in my state are really upset with the government, and that just shows how important they are to people.

A) That's really interesting that there's a resistance to them going away or becoming less well looked after as a public service. How long have they been up and running?

M) Indira canteen have been around for a while, but a while in an Indian sense. So that's like a little over 10 years I think?

A) I read an article about these canteens which essentially framed them as food banks. The way they spoke about them is such a contrast to how you're describing them.

M) I read that article as well, and I was actually quite upset with the way it was phrased. We do have initiatives that are specifically for people on low income and you have to prove your income to be able to access these services. But the Indira canteens are definitely not one of these initiatives.

A) As a student, would you appreciate something like an Indira canteen or public diner in Scotland?

M) Oh, definitely. I so would. There are definitely days when I'm on campus from 9 to 5 and I just don't buy meals because they're so expensive and meal deals aren't filling. You need 2 of them to fill you up. There have definitely been times where I've skipped lunch. I think that would stop if these canteens came to the UK. That would be nice.