

Article

Middle Class, Tradition and the Desi-Realm—Discourses of Alternative Food Networks in Bengaluru, India

Mirka Erler *  and Christoph Dittrich

Institute of Geography, Department of Human Geography, University of Göttingen, 37077 Göttingen, Germany; christoph.dittrich@geo.uni-goettingen.de

* Correspondence: mirka.erler@uni-goettingen.de; Tel.: +49-551-398028

Received: 19 February 2020; Accepted: 27 March 2020; Published: 31 March 2020



Abstract: It has repeatedly been claimed that persistent traditional agriculture and marketing in countries of the Global South, such as India, are a fruitful basis for the foundation of alternative food networks (AFNs). However, literature on AFNs in the Global South is scarce and it thus remains uncertain how the appropriation of traditional agri-food practices plays out. We conducted semi-structured expert interviews with representatives of 14 AFNs in Bengaluru, India, in order to explore their aims and approaches. We found that there is a high variety of different AFNs in the city. One salient discourse among the representatives was that the agri-food system can be improved by a revitalization of tradition. In this paper, we discuss the implications of this conviction on representatives of AFNs. Traditionalism, we argue, does rather represent a deflection from achieving the stated goals of the AFN, namely the improvement of the livelihood of Indian farmers.

Keywords: alternative food networks; India; Bengaluru; Global South; unreflexive traditionalism; defensive traditionalism; peasants

1. Introduction

While alternative food networks (AFNs) in the Global North have been discussed broadly in scientific publications, AFNs in the Global South including India have been studied only rarely [1]. In this paper, we seek to redress the North–South imbalance in the AFNs literature by drawing on our in-depth study of AFNs in Bengaluru, India. The few existing contributions on Southern AFNs show that both smallholder structures and traditional agricultural practices in the Global South are seen as positive, resourceful characteristics on which to base AFNs [2–5].

Goodman and Goodman [6] define AFNs as networks that claim to tie “the production and consumption of food [. . .] more closely [. . .] together spatially, economically, and socially” (p.1). These networks try to achieve this end by opening new spaces in the food economy, which draw on alternative production principles such as organic, Fairtrade, or local production. Examples of AFNs are farmers’ markets [7], community-supported agriculture (CSA), or organic retail trade [8].

In the last decade, Bengaluru, the capital of Karnataka in South India, has experienced the rise of an organic food movement led mainly by middle-class activists and entrepreneurs, who are unsatisfied with India’s agri-food system. This movement is, among other things, based on an increasing number of AFNs establishing in and around the city. These AFNs range from companies developing organically labeled food product lines, which are sold in organic shops burgeoning all over Bengaluru, to CSA initiatives. To the best of our knowledge, no existing research explores the motivations and goals of AFNs in Southern India. In this study, we will therefore explore discourses among AFN representatives and discuss their potential societal implications.

In order to avoid missing out on important developments in this relatively recent landscape of AFN, we used Goodman and Goodman's [6] relatively broad definition of AFN as a guide for selecting businesses and initiatives for this study. The AFNs in this paper are mostly businesses and initiatives dealing with the production and distribution of alternatively produced food. In most cases, we found that 'alternative' was interpreted as organic production. One aspect which, remarkably, almost all AFN representatives shared, was the passion to revitalize traditional Indian agriculture and food culture. In this paper, we will therefore pay particular attention to how this discourse unfolds in Bengaluru's AFNs and discuss possible consequences.

More precisely, we will look at discourses among AFN representatives in Bengaluru. This discourse consisted of statements that claimed that India's agri-food system could be improved through a revitalization of tradition. We conceptualized this discourse predominantly by building on Sinha et al.'s [9] work on new traditionalism. In new traditionalism, traditional India is perceived as inherently sustainable. However, this is based on romanticizing, or even false claims about, the country, and can often be traced back to elitist and nationalist endeavors. By connecting the organizers' discourse to new traditionalism, we aim to show how the traditionalist discourse in Bengaluru's AFNs is connected to wider societal discourses and why a traditionalist orientation of AFNs is problematic. In order to provide a conceptual basis to distinguish between different kinds of traditionalism, we merge new traditionalism with the concepts of unreflexive and defensive localism from previous academic debates on AFNs. Furthermore, in order to capture all cases of traditionalism found in our data, we aim to widen the notion of unreflexiveness and defensiveness.

We will start this paper by providing more context on how AFNs are discussed in research generally and present the rare but nascent literature on Southern AFN. In Section 2, we will present our methodology and also comment on the study's limitations. Our findings will be presented in Section 3. We will discuss these findings and how we distinguish between cases of unreflexive and defensive traditionalism in Section 4. In the conclusion, we will point out the contributions of our paper to academic literature on AFN, but also to discursive practices of AFNs.

1.1. AFN in Research

The first AFNs in Europe and North America started as rather small-scale initiatives with the aim of producing and consuming food with, for example, a less negative environmental impact or better working conditions for the producers. This was followed by a phase of conventionalization in which alternative (e.g., organic) food became increasingly available in the conventional retail sector. Thereby, initially high environmental and social standards of many AFNs became somewhat blurred behind labels such as organic or fair trade [6]. In a third phase, this conventionalization and the resulting decrease of standards, in particular the alienation between production and consumption, recently resulted in a resurgence of AFNs with direct marketing models such as CSA. Direct marketing is often supported by internet platforms. This rapprochement between production and consumption is deemed to lead to high standards regarding working conditions and product quality [1]. Although these three phases occurred more or less in historic sequence, the occurrence of new phases did not mark the end of the previous phase. Instead, the different phases contributed to a range of AFNs, which, as networks, epitomize either one or several phases at the same time. For this reason, in this paper, we will refer to these phases as forms of AFNs. These different forms reveal three distinguishing characteristics for AFNs: Alternative food, such as organic or Fairtrade; alternative networks, offering alternative retail or distribution channels; and alternative economies, which aim to go beyond economic livelihood security such as cooperative models [1]. One AFN can either incorporate just one or several different characteristics of alternativeness, and the rigorousness with which they are pursued also varies [1,6].

Countries in the Global South, such as India, have not been completely excluded from the development of AFNs in the Global North. For example, food products labeled as fair trade are often produced in the Global South. However, the management and the consumers of the AFNs, which are regarded in the studies reviewed above, are often in the Global North. Therefore, the question arises of

if and how AFNs in the Global South incorporate certain distinguishing characteristics of AFNs, if they add new characteristics, and what aims they have with regard to changing the agri-food system. In this, paper we will analyze AFNs in Bengaluru, India as representatives of Southern AFNs.

1.2. Southern AFN in Research

The limited published literature on AFNs in the Global South shows that, like their Northern counterparts, Southern AFNs have been criticized for reproducing existing societal power relations as well as conventional market mechanisms [5,10]. However, research on AFNs in the Global South also deliver findings, which can clearly be delimited from findings in the Global North [11]. Abrahams [4] goes as far as to say that farmers' markets and street vendors, which have never ceased to exist in many countries of the Global South, could be regarded as AFNs because "in part or fully, [they contest or oppose] the dominance of conventional food networks within urban areas of the developing south" (p. 97) [4]. Contrary to Goodman and Goodman's [6] definition, farmers' markets and street vendors do not open new spaces in the food economy. Rather, it appears in Abraham's notion of Southern AFN that endangered spaces in the food economy are preserved. The food sold in these spaces is neither Fairtrade or organic certified, but it is often locally sourced, therefore complying with Goodman and Goodman's definition [6]. However, resistance to conventional food systems is not necessarily synonymous with socially and environmentally progressive alternatives.

The persistence of peasant structures in the Global South could give an advantage when creating or promoting AFNs there [3,5]. According to Krul and Ho [2], peasants often still cultivate without the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. However, they are frequently marginalized, and their livelihoods are endangered by issues like the disappearance of marketing channels for smaller scale harvest, or the threat of land loss to expanding urban construction. Therefore, integrating peasants who cultivate without the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers can help cement newly founded AFNs. Moreover, farmers, particularly those around urban centers, gain economic benefits by participating in AFNs, because it ensures a market for their produce and increases the number of stakeholders interested in preserving their land for agricultural use [2,5].

Emphasizing peasants' capacities may run the risk of romanticizing their livelihoods. This is problematic for two reasons: First, this frequently does not depict farmers' realities, such as the fact that smallholder farmers might use high amounts of chemical pesticides and fertilizers [12]. Second, the correlation claimed between their peasantry identity and ecological sustainability might pressure them to accept hardships (such as the renunciation of labor-saving agricultural machines), which they would not otherwise be willing to accept. Therefore, organizations who speak for farmers would be well advised to at least take heed of the contemporary realities of farmers and what they regard as improvements for their livelihoods [12,13]. This discussion reveals that the integration of peasantry structures in Southern AFNs [13] might result in farmers' opinions being disregarded in favor of environmental considerations.

Regarding the consumption side in Southern AFNs, two aspects have been discussed in the literature so far: (1) The role of AFNs' consumers and (2) their relationship to the AFNs' producers. Newly developed Southern AFNs in particular are at risk of remaining a niche development as their consumers are often part of very specific middle- to upper-class groups [2,14]. Furthermore, in much of the Global South, farmers' livelihoods are uncertain, so improvement of livelihoods should probably take priority over producer–consumer relationships [15]. However, strengthening these relationships could be particularly important to gain trust especially on the consumers' side. In many countries of the Global South, this trust is eroded due to repeated food scandals in the industrial food system. A close producer–consumer relationship could be the decisive argument for consumers to join an AFN [2,16]. Thus, in order to disseminate AFNs, more research is needed about how different networks affect the consumption side. For example, is it sufficient for consumers to simply meet the farmer in order to establish trust, or do they also have to visit the farm? For Bengaluru, we have discussed this elsewhere in more detail [14].

Third-party certification could become redundant if consumers know the producers of their food and trust that they adhere to AFN-agreed cultivation methods. This would benefit peasants, who often cannot afford the pricey certification process [17,18]. Alternative certification systems such as Participatory Guarantee Systems provide a more affordable alternative to conventional third-party certification, *inter alia*, because they do not have to be paid by the farmers. Furthermore, they might also include progress towards sustainability beyond organic certification [2,18]. However, consumers' knowledge and trust in these systems is essential for AFNs to thrive [19,20]. Irrespective of the certification process, AFNs can make an important contribution to creating a market for alternatively produced food [5]. According to Glin et al. [21], these markets are important because if there is no market found with consumers willing to pay a premium price for alternatively produced food, this food percolates into the conventional system and farmers might not be able to continue organic or other alternative farming [21].

2. Unreflexive and Defensive Traditionalism

Sinha et al.'s [9] notion of new traditionalism is the main conceptual basis for this paper. In new-traditionalist representations, traditional Indian agriculture and human–nature relationships are claimed to be inherently ecologically and socially sustainable. Furthermore, such representations romanticize traditional gender and caste roles and their relationship with nature. This supposed tradition is compared to times of colonial rule, development, and modern science. Sinha et al. caution that this unidimensional view of India's past is a way of romanticizing the past and benefits rural elites rather than establishing increased social and environmental sustainability.

In order to distinguish between different outcomes of traditionalism, we merge new traditionalism with the concept of unreflexive and defensive localism, which has been developed from research on AFNs in the Global North. Unreflexive localism refers to the process of hiding problematic conditions of food production behind the localization or regionalization of food systems. While the spatial localization of food systems might result in lower environmental impacts in the transportation of food, it does not necessarily have an impact on, for example, working conditions of producers or cultivation methods. The latter is however suggested by representatives of unreflexive localism [22–24].

Defensive localism refers to a process in which the localization of food systems is imparted as a necessity to defend the AFN's locality from others [25,26]. This defensive localism can eventually become more important to the final consumer than elements such as the organic or ethical quality of the food [25]. Both unreflexive and defensive localism can be appropriated by undemocratic elites, who inject a meaning into it that obscures actual local power relations and makes alternative production vulnerable to appropriation for marketing purposes [7,24].

In this paper, unreflexiveness and defensiveness are primarily used as differentiators for different kinds of traditionalism, an aspect that we will take up in the discussion in more detail. Thereby, we also extend the notion of unreflexiveness and defensiveness based on our findings. However, we use the more original notion of traditionalism [9]. In sum, traditionalism becomes our main conceptual framework, which we refine through the concepts of unreflexiveness and defensiveness.

3. Materials and Methods

Data were collected during two periods of fieldwork from April to December 2017. The first period took place during three months, from April until July 2017. The second period was conducted over two months, from November until December 2017. During these time periods, the first author lived in Bengaluru and, as part of her research work, she contacted and interviewed managers of Bengaluru's AFNs.

Using email, we contacted all the Bengaluru-based AFNs we had identified in our own online research for alternative food producers in Bengaluru. This was supplemented with a list provided by the International Competence Centre for Organic Agriculture (ICCOA), which is based in Bengaluru. We only considered businesses and initiatives involved with the production and/or processing, and the

marketing or distribution of alternatively produced food. We conducted 14 semi-structured expert interviews. As our initial question regarding the interviews was whether the AFNs would make the agri-food system more sustainable, the guidelines for the interviews were based on IFOAM's organic 3.0 concept [17]. Appendix A comprises a table of the six points from the organic 3.0 concept and the questions we derived from it. Based on the advice from animal scientists, working in our research unit, a few additional questions for dairy-processing AFNs were added in order to provide the basis for future collaboration with them. However, the answers to these questions also informed the results of this manuscript.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed applicable for further analysis. Except for one interview, all interviews were conducted in English. In one case, the interview was conducted in the local language of Kannada. In that case, we were accompanied by an interpreter, who was also responsible for transcribing the complete audio-recording into English. Appendix B comprises a table of all interviewed AFN representatives, their backgrounds, and main motivations to start an AFN. The transcripts were then entered into qualitative data coding software and examined by the first author for dominant themes. 'Dominant themes' refers to topics that were raised repeatedly by more than one respondent.

The themes presented in this paper represent a very selective choice of the overall themes, which were interpreted by the first author using a set of theoretical concepts. The respondents had equivocal opinions regarding these themes, which we will elaborate in the discussion section. Due to the selectivity of the presented themes, this paper should be regarded as an extract rather than a comprehensive overview over Bengaluru's AFN. This, and the fact that the analysis was done by only one author, is a clear limitation of this paper. However, by making our case from the selected themes, we aspire to untangle the dynamics of unreflexiveness and defensiveness that, we argue, are common drawbacks in AFNs. This analysis can be useful for AFNs worldwide.

4. Findings

Most of the AFNs considered in this study had direct contact with farmers and helped them to convert to alternative agriculture, which often meant organic agriculture. While some of the AFNs developed an organic brand, which was sold to organic shops, others also marketed their produce directly to the final consumer. Some AFN representatives emphasized their personal contact with the final consumer, while others only had contact with their consumers online. While some AFNs provided home deliveries, others invested in their own shops or collection points in the city. While some of the respondents declared that they only wanted to grow to the extent that they could continue working with smallholder farmers, others seemed to aim towards conventionalization, for instance by setting up modern organic supermarkets. Finally, unlike most AFNs, there were also some who only handled food processing and marketing and did not have direct contact with the producers of their raw materials. Therefore, it is not possible to make a statement about what form or characteristic was dominant among the AFNs in this study. Instead, there was a high variety of different AFNs, most of which displayed elements of all three forms (namely small-scale initiatives, conventionalization, and direct marketing models, sometimes via online platforms) and characteristics (namely alternative food, alternative networks, and alternative economies). A remarkable similarity, however, was that many of them shared the conviction that the answer to many problems of India's food system today could be solved by revitalizing tradition.

4.1. Revitalizing Tradition

Most AFN respondents expressed deep dissatisfaction with the conventional agri-food system in India, especially with those changes that had been introduced during the previous decades. This was often put forward as a major motivation to start an AFN.

Several representatives were particularly concerned with how the situation of the farmers had changed in the decades after Indian independence. R13 (Representative 13) said about this:

“[. . .] 40 years ago, the entire district was sustainable. So most of the villages, almost all the villages [. . .], each and every farmer was self-sustainable. They led a self-sustainable life. They never bought anything from outside. They produced everything within the farm. After that Green Revolution, it brought misery and the model education has brought the misery to our country, the entire country. So now for farmers are not producing everything. They started buying for example toothpaste. Toothpaste, they used to brush their teeth using the neem sticks or chalk. So now we made them to buy Colgate toothpaste. So, money started going out of the houses. The business started bundling and on top of it putting fertilizers pesticides and all. Again, money started going out of the houses. They started eating the same food. Health got bad. And from health and wealth they started suffering. Today the life span is 60 years. In one generation 30 years were lost.”

This quotation reflects that, according to R13, the current agri-food system in India means a deterioration in quality of life for farmers. In particular, two points are addressed by the representative, which cause this deterioration: Increased expenses for durables and consumables and the decline of subsistence cultivation. The Green Revolution and the model education loan scheme are mentioned as the two major causes of the misery. The term ‘Green Revolution’ broadly refers to changing agricultural practices, which were grounded in scientific findings and technological innovations after the second World War. The most significant of the changes were the introduction of machine labor and new irrigation techniques, the cultivation of higher-yielding staple grains, and application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The Green Revolution led to a massive increase in agricultural productivity, but it also increased the energy intensification of agriculture [27–29]. The model education loan scheme, on the other hand, provides bank loans for higher education. Loans have to be repaid one year after graduation or six months after the student is employed. Repayment can become difficult, for example as not all students find employment after finishing their studies, or might encounter other financial problems [30]. R13 claims that before the start of the Green Revolution and the model education loan scheme, farmers were entirely subsistence based and that they had a significantly higher quality of life. According to him, this life might have been simple but it was also healthier.

However, according to the representatives, it was not only subsistence cultivation that contributed to the benefits of traditional Indian agriculture. They also mentioned other issues such as traditional practices to prepare fertilizers and pesticides based on natural ingredients. R4 even claimed that Indian tradition regulated the share that farmers would receive from their produce:

“It is an ancient philosophy of Indian culture that the farmer should get maximum benefit of every rupee for his produce.”

R4 refers to a claim here that is often raised regarding the improvement of Indian farmers’ situations, namely that most of the price paid for an agricultural product by the consumer goes to the middlemen and not the farmer. He then claims that this would contradict Indian culture. Although we will not explore the historic accuracy of the respondents’ statements, it is nonetheless interesting to note the belief of several respondents that Indian traditions and old practices will play an important role in saving Indian agriculture. We argue that these strong beliefs could contribute to a rationale whereby agricultural practices are regarded as inherently good, if they comply with Indian tradition.

According to some of the representatives, another problem with India’s Green Revolution was the lopsided focus on rice and wheat, while millets were neglected as a staple food. Others claimed that this neglect of millets had already started under British rule. R14 said:

“Millets have been in the tradition. We used millets. It’s been grown aside [sic] the different crop, like for example you grow rice as the main crop. Subsidy will be the millet crop [sic][meaning that millets are only grown for farmers’ own use]. [. . .] Just after the revolution, [...] when the British conquered they started using rice and we did all that [...] was introduced here. And people just turn[ed] their lifestyles around you know they all went to rice and wheat and they forgot about millets.”

While R14 does also mention subsistence cultivation, her concern is mostly how to take millets out of that niche and back to being a commonly consumed staple. Despite mentioning the foreign influence, which stimulated the transition to rice and wheat as staple foods, she acknowledges that this lifestyle change was easily accepted by consumers. However, we are doubtful that the handling of millet marketing by AFNs will result in a general lifestyle change towards an increase in millet consumption. During the fieldwork (conducted by the first author), it was noted that millets were marketed at high prices by the AFNs to an urban (upper-) middle class [14]. Any lifestyle change would therefore be confined to this social class. In contrast to that observation, R8 highlighted that the promotion of millet consumption has to target people beyond the urban middle class. To move away from this niche market, R8's AFN ran a small lunch restaurant where they offered dishes mainly based on millets at reduced rates in order to make the grains palatable beyond the middle class. However, he was the only respondent who mentioned that the reintroduction of millets should be class inclusive.

Several representatives made the criticism that in the course of the Green Revolution, a lot of knowledge about traditional agriculture was lost. They stressed the importance of knowledge held by the farmers in establishing a more sustainable form of agriculture. R12 reported:

“We don't have people working in agriculture simply because all of them go to school and study. What do they study? God knows. [...] You don't need to study agriculture. Agriculture requires wisdom. Wisdom of observation, understanding ... ”

While this statement could be read as an expression of respect towards some kind indigenous knowledge of farmers, it also questions any education of farmers beyond what can be learned within the family. Furthermore, R12 expresses a vigorous rejection of agricultural sciences here. The fact that R12's AFN's rules require the farmers to adopt certain agricultural practices in order to join the network, it also contradicts the last statement. It seems that rather than relying on farmers' indigenous knowledge, she questions who should be in charge of conveying the “wisdom of observation” and “understanding”. Similarly, R13's vigorous rejection of the model education loan scheme could also be read as a rejection of an education of not only higher education in agriculture, but higher education for agricultural families in general. Thus, some of the respondents seemed be uncomfortable with rural people entering the higher education system or, in other words, some respondents believed that rural people did not 'belong' there.

4.2. Belonging

Questions of belonging were discussed by several representatives. Most questions concerned people who, in the view of AFN representatives, only migrated to the city, but 'belonged' in rural areas. Some representatives, particularly those in dairy production, were concerned not only about which *people*, but also which *cattle breeds* belonged in India and/or Bengaluru, and therefore on this basis, which of them had the right to be there.

Partly because of university education, children from agricultural families would often migrate to find better paid jobs outside of agriculture. Even former farmers would migrate from their village or their traditional agricultural occupations to find better paid jobs in the city, specifically Bengaluru. According to several representatives, this migration had got out of hand. R1 was convinced that it required well-paid, non-agricultural jobs in rural areas to prevent further migration to the cities, therefore he had the following plan for his farm, located in a village about 70km outside of Bengaluru:

“I want to set up [...] operation to be done from that place, from my farm itself. There are local people who have studied. Not everybody has to come to the city.”

Similar to R1, several other representatives declared that decreasing the rural outward migration was one of their network's objectives and they also marketed their products by mentioning that objective to their customers. Some of the AFNs' homepages and Facebook presences included stories about former migrants who returned to their traditional agricultural occupation with the AFNs' help,

leading a happier, healthier life than ever before. Often, this was combined with the idea of supporting and maintaining smallholder structures. While R2, for example, states that his AFN supported former farmers to become farmers again, he insisted that farms should only grow to a certain extent and he therefore opposed land consolidation. Thus, although the representatives did not agree on how this could be achieved, they did agree that the migration of farmers to the city should be prevented, while at the same time maintaining smallholder structures. In other words, it was asserted that farmers should remain smallholders and that they ‘belonged’ in rural areas, not in the city.

According to some representatives of dairy-processing AFNs, the introduction of Western high-yielding cow breeds was regarded as another drawback of British rule and the Green Revolution. These respondents stressed the advantages of Indian or local cow breeds. Of those representatives, R12 had the most straightforward, yet polarizing position:

“The cows which we are talking about are the cows which belong in this local place from probably 5000–10,000 years. The advantages of their bioclimatic system, they have got used to their bioclimatic system as their DNA is completely in line with the human beings who live here.”

In this statement, R12 stresses that local cow breeds have been found in South India for thousands of years. Supposedly, this led to an alignment of their milk with the digestive system of the local human population. Again, we will not explore the scientific accuracy of this statement. However, we would like to point out that a statement like this can have implications not only for the choice of cow breeds for agricultural purposes, but, following this line of argumentation, one could also draw conclusions with regard to what human beings belong in this area, namely, those who can digest this kind of milk.

Furthermore, these cows were usually referred to as Desi cows, ‘Desi’ meaning of South Asian descent. Most dairy processing AFN representatives pointed out that they were working only with Desi or Indian cow breeds. R12 also elaborated on the meaning of the word Desi for her AFN:

“Desi means native. [. . .] So, we are talking about everything which has been part of this nature 50 years ago, which has in the course of five decades been spoiled by huge technology intervention, huge chemical intervention and a mindless system dominated of [sic] trade and policy. There is a lot of damage which has been done to the earth. Today the topsoil is completely barren and the water table has gone really bad.”

In this statement, R12 clearly prefers Desi to processes in Indian agriculture in the last five decades. As this interview was conducted in 2017, she roughly refers to the time between 1967 until today, which is more or less the time of the Green Revolution. During the course of the interview, she repeatedly circumscribed ‘Desi’ as a normative goal for her AFN.

5. Discussion—Unreflexive and Defensive Traditionalism in Bengaluru’s AFNs

In this section, we will elaborate on how we conceptualize the findings presented above as unreflexive and defensive traditionalism. We will begin by addressing the three main topics, which represent the cases of unreflexive or defensive traditionalism in our data: Preventing rural migration to Bengaluru, a negative attitude towards university education of agricultural households, and constructing dichotomies between traditional India and rather modern phenomena. Furthermore, we will discuss how similar tendencies are addressed in other academic contributions and why we think that they are a reason for concern. In a second section, we will show how the application of the word Desi is used to justify particularly defensive traditionalism. In a third section, we will then discuss why we find it necessary to distinguish between unreflexive and defensive traditionalism.

5.1. Tradition and the Middle Class

The aim of several of the AFNs, that migration to the city should be prevented by providing decent employment in rural areas, can be connected to discourses of reactions of urban middle classes

in India towards rural migrants. Urban middle classes in India might feel threatened in their access to social, cultural, and economic capital by the growing number of rural populations migrating into the city. While this led to a hostility of urban middle classes towards rural population elsewhere [31], in our case, this is reflected in the respondents' declared aim to prevent further migration into the city. According to them, farmers are supposed to remain in or return to their traditional occupation, in their traditional role. This opinion was, furthermore, evident in statements about university education in agricultural families: While one respondent said that farmers would need specific agricultural education, others completely rejected the purpose of university education for agricultural families. We argue that these endeavors are an example of defensive traditionalism. Firstly, they are defensive in the sense that a dichotomy between the rural and the urban is shaped. In contrast to the original concept, where the AFN's locality is depicted as needing defense from other localities, in our case, the line of defense is drawn within the AFN, namely between urban and rural participants of the network. Secondly, within the AFNs, this discussion around migration clearly transcends the discussion of *where* (localism) rural people should live, into the discussion on what their *traditional role* is (traditionalism). This way, the traditionalization of the food system regarding traditional roles is imparted as a necessity to defend groups of rural and urban population from each other.

A more rigorous example of how urban middle classes seek to determine the role of farmers was the rejection of agricultural or higher education, which was expressed by two of the respondents. A similar rejection was also reflected in a study by Khadse et al. [32] on the Zero Budget Natural farming movement in Karnataka. We argue that in our case, these findings represent another facet of how some representatives sought to influence farmers' livelihoods. Apart from asserting that farmers should remain in rural areas and maintain smallholder structures, representatives also thought that farmers should not receive agricultural or higher education.

We regard the rejection of education as a manifestation of new-traditionalist writings in alternative farming movements [9]: Instead of criticizing agricultural education for any particular characteristics, it is depicted as a scapegoat in opposition to supposedly superior traditional wisdom. Although there might be reasons to criticize the curriculum of agricultural schools and universities, we regard the vigorous rejection of agricultural education as exaggerated. We argue that fostering the return of farmers to a supposedly traditional agriculture without any formal agricultural education conceals other possible consequences of a lack of such education. R2, for example, said that farmers would not be able to value their own work as labor because they would lack skills in bookkeeping. Knowledge gaps such as these would make farmers more vulnerable to (self-) exploitation. Thus, parallel to unreflexive localism [22–24], we suggest that while the application of traditional agricultural techniques, such as the application of plant-based pesticides, might result in fewer negative environmental impacts, it does not necessarily mean an improvement of farmers' livelihoods. As our example above illustrates, unreflexive traditionalism regarding farmer education may have negative impacts on the farmers' autonomy.

However, modern education versus traditional knowledge was not the only dichotomy drawn by the respondents. Also, they presented the current agri-food system, the Green Revolution, and Colonial Power as diametrically contrary to the agricultural system of the past. They associated adequate food supply through subsistence cultivation (R13), reasonable payment of farmers (R4), and the cultivation of millets (R14) with this agricultural system. These dichotomies are very similar to those drawn by new traditionalism. They are criticized for oversimplifying the situation and, despite opposite claims made by new traditionalists, not being conducive to making the agricultural system any more ecologically or socially sustainable. Particular practices from the past can help make agriculture more sustainable, for example the cultivation of drought resistant crops such as millets or the application of local herbs for pest control, as reported to be practiced by some of the AFNs. However, it has been shown that India's pre-colonial past is full of examples of ecological exploitation and injustice. Neither the current situation nor the past should therefore be discussed uncritically [9,33]. We classify these statements as unreflexive, as they imply that the application of traditional agricultural practices would necessarily result in more sustainable agri-food systems [22–24]. Contrary to unreflexive localism,

unreflexive traditionalism does not simply conceal problems that cannot be solved by traditionalism, but also includes aspects that undermine purported solutions to identified problems. For instance, the argument that fair payment of farmers is inherently Indian becomes questionable, considering that the property of agricultural land in the country was very uneven even before colonial times [9].

Unlike most of the representatives in this study, farmers in India do not often share a strong conviction about traditional agriculture [13]. This is also reinforced by our data. In contrast to other AFN representatives, the representative who was also a farmer did not mention tradition at all. His concern was predominantly the negative health impacts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides for farmers. He also stressed that in order to establish his AFN, he had worked closely together with agricultural scientists to develop suitable methods to cultivate chemical-free. This indicates that farmers' motivations to participate in AFNs are different from the motivations of other AFN participants, in as much as they are more focused on practical goals such as increased workplace safety, rather than revitalizing traditional agriculture.

We are concerned that unreflexive traditionalism might be used by middle-class organizers to obscure a shift of power relations in the food system. While proclaiming the revival of traditional agriculture, an urban middle class seizes some of the power previously held by middlemen and the industrial food system, in order to establish middle-class interests. Based on our findings, these interests include the production of chemical-free food [14] and the repatriation of rural migrants. Thus, contrary to what the representatives suggest, we argue that the revival of traditional agriculture as proclaimed by the majority of the respondents in this study does not result in the empowerment of farmers in order to improve their livelihoods, but rather in securing middle-class interests in the agri-food system.

The tendency of middle-class organizers of sustainable farming initiatives to defer their initial aims of supporting the interests of rural populations in favor of the agenda of middle-class stakeholders has been described by Brown [13]. He describes this as a deferment of aims, which is partly inevitable: In order to establish AFNs, organizers have to spend significant amounts of time with middle-class stakeholders, which leverage initiatives with resources such as money and political influence. As a consequence of those relations, middle-class organizers become more attentive to the needs of those stakeholders than those of rural populations. Thus, in order to focus more on their initial aims of improving farmers' livelihoods, the representatives of Bengaluru's AFNs would be well advised to become more attentive to the needs of their farmers.

5.2. *The Desi-Realm*

Statements regarding native cow breeds and the notion of 'Desi' contain, as we argue, a particularly defensive character. In Section 4.2, we described how a dichotomy is drawn between Desi cows together with the local people, who are claimed to be genetically adapted to each other, and everything that has been introduced to the country since India's independence. In order to continue to benefit the local people, these Desi cows have to be defended from other cow species. This rhetoric of genetic adaptation is clearly in line with the appropriation of genetics for Hindutva argumentation [33]. Hindutva is a political project that aims to conflate the Indian state with Hindu religion, declaring Hinduism as hegemonic and thus conveying the superiority of members of Hindu religions. Representatives of Hindutva have, in the past, expressed hostility towards other religions as well as xenophobia [34]. The rhetoric of genetic adaptation has a predominantly defensive character because it excludes not only other cow breeds, but also all people who are not particularly adapted to the milk of these cows and (by definition) who came to the area after India's independence. Therefore, we concur with Narayan who argues that "[t]he native-bred cows are invoked as representatives of Hindu purity [...] The Jersey crossbreeds and buffalo are correspondingly regarded as the antithesis of such sociocultural purity, occupying a status similar to that of the former low/untouchable castes." [35] (pp.351). She shows that this kind of argumentation provides the basis to exclude lower castes. Similarly, we argue that R12 is

defining a certain territory and a group of people and animals as Desi. This ‘Desi’-realm then has to be defended from other influences—or as in our case, non-desi beings.

The argumentation of alternative food actors in Karnataka as well as of other sustainable agriculture proponents in India often resembles argumentation structures of Hindutva [13,32]. We find that the defensive statements expressed by some of our respondents, particularly those regarding native cow breeds, can be attributed to Hindutva’s argumentation structure as well. As a discourse prevalent in the Indian middle class [13,33], also specifically in Bengaluru’s middle class [35], this argumentation structure might be another example of how middle-class interests come to prevail in Indian AFNs. Because of the vigor with which a few of the respondents presented such arguments, we believe, however, that they can be regarded as active proponents of Hindutva. This is also the reason that it is necessary to distinguish between different kinds of traditionalism.

5.3. *The Subtle Differences between Unreflexive and Defensive Traditionalism*

It should be considered whether unreflexive and defensive notions of traditionalism might lead to the same outcome. As Dasgupta [35] has argued, even lighter and less aggressive notions of Hindutva leave “little space for the ‘other’, the ‘other’ being Muslims or the lower classes” [35] (p. 22). However, in some of the transcribed interviews as well as on some of the homepages of AFNs included in this study, we found statements clearly endorsing the inclusion of marginalized groups such as sexual minorities, which contrasts with argumentation structures of Hindutva. Furthermore, including the groups mentioned above would mean making a clear distinction from the defensive traditionalism we found in the statements of other respondents. Although those inclusive statements were rare, they nevertheless make us doubt whether both notions of traditionalism should be judged equally.

We suggest the following differentiation of unreflexive and defensive traditionalism: Unreflexive traditionalism obscures many facets of the agri-food system relevant to improved farmer livelihoods or, more ambitiously, sustainability transition, and represents a reduced argumentation of product qualities to increase the influence of the middle class on agri-food systems. Defensive traditionalism goes beyond that by aggravating the divide between rural and urban populations and by actively contributing to the exclusion of foreigners and marginalized groups. Similar to marketing purposes described for unreflexive and defensive localism [7,24], traditionalist arguments are used to market the AFNs’ products to an urban (upper) middle-class.

Similar unreflexive and defensive endeavors have also recently been described by Fendrychová and Jehlička [7] for farmers’ markets in the Czech Republic. They found that organizers of Czech farmers’ markets clearly rejected imported food, and that while their stated aim was to support family farms, in practice that aim was secondary to the goal of providing high-quality food to consumers. These relatively recent findings are geographically focused, which contrasts with our own study, but they are nevertheless an example of AFNs at the margins. This highlights the attention that should be paid to the possible emergence of such endeavors in AFNs worldwide.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the discourses of representatives of AFNs in Bengaluru, while problematizing an unreflexive and defensive traditionalism. Traditionalism refers to a romanticized and sometimes exclusionary way of understanding practices of the past, which seems to gain ground in AFNs in Bengaluru.

More than 20 years after the paper of Sinha et al. [9] on new traditionalism in India, our paper shows that unreflexive and defensive notions of tradition have come to affect discourses of AFN organizers. Unreflexive traditionalism, we have argued, represents an obfuscation of important factors for the improvement of farmers’ livelihoods in order to increase middle-class influence on agri-food systems. Defensive traditionalism, in addition, aggravates the divide between rural and urban populations and contributes to the exclusion of foreigners and marginalized groups. Both kinds of traditionalism are used to market products to an urban (upper) middle class. This way, both

expressions of traditionalism jeopardize the AFNs' goal of improving the livelihood of farmers by shifting the attention of the networks' participants, both producers and consumers, away from the improvement of the agri-food-system to an unconditional acceptance of supposed traditional practices.

We cannot answer whether the improvement of farmers' livelihoods really was the initial goal of the AFNs, or was always only purported. As the vehemence in which unreflexive and defensive traditionalism was expressed differed remarkably among the respondents, we find it likely that the truthfulness regarding the aim of farmers' livelihood improvement varies among the different AFNs. The different vehemence should also be highlighted, as certainly the majority of respondents did not actively seek to exclude foreigners and marginalized groups. However, we have argued that even unreflexive traditionalism, as the more moderate form, will hamper any improvement of India's agri-food-system towards social justice.

This paper also refocuses concepts of unreflexiveness and defensiveness in AFNs, first, by connecting them not only to localism, but also to traditionalism; second, by extending their notion based on our empirical findings. In this paper, unreflexiveness describes all attempts to conceal important facets of the agri-food system in order to present tradition as the solution for improving farmers' livelihoods. Defensiveness does not only delimit an AFN or a region against others, but also serves to define boundaries within the AFN. Whether this is a phenomenon particularly relevant to countries of the Global South, where tensions between urban and rural populations arise because of rural migration, is a question that should be addressed in future research.

Concurring with Sinha et al., we would like to close this paper by stating that India's agricultural traditions certainly have something to offer in improving agricultural sustainability. However, an unreflexive and defensive traditionalism will, if anything, only shift the problems to another dimension. We conclude with the recommendation that the managers and participants of AFNs reflect on practices of unreflexive and defensive traditionalism and try to avoid them as much as possible. A more serious engagement of managers and initiators of AFNs with farmers' opinions and realities could help to pursue the aim of improving farmers' livelihoods in a more straightforward manner.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.E. and C.D.; methodology, M.E. and C.D.; formal analysis, M.E.; investigation, M.E.; data curation, M.E.; writing—original draft preparation, M.E.; writing—review and editing, M.E.; visualization, M.E.; supervision, C.D.; project administration, C.D.; funding acquisition, C.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the German Research Foundation, DFG, through grant number DI 709/2-1 as part of the Research Unit FOR2432/1.

Acknowledgments: We are thankful for the cooperation with and infrastructural support provided by our Indian partners at the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bengaluru. We would also like to thank Annalisa Colombino and Petr Jehlička for editing this special issue and their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Questions for interview guideline with representatives of AFNs in Bengaluru.

Feature	Aspects of Feature	Questions
	Introduction	Please introduce yourself and how you came up with the foundation of your AFN.
1 A culture of innovation	Societal and economic transformation through increased consciousness e.g., reduced meat consumption, promotion of organic lifestyles, fostering spiritual health; Use of Internet technology, CSA etc. to democratize value chain	How do you want to change the food culture of Bangalore? What kinds of technology, methods, and social innovations do you use to spread your business?
2 Continuous improvement towards best practice	Participatory certification; Address neglected areas of sustainability; Individual tool to benchmark own operations, outstrip minimum standards	Since the foundation of your company: Were there any improvements? Please elaborate. What improvements do you plan for the future?
3 Diverse ways to ensure transparency and integrity	concomitantly: Self-claims, PGS, third-party certification, brand value; short chain markets, CSA, consumer cooperatives; technology-based verification; transparency	In what sense is your AFN organic or do you use other certification? How do you explain the specific quality of your food to the customers?
4 Inclusive of wider sustainability interests	Inclusion of like-minded movements; clear positioning against unsustainable practices; positioning against green-washing or misuse of term organic	Beyond the production of organic food: What other improvements does your project bring to society? Do you collaborate with other companies or organizations?
5 Empowerment from farm to the final consumer	transparency of prices; empowerment of women; supporting healthy consumption patterns opposing NCDs	In what way does your AFN bring benefits to the people?
6 True value & cost accounting	viable prices for better choices; labeling of unsustainable practices; awareness raising	How do you come up with prices?
Additional questions for dairy-producing AFN		Do you have a breeding program? What do you think about the A1/A2-milk discussion?

Note: Questions 1–6 are based on the features of IFOAM's Organic 3.0 concept [27].

Appendix B

Table A2. Interviewed experts.

Representative	Sex	Function	Background	Alternative Characteristics	Motivation
R1	M	<i>Founder, manager</i>	<i>IT engineer</i>	<i>Food; network</i>	<i>Not satisfied with previous job, personal and own family's health</i>
R2	M	<i>Co-founder, manager</i>	<i>IT engineer</i>	<i>Food; network</i>	<i>Bring people back into agriculture</i>
R3	M	Founder	Lawyer	Food; network	Increasing awareness on organic food
R4	M	<i>Founder</i>	<i>Engineer</i>	<i>Food; network</i>	<i>Doing something good for the country</i>
R5	M	<i>Founder</i>	<i>Farmer</i>	<i>Food; economy</i>	<i>Improving farmer's health</i>
R6	M	Founder	Business man	Food; network	Do something for the environment
R7	M	Founder	IT engineer	Food	Contributing to sustainable ecosystem
R8	M	<i>Managers</i>	-	<i>Network</i>	<i>End agrarian crisis</i>
R9	M	Founder	IT engineer	Food; network	Helping the farmers
R10	F	Founder	-	Food; network	Protection of Indian cow breeds
R11	M	Founder	Engineer	Food; network	Make Bengaluru greener
R12	F	<i>Founder</i>	-	<i>Food; network</i>	<i>Modern society destroys nature</i>
R13	M	<i>Founder</i>	<i>Engineer</i>	<i>Food; network; economy</i>	<i>Improve living standard for farmers in native area</i>
R14	F	<i>Founder</i>	<i>Business consultant</i>	<i>Food; network</i>	<i>Increase vegan alternatives in the market</i>

Note: The ones who are cited in this paper are highlighted in italics.

References

- Rosol, M. Alternative Ernährungsnetzwerke als Alternative Ökonomien. *Z. Für Wirtsch.* **2018**, *62*, 174–186. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Krul, K.; Ho, P. Alternative Approaches to Food: Community Supported Agriculture in Urban China. *Sustainability* **2017**, *9*, 844. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Fadaee, S. The permaculture movement in India: A social movement with Southern characteristics. *Soc. Mov. Stud.* **2019**, *2*, 1–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Abrahams, C. Globally Useful Conceptions of Alternative Food Networks in the Developing South: The Case of Johannesburg's Urban Food Supply System. In *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice*, 1st ed.; Maye, D., Holloway, L., Kneafsey, M., Eds.; Elsevier: Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Boston, MA, USA, 2007; pp. 95–114. ISBN 9780080450186.
- Bellante, L. Building the local food movement in Chiapas, Mexico: Rationales, benefits, and limitations. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2017**, *34*, 119–134. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Goodman, D.; Goodman, M.K. Alternative Food Networks. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*; Kitchin, R., Thrift, N., Eds.; Elsevier Science: Oxford, UK, 2009; pp. 208–220.
- Fendrychová, L.; Jehlička, P. Revealing the hidden geography of alternative food networks: The travelling concept of farmers' markets. *Geoforum* **2018**, *95*, 1–10. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Doernberg, A.; Zasada, I.; Bruszewska, K.; Skoczowski, B.; Pierr, A. Potentials and Limitations of Regional Organic Food Supply: A Qualitative Analysis of Two Food Chain Types in the Berlin Metropolitan Region. *Sustainability* **2016**, *8*, 1125. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Sinha, S.; Gururani, S.; Greenberg, B. The 'new traditionalist' discourse of Indian environmentalism. *J. Peasant Stud.* **1997**, *24*, 65–99. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Lundström, M. "We do this because the market demands it": Alternative meat production and the speciesist logic. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2019**, *36*, 127–136. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wills, B.; Arundel, A. Internet-enabled access to alternative food networks: A comparison of online and offline food shoppers and their differing interpretations of quality. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2017**, *34*, 701–712. [[CrossRef](#)]

12. Soper, R. From protecting peasant livelihoods to essentializing peasant agriculture: Problematic trends in food sovereignty discourse. *J. Peasant Stud.* **2020**, *47*, 265–268. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Brown, T. Sustainable Agriculture, Civil Society and Social Power in Rural India. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia, 2013.
14. Erler, M.; Keck, M.; Dittrich, C. The changing meaning of millets: Organic shops and distinctive consumption practices in Bengaluru, India. *J. Consum. Cult.* **2020**, *32*. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Liu, P.; Gilchrist, P.; Taylor, B.; Ravenscroft, N. The spaces and times of community farming. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2017**, *34*, 363–375. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
16. Si, Z.; Schumilas, T.; Scott, S. Characterizing alternative food networks in China. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2015**, *32*, 299–313. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Arbenz, M.; Gould, D.; Stopes, C. *Organic 3.0. for Truly Sustainable Farming and Consumption*, 2nd ed.; 2016; Available online: www.ifoam.bio/organic3zero (accessed on 12 November 2019).
18. Nelson, E.; Gómez Tovar, L.; Schwentesius Rindermann, R.; Gómez Cruz, M.Á. Participatory organic certification in Mexico: An alternative approach to maintaining the integrity of the organic label. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2010**, *27*, 227–237. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Vandergeest, P.; DuPuis, E.M. Introduction. In *Creating The Countryside*; Dupuis, M., Ed.; Temple University Press: Philadelphia, PA, USA, 1995; pp. 1–25. ISBN 1-439-90145-7.
20. Sacchi, G.; Caputo, V.; Nayga, R. Alternative Labeling Programs and Purchasing Behavior toward Organic Foods: The Case of the Participatory Guarantee Systems in Brazil. *Sustainability* **2015**, *7*, 7397–7416. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Glin, L.C.; Mol, A.P.J.; Oosterveer, P. Conventionalization of the organic sesame network from Burkina Faso: Shrinking into mainstream. *Agric. Hum. Values* **2013**, *30*, 539–554. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Hinrichs, C. The practice and politics of food system localization. *J. Rural Stud.* **2003**, *19*, 33–45. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Harris, E.M. Eat Local?: Constructions of Place in Alternative Food Politics. *Geogr. Compass* **2010**, *4*, 355–369. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. DuPuis, E.M.; Goodman, D. Should we go “home” to eat?: Toward a reflexive politics of localism. *J. Rural Stud.* **2005**, *21*, 359–371. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Winter, M. Embeddedness, the new food economy and defensive localism. *J. Rural Stud.* **2003**, *19*, 23–32. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Allen, P. Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship. *Agric. Hum. Values* **1999**, *16*, 117–129. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Shrimpton, R.; Rokx, C. The Double Burden of Malnutrition in Indonesia. Report 76192-ID. 2013. Available online: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/17007> (accessed on 14 November 2019).
28. Jordan, C.F. *An Ecosystem Approach to Sustainable Agriculture. Energy Use Efficiency in the American South*; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2013; ISBN 978-94-007-6790-4.
29. Conway, G.R.; Barbier, E. *After the Green Revolution. Sustainable Agriculture for Development*; Earthscan Publ: London, UK, 1990; ISBN 1-85383.
30. Bandyopadhyay, A. Studying borrower level risk characteristics of education loan in India. *IIMB Manag. Rev.* **2016**, *28*, 126–135. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Brown, T.; Ganguly-Scrase, R.; Scrase, T.J. Urbanization, Rural Mobility, and New Class Relations in Darjeeling, India. *Crit. Asian Stud.* **2016**, *48*, 235–256. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Khadse, A.; Rosset, P.M.; Morales, H.; Ferguson, B.G. Taking agroecology to scale: The Zero Budget Natural Farming peasant movement in Karnataka, India. *J. Peasant Stud.* **2018**, *45*, 192–219. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Subramaniam, B. *Holy science. The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*; University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA, USA, 2019; ISBN 9780295745589.
34. Siddiqui, K. Hindutva, Neoliberalism and the Reinventing of India. *J. Econ. Soc. Thought* **2017**, *4*, 142–186.
35. Dasgupta, S. *BITS of Belonging. Information Technology, Water, and Neoliberal Governance in India*; Temple University Press: Philadelphia, PA, USA, 2015; ISBN 9781439912607.

