Crossing the Veg/Non-Veg Divide: Commensality and Sociality Among the Middle Classes in Madras/Chennai

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Introduction: Commensality, Caste and Class in India
Some of the literature on food in India seeks to relate culinary habits to caste or ethnic distinctions.¹ There is also a widespread assumption that in India generally, and in Tamilnadu in particular, the highest castes are associated with ‘purer’ vegetarianism and lower castes with ‘polluting’ non-vegetarianism. The classic literature on food in India also includes much discussion of the relation between caste and commensality: who takes or gives food and drink of different categories to whom and who eats with whom.² Most of this literature, published between the mid 1950s and around 1980, refers to village studies, and there is relatively little on how such issues are handled in urban settings. In his article on ‘gastro-politics’ among Tamilian Brahmins, Appadurai does note that in urban settings such as Madras, weddings will include people of different caste backgrounds, and their food needs have to be accommodated, but he does not discuss this issue in any detail.³

Some of the more recent literature on class in Indian society grapples with its articulation with caste, showing that the previously high correlation (particularly marked in Tamilnadu) no longer stands to quite the same extent. This means that a few people of relatively low-caste background can rise in the socio-economic hierarchy and such individuals have to be treated with respect. This can lead to them being invited to weddings and being elected to membership of elite clubs such as the venerable Madras and Gymkhana Clubs and the newer men’s ‘service’ clubs (Rotary, Lions, etc.). All of these settings involve the management of commensality between people of different backgrounds and statuses.

But commensality is not only an issue on public or semi-public occasions, it is also of significance domestically. While much of the literature on Indian food takes a primarily semiotic approach to food and eating, there is another category which considers the implications, especially for women, of the domestic politics of food and entitlements.

In this paper, my concern is particularly with the divide between vegetarians and non-vegetarians, and how this was handled in different settings among the middle classes in 1970s – 1990s Madras (now known as Chennai). Before going on to discuss my ethnography, however, I would like to make two general points. The first is that in Hindu India generally, and Tamilnadu in particular, vegetarian food is deemed ‘purer’ than non-vegetarian by most caste Hindus and for that reason, sub-castes in India which seek to raise their status do so by a process of Sanskritisation, which includes giving up polluting foods or becoming vegetarian.

Brahmins (disproportionately represented among the middle classes in Madras) are supposed to be entirely vegetarian. Vegetarianism was also strongly

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4 Ibid.
7 The situation is somewhat different in Bengal: see Donner in this issue.
espoused by ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi on grounds of health as well as morality, and this formed part of the rhetoric of the nationalist movement in the Indian freedom struggle. Food also ties in with sexuality, since the consumption of a non-vegetarian diet is supposed to encourage desire. Yet non-vegetarian food is also seen as appropriate for certain castes in order to enhance physical strength. In middle-class Madras, by and large, vegetarianism is associated with Brahmans and non-vegetarianism with non-Brahmins. One purpose of this paper is to argue against such a crude essentialism, and to suggest a more complex and changing array of dietary choices within the Brahmin and non-Brahmin middle-class populations as well as a dynamic and flexible set of commensal relations both within and between these groups.

In this article, then, I try to unpack the different meanings of commensality (preparing, taking and receiving food, eating together) in both domestic and extra-domestic settings among middle-class families living in south Madras. I seek to show how, in addition to caste status, factors such as gender and age impinge, and how discourses shift between the religious (purity and pollution) and the nutritional (what is good for health). The paper also considers the ways in which middle-class women of various caste and religious backgrounds, some vegetarian, some not, express their friendships and support their women’s association through eating together. It shows what strategies are used to ensure that, as one woman put it, ‘No one is offended’. In so doing, it also reveals a certain degree of permeability of the divide separating vegetarians and non-vegetarians.

The Setting
My research on women’s organisations in Madras involved considerations of class culture, ‘status production work’ and the politics of social welfare. In

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8 Although Gandhi took a vow before his mother to eat only vegetarian food when he went to study in London, while he was there he read an English book on vegetarianism, noting: ‘From the date of reading this book I may claim to have become a vegetarian by choice... The choice was now made in favour of vegetarianism, the spread of which henceforward became my mission’. M.K. Gandhi, An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, [1927] 1959), p.39.
9 Especially ruler or warrior castes of the Kshatriya varna in north India.
10 This was funded by the Social Science Research Foundation (SSRC), and its successor the ESRC. Later shorter trips were funded by the Nuffield Foundation. I am grateful to all of these bodies.
the course of focussing on five women’s associations, I came to know some of their members well, and spent time with them in their homes, as well as at meetings. Women themselves often talked about food issues, particularly in the context of accounts of how they spent their time, discussing such issues as the division of labour between themselves and their mothers-in-law, their husbands’ and children’s preferences, and what food was considered good for children’s health.  

In the 1990s, as my attention turned directly to issues of food, I undertook several short research trips to Madras to study the changes which were taking place in middle-class food consumption. In addition to interviews and (participant) observation in supermarkets and restaurants, I also spent time with women I already knew well—most of whom by this time were already mothers-in-law and grandmothers—as well as the younger members of their families. Here the major focus was on a suburb which I shall call ‘Kamalapuram’ situated in the south of the city, where there was a women’s association which had formed part of the original study.

Kamalapuram was built in the 1960s on land allocated by the government for civil servants in the Adayar area of southern Madras and by the time of my first fieldwork in 1974–75, there were 134 houses. Not all were occupied by civil servants, since some were rented out, so a range of occupations was represented, of whom only a third were civil servants. The caste background of the population was mixed, but Brahmins formed the largest category (around 40 percent), scarcely surprising since at that time they were still disproportionately employed in the civil service. After them came higher- and middle-caste Tamil Hindus, such as Mudaliars, Vellalas, Nadars and Kallars. The remainder was non-Hindu and included Christians (including Syrian

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13 See Caplan, Class and Gender in India, pp.68–73.


15 These castes are of Sudra status but, given the dearth of sub-castes which claim Kshatriya status in Tamilnadu, they were considered of relatively high or middle status and several such castes have improved their ranking in the last few decades. See R. Hardgrave, The Nadars of Tamilnadu: The Political Culture of a Community in Change (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969); N. Dirks, The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in association with Orient Longman, 1987); and Y. Nishimura, Gender, Kinship and Property Rights: Nagarattar Womanhood in South India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
Christians) and Tamil Muslims. There was also a sprinkling of people with a ‘tribal’ background.

The women’s club was set up around 1970 and took a large loan from the Tamilnadu Housing Board to erect a club building in which to conduct its activities. These included classes of various kinds (English, handicrafts, cookery), organising a nursery (balwadi), carrying out other forms of social service such as immunisations, and providing medical treatment to poor people. The club in its early years also had to engage in fund-raising to pay off its loan, although in later years it was able to extend the building, and then make money by renting it out to non-members for ‘functions’. People who joined the club gave three reasons: to make friends, to ‘learn new things’, and to do social service. As I have argued elsewhere, organisations such as these can be variously viewed as ‘institutions of urban adaptation’, and as a means for women to engage in ‘status production work’.16

In an article published in 1980, I showed that women from Brahmin households were more likely than not to join the women’s club, while those from the households of other communities were less likely to do so. Further, women who chose to join the club were from households where both they and their husbands had relatively higher educational and income levels than non-joiners.

Although I have not been able to carry out a complete census of the suburb in recent years, it is clear that it has become more mixed in terms of communal background. Nonetheless, it remains an area of single-family occupancy households and has not suffered the fate of many neighbouring suburbs built around the same time, where detached houses have given way to redevelopment and apartment buildings.

In spite of some changes in the composition of the area, the core activist personnel in the women’s club remained very stable for many years, and consisted of a group of women of extremely mixed backgrounds: Brahmins, non-Brahmins, a Muslim, and a Christian, several of whom were extremely close friends.

‘Tamil Cuisine’ and the Issue of Positionality of the Researcher

In writing this article I turned for information on vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism not only to my notes on food research conducted in the 1990s, but also to my earlier research on women’s organisations in the 1970s and early 1980s. In regard to the earlier period, there was, for example, material that emerged from the diaries which some women had kept for me for two-week periods. However I was surprised to find the extent to which I remembered a number of comments and events concerning commensality and veg/non-veg issues of which there was little mention in my notes. This is perhaps not surprising, given the extent to which my first stay in Madras influenced my own eating habits.

My first visit to India was in 1968, when my husband and I stayed in Delhi on our way to spend a year doing fieldwork in Nepal. During that period I contracted a severe case of bacillary dysentery from eating meat. Although we subsequently ate the permitted meats (chicken and goat) during our time in Nepal, when we later returned to South India to carry out fieldwork in 1974, accompanied this time by two small children, we decided that it would be safer to stick to a vegetarian diet. The appropriateness of this decision was heightened when I found that many of the women with whom I was working in my research on women’s organisations were Brahmins, and that even some of the non-Brahmins were vegetarian too. They were all pleased to find that our household too was vegetarian—although we still eat eggs—but since, as I discuss below, many vegetarians permitted the cooking and eating of eggs in their households this was not a problem provided we did not serve them to guests. In any case, by 1981, we were beginning to see ‘vegetarian’ (i.e. unfertilised) eggs being sold.

We had originally intended to be vegetarians only during our time in Madras, but on our return to the UK, could not think of a sufficiently good reason to start eating meat again. This delighted our Madras vegetarian friends, many of whom have been to stay with us in London: one of them christened us ‘the London Brahmins’.

I mention this because, as has by now been well-established in anthropology, what one sees is highly dependent upon who one is. I learned the grammar of Tamil food from middle-class, higher-caste friends, many but by no means all of whom were Brahmins and not all of whom were Hindus. I argue in this paper that at this class level and in this area all Tamils, including even Muslims and Christians, ate a fairly similar diet, except that some might from time to time eat meat or chicken. This is not to say that there are no culinary
distinctions between communities. Indeed, I well remember a lively discussion between club members of different castes about differences in ways of preparing rasam; but while some argued that their community did it in a particular way, it remained unmistakably rasam. The point is that all communities with whom I worked had a common basic structure and content to their food.

In this regard the distinction, common to most parts of India, between ‘meals’ and ‘snacks’ (tiffin) is significant. A meal is cooked from fresh ingredients and ideally includes either rice or chapatis, dhal, vegetables (particularly sambar), and rasam; non-vegetarians may also include meat or chicken. For the middle classes in Madras, there are two proper meals, one in the morning or around mid-day (often glossed as ‘lunch’) and one in the evening (‘dinner’). In addition, some middle-class families have ‘breakfast’ (their term) before leaving for work, school or college, and virtually everyone has tiffin on returning home. Breakfast includes a wide range of foods, from toast and eggs, to iddlis and curry, while tiffin includes dosai, bhajia, cake and biscuits. Snacks are usually vegetarian, while meals can be either veg or non-veg. As snacks consist of fried (or baked) foods, they are not subject to the same restrictions as meals—particularly those in which rice is served. Thus, while the distinction between pakka and kaccha foods, common for north India, is not made in quite the same way in the south, there is still a clear hierarchy of cooked foods, and some are deemed more vulnerable to pollution than others. The most vulnerable is cooked rice, which is only taken from those deemed to be of equal or higher status. Snacks on the other hand can be accepted from a wide range of people; for example one woman wrote in her diary that she would allow her maidservant to prepare snacks for her children but she herself cooked their meals.

Four people have read and commented on an early draft of this paper. Penny Vera-Sanso, who also carried out fieldwork in Madras in the 1980s, but among slum dwellers, commented: ‘I wasn’t comfortable with your position which

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17 In north India, food cooked in water is called kaccha and would only be accepted from an equal or a superior. The other category is pakka food, which is considered to be less vulnerable, and thus may be accepted from a wider range of persons. See A. Cantlie, ‘The Moral Significance of Food among Assamese Hindus’, in Adrian C. Mayer (ed.), Culture and Morality: Essays in Honour of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp.42–62.

seemed to be aligned with the general Indianist one on food, caste and pollution—it came across as though all of India is agreed on this’.

Her criticism is a common one and has been levelled at anthropologists seduced by a Brahminical view of Indian culture and society which they tend to replicate in their own work. However, my argument here is that there is a Tamil grammar of food, influenced of course by Hindu principles, which cuts across caste and even class differences—although its ideal structure is of course often not met by the poor, for whom the idea of two meals and two snacks a day is an unattainable luxury. 19

Henrike Donner, whose paper on Bengal appears elsewhere in this issue, asked whether there was not resentment discernible in the way non-Brahmin women talked about Brahmin food. Although I certainly heard plenty of criticisms of Brahmins and their behaviour from non-Brahmins over the course of time, I did not hear this expressed in terms of resentment about Brahmin food practices.

Caroline Osella, who has worked with Hindus and then Muslims in Kerala, was struck by contrasts between my depiction of Tamilnadu and her own knowledge of Kerala. She asked me whether Tamil cuisine was ‘normatively vegetarian’ in contrast to Kerala, where it is ‘normatively meat-eating’. On reflection, I had to say that I thought that it was. In spite of the fact that Brahmins constitute only a small proportion of the population, the ideal of vegetarianism, and that of ‘simple’ food, is a powerful one which resonates through all the groups with which I have worked. Indeed, the food diaries of Brahmins, non-Brahmins, Christian and Muslim present remarkably similar pictures of daily meals.

Lionel Caplan, who has worked with Indian Christians, both middle- and working-class, and with Anglo-Indians, thought that the food patterns I describe here even hold good for Christians, although for Anglo-Indians meat, and especially beef, is of considerable importance.

19 Lionel Caplan noted: ‘I am reminded of the mid-day meals served in Madras “hotels” which cater to workers (eg rickshaw-wallahs) and others who are not normally vegetarians. Most of these eating places, in which I often took lunch, offer very cheap vegetarian meals (a few offer non-vegetarian meals): the meal consists of rice, several vegetable dishes, rasam and, if you pay an extra rupee, curd, so people who could afford that, would keep a little of their rice aside until the end of the meal and make curd rice. The vast majority of people eating in these places are not Brahmins’ (personal communication).
Some of these ideals about food in Tamilnadu may be fairly widespread in India. R.S. Khare, himself of north Indian origin, suggests that ‘eating must proceed under self control, eating satisfying and sufficient food according to the lifestage and its duties’. He goes on to note: ‘The indigenous notion is analogous to the concept of the balanced diet. It should also be moderate, and this encourages wider distribution of food and decries wasteful consumption’. Elsewhere he says that the Hindu ethic is to ‘feed others generously but eat only moderately’.

Khare distinguishes between not only pure and impure foods, but also between the overlapping categories of rich, good and healthy foods and the further categories of light, easily digestible foods and heavy ones: ‘Good foods are eaten daily for maintaining health, efficiency and happiness. A basic gastronomic grid is bread and or rice plus lentils plus vegetables (and meat or fish in some groups)’. This is not too dissimilar to the points made by Brenda Beck in her study of colour and heat in South Indian (Tamil) ritual. She notes that the essence of a good diet is to main a proper balance between heating and cooling foods, but that most prestigious foods are cooling.

I often heard South Indians in general contrast their ‘light’ (sometimes called ‘healthy’) cuisine with that of north India, particularly criticising the much greater use of oil and ghee in the latter. In the food questionnaires used in 1998, people were asked what they thought constituted ‘good food’ and their choices proved strikingly familiar, with vegetables and fruit being mentioned most frequently, regardless of caste or religious background. The same respondents nominated as ‘bad foods’ aerated drinks, frozen or fried food and oily food of the sort served at roadside stalls and in some restaurants.

In her work on love in a Tamil family, Margaret Trawick also suggests that there is an ‘austere’ Tamil ethic. This fits in well with the kind of views that I heard expressed quite often during my first fieldwork in the 1970s concerning dress and household furnishing where simplicity and understatement was praised, and any kind of ostentation was criticised—although I suspect that this...
situation has now changed somewhat under the impact of the post-liberalisation Indian economy and growing material affluence of the middle classes.

Veg and Non-Veg in South Madras: Permeable Boundaries?
As already stated, a simplistic view of the situation in Madras would be to conclude that Brahmins are vegetarians, while most other castes and communities (including Muslims and Christians) eat meat (mutton and chicken) and fish. Muslims and caste Hindus do not eat pork, although it is eaten by many Christians and by Dalits (locally still referred to as Harijans) and some of these may also eat beef.

In the research I conducted in 1998–99, I asked a number of women to complete food questionnaires and/or fill out 7-day food diaries.27 I also distributed a questionnaire to the members of a karate class run by the club in order to obtain a sample from young people. These revealed a pattern even more complex than I had previously realised. First of all, many non-vegetarian Hindu households ate only vegetarian food on certain days (usually Tuesdays and Fridays) and on other special days. For instance a non-Brahmin talking in a group discussion about food at the Club in 1998 stated:

We eat meat once a week and fish. I like fish but my husband and daughter don’t like it very much so I only buy it occasionally. I like prawns very much so I do buy those. We are Hindus so we follow the system whereby on Tuesdays and Fridays we are pure vegetarians.

Secondly, the amount of meat or fish consumed by non-vegetarians was very small. In no instance was it eaten more than once a day, and in many cases only a few times a week, mainly on weekends. Indeed, the composition of meals and snacks by vegetarians and non-vegetarians was remarkably similar, drawing on a common repertoire of Tamil cuisine in which a main meal always includes rice, dhal, sambar and rasam (although there may be other dishes too).

Moreover the Brahmin/non-Brahmin vegetarian/non-vegetarian divide was much less absolute than I had hitherto realised. First of all, there are many non-Brahmins who are also vegetarians, and this applies particularly to women: ‘I

27 These included some of the ‘activist’ club members whom I knew well, plus their daughters and daughters-in-law and some of their male relatives. Most were Hindus, but the sample included one Christian and one Tamil Muslim.
was a non-vegetarian [but] for the last 30 years I have been taking vegetarian food only due to following the principles of Saivaite teachings’, remarked a Kallar woman. However, significantly, this woman did not ban meat from her house: ‘I prepare non-vegetarian food for my sons, son-in-law and grandchildren’.

Another woman, a Mudaliar, similarly told me that she was a vegetarian, but her husband ate meat, which she prepared for him. Of their two young sons, one of whom was vegetarian and the other not, she commented: ‘His father has been trying to persuade him (the vegetarian) to eat eggs and mutton but so far without success’.

Even Brahmin households might evince complex patterns of veg and non-veg. In households I knew in the 1970s many women used to make eggs for their children, arguing that they were concerned about their nutritional needs. One woman, who regarded herself as so orthodox that she would not touch either garlic or onions, said that she gave eggs to her children. Further, she knew that her husband would eat chicken outside the house when he had lunch with his non-Brahmin business partner. Another Brahmin household which I knew well was very orthodox in many ways. During my first phase of fieldwork, the wife told me that her husband always cooked when she was menstruating (a practice mainly followed by Brahmins), and that she used no garlic or onions. Yet she also knew that her husband ate non-vegetarian food outside the house. Indeed, a number of men whose households were vegetarian admitted that they sometimes ate meat outside the house, but would hastily add: ‘But my wife is a pure vegetarian’. Likewise, some Brahmin men abandoned their vegetarian diet when living abroad. A university professor told me that he had spent six years doing his postgraduate work in the USA: ‘For two years I tried to hang on to my Indian ways, and cooked myself, then I gave up and ate everything, including non-veg food’.

But other Brahmin men try their utmost to stick to their principles even when it becomes difficult, as it does when they travel abroad. A businessman who was the husband of a Club member arrived for his first trip to the UK in the 1970s and stayed in a four-star hotel in London: ‘There was nothing I could eat in that hotel so I went out looking and came across a McDonalds. It said on the menu ‘cheeseburger’ and friends in India had said cheese would be OK, so I ordered one. Imagine my dismay when it arrived with a beefburger in it!’ By the time this man came to our house for (vegetarian) dinner, he had not eaten for

28 Eggs are considered living things and thus should not be eaten by vegetarians.
two days! Similarly, a Brahmin professional woman told me that she felt triumphant when she managed to climb a high peak in the Himalayas: ‘My mountaineering friends all tried to persuade me to drop my vegetarian diet. They said: “Vegetarians will never have the strength to do this”. But I did!’

Here then the distinction between Brahmin and non-Brahmin households is not simply in terms of veg and non-veg. Rather, in the former category, non-vegetarian food, other than eggs for children, is not permitted inside the house, but such food may be consumed by men outside the house. In the latter category, non-vegetarian food may be eaten by male members and even cooked by the wife/mother, but the wife herself may remain partly or entirely vegetarian.

But there may also be distinctions between Brahmins, some of whom evidently consider themselves ‘purer’ than others. One Brahmin woman recorded in her diary that she had been visited by some of her husband’s relatives:

I welcomed them and when they were busy talking [to her husband] I went out to the shop to get some fruit for them. That lady is very orthodox and would not take anything outside [her own house] except milk and fruit. The shop is nearby and I soon came back with bananas and mangoes. I cut [them up] and gave it to them.

What all of this suggests, then, is that patterns are complex and influenced not only by caste but also by factors such as gender and age, religious preference and by spatial distinctions as between inside and outside the household. In the following sections, I turn first to an exploration of issues of commensality between household members, including eating at home and eating out, and then turn to commensality involving hospitality (hosts and guests), and then sharing food at the neighbourhood club, focusing particularly on the veg/non-veg divide.

**Domestic Commensality**

With the exception of the evening meal, each member of the household, at least on weekdays, would eat individually, albeit served by the wife/mother who usually ate alone at midday, as diaries and food questionnaires revealed. She would also usually cook all the household food, except in a few wealthier households where there was a cook employed, or in joint families where there might be a daughter-in-law or grandmother to share the cooking. In Madras, as in other parts of India, there is considerable importance attributed not only to cooking the food, but also to serving it. In part considerations of having someone...
serve the food is tied in with notions of purity and pollution, since once a person
has begun to eat, they risk polluting other people’s food.\textsuperscript{29} But the preparation
and giving of food is also an intrinsic part of the role of wife and mother.

One woman wrote in her diary that she had attended a dinner at the
Club, which meant that at home her husband and daughter had had to eat the
food she had prepared without her being there, and she felt very bad about
that. Another said that, if she was absent, only her daughter would eat food she
had prepared in advance but that her sons and husband would not serve
themselves.

Analysis of the food questionnaires shows that in many households, women
would eat the evening meal with other family members. In part this was because
it was the one time of day when everyone was in the house at the same time, and
in part because the main cooking preparation for the day was usually done in
the morning, so the food was already prepared.

Few of my respondents had family members who ate food at school or in
canteens at work. Indeed, a number of informants, both in their diaries and
in interviews, said that they were concerned about the levels of hygiene in
such places; their discourse also referred frequently to concerns about the
caste status of the person who had cooked it. As a result, the vast
majority took food with them in a \textit{tiffin-carrier}\textsuperscript{30} or, in the case of adult
males, had it sent to their workplace by a \textit{dubbawallah}\textsuperscript{31} or an office-boy.
Women reported getting up early (one even at 4 am) to ensure that they
had prepared cooked food, either whole meals or \textit{tiffin}, to send in \textit{tiffin}-
carriers. One Club member, a Muslim, explained the practice in the following
way:

\begin{quote}
We need only home cooking because it is very hygienic and we
don’t want to waste money. In our house, we’ll cook with good oil
[whereas in restaurants they do not always do so]. In India we have
to struggle with our lives, so it is good to take food from our [own]
house and give it packed for the office for adults, and for children
to take to school.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} However in many households this would be overcome by using the right hand for eating and the left hand
to serve or take food from the serving dishes placed in the centre of the table.

\textsuperscript{30} A series of inter-locking containers which is used for all kinds of food, meals as well as snacks.

\textsuperscript{31} D\textit{ubb}a is the term used for the containers in which food is stored. A \textit{dubbawallah} is a man who collects a
number of \textit{tiffin}-carriers from various houses and delivers them to the designated workplaces.
This woman cited two reasons—better quality food and economy—for the practice of preparing food at home to eat outside. Can this practice perhaps be considered a form of commensality since household members can continue to eat household food prepared by the mother even when they are away from home? Yet the diaries kept by younger people indicated that they invariably ate such food alongside their friends or colleagues, and even shared it with them. Here is one non-Brahmin youth reporting on his schooldays:

‘When I was at school, I used to take a lunch box containing egg fried rice, noodles, curd rice, or sandwiches’.

Q: ‘Did everyone do that?’

‘Yes, out of the class of 30, only half a dozen lived near enough to go home for lunch’.

Q: ‘Did you make comparisons?’

‘Yes, people would take a bit out of others’ boxes’.

His mother said: ‘He used to ask me to put the meat at the bottom, otherwise someone else would have eaten it’!

So is this sharing, or at least eating together, also a form of commensality? Or might it better be described as ‘sociality’? If the former, to some extent it defeats one of the purposes of bringing food from home, namely the maintenance of caste purity. Yet school children sharing each other’s lunch boxes, men eating lunch with their (different caste) business partners or in work canteens and restaurants which provide neutral contexts where some normal domestic food behaviour is suspended, all constitute ‘small islands of egalitarianism’—as Dumont calls them—in affirming the importance of sociality.

**Eating Out and Eating Outside Food at Home**

In recent years, restaurants have proliferated in Madras and by the time of my work on changes in food consumption practices in the 1990s, it was common for members of households at this class level to eat out. Some would do so only occasionally, for children’s birthdays, for example, others ate out weekly, giving as their reasons ‘having a change’, ‘saves the wife having to cook’, although, interestingly, it was clear from the food questionnaires that the decision to eat out was usually made by the husband and/or children, almost never by the wife.

Particularly noticeable has been the increase in pizza ‘joints’ (as they are termed locally), of which there were several in the Adayar area. In a visit to
one such place, I was hailed by a Brahmin friend, her niece and the latter’s four-year-old son. I was somewhat surprised, knowing of my friend’s strict vegetarianism:

Q: ‘Do you often come here?’
‘Oh yes, once in a while, for a change. He (great-nephew) likes it very much’.
Q: ‘Can you find things to eat?’
‘Yes, no problem’.

Some restaurants are strictly vegetarian (although they are often patronised by non-vegetarians) and take pains to employ only Brahmins as cooks, but others, including those specialising in ‘foreign’ food (Mexican, Italian, Chinese) or in Indian regional food, are non-vegetarian. Here the menus always state clearly whether food is veg or non-veg, and none that I visited served beef and very few pork. Even so, some informants stated that they would eat outside the house food which they would never consider cooking and serving at home. Here is a non-Brahmin Club member describing her family’s preferences:

Q: ‘Do you eat out?’
‘Yes, we are members of the [mixed] club in the neighbouring suburb [which has a restaurant] and go there frequently. One of the reasons is that my husband and children like to eat chicken or fish occasionally, whereas in the house they are pure vegetarians. Also they like to have a change—different kinds of food such as Chinese (‘not cooked by Chinese, but Indian Chinese’) which are served there. And they also use the sports facilities. The Club food is cheaper than eating in restaurants or hotels’.

Some restaurants, especially pizza parlours, also offer a delivery service, which is increasingly made use of by households with children, who are the target of much TV advertising for ‘modern’ foods. Here, then, the home/outside distinction is breached by the entry of foods which have not been prepared according to the usual rules. I had thought that this was mainly to please children, to whom the rules about purity and pollution apply less strictly. However, I discovered in the 1990s that there was also a new form of home foods in the shape of ready-prepared meals which were delivered to the house. Some services were offered by established restaurants, others were small home-based industries. They tended to be utilised particularly by elderly people living on their own (‘like your meals on wheels’ said one
woman who had lived in the UK). Here is an extract from one of my notebooks:

I asked the husband of one Club member about the importance of home cooking. He said that things had changed in the last few years, and that now, quite a lot of people use home caterers, especially a) elderly couples living on their own who do not want to be bothered with cooking or go to the expense of hiring a cook, and b) young couples where both are working. Usually the caterers supply cooked vegetables, but many people prefer to make their own rice. I asked if this was because of caste considerations: he said that many of them say that it is not usually an issue as it is cooked and delivered by Brahmins.

In the case of catered food, the status of the cooks who prepare it is often flagged in the trade advertisements which appear regularly in the local *Adyar Times* such as the following:

We will arrange [a] Brahmin cook on [a] monthly basis and [deliver] order[ed] meals also.

Another, placed by Iyangar’s Catering, offered ‘tasty, homely north and south Indian meals, home delivery, party functions orders taken’.

Note the name of the enterprise—Iyangar’s. Iyangars are one of the two kinds of Tamil Brahmins. The nomenclature signals its high-caste status (although its clients might well come from other caste backgrounds).

In a group discussion at the Club, I asked for more information about this new practice:

Woman A: ‘I know a woman who uses this daily. She is a doctor and so is her husband, the children eat at her mother’s house every day, but her food comes in a *tiffin*-carrier at 2 pm so she comes back for lunch, which is ready and whatever is left over she takes for dinner’.

Q: ‘So what is that system called?’
A: ‘It’s just catering, house catering’.

Woman B: ‘When we did not have a servant for 2 or 3 months we used that system. They will come and deliver; in some places you have to go and fetch it’.
Here, then, we find cooked food crossing the boundaries of the household. On the one hand food cooked by the wife and mother goes out to the workplace, college or school; on the other hand, food cooked by others, whether delivery pizzas or ‘home-foods’, is brought in for reasons of convenience or to please particular family members, especially husbands and children. In the course of this process, there are shifts in the maintenance of caste purity (schoolchildren sharing their lunch boxes, for example), and also in the veg/non-veg divide, as when an otherwise vegetarian family goes to eat out because some members want to eat meat, or a Brahmin man eats chicken with his business partner at lunch-time.

**Commensality and Hospitality**

I turn now to eating at home with non-relatives, an occasion in which I was often a participant. Here the issues are not only what food is served, but who eats with whom.

It is considered acceptable to visit friends or neighbours at home in the afternoon, even without making an appointment. On such occasions, visitors are invariably offered a drink (coffee, tea or fruit juice) and something to eat, which may be as simple as a biscuit, or as elaborate as a dosai. Visitors may not leave the house without accepting some form of hospitality, and on one occasion when I had to refuse because of stomach problems, I was given a package to take away.

Invitations to lunch or dinner involve more complex considerations of choice of menu and manner of serving. Women always said that they made more elaborate dishes when they had guests, regardless of whether these were relatives or friends. Here is an extract from a diary kept for me by a Brahmin woman:

> My husband had invited a friend and his family for dinner. I had hardly time to breathe. My maidservant had already cut the vegetables, grated the coconuts and scraped the carrots. I finished the cooking in an hour. . . . 32 My mother-in-law helped me. The guests arrived exactly at 8 pm. I snatched 15 minutes and washed my face to look presentable. [The menu of] sambar sadam, bean

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32 This was a remarkably short period of time in which to prepare a meal, even given that this woman had the help of a maidservant and her mother-in-law. My time budgets carried out in the 1970s showed that most women spent between three and five hours daily cooking food.
curry, carrot salad, cucumber raitha, curd rice, pappad, [banana] chips was ready by 8.30 pm. I was really feeling proud because all of them liked the food and really complimented me.

This woman does not record the caste status of her guests, but the menu would have been suitable for anyone, and, given her own Brahmin status, she could have served food to all except perhaps the most orthodox. The same was not true however of my own household, as I ruefully discovered when in the 1970s I hosted a lunch for a mixed-caste group of women from the Club and chose pilao as one of the dishes. I realised that this was a mistake when a Brahmin friend (who was actually no longer a Club member) refused to eat it—although another Brahmin guest did so—ostensibly on the grounds that it contained onions and garlic ‘which Brahmins do not eat’ but in reality, probably because it was rice which had been cooked by our housekeeper who was a Christian.

Thus meals which were shared by people of different communities, and particularly where there was a vegetarian/non-vegetarian divide, required careful planning. Infringing rules of purity can to some extent be overcome by choosing an all-vegetarian menu, or by ensuring that the two categories of food are kept quite separate. Indian cooks often try to avoid serving food which is most vulnerable to pollution, particularly boiled rice.

However, the issue is not only what food is served, and by whom, but also how this is done. Here there are often differences between less and more formal occasions. When just two women get together, it is appropriate for them to eat together, as the following extract from my notebook reveals:

I am invited to M’s for lunch. She is especially keen that I come today which is a full moon day and a special day for the Iyer Brahmins. Lunch was elaborate: boiled rice, a sweet rice, several curries (including a 7-vegetable curry which is special to this day), sambar and rasam, as well as vadai and appalam. We eat together at the table, and she keeps piling my plate high, and then serves a ‘pudding’ on top.

However, on occasions when several people are present, the hostess who has cooked the food will usually not eat with her guests. The following is my account of a dinner held by a non-Brahmin woman friend whose daughter, husband and children were visiting; her non-resident son and his family, as well as some friends, were also invited:
My friend has roped in a (Brahmin) friend of hers to help with the cooking, and her daughter and her sister-in-law have also helped. So there is a lavish spread, mostly vegetarian with dahi iddly, curries, biriani, puris, etc., and a single non-vegetarian dish kept to the side. The meal is served as a buffet, and people eat with paper napkins and spoons. Prior to eating we are served drinks—some kind of cola drink. Her son comments that Indian drinks are not good, only Pepsi and Coke [are good]. The first course is a soup which her daughter has made, and which is served separately. My friend, her daughter and the Brahmin friend who has been drafted in do not eat with us and the last takes away her share in a tiffin-carrier.

This meal is interesting for its mixture of ‘Indian’ features (choice of food, fact that hostess, daughter and their helper serve guests and do not eat themselves until later) and ‘Western’ (division of meal into ‘courses’, use of spoons and napkins). It should also be noted that the single non-vegetarian dish was kept well away from the other dishes. On this, as on other occasions I witnessed, commensality between vegetarians and non-vegetarians was managed both by choice of menu, location of dishes, and sometimes also by sequential eating—as in the case of the Brahmin woman helper who took her food away with her to eat at home.

On the occasion of a Brahmin family’s celebration for their daughter’s first birthday in the 1970s, invitations were issued both to relatives and to Club members. After a puja had been performed by the family priest, lunch was served by Brahmin cooks to women from the Club and a few others—but the relatives either waited to eat later or else took the food away with them. Although this would have been presented as a gesture of politeness (‘guests eat first’), it also obviated the necessity for any orthodox relatives to have to eat with non-Brahmins.

In middle-class Madras, it is above all weddings which provide occasions for the coming together of large numbers of people of different caste backgrounds and the dispensing of lavish hospitality. The majority of weddings are held in

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33 Caroline Osella asked me whether the practice of giving food to take away was connected with the removal of inauspiciousness, citing particularly G. Raheja, The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1988). This is a question I cannot answer, and it did not occur to me to ask it back in the 1970s. People certainly never explained the practice in this way.

34 I well remember the wife of a middle-ranking government servant, who had five daughters, telling me that the marriage of one of them would be ‘just a small affair’. I asked how many guests she was expecting. ‘Only about a thousand’ was her reply.
special wedding halls (*kalyana mandapam*) rented by the bride’s family which become their ‘home’ for the duration of the festivities, which usually span several days. Here the catering is carried out by Brahmins and vegetarian food is served by Brahmins in *dhotti*, even if the caste of the hosts is non-vegetarian.

But caste considerations may also be relaxed on occasion. I went with the mother of the child above (a Brahmin) and a non-Brahmin friend, both close friends and Club committee members, to visit a temple outside the city. After we had finished seeing the temple and doing *puja*, my friends produced a picnic. I jotted in my notebook:

The non-Brahmin friend unpacks the lunch which she has cooked and brought: it consists of savoury rice, vegetables etc. but it is served by the Brahmin friend. We three eat on banana leaves with plates underneath, balancing them on our laps.

Here food cooked by a non-Brahmin was eaten by a Brahmin, although it was the latter who served it. What is more, cook, server and guest (myself) ate together. There are multiple interpretations possible here. Did the informality of the occasion allow conventions to be broken, or did friendship over-ride them? Did the Brahmin woman serve the food because she was younger than (and therefore junior to) the non-Brahmin? Or did she serve the food because she was adopting the maternal role?  

There is in fact a range of possible meanings: as Daniel noted, signs are ‘fluid’.

**Commensality and Sociality: Club ‘Functions’**

The Clubs hosts a variety of events, many of which involve inter-dining. Here is my record of one such occasion:

The Club members invited me for a dinner at 7 pm on Friday 12th. This was served in buffet style by caterers—*dahi vada*, coconut

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35 A few upper-middle-class weddings have more recently begun to be held in large hotels, where obviously catering arrangements are different, and may include non-veg food, which is however always placed separately from vegetarian food.

36 Penny Vera-Sanso commented: ‘If the Brahmin was a good friend, more educated, younger or poorer she may have been serving the food to express close affection, a refutation of rank based on education, respect for age, a sense of service to a patron either along with or without any consideration of the pollution issues.’ All of these are possible.

chips, *polli* (sweet *chapatis*), *chapatis*, savoury rice, *sambar*, *payasam*, etc. It was very good. The men (husbands of Club members who had been invited for the occasion) ate by themselves in the side hall. People ate with either spoons or their hands.

Here there were no problematic issues because the food was cooked by caterers, who were almost certainly Brahmins.\(^{38}\) The food was all vegetarian, so it could be eaten by everyone.\(^{39}\) The caterers served the food—so everyone was able to eat at the same time—and also dealt with the clearing up, which allowed ordinary plates to be used, not leaf plates or banana leaves which would have had to be thrown away. This was the pattern utilised by the Club on the many occasions I participated in dinners there.

But eating together at a club may be about more than simply being friendly with one’s neighbours. It may also be a powerful expression of resistance to the growth of communalism in Tamilnadu. In 1996 when I again interviewed the Muslim Club Secretary, I asked her if she was concerned about communalism. She replied as follows:

Yes, although it never used to be a problem in the south of India. Now the BJP and its leaders are stirring up trouble, they are saying that India must be only a Hindu country. Muslims should go to Pakistan, and Christians should go to the UK or USA. They have meetings on the Marina which attract big crowds, and last year the Church of San Thome was attacked with stones by such a crowd. The Christians and the Muslims got together to defend themselves . . . . I am and have always been the only Muslim in the Club—but the other committee members are like my sisters. They respect me, that is why I have remained the Secretary for five years.

Two years later, in January 1999, I was present at one of the Club’s regular events, an inter-faith prayers and dinner. Here is what transpired:

\(^{38}\) Most catering companies in Madras are either Brahmin-run or employ Brahmin cooks.

\(^{39}\) The all-vegetarian option is the easiest way to deal with a mixed eating group, but it does not always satisfy all. In planning the meeting of another women’s group, that of professional women, where the core activists were both vegetarian and non-vegetarian and included women from Andhra and Kerala, as well as Tamilnadu, the non-vegetarians, led by a lawyer from Kerala, put in a special plea to have ‘the kind of food we like’, meaning meat. At the event, both kinds of food were served but placed on different tables from which people helped themselves. I doubt if this issue would have arisen had all members been Tamilians.
At 5 pm some two dozen women had gathered on the Club’s premises, as they do on the first Monday of every month, although the numbers were apparently larger than usual, and there was one husband present. They began with Hindu prayers, sung by three women. Then the five Christian members of the Club sang some hymns—first in Tamil, then in English after a specific request. Finally the Secretary, the sole Muslim in the organisation, covered her head and sang a Muslim prayer. In the light of the frequent recent reports of communal clashes, and especially attacks on Christians in Gujarat, this was a rather moving statement of amity and harmony.

Then a few men arrived . . . and more club members, so the total was around 50. Dinner was done by caterers: curd rice, savoury rice, cutlets, vegetables, payasam.

In my earlier work on women’s organisations, I showed how a neighbourhood club such as this one, by bringing together women from very diverse backgrounds, could function not only as what was once termed an ‘institution of urban adaptation’, but also enable its members to construct a class sub-culture through its choice of activities. Here I would also argue that the women members were choosing very deliberately to go against current divisive trends in Indian society by both praying and eating together. Commensality here is a form of sociality and civility.

Conclusions: Commensality and the Veg/Non-Veg Divide

This paper suggests that there are several important factors which inform the issue of vegetarianism versus non-vegetarianism in Madras. While caste is clearly significant, so too is gender. Women are much more likely than men to be vegetarians even in non-Brahmin castes, while some male Brahmins sometimes eat non-veg food outside the home. Age too is important, with children being allowed more leeway, even inside the home—e.g. the consumption of eggs, which is rationalised on the grounds of their greater need for protein.

However, another division, that between home food and food taken outside, is also far from absolute. Commensality is practised between vegetarians and non-vegetarians in the home, where some non-Brahmin vegetarian women cook non-veg foods for their husbands, children and other relatives. These days, outside food is also entering the home, in the form of food delivered such as pizzas, or catered meals. Further, even as members of many households take food cooked at home to work or school—thereby apparently practising a form
of ‘virtual’ domestic commensality—they also practise sociality at work or school by eating with and even sharing this food with their peers.

Another useful distinction seems to be between informal and formal occasions. Where a small number of women share a lunch at the home of one of them, or a picnic on a visit to a temple, rules of commensality can be sufficiently relaxed to allow a Brahmin to consume food cooked by a non-Brahmin. But on a more formal occasion, particularly where more people are present, such as a first birthday celebration or a wedding, issues around commensality are dealt with by having Brahmin caterers cook and serve the food.

In the context of the women’s club, eating together is an important aspect of the expression of sociality and enjoyment. Here, too, any awkwardness because of caste differences between members may be got over by utilising outside caterers for functions—but the emphasis is on eating together. Of course, it may be argued that those women who choose to join such a club are more likely to have liberal rather than orthodox ideas, but it is clear that what also matters, as the Club Secretary pointed out, is mutual respect.

I thus conclude that among the middle classes in Madras, there is no simple divide between vegetarians and non-vegetarians, and that the handling of commensality and sociality is complex and shifting, although facilitated by a common Tamil food repertoire that applies not only to Hindus but most Christians and Muslims as well.

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