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CHANGING FOOD HABITS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Discourses and practices from the middle classes in Chennai (Tamil Nadu)

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Introduction

In 2014, while campaigning for the general elections, Narendra Modi, the candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party¹ (who was elected as the fifteenth Prime Minister of India on 16 May), blamed the ruling Congress Party for having orchestrated a ‘pink revolution’, namely a boom in meat production epitomised by India’s new position as the largest beef exporter in the world.² Such an attack may sound puzzling, uttered by a politician who wants to put India on the tracks of prosperity with the help of private investments and the invisible hand of the market. But Modi is a Hindu nationalist, inspired by an ideological movement well known for its anti-Muslim and anti-cow slaughter rhetoric and activism.³

This apparent paradox between a conservative discourse on food and a call for economic modernity sheds light on the complex and negotiated meanings of food in present-day India. Mass production and consumption, brought about by rising incomes, commodification of goods and services and globalisation – namely the worldwide expansion of flows of people, capital, products and imaginaries – are indeed supposed to reconfigure, if not erode the food habits of Indians, especially those who claim to belong to the emerging ‘middle classes’. It is for instance alleged by some scholars that, in a process termed ‘nutrition transition’ (Popkin 1993, Shetty 2002), ‘diet transition’ (Pingali 2006) or ‘food transition’ (Bengoa 2001) economic development would result in an increasing consumption of meat. In this context, how will the Holy Cow revered by Modi and millions of Hindus⁴ encounter the ‘global steak’ allegedly diffused by the forces of this globalisation that India is now increasingly embracing? In the wake of global interconnectedness, urbanisation and economic growth, how will socio-economic changes affect practices and representations related to food in a country where the diet has long been a bio-moral marker of the position in the socio-cosmic order?
In India, food patterns differ according to region, religion, caste, financial means, habitat (rural or urban) and also to the age and gender of the individuals. Portraying changes on the national scale within such a fragmented mosaic is an arduous, if not an impossible, task. I will therefore address the changing food habits in contemporary India through the particular case of Chennai (formerly Madras). The capital of Tamil Nadu, also the fourth most populated city in India (about 6 million inhabitants in 2011), is characterised by the diversity of its population in terms of religions (Hinduism, Islam and Christianity), castes, occupations (from white-collar to daily workers) and revenues. It therefore allows a comprehensive overview of food change within a circumscribed space. More specifically, the population of the city (mostly the Tamil people) is generally defined as conservative in terms of food habits (Osella and Osella 2008: 196). According to Patricia Caplan (2008: 127), Tamils consume a very small amount of meat and fish, even those who do not claim to be vegetarian. But the people of Chennai are gradually encountering global flows of ideas, people and goods, in a state where social and economic indicators are, in broad terms, higher than those at the national level. Indeed, the development of computer services and other outsourcing industries in the city has triggered the growth of a new middle class of engineers and entrepreneurs, beside an older middle class of bureaucrats, teachers, physicians or lawyers (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). These middle classes (defined by the National Council of Applied Economic Research as having an annual household income between Rs. 200,000 and 1,000,000), will be the main focus of this chapter, as their purchasing power and cultural influence may set the trend for food change in the years and decades to come.

This apparent contrast between a cultural conservatism and a socio-economic boom is a factor that makes Chennai a relevant place to study food change. With the empirical findings from my fieldwork in the city in 2012 and 2013 as a base, I will attempt to define the complex ways in which food patterns are reconfigured, neutralising the basic opposition of modernity versus tradition. As my investigations and interviews mainly centred on meat production, distribution and consumption, this chapter will place particular emphasis on the issue of flesh food. The first section explores the notion of food transition. Drawing on statistical data and on second-hand sources, it questions the relevance of this model as many indicators reveal the non-achievement of this transition in the case of India. The second briefly exposes the theoretical ethos of food in the Indian context, relating it to conceptions about the social hierarchy and the individual body. The third section calls for an analysis that goes beyond the mere economic approach, putting forward the need to consider a cultural economy of food: although the (so-called) rational choices are made under financial constraint, they are also always embedded in moral values. This section therefore portrays specific modes of selecting, provisioning, transforming and consuming food that highlight both the persistence of longstanding habits and the emergence of new practices and discourses in the city of Chennai. It also investigates the restrictions limiting meat consumption. The last section argues that, for the urban middle classes, the experience of eating out can pave the way to food change. Although mirroring domestic consumption, it partially recasts notions of purity and commensality.

**Discussing food transition in contemporary India**

**Definition of food transition**

The notion of ‘food transition’ (Bengoa 2001) theorises a universal pattern of food change. It derives from the model of ‘nutrition transition’ that was widely popularised by Barry M.
Popkin in the early 1990s. In his article entitled ‘Nutritional patterns and transitions’, the nutritionist argues that ‘the pace of dietary change has accelerated to varying degrees in different regions of the world’ (Popkin 1993: 138). The author explains later that ‘modern societies seem to be converging on a diet high in saturated fats, sugar and refined foods and low in fibre’ (Popkin 2003: 581). Drawing on these analyses, the economist Prabhu Pingali specifies that ‘rapid economic and income growth, urbanization, and globalization are leading to a dramatic shift of Asian diets away from staples and increasingly towards livestock and dairy products, vegetables and fruit, and fats and oils’ (Pingali 2006: 281). It is usually admitted that the transition is threefold: first, a higher purchasing power combined with better agricultural yields prompts a rise in cereal consumption, especially rice and wheat, at the expense of traditional cereals such as millets or sorghum. In a second step, the demand for grains decreases while the consumption of animal products (including meat, fish, eggs and dairy products), oil seeds, sugar, vegetables and fruits is increasing, so that protein and fat intakes are rising. Third, health-related awareness tends to mitigate these trends (Popkin 2003).

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changes that match the definition only partially

On the Indian scale, some of the mechanisms depicted by nutritionists have been confirmed by economic and statistical studies. Prakash S. Shetty (2002) argues that milk, meat and oil consumption are indeed on the rise in the country. In his paper, he points out a causal link between what he calls an ‘inculcation of imbalanced and calorically excessive Western-type diets existing globally’ (2002: 181) and the growing prevalence of metabolic disorders such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and obesity in the country. The 2009–2010 Nutritional Intake and Household Consumption Reports by the National Sample Survey Office of the Indian Government (NSSO 2012a, 2012b) state that the share of calories derived from cereals is decreasing. It is still higher in rural areas and negatively correlated to the economic status of the households: the upper-income urban sections have a more diversified diet. The NSSO data also shows that the average protein intake per person is the same in the rural and urban areas but that it increases with income. These trends suggest that the country is today going through the second stage of the food transition.

Some recent studies, however, cast doubt upon Shetty’s assertions. Angus Deaton and Jean Drèze have argued that, even though there is ‘evidence (...) of a sustained decline in per capita calorie consumption during the last 25 years or so’ (2009: 62) and an increase in fat consumption, the total intake of proteins (vegetal and animal) and other nutrients is diminishing. Their analyses contradict the model exposed above. Quoting Deaton and Drèze, Frédéric Landy aptly notices that ‘the second stage of food transition seems to have started in India before the first stage has been completed’ (2009b: 60): per capita cereal consumption is already decreasing while meat, fish and eggs still account for only 6 per cent of protein in rural India and for 8 per cent in urban India. These low animal protein intakes are not compensated by vegetal protein: the NSSO data reveal that, while meat, fish, eggs and dairy products intake is hardly increasing, pulse consumption is declining. Besides, meat consumption is high in states where milk product consumption is low, and vice versa. Due to this low protein intake and despite rising incomes, India still displays one of the highest rates of child malnutrition and anaemia in the world (Sébastia, et al., forthcoming).

There are certainly distinctive features in the way India is experiencing food change today. In spite of globalisation and economic growth, food patterns are not converging towards
what has sometimes been termed a ‘westernisation’ of diets, to use Shetty’s terminology. With an annual consumption of only 5 kg of meat per person, whereas the world average comes close to 50 kg, Indians seem to resist the too rapidly predicted modification of their eating habits.

In the state of Tamil Nadu, long-term changes in food habits have been partly documented. The substitution of what is called ‘coarse grains’ (i.e. finger millet, pearl millet, sorghum, etc.) in favour of rice in Chennai accelerated during the nineteenth century. At that time, highly polished rice imported from Burma by the British flooded the city markets (Sébastia 2013) and in 1900, the parboiling of this cereal was the most thriving industry of the city (Lewandowski 1975: 353). Barbara Harriss-White, in her accounts of public nutrition policies in Tamil Nadu in the late 1970s notices a ‘long-term shift in diet against coarse grains and towards rice’ (2004: 53). She also argues that in the villages where she carried out her investigations, per capita protein consumption has remained low and almost constant between the late 1970s and the early 2000s (Harriss-White 2004: 59), while caloric consumption has hardly risen (Harriss-White 2004: 66). She concludes that, in Tamil Nadu, ‘nutrition transition has resulted in increasingly differentiated nutritional behaviour’ (Harriss-White 2004: 66): only better-off households can afford a more diversified diet.

While Harriss-White suggests that revenue inequality is the main reason for this dietary differentiation, one may advocate with Landy that ‘cultural density’ (2009b: 61) could be another, and perhaps the main factor that makes India an exception to the food transition model. Quantitative data, in terms of economic and nutritional values, do not permit the exploration of the non-market relationships in which people indulge with their food. Incomes not only pertain to purchasing power, but to ways of life as well. Moral values matter as food is always socially and symbolically constructed. What the ‘food transition’ approach actually neglects in the Indian context is the influence of the local ethos over the representations and practices.

The theoretical ethos of food on India

Food as a cultural practice or as a ‘total social fact’ has been thoroughly argued by anthropologists (Douglas 1972; Goody 1982; Lévi-Strauss 1983, Sahlins 1976, to name a few). India is not an exception to this rule. R.S. Khare, who abundantly addressed this issue (1976a, 1976b, 1992), defines food in the Indian context as ‘an item that receives a pervasive cultural direction’ (Khare and Rao 1986: 160). Arjun Appadurai refers to the ‘density, scope, and taxonomic complexity of Hindu symbolic thought in regard to food’ (Appadurai 1981: 496).

In India, the dominating ethos of food is set by both Hinduism and a discourse about the physical properties of the food material (including a classification of species). Thus, food practices relate mainly to hierarchy but also to conceptions about the body, these two considerations being intermingled. On the one hand, food practices are embedded in a socio-cosmological dimension: food stands as a marker of caste as it determines and reflects one’s relative place in a stratification defined by rules of social and symbolic purity. Food prescriptions and proscriptions operate differently according to the position in this hierarchy: the higher the status, the stricter the observances. To put it briefly, four observances are essential to the maintenance of relative purity: what kind of food is eaten (given that food items are ranked on a purity scale); how it is cooked; who cooks it; with whom it is eaten. On the other hand, food has a medical dimension as it is supposed to prevent, cure or cause diseases. In short, food, which is incorporated as a bio-moral aggregate (Appadurai 1981: 507),
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participates in stabilising the place of the eater within the socio-cosmic order as well as his/her physical and psychological conditions. However, this food ethos is theoretical and often contradicted by reality. It applies mostly to Hindus6 and the rules are more rigid for the orthodox upper castes. Yet, these conceptions pervade and underlie most of the attitudes pertaining to the ways food is handled and consumed in India. They shape the significances bestowed on food and create obstacles to food change. Codifications in terms of purity and health entail a feeling of ‘neophobia’: food that is symbolically unacceptable and thought of as ‘impure’ is perceived as a potential danger (Osella and Osella 2008: 192). For orthodox Brahmins, the restrictions with regard to food transactions confine proper food intake to the hearth of the home.

To grasp the complexity which emerges from the Indian food scene, it is necessary to go beyond two reductionisms: the economic and nutritionist approach that considers, through the theory of food transition, that every country goes through a similar pattern of food change, and the essentialist approach that portrays Indian food as totally imbued by its ethos since ancient times. Therefore, I propose here an approach in terms of cultural economy, focused on the ascription of meaning in the acts of buying, transforming, sharing and eating food in present-day India.

A cultural economy of food in Chennai

Food change in urban India in second-hand sources

The urban middle classes have concentrated the attention of scholars working on food change in India for the past ten years. The emergence of national, regional and ethnic cuisines (Appadurai 1988; Nandy 2004), the arrival of new products (Baviskar 2012; Dittrich 2009; Donner 2011; Srinivas 2007), the evolution of the retailing sector (Dittrich 2009; Srinivas 2007) and the mushrooming of street food stalls (Mukhopadhyay 2004) and restaurants (Appadurai 1988; Conlon 1995; Quien 2007; Ray and Srinivas 2012; Siegel 2010; Srinivas 2002, 2007) have been extensively investigated. In a nutshell, food has been mostly described as a marker for middle-class identity (Donner 2011; Srinivas 2007). Some authors emphasise the rapid changes that urban food patterns undergo in contemporary India. Arguing that food choice is increasingly individual, they consider eating as mostly a practice of conspicuous consumption, in a strategy of class distinction (Dittrich 2009; Dolphijn 2006; Mukhopadhyay 2004). Others who are more cautious state that Western or cosmopolitan products or diets are indeed entering the Indian food culture but are still negotiated (appropriated, adapted or discarded), intersecting with vernacular categories (religion, caste, gender, kinship, etc.). Thus, Tulasi Srinivas tries to go beyond the apparent contradiction between ‘gastro-nostalgia’ and ‘gastro-adventure’, analysing these attitudes in Bangalore as two faces of the same ‘cosmopolitan narrative’ (Srinivas 2007: 100). In the same way, Henrike Donner (2011) explores the articulation between ethnicity and cosmopolitanism in Bengali middle classes, showing how these two values are mediated by mothers within the household.

Chennai: a place of food conservatism?

At first sight, food patterns in Chennai seem to bare the mark of conservatism. Most of the Chennai people still stick to a Tamil repertoire when eating at home. One Hindu couple told me that ‘(they) prefer Tamil kind of preparations only’, a preference that can be generalised in most of the lower and middle classes. Similarly, a college administrator was proud to
report that his wife sometimes tries new recipes, but ‘only Tamil ones’, he added when I asked more details about his wife’s experiments. In both urban and rural Tamil Nadu, food intake is still mostly based on cereals: a standard meal cannot be imagined if not dominated by a large amount of white rice, drizzled by a dhal and campar (sambar, tamarind sauce) and accompanied by a pickle. The poor rarely enjoy more than this basic food. The working class may afford a variety of side dishes: stewed vegetables, fried green leaves, deep-fried pulse pancakes (appalam), tamarind gravies (kulampu), ‘pepperwater’ (raacam) and curd or buttermilk (mor) to accompany the rice. For the middle classes, til (idli, steamed cakes made of fermented rice-and-black gram batter) and tocai (dosa, thin pancakes made of the same batter) can also be cooked for breakfast or dinner. In non-vegetarian families, meat dishes such as spicy fried chicken or stewed lamb are served once or twice a week, mostly on Sundays. In fact, there is no striking difference between urban and rural people regarding the daily diet consumed at home. Rural populations have now adopted the food pattern of urban ones notably as they shifted from coarse grains to highly-valued rice. Thus, the centrality of rice remains unquestioned by Tamils, except by the elites who have resided abroad and claim a cosmopolitan way of life.

In cities, and particularly in Chennai, a better availability of foodstuffs and probably a certain taste for diversity, however, usually make the food choice wider than in villages. Various chutneys (made of onions, coriander, etc.) and gravies, uppuma (thick semolina porridge), omelettes, tocai stuffed with potatoes, north-Indian chapattis (wheat-made flat bread) and snacks such as chick pea-flour fritters (vatai) are added to the base described above. Milk, curd and ghee are surprisingly consumed far more in Chennai than in rural Tamil Nadu. Indeed, even though villagers possess cattle, they rarely drink or transform milk: agricultural labourers and farmers sell it to local cooperatives or to middlemen to get a substantial financial surplus.

New equipment, new modes of provisioning, new foodstuffs and new habits

According to studies conducted in other megacities such as Bangalore (Srinivas 2007), Hyderabad (Dittrich 2009), Kolkata (Donner 2011) or Pune (Baviskar 2012), Tamils from the urban middle classes appear to be particularly conservative. Nonetheless, food change in Chennai is a reality that should not be underestimated, as the city has experienced many evolutions of its foodscape in the recent years. In this regard, Patricia Caplan’s accounts are path-breaking (2001, 2006, 2008): she thoroughly describes the advent of processed and packaged food in the 1970s, the enlargement of the eating out scene in the 1980s and the development of supermarkets in the late 1990s. Indeed, a weaker connection with agriculture and a more extensive exposure to global material and immaterial flows, make urbanites with higher revenues less reluctant to let their diet evolve. Among other factors that encourage food change, space and time allotted to cooking are slightly less than in villages: kitchens are smaller and, in progressive families, women often work outside (see Sébastia in this volume), which affects cooking practices. Moreover, the urban context tends to erode the model of the joint family, where the husband’s mother stands as the official cook and gradually teaches her daughter-in-law. It favours nuclear families where wives, especially those with higher education and outside employment, sometimes lack culinary know-how, while their husbands rarely enter the kitchen. These changes induce a shift and even a break in the transmission of cooking abilities. TV shows, cookbooks, lifestyle magazines, columns in daily papers and internet blogs provide an abundant array of Tamil, Indian or more cosmopolitan recipes, but few women from the middle classes claim to take inspiration from them. Domestic facilities
have also evolved significantly, as electric grinders, pressure-cookers and refrigerators now equip many homes. Noticeably, ovens and microwave ovens are still confined to upper-class households as no dish from the Tamil repertoire needs baking or roasting. In upper-class and Westernised families, eating behaviour has begun to follow the ‘process of civilisation’ described by Elias (2000) as spoons tend to substitute for hands. Tables and chairs also tend to edge out mats and the cooking tasks are no longer undertaken on the floor but on an elevated counter top (Baviskar 2012). Whatever the economic background, stainless-steel or plastic plates have taken over from banana leaves.

Furthermore, new food products are entering the domestic space. In middle-class families, three main driving forces may account for this change. First, children, the preferential targets of TV advertisements, are the first actors by which change crosses the threshold of homes. Second, mothers, coping with the fast pace of urban life, more and more cook with ready-made preparations. Third, a growing number of adults are seeking healthy food to prevent or cure diseases caused by a sedentary life and an imbalanced diet. This demand for new foodstuffs is both fostered and met by the soaring of new modes of provisioning on national and international scales: new brands and products are distributed by the supermarkets and retail stores that are mushrooming throughout the city, offering ‘a mark of modernity and cultural sophistication’ (Osella 2008: 2). Since the economic liberalisation, begun in the 1990s, transnational companies have broken into the market and the national corporate sector has expanded. Products from Maggi, Coca-Cola or Kellogg have been available in Chennai for a long time (Caplan 2001). Indian distributors such as Reliance Fresh, More (Aditya Birla Group), Heritage Fresh, Oceanaa, Big Bazaar (Future Group), Spencer’s and Nilgiri’s 1905 have conquered the urban foodscape, supplying with a variety of references in two-storied air-conditioned buildings, mostly settled in the main avenues of the city’s upmarket neighbourhoods. In these outlets, consumers escape the hardships of the city and make a choice among a broad variety of packaged products that they once considered as stale but now see as hygienic, easy-to-handle and high quality (Dittrich 2009: 273). Apart from this well-organised sector, many small supermarkets, sometimes state-run or owned by cooperatives, are flourishing. International operators such as Walmart, Carrefour,10 Tesco or Metro are, however, still not allowed to enter the retailing scene, and are confined to wholesale. As an exception, the France-based Auchan Group is operating in the retailing sector in Chennai under a franchise signed with the Landmark Group. Moreover, despite higher prices, small-scale grocery shops, valued for their proximity, are resisting the assault of these high-capital-input outlets. Besides, local pastry and bakery shops, sometimes borrowing European names (‘French Loaf’, ‘La Chocolaterie’, etc.), are thriving in Chennai, selling the usual puffs and English-style sponge cakes (made ‘eggless’ for vegetarians) with artificial fruit flavours, covered with a layer of cream and topped with shiny colours, and more recently viennoiseries and baguettes have appeared. These places usually sell take-away items but they increasingly put chairs and tables at the disposal of customers. Indeed, if the food eaten at home is only marginally affected by the new consumption patterns, food eaten out is often the frontrunner of modernisation, an issue which I shall get back to in the last section.

The recomposed retailing sector has also contributed to the recent success of products such as breakfast cereals, pastas, dehydrated soups, cake mixes, wholesome grains and flours (varieties of rice, millets, pulses and beans), a wide scope of dairy products (butter, fresh cream, yoghurt, processed cheese, paneer, etc.), ‘exotic’ condiments (mustard, mayonnaise, soy sauce, Mexican salsa, etc.) or sweet items (chocolate, jams, spreads, etc.). Some of these products escape the vernacular classification of foodstuffs, which actually makes them appear neutral in terms of symbolic purity. Many of them are popularised by TV commercials intended for children or mothers, and praising either their convenience, their novelty or their medical benefits. Indeed,
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the increasing prevalence of metabolic disorders among the middle classes of Chennai has created an interest in ‘healthy food’. Whereas the market of organic products remains a very narrow niche, low-fat, low-sugar and wholesome food tend to occupy a growing stretch on the shelves, targeting those suffering from obesity, diabetes or cardiovascular diseases. Many brands available in supermarkets as well play the card of traditional knowledge, for instance selling ayurvedic purifying infusions or plant powders and extracts (from garlic, tulasi, nellikay, etc.). Meanwhile, imported olive oil, taking advantage of aggressive marketing and positive conceptions regarding its nutritional properties, is increasingly available but still is prohibitively expensive. Green tea sales are picking up, boosted by its alleged benefits to health. Health consciousness, together with higher purchasing power and advances in horticulture, has also made vegetables and fruits easily available and highly desirable. In Chennai, the so-called ‘English’ and hill-grown vegetables (carrots, cabbage, peas, etc.), which are profiting from improved transportation, have penetrated the market. The fruits on offer have also diversified. Apart from the common mangoes, bananas, papayas, watermelons and guavas, the consumption of which is on the rise, grapes have benefited from an increasing local production whereas Kashmir- and Himachal Pradesh-grown apples are still a luxury that many cannot afford. Moreover, strawberries, litchis, pears and mangosteens sometimes appear on the shelves of dedicated stores that also sell freshly made drinks from their surplus fruits. In front of the big supermarkets of the city, the traditional sugar cane juice is now squeezed in neat huts flanked by boards displaying its therapeutic properties. Another newcomer has quickly conquered the appetite of the middle classes: steamed sweet corn, eaten as a gourmandise and for its claimed medicinal values, is sold in small paper cups by street vendors – an ironic turn of fate for maize, which used to be a staple in many regions of central India before the green revolution. The deep-seated belief in a strong relation between food and health is thus re-invested in retailing strategies.

Less healthy products such as snacks, sweets and drinks have experienced sky-rocketing growth as people, and especially the younger generation, become eager for their appealing taste. But it would be misleading to consider that the food sector in Chennai is invaded by faceless globalised capitalism as upmarket retail stores as well as informal vendors source both locally and globally. When returning from work or from school, it is common for men to grab freshly-fried samosas at the tea shop. Drinks and packaged food are manufactured by both foreign and national companies and local cottage industries hiring women on a caste or ethnic basis (Baviskar 2012; Srinivas 2007). Since the liberalisation of the economy, local retail shops have admittedly been flooded by a wide variety of industrial biscuits (Britannia, Oreo, etc.) with flavours referring to the Indian (mango) and the cosmopolitan (chocolate or vanilla) taste. But snacks and biscuits are also produced by hand by family-owned businesses and then sold to shops around the corner. On a single shelf at a grocery store, fussy consumers can for instance choose between banana chips, fried in coconut oil by a neighbouring craftsman, and packets from the US brand Lay’s. Another consequence of economic liberalisation is the invasion for the past few decades of the Indian market by sodas (Caplan 2001). Referred to as ‘cool drinks’, they are served chilled-from-the-fridge to children, presented to guests or drunk with friends on the way back from college. Here again, the broad offer ranges from local to global, from the decades-old sparkling rose water served in returnable bottles to the ubiquitous cans of 7-Up. Transnational beverage companies are selling their own products or developing a new range adapted to local preferences.

Many food items on sale at supermarkets do not actually reach the entire middle classes nor substitute for the daily meals. Breakfast cereals and energy drinks, for long heavily advertised (Caplan 2006: 2.19), are consumed mainly by children. Instant noodles and chicken sausages
are eaten preferentially as snacks or by students living away from their families. Mostly, the novelties on offer illustrate the ‘local refraction of global processes’ that characterise the industrialised food chains (Morgan et al. 2006: 10). To save time, urban women from the middle classes rely more and more on ready-made Tamil preparations such as mixed spice powders, ginger-garlic paste and idli (idli) and dosa (fermented batter). Similarly, murukku (salty and spicy deep-fried dumplings) was usually hand-made, but its production tends to shift from the home to the factory. The demand for new foodstuffs is indeed mediated by local specificities. Some best-sellers in the West barely appear on the shelves in Chennai. Tin boxes, baby food in pots and frozen food do not succeed in the city for reasons of cost and preference mostly given for fresh products. If de-alcoholised wine is to be found in some supermarkets, alcohol production and sales are controlled exclusively by the state government. On each packaged product (even on bottles of water), a label indicates whether it is vegetarian or not, and meat is available only in a minority of Chennai’s retail stores as its presence in fridges would deter vegetarians from shopping there.

**Meat in Chennai: a heavily regulated consumption**

Despite the changes noticed in the city, Chennai is not only a place of unleashed modernity and Westernisation. One specific feature of the Tamil diet, in both rural and urban contexts, is the very low consumption of meat that accounts for the low levels of protein intake mentioned in the first section. Meat in India is not endowed with the rather positive significances it has in other countries. Although economic and geographical factors obviously play a paramount role in limiting its consumption (more meat is consumed in cities due to higher incomes and availability), its status in Chennai is also defined by conceptions about culture, religion and health.

When served, meat is always a side dish, cereals remaining the staple food. The NSSO data show that, in 2009, more than 70 per cent of the people interviewed in Tamil Nadu declared themselves as having eaten meat during the past 30 days (NSSO 2012a), but all Tamils actually share a common vegetarian food repertoire (Caplan 2008: 127). Many people I met claimed to be ‘both veg and non-veg’, these two notions not being mutually exclusive for them. Even many of those who pretend to be keen meat-eaters reckon that they would become tired of eating flesh food daily. Moreover, for reasons of penance or purity, many Hindus still refrain from eating meat on ‘auspicious days’ (as often as two to three days per week for most of them), when visiting a major temple or preparing for a pilgrimage. ‘I have something to pray for the god so I abstain from non-veg for the past two years,’ a company chairman from Chennai told me, wondering how he would maintain his diet during his next business trip to China. A temporary state of ritual defilement, for instance after the death of a relative or during menstruation, also leads to meat avoidance. On a register of fasting, the majority of Tamil Christians follow a 40-day-Lent before Easter, during which they eschew meat and fish. Moreover, conceptions of the holiness of the cow or merely a family habit deter most of middle- and high-caste Hindus from eating beef, be it from cattle or buffalo. After coming to power in 2014, some leaders of the BJP pushed Modi to implement a total ban on cow slaughter throughout India. As Paul Robbins puts it, ‘meat is a politically- and socially-contentious issue in India’ (1994: 11). The taboo on beef has spread over the centuries towards certain Muslim communities that now regard this meat as a low-status food or abstain from it as a sign of respect towards Hindu feelings (Chigateri 2008: 18). Furthermore, health factors are often mentioned to justify a low consumption of animal flesh: meat, especially mutton and beef, is blamed for causing diseases such as
hypercholesterolemia, diabetes, high blood pressure, and so on (see Sébastia in this volume). Many of my informants, mostly males ranging from lower- to upper-urban classes, reported that they stopped eating meat following their doctor’s advice. These Western-influenced medical conceptions of food are articulated with more vernacular representations of its ‘thermal qualities’ (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1975: 471). For instance, a person considering his/her body to be too hot will avoid chicken or lamb, both classified as heating. Other symbolic properties of meat make high consumption suspected of contributing to the development of peculiar physical and psychological characteristics such as an ‘animal spirit’, a violent character, a bad smell, pimples, and so on. Last, a new and more individualistic vegetarianism, sometimes claiming a Western influence, is emerging. Although often underpinned by a brahmanical ideology, it intermingles hygienic, moral and ritual concerns (Donner 2008; Quien 2007; Sébastia 2010). In some cases, a fleshless diet is promoted as a panacea against the evils of the modern world, such as metabolic diseases and relentless lust, as well as environmental damage, global warming, harmful behaviours towards animals, over-consumption and Americanisation of society.

Admittedly, there has been a surge in meat consumption over the past few decades (Robbins 1999). Chicken especially has benefited from the integration of its raising and the spatial concentration of its distribution. Broiler shops and non-vegetarian restaurants are spreading across Chennai. In a few supermarkets, marinated or ready-to-cook chilled chicken as well as frozen minced lamb are for sale. Some cosmopolitan young Brahmans move away from the ancestral vegetarianism of their parents. Numerous men indulge in meat-eating – notably when drinking alcohol – as a marker for virility, but practices regarding meat consumption hardly evolve. Meat is mostly bought from the ‘wet market’ – animals are slaughtered in the morning, carcasses are kept at ambient temperature and the flesh is sold the same day in open-air shops and bazaars. Heavy consumption of meat is still not a daily experience, even for the middle classes. Meat is rarely consumed more than twice a week, in portions usually not exceeding 50 grams. In addition to economic constraints, cultural and individual regulations account for the low level of protein intake evoked in the first section of this chapter and contradict the assumption that meat consumption is alleged to increase mechanically with economic development.

Restaurants in Chennai: venues of food change and mirrors of domestic consumption

While the domestic context gives a framework to regulate meat consumption, eating out often provides the opportunity to erode, refigure or transgress some of the cultural habits and purity rules. Numerous works have portrayed the specificities of eating in the public sphere, interrogating restaurants as loci for the discovery of new tastes relating to social differentiation and conspicuous consumption (Ashley et al. 2004; Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Bell and Valentine 1997; Warde and Martens 2000). In the specific Indian context, Appadurai has defined restaurants as ‘arenas for the transcendence of ethnic difference and for the exploration of the culinary Other’ (1988: 9). Arguments about the role of eating out as a main factor in food change in the country have been widely developed by Frank Conlon for Mumbai (Bombay) and Benjamin Siegel for Delhi. These two historians analyse public eating as a marker for class belonging and as a driving force of social change. For Conlon, restaurants ‘reflect, permit, and promote the introduction of a wide variety of changes in modern Indian life’ (1995: 91). Siegel depicts dining out as a ‘primary method by which the city’s denizens can embody both wealth and cosmopolitanism’ (2010: 73).
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Different places, different foods, different people

Let me now turn to the public food sphere in Chennai. Venues for eating out actually cover a reality that ranges from ‘loosely constrained’ to ‘highly structured’ eating places (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 121). A basic typology would differentiate several kinds of places:

- Street stalls offer a diversity of food, including north-Indian chaats (snacks) such as bhelpuri (puffed rice served with a sauce) or panipuri (small deep-fried bread), but as well spicy chickpea stew, steamed groundnuts, sliced fruits and fish curry served with itiyappam (steamed rice-made vermicelli cakes) or rice, mutton leg soup, or, more rarely, even fried beef.
- ‘Messes’, as they are called in Chennai, are basic restaurants open mostly for lunch, catering to the needs of male workers looking for a cheap meal. When they are non-vegetarian, they often serve offal (mutton legs, brain or liver).
- ‘Fast-foods’ are small restaurants that offer a variety of pre-cooked food, heated up on demand, such as fried rice, fried noodles or chicken 65 (chicken deep-fried in a variety of spices). These outlets sometimes sprawl onto the pavement and serve single dishes such as kebabs or greasy biryani. They are mostly frequented by students and single men.
- ‘High-class restaurants’, ‘family restaurants’ or ‘hotels’, many of them being ‘pure vegetarian’ (cuttu caivam), are of higher standard, usually with neatly tiled walls, a number of waiters and sometimes an air-conditioned zone. On the laminated menus, items are listed following a geographical or sometimes culinary classification (south Indian, north Indian, Chinese, Arabian, Chettinadu, tandoori, etc.). At noon, they are packed with political leaders and office employees, local or travelling on business; in the evening and during weekends, they welcome middle-class families.
- Western chains, advertised on TV, are enjoying increasing popularity among the affluent classes, with Pizza Hut and KFC mostly targeting college students attracted by ‘modernity’ while McDonald’s, as everywhere else, tries to be regarded as a ‘family restaurant’.
- Upper-scale ‘multi-cuisine’ restaurants, mostly attached to star hotels, offer worldwide food (Lebanese, Continental, Italian, Thai …) to the local upper class, but also to expatriates, tourists and foreign businessmen.

Other places dedicated to public food consumption must quickly be described: ice-cream parlours are more and more alluring, especially for families with children. Air-conditioned cafés, serving espresso, latte and pastries, are sometimes similar to the previously described bakeries and pastry shops. They attract upper-class single men taking advantage of wireless internet connections and young couples hiding their relationships. Food courts in malls exhibit a concentration of world cuisines, from traditional Tamil to ice-creams, pastas, Chinese and Mexican, allowing both an exotic and extremely individualised experience.

Restaurants: commensality and conviviality

In Chennai, as elsewhere in India, eating out paves the way to food change. For a long time, the food-related taboos described in the second section have prevented Indians, especially high-caste Hindus, from eating outside. Therefore, the main novelty experienced in the domain of food consumption is the mere fact of eating out; the public space has become an arena for food discovery.
Discrepancies between domestic and non-domestic food in the Indian context have been argued with salience (Khare 1976b; Caplan 2008). For instance, a significant number of high-caste men, who are pure vegetarians at home, sometimes eat meat outside, usually with colleagues from lower castes and quite often without informing their wives. Some youngsters from families who eschew beef transgress the taboo when accompanying friends to restaurants. More essentially, the pattern of the meal changes with the context: in the house, cereal consumption continues to prevail, while outside, the preference may go to dishes composed of meat (kebab, grilled chicken, etc.). But food eaten outside hardly affects domestic consumption patterns, the main reason being that the first must take the shape of a ‘proper meal’ (Douglas 1972: 68) – namely, for the Tamils, rice and pulses. Besides, the home is the place where caste purity is constantly being re-activated: to stay pure, the house should not be contaminated by alien products (Khare 1976b). Lastly, many housekeepers lack the equipment and the skills to cook new items such as pizzas or kebabs – foodstuffs that as well often require costly ingredients. When eaten at home, such dishes are actually bought outside and taken away.

As a consequence, food eaten outside paves the way for new patterns of sociability as it potentially emancipates from ethnic, religious or caste rules. Revenue, class, generation and gender prevail in the choices, hence reconfiguring food habits (Staples 2014). While domestic food is still dominated by rules of commensality (food transactions are confined within certain community boundaries), non-domestic food patterns are increasingly shaped by conviviality (the pleasure of discovering and sharing food induces cross-caste gatherings). This contrast makes food prescriptions highly contextual and relative to castes, places or interactions. Indian eaters enjoy a ‘simultaneous individual cultural multiplicity’ (Heinrich and Landy 1995: 8): they are able to deal with different contexts, by switching from a code referring to commensality and tradition to one referring to conviviality (Strümpell 2008) and cosmopolitanism. The city is exacerbating these interactional and spatial compartmentalisations (Singer 1972: 392). Increasing mobility and obvious diversity make this code switching (Heinrich and Landy 1995) more and more necessary, if not appealing.

Moreover, even the public foodscape has two dimensions: it allows play with both visibility and invisibility. As restaurants are located ‘in the space between the public and the domestic’ (Ray and Srinivas 2012: 17), eating there implies being seen by one’s peers, thus demonstrating social status, but also being protected from the gaze of one’s community. This duality is exemplified by beef consumption: when it is ordered in five star hotels, it symbolises cosmopolitanism; when it is eaten by Muslims, Christians or Dalits, it is a defining marker of identity; when it is tasted by other high-caste communities in dark local fast-food outlets, it denotes a transgression of family rules.

A continuum between domestic and non-domestic food

The dichotomy between eating out and eating in should not be overstressed nor reduced to an opposition of modernity versus tradition. Home and outside food indeed are still articulated together, linked by a continuum. Community rules and references have not faded completely when it comes to going out for lunch or dinner. In Chennai, as in most places in India, all restaurants display whether they are ‘pure vegetarian’ or ‘non-vegetarian’. As well, many vegetarian restaurants have gods’ names (Sri Krishna Bhavan, Ganapati Mess) and displays in some bakeries proudly proclaim that the owner is from a high caste, notably from the Brahman Iyengar community. Around the brahmanical temples of the city, restaurants are all pure vegetarian. Ethnicity matters and eating out does not always imply eating ‘alien
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Many successful restaurants serve dishes from the Tamil repertoire. In Chennai (and in other cities of Tamil Nadu), this appetite for what is seen as ‘authentic food’ is exemplified by the success of the vegetarian chain Saravana Bhavan. Middle- and upper-class people rush to its high-class restaurants for the tasty dosa (dosa) or the sumptuous ‘south Indian meals’ (rice served with an impressive range of gravies, vegetables and sweets). Even in restaurants, community belonging (be it on an ethnic, caste or national basis) still shapes practices, reflecting what Ian Cook and Peter Crang have named a ‘commodification of ethnicities’ (1996: 144). Moreover, Western fast-food chains do not impose an ‘Americanised’ food consumption model. Burgers and chicken wings are eaten more like a snack than like a meal and their taste is often ‘Indianised’: McDonald’s restaurants claim that they serve no beef or pork. KFC includes curry leaves in the bread crumbs and both these chains split their kitchens into a vegetarian and a non-vegetarian sector. New restaurants may permit the discovery of culinary otherness, but their menus do not become Westernised: they conversely give preference to easy-to-locate cuisines, mostly to the above mentioned north Indian, Arabian or Mughal dishes (biryani, kebabs) inspired by the food repertoire of the ancient royal courts of Delhi and Lucknow. People therefore try to accommodate the new food consumption patterns in their local systems of significance (Caplan 2006: 4.4).

Many connections indicate the existence of a strong physical and symbolic link between the domestic and the public food spheres. Numerous people buy parcelled food in restaurants and eat it at home. But if outside food may prompt enthusiasm, it can also provoke reluctance, drawing a ‘moral geography of polite public food consumption’ (Bell and Valentine 1997: 131). Many people lack the economic resources to eat in restaurants on a regular basis. A lot of workers and students still bring home food in lunch-boxes at their places of work or study as it is still a duty and a pride for many women of the middle classes, and even for those working outside the house, to take time to cook food for the whole family. Noticeably, food served outside is often criticised: it is reported that ‘powders’ are added to the rice, frying oil is said to be adulterated, kitchens are deemed unhygienic, and so on, thus paradoxically making restaurants ‘non-modern’ places. In the same way, restaurants should not be regarded only as places of freedom. Many eaters are driven there by their desire but others also by compulsion: single men who do not have use of a kitchen in their lodgings, single workers who lack time and knowledge to cook, and employees away from home.

Conclusion: a segmentation of food consumption patterns

This chapter has attempted to illustrate the complexity of food change in contemporary India through the specific example of the middle classes in Chennai. Capital-intensive agricultural practices, the rapid growth of the agri-food industry, including the sector of ready-made and packaged products, expanding circuits of supply that more and more source at a global scale, new modes of provisioning and the now well-anchored habit of eating outside, have partly transformed the ways Indians relate to food. It is also hardly deniable that, in some specific contexts and for the upper sections only, mass consumption and a globalised urban way of life turn the act of eating into a demonstration of social status. Adhesion to the consumer society and distinction from the diet of the poor are a way to show middle-class respectability. Outside and new processed food appears as ritually neutral. Places of conviviality such as restaurants question the domestic rules of commensality and contribute to a secularisation of food: revenue, class and generation intersect with ethnicity, religion and caste, blurring the lines of community affiliation and becoming new decisive factors in food decisions.
However, food change, as obvious as it may seem, is embedded in a deep-rooted system of values to which the analysis in terms of ‘food transition’, when it concerns India, unfortunately often turns a blind eye. Whereas economic constraints prevent the poorest sections of the society from diversifying their diet, the symbolic meanings of food account for the specificities of the Indian food scenario. In Chennai, food change mostly occurs at the margins: margins of the kitchen (new equipment, ready-made preparations), margins of the plate (take-away snacks and drinks, new side dishes) and margins of the home (new food experienced outside). New food patterns rarely refer to a Western or cosmopolitan repertoire, but rather to regional or national ones. The narratives of authenticity reveal how ethnic identity becomes an increasing concern which is constantly negotiated, commodified and essentialised in the domestic and public arenas. In this way, Indians try to incorporate novelties in a long-lasting and dense cultural matrix. For instance, attitudes to meat are still entrenched in conceptions about status and symbolic pollution. Other vernacular notions about purity and health are not disappearing but they are reconfigured by the middle classes into modern discourses about hygiene and nutrition. The emerging food cosmopolitanism of the middle and upper classes in Chennai continues to mediate moral values and conceptions about what is acceptable and what is not. Conspicuous eating in the public sphere is actually re-asserting the link between diet and hierarchy elaborated in the Hindu cosmology. Food consumption patterns still shape and legitimise the position in society, but for the middle and upper-urban classes, this position is less and less an assigned one but becomes an achieved one. Thus, more than a standardisation of diets, food in contemporary India and in particular in Tamil Nadu displays models of renewed and increasing spatial compartmentalisation and social segmentation.

Notes

1 Party of the People of India, the political organisation of a nebulous network that seeks to promote Hinduism as the cornerstone of India’s identity.
2 According to the Ministry of Food Processing, in 2012–2013 India has exported 1.89 million tonnes of beef (officially only buffalo meat), bringing a revenue of approximately €2.5 billion.
3 Hindu nationalists often blame Muslims for having introduced meat and beef consumption in India (Robbins 1999: 417).
4 Claiming that the cow is ‘holy’ in India would be an essentialising discourse, but it is true that religious sentiments towards this animal deter many Hindus (with the notable exception of those from lower castes) from slaughtering cattle and eating beef.
5 Between approximately €2,500 and €12,500 in 2014.
6 For instance, Osella and Osella (2008) have well argued that in Kerala, Muslims’ food practices are underpinned by more egalitarian standards.
7 It has been satisfyingly argued that the green revolution movement and Tamil governmental food schemes such as the Public Distribution System (subsidised food grains and commodities) and the Midday Meal (free lunch in schools) have promoted rice at the expense of ‘coarse cereals’ (Harriss-White 2004; Landy 2009a). Polished rice, as commonly consumed, is blamed for causing type 2 diabetes as well as micronutrient deficiencies (see Chapter 32 in this volume).
8 Ghee (clarified butter) is especially favoured by Brahman households, more numerous in cities than in the countryside of Tamil Nadu.
9 Even though we may argue that what Patricia Caplan calls the ‘middle-class’ refers more to upper-middle or upper classes.
10 As Modi did not make any move regarding the opening up of the retail sector, Carrefour announced in July 2014 that it would leave India.
11 Ocimum tenuiflorum.
12 Phyllanthus emblica.
13 Urban fruit consumption has largely outstripped the rural (NSSO 2012a: ii).
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14 In Chennai, Pazhamudir and Reliance Fresh are competing for this booming market.
15 Coca-Cola and PepsiCo share the market in bottled mango juice: the first sells Maaza® and the second Slice®.
16 For the time being, the legislation regarding cattle and buffalo slaughter is set by the states, but the Article 48 of the Constitution encourages them to prohibit it (see also Chigateri 2008: 16).
17 Pilaf rice of Mughal origin cooked with meat and specific spices.
18 A region of Tamil Nadu that many Tamils associate with tasty non-vegetarian food.
19 In Chennai, Café Coffee Day and Barista are the main actors in the sector.

Bibliography


