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South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,
n.s., Vol.XXXI, no.1, April 2008

Introduction

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It was a happy coincidence that SOAS inaugurated a research centre for the study of food[1] just around the moment when my husband Filippo and I were returning from a two-year period of fieldwork which had left us reeling with shock at the differences we encountered in Kerala between different communities' food habits.[2] After spending several years (1989–2002) working among Kerala Hindus, we had ourselves begun to take for granted that 'of course' it was 'natural' for most people to want to feed us without accepting reciprocal hospitality, and it was taken for granted that Malayalis often felt diffident about eating outside of their own homes. We had endured much criticism of our habit of sometimes eating out in town hotels and had learned to make such visits clandestine. We had also begun to find it quite normal that, while daily fare was non-vegetarian, to serve meat or fish at a festive or ritual occasion would be somehow 'odd'; we totally accepted the ambivalence and often secrecy which surrounded the killing and eating of cows. We knew to be careful in people's homes about issues of plate clearing, often finding ourselves at functions in a queue at a tap along with others, waiting to wash our own plates, so that nobody would have to deal with anybody's *juthu* (pollution). And when we found ourselves (2002–2004) working among Muslims, caught up in hectic circuits of dinners in which we were also expected to participate as hosts; when we were asked by several respondents for the recipe for *pasta al ragu* (pasta with beef sauce); when I was invited into kitchens to shred beef and help prepare *ramzan samosa*s for the household fast-breaking meal; all this gave us pause to reflect upon issues of 'gastro-politics', in Appadurai's felicitous

[1] See www.soas.ac.uk/foodstudies for details.

[2] My thanks to Irfan Ahmad, Shraddha Chigateri, Filippo Osella, and Atreyee Sen for commenting on this Introduction. Thanks to ESRC and SOAS for funding the workshop where papers were presented. Filippo and I regret that in the end, because of time and re-writing constraints, Radhika Chopra and Marie-Claude Mahias were unable to offer this special issue their papers on, respectively, Punjabi and Jain food practices. Sincere thanks also to the journal team, editor Ian Copland and editorial assistant Vivien Seyler for their sustained support and input.

ISSN 0085-6401 print; 1479-0270 online/08/010001-09 © 2008 South Asian Studies Association of Australia
DOI: 10.1080/00856400701874684

phrase.[3] Yet my most amazing revelatory moment of early fieldwork among Muslims came during a meal with a Muslim family. My friend Shahida looked over at my plate where a piece of chicken remained uneaten (I had found it too tough). Shahida asked politely, 'Do you not want that bit?' When I shamefacedly replied in the negative, Shahida jauntily remarked, 'I love these bits. Do you mind?' She reached across to my plate, took the piece and began to chew it with relish. It was true, then! Here, issues of caste pollution and *juthu* simply did not exist! It is almost impossible to register the degree of shock (and sense of liberation) that Shahida's act provoked in me.

We continually trip over the idea that, as postcolonial anthropologists, we should not contribute to objectifying practices nor take 'communities' as objects of study. If we could write about food in India in terms stripped of all caste and religious community references we happily would. But this would be utterly absurd as things stand. As the papers in this collection demonstrate over and over, essentialised notions of community, a folk version of *habitus* theory, radically different food practices, and a conviction that 'you are what you eat', entwine to locate large parts of South Asian culinary culture within specific social groupings and practically enforce individual affiliation to one's community—both via habit and by the policing within the home of 'correct' or socially-coherent food styles. Cooking and eating practices draw South Asians into a distinctive regional food *habitus*, in which the taste of—for example—coconut or hilsa fish is *par excellence* the 'taste of home'; but also into food comfort zones of caste or denominational familiarity, which then tend to become associated with highly specific dishes.

Regarding *habitus*, we should point out that while this is a structuring structure[4] which sets up food 'comfort zones', it in no way implies a static diet or inability to incorporate the new. Rather, it sets the boundaries for experimentation and produces tendencies towards certain reactions—Bourdieu's 'durable dispositions'[5]—when encountering new items for the first time. We note also that the same dish need not hold the same meanings for different consumers. Thus, Kentucky Fried Chicken is happily adopted and eaten by South Asian Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike in a continuum with pre-existing 'indigenous' dishes like chicken dry fry; at the same time, it offers a mark of modernity and cultural sophistication. For some, notably

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[3] A. Appadurai, 'Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol.8, no.3 (1981), pp.494–511.
[4] P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
[5] *Ibid.*

among Anglo-Indians and Christians, KFC may hold the added allure of having a touch of American/European style.[6] Indeed in north India and the metropolises, even McDonalds is becoming widely appreciated, as Atreyee Sen pointed out to me: 'You don't have to go to the West, the West comes to you, and it can be relatively cheap as well!'[7] But of course for caste Hindus, such transgressive foods are generally to be eaten only outside, as in Mukhopadhyay's discussion.[8] Purity, then, becomes not simply about the body, but about the body at home.

It is also through thinking about *habitus*, and the ways in which endogamy works to preserve it, that some of the links between community and food are highlighted. Here, we turn specifically to discuss caste. So long as practices of community (or meta-community, as in 'Brahman or Baniya', '*savarna* Hindu') endogamy persists, then so too does caste persist, albeit increasingly concealed under pragmatic wider 'caste blocs' or bad-faith discourses about 'shared culture'. One of the commonest arguments we hear against inter-community marriage is that it leads to incompatability in the domestic cultures—of which eating habits form the core—between husband and wife, and is hence productive of discord in the home. The desire to reproduce certain habits of cooking, eating, spicing, home maintenance, child socialisation, religious practice, domestic living arrangements and so on, together with an unwillingness to countenance hybridity within the family, is strong right across South Asia, and mitigates severely against community exogamy.[9] Thus, even when vegetarianism can be seen as act of rebellion, it is always a rebellion against the background of one's own particular community's presumed 'normal' practices.

We note, following Sutton, that a 'feedback loop exists, between the situation in which and people with whom one prepares, shares and eats food and the food itself'.[10] Through repeated meals, ethnicity is performed and produced. A particular *habitus* is inculcated, and a tight knot drawn which binds together groups of people through the types of food provided and the modality of eating it. Breaking out of that tight loop requires a self-conscious effort at innovation or an ethic of cosmopolitanism, as among Kerala Muslims (Osellas, below),

[6] See L. Caplan, 'Colonial and Contemporary Transnationalisms: Traversing Anglo-Indian Boundaries of the Mind', paper presented at ICCCR workshop on Transnationalism, Manchester University, 16–18 May 1998.
[7] Personal communication.
[8] B. Mukhopadhyay, 'Between Elite Hysteria and Subaltern Carnivalesque: The Politics of Street-Food in the City of Calcutta', in *South Asia Research*, Vol.24, no.3 (2004), pp.7–50.
[9] See for example A. Beteille, 'The Reproduction Of Inequality: Occupation, Caste, Family', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.25 (1991), pp.3–29.
[10] D.E. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

Chennai colony-dwellers (Caplan, below) or Nayanika Mookherjee's brave experiments in forging solidarity and dissolving the fictions of the border (below); or else it requires a desire to separate oneself in some way from the embodied food memory and *habitus* of one's assigned social group, as among the rebellious Calcutta teens described by Donner (below) or the sect-adhering Gonds whose adoption of vegetarianism has been studied by Desai (below). Food memory, *habitus*, domestic practices—all these are informal and tacit means of working on the person through the production of particular embodied states and they support the formal structure of endogamy in continuing to reproduce caste and community identities.

However caste is coded, re-coded, euphemised, denied or concealed, it is evident that arguments about the weakening of or disappearance of it are at best naïve and at worst, risible. While caste elites continue overwhelmingly to reproduce themselves through endogamy and to dominate in prestigious, secure and well-paid employment,[11] Dalits continue to be over-represented at the other end of the socio-economic scale.[12] Furthermore lower castes,[13] Dalit Christians,[14] Adivasi communities[15] and Muslims[16] all continue to be held as inferior by caste Hindus and to suffer at the hands of the latter various forms of violence: actual, structural and symbolic. It cannot be ignored that, while the latter subaltern groups are normatively non-vegetarian, many dominant groups such as the 'I.T. professional Tamil Brahmans' studied by Fuller and Haripriya are normatively vegetarian, and that their vegetarianism is, for them, one of the indices of their superiority and their birthright to privilege.[17] Michelutti (below)

[11] See for example C. Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi, 'Work Culture and Sociality in the Indian IT Industry: A Sociological Study. Final Report (2006)' [http://www.union-network.org/uniindep.nsf/2135ca57dacb358dc1256aa2002eba4f/40601d743f5e3567c125723b0034587d/$FILE/NIAS-IDPAD%20IT%20Study%20Final%20Report.pdf, accessed 27 Nov. 2007]; and C.J. Fuller and H. Narasimhan, 'Information Technology Professionals and the New-Rich Middle Class in Chennai (Madras)', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.41, no.1 (2007), pp.121–50.

[12] See for example J.L. Varriano, J-L. Racine, Viramma Josiane Racine and Josiane Racine, *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable Woman* (London: Verso, 1997); and O. Mendelsohn and M. Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[13] F. Osella and C. Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); J. Parry, 'Two Cheers for Reservation: The Satnamis and the Steel Plant', in R. Guha and J. Parry (eds), *Institutions and Inequalities: Essays in Honour of Andre Beteille* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.128–69; and M.S.S. Pandian, 'One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere' [http://www.sephis.org/pdf/pandian.pdf, accessed 27 Nov. 2007].

[14] D. Mosse, 'Idioms of Subordination and Styles of Protest among Christian and Hindu Harijan Castes in Tamil Nadu', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.28 (1994), pp.67–106.

[15] A. Shah, 'The Labour of Love: Seasonal Migration from Jharkhand to the Brick Kilns of Other States in India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol.40, no.1 (2006), pp.91–119.

[16] T.B. Hansen, 'The India that does not Shine', in *ISIM Review*, Vol.19 (2007), pp.50–1.

[17] Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Information Technology Professionals', pp.121–50.

is among those who suggest to us that vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism cannot ever be separated from the weight that they carry in India in indexing ‘types of people’, or from cultural assumptions about the effects of certain foods in the mind-body-soul.

During the 1970s, the study of caste came to be dominated by Dumontian-inspired frameworks.[18] However McKim Marriott’s ‘indigenist’ ethnosociological project[19] stood out from the trend—appeared indeed to position itself in direct opposition to Dumont’s highly-abstracted structuralism. Accordingly anthropologists of the 1980s and 1990s felt obliged to take up one or other of the two paradigms, with no possibility of negotiation or nuance between the positions. Most, though, reacted sceptically, even hostilely, to Marriott’s assertions about the Hindu person and the fluid self, his call to try to understand ‘from within’ and from the ground up via synthesis of a range of contemporary ethnographies and some key principles active in daily Indian social life, and instead chose to ‘side with’ (as it was seen at the time) Dumont’s Indological and high-level abstraction. To date Daniel’s Tamil monograph is still the only genuine full-length Indian ethnosociological ethnography.[20]

In Babb’s reaction to Marriott (published as part of a special issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* dedicated to assessing ethnosociology[21]) he asserted that, despite serious flaws in the project, anthropologists of India were indeed being furnished thereby with new insights. Yet Babb’s conclusion, that ethnography would never ‘look at Indian social life in quite the same way again’,[22] has to date proved unfounded. Most anthropologists simply failed to engage with Marriott’s work and, rather than object to the parts of the ethnosociological framework which seemed too constricting or inaccurate, simply dismissed the entire project outright. On the other hand, as a host of journal articles have shown, while the 1990s ‘cube’ is too constricting a

[18] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).
[19] McKim Marriott, ‘Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism’, in B. Kapferer (ed.), *Transactions and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior* (Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1976), pp.109–42; McK. Marriott and R. Inden, ‘Toward an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems’, in K. David (ed.), *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1976), pp.227–38; McK. Marriott, ‘Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology’, in McK. Marriott (ed.), *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), pp 1–39.
[20] E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
[21] L.A. Babb, ‘Social Science Inside Out’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol.24, no.2 (1990), pp.201–23.
[22] *Ibid*., p.213.

framework, certain core principles of the ethnosociological view of social relations do appear to be borne out by ethnography.[23]

More recently, ethnosociological concepts have been taken up and shown to be useful tools for thinking about personhood in Melanesia[24]—and even in the UK.[25] Issues of partibility, transactions, fluidity, malleability—not to mention the concept of the 'dividual'—have been demonstrated to be theoretically fruitful terms of thinking in locations way beyond Hindu India, reminding us again of Babb's reaction to Marriott: that these may be not specifically Indian but conceptual universals.[26] Now that it has been shown how useful much of Marriott's work can be in sites outside India—thereby at once giving intellectual legitimacy to the work while ridding it of its foundation in a discredited dichotomy between 'India' and 'The West'—it is to be hoped that old prejudices against the 'Chicago ethnosociologists' will be set aside to allow deeper exploration of the complexities of producing social hierarchies and forging difference from embodied practice. Observing how persons transact or refuse to transact with each other, thinking about how they are said or felt to change and to produce bodily effects on each other, taking serious account of how different foods are said to affect the humoral body—all of this has the possibility to take us beyond Marriott's original formal project of 'Thinking through Hindu Categories' and into a realm of possibilities that could include an analytical framework for personhood and social relations which is at once more ambitious—being no longer tied tightly to the Hindu world of caste—and less ambitious—being envisaged not as an all-encompassing key but as part of a wider and eclectic set of conceptual tools.

One negative effect of the dominance of Dumontian sociology and the failure to engage seriously with Marriott's propositions is that anthropologists, thinking

[23] See for example L.A. Babb, 'Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism', in *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol.37, no.4 (1981), pp.387–401; L.A. Babb, 'The Physiology of Redemption', in *History of Religions*, Vol.22, no.4 (1983), pp.293–312; J. Alter, 'The Celibate Wrestler: Sexual Chaos, Embodied Balance and Competitive Politics in North India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.29, no.1 (1995), pp.109–31; R. Freeman, 'Dynamics of the Person in the Worship and Sorcery of Malabar', in *La Possession en Asie du Sud: Parole, Corp, et Territoire: Purusartha Numero 21* (Paris: EHESS, 1999), pp.149–82; C. Osella and F. Osella, 'Points de Vue Malayalis sur l'Inné et l'Acquis', in V. Bouiller and G. Tarabout (eds), *Images du Corps dans le Monde Hindou* (Paris: CNRS Publications, 2001), pp.410–36; and R.T. Rosin, 'Wind, Traffic and Dust: The Recycling of Wastes', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.34, no.3 (2001), pp.361–408.

[24] M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[25] See for example N. Rapport, *Diverse World-Views in an English Village* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

[26] Babb, 'Social Science Inside Out', p.212.

in terms of a structural dualism, have not been encouraged to study issues such as the *processes* and *means* by which social hierarchy, diet and body might be drawn together in India, nor how food hierarchies might be complexified beyond the binary 'veg/non-veg' opposition, nor indeed how the range of Indian communities—Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains and so on—all relate to each other and to various Hindu castes in social morphologies, and how such relations are sedimented in ideas about the body.[27]

Food is clearly one of the most potent means by which these issues may be understood, and in this issue we address head-on questions of diet, body, personhood, hierarchy and sociality, all the while troubling the idea of a simple veg/non-veg dichotomy. Still, the latter remains a useful shorthand for highlighting the bare bones of the food hierarchy—as recognised in railway station refreshment rooms across India—of 'Brahmans and a few others' versus 'the rest'. This goes along with an always-implicit understanding that vegetarianism articulates here with ideas about Hindu ritual purity, caste pollution and social status. It also goes along with an equally-implicit disciplining of the entire travelling population into the discourse that vegetarianism is necessarily superior—for vegetarianism is permitted in India to drag the other category of 'non-veg' towards its own logics of 'purity', both by the very fact of segregation of the 'veg' from (allegedly impure) others and then again, for example, by reducing the 'non-veg' available in public places to a bland and narrow array of flesh considered less 'objectionable'.

Another issue which must be faced head-on, because of the near-hegemonic assertion that vegetarianism is necessarily superior, is the association made between vegetarianism and non-violence. This, as Chigateri (below) points out, is one of the cornerstones for high-caste Hindu claims to moral, spiritual and personal superiority. Along with this, Hindu nationalist discourse commonly claims that Muslims, because they eat beef, are particularly prone to violence and especially sexual violence.[28] The assertion that vegetarian is non-violent is itself an ideological reversal of the true state of affairs in contemporary India. Many subaltern Indians (Dalits, Muslims, Catholics) with whom we have discussed the ideas for this volume have had similar reactions: one respondent demanded: 'Narendra Modi is a violent fascist and a vegetarian. What does this say about their claims that a vegetarian diet makes you non-violent?' Another

[27] F. and C. Osella, 'Articulation of Physical and Social Bodies in Kerala', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.30, no.1 (1996), pp.37–68.

[28] T.B. Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, NJ/Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2001); and C. Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, and Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

pointed out: 'The Hindutva people are all vegetarians. And they are the ones who encourage violence against minorities. They claim to be non-violent but actually they are not'. Another asked rhetorically if any of those who engaged in or lent tacit support to the Gujarat pogroms of 2002[29] were vegetarians?

As the literature on communal and caste violence makes clear, claims that vegetarians are necessarily more peaceful, spiritually-advanced, morally-superior and so on than their non-vegetarian counterparts simply cannot be upheld.[30] But these fake claims to peaceability are not only undermined by actual violent events. The phony—yet continuing—equation in public discourse of vegetarianism with non-violence needs to be taken quite seriously to task. For what is the conviction that other peoples' foodstuffs are dirty, inedible, rubbish, polluting, inferior and so on, if not a strong form of symbolic violence?[31] And what is the refusal to take food from the hand of another for fear of pollution, not by the particular foodstuff, but *by the very person themself*, if not a powerful refusal of the humanity of the other? We must think about the discourse of vegetarian food as being superior and as 'pure' in tandem with the discourse about high-caste Hindu persons as superior and as more pure. These two aspects of 'purity discourses' cannot be de-linked as different types of purity or realms of discourse. They clearly articulate with and support each other.

In short, the politics of vegetarianism in contemporary India take on a particular shade—a shade which is, as Jakob Klein notes in his thoughtful 'Afterword' (below), quite distinctive. And as recent scholarship makes plain, it is in our practice and our performance that we make our identities.[32] In India, the performative social implications of vegetarianism are so strong that I—

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[29] For details see for example E. Simpson, 'The State of Gujarat and the Men without Souls', in *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol.26, no.3 (2006), pp.331–48.

[30] On violence against Dalits see for example 'Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables"', Human Rights Watch Report 1999 [http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/, accessed 27 Nov. 2007]; on anti-Christian violence see P.K. Vijayan, 'Developing Powers: Modernisation and the Masculine Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism', in R. Chopra, C. Osella and F. Osella (eds), *South Asian Masculinities: Contexts of Change, Sites of Continuity* (Delhi: Women Unlimited/Kali for Women, 2004), pp.364–90. More generally on caste Hinduism and its articulation into the violence of Hindu nationalism see P. Van der Veer, 'God Must be Liberated. A Hindu Liberation Movement in Ayodhya', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.21, no.2 (1987), pp.283–301; T.B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics* (London: Hurst, 1996); A. Sen, *Shiv Sena Women: Violence and Communalism in a Bombay Slum* (London: Hurst, 2007); and S. Chanda, 'Of Communal Consciousness and Communal Violence: Impressions from Post-Riot Surat', in *South Asia*, Vol.17, no.1 (1994), pp.49–61.

[31] As discussed in Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

[32] Following J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

almost totally vegetarian by choice since the age of 13—switched in the late 1980s to eating meat. The social and cultural meanings of food are so powerful that they cannot easily be side-stepped by the foreign anthropologist, an issue that Staples (below) has struggled with and reflected upon. For me, learning to eat (and, by now, enjoy) beef fry with Muslim research respondents in the 1990s (in defiance of all attempts to introduce the beef ban into Kerala) has been a small but necessary political act. If I had worked harder to make this transition earlier in the 1980s instead of sticking to my personal eating preferences, it might have been better. Certainly, I would have caused less puzzlement and far less inconvenience to my Christian OBC (Other Backward Castes) and Dalit hosts (see Caplan below). As Arun has recently pointed out,[33] and as Chigateri (below) explores, a willingness to eat beef and to insist that it is neither productive of impurity nor a low-status food is one of the most important moves that can be made to counter the food hierarchy stigma—making beef-eating a small act of solidarity available to some anthropologists in the field.[34]

Finally, we are trying in this symposium to work against South Asian exceptionalism, which is a trope as much belonging to South Asians themselves as to many—too many—scholars of the region. In asking our colleague Jakob Klein, an anthropologist of China also involved with the SOAS Food Studies Centre, to write an 'Afterword' setting our material into a comparative perspective, we are explicitly working against this all-too-common grain. Klein's 'Afterword' reveals, we feel, the value of a fresh viewpoint; as he points out, the broader view makes very clear exactly what is specific to India or South Asia and also what is not, while situating current food habits into their proper historical perspective and as part of a contemporary globalised food economy. Klein's 'Afterword' also points us towards several interesting lines of analysis and possibilities for future comparative work—historical and sociological—which we hope will be taken up.

[33] C.J. Arun, *Constructing Dalit Identity* (New Delhi: Rawat Publishers, 2007).

[34] I am not here prescribing wholesale adoption of all local foods. In particular, ethnographers often report discomfort at being offered 'special foods', which they struggle to eat. I am arguing that if one finds that one can eat meat and—especially—beef then, as Nayanika Mookherjee (this issue) and I have found, it is a move worth making in the interests of solidarity and challenging stigma.