

‘Go on, just try some!’ Meat and Meaning-Making among South Indian Christians

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Introduction

Much of what has been written about food in classical Hindu South Asian ethnography—whether about commensality or about what is actually consumed—implies a direct correlation between the stringency of food rules and position in the caste hierarchy. Brahmins ideally accept cooked (or *kacca*) food from no one and, as strict vegetarians, are the most careful about what they consume. Untouchables, on the other hand, eat the widest range of foods—even, in some cases, the flesh of the sacred cow—and can eat it regardless of who was involved in the preparation.¹

The above does, of course, caricature the arguments made in the literature. The long standing observation that castes of the warrior *varna* (Kshatriyas) eat meat yet top certain caste hierarchies² significantly nuances the Dumontian dichotomy between

¹ See, for example, Andre Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.56–60; Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), pp.141–8; McKim Marriott, ‘Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis’, in M. Singer and B.S. Cohn (eds), *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968) pp.133-171; Adrian Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and its Region* (London: Routledge, 1960).

² See, for example, A.M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study* (London: Methuen, 1950); Richard Burghart, ‘Hierarchical Models of the Hindu Social System’, in *Man*, Vol.XIIV, no.4 (1978), pp.519-536; Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Nicholas Dirks, ‘The Original Caste: Power, History and Hierarchy in South Asia’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol.XXIII, no.1 (1989), pp.59–77.

vegetarianism as high and pure on the one hand, and meat eating as low and impure on the other. Zimmermann's painstaking textual analysis of classical Ayurveda similarly chips away at such a division, illustrating how vegetarianism and meat-eating co-exist in Ayurvedic medicine.³ Contemporary work focusing on dietary change in (mostly) urban environments further blurs the boundaries, as does research challenging the over emphasis on caste in favour of other identities such as gender, age and economic status.⁴ Nevertheless, the general inference in anthropological accounts remains that those towards the bottom of whichever of the notional hierarchies we chose—namely, scheduled castes and tribes—differentiate less between foods they consider suitable and unsuitable for consumption than those above them. This chapter challenges this assumption.

In particular, I argue that a non-vegetarian diet—even one that includes beef as a viable option—is also shaped by rules concerning food avoidance and acceptability. Secondly, I suggest that food was also as *symbolically* important for my low caste, Christian meat-eating informants as it was for the vegetarian caste-Hindus I also

³ F. Zimmermann, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1982] 1999), p.187.

⁴ See for example Pat Caplan, 'Food in Middle-Class Madras Households from the 1970s to the 1990s', in K. Cwiertka and B. Walraven (eds), *Asian Food: The Global and the Local* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), pp.46-62, on food and the urban middle classes; F. Conlon, 'Dining Out in Bombay', in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp.90-130, on 'public dining'; H. Papanek, 'To Each Less Than She Needs, From Each More Than She Can Do: Locations, Entitlements and Value', in I. Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.162-181; T. Selwyn, 'The Order of Men and the Order of Things: An Examination of Food Transactions in an Indian Village', in *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, Vol.VIII (1980), pp.297-317, on gender and food; and—as a guard against cultural over-determinism—Barbara Harriss-White, 'The Inter-Family Distribution of Hunger in South Asia', in J. Dreze and A. Sen (eds), *The Political Economy of Hunger*, Vol.1 (Clarendon Press, 1990) and Barbara Harriss-White, 'Nutrition and its Politics in Tamil Nadu', in *South Asia Research*, Vol.XXIV, no.1 (2004) pp.51-71, on the economics of food consumption.

encountered during field research⁵. As I shall show, meat—and particularly beef—was important as a marker of identity and, in the political struggle for improved rights, of superiority and modernity. Many types of food—despite, or perhaps *because* of their usual connotations—were ripe for appropriation by particular interest groups to signify particular meanings. In certain contexts, for example, the provision of particular meat dishes as part of a meal was status *enhancing* rather than indicative of low status.

Before I get too locked into this interpretative framework—within which food is seen as important only in terms of what it represents—I should stress here the fact that food is also *experienced* as it is eaten. As food is handled, chewed, tasted and swallowed in a range of social contexts it literally creates sensation—and thus meaning—for those who consume it. It evokes embodied feelings of pleasure or disgust; it triggers memories; it satisfies and sustains or, if there is not enough, leaves the diner hungry. In South India, where food is commonly eaten with the fingers rather than with cutlery, it was, as I was told countless times, important to ‘get a *feel* for the food.’ The sensation of rice being rolled between one’s fingers was an integral part of eating. These carnal, on-the-ground and not always predictable experiences of food—part of ‘being in the world’⁶—intermingle with our socio-historically constructed perceptions of food to create a more fluid arena than either structuralist or semiotic explanations of dining can explain. To understand the ways in which food is made sense of by those engaged in sharing and eating it one needs, therefore, to be

⁵ I use the term ‘caste Hindus’ to refer to those who categorised themselves as belonging to castes that can notionally be located within the classic *varna* system or, to put it another way, all those not from Scheduled Castes and Tribes (the administrative categories for those formerly considered ‘untouchable’).

⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. C. Smith) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

tuned in to shifts in meaning according to context, across both space and time. Food is—excuse the pun—a moveable feast.

What I intend to do in the following, then, is to elaborate upon and justify this position using ethnographic examples from my fieldwork in South India. In particular, I am going to argue first that a non-vegetarian diet, from the meat eater's perspective, is not seen as more polluting or socially lower than a vegetarian one. Meat, in the contexts I describe, takes on a range of meanings (not all of them obviously compatible). At the same time, my reading of the ethnography challenges a simplistic dichotomy between vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism. The latter is not synonymous with some kind of gastronomic free-for-all, but is separable into several sub-categories, all governed by rules comparable with—and in some senses continuous with—those governing a vegetarian diet. This consideration of 'rules'—which will move us away from a veg/non-veg split to consider the meanings of individual food substances in relation to one another—will also consider the extent to which the cooks and diners might exert agency to subvert and re-mould such rules.

Before doing any of that, however, some scene-setting is called for, not least because the location of my research was probably even further away than most from the Hindu Indian village of popular ethnographic imagination.

* * *

Bethany and Environs⁷

My research was carried out mainly with South Indian Christians—many of them converts from the formerly untouchable Madiga and Mala castes—in coastal Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh. More particularly, my fieldwork was centred in Bethany, a self-established and self-run leprosy colony, situated around 200 miles north of Chennai (Madras) and the same distance east of Hyderabad, the state capital. Bethany had started out in the late 1950s as a squatter settlement of patients with leprosy who had been discharged from a nearby Salvation Army hospital. Cured of their biomedical disease but either too institutionalised to return home (many had spent up to a decade in the hospital), or unwelcome because of the stigma associated with leprosy, the early settlers built makeshift mud and thatch homes on railway-owned wasteland and eked out livelihoods from begging.

Since then the village has grown from an initial 30 inhabitants to a population bordering on 1,000. Just under half of the population has had leprosy, the rest is made up of the children and spouses of former patients. Around 150 people go begging for the main source of their income, but several social development and welfare programmes—started by the foreigners who came to stay in the village from the early 1980s—now provide work for around 300 people. Between November 1999 and October 2000, the period of my fieldwork, there were no other foreigners but myself

⁷ I have written in detail elsewhere about Bethany, initially under the pseudonym Anandapuram. See, for example, James Staples, “‘Peculiar People, Amazing Lives’”. A Study of Social Exclusion and Community-Making among Leprosy Affected People in South India’, unpublished PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2003; James Staples, ‘Disguise, Revelation and Copyright: Disassembling the South Indian Leper’, in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.) Vol.IX (2003), pp.291–309; James Staples, ‘Delineating Disease: Self-Management of Leprosy Identities in South India’, in *Medical Anthropology*, Vol.XXIII, no.1 (2004), pp.66–89; and James Staples, *‘Peculiar People, Amazing Lives’*. *Leprosy, Social Exclusion and Community-Making in South India* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006).

in the village and development projects were managed by a project co-ordinator appointed from within Bethany. However, much of Bethany's income was still channelled through overseas donors and a management committee on which they, as well as villagers, were represented. This ensured a continued close relationship between Bethany villagers and 'the foreigner'—a shorthand category for their white, Christian patrons.

Settlers in the community came from a range of backgrounds—Hindu, Moslem and Christian—but nearly all of them now identify as Protestant Christians (even though some revert to being Hindus or Moslems when they visit their natal homes). The only place of worship in Bethany is thus a church, managed by an Evangelical Baptist pastor, appointed from outside the community, and several lay preachers drawn from within the village. Hosting services, prayer meetings, youth groups and annual Christian meetings, the church was an important social space within the village. The broadcasting via a PA system of the Pastor's morning prayer sessions and other religious events ensured that a Lutheran Christian ethos was well disseminated.

Although this chapter draws significantly on work in this community, several of my ethnographic examples are from encounters with people in the local area with whom I built up relationships during visits spanning 20 years. These contacts were mainly with teachers, social workers, medics, pastors and traders who, at one time or another, had worked in or done business with Bethany. For the most part, they were also Christian converts from the Mala or Madiga Scheduled Castes.

Christians were not unusual in the area. Bapatla, the town adjacent to Bethany, had a Hindu majority, but there were large minorities of both Muslims (16 percent, or 11,360) and Christians (20 percent, or 14,200). There were several churches along the roads leading out from the town centre, and the large Salvation Army compound where Bethany's settlers had originally been treated, established back in 1902, dominated one of its peripheries.⁸ Moreover, the District had a high concentration of Christians in relation to India as a whole. In 1921, Guntur District counted 153,429 Christians (nearly half of them Lutherans)—the second largest number of Christians of any district in the State. Bapatla municipality had the second highest number—20,367—within the district.⁹ At that time, 8.25 percent of Guntur District's population was Christian. Although that proportion had dropped to 6.67 percent (as opposed to 2.34 percent of the Indian population as a whole) by the 1991 Census, Guntur continued to boast more Christians (274,172 in 1991) than any other district in the State.¹⁰

My work with Christians both within a multi-caste leprosy colony and in the local area offers telling comparative material in terms of dietary habits, as the following shows.

Celebrating Beef

While I was at Victoria Rani's family house, I inadvertently almost ate some meat. As we sat talking, Victoria Rani raised a serving spoon with some curry on it towards my mouth, and urged me to try it. I ask what it is, and am about to sample it, but when she doesn't answer—she just keeps

⁸ *Andhra Pradesh District Gazetteers* (Guntur: Government of Andhra Pradesh, Government Publications Bureau, 1977), pp.297–331.

⁹ J.E. Graefe, 'Islam and Christianity in Guntur', in *Moslem World*, Vol.XV (1925), pp.119–34.

¹⁰ See the website http://www.andhrapradesh.com/apwebsite/tables/Population/table_21.htm for further statistical breakdown.

repeating, 'Try! Try!'—I get suspicious and ask if it is meat. She finally admits that it is, sighs, and turns to tell her mother—who is sitting there with us—that I am a vegetarian. She rolls her eyes in response. Even then she keeps on pressing me to try it, which puzzles me, since vegetarians are hardly rare in South India. 'Just try a taste, it's so good! It's beef. You like beef in your country, don't you?' It reminded me of the time I was at Kamala Mary's place and she tried to get me to eat chicken kidneys.

Until my 1999-2000 fieldwork, I had seldom encountered beef—literally or in conversation—during the 15 years I had been visiting Bethany. Feasts to mark weddings, first menstruations, mass prayer meetings and other celebrations generally included meat as their centrepiece, but it had always been chicken or goat. And although they were seldom eaten more than once or twice a week in the home, chicken and goat were also the most likely foods to be served when I was invited to dinner in people's houses. Although I stopped eating meat myself in the late 1980s and would be offered a vegetarian alternative, the sociality of these occasions usually necessitated the provision of meat for other diners. During my fieldwork, however, I came to realise that beef—mostly buffalo, although I was told this was more because of non-availability of cow beef rather than an aversion to it—was eaten at least as often as goat and chicken in certain village homes. A friend estimated that in many households it would be eaten up to twice a week, and regularly on Sundays. However, it was talked about less and seldom—if ever—served on public occasions.

Elsewhere in the neighbourhood—as the above extract from my field diary suggests—beef could be offered more openly on small-scale social occasions, especially when it could be assumed that all the diners were Christians and, by association, beef-eaters. From Victoria Rani's perspective, my status as a white

foreigner—as a *doragaru*,¹¹ as I was referred to locally—placed me firmly within both these categories. It was, rather, my claim to vegetarianism that was anomalous; a claim that, with her repeated offerings of the meat dish, she was determined to put to the test. This was a recurrent theme when I visited Christian homes outside Bethany for a meal; even after the occasion I described, on two subsequent trips to Victoria Rani’s house I was offered meat. Why were they so keen to tempt me with what they knew I did not eat?

Part of the answer—apart from the genuine concern that I was missing out on a tasty delicacy—lies in what meat and, for Christians, beef in particular, had come to represent. Victoria Rani was not alone among Bapatla’s Christians in reacting to what she saw as long-standing Hindu oppression. Another woman I knew, a Christian Madiga, referred to her caste as ‘the people Hindus always treat very badly’. Another, from the same background, explained why she rejected Hindu theology: ‘They think *everything* is God! A tree, a snake, everything!’ The rejection of beef, by association, was to take a pro-Hindu stance; to embrace and enjoy it was to celebrate Christianity, a religion which—as the second informant’s comment suggests—presented a much more plausible framework for explaining the world. My refusal to eat beef, then, was

¹¹ The Telugu term *dora* (from the Turanian root *tur*, meaning swift or powerful) means, according to the dictionary, a chief, a baron, a lord, master, owner, ruler or king. See C.P. Brown, *Telugu English Dictionary. Second Edition* (Madras: Asian Educational Series, 1903). According to Susan Bayly, the *doras* were also a class of ‘fortress-dwelling land-controllers’—of ‘little kings’—in the Telengana region on the Andhra–Maharashtra borderlands. See Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.327. In Bethany the term—combined with the honorific *garu* (comparable to the Hindi suffix *ji*)—was used exclusively in relation to foreign men, rather than the term *ayya garu*—‘sir’ or ‘father’—commonly used as a term of respect for local people (such as government officials) and sometimes used by others to address me in contexts outside the village.

confusing. Firstly, as a Westerner, I was supposed to be modern¹²—a category which, for my Christian informants at least, was closely associated with that of non-Hindu—and should, as such, eat beef.¹³ In addition, my vegetarianism also suggested a refusal to reject the sacred status afforded by Hindus to the cow, and, by association, an acceptance of their own Hindu defined status as untouchable. As has been discussed in detail elsewhere, the cow-protection movement in India has been closely associated with the imagining of a Hindu nation.¹⁴ Rejection of this position through the discreet enjoyment of beef could be considered—as Scott puts it—a ‘weapon of the weak’.¹⁵ That is to say, like the ‘everyday forms of resistance’¹⁶ Scott describes, the purchase, consumption and celebration of beef are not openly flaunted, organised activities. Rather, these activities are conducted quietly through mostly informal social networks, and they avoid direct conflict with non-beef eating Hindus. Beef is traded by particular households or is sold in closed-off, separate sections of the market place, and is eaten by family members or shared with fellow Christians in the home. As such, its shared consumption is socially cohesive, symbolically binding Christian diners against a common oppressor. Consumption of particular foods, as Gillette

¹² See John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹³ But my non-consumption of beef did not, I should note, challenge the belief that beef—as a progressive, rational, wholesome choice—was ‘modern’, suggesting a notion of modernity more akin to that outlined by the Osellas (2002). That is, while modernity was linked to ideas about Western progress, my informants also placed *themselves* firmly as innovators and participants in modernity. See C. Osella and F. Osella, ‘Once upon a time in the West? Narrating modernity in Kerala, South India’, In J. Parry & D. Arnold (eds.) *Life Stories in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ See, for example, T. O’Toole, ‘Secularising the Sacred Cow: The Relationship between Religious Reform and Hindu Nationalism’, in Antony Copley (ed.), *Hinduism in Public and Private* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); and P. van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁵ J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xvi.

shows in relation to the *Hui* in China, helps constitute and maintain a group's distinctive identity.¹⁷

At the same time, the sharing and enjoyment of beef subtly resisted the hegemonic notion that its consumption was inherently linked to impurity and low social status. Bapatla's Christians, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁸ attempted to invert the negative symbols of their former low caste status, transforming them into positive aspects of a Christian identity. Meat consumption, therefore—especially of beef—had become a quiet celebration of their shared Christianity *and* an illustration that they did not accept their Hindu-imposed classification as ritually impure. Like the Tamil Paraiyars described by Mosse, conversion to Christianity 'has generated self-respect and a world view which is consistent with and justifies an everyday re-negotiation of subordination'.¹⁹ The appropriation of *particular* food habits deemed unacceptable to caste Hindus became markers of their Christian identities. Beef also provided a link with the West—the white Christian missionaries who had become their patrons in the past—and, by association, with modernity.²⁰ For Madigas²¹ following their traditional occupations as leatherworkers, it allowed them to reconceptualise their work with dead cattle as respectable rather than polluting.

Beef also, I was assured, tasted good and offered a decent, affordable source of protein associated, like other types of meat, with physical strength. Even Gandhi, for

¹⁷ M.B. Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp.136–7.

¹⁸ Staples, *Peculiar People, Amazing Lives*.

¹⁹ David Mosse, 'Responding to Subordination: The Politics of Identity Change Among South Indian Untouchable Castes', in J.R. Campbell and A. Rew (eds), *Identity and Affect: Experiences of Identity in a Globalising World* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p.76.

²⁰ Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing*, p.162.

example, in his youth believed that ‘Meat-eating, or a kind of culinary masculinity... would nourish, in the most literal sense, not just Indian resistance to British rule but an entry into modernity and a condition of *post-coloniality*’.²² He was, no doubt, inspired in this view by Swami Vivekananda’s oft cited prescription of ‘beef, biceps and Bhagvad-Gita’ as the antidote to colonial accusations of Indian effeminacy.²³ These links between meat and physical—especially masculine—prowess is not, of course, peculiar to South India, warranting mention in most cross-cultural accounts of food consumption.²⁴ As is no doubt also the case in other cultural contexts, however, strength was not seen unambiguously as a good thing. Although my informants often presented it as a positive quality—its promise sometimes used to lure me into trying it—it was also recognised as a requirement for manual, low-status occupations, such as farm coolie work and rickshaw pulling. ‘Plumpness’, on the other hand—that could be achieved without physical exertion and which was more usually associated with consumption of milk products, ghee and other luxury foods—tended to be a more valued in terms of social status, even though ‘strength’ was recognised as offering practical advantages.²⁵

Beyond Beef

Beyond beef, other meat preparations—especially chicken and goat—were also prestigious and desirable. When Bethany villagers organised a mass prayer meeting to

²¹ The Madigas, the cobbler and leather-working caste, was one of the two main Scheduled Castes in the area where I worked. The other was the Malas.

²² P. Roy, ‘Meat-Eating, Masculinity, and Renunciation in India: A Gandhian Grammar of Diet’, in *Gender & History*, Vol.XIV, no.1 (2002), p.66.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See, for example, D. Sutton, ‘The Vegetarian Anthropologist’, in *Anthropology Today*, Vol.XIIV, no.1 (1997), pp.5–8; and D. Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage, 1996).

²⁵ See F. Osella and C. Osella, ‘Articulation of Physical and Social Bodies in Kerala’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) Vol.XXX, no.1 (1996), pp.37–68.

which outsiders were invited—culminating in a feast—they showed their generosity by providing not just chicken, but biryani, the luxury dish of choice. ‘If we don’t provide biryani at lunch, they won’t come’, lamented an NGO project worker involved in organising a training programme. He was right. The quality of the food at such events was an important talking point, and often participants privately cited the biryani as the biggest benefit of the training.

People were extremely critical when the food did not come up to scratch. When I was doing fieldwork with begging leprosy-affected people in Mumbai, a Christian philanthropist brought a steaming vat of chicken biryani to the begging settlement as a gift to mark his birthday. Although people waited until they had eaten and the philanthropist gone before making their feelings heard out loud, the poor quality of the food—‘not nearly enough salt!’—had clearly affronted them. The pained looks on their faces as they silently ate it and then turned away or lowered their heads also ensured that the philanthropist did not receive quite the satisfaction he might have hoped for.

This was a reaction I witnessed several times. On another occasion, when I was involved in a week-long fundraising cycle rally with a group of young village men, we were provided with most of our food and accommodation by charitable organisations along the way. The meals offered always provided a talking point during the hours that followed them, their quality praised or criticised. ‘That curry,’ my friend Jobdas explained to me quietly after one such meal, ‘was the kind of thing they might eat in very poor villages’. Both the quality of the meat and the roughness of the spicing, as well as the thinness of the *pappu* (dhal or pulse dish) had been taken

to convey a lack of respect from the host. The men had fallen silent and wanted to leave the place immediately after we had eaten. Such responses to meal hosts, I would suggest, are further examples of quotidian resistance to those deemed powerful. While the food offered communicated something of the host's feelings towards the diners, the latter—in reading and then reacting to those messages—were able to send back messages about their self-perceived status.²⁶

Opportunities to dine outside the restrictions of everyday life further reinforced the value afforded not only to quality of food but to meat in particular. During my research I accompanied a group of older men from the village to a World Leprosy Day meeting in Chennai, when a large proportion of the evening was spent seeking out a suitable non-vegetarian restaurant from which to purchase a takeaway. They were away from home and the food was being provided at the expense of the meeting organisers: it was therefore important not to miss an opportunity to eat meat, and to seek out the tastiest that could be found. Time spent finding a suitable outlet very often superseded the amount of time spent at the meetings the trips were ostensibly about.

Meat, in summary, was celebratory, expensive, highly desired, status-enhancing, and pleasing to the tastebuds. It differentiated those who could afford it from the poor farm labourers in the settlements bordering them who only ever got to eat pickles or chilli powder with their rice. The prospect of returning full-time to such a meagre

²⁶ There are examples of this in other cultural contexts. See, for example, M.C. Cesaro, 'Consuming Identities: Food and Resistance among the Uyghur in Contemporary Xinjiang', in *Inner Asia*, Vol.II (2000), pp.225–38, which describes how Muslims in Xinjiang, China—a socially-marginalised group—are empowered by their refusal to accept food from the Han Chinese.

diet—often necessary during lean periods—was ever present as a reminder of the value of meat.

Beef in Bethany...

For a large proportion of Bethany's population, several of whom interacted with the wider Christian population already cited, my more general comments about beef consumption also hold true. Sambrajamma, who I employed to cook for me during my stay, provides a good example. She was a Christian Madiga whose father's family had converted to Christianity two generations previously, and she was a great advocate of the virtues of beef. She had long since supplemented her income from casual farm labouring by buying beef from the local market, curing it and selling it on to like-minded villagers. On the small patch of land in front of her house, visitors would often be confronted with lines of rope tied at head height, on which pieces of meat would be fastened to dry out in the sun. It was a great source of disappointment to her that I did not partake. When her children were younger, she told me, she had worked for another *doragaru* in a nearby town who had regularly requested meat, including beef.

Although Sambrajamma was by no means unique, beef eating in Bethany had initially been restricted to members of Scheduled Castes—Madigas and Malas—and to those who had converted to Christianity *prior* to contracting leprosy. In all the cases I knew of, the latter group was entirely contained within the former: earlier converts were all from the lowest castes. These days, however, beef-eating was ubiquitous. One man told me: 'In Bethany, 75 percent of people will eat beef: not only Madigas and Malas, but people from other castes. That's because people from other castes also went to

begging and, with everyone cooking and eating together, it became a habit. Beef also costs much less than other meat'. The fact that beef is now becoming increasingly expensive attests to its increasing popularity.

Nevertheless, for those who had been socialised as caste Hindus, beef—and in a few cases meat more generally—remained at least publicly taboo. A Brahmin friend, Krishna, who had converted to Christianity after contracting leprosy and coming to Bethany had indicated his rejection of caste rules by marrying a Mala woman, but had continued to follow a strict vegetarian diet even though his wife and now children ate meat. Although he claimed to have no 'caste feeling', he said he was inherently a Brahmin—it was as much a part of his personal identity as was his gender, something he could never change—and Brahmins simply did not eat meat.

There were few who were as strict as Krishna, but an unwillingness to publicly endorse beef in the village, despite the fact that three quarters of the population ate it, was more widespread. A visit from a representative from the Christian NGO that funded the children's day care centre in the village provides a good illustration of this. The NGO in question was particularly prescriptive in what it expected the centres it funded to provide, right down to specifying the numbers of eggs or quantity of rice that should be offered to each child each week. After examining all the menus, the representative called a meeting with staff and parents to suggest that, on one of the days for providing meat, beef curry should be offered. It was, he said, a more economical option than chicken, and an equally good source of protein. Parents protested that it should be chicken or goat. A large part of this was self-interest—the latter were more expensive and, in a hierarchy of meat consumption, the most sought

after. Their pitch to the donor, however, was that while they were Christian, they were also a multi-caste village. Some villagers *did* object to beef being served to their children, even though they were relaxed about it being cooked and served within their neighbours' homes. The NGO eventually conceded to their demands but, interestingly, the representative framed their objection not in terms of caste but in terms of their backwardness. For him, as for the Christians I encountered in Bapatla, eating beef was seen as a progressive practice.

Before moving on, it is worth stressing that although beef was recognised as being *publicly* unacceptable—and as a consequence was not served at public feasts nor cooked by the central kitchens catering for elderly people and children—that is not to say it was not eaten, even by members of families that continued to eschew it. For those of the younger generation of men who had grown up in Bethany among non-beef eaters, for example, beef—along with other food not usually consumed in the home—was sometimes eaten without their parents' knowledge when eating in the local town or further afield. One man I spoke to licked his lips at the thought of a beef dish he had once enjoyed in a Chinese restaurant several hundred miles away on a trip to Delhi; others spoke of having sampled beef curries in the homes of school friends. Although the particular circumstances of a leprosy colony had shifted norms to the extent that these transgressions were made possible, I would suggest that there is a more general disparity between public food consumption at feasts and what is actually eaten more privately and in small groups. Food sharing at feasts should not be read as illustrative of what is acceptable to eat more generally. With an ever wider range of food options becoming available in the local town—from Chinese restaurants to ready-made packaged foods—these differences are likely to grow ever wider. It is

worth bearing this in mind in considering what I want to explore next: the assumption that a low-caste or Christian diet that includes beef is one with fewer rules and restrictions than one which does not.

Christian Rules

You could usually tell a Madiga or a Mala, I was told by several higher caste informants, not just by what they ate, but by the way that they ate it. ‘You watch Prasad Rao when he’s eating’, one woman told me in hushed tones. ‘See how he rolls his rice into a ball, squeezes it in his palm and then almost throws it into his mouth? And just watch the way he keeps his mouth open when he chews the food around’. A diner’s caste ranking could also be roughly distinguished, I was told, by whether he lifted the rice with the finger tips or used more of the hand to scoop it up. Such a method of discerning status was doubtlessly no more reliable than judging an English diner’s class by the direction in which he moves a spoon across a soup bowl²⁷, particularly when I was the reader of such body language. In the case of the woman I quoted, her comment was just as much about using food as a device through which to inform me about her own status *vis-a-vis* the diner as it was about the embodiment of caste. If his eating habits defined him as low-status, then, by implication, her different habits identified her as higher up the social scale. Nevertheless, styles of eating *were* embodied and, taken as part of the network of habituated signs through which people communicated identities, could not be dismissed as insignificant. What is at question is not that people’s habits were different, but that certain habits—from holding rice in the palm of the hand rather than the finger-tips to eating beef—were low, and that others were high. This was the view that was propagated by my higher caste

informants and those outside the Christian community. ‘They eat *anything*’, people would say in relation to the SC/ST castes, before sharing apocryphal stories of the gruesome things—from rats and frogs to insects—that people *other* than themselves ate.

Aside from the fact that beef was justified by my informants as a high status, modern food, however, it was not the case that a Christian or low caste diet amounted to consumption of whatever was available. For one thing, as I shall elaborate on later, they were just as concerned as anyone else to achieve a balance between heating and cooling foods. Ideas about ‘proper mixing’²⁸ were just as prevalent. There were also rules about when to eat. Many of the more devout Christians in Bethany—that is, for the most part, those of lower castes already converted to Christianity prior to contracting leprosy—fasted on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the days of evening prayer meetings, only taking food after prayers were finished at around midnight. During the ‘fast’, most would allow themselves to eat *chapatis* and pickles, sweets and maybe even a small amount of vegetable curry, but they would not eat rice (the main staple), meat or heavily-spiced dishes until after the fast was over.

More significantly, as my cook Sambrajamma told me with alarm when I suggested the possibility, they *never* ate pork. ‘Ugh!’ she said, pulling a face that indicated disgust. Surprised at my ignorance, she informed me it was listed in the Bible as a prohibited substance, and that, since Jesus had removed a man’s ‘devils’ and put them

²⁷ J. Morgan, *Debrett’s New Guide to Etiquette and Modern Manners* (London: Headline, 1999).

²⁸ Valentine E. Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (London: University of California Press, 1987), pp.71, 184.

into pigs, their meat was unclean.²⁹ Now, I could construct a cultural materialist explanation for this, *à la* Marvin Harris,³⁰ over which a spiritual explanation has subsequently been overlaid. This would mean arguing that because pigs were seen as carriers of worms and other diseases there were good health reasons for avoiding them.

Such an explanation would help to explain why most local Hindus (and recent converts who did not eat beef) also avoided pork; why other food substances banned in the Old Testament—such as prawns—were eaten with relish; and why Christian friends of mine who had migrated to Delhi decided it was okay for them to eat pork there because it was reared as ‘clean meat’. Another reason for not eating pork could have been that Christian Malas and Madigas wanted to differentiate themselves from the tribal Erukalas—who they described as dirty—who *did* eat pork. Noting when I visited a Madiga (converted Christian) friend’s natal home that the Erukala part of his village seemed even more isolated from the rest of the village than the Madiga and Mala areas, my friend responded: ‘[That’s because] they keep pigs, so not many people would want to live alongside them’.

There is no doubt something in all these arguments. That should not divert our attention, however, from the fact that for Sambrajamma—and for the other older village women with whom she attended prayers—pork was not eaten *simply* because it was forbidden. Christian explanations for certain food rules are well-summarised by Mary Douglas:

²⁹ See Leviticus 11:7 and Mark 5:1–17.

³⁰ Marvin Harris, ‘The Cultural Ecology of India’s Sacred Cattle’, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol.7 (1966), pp.51–66.

The dietary rules [in Leviticus] would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.³¹

Sambrajamma would never have made such grand claims, but for her, considerations about the nutritional value of certain foods—whether it was more or less healthy to eat pork than beef, for example—were inseparable from the symbolic meanings attached to the food. Circumventing the argument Harris has with Douglas—materialism versus symbolism—from the perspective of Bethany Christians, if God forbade it, the food was necessarily not as good to eat as something that had been sanctioned.³²

Having shown, then, that dietary regulation is no less stringent—although perhaps more flexible—among beef-eating Christians than other meat-eating Hindus or vegetarians, it is important to locate constraints on food within a broader framework of what is and what is not permissible. This will help to break down not only the problematic differentiation between vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism, but also between what might be considered food and non-food. For example, for devout Christians in Bethany and in Bapatla more generally, it was not only pork that was taboo, so were cigarette smoking, drinking alcohol, and going to the cinema. Together they formed their own category of negative or unchristian practices, which included food and drink but clearly were not limited to them. These habits were often attributed to Hindus, a term loosely used in this case to refer to those who were not Christians or

³¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p.58.

Muslims, or to their own status pre-conversion, rather than as followers of a particular religion. Many of the conversion stories recalled at prayer meetings contrasted previous sins—typically alcohol consumption, smoking, cinema-going and sex outside marriage—with their new, cleaner lives as Christians. Food habits, including fasting, were clearly important here, but they were a part of a wider set of rules that transcended a veg/non-veg split.

Further problems arise when one looks at reactions to different preparations of the same food. Fried chicken and fried fish, for example, to quote one of my caste Hindu informants, were ‘only eaten by drinking fellows’ and were not, therefore, considered as good to serve up as chicken or goat served in a sauce. Likewise, Krishna, the Brahmin I cited above, often complained about the kinds of *masalas*—the mixtures of spices to flavour a particular dish—used by non-Brahmin cooks. They also, in his opinion, made too much use of garlic and onions, and could be overly liberal with the chilli powder.³³ While fried fish was avoided on the basis of its association with alcohol by some people, for others—such as Sambrajamma, for whom alcohol was strictly forbidden—it was a regular menu item. The *masala* preparations and alliums rejected because of the passions (and gastric ulcers) they might provoke were also, for many Christian cooks, welcome additions to most meals. So too were the pungent dried fish preparations that some of my higher caste informants turned their noses up at. In short, it was impossible to construct mutually exclusive categories of foods that were taboo for certain groups and not for others. Alcohol was almost universally

³² At least, that is, in theory: in practice, some of the less devout were as likely to ignore food rules in private as Hindus were to be lured by beef.

³³ This was a criticism levelled more generally at Andhra cooks. During a visit to Kolkata in December 2004 I found myself defending the Andhra cuisine to Bengalis, one of whom dismissed it as being ‘all fire and no taste’.

frowned on by the people I worked with (although drunk by a good many of them), but other preparations defied such easy classification.

A Question of Context

Part of the problem of trying to classify different kinds of food as suitable or otherwise for particular people is, as I have already suggested, because suitability—both of types of food and of whom one might accept it from—shifts according to context.

By way of illustration, the following is my record of a conversation with Yesupadam, a friend from Bethany who often liked to discuss issues of caste with me. He was from a relatively powerful land-owning caste—the Kapus—as was Lakshmi, the sister of a mutual friend of ours who has recently visited Bethany:

...I say that if caste is still observable on the basis of who accepts food from who in [Hindu] villages [in this area], what would happen, say, if his brother's family came here to visit, and I called them to dinner with Sambrajamma [my Madiga cook] doing the cooking. 'They would come,' he replied, 'because it is out of their village and they would adjust to this place. But in their place, this would not be suitable.' He goes on to cite Lakshmi's recent visit as another example... When she came the other day, he said, she had come to my house and eaten food prepared by Sambrajamma, and she also ate (and spent the night) in our [Mala] neighbour's house. In her village, Yesupadam thinks, she wouldn't accept food prepared by either.

In short, when people dine in situations outside their usual environments, rules are applied differently. I am certain that Lakshmi would not have accepted beef—and neither would she have been offered it—but the caste status of the cook was less of a concern here than it might have been in her native place. Likewise, people who claimed only to eat food prepared by castes they perceived as equal or higher to themselves, would have no way of knowing the caste of the cook when they ate in

restaurants in the city. Commensal rules, it seemed to me, had become more about maintaining or improving status than they were about pollution and purity, a change Mayer concedes to in his later work.³⁴ The ways in which people adapted in particular situations also highlighted which of the food rules were more or less important to them. For Lakshmi, *what* she ate was more important than *who* prepared it—or at least that was the case when she was away from home. This suggests a hierarchy of rules, within which some are more context-bound than others.

In terms of what was consumed, certain foods—and certain styles of preparation—were more or less appropriate at different times of the year (depending on the weather, for example); at different stages in the life cycle (after giving birth or during menstruation, for example); and on the particular needs of one's own body.³⁵ Even alcohol, while never prescribed, was seen as more excusable for men (and sometimes even women) who were away from home begging than it would have been in other situations. As a substance to help bare the physical deprivations associated with begging, alcohol could be seen, as one man described it to me, 'as a medicine.'

Pork, too—in contrast to its unclean image—had come to be seen by a few as acceptable for consumption on medical grounds. A middle-caste ranking paramedic I knew told me: 'Nowadays some high caste people have also started eating pork because pork is a good medicine for the prevention of high blood pressure and for diabetes patients'. Like biomedicine—and like beef for Scheduled Caste Christians—acceptance of pork could also be associated with modernity. It also—despite the biomedical spin my informants put on it—fits with classical Ayurveda, and the

³⁴ Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and Its Region*, p.37.

latter is also a likely source of this belief. As Zimmermann notes, medical necessity is presented in Ayurvedic texts as a valid reason for authorising the eating of meat.³⁶

Sambrajamma, my cook, also made judgments about the suitability of food at different times. These judgments appeared to correspond broadly with Ayurvedic notions of hot and cold,³⁷ albeit nuanced in the ways Daniel suggests.³⁸ Our discussions about what to eat, for example, revolved around selecting dishes that were suitable both for our particular bodies and for the season or particular climatic conditions. *Dosakaya pappu* (marrow and lentil) might be acceptable for lunch but, during the cooler seasons, was not an appropriate dish for the evening.

Although Sambrajamma's categorisations clearly drew on a general understanding of the properties of food that she shared, more or less, with other villagers, over time my notes began to reveal puzzling inconsistencies in Sambrajamma's categories. I have discussed these elsewhere,³⁹ but this example bears repetition here because it indicates that food categories not only shift according to context but how they might also—in certain circumstances—be manipulated. I discovered, for example, that a food previously dismissed as too heating might, on another occasion, be rejected as too cooling.

Some of these inconsistencies could be explained by changes in other variables, such as weather conditions. It seemed more likely, however, that Sambrajamma's

³⁵ See, for example, Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*.

³⁶ F. Zimmermann, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1982] 1999) p.183.

³⁷ B.E.F. Beck, 'Colour and Heat in South Indian Ritual', in *Man* (n.s.) Vol.IV (1969), pp.553–72.

³⁸ Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, p.184.

knowledge of the properties of food, balanced against my ignorance, provided an idiom through which she could express her own preferences about what we should eat. She may have felt unable to explain that she did not want to prepare a particular dish because it would involve another trip to market or because she wanted to eat something else. However, she was able to ensure the same end result by allusion to her, or preferably my, state of health. If I suggested potato curry when there were no potatoes in the house, for example, she would often say that they gave her leg pains and that it would be better to have something else. When they were readily available, however, she might insist on them over another dish because of their curative properties. In other words, uses of ideas and idioms from various sources—such as Ayurveda—are malleable, their invocation indicative not of conformity to certain belief systems, but of recognition of the practical value certain ideas might have in particular situations (across cultural boundaries, for example). In this case, reference to food knowledges enabled the otherwise voiceless to impose their wishes on the apparently powerful.

Conclusions

In exploring the radical distinction sometimes drawn between vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism, this chapter has set out not only to explore and problematise the space which exists between these two poles, but to question a whole series of associated dualisms used to structure thinking about food and eating-related activities in South Asia. While vegetarianism tends to be presented as high status, pure and highly regulated, its opposite, non-vegetarianism, is linked with low social status, impurity, and a lack of regulation. While even the evidence of classic South Asian ethnography

³⁹ Staples, 'Peculiar People, Amazing Lives'.

nuances the starkness of these splits, what I have demonstrated through my particular example of South Indian Christians is that the splitting of categories along these lines is in itself highly problematic. Not only are there myriad distinctions to be drawn within the categories—such as, in the case of non-vegetarianism, types of meat and styles of preparation—but the links between them are also contestable. Non-vegetarianism is not, as I have shown, uniformly non-prestigious or impure, and—depending on context—can be subject to every bit as much regulation as a vegetarian diet. The split is further blurred by the evidence that vegetarians may at times eat meat⁴⁰—and that non-vegetarians might sometimes eschew meat and reject the flesh of certain animals but not others. It consequently becomes clear that any attempt to plot a structural map along the lines of Levi-Strauss’s elegant ‘culinary triangle’⁴¹ is doomed to result in something of Marriottesque indecipherability. In short, the simultaneous diversity and changeability of meanings applied to food—and the practices those meanings generate—suggest that an analysis of food in South Asia based rigidly on binary oppositions is untenable.

Rules concerning commensality and consumption of food are contextual, change across time and space, and are bound by complex sets of personal and social rules related to many issues. While these rules might defy interpretation within a veg:non-veg framework, however, this is not to suggest they are unimportant. On the contrary, rules are ordered into cross-cutting hierarchies, the relative importance of which

⁴⁰ See, for examples, Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp.146–9; and Zimmermann, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats*.

⁴¹ C. Levi-Strauss, ‘The Culinary Triangle’, in *Partisan Review*, Vol.XXXIII (1965), pp.586–95.

become clear as diners move across social boundaries. Rules concerning *who* food can be accepted from are generally subordinated to rules governing *what* can be eaten.

What I have also shown is that gaps within food rules—again, more evident as diners move across social contexts—prevent them from forming the ‘totalized terrain’⁴² they might sometimes be interpreted as. These gaps allow rules to be subverted for particular purposes at particular moments. I suggest that high caste Hindu food symbolism—especially, in the cases I have described, the associations between beef consumption, low status and impurity—can at times be appropriated by oppressed minority groups and utilised for the self-empowerment. The Christian communities I describe realigned a vegetarian: non-vegetarian dichotomy with one of their own: that drawn between backwardness and progressiveness. Beef, associated with modernity and still, at least at the time of writing, just about affordable for those on low incomes, came to represent a celebration of their Christianity rather than a marker of their low status. At its most radical—while still low-key, mostly private and implicit rather than confrontational—its shared consumption also poked fun at high caste reverence towards the cow and questioned the very basis of high caste claims to supremacy. It also provided a symbol—‘a marvellously plastic kind of collective representation’, as Appadurai puts it.⁴³

Furthermore, it was not just *what* was eaten but also *how* it was eaten that had the potential to become empowering. Apparently submissive acceptance of below par food from more powerful donors could be transformed into quiet protest by giving,

⁴² S. Dube, *Stitches on Time: Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p.10.

for example, less than an effusive response, subtly subverting the relation between donor and recipient. My informants utilised, to borrow another of Appadurai's phrases, a form of 'coercive subordination',⁴⁴ while my cook used my own ignorance of local food rules to take control of what was eaten in my household and when.

Regulation of food was important at a number of levels for the people I worked with, but those rules, while not infinitely malleable, certainly shifted according to context, and, once mastered, could be used to change relationships as well as to maintain them.

⁴³ Arjun Appadurai, 'Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol.VIII, no.3 (1981), pp.494–511.

⁴⁴ Arjun Appadurai, 'Topographies of the Self: Praise and Emotion in Hindu India', in A.C. Lutz and L. Abu-Lughod (eds), *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.101.

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