Changing food habits in contemporary India: discourses and practices among the middle classes

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Abstract

This chapter questions how socioeconomic changes affect the practices and representations related to food in contemporary India. While food has ritual, social, economic and nutritional meanings, mass production, vertical integration of supply chains and mass consumption – brought about by rising incomes, commodification of goods and services – are reconfiguring the Indians' food habits. Economic growth and urbanisation bring about a food transition, but also a fragmentation of practices due to increasing social inequalities. Food patterns differ according to region, religion, caste, financial means, residential area and also to the age and gender of the individuals. In urban areas, new food environments, new equipment and new foodstuffs have contributed to the diversification of diets. However, chronic and acute malnutrition are still prevalent. Even though meat is still eaten in low quantities, it has become a highly contentious and political foodstuff. Practices of meat consumption or abstinence are leveraged to claim power or purity. Food change is embedded in systems of values and of power that the analysis in terms of 'food transition' unfortunately often obfuscates. More than a standardisation of diets, food in contemporary India displays models of renewed and increasing spatial compartmentalisation and social segmentation.

Introduction

In 2014, while campaigning for the Indian general elections, Narendra Modi, the then Prime Minister candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), 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. Such an attack may sound puzzling, uttered by a politician who wanted 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. Even though his speeches became less divisive once he became Prime Minister, he is inspired by an ideological movement well known for its anti-Muslim and anti-cow slaughter rhetoric and activism.

This apparent paradox between a conservative discourse on food and a call for economic modernity sheds light on the complex meanings and practices relating to food in present-day India, where many have pointed to 'the depth and density of the cosmological, ritual, social, economic and nutritional meanings of food' (Baviskar 2019: 363). Meanwhile, mass production, resulting from intensification of agriculture, vertical integration of supply chains and mass consumption – brought about by rising incomes, commodification of goods and services – are reconfiguring the food habits of Indians.

India is increasingly connected to global flows of people, capital, products and imaginaries. Trade liberalisation and economic growth have favoured the emergence of a new middle class of engineers and entrepreneurs, beside an older middle class of bureaucrats, teachers, physicians or lawyers (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). In economic terms, this 'new middle class' is definitely a social category designating people at the upper end of the economic scale. But it is also an aspirational category, as many who do not correspond to these economic standards still claim to belong to it. As such, these economically well-off people have a purchasing power and a cultural influence that may set the trend for food change in the years and decades to come.

Some scholars allege that economic development and urbanisation would result in a 'food transition' (Bengoa 2001), notably characterised by a surge in meat consumption. Yet economic growth and integration in the global economy may also foster a fragmentation of food-related

practices due to increasing social inequalities reflected in already segmented lifestyles at the top and bottom of the Indian social space (Ferry et al. 2018). In this context, how do socioeconomic changes affect the practices and representations related to food? 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 task. While trying to give an overview of the main dynamics happening at the national scale, we will concentrate our analysis on two main states where we carried out fieldwork: Tamil Nadu (in the Southeast) and Uttar Pradesh (in the North), and on the members of the urban middle class. Besides, as our investigations were mainly centred on meat production, distribution and consumption and on the practice of vegetarianism, this chapter will place particular emphasis on the issue of animal-based food products. Drawing on statistics, secondary data and empirical findings from our fieldwork in Tamil Nadu between 2012 and 2014 and in Uttar Pradesh between 2018 and 2019, we will attempt to define the complex ways in which food patterns are reconfigured in India.

The first section discusses food transition. Drawing on statistical data and on second-hand sources, it questions the relevance of the food transition model as many indicators and growing inequalities in the access to food reveal its non-achievement in the case of India. The second section develops a cultural economy of food in urban areas, as food choices are always embedded in local material contexts and moral values. This section therefore portrays specific modes of selecting, provisioning, transforming, consuming food and eating out that highlight both the persistence of longstanding habits and the emergence of new practices and discourses in urban India. The last section investigates the consumption of meat in contemporary India. It depicts the changes that are taking place while highlighting the growing politicisation of this specific foodstuff.

The non-achievement of food transition: a growing fragmentation of practices

Defining food transition

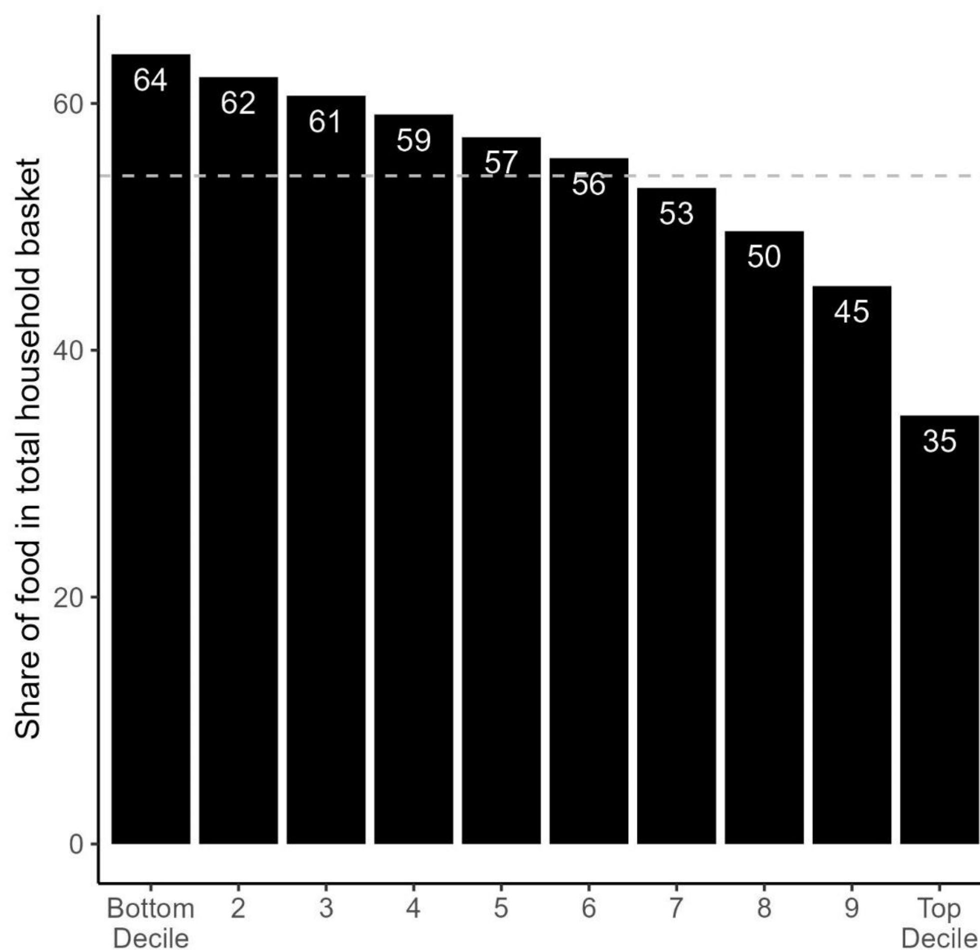
The notions of 'nutrition transition' and 'food transition', popularised in the early 1990s, theorise a supposedly universal pattern of food change. Prabhu Pingali, for instance, specifies that 'rapid economic and income growth, urbanization, and globalization are leading to a dramatic shift of Asian diets' (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 2004).

Differentiations across space and social groups

Several works confirm the aforementioned mechanisms in India. Prakash S. Shetty (2002) argues that milk, meat and oil consumption are indeed on the rise in the country. He points out a causal link between what he calls 'Western-type diets' (2002: 181) and the growing prevalence of metabolic disorders such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and obesity in the country. Governmental statistics show that the share of calories derived from cereals is decreasing (NSSO 2012a, 2012b). These temporal variations also correspond to strong differences in rural and urban areas and in household living standards. A study of household budgets reveals the enormous

weight of food in the management of domestic expenditures, a weight that is even greater for the poorest households. Thus, while the poorest households (bottom decile) devote more than two-thirds of their budget to food expenditures, the richest (top decile) devote only one-third (Figure 1[1]). This high weight devoted to food means that economic shocks, such as the 2016 demonetisation or the COVID-19 pandemic with lockdowns that brought the Indian economy to a halt, leave Indian households extremely vulnerable (Al Dahdah, Ferry, Guérin and Venkatasubramanian 2020).

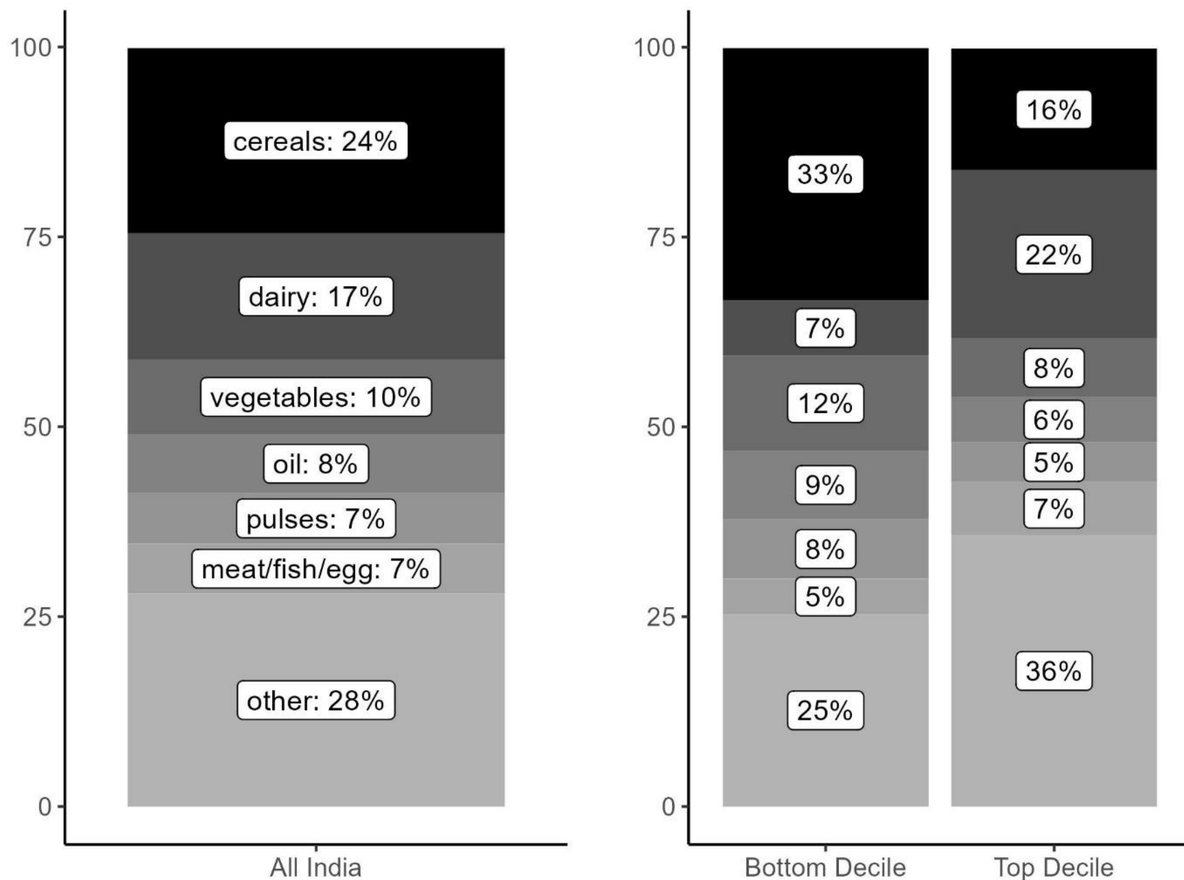
Figure 1 – Share of food in the total consumption basket according to standard of living



Source: Consumer Expenditure Survey, 68th round, 2011–12 (NSSO 2018). Estimates include spending on drinks (including alcohol) and tobacco

Within food expenditures, the nutrition transition also appears to be economically segmented: cereals represent one third of the food expenditures of the poorest, but only 16 per cent of the richest households (Figure 2). These trends suggest that the country is today going through the second stage of the nutrition transition.

Figure 2 – Composition of the food basket: all households, 10 per cent poorest and 10 per cent richest households



Source: Consumer Expenditure Survey, National Sample Survey Office, 68th round, 2011–12. The 'other' category in the food budget notably includes spices, fruits, processed food products and beverages

Some studies, however, put this transition into perspective. 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' (Deaton and Drèze 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' (2009: 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. Meat, fish and eggs account for 5 per cent of the food spending among the poorest households and only slightly increase for the richest ones (7 per cent). These low animal protein intakes are not compensated by vegetarian proteins: pulse consumption does not increase over time and in terms of budget share, it is even lower among the richest households as compared to the poorest ones (Figure 2). Overall, the 'succession of the different phases of transition should not be seen as clear cut' (Fourat and Lepiller 2015: 56) as they overlap.

Further, economic inequalities in food consumption result in significant nutritional inequalities. The last report of the Global Hunger Index of 2021 points out that India has a 'serious' hunger situation, being ranked 101 out of 117 countries among which the indicator has been calculated (India is notably behind Pakistan ranked 92, or Sri Lanka ranked 65). The indicator shows that the Indian situation has greatly improved over time – though most current statistical indicators rely on pre-pandemic surveys (Von Grebmer et al. 2021). However, in detail, child underweight measured as 'weight-for-age', which entails aspects of both chronic and acute malnutrition, was still at a 32 per cent height in 2019–20 according to the National Family Health Survey (the World Health Organization considers that a level of underweight higher than 30 per cent reflects a 'very high prevalence'). While this proportion has been declining since at least the past 20 years, it is still high in some states, including North Central and especially Eastern states of India (IIPS and ICF

2021). Food quality and diversity is also a large concern. Anaemia, implying low haemoglobin levels, has increased among children and adult men and women over the same period (67 per cent of children between six months and five years of age and more than 50 per cent of women and 20 per cent of men). Part of these high levels may be related to low meat consumption levels (Dasgupta et al. 2022).

Besides, the richest segments of the population, and more specifically those who reside in urban or urbanising areas (Aiyar et al. 2021), are at a higher risk of being overweight and even of obesity, a growing trend over time: in 2019–21, 24 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men suffer from it (IIPS and ICF 2021). Overweighting correlates with abdominal obesity, of which half of men and women suffer and which may lead to metabolic complications, notably type-2 diabetes most prevalent in urban settings (Solomon 2016). The growing concern of obesity among urban affluent Indians contrasts with the 'new ideal of lean, muscular physiques' circulated by billboards or Bollywood stars which correlates with the advent of gyms for urban-middle-class Indians (Baas 2019).

The coexistence within the same society of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and over-nutrition reflects the strong economic inequalities in Indian society, the lack of food diversity and the peculiar position of Indian society within the nutrition transition. Various public health interventions are required to inclusively cover all population segments and tackle this 'triple burden of malnutrition'.

An Indian model of food transition?

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, Barbara Harriss-White notices a shift away from coarse grains and towards rice in the late 1970s, partly fostered by the green revolution movement (2004). 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, while calorie consumption has hardly risen. 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. In Uttar Pradesh, despite being a poorer state, coarse cereals consumption has long been lower than in other states (in favour of wheat consumption), but food habits are also extremely segmented and the poorest have less access to high-calorie food items (Kumar et al. 2007).

While Harriss-White suggests that revenue inequality is the main reason for this dietary differentiation, one may advocate with Landy that 'cultural density' (2009: 61) could be another, and perhaps the main factor that makes India an exception to the food transition model. 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 that a specific ethos, mainly deriving from Hindu conceptions on caste, purity and morality, holds over representations and practices (Baviskar 2019), as the issue of meat consumption will make it clear in the third section.

A cultural economy of food in Indian cities

Food change in urban India

To some extent, food patterns in urban India seem to evolve quite slowly. In Chennai, for example, our research showed that most of the people of the lower and middle classes still stick to a Tamil repertoire when eating at home. In both urban and rural Tamil Nadu, food intake is still mostly based on cereals: a standard meal is dominated by a large amount of white rice, drizzled by a legumes-and-tamarind sauce (c*ampar*) and accompanied by a pickle. The poor rarely enjoy more than this basic food. People who are more affluent may afford a variety of side dishes: stewed vegetables, fried green leaves, deep-fried pulse pancakes, curd or buttermilk to accompany rice, and cakes made of fermented rice and beans.

Despite the apparent food conservatism observed in Chennai, practices of food consumption in Indian cities are being transformed through multiple processes: the emergence of national, regional and ethnic cuisines (Appadurai 1988), the evolution of a retailing sector that supplies new products (Baviskar 2018), and the growing practice of eating out, pertaining to the mushrooming of street food stalls (Baviskar 2021) and restaurants (Ray and Srinivas 2012).

Urban middle classes have concentrated the attention of scholars working on food change in India for the past 20 years. Indeed, practices related to food are often leveraged when claiming a belonging to the middle class (Donner 2011). Many authors question the tension between food conservatism and food discoveries. 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). Others state that Western or cosmopolitan products or diets are indeed entering the Indian food culture but are still negotiated – in other words, they are appropriated, adapted or

discarded in line with the belonging to specific categories such as religion, caste, gender or kinship (see Srinivas 2007; Donner 2011).

New equipment and foodstuffs, but lasting gendered specialisation

Studies conducted in megacities such as New Delhi (Patgiri 2022), Bangalore (Srinivas 2007), Chennai (Bruckert 2018), Hyderabad (Dittrich 2009), Kolkata (Donner 2011) or Pune (Baviskar 2012) emphasise the magnitude of food change in contemporary India. Most cities have experienced evolutions of their foodscapes in recent years. New food products are gradually entering the domestic space, especially in urban-middle-class families. The social diffusion of these changes remains limited, but some affordable processed food products such as ready-made noodles are also available to the less socioeconomically privileged and denote belonging to modern consumerism (Baviskar 2018).

Domestic facilities have evolved significantly, as electric grinders, pressure-cookers and refrigerators now equip many homes. For instance, only 15 per cent of households owned a refrigerator in the early 2000s, they are now 38 per cent. However, strong disparities remain according to the socioeconomic level: two-thirds of urban households own a refrigerator compared to only one fourth of rural households (IIPS and Macro International 2007 and IIPS and ICF 2021). Noticeably, ovens and microwave ovens are still confined to upper-class households. In some upper-class and Westernised families, the use of spoons substitutes for the use of 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 countertop (Baviskar 2012). Whatever the economic background, stainless-steel or plastic plates have taken over from banana leaves (in South India) or sal leaves (in North India).

But inversely, 41 per cent of households still use solid fuel (wood or dung cakes) for cooking (IIPS and ICF 2021).

Despite these significant on-going changes, the division of labour remains highly unequal and specialised between men and women within the household. The first Indian nation-wide time-use survey conducted in 2019 shows that women spend daily almost 3.5 hours on meal management (cooking, serving, cleaning up after eating) as compared to only 1.5 hours for men who engage in this activity (only 6 per cent of men routinely engage in meal management), a gap that shows little variation according to educational attainment or the residential area (NSSO 2020). Yet, the classical model of the joint family, where the husband's mother stands as the official cook and gradually teaches her daughter-in-law, tends to gradually erode, notably thanks to female higher education which increases daughter-in-law's 'bargaining power' (Srivastava 2020). In nuclear families where wives have higher educational attainment and engage in outside paid employment, they sometimes lack culinary know-how, while their husbands still 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 local, national or more cosmopolitan recipes, but few women from the middle classes claim to take inspiration from them. Finally, among urban upper-middle-class households where women work outside home, domestic workers may be employed for domestic chores, including cooking tasks (Jain et al. 2018).

Changing food environments

The Indian agrifood sector has undergone massive changes in the past 30 years. The urban demand for new foodstuffs is both fostered and met by new modes of provisioning at multiple scales. Since

the economic liberalisation initiated in the 1990s, transnational companies have broken into the market and the national corporate sector has expanded. Products from world brands such as Maggi, Coca-Cola or Kellogg have been available in Indian cities for decades (Caplan 2001). While the small-scale and independent retail sector is historically dominant, India has been partly affected by a 'supermarket revolution' (Reardon et al. 2012). Indian distributors such as Reliance Fresh, More (Aditya Birla Group) or Big Bazaar (Future Group) have conquered the urban foodscape, supplying with a variety of references, including fresh and processed food, in multi-storied and air-conditioned buildings mostly located in upmarket neighbourhoods.

In these outlets, consumers make a choice among a broad variety of packaged food products that they once considered as stale but now see as hygienic, easy-to-handle and of high quality (Dittrich 2009). Small-scale independent supermarkets are also flourishing. The access to the retailing scene is subject to restrictions for international operators: Walmart or Tesco are still confined to wholesale while Metro has recently left the country. Moreover, despite higher prices, small-scale grocery shops are valued for their proximity and resist the assault of these high-capital-input outlets. Besides, local pastry and bakery shops are thriving, selling the usual puffs and English-style sponge cakes (made 'eggless' for vegetarians). 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, etc.), 'exotic' condiments (mustard, mayonnaise, soy sauce, Mexican *salsa*, etc.) or sweet items (chocolate, jams, spreads, etc.).

A growing number of adults are seeking healthy food to prevent or cure diseases caused by a sedentary life and an imbalanced diet (Solomon 2016). While the market of organic products

remains a narrow niche despite its recent growth, 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. Food supplements to gain muscle have also emerged and sports nutrition shops have mushroomed along with gyms in cities, in line with the emergence of new body and masculinity norms for the middle class (Baas 2020). Meanwhile, imported olive oil, taking advantage of aggressive marketing and positive conceptions regarding its nutritional properties, is increasingly available but still 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.), benefiting from improved transportation, have penetrated the market. Concerning fruits, the consumption of the common mangoes, bananas, papayas, watermelons and guavas is on the rise, while local grapes, apples grown in Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, strawberries or litchis appear on the shelves of dedicated stores. Throughout India, steamed sweet corn has quickly conquered the appetite of the middle classes: eaten as a gourmandise and for its claimed medicinal values, it 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. Sodas, referred to as 'cool drinks', are served chilled-from-the-fridge to children, presented to guests or drunk with friends on the way back from

college. Transnational beverage companies are selling their own products or developing a new range adapted to local preferences such as bottled mango juice.

Global agrifood capitalism has extended its networks in Indian cities, but many upmarket retail stores and informal vendors still source locally. Drinks and packaged food are manufactured by both foreign and national companies and local cottage industries hiring women on a caste or ethnic basis (Srinivas 2007; Baviskar 2012). 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 Indian (mango) and the cosmopolitan (chocolate or vanilla) tastes. 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 in Chennai, 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, or between the decades-old sparkling rose water served in returnable bottles and cans of 7-Up.

Importantly, these new food environments are not necessarily perceived as beneficial by everyone and their adoption is ambivalent. Though marketing strategies of packaged food items help consumers perceive new food products as reliable, the retail sector is not devoid of food scandals such as the Maggi noodle food safety issue of 2015 (Baviskar 2018). Plastic wrapping, adulteration of milk with unsafe water in boxed containers and use of chemicals such as pesticides in vegetables and fruits are often mentioned as forms of food adulteration (Solomon 2016) which participates in a 'middle-class anxiety over food safety' (Baas 2019: 246). Our interviewees sometimes deplore the decline in the nutritional quality and taste of foods compared to those consumed in their childhood.

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, heavily advertised, are consumed mainly by children. Instant noodles are eaten preferentially as snacks or by students living away from their families. The demand for new foodstuffs is mediated by local specificities. Tin boxes, baby food in pots and frozen food do not succeed 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 local governments. On each packaged product (even on bottles of water), a label indicates whether it is vegetarian or not (Fischer 2019).

Restaurants: venues of food change and mirrors of domestic consumption

Numerous works in food studies 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 (see, for example, Beardsworth and Keil 1997). In Indian cities, eating out obviously paves the way to food change. For a long time, food-related taboos have prevented Indians, especially high-caste Hindus, from eating outside as only the home space was considered as 'pure' enough (Khare 1976). For some, 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. 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'

(1996: 91). Siegel depicts dining out as a ‘primary method by which the city’s denizens can embody both wealth and cosmopolitanism’ (2010: 73).

In Indian cities, venues for eating out 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, lower-end restaurants catering to the needs of male workers looking for a cheap meal, small restaurants offering a variety of pre-cooked food such as fried rice and fried noodles, upper-hand restaurants or ‘family restaurants’ targeting the urban middle classes and that may offer regional specialties or borrow from a ‘national’ repertoire (Appadurai 1988), Western chains such as Pizza Hut or McDonald’s that enjoy increasing popularity among the affluent classes, upper-scale ‘multi-cuisine’ restaurants, mostly attached to star hotels and offering worldwide food, etc. We can also mention ice-cream parlours, air-conditioned coffee shops serving *espresso* and pastries, and food courts in malls exhibiting a concentration of local and world cuisines. Street food stalls gradually evolve as ‘foodie destinations’’ and gain legitimacy in public spaces through food blogs and videos (Baviskar 2021). Some of these chains also offer ‘ordering in’ services. Digital applications such as Zomato or Swiggy have emerged as food delivery leaders in India, offering worldwide food in the main cities. In Bangalore, for instance, middle-class consumers increasingly use their cell phones to order ready-made food that migrant deliverymen bring to them from nearby restaurants within a dozen minutes (Srinivas 2021). Although the use of food delivery applications is partly a new habit, it also resonates with already existing decentralised forms of services of delivering home-cooked (Indian) food for domestic consumption for young students, migrants and the elderly in cities (see, for instance, Gooptu et al. 2018). According to Patgiri (2022), food delivery is a specific feature

of the urban-middle-class youth, as was exemplified during the 2020 lockdown where most youth went back to their family home.

Discrepancies between domestic and non-domestic food in the Indian context have long been underlined (Caplan 2008). Admittedly, many housekeepers lack the equipment and the skills to cook new items such as pizzas or kebabs. Most importantly, food consumption patterns and prescriptions are highly contextual. 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 1976). In the house, meals combine cereals and legumes while outside the preference may go to dishes composed of meat (kebab, grilled chicken, etc.). While domestic food is still dominated by rules of commensality with food transactions confined within certain community boundaries, non-domestic food patterns are increasingly shaped by conviviality and cosmopolitanism, inducing cross-caste gatherings. Interestingly, food at work may be an opportunity for relaxing village caste norms of non-commensality for factory workers (Strümpell 2008), whereas this is not necessarily so in higher-educated professional contexts maintaining implicit caste and religious norms through a segregation between vegetarian and non-vegetarians (Benbabaali 2008). Food eaten outside may pave the way for new patterns of sociability as it potentially emancipates from ethnic, religious or caste rules.

However, the dichotomy between eating out and eating in should not be overstressed. Domestic and public food spheres are mutually constituted through material and discursive links. Community rules and references – be it on an ethnic, caste or national basis – still shapes practices, even when eating away from home. In many Indian cities, restaurants display whether they are ‘pure vegetarian’ or ‘non-vegetarian’. The upholding of caste non-commensality rules also affects employment in the restaurant industry: lower-caste Dalits find it more difficult to secure kitchen

jobs (unless they conceal their caste background) resulting from the maintenance of traditional rules of ‘cleanliness’, as exemplified in the case of Udupi hotels in Karnataka (Iversen and Raghavendra 2016). In Chennai, many vegetarian restaurants have gods’ names and, in some bakeries, billboards proudly proclaim that the owner is from a high caste. Around the brahmanical temples of the city, all restaurants are pure vegetarian. Ethnicity matters and eating out does not always imply eating ‘alien food’ as many successful restaurants serve dishes from the local repertoire – as exemplified by the success of the vegetarian chain Saravana Bhavan originating from Tamil Nadu. New food consumption patterns are accommodated in local systems of significance (Caplan 2006). In Western fast-food chains, burgers and chicken wings are eaten more like a snack than like a meal. McDonald’s restaurants do not serve beef or pork while KFC includes curry leaves in the breadcrumbs. Both chains split their kitchens into a vegetarian and a non-vegetarian sector.

Outside food may prompt enthusiasm but can also provoke reluctance. 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 many women of the middle classes take it as a moral duty to cook food for the whole family, even when they work outside. Food served outside is often criticised: it is reported that ‘powders’ are added to rice, frying oil is said to be adulterated (Solomon 2016), kitchens are deemed unhygienic, and the legal implementation of hygienic norms from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India for street vendors remains very limited. Restaurants and food stalls should not be regarded only as places of food discovery. Consumers are driven there by their desire but also by compulsion: single men who do not have use of a kitchen in their lodgings, workers who lack time and knowledge to cook, and migrants living away from home.

Meat in India: a highly contentious and political foodstuff

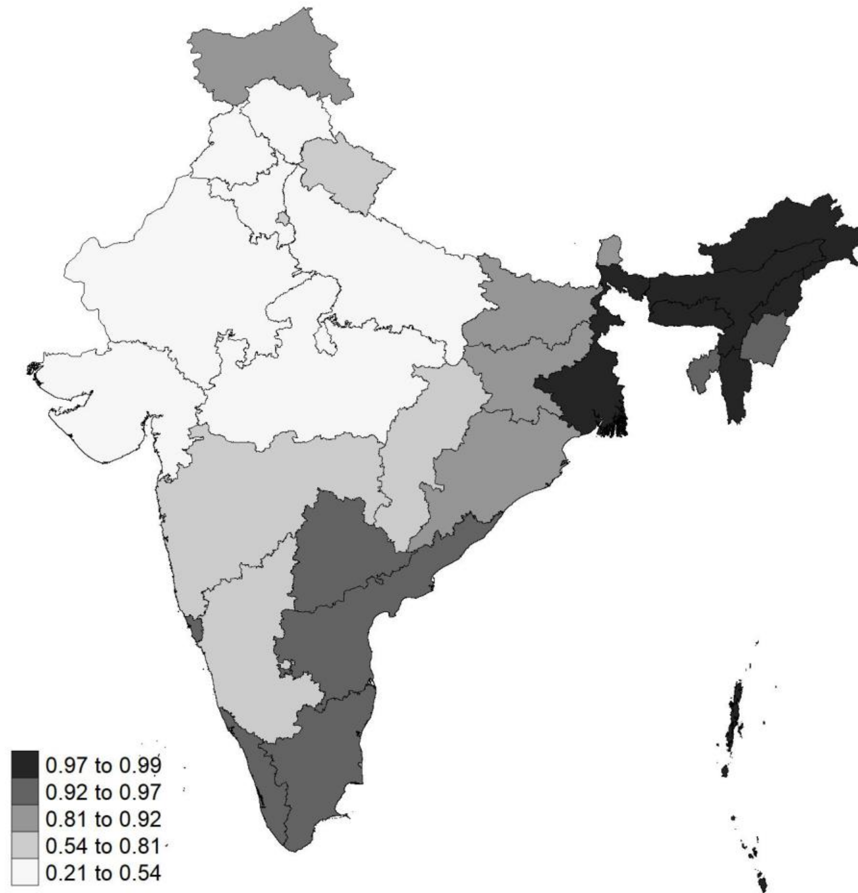
Despite the food changes noticed mostly in cities and among upper-middle classes, India is not a place of unleashed food Westernisation. One specific feature of the Indian diet, in both rural and urban contexts, is the very low consumption of meat. In the latest available estimates from the National Family Health Survey (2019–21), 30 per cent of adults (up to 50 years old) declare never eating meat. This low meat consumption may have beneficial environmental outcomes, but it also raises burning issues in terms of social justice, political discrimination and nutrition – accounting for the aforementioned low levels of protein intake (Bruckert 2019a).

Obviously, economic and geographical factors play a paramount role in limiting its consumption: more meat is consumed in cities due to higher incomes and availability. However, its status is also defined by conceptions about culture, religion and health. Regional variations in meat consumption are one of its most staggering features (Figure 3): in North-Western India, on average less than half of the population eat meat even if occasionally (in Uttar Pradesh, 47 per cent never eat meat). Conversely, in Southern India, more than 90 per cent of adults eat meat, even though most only occasionally (in Tamil Nadu, this proportion amounts to 92 per cent). The highest quantities of meat are consumed in the South and the Northeast, in states where the percentage of meat eaters is also the highest (see Figure 3). Average annual consumption per person is less than 1 kg in the North-West, while it reaches 20 kg in the Northeast. On average, the richest decile in urban areas consumes 13 times more meat than the poorest decile in rural areas (NSSO 2012a).

As Natrajan and Jacob (2018) have underlined, the Indian diet should hence not be essentialised as only vegetarian and uniform across the subcontinent, but ‘provincialised’ according to the contextual regional peculiarities. We follow their recommendation in providing some insights from our fieldworks in Uttar Pradesh, and notably in Lucknow, and in Tamil Nadu, especially in

Chennai. Understanding regional commonalities and differences is all the more pressing that they are growing over time, Southern India gradually adopting more meaty diets while a significant proportion of North-Western India dwellers remain vegetarian (Jacob and Natrajan 2020).

Figure 3 – Proportion of meat consumers across Indian states



Source: National Family Health Survey, 2019–2020. Male and female estimates are computed together

In Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh: claiming power or purity through consumption and abstinence

In India, meat is not endowed with the rather unanimously positive significances it may have in other regions of the world. Diet rules would have been historically rigidified among upper-caste

Hindus as a way to ensure religious dominance over Jainism and Buddhism, as theorised by Max Weber and B. R. Ambedkar (Ferry 2018). The impurity of lower meat-eating castes has historically been associated with the principle of non-commensality between pure and impure caste groups and conversely this may have motivated the adoption of vegetarian diets among lower castes as a way to legitimise one's position (Srinivas 1956). Many Brahman castes and other groups claiming a high status are still vegetarian in contemporary India and vegetarian and non-vegetarians diet caste distinctions are stronger in North-Western India (Ferry 2020).

Importantly, even in regions such as Tamil Nadu where only a minority of the population is 'pure vegetarian' today, meat is always a side dish, cereals remaining the staple food. High consumption of meat is still not a daily experience, even for the middle classes. Meat is rarely consumed more than three times a week, in portions usually not exceeding 50 grams. In addition to economic constraints, cultural and individual regulations contradict the assumption of the nutrition transition model that meat consumption is alleged to increase mechanically with economic development. In Tamil Nadu, a significant number of interviewees 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. In Uttar Pradesh, acknowledging consuming meat is less common and respondents rather tend to declare themselves as 'veg' even though they consume meat, as a Dalit medical doctor declared: 'I consider myself a vegetarian. I get non-vegetarian in one month, 1.5 months or in 2 months'. In this region, vegetarianism appeared as a more salient diet norm and the insistence to claim oneself as 'veg' contrasts with what people consider of each other's diets. For instance, a lower-caste labourer alleged that Brahman's meat consumption is an open secret: 'They won't eat in front of me, but secretly'.

For reasons of penance or of quest for purity, many Hindus still refrain from eating meat on 'auspicious days' (as often as two to three days per week for most of them) or when visiting a major temple. '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 us, 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, may also lead to meat avoidance. In a process of asceticism, the majority of Tamil Christians follow a 40-day-Lent before Easter, during which they eschew meat and fish. In Uttar Pradesh, many Hindus do not consume meat during the Shivratri or Navratri festivals. After the end of the latter festival, one of our Brahman upper-class respondents was very keen on being able to consume meat again and he expressed anguish at the perspective that non-vegetarian restaurants may run short of supply caused by a sudden excess of demand. Meat abstinence may also relate to days of the week. For instance, on Tuesdays, many Hindus revering Hanuman (this day of the week is associated with this popular Hindu god) do not consume meat but others prefer Monday (Shiva day) or Thursday (Vishnu).

Moreover, conceptions of the holiness of the cow in Hinduism, correlated with the alleged beef consumption of lower-caste Dalits (this being the core reason for their stigmatisation according to B. R. Ambedkar 2019), but also more generally merely a deep-rooted family habit, deter most middle- and high-caste Hindus from eating beef, be it from cattle or buffalo. The importance of cow protection as a Hindu religious marker has been recently confirmed by a Pew Research Survey, which showed that it was the most widespread marker among the religious community, more than festival celebration or even god belief (Saghal et al. 2021). Interestingly, cow protection and relatedly beef abstinence is rather uniform depending on caste and class, but it is less salient in Southern India (Ferry,2021). But regional exceptions are also important: buffalo meat has

traditionally been part of the Nawabi cuisine in Lucknow and galouti kebabs, made of minced buffalo meat, are a delicacy favoured by many irrespective of their religion. Yet, in Uttar Pradesh, code words – such as 'bada' meaning 'general', or '14 number' referring to its former cost – are frequent among beef or buffalo consumers to invisibilise its consumption.

Religious and caste norms are far from the only elements according to which people discursively justify their meat consumption practices, especially among middle- and upper-class Indians. Health factors are often mentioned to justify a low consumption of animal flesh: some blame meat, especially mutton and beef, for causing diseases such as hypercholesterolemia, diabetes, or high blood pressure. Many of our informants in Tamil Nadu, 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. For instance, a person considering his/her body to be too hot will avoid goat or lamb, both classified as 'heating'. Others reduce their meat consumption, fearing that it may foster an 'animal spirit', a violent character, a bad smell, 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).

However, meat can also be associated with strength, power and modernity. 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. Meat consumption is thus overall highly gendered, especially in regions where meat consumption is lower. In India, only 19 per cent of adult men never eat meat but it amounts to 32 per cent for women (IIPS and ICF 2021). This gendered pattern in meat consumption especially among upper caste households suggests that women tend to be the gatekeepers of the household's caste status

position when it comes to maintaining the vegetarian distinction. Meat-eating upper caste men are usually pure vegetarians at home, and only eat meat outside, usually with colleagues or friends from lower castes and quite often without informing their wives. Khara et al. (2020) interpret this duality as a 'backstage behaviour' while in the 'frontstage' (with their family) respondents remain vegetarian. This Goffman-inspired dramaturgical analysis highlights the importance of the social norm of vegetarianism within the household, from which members only deviate outside the abode. Overall, the contextual variations in the meaning of meat practices is exemplified by beef consumption: when it is ordered in five star hotels, it symbolises cosmopolitanism and modernity; 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.

Admittedly, there has been a surge in meat consumption over the past few decades associated with a qualitative change in the significations endowed to meat eating (Robbins 1999). In Tamil Nadu, the pattern of meat consumption for urban upper-middle classes is gradually shifting away from a 'ceremonial' one, whereby meat is served only for special occasions, towards a more 'secular' one, whereby meat is consumed more regularly as a 'banal' food (Bruckert 2018). Chicken especially has benefited from intensified farming methods, integrated supply chains and spatially concentrated retailing (Bruckert 2021). Its relative cost has plummeted compared to other meats, and the consumption of sheep and goat has largely decreased since the 1980s, replaced by chicken (Ferry 2020). Broiler shops and non-vegetarian restaurants are spreading across urban settings. In Chennai, meat is available only in a minority of urban retail stores as its presence in fridges would deter vegetarians from shopping there. In a few supermarkets, marinated or ready-to-cook chilled chicken pieces as well as frozen minced lamb are for sale. But 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. In Uttar Pradesh, strong regulations limit the development of slaughterhouses (e.g. they cannot be settled next to Hindu temples), and butchers usually have to hide their meat products behind curtains or frosted glass, especially buffalo meat. This relegation of meat correlates with the overall stigmatisation of butchers, who often belong to the Muslim Qureshi caste in North India, as studied by Zahrin Ahmad (2018) in Delhi.

The politisation of meat and beef in contemporary India

Meat in general, and beef meat in particular, have for long been leveraged for identity claims, the alienation of Muslims, political domination and, more recently, for electoral strategies (Bruckert 2019b). As we have already emphasised, the cow is a widely shared religious marker of the boundary between Hindus and non-Hindus, but it also plays a role in defining national identity. For the majority of Hindus, national identity and religious identity are clearly intertwined: two-thirds of them (65 per cent) consider as 'very important' the idea that to be 'truly Indian', one must be Hindu, and this is even more true when Hindu identity is understood as resting on a cultural foundation based on the protection of the cow (Saghal et al. 2021). As a consequence, the attachment to cow protection is also all the more salient that Hindu people support the BJP, the party in power at the national level and in many Indian states (including Uttar Pradesh) (Ferry 2021).

The religious symbol of the cow has been widely instrumentalised by Hindu nationalists over the past decade. Legally, BJP leaders have aimed at strengthening the legislation prohibiting cattle slaughter. The Article 48 of the Constitution stipulates that the states of the Indian Union shall take

steps for prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves (Chigateri 2008). Yet in 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi violated this constitutional logic and proposed a bill to ban pan-India cow slaughter, a bill rejected by the Supreme Court a few months later. But several BJP-ruled states have strengthened their legal arsenal to condemn the slaughter, sale and consumption of beef. Yogi Adityanath, elected in 2017 as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, portrays himself as a protector of cows and has, for example, closed down illegal artisanal slaughterhouses and opened 'Gaushalas' (cow shelters) for dairy cows that have become unproductive. In Gujarat, penalties of up to life imprisonment may now be imposed on those who might have produced, eaten or even stored beef. As James Staples (2020) shows, legal authority does not necessarily play a central role in defining everyday dietary practices and whether or not beef is included in the meal. The role of identities claimed for oneself or that may be imposed probably plays a more important role. In this regard, nationwide, but more especially in Northern India and in Karnataka, Hindu militias known as 'Gau Rakshaks' (cow protectors) threaten and sometimes attack anyone suspected of producing, transporting or eating beef. Since the mid-2010s, hundreds of people, most of them Muslims, have been attacked by Hindu majoritarian groups who take the law into their own hands and at least 50 have been killed. Several political leaders of the BJP have publicly expressed their support for this campaign of violence. For example, the Chief Minister of Chattisgarh stated that 'We will hang those who kill cows'. The Social Attitudes Research India survey conducted over mobile phone in the states most-hit by this violence shows that more than a third of Hindu respondents acknowledge supporting this form of violence against the Muslim minority, a figure in line with our own survey in Uttar Pradesh (Ferry 2021). The division of roles between the Hindu militias who commit the violence, and the BJP political representatives who justify it, thus promotes greater acceptability of violence against Muslims in the name of the cow.

Beyond beef, meat at large is targeted by nationalist politicians and religious activists. Modi himself praises vegetarianism as the only diet to achieve 'the purity of thoughts and action' (cited by Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 154). The meat sector is regularly threatened by regulations and political discourses. Since the BJP won the general elections in 2014, Hindu nationalists have been waging a war on meat: slaughterhouses have been closed in many states and butcher stores have been restricted in their practices. During the Navratri Hindu festival in April 2022, meat shops, most of them run by Muslims, were forced to shut down in Delhi.[2] Throughout the country, spatial and temporal restrictions are imposed on meat production and sales. In a context where religious affiliations are polarised by the right-wing parties, meat and vegetarianism are powerful tools to manipulate emotions, to control the population and to subordinate minority religious groups. In return, the consumption of meat and beef can be proudly extolled as a marker of secularism, political resistance and lower-caste and non-Hindu identity, as exemplified by the organisation of 'beef festivals' in universities (Sébastia 2016).

Conclusion: a segmentation of food consumption patterns

This chapter has attempted to illustrate the complexity of food change in contemporary India, with a specific focus on Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. The intensification of agriculture, the rapid growth of the agrifood industry, expanding circuits of supply that more and more source at a global scale, new food environments, new modes of provisioning and the now well-anchored habit of eating outside, have partly transformed the ways Indians relate to food. 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 is 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 influencing foodways.

However, food change, as obvious as it may seem, is embedded in systems of values and of power that the analysis in terms of 'food transition', when it concerns India, unfortunately often obfuscates. While constraints in terms of economic and spatial access to food prevent the poorest sections of the society from diversifying their diet, the social, political and symbolic meanings of food account for some specificities of the Indian food scenario. In India, 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) 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 and political matrix. For instance, attitudes to meat are still entrenched in conflicting conceptions about power and nutrition on the one hand, and status and symbolic purity on the other hand. 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 India 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 now more achieved than assigned. Thus, more than a standardisation of diets, food in contemporary India displays models of renewed and increasing spatial compartmentalisation and social segmentation.

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[1] For comparison, in France, households devote about 20 per cent of their budget to food expenditures.

[2] 'Navratri: Outrage as Delhi meat shops shut for Hindu festival,' https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61006174 [accessed February 7, 2023]