My Grandfather’s House: Proscription and Practice in the Food System of the Iyengars of Tamil Nadu.¹

Fig 1. The house from the front.

Introduction

If we eat food that is not pure, the mind will not be clear. If the mind is not clear there will be no urge to do good deeds.

_Ahara Niyamam²_

Sri Vedanta Desika (AD 1068–AD 1169)

If you touch a glass to your lips, the glass becomes _yechhal³_ and you have to go and wash the glass with cow dung to clean it. Water, and all liquid, must be poured into the mouth from a glass without the glass touching the lip. This is a manifestation of the principle of purity, which shapes the ways of sitting, eating and drinking. (Similarly, _madi_ is a state of purity of the person that must be protected by restricting contact with the impure, and _pattu_ is food that is not pure.) The cooking of food, its serving

¹ As the title suggests the ethnographic material used for the discussion in this paper is largely autobiographical. It is only recently that a few elderly people of the Iyengar community were asked to read the drafts and comment on the description of practices. Their comprehension of the practices outlined reinforced the earlier proposition that the particular example, the house under discussion, was a typical artifact that was to found all over Tamil Nadu and may have come into existence in this form prior to the 1500s.

² The Brahmans of Tamil Nadu consider the Ahara Niyamam an important document where the author brings together all the references that can be found in the sacred texts on the subject of food prohibitions and injunctions.

³ Yechhal is a phrase used to refer to a particular kind of impurity that is caused by contact with saliva.
and eating and washing up constitutes an important set of activities that have to be performed in the correct way to protect purity. The paper considers the possibility of portraying how a functioning household of an orthodox South Indian Brahmin in the 16th century would have perceived foodstuffs from the new world. Though houses have changed in form they can be seen to be derivatives of a model house. The system of practices described here is rooted in a system of meanings that are universal and relevant for the orthodox even today. It is safe to conjecture that the traditional practice presented here would have applied as well to the year 1500 as to 1950. The issue of purity among the Brahmins would have precluded the immediate incorporation of new foodstuffs into their cuisine. The reality is that the New World and European foods introduced by the Portuguese are accepted and eaten in India. The process of incorporation of new foodstuffs may thus be conjectured from a description of practices related to ‘food areas’ and to the general scheme of meanings associated with the spaces in the Brahmin household.

The imports of foodstuffs would have happened over a period of time, and it is the period after AD1500 that is of interest here. At that time, a foreigner in South India would have seen very little public consumption of food. People would have cooked for their own consumption and would have eaten their food away from the eyes of a stranger. They would have refused food offered to them. This would have been especially true about the Brahmins the foreigner would have interacted with. Since local custom did not allow the Portuguese entry into the Brahmin house, they may have seen nothing of the strange new foods they brought with them being incorporated into the local cuisine.

Past studies of the food ways of traditional cultures have shown that new foods would be expected to encounter prohibitions. The lines demarcating the edible from the inedible in the sense of ‘that which can be eaten’ from ‘that which cannot’ may identify a category of the foreign/prohibited. New foods may thus fall under the category of inedible-prohibited substances. These works have also shown how prohibitions may have been based on criteria other than that of keeping out food substances that were not available at the time the prohibitions were formulated. This can be seen in the case of the Akara Nyamam, (henceforth referred to as the Nyamam) a poem on the food to be eaten by devout Iyengars. The poem specifies that which is ‘good to eat’ by keeping issues of purity central, hence “The same item can be eaten by some and may be prohibited for some others because of varying circumstances …”. Here the incorporation of the new has to be seen in context, by comprehending the way the whole system works in practice. Of the prohibitions listed in Nyamam the majority deal not with any properties pertaining to the physical substance of the food but with the context: of either their environment of cultivation (“vegetables grown in unclean places”); the person who may have seen it (“food that has been by wicked people”) or handled it (“food touched by sinful people, diseased people”); or the person who cooked it (“food cooked by youngsters who may not be observing the required cleanliness”); or the specific state they are in (“rice cooked in other’s houses is not recommended”); or the events preceding contact with food (“food not offered to the household deity”). This can be interpreted as all food is pure (nature) and it is the contact (culture) that carries the threat of pollution. The Nyamam thus serves to provide guidelines for the protection of the purity of the Brahmin in the practice of the consumption of food. The guidelines

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4 Purity is used here and in the rest of the paper to imply a concept that has religious and caste connotations.
5 This term has been used by Khare to refer to all food related spaces in a Hindu home. Khare, 1976.
6 A chart detailing the specific substances and their possible year of arrival in India can be seen later in this paper.
7 ‘Early Portuguese observers like Duarte Barbosa naively but accurately reported major cultural features of the caste system which continue to be recognized as central today: the high position of the Brahmins, the significance of pollution in relation to untouchability, the bars to commensality among endogamous groups’. Cohn, 1987, 139.
8 ‘From an earlier source the Hindu dietary prohibitions can be classified as being associated with: status, food location, human behaviour and contact, animal behaviour and contact, animal morphology and specific foods’. Grivetti, 2000, 1505
9 This can be seen in the present instance too, the emphasis is on purity and the Brahmin.
thus lay down the way in which the handling of food can threaten purity and hence must be avoided and also specify what is acceptable to consume. So if for the Iyengar, food (the dietary regime or the gustatory regime) is governed by the desire to maintain purity, the household, too, is involved and becomes a space seen in the articulation of rules governing contact between humans and also instances of substance to human contact with the aim of maintaining purity. The relationship with the servants, thus involving the caste system, and the role of women in the household are components and are affected by the same overall system of meanings. The organization of spaces in a house facilitates the maintenance of these practices thus in a sense defines the relationships of the castes, sexes and of the household to the world outside. The description of the functioning spaces of an Iyengar Brahmin household describe the context in which food is stored, prepared and eaten and provide an insight into the meanings that would have been negotiated (or not negotiated) in the process of incorporation of new foodstuffs in the 16th century and thereafter.

The Iyengar Identity

My grandfather (tata) did not shave himself. Maari, the barber (ambattan), came to the house and did this for him. This was done every two or three days. Maari would enter the front gate, walk around the house using the lane (sandu), where the cows were tied during the day, and arrive next to the open well at the back. Here a stool would be given to him; this he would place next to the well and wait for Veeraraghava Iyengar, my grandfather. This practice illustrates the relationship between the Brahmins and the other castes.

The Iyengars are vegetarian. The Iyengar identity is a comparatively recent formulation dating back to a particular movement in history called the Sri Vaishnavite movement, which was a partitioning of the undifferentiated group of original Brahmins of Tamil Nadu and neighbouring regions. The Iyengar thus is a Vaishnav Brahmin. The Iyengars as a group constitute a small fraction of the total population of Brahmins. The practices of the Iyengars, contain the general beliefs of all Brahmins as well as a few others that are unique. The food culture of the Iyengars, too, contains some elements common to all Brahmins in South India and other elements that are specific to the Iyengars. These other elements constitute the components that are used in the construction of a separate identity. The Iyengar identity is constructed in opposition to the shudra (the lower caste), in a sense as a polar opposite to define the notion of purity. The Iyengar considers it important to go to the temple every morning and evening. The elders sport a big belly, seen to imply prosperity, grace and power and indicative of a sedentary life characterized by rituals and scholarly pursuits. It marked them out to be true Brahmins, for they were often poor and ate when they could or they ate a lot at others’ expense. The poverty was often ideological and took the form of eschewing ownership of property among the more religious. Iyengar were to be found living near a temple or on a street leading to the temple. Their bodies would be clean-shaven and marked with a sign rather like an I drawn inside a U on the forehead (namam), or in the more devout, on twelve places on the body. For the prayer (puja) every morning, a special dhoti in silk may be worn. At other times they wear only a white cotton dhoti, no upper garment is worn and no footwear is worn except to go to some place that is considered formal and unfamiliar. The very orthodox are conscious that they are polluted by contact outside the home, as in Dumont’s description: “If he works away from home he takes care to have a bath when he returns”.  

10 This notion of purity as described by Dumont: 'The racial purity is only a part of the purity to a Brahmin ...[This ] is acquired by generations of pure conduct, which consists of doing actions that are pure, eating pure food, by increasing his own personal sacredness,....' Dumont, 1970, 359.

11 It was noted that in conversation food that is not meant for the Brahmin, like the papaya or drumstick, would be referred to as the food for the shudra.

12 As being free of the attractions of material possessions, thus being more spiritual.

13 The dhoti is an unstitched lower garment for men which can be seen in the pictures illustrating this paper.

14 For silk is considered pure (madi) and superior to cotton, which easily loses its state of purity.

The Prototypic House of the Brahmin—the Agraharam\textsuperscript{16} house

A few centuries ago the center of a typical village settlement would have been the temple complex. This is still in evidence in many older settlements\textsuperscript{17} and many of these temples had a sunken tank\textsuperscript{18} in front of their entrance. The temple and tank complex formed a rectangle. The complex would have streets on all four sides. These streets are referred to as the mada streets. The houses of the Brahmins were located on the outer side of these streets, thus looking onto the temple complex.

The agraharam house was thus a row house, that is, sharing its side walls with the adjoining plots and hence with access front and back only. The front and rear portion of the house was well lit, leaving the inner rooms dark. Houses in villages have a central courtyard, which has been dispensed with in urban settlements. The layout of the house contained many features that allowed the Brahmin to retain their customs.

At the rear of such a prototypic house would be a service lane, to be used by the help who milked the cows every day (\textit{maatu karan}), the scavenger and the others who would need to access the rear of the house. The first space on entry would be a semi-enclosed porch, referred to as the ‘outside’ (\textit{vasal}), with a stone bench (\textit{tinnai}). This was the space to receive visitors, for the haircut and shave (\textit{chavaram}); after which the space was washed out with water; for the men folk to sit and watch the street and the passersby; and to sleep at night.

Beyond this would be the “camera room”\textsuperscript{19} or the special room for the elder. On one side of the porch would be the dooram room, for the seclusion of the menstruating women. Past the camera room would be the hall, the room with the swing, \textit{oonjal ull}\textsuperscript{20}. This would be an all-purpose room and, being inside

\textsuperscript{16} The agraharam is the term used to refer to the locality where the Brahmins live.

\textsuperscript{17} The temples of Triplicane and Mylapore in Chennai city are surrounded by \textit{mada} streets and can be considered to be \textit{agraharam} complexes of the sort described here.

\textsuperscript{18} This tank would be open to the sky, square in plan and constructed of stone and masonry. On the side where the temple is situated would be steps leading down to the water.

\textsuperscript{19} Maybe it was called the “camera room” because it was the usual place for taking family portraits. [Such a picture can be seen in Fig. 9, where the men are lined up against the best backdrop the room offers.]

\textsuperscript{20} Ull is the tamil word for room.
and dark, would have a barred opening in the ceiling to admit light. Leading off from this room would be the ugranam ull, where the belongings would be kept locked, sometimes separately for men and women.

On the other side the hall would lead off to the saapadara ull, the room for eating, which then led to the cooking room, samayal ull. The well, the source of water, would be in this room. Beyond this space would be the pinkattu, a semi-open space for the work of the women. The pickle, the vattal, and other preserves would be made here. The bathroom was on one side of this room. A distance from the pinkattu, set away, would be the latrine. In the more recent houses with smaller plots, this distance was reduced, but the location is still apart from the house.

My Grandfather’s Old House (1931–96)

Fig 4: The full plan of the house.

The house was built in 1931 and survived till the 1990s, when it was demolished to make room for a block of apartments. It was based upon the prototypic agraharam house and, like the prototype, was designed to facilitate the maintenance of the practices of Iyengars. The plot on which this house was constructed was 35 feet (10.6 meters) wide and 110 feet (33.5 meters) long. The front onto the road was the southern boundary; the plot was thus south facing hence considered auspicious and commercially valuable. The sides were shared with adjoining plots, one separated by a mesh fence (the house of a relative was on this side), and the other by a brick wall. Rules of contact between Brahmins and other castes determined the site plan—that is, the location of the house in the plot. The house was set back equally front and back, with a lane (sandu) on the east side of the plot. This lane connected the front of the house to the back. The washerwoman or the barber or the lady who cleaned the toilets would use this lane to go to the rear courtyard. They did not enter the house. The resulting house was

21 Vattal is a food made from soaked and ground rice and pulses. It is formed in different shapes and dried in the sun. When necessary, it is fried and eaten along with the meal as an accompaniment.

22 South is considered to be the most auspicious direction for a house to face. With the north being the least auspicious. This may have specific references in Vaastu Shastra.
thus thin and long. The rooms were placed one behind the other, from front to back. In its length, it was divided into four sections; the front room, which led on one side to the bedroom; the middle room with the swing, which led to the store where clothes and valuables were kept; the dining area and store, which led off on one side to the kitchen; and the rear semi-open area, where the coconut would be peeled, the rice ground and pounded. The doors connecting all the rooms were situated along the central longitudinal axis, so that if all the doors were open, from the street in front one could see the cow shed at the back of the house.

The Space for Men

The first space at the front was the porch, the bench (tinnai) space. This contained a wooden bench and a bench in cement fashioned into the wall. The wooden bench was used for sitting and sleeping upon during the day and was where male guests were often entertained. Here was the place where the men folk could sit to watch the activity on the street. The space was thus connected to the outside and to the street. The next space, the first room of the house, was entered through a toranam\(^2\) of mango leaves [Fig. 2]; it was well lit and contained four cane chairs, the only room to have furniture. The cane, with no upholstery, ensured that there was no pollution due to contact with cloth. This room constituted the outside in the inside/outside oppositions of the house. The room had a well-made, expensive floor in multicoloured mosaic. It was the space for the more intimate visitor; the men sat here to talk and did not venture further into the house. It was the space for the dead; a body was placed here for mourning. A small cupboard in this room held my grandfather’s papers and stationery. Since this room was on the east side, it received a lot of the sun and light. It also had more windows than all the other rooms in the house. Since this room was permanently occupied by tata (he spent his time here, dozed on the chair, or summoned someone to talk to him), the daughters-in-law seldom ventured here. If they did, it would be in his absence. It was the children who carried instructions and calls to meals. The daughters would go, too, but more infrequently. Payments were made from here, though money was kept in the inner room. In the evening it was believed that it was through this front door that Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and prosperity) entered the house at the lighting of the lamps. The space thus was male in the male/female opposition of the house and excluded women. Further, as outside-male, it was opposed to the inside-female meaning associated with the inner space. This light-male space on the outside was opposed to the dark-female space on the inside of the house. This was the limit to which the visitor could enter, and the servants cleaned up to this point. It was thus the space for public interaction with others and opposed to private interaction among the householders, which would happen in spaces further inside the house. This is significant if seen in the context of the interactions of the household with the outside world.

The visitor was usually family or a priest, and very rarely was a visitor someone not connected by blood ties, but even then, a visitor was a fellow Brahmin. Friends\(^24\) did not visit this house. There were a few containers kept apart for the servants, for tea (the food container they keep to themselves) and these were in china ware or glass\(^25\). In principle, if a visitor of another caste were to visit, he could be served in these cups, called the 'outside vessels', which are opposed to the 'inside vessels', which are reserved for the use of the people of the house.

The Room for the Distant (dooram ull)

A small room, marked as the “bedroom” in the drawings of the house, was connected to this first room. Though it served, when necessary, as a room for newlyweds, its meaning as a conjugal space was not very strong. This room had at various times held a table and chair or a bed. The room was

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\(^2\) Mango leaves strung across the top of a doorway.

\(^24\) Friend is like foreign food. 'Friend' may not be a significant category in the traditional set of relationships.

\(^25\) Metal is opposed to glass as the opposition of the pure to the impure.
used by children as a study and periodically served as the room where the women during *dooram* (literally, "distant", a term used to denote the woman during menstruation) secluded themselves, for physical contact with them was prohibited during this period. The *dooram* woman would be the last to eat, after everyone had eaten. All foods of a meal would be served onto her plate at time, as compared to individual courses served in a normal meal. The elder will not eat if he had seen a *dooram* woman before the meal. Small children were allowed go to the *dooram* woman after taking off their clothes.

This room had a fortuitous location that allowed the occupant to witness the coming and goings of people to the house. And in recent times the *dooram* woman could leave for work without entering the rest of the house. She could also use the lane to access the rear of the house where the wash area and toilets were located, outside the house proper. She would also make such a trip after every meal to wash her plate, which she retained and kept in the room. As also the only space with sexual connotations when kept for the newlyweds, the space contained the meaning of fertility in a birth-death opposition. Though not physically set apart it is, as a category, treated as being outside the main house.

Adjacent to this was the staircase to the upper floor. The space under the staircase was used as a store for slippers and shoes, the mattresses and mats for sleeping on, and sacks of grain from the village fields. Shoes denote impurity, and the location of the sheets and mattresses to sleep on with them was significant in this space for the impure. The sacks of grain from the village were stored here, too, because they are not vulnerable to pollution. The rooms beyond this point were entered barefoot. The spaces thus were hierarchically ordered, from the least pure-outside to the purest-innermost. When a younger member of the house returned from a haircut at the barber shop, he did not enter the house. He would go around to the back, bathe and change into clean washed clothes before entering through the rear of the house.

**Liminal Space: Room with the Swing**

The next part of the house was the swing room (*oonjal  ull*). Half a step lower than the floor of the Camera room this room had a rough cement floor. It is here that the women and children would be met during visits. The fire for rituals (*havan*) was located here for ceremonial occasions. This room had mattresses or reed mats (*pai*) spread out at night; women would sleep in the swing room with the babies and the younger children, and men would sleep in the front room with the older children.

This is the liminal space, neither inside nor outside but in-between, a transitional space separating the two parts of the house. Men were allowed up to the swing room. *Tata* would enter this room clearing his throat (*kanachikaradu*) to announce his entrance. This was the point up to which women visitors were received. The daughters of the house sat at the threshold, with the body in this room and the head craned into the front room and talked to the visitors. The daughters-in-law were not expected to talk to the men. If required to do so, they stood behind the door, drew their sari over their shoulders so the

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26 On the fourth day a member of the household has to do ‘the pouring of the water’ (*tanni kottu*) for the *dooram* woman, which involved this person pouring water over the seated woman till she was completely wet. After which the person pouring becomes polluted, *vizupu*, and has to bathe too.

27 In earlier times she would not have been allowed to go out of the house.

28 This was extremely inconvenient on dark nights. Other members of the family, usually male children, would be roused to accompany a *dooram* woman.

29 In many instances the rural house would locate this space set apart from the house or connected to the cow shed.

30 A typical swing would be a 1 m deep by 2 m wide wooden plank construction suspended from the ceiling by four heavy iron chains.

31 The men would be received in the front room and the women and children would go ahead to the room with the swing. These visitors were typically relatives or very rarely other Brahmin families.
blouse did not show\textsuperscript{32}, and talked. This was the space for discussion. The small cupboard in the wall
had powder and the makeup things of the women. It also held a small radio. The western end of this
room was partitioned in wood, with a loft above. The loft contained many brass objects, and much of
the dowries of the daughters-in-law. \textit{Tata} had nine children, of whom three were sons, and here was
stored the unwanted items of these three daughters-in-law.

The partitioned cabin (store and changing room) contained four metal cupboards (\textit{almirahs}). Each
cupboard would contain the clothes, jewellery and valuables of the family of one of the sons or other
resident family members like an unmarried son or daughter. People went into this room to change
clothes. This room had very little light. This combined the dark-inside along with the women-valuables
and marked the location of the feminine. It defined women and valuables as belonging to the inside.

\textbf{Fig 5-7:} From Left, Tata with my parents; the youngest of my aunts looks after the youngest child in the house, the children of the house.

\textbf{Fig 8 & 9:} From left, Sitting for a meal; coffee being made in the outer kitchen.

The Eating Space (dining room: \textit{sapadara ull})

The room beyond the swing room is used only during a meal. This was the eating space, a step higher
than the swing room; it was tiled in terracotta and completely bare. The servant did not enter this
room to sweep. Cooking and eating are the purest activities and hence were carried out in the \textit{sanctum
sanctorum} of the house, the innermost space. The door from here leading out to the rear of the house
was closed to retain Lalshmi (as spirit, influence of the goddess) in the evening at ‘the lighting of the
lamps’ (\textit{vilaku etal}). The cupboard in the wall here contained the glasses and vessels for water, coffee and
milk. On the right on entry was a counter on which were kept the stainless steel (referred to in local parlance as ‘ever silver’) plates with the name of the owner (the person using them) engraved on them.

\textsuperscript{32} Women were required to cover their blouses and did not cover their heads as is the custom in North India. The covering of the head demarcated the person as a widow.
In this scheme of materials and foodstuffs, the plates used for eating and the glasses were to be in silver. Aluminium was considered impure and not permissible. The relationship to stainless steel is ambiguous, and some indication of its acceptability is found in the terminology used, ‘ever silver’. This has also allowed it to virtually replace all of the above traditional materials in daily usage. Today it is only in certain specific ceremonies, like those associated with rites of passage, that the injunctions relating to material prevail. In these ceremonies, water has to be kept and offered in copper vessels.

On the opposite wall was a window, the sill of which contained the pots of water. Next to the window was a counter that housed a shrine. Below this shrine was kept a stove and some vessels. These were brought out to make coffee and curd (tayir). The boiled milk was kept in front of the pictures in the shrine. Milk is pure and so kept away from the inner kitchen, where issues related to impure food (pattu) dominate and where the rice and the other food was cooked. The outer kitchen to inner kitchen is a pure/impure opposition. The floor was where the family sat to eat. Visitors permitted to eat in this eating room must be family or priests. Food was eaten in shifts, with the elders being the first to start the meal and being the first to get up.

Food was served as a sequence of courses. In this inner room, the family eating would be hidden from view, protecting the eater from the eyes of outsiders. Dumont in his description of the Brahmin eating habit writes: “When he eats he is in an extremely vulnerable state, and even if everything takes place without mishap he rises from his meal less pure than when he sat down. It is not only a question of avoiding contact with polluting agents (even of the same caste) but of general precautions. Among the Brahmins, the eater must be pure (he has bathed and his torso is bare) and he must be sheltered from any impure contact. He eats alone or in a small group in a pure ‘square’ (cauka) in the kitchen or a nearby part of the house carefully protected from intrusion. Any unforeseen contact, not only with a low-caste man (sometimes going as far as his shadow) or an animal, but even with someone from the house (woman, child, man who is not purified for eating) would make the food unfit for consumption. It is thought that ordinary cooked food is particularly vulnerable, and so is the eater, who, the texts tell us, is in any case less pure when he finishes his meal than when he began.”

During a meal, the food is brought from the inner kitchen and served, after which it is returned to the kitchen. In its journey it is never placed anywhere, either on the ground or on a counter, and it is ensured that it does not touch the people eating or their plates. The person eating thus cannot serve himself. There was, however, one practice where a certain kind of allowance was made. As children, for our afternoon meal we would sometimes sit in a circle around our aunt. She would have in front of her a large vessel with curd rice in it. She would hand out by turn portions to us in our hands. A certain minimum physical contact would occur in this meal.

After the meal, each person took his/her plate to the wash area at the back, washed it, and brought it back and placed it on the counter. The floor was cleaned by sprinkling water on it, followed by rolling balls of cow dung over the floor, and finally cleaned with a damp cloth. In eating from a leaf on the floor, one sits cross-legged and bends from the waist. Women are allowed to raise the folded leg perpendicular with the soles of the feet on the ground. The left hand wrapped around the raised leg with the right hand transporting the food to the mouth. The left hand here is to pick up the glass of water, on the right hand side for men and the left for women. The desire to maintain purity determines the ways of sitting and eating. In washing one plate after the meal, the left hand is used for pouring the water while the right holds the plate. The right hand also simultaneously scrubs the plate, without putting it down. The similar practice occurs with the washing of feet, the right holds up the garment, the left pours, and the feet are rubbed against each other. The whole series of hand and body movements are difficult for the uninitiated. But for the practiced, they are marked by a certain ease and gracefulness, which then becomes reason enough for these gestures to survive or be exported to the practice of doing other tasks. The notion of purity/pollution attaches itself to specific kinds of movements of the hands, feet and the body as a whole. Thus the food culture that requires these movements and capabilities transforms the body to enable it to participate in a specific system of gestures.

The food eaten through the day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Eating event</th>
<th>Course I</th>
<th>Course II</th>
<th>Course III</th>
<th>Course IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-11 A.M.</td>
<td>Saapadu</td>
<td>Rice + pulses (paruppu) + clarified butter (ghee) + vegetables</td>
<td>Rice + sambar + vegetables</td>
<td>Rice + rasam + fried crisps</td>
<td>Rice + curd + pickle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 P.M.</td>
<td>Tiffin</td>
<td>Curd rice/ dosa/idli or other snack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8 P.M.</td>
<td>Evening meal</td>
<td>Only palaharam: dosa, fruits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the daily timetable of the elder, food is eaten once (oru podhu). This is so for the very orthodox even today, with the major meal of the day being at 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning. The next event is the tiffin, a more recent phenomenon, where a snack is served followed by coffee. The last meal occurs in the evening, when the elders partake of a light evening meal (palaharam). Substances considered acceptable for palaharam are mainly fruits (banana, mango) or varieties of pancake (dosa). On many days the elders are required to fast, and even this is not eaten.

The morning meal is constructed as a progression of four courses, each course defined as what is to be eaten with the rice, thus: boiled pulses (paruppu), then a thick stew (sambar), then the thin soup (rasam), and finally yoghurt (curd; tayir). Accompanying each course are various vegetable dishes, predominantly dry. Leftovers are not served to the elders, but the children can eat these in the evening. After the first serving and the meal is over, leftover cooked food is considered polluted (pattu).

The daughters-in-law have a dish referred to as burnt-sambar (yericha kozumbu), made from the leftover foods. This is cooked in the outer kitchen.

Certain concessions were made now and then for very small children. The rules, as it were, got stricter as you grew older. In Dumont’s description; “this everyday food whose cooking and eating requires so many precautions, and which is, like the eater himself, so vulnerable to impurity...is the subject of various rules which apply to the preparation and consumption of food”. He further adds: “For one thing, food, once cooked, participates in the family who prepared it. It seems that it is appropriated like an object in use (pot, garment) but even more intimately and without even entering the body, ingestion being only one part of the matter. This is perhaps because, by cooking, food is made to pass from the natural to the human world, and one may wonder whether there is not here something analogous to the 'marginal state' in rites de passage, when a person is no longer in one condition nor yet in another, and consequently exposed, open in some way, to evil influences. In India itself most of these rites de passage correspond to an impurity which expresses the irruption of the organic into social life; now there is something of the organic in our case, as with excretion, and, with the necessary difference, there is if not true impurity at least an exceptional permeability to impurity. Hence the preliminary bath which, however, is not enough, because, as we know, the pure is powerless in the face of the impure and only the sacred vanquishes it (hence in what follows, the use of the products of the cow).”

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34 Today many of the elderly Iyengars who have retired from professional jobs can be seen taking up these beliefs and practices and incorporating them into their daily lives.

35 Could this be a practice that is carried over from times when child marriage was common. The daughter-in-law would be a little girl and hence would need to be treated as a child.

36 Dumont, 1970, 139-140
Inner Cooking Space (*samayal ull*)

Leading off from the dining space was a door to the inner cooking area. The location of the inner kitchen was the farthest from the front, without direct access to the outside. At the far end was a big shrine, with a small wooden temple on a counter. This was used for the daily Morning Prayer (*puja*) by *tata*[^37]. Above the counter was a shelf containing tins of fried snacks and sweets. In front of the shrine was space to keep the food after it was cooked. This is the ritual offering of food to the gods. Food offered to the Gods is sacralised and thus becomes edible[^38]. The inner kitchen was, in principle, accessible only to those who had been through the rite of *samasrayanam*, or the hot metal branding with the mark of Vishnu’s disc and conch. Some limited access was permitted to those who had been through the thread ceremony and were thus twice born.

On the right of the entry to this room was a counter, which was, in sequence, composed of the cooking area (which contained the space for the fire, with chimney above), then the space for the grinding (both on the floor and on the counter), then water, and finally on the floor was the space for washing utensils. Above the counter was the sole window, which looked out onto the semi-open rear porch. The cooking fire was initially a wood stove constructed in bricks and cement. For events like the *Shraadh*[^39], “In many orthodox families where gas is used for cooking the daily food, only fire wood or charcoal is used for

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[^37]: “In daily life, the long ceremony which the Brahman performs in the morning, and which combines cares of hygiene with prayer and the purificatory bath, is necessary for him to be reborn to his condition of the highest purity and to make him fit to have his meal.” Dumont, 1970, 53-54.

[^38]: In the *Niyamam* elders are prohibited from eating food that has not been first offered to the gods.

[^39]: Shradh is the ceremony for the dead and the ancestors.
cooking the food meant for the Brahmin who represent the departed ancestor and the Gods”\textsuperscript{10}. Every evening when the kitchen was washed after the last meal, this area was washed, too, and then plastered with fresh cow-dung paste. After this, the door was bolted and opened only the next morning. On the wall opposite this counter for cooking was a table on which the gas stove was kept. Over the years, gas came to be used more and more. After some years, the wood stove was broken, and the gas stove was moved to this place, the main space for cooking.

The maintenance of purity also required the observance of strict rules regarding utensils. Stainless steel utensils were not permitted in the inner kitchen; there was a cupboard in the dining area for them. Rules dictated which utensil was used to cook which food. The utensil and food that was cooked in it is shown in the table below.

| Stone vessel (kalchetti) | Sambar |
| Cast-iron frying pan | Frying and curries |
| Narrow-mouthed brass (vengala) vessels | Rice and pongal |
| Lead vessel | Rasam |
| Wooden bowls | Salads (kosumallies) |

Since rice was cooked here, certain precautions were taken to ensure and protect the purity of the cooked rice. Hands had to be washed each time the vessel containing rice was to be touched or had been touched. The principle of \textit{pattu} attaches itself to the other foodstuffs prepared in this kitchen, too, because of their contact with the area where rice was prepared. After the completion of the meal, the food substances in this kitchen are considered polluting, thus threatening the purity of the Brahmin.

The decision of what to prepare for a meal rests with the elder-senior women, though in some instances they would seek the wishes of the other members of the household. The choice of the elements that constitute the meal can be governed by the need to feed some ill member of the family a specific substance. Food eaten is largely what is available seasonally. In most other instances, there may be a cyclical or religious event marking the day. Such events provide a symbolic significance to certain foods, thus these would be cooked. After the completion of their duties of serving others in the dining room, the women would sit on the floor of this room to eat. Preparatory activities like cutting vegetables could take place on the floor here or in the dining area.

At the back of the dining room, the central door led to the rear porch, which contained a grinding stone embedded in the floor. Three steps down was the shaft for de-husking of coconuts.

\section*{The New House}

My grandfather’s house was demolished in 1996 to make way for a set of four flats. I designed this complex of four identical flats with specifications that were functional, so was the nomenclature, like ‘bedroom,’ ‘drawing room’ and ‘dining room’. \textit{Dooram} is not practiced anymore. The servant does not enter the kitchen, but washes the utensils outside. Thus, in the new house, an additional space for washing dishes was provided outside the kitchen. Visitors are welcome in this house and sometimes stay for meals, too. The dining room contains a washtub, where each person washes his/her own plate. Food is eaten at a table and in most instances placed for each person to serve himself. Outside food is brought into the house and eaten at the table. And it appears that the old practices have been given up except for a core, articulated, for example, in the convention that the was out of bounds for servants. These practices are significant if seen in the light of the transformations in the norms that had prevailed in the earlier home, which had served as the model for the new apartment. This new apartment, in a sense, mediates between the notion of the universal urban ‘modern flat’ and the desire to retain the culture of the earlier home so as not to offend the deep sensibilities of the relatives and the community. At the entry is the space for footwear. The steel \textit{almirah} with the valuables of the house is

\textsuperscript{10} Meenakshi Ammal, 1995, III, 63.
located in the master bedroom. Visitors are received in the hall, a space that combines the dining and living room. It is here in the hall that the frequent ceremonies are held.

The New Foods—The Edible-Inedible Classification

The Niyamam contain clear injunctions against some food substances: “Figs, white brinjal, root of the lotus, palmyra fruit, mushrooms, bottle gourd, ridge gourd, sour greens (goskura in Telugu), and also vegetables grown in unclean places.” However, it is not possible to surmise if these prohibitions were made because these foods were ‘new’.

The chart below has been made to develop a picture of what foods came to India and could thus be treated as part of the conceptual category of ‘the new’. It may then be possible to see if any of the food substances listed as ‘foreign’ were part of any list of prohibitions. Except for bottle gourd, none of the others are listed in any injunctions. In the period after 1500, the elder is prohibited from eating all the new vegetables. The elder is however allowed to eat guava and pineapple, both of which are 16th century imports. This may be because these fruits are eaten raw and hence are pure (nature), whereas the vegetables are to be cooked (culture) and hence come in for prohibitions, since they may threaten the purity of the Brahmin. Also the food prohibited in the important ceremonies (shraadh) dates largely from the period after 1500. To quote Meenakshi Ammal: “On Shraadh days, the following items are not used in cooking: green or red chilli, potatoes, tomatoes and other vegetables classified as English vegetables. Only black pepper is used. Additionally the elder would avoid sapota, tomatoes, English vegetables41 (cabbage and cauliflower), coconut (tengayam), beetroot, turnip, potatoes, carrots, and radish.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Fruit common name</th>
<th>Latin Name</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Dated in India</th>
<th>Do elders eat it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Banana</td>
<td>Musa paradisiaca</td>
<td>The various forms of the banana are probably native to South and South East Asia</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Guava</td>
<td>Psidium guajava</td>
<td>Is native to Brazil and possibly the Caribbean region</td>
<td>Possibly 16th Century</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pineapple</td>
<td>Ananas comosus</td>
<td>A native of the new world. The Tulu-Quranis Indians of South America have been credited with its domestication.</td>
<td>16th century</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sapota</td>
<td>Diospyros envis</td>
<td>Native of tropical America</td>
<td>16th century</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jackfruit</td>
<td>Artocarpus heterophyllus</td>
<td>Native of India</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mango</td>
<td>Mangifera indica</td>
<td>Native of India</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Grapes</td>
<td>Vitis vinifera</td>
<td>Asia Minor, 6000 years ago</td>
<td>Ancient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pomegranate</td>
<td>Punica granatum</td>
<td>Native of the Middle East, possibly Iran</td>
<td>Ancient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pear</td>
<td>Pyrus communis</td>
<td>Native of the Middle East</td>
<td>Ancient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 14: The fruits common to South India today, and eaten by the Brahmin.

41 The term ‘English vegetables’ loosely refers to food that appeared in South India over the past three or four centuries and is generally seen as having come during the British Colonial period.
Purity, and the whole system of meanings is what new food substances encounter. The system does not have a direct category into which the new/foreign substance can be allocated, and thus does not immediately label these foods as prohibited. The specific category of the 'food for the elder' is restrictive and thus could prompt elders, where they have influence, from allowing too much change or the incorporation of the new. Like the prohibition applied to the tomatoes, the discussions surrounding this in Dumont\textsuperscript{42} cites the seeds of the tomato as the problem (the Brahmin is not to eat seeds), hence prohibited. But they do eat other vegetables with seeds in them like aubergines.

The prohibitions for the Iyengars do not dwell upon the attributes of the material substances\textsuperscript{43} exclusively but are about avoidances linked to phenomena outside the household that could threaten the purity of the Brahmin. In a sense, it is only possible to observe the rules (\textit{Niyamam}) by controlling the circumstances that generate each food event, in short by cooking and consuming food in the

\textsuperscript{42} “In detail, interpretation is not easy: some say that the Brahmins’ abstinence from tomatoes is due to the presence of seeds, a ‘living’ element, but Brahmins also abstain from onions and garlic.” Dumont, 1970, 141

\textsuperscript{43} “Any piecemeal interpretation of the pollution rules of another culture is bound to fail, for the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought whose key-stone, boundaries, margins, and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation.” Douglas, 1996, 42
innermost reaches of one’s own home. In the Nyamam it is often the events before the Brahmin’s encounter with the food that makes it inedible. However, as outlined above, there are a few prohibitions where specific food substances are mentioned, though without the rationale for their prohibition.

Transformation and Change

Traditionally food for consumption is only to be that cooked in the home. Cooked food is not brought into the house, and eating out is not permitted. Thus, change in tastes and in foodstuffs used in cooking would have been a slow process. It can be speculated that the process of change would be faster if the community acquired a taste for new foods by encountering them routinely outside the home.

These days new foods are often served as items in weddings or festive occasions, when food is eaten outside the home. Also, people traveling to other states or cultures away from home are exposed to different practices. They would thus become an agency introducing change and innovation. Roti and puri⁴⁴ are seen as introductions from the north of India, brought back as preferences in the diets of people lived in those parts for extended periods of time. Thus occasions of consumption of food shifts may be categorized as either normal or everyday or special, ceremonial or festive. While ‘normal’ eating events are relatively flexible and choice of foodstuffs depends upon level of orthodoxy, those for ceremonial events are prescribed and hence are not easily open to change. The afternoon tiffin and the evening meal are slightly less formal, and variations and experiments are made in what is to be eaten by the children.

The presence of new foods at other events would need to have been introduced with a construct⁴⁵, an explanation of either the virtues of the foodstuff like its taste or medical properties, or its relative safety from transgression. Most food substances are considered to have curative-medicinal properties. This draws upon the common understandings of the beneficial effects of specific foods—a sort of grandmother’s wisdom. Much of this may have come from Ayurveda or the Charaka Samhita, and may also contain components from other sources.

Conclusion

Space and the preparation and consumption of food are intrinsically linked. Both are orientated to maintaining and preserving the ‘purity’, the value that defines the Brahmin. Purity thus organizes both spatial and social relationships. The important area of prohibitions related to what may be eaten is seen largely to apply to elder males and not to children and women. In this system, senior men and women acted as repositories of tradition; their duty was to preserve tradition and the ritual superiority of the Brahmin.

The traditional food system of the Iyengars of Tamil Nadu is very complex and has continuously incorporated new elements while retaining a core ritual-related complex. In this view, food is not something to be ‘enjoyed’; it does not lead to social interaction and is thus not a tool or source for conviviality. The activity of ‘eating’ is emphatically not a social activity and the Iyengar community does not have specific occasions devoted to consumption of food. Family members eat sequentially, and this makes it a task to be performed, during which the danger of pollution is to be avoided.

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⁴⁴ Roti is unleavened bread eaten commonly in the north of India. Puri refers to dough that is rolled out flat and then deep fried to make a breadylike dish.

It can be safely concluded that the Portuguese in South India would have never had a meal with a Brahmin, and the food system of the Brahmin, in aspects such as cuisine, commensality and incorporation of the new, would have remained an impenetrable mystery. This can be juxtaposed against the many food items introduced by the Portuguese into the range of Indian cuisine.

Bibliography