

2006

Indian writing on food: A skewed representation of contemporary social reality

Meenakshi Sharma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sharma, Meenakshi, Indian writing on food: A skewed representation of contemporary social reality, *Kunapipi*, 28(2), 2006.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol28/iss2/12>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Indian writing on food: A skewed representation of contemporary social reality

Abstract

Food is a basic requirement for life, and it remains only that for a painfully large proportion of the human population. In India, for more than a quarter billion people food is a matter of sheer survival. Even though the fame of India's riches may have spurred the European race to seek out India from the fifteenth century onwards, its image in the West is predominantly one of a poor country with regular droughts, famines and starving millions. Today neither the picture of amazing riches nor of stark poverty is completely baseless.

MEENAKSHI SHARMA

Indian Writing on Food: A Skewed Representation of Contemporary Social Reality

Food is a basic requirement for life, and it remains only that for a painfully large proportion of the human population. In India, for more than a quarter billion people food is a matter of sheer survival. Even though the fame of India's riches may have spurred the European race to seek out India from the fifteenth century onwards, its image in the West is predominantly one of a poor country with regular droughts, famines and starving millions. Today neither the picture of amazing riches nor of stark poverty is completely baseless. Quite characteristically, this land of extremes and contradictions remains a place where one finds appalling poverty and fabulous riches, starvation or near-starvation and a glut of gourmet food, co-existing. At the same time that the lives of a very large proportion of the population revolve around the search for livelihood and the urgency of putting two square meals before their families, there are others for whom there is a plethora of choices and an almost unsurpassed range of Indian food and international cuisine. These choices have multiplied for certain classes of Indians today through books, travel, careers that involve moving to new places, inter-marriages between people of diverse regional and cultural groups, and the growing availability of a large variety of foods. Through all the consequent interest in new foods and writing about it flows the undercurrent of class. India being a land of contradictions is not just a cliché — while the 30% of the population that live below the poverty line survive on less than the minimum dietary requirements of 2100 calories per day, the affluent classes provide a market gourmet foods and for cookery books, popular columns on food in newspapers and magazines, and TV programmes on cooking that probably rank next only to the most popular category — programmes based on Hindi films and saas/bahu (mother-in-law/daughter-in-law) soap operas. In the context of a very large number of Indians not having the buying capacity, leisure, luxury, or exposure to need or appreciate writing on food, the genre is based on the implicit assumption of a certain class of readership and the associated exclusion of other classes. In the case of writing in English, the language itself serves to set apart certain classes in terms of access. Recipe books and food writing in English newspapers and popular magazines cater to an elite section's appetite for gourmet food and international cuisines. The representation of contemporary Indian society in this writing, however, does not acknowledge that representation as partial and specific.

In glossing over the disparities of class, this writing reveals the disjunction between the affluent, Westward-looking upper classes and the poor. Its partial picture of Indian society effectively hides the other face of India and troubling facts such as, malnutrition being more common in India than in Sub-Saharan Africa, and half of India's children not meeting their basic needs for optimal nutrition (IFPRI report). Mari Marcel Thekaekara describes in *Info Change* how poverty equates to hunger:

In India, of our famous one billion people, 350–400 million are below the poverty line.... In India, poverty is hunger. Real hunger. Never having even three basic meals a day. Poverty is hearing your children cry themselves to sleep because there is no rice and *dal* or a few *chappatis* to give them. (online)

Nor does this situation become drastically different on crossing the magical line: people may be obtaining the basic minimum requirement but only just managing it and living with the hanging sword of uncertainty — the fear that with the smallest change in circumstances, often beyond their control, that situation may change. In a country where there is hardly any concept of social security as enjoyed by developed countries, hunger is — for a very large number of people — a very real fear. Yet, writing on food hardly ever addresses its assumption of class: a class set apart firstly by being above such fears, and then by distinctions based on buying capacity, leisure, luxury, exposure, and education.

In this context such writing takes on immense significance in terms of the implied audience — seeming to be addressed at a generalised and homogenised notion of Indians even though it is clearly beyond the classes who don't frequent the exclusive places the author mentions or who are unfamiliar with the foods described. As for most things in the Indian context, what is true for one section or class may not apply at all to another. Writing on food however, while representing only a very small segment of Indian society, does not directly acknowledge the limitedness of its representation. Additionally, the implicit class basis of this writing makes it a tool for creating new social mores around food by making the capacity to read and appreciate it, as well as to afford and appreciate fine food itself, markers of a privileged social class.

This exposition is supported by the writing of Vir Sanghvi, an eminent food writer for over three decades whose collection of food columns from *The Hindustan Times* has been published (in 2004) under the title *Rude Food* by Penguin. Sanghvi writes in a signature style on what may loosely be termed 'food criticism' for a class of readers who are literate, read English newspapers, aspire to social mobility and to a better quality of life. Reviewers are profuse in their praise for this collection, but perhaps because the writer is so highly regarded, remark on the elitist bias and the implicit snobbery is only occasional and mild. Dileep Padgaonkar in a *Hindustan Times* review says that 'greater heed to our own culinary traditions would enable Vir to deflect the criticism that much of his writing can appeal to the upper crust alone and that the praises he occasionally

sings for desi khana [local food] is a telling example of inverted snobbery' (online). However, he quickly abandons this pertinent note of critique — what he himself calls 'quibbling' — and commends Sanghvi for 'reveal[ing] an India that is rapidly coming of age in the gastronomic area as well' (online). In a similar vein, Sujit Chaudhari notes that the section dealing with 'delicacies like caviar, oysters, truffles, swiss chocolates, foie gras, smoked salmon etc.' concerns 'high society' and 'seem[s] far away from the plates of the hoi polloi' but is quick to sugar-coat the criticism with praise for being 'full of witticism and information' (online). Critics would appear then to be complicit in this classist bias and hardly quibble over it or object to the unqualified generalisations that may be found in his food columns, as for example his comment that, 'the idea [was] to demystify food, to make all the wonderful new dishes that were now available at our restaurants accessible to everybody' (xxiv). There is no qualification about the general 'availability' for 'everybody' or of the problematic 'accessibility' that is simply assumed to be a matter of information.

Bhaichand Patel, an ex-diplomat, reviewing Sanghvi's collection in *Outlook* calls him the best food writer in India: 'No one in India writes on food as well as Vir does. No one else comes even close second' (np). As one of the best-known and respected writers in the genre, Sanghvi's writing is typical of the genre's myopic representation of Indian society. The obvious basis of class underlying such writing and the sweeping generalisations that give a picture that is true only for a specific section of Indian elite classes as a general one, reveal the attitudinal chasm that exists between the classes in India today. Such writing implicitly excludes certain classes not only through its assumption of economic status, but also through its choice of the English language. Even the class that reads writing on food is neither unified nor uniform; there are many sub-classes within the broad class of those that have the means to be interested in food as a source of pleasure rather than as a means of survival. One obvious class distinction is that of readers who are literate and who have the means and leisure to read English newspapers. Further, one might distinguish between those who can afford food for pleasure and adventure and those who can identify with the author by recognising the places (in India and abroad) that he mentions, and can afford to eat at the fancy restaurants he recommends. Another set of readers may be those who read to broaden their minds as armchair gourmets or as aspirants to the good life. Some of these classes overlap and intersect but they are collectively apart from a large section of the Indian population for which this kind of writing would not only be inaccessible but also utterly meaningless. Yet, there is hardly any acknowledgement of the existence of these classes amongst the Indian population that is treated as if it is largely homogeneous — an assumption very hard to sustain with even the briefest acquaintance with India.

Despite sporadically adopting a chatty style peppered with 'you and I' statements, Sanghvi largely deals with people, places and foods that would be far

from most Indian readers' experience. His easy and familiar manner of writing about these subjects establishes his own superior and elite place in the social hierarchy. The majority of readers of *The Hindustan Times* would not be part of the elite class that regularly eats at fancy places, travels abroad, and is familiar with fine dining and gourmet foods. When Sanghvi writes of foods that even most educated Indians would not know how to pronounce, recognise or where to buy, is Sanghvi offering a glimpse of the life of the elite class and the lifestyle of the rich and famous, less for the benefit of those who actually belong to that class than as a window into a possible realm and class that those with ambition can aspire to? By fuelling a desire for new and 'foreign' foods, such writing may be seen to serve as a tool for shaping social aspirations through the 'snob quotient' of certain foods and locales that makes claims on the cultivation of 'good taste', 'style' and discernment. Recipe books and columns on food in popular newspapers and magazines create and fan the desires of the middle classes who, having reached various levels of affluence, might be seen to look to this writing to 'fancy-up' their experience of food through education, travel and wider exposure. Even though none are jet-setters or globe-trotters and few among them stay at five-star hotels or even dine in one, they are as much the readers of such writing as of articles on foreign travel that often include critiques of the food. Even though its tone and content are clearly removed from the experience of its readers, its circulation in the mass print media serves to familiarise and eventually popularise gourmet food to the section of readers who could potentially be its consumers. As one analyst puts it,

one of the core strengths of the Indian middle class is that it has a great aspirational buoyancy. It is a class incorrigibly seeking to get on the fast track to upward mobility ... [for] the middle class ... the waterline of hope somehow always remains a few notches above that of despair. A person who owns a cycle is dreaming about a scooter. Somebody with a fan wants a cooler. Somebody with a small car wants a bigger car.... As people clamour on the lowest rung of the middle class, the possibility of becoming rich overtakes the fear of being inevitably poor. (Varma np)

Middle class readers may read such articles not because they would rush to buy those foods or visit those places, but as one of the ways of expanding their aspirational horizon. Food, for this class, takes the form of a status symbol and cultivating a taste for new cuisines and foreign foods becomes a hobby and an affordable indulgence that speaks of having made it to a certain level of affluence. This fuels both the growth of the food industry and writing concerned with food. In the times of booming consumerism affecting Indian middle classes, food becomes one more arena for exhibitionism fuelled by the desire to match or exceed the next person's acquisitions. Here, rather than quantity, 'stylistation' and exclusivity function as markers of status. Reading about top-rung eating places, new fads in food and the food preferences of celebrities becomes an easy way to pick up information that helps in 'fitting in' with the status that one aspires

to or has newly acquired. The newspaper format is especially appropriate for such readers and that may explain the genre's success. While newspapers provide access to such information incidentally, and in passing, the reader/buyer of a book on the subject would need to be driven by more than a passing curiosity. In fact, Sanghvi, in his introduction to the volume, admits his apprehensions about a collection of articles of this sort: 'People may be willing to read a food column in a newspaper or a magazine. But would they actually pay good money to buy a book of columns?' (xxx). There is thus, a further division in the reader-base of the two formats. There are other distinctions at work too. The author seems to be aware that his readers will not include even some of those who do frequent five-star restaurants and host large hotel parties when he mentions that many among them 'can't tell the difference between good and mediocre food' (151). When he writes disparagingly of the moneyed class with no taste, he is clearly not visualising this class as the readers despite their ability to afford the best food at the most exclusive places. In a piece on rude waiters, he writes that waiters are increasingly less likely to be rude to guests because 'five-star hotels make their money from black marketeers and corrupt politicians' and because 'yokels' who chew with their mouths open and 'bumpkins' who belch in contentment, spend more money than anyone else (189). While at one point he refers to celebrities knowing nothing about food (194), at another he bemoans that 'luxury is a concept that fewer and fewer Indians seem to have time for — though people are much richer today than they used to be' (130). There is a distinction between 'classy' and 'moneyed' and it seems that although the possession of money is presupposed in the intended reader, so is sophistication, etiquette and style. While sarcastic distinctions among the moneyed class are made in this vein, the teeming India outside of the posh areas and five-star hotels/resorts hardly registers on the radar of this writing.

Even on the rare occasions when this writing makes a reference to social classes, it is in very broad terms: as between 'serious foodies and gourmets' who can afford to spend upwards of £70 a kilo on smoked salmon and 'the rest of us' who can only buy from the Oberoi (a chain of five-star hotels) (72). Similarly, when Sanghvi advises readers to steer clear of 'outrageously priced crap' (65), he makes a passing reference to economic class in terms of the subtle differences in chocolates and wines being 'of little use to us (and of less use to our wallets)' (65). The problem again is that there is no clarity about which class of readers Sanghvi affiliates himself with. Readers would probably remember that in his other pieces he writes of places, people, and things quite out of their reach, so the unqualified 'us' is as problematic as the condescension that he more characteristically practices. Even when Sanghvi seems to be self-deprecating, his snobbery is apparent: hardly any of his readers would be able to recognise the names or relate to the experience of the author and his 'gastronomically illiterate peers at Oxford' who 'when the young Raymond Blanc opened Les Quatre Saisons in Summertown ... went there

and pronounced the food “not in the same league as Elizabeth, just fancified Frog rubbish” (140).

The rare occasions when the writer mentions prices and availability or affordability seem to be a conscious effort to deflect the charge of elitism. However, even these references are only in relative terms. In one of the few instances where he actually mentions prices, he writes of the buffet lunch at the Taj (a super-luxury hotel in Bombay) as costing around Rs.12 per head but then he is quick to place this in perspective with prices of his childhood days when ‘rooms cost Rs.100 to 150’. His class bearings become quite clear when he mentions that ‘even kids given pocket money for a special treat could afford it’ (159). The only set of readers who could possibly identify with this would be those whose children receive 1/5th the cost of a room at a five-star hotel as pocket money. In a piece on the risotto Sangvhi provides a recipe where he seems to recollect that there are some distinctions in Indian society and mentions that the Italian rice brands and vegetable stock cubes he recommends are available only in ‘fancy markets’ (251). In the same piece he actually hesitates to recommend truffle oil because it is ‘hardly a staple at most markets’ (252). However, this is only in terms of availability and not affordability; hence the advice: ‘but if you can get it — go for it!’ (252). At certain times the intended reader is a little easier to visualise: as in the piece on truffles, the advice is for the ‘loads of Indians who go to London and bring back £25-bottles of malt whisky’ (61). That money to travel abroad and splurge on expensive items is not enough for the writer is evident in the edifying tone of the advice for such people: ‘Any fool can drink whisky anywhere. Why not try and broaden your horizons with something more adventurous, the next time you travel’ (61). When for this class of Indians, the writer suggests the ‘cheaper’ alternative of buying fresh truffle and shaving it over various foods, or of going to ‘Perigord or Alba, if not ... [to] Paris’ (60), one realises that it can only be a relative cheapness. The writing seems to hang in some sort of vacuum untouched by social and economic realities.

The genre, while glossing its obvious basis in class, provides a clear commentary on class difference, and functions as a shaping force for class distinction. Such writing brings out very clearly the attitudinal distance between the classes within Indian society; the very absence of any class awareness here being a marker of this disjunction. This is not to say that writers such as Sanghvi are writing of something that does not exist. There is definitely a boom in prosperity for certain classes of Indian society as evidenced by the shining new shopping malls and multiplexes, clothing and jewellery stores with designer labels, foreign cars, impressive houses. In an article in *Outlook* it is claimed that ‘eating out is urban India’s most overpowering collective passion. There are more than 22,000 registered restaurants in India today; and the food service sector in the country is worth a whopping Rs 30,000 crores [nearly £8 billion]’ (*Bharat* 48). Yet a sampling of the genre in which writers such as Sanghvi have made

formidable reputations, not only does one find no acknowledgement of how small this segment of Indian life and population is, there is no qualification of the general term ‘Indians’ in terms of class.

In his essay on the ‘beautiful future’ of poverty Ashis Nandy offers some psychological insight into such relegation of poverty to a *passé* issue:

Everyone knows what the problem is, and determined scrutiny only embarrasses one and disturbs normal life. The three richest persons in the world have wealth, the UN Human Development Report of 1998 tells us, that exceeds the combined gross domestic product of the 48 least developed countries. One of them is Indian and instead of grimly talking of poverty all the while, many Indians have diffidently begun to celebrate such national achievements [and to] ... spend enormous psychological resources [to ensure that the disturbing facts] do not interfere with our ‘normal’ life by burdening us with a crippling sense of guilt. (95)

It is such a disjunction that allows Sanghvi to write about dal and rice as ‘therapy’ — which he illustrates by narrating how he once ordered this ‘simple food’ as the Michelin-starred staff at Tamarind watched incredulously (116). It should be kept in mind here that this is staple food for millions of Indians and would be manna from heaven for the many other millions of poor and struggling lower-income and below-the-poverty-line-Indians — but then one would hardly suspect the existence of these other classes of Indians through reading Indian food writing. Perhaps the genre presupposes the exclusion so well that there are no qualms about proceeding with blindness to the existence of this other face of India and Indians. It is not even considered necessary to qualify sweeping remarks about ‘we Indians,’ ‘most Indians,’ ‘most of us’. Even in a place where the writer is apparently trying to place himself at the level of the readers the disjunction is quite clear: he answers the question whether you should make a Caesar Salad ‘the way that Cardini used to’ with his opinion that while restaurants must do so, ‘for the rest of us’ it doesn’t matter because if you want to mix leftover boiled potatoes and other ingredients ‘it is entirely your own business, not Jacques Medecin’s’ (281). The pertinent question that the author sweeps aside is whether ‘the rest of us’ would recognise these names he assumes are known to all his readers.

In a piece titled, ‘Seeing Through Bottled Water’, Sanghvi writes: ‘We Indians ... treat anything that comes out of a tap with suspicion’ and further in the context of expensive bottled water he poses the question ‘why does water have to be so expensive?’ answering it with the superbly sweeping reply: ‘It doesn’t. We are just willing to pay those prices’ (208). Again, one wonders who this ‘we’ is. A cursory glance at Indian data on availability of water to Indians brings up such statistics of inequities:

13% of Delhi’s citizens do not get water supply every day; 40% of households in Madhya Pradesh are not supplied even 40 litres per person per day ... by 2015, 244 million people in rural India and 90 million in urban India will still not have access to safe, sustainable water supply ... an average room in a five-star hotel in Delhi consumes 1,600 litres of water every day. VIP residences consume over 30,000 litres

per day. But 78% of Delhi's citizens, who live in sub-standard settlements, struggle to collect or buy 30-90 litres per capita per day ... daily wage-earners pay up to 20% of their wages on water; slum-dwellers pay Rs 5 per can of water; others tap into water lines illegally, or pay the local mafia for the supply. (D'Monte online)

Rather than being suspicious of what comes out of a tap, most Indians — both rural and urban — would love to have running water available through a tap, and 'most Indians' are not able to afford bottled water on a regular basis. According to Central Public Health Engineering Organisation (CPHEEO) estimates, as on 31st March 2000, 88% of the urban population had access to a potable water supply; but this by no means implies that people actually get the water, because the supply is highly erratic and unreliable. Water is typically only available for between two and eight hours each day in most Indian cities. The situation is even worse in summer when water may be available only for a few minutes, sometimes not at all. A news report of 7th March, 2006 in *The Hindustan Times* is headed 'Taps Still Dry in South Delhi'. According to another source approximately 13% of Delhi households do not receive water every day and in places in Gujarat water availability goes down to thirty minutes every alternate day ('Politics' online). A World Bank study of 2001 of 27 Asian cities puts Delhi and Chennai as the worst in terms of hours of water availability, with Mumbai and Calcutta at second and fourth position respectively. So much for the so-called Indian 'fondness' for bottled water. In similar vein, in another essay Sanghvi bemoans the lack of any diet with an Indian name. He goes on to make a gross generalisation that 'most Indian women seem to be on diets of some description' (213). The statement has no qualification in terms of class or status and completely ignores the fact that 'most Indian women' are poor and malnourished and have no concept of dieting.

It is not that poverty is only a rural phenomenon. The Urban Development Minister is quoted on a Government of India website as saying in a speech on 19th January, 2006 that sixty-seven million urban people live below the poverty line. This large population does not live in some sort of self-contained, insulated world apart from the more affluent classes of the urban populace. It is these people who work in homes as servants, who hawk vegetables, who segregate garbage, who live and die on the city streets. Yet from the kind of writing in which Sanghvi engages, no sense of this other life of India and Indians can be obtained. In some wilful insulation from the world all around him, Sanghvi's view of Indian society is limited to the world he lives in. In his upper class residential area of Delhi, his *sabziwallah* (greengrocer) 'has all kinds of fresh vegetables flown in from Thailand' which logically leads him to the unqualified statement about 'Indian *sabziwallahs* who fly in asparagus from Holland and fresh fruit from Bangkok' but stubbornly refuse to order fresh mushrooms from the East or the West (250).

What is the value of this pose that 'forgets' how a very large number of Indians live? Is it mere snobbery that the potatoes in the markets are described as 'useless' and if one cannot follow his example and buy ones's potatoes on ones's

overseas trips then the only way to make them ‘edible’ is to follow his rich recipe for mashed potatoes (301)? How might this wilful ignorance of the existence of classes of Indians other than those who can identify with, or at the least be impressed by, someone who can write in a land where many would die without access to food of any kind, be understood? In a moment of candour and brief self-analysis, Sanghvi comments in his introduction on the early pieces of his writing that reflected the missionary zeal of ‘demystifying the whole business of fancy food and fine wine’ but that he came to realize that

the column had moved away from its original intent. I hoped that the pieces would deal with foie gras, caviar and truffles without seeming pretentious, but it was clear that I had wandered far from my original brief: how many of my readers actually shaved truffles over their pasta and how many needed to know the difference between beluga and servuga? (xxviii)

The possible explanation of why, despite this admission, he shows scant concern for whether the writing appears pretentious is that the columns were often written without much time or research and ‘almost all of them came off the top of [his] head’ (xxix). But this take-it-or-leave-it attitude reveals another disjunction between the writer who questions how many of his readers will be able to relate to the foods he writes about, and the writer who does not care to modify his subjects or style. A justification for the matter and tone of such writing seems to be its role as an educator about high-end elite food products for those who are interested in such things, whether they can actually afford them or only aspire to them. Despite hardly ever acknowledging its basis in class, it reinforces the idea of the eating experience as a marker of affluence and privilege and as an elite affair that those not in the circle can still find fascinating.

As this critique of a particular volume of contemporary Indian food writing indicates, the genre ignores the heterogeneity of Indian society as well as its own exclusivity and addresses itself to an unexamined, unqualified notion of Indianness. Since this is an influential food writer and a trend-setter of reputation and influence, the volume is exemplar of this kind of writing and speaks of a cultural divide between the moneyed, privileged classes in contemporary Indian society, the middle classes who enjoy varying degrees of affluence and comfort, and those millions who struggle for the basic requirements for life. In his column in *The Hindu* Shashi Tharoor refers to the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) surveys of 1986 and 1994 that found that

India’s consumers could be divided into five classes, not three: the very rich, of six million people (or one million households), the ‘consuming class’ of some 150 million (half the conventional estimate), the ‘climbers’ (a lower middle class of 275 million), the ‘aspirants’ (another 275 million who in America or Europe would be classified as ‘poor’), and finally the destitute (210 million). Of course the numbers have gone up by another 100 million or so in the decade since the survey was conducted, but the relative balance amongst these five classes, despite some progress in all of them, is unlikely to have changed dramatically. Cumulatively, the NCAER survey concluded, India has a

‘consuming population’ of 168 million to 504 million people. But what they consume, and how much they can afford to pay for it, is another matter altogether. (Tharoor np)

These distinctions seem to be simply wished away and left out of the definition of ‘all of us’ and ‘most of us.’ It is not seen as necessary to qualify sweeping statements on Indian cultural life, and the consequent treatment of a highly heterogeneous society in a simple and generalised manner shows a troubling disjunction between the small elite class and all the other classes. Rajesh Kochhar, writing in the respected *Economic and Political Weekly*, asserts that the Indian middle class has divested itself of any sense of noblesse oblige and, declaring autonomy, has adopted a lifestyle that mimics the one in economically advanced countries. The emergence of this denationalised middle class that sets its standards in the West is linked by Kochhar to ‘mandalisation’ (caste-based access to education and employment) and globalisation. He argues that the Indian middle class has decoupled from mainstream India. However, he treats the class as an upper-caste dominated one, neither distinguishing between the many levels that make up the middle class nor taking into account the change from caste-basis to that of money, power and influence. Although the aspirations of upward mobility mark the entire middle class, his remarks about seeking legitimacy as well as standards from the West, apply more precisely to what is a sub-class — the upper-middle class, constituted of the business and professional people who seek to model themselves on the Indian class above them, that is, the upper class comprising the very rich, the celebrities and the movers and shakers, and the Westernised lifestyle that this class seems to offer as the universal standard of the ‘good life’. Such modelling speaks for the commanding position of the new social mores and the social aspirations of a society in the middle of a new prosperity and a shaking up of traditional classes. The opening up of the Indian economy and the impact of Westernisation through globalisation of trade and commerce, as much as of culture, underlie the curious phenomenon that upper classes of India can feel more in common with a global culture of affluence, than with the millions of Indians not in the same class as them. It is not as if writing on food is the only place where this disjunction is apparent — a similar disjunction is obvious in writing on fashion, travel, and the ‘good’ life in general; but in food writing it becomes more apparent and more troubling because food, unlike the other obvious markers of status and class, is not primarily a luxury item but a necessity of life. It speaks to, and of, an upper class that lives in a self-contained and insulated world of money and privilege, and to other upwardly mobile classes that look up to it, all the while turning a blind eye to their fellow compatriots who do not conform to their standards.

WORKS CITED

‘Bharat, Ek Bhoj’ 2001, *Outlook*, Nov 19, Special Issue on India’s Best Restaurants, p. 48.

- Chaudhari, Sujit 2004, Review of *Rude Food* by Vir Sanghvi, *Deccan Herald*, online, <http://www.deccanherald.com/Archives/aug222004/br2.asp>, accessed, November 12, 2007.
- D'Monte, Darryl 2005, '2015: 334 Million Indians Will Still Lack Access to Safe Water Supply', online, http://www.infochangeindia.org/agenda3_03.jsp, accessed November, 24, 2007.
- IFPRI Report. 'Despite Efforts Why Does Child Malnutrition Persist in India?' <http://www.ifpri.org/media/BeijingPlus10/briefIndia.pdf>, accessed November 6, 2007.
- Nandy, Ashis 2004, 'The Beautiful, Expanding Future of Poverty: Popular Economics as a Psychological Defence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 3, pp. 94–99.
- Padgaonkar, Dileep 2007, 'A Dash of Gusto, A Pinch of Scepticism', Review of *Rude Food* by Vir Sanghvi, *Hindustan Times*, online, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print.aspx?Id=5cf3df65-6325-447e-b051-fe63a5e1fcd4> accessed, November 12, 2007.
- Patel, Bhaichand 2004, 'Vir ... Nom De Epicure', Rev. of *Rude Food*, *Outlook*, June 21, <http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20040621&fname=Booksa&sid=1>, accessed, November 12, 2007.
- Sanghvi, Vir 2004, *Rude Food: The Collected Food Writings of Vir Sanghvi*, Penguin, New Delhi.
- Tharoor, Shashi 2005, 'Who Is This Middle Class?', *The Hindu*, May 22, online, <http://www.shashitharoor.com/articles/hindu/middleclass.php>, accessed, November 6, 2007.
- Thekaekara, Mari Marcel, 'Background and Perspective', *Info Change*, online, <http://www.infochangeindia.org/PovertyIbp.jsp#h3>, accessed November 6, 2007.
- Urban Water Scenario online, <http://www.rainwaterharvesting.org/Crisis/Urbanwater-scenario.htm>, accessed November 6, 2007.
- Varma, Pavan 2006, 'The Middle Class: Harmonious Schizophrenics', online, http://www.tehelka.com/story_main16.asp?filename=In021106Harmonious_Schizophrenics_p25.asp, accessed November 6, 2007.

Recipes for a Typical Single Course North-Indian Meal

This is the everyday food that 'classy' food writing does not deal with — the kind of 'simple food' Sanghvi mentions eating occasionally as 'therapy'. Yet, it is the staple food of a large section of the population, and the dream food of those who live in the hope of getting any food at all, and for whom this would be a feast.

Dal

INGREDIENTS

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup red lentils or split peas
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp turmeric powder
salt to taste
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cumin seeds
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp garam masala
green coriander leaves

METHOD

1. Wash and soak lentils in 3 cups water.
2. Add salt and turmeric powder.
3. Bring to a boil and cook on slow heat for 20 mins, stirring occasionally.
4. Take off heat when lentils are done and the water has been reduced by about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup.
5. Take butter or ghee (clarified butter) in a large ladle, heat on high, take off fire, add $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cumin seeds and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp garam masala, plunge this very hot ladle into the cooked lentils.
6. Sprinkle chopped coriander leaves.

Raita

INGREDIENTS

1 tub plain yoghurt
1 cucumber
1 small onion
2 tsp cumin seeds
paprika powder
salt to taste

METHOD

1. Grate or finely chop cucumber.
2. Finely chop onion.
3. Dry roast 2 tsp cumin seeds and grind coarsely.
4. Add all the above, salt and paprika to lightly whisked yoghurt.
Chill before serving.

Stuffed Eggplant

INGREDIENTS

6 thin, long eggplants
2 onions
10 cloves garlic
2 inches ginger
3 tbsp fennel seeds
3 tbsp coriander seeds
1 tsp chilli powder
2 tbsp mango powder
salt to taste
vegetable oil (preferably mustard or sunflower oil)

METHOD

1. Finely chop onions.
2. Make paste of ginger and garlic.
3. Dry roast fennel and coriander seeds, grind coarsely.
4. Mix all the above along with the chilli powder, mango powder, salt and 2 tbsp oil.
5. Wash and cut off the heads of the eggplant. Slit open along the middle. Stuff the mixture into the slits.
6. Heat 3tbsp oil in a shallow pan. Lay the stuffed eggplants in the hot oil. Cover and cook on a low flame for 5 mins.
7. Turn the eggplants around by fully lifting them and replacing them in different positions so they cooked on all sides, taking care the slit side does not face completely down to avoid spilling the stuffing.
8. Uncover after another 5 mins and cook on low flame till the skins become golden and translucent on all sides.
9. Arrange on a serving dish and sprinkle chopped coriander leaves.

Serve dahl, raita and eggplant together. Roast papads and pickles will go really well with this meal.