

A Privilege for All Times

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Friends, I understand that we are privileged to have special food on our plates. But let's be sensitive with food politics happening around us. There are thousands of people just near our homes without food... This is not the time to share your culinary skills or your talent in food photography. For now our battle is with hunger and food insecurity.

I am no stranger to thinking about privilege. Yet this Facebook post by an activist friend made me uncomfortable. My timeline was flooded with news about India's laborers starving in the face of the crisis-imposed lockdown. Right above it was my own story: a carefully composed photograph of mushroom and peas quesadillas, Spanish rice, and guacamole I had whipped up in my kitchen the previous night. I had Facebook friends who were indeed daily-wage laborers in Chennai, struggling to access food in the crisis. One of them had "loved" my story. I was a terrible person, wasn't I?

I am also human and, therefore, reliably came up with a clutch of persuasive defenses. Here I was, living alone, with my loved ones eight thousand miles away, and having no idea when I was going to see them next. Last summer, when the New Jersey quasi-college town I live in had emptied out as usual, I got by on a cocktail of coffee, chocolate ice cream, and Advil while pounding out my dissertation. Just as I passed out most nights with a splitting headache, I wondered how long it would be before anyone discovered me, if I didn't wake up the next morning. In these times of enforced isolation, just as then, I long for a witness to my alienation, my strange life in this little apartment in this faraway, always strange land. Also, a housing rights activist couldn't be a monster, surely? I work with an organization mobilizing for tenure security for poor residents in Chennai. As part of this organization, I help set up and run childcare centers that feed and care for kids in neglected neighborhoods. On the very same Facebook timeline, I was raising funds to provide food relief for workers in the ongoing crisis. I do my bit; surely I was allowed some indulgent, social media-approved behavior in these unusual times?

Posting pictures of food on social media is not a big deal in and of itself. Most everyone is cooking and thinking about food so much more than usual. But the work of reckoning with privilege (visible in food and food choices) cannot be flipped on and off, because privilege itself isn't turned on and off. I have always had a life that clearly separates the "here" from the "there." In a research context, the "here" is the university space in the United States, where I contemplated on the "there," my field site (Geertz 1988) in my hometown. I am the only one with access to the here, with its associated first-world problems (#loneliness cushioned by a full refrigerator); my research subjects, including the Facebook friend who loved my food story, can only inhabit the there, always curious about whether I cook sambar and poriyal in America.¹ Who was I kidding, even in Chennai, I always have a here to retreat to after an emotionally exhausting day in the there, an air-conditioned bubble in which I quash my privilege guilt with pizza. I even carry my here into the there, in Tupperware containers of thair saadham (rice and yogurt), described euphemistically as "safe," "cooling" food in Chennai's heat, but in truth a dead giveaway of Brahminness. Upon eventually deducing my caste—from said lunchbox, among other markers—Rajathi ayah, a wise old lady, pointed to the quotidian practices of untouchability that thrive in the contemporary city:

iyerunga nalla pesuvaanga, pazhaguvaanga. aana namma veetla oru vaaya saapida maatanga.

(THE BRAHMINS SOCIALIZE WITH US WELL ENOUGH. BUT THEY NEVER EAT A MOUTHFUL IN OUR HOUSE.)


I eat in the there often enough, brinji (vegetable rice spiced with bay leaf), sambar saadham (rice and sambar), countless cups of tea, dizzying numbers of Milk Bikis (a popular Indian biscuit). Even then, I betray my here, in my refusal of meen kuzhambu (fish stew) and mutton biryani.²

The there however, rarely breaks through the bastions of the here. As my working-class colleagues made plans to visit a bedridden me after a road accident, I was besieged by anxiety of them finally seeing me in my here, unobscured by how

I presented myself in the there: in my parents' spacious apartment in agraaharam³ Mylapore, sipping the cliched filter coffee. As someone who invited herself to others' homes to write about how they lived, even if as a "colleague" or "ally," the irony was not lost on me.

Dalit intellectuals such as Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2019) and Suraj Yengde (2020) point out that if Brahmin academics wanted to study inequality, they would do well to examine their own households and practices rather than the Dalit home; to expose caste as a system of privileges enjoyed by some, consolidated by the necessary marginalization of others. Perhaps my Facebook stories—of egg sweet potato casserole, asparagus roasted with lemon, and glasses of sparkling rose—are an opportunity to turn a critical lens on myself, to invite an audience to the abundant privileges that are inextricable from my structural position. Class and caste dynamics have long since mediated in food citizenship and access to nutrition (Thorat and Lee 2005). Food choices render one vulnerable to lynching in today's India, even in "non-crisis" situations. My colleagues remind me that food relief during the COVID-19 crisis, then, is not just a benevolent act of charity by the privileged, but an opportunity to ensure the right to food security for all, to redistribute resources, and to rethink our structures.

And as scholars of autoethnography note, the self is a social phenomenon, and writing about the self is a way to examine the worlds we create and inhabit (Sparkes 2002). I inhabit and am complicit in a world of great structural inequality, a world that won't stop giving to or protecting those at the apex of the

pyramid, people like me, no matter what we choose to eat. Given my comforts (evident in endless access to all kinds of food), there's no excuse for being unable to find a voice that can be honest and critical about them. 

NOTES

1. Sambar is a thick, spicy lentil gravy with tamarind and vegetables, and poriyal is vegetables sautéed with spices.
2. As I am usually quick to clarify, I was not raised vegetarian. I gave up eating meat after writing and delivering an impassioned speech against cruelty to animals at the age of eight. I have not revisited my decision in the time since, nor considered the politics of being vegetarian in India today. My dietary choice has not necessitated any change in cooking practices in my household, nor in my cultural practices at large. It is also validated by my being a Brahmin, a traditionally vegetarian-eating caste group.
3. Largely-Brahmin settlement.

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