

# Capitalism on a Plate

## The Politics of Meat Eating in Bangalore, India

ON JANUARY 31, 1996, a major riot shook the city of Bangalore, India. It was sparked by a rumor that the vegetarian salads at Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) were prepared using pork fat. Others charged that the riot was a response to what many considered the brutal invasion of American culture. At any rate, KFC had to close down its first outlet in Bangalore and has returned only recently, now accompanied by such other American-style fast-food chains as Pizza Hut, Stars and Stripes, and us Pizza.

In this article I intend to explain why the opening of KFC was met with such strong resistance in 1996, while the recent massive arrival of American fast-food chains (KFC being only one of them) does not seem to bother the people of Bangalore. To get some answers to this question, I stayed in the city of Bangalore for two months, during February and March 2002. I walked its streets, frequented its shops, dined in its restaurants, and—mostly over lunch or dinner—talked to its people. I held thirty long conversations with individuals or groups ranging from housewives to chefs, yoga teachers to information technology (IT) specialists. They all told me different stories about food. With a local assistant, I chose people I hoped would be helpful in constructing manifold stories of food in the city of Bangalore. These stories did not inform me about the particular cuisine of this part of India; rather, they allowed the city to unfold in its social, political, and cultural dimensions, revealing in miniature what Bangalorean urbanism is all about. In the end, the stories, together with my personal experiences and the literature I consulted, provide some insight into why the 1996 KFC riot is unlikely to be repeated today.

Not too long ago, the city of Bangalore was known as an ideal city for retirees. It has many parks; it's spacious; and because it is situated on a plateau, the city, by Indian standards, is relatively cool: the temperature hovers around 25 degrees Celsius (77 degrees Fahrenheit) throughout the year. Bangalore was dependent on the larger neighboring city of Mysore, from which the sultan, frequently in collaboration with the British, ruled India. But with the sultan's loss of

influence and the increasing importance of the national government, Bangalore slowly became more powerful. When the British left India, Bangalore was chosen to be the capital of the newly enlarged province of Karnataka (Mysore was avoided because of its royal past), and it was then that the city began to flourish. Nevertheless, ten years ago Bangalore was still a midsize city, especially compared with the megacities of India. It was a regional center with about six hundred thousand inhabitants.

### The Power of the Caste System

Although the sultan lost his power over the city, a far greater power still regulated the people's lives closely, a power that had ruled not only the city of Bangalore but the larger part of the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. This was the caste system. Arising from a need for practical organization of the village economy through the division of labor, the caste system structured and segmented Indian society in a myriad of ways. It began with economic arrangements but quickly moved into other sociocultural realms, such as language, religion, education, love, and, notably, food.

There was surely no equality among the different castes; there never has been. For most of Indian history, the Brahmins (together with the Baniya) have been the dominant caste, regarding the other castes as their subordinates. As Kancha Ilaiah argues, the Brahmins defined what it means to be "the Hindu."<sup>1</sup> They had the power to overrule the customs and habits of the non-Brahmins and (implicitly) tried to subject them to their rule. Ilaiah tries to clarify this idea in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, his impressive volume on the contemporary caste politics of India, in which he argues that the lower castes or *sudra*, such as the Dalitbahujans (with whom he identifies), should not be considered Hindu. Rather, they should be seen as constituting completely different social groupings, which have been exploited and suppressed by the dominant Hindu (Brahmin/Baniya) powers.



Above: Brigade Road, downtown Bangalore, with KFC on the left.

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Interestingly enough, it was only under British rule and as a consequence of the British administrative system that caste distinctions became so well defined. The formerly fluctuating laws that arose out of daily practice were turned into rigid proscriptions. With the growing bureaucratic rule of the British Empire came its efforts to “rank and grade Indian social orders.”<sup>2</sup> Hierarchy had always existed, but now it was no longer loosely defined and administered.

British colonialism along with the strongly established hereditary customs of the caste system turned the latter into a sort of Moloch of social organization in which almost every daily action was in some way organized by the caste system. The caste system dictated everything, from how a mother should raise her children to how changes in the weather and in the seasons should be explained. Even the networks of village roads were incorporated into the caste system and thus contributed to its dynamics. (The roads of a particular village were often so strongly defined as part of the identity of a particular caste that members of other castes were forbidden to use them.) The caste system led to a society defined by strictly segmented social spaces in which the different groups lived as much as possible in isolation from one another.

Nevertheless, with the Brahmins dominating society, especially in respect to food, their rules were pervasive, as the 1996 riots in Bangalore demonstrate. Although we might

not directly link the resistance to the coming of KFC to caste politics, the riots in fact reflected Brahmin ideals. Conservatives and leftists throughout the world generally decry (for very different reasons) the infiltration of American fast-food chains. But in India, in addition to the usual right/left political divide, something else was going on: the Brahmin—vegetarian—community takes serious issue with American fast-food chains because their menus are predominantly nonvegetarian.

I hasten to add that Brahmin vegetarianism—in contrast to their supremacy—is a rather elastic concept. If we study Brahmin communities throughout India, we see that vegetarianism is subject to various interpretations. In communities living close to the sea (especially the Bengal and Kerala Brahmins), fish is often part of the menu, defined as the “gourd of the sea.” By contrast, in Kashmir—the disputed region between India and Pakistan—Brahmins predominantly abstain only from pork and beef; chicken and mutton are considered largely acceptable.

But in the city of Bangalore, as in most parts of India, the consumption of meat, fish, or any animal product—or even dishes containing animal products (such as cakes that use eggs or cookies that contain animal fat) is forbidden to





Brahmins.<sup>3</sup> This proscription helps us understand the strong resistance to the arrival of KFC, an American fast-food company that not only sells dead chicken by the bucket but also—as rumor had it—uses pork fat in its “vegetarian” salad. How appalled the true Brahmins must have been!

## The Good and the Bad

The Brahmins are predominantly vegetarian as a result of their exclusion from heavy physical labor. This caste consisted mainly of priests and village administrators (a combination common in many agrarian/sedentary societies), who largely limited their menu to what is called *saatvik* food. *Saatvik* refers to food that is natural and “good for the soul,” that is, food without “warm” elements like meat (known as *rajasik* food) and “poisonous” elements like garlic and alcohol (called *tamasik* food). Castes involved in heavy physical labor developed menus that included many more warm (*rajasik*) elements, including meat. The dietary regulations are very clear: If you perform *rajasik* actions such as heavy physical labor you should eat *rajasik* food (i.e., you should eat meat).

Of course, the fact that a small segment of society—the Brahmin caste—sticks to a vegetarian menu while the other segments of society prefer to eat meat is not in itself problematic. The problem arises, as always, when this dominant caste imposes its dietary preferences upon the other members of society. Because Brahmin rules and regulations occupy the highest position in the hierarchy, they have assumed a kind of universality in respect to concepts of Good and Bad. They have acquired moral weight, according to which the Brahmins judge not only their own actions but also the actions of other castes. It is interesting to note that an alimentary morality arising from caste rules can already be found in the ancient *Bhagavad Gita*, the famous Hindu religious text, which Ilaiah identifies as a thoroughly Brahmin work, since the lower castes were never allowed even to read it.<sup>4</sup> Here we can already find a strong moral (and political) dimension to food regulations. Tasty, rich, and substantial foods (*saatvik*) are said to be loved by the man of goodness, while pungent, sour, salty, very hot, sharp, astringent, and heated foods (*rajasik*) are loved by the man of passion. These latter foods cause pain, misery, and sickness. Spoiled, tasteless, putrid, and stale foods, as well as leavings and filth (*tamasik*), are, for their part, loved by the man of darkness.<sup>5</sup>

Based on Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, it is possible to make a connection between India’s

caste-based society and Europe’s Christian society.<sup>6</sup> Within Christianity, Nietzsche argues, the priests/administrators were the ones to define Good and Bad (or Evil, as he conceptualizes it).<sup>7</sup> Since they construed their actions as Good, they were able to place themselves at the center of society; others were judged and assigned positions accordingly. If the laity followed the priests, their actions were considered Good; but if they devoted their time to other matters, their actions were seen as Bad. In India’s caste-based society, similar processes are at work with respect to defining what is good to eat. Just as Christian priests defined Good, so the Brahmin caste defined its own *saatvik* (vegetarian) diet as the only Good one and considered the *rajasik* and *tamasik* menus Bad. *Saatvik* food stands at the center of society, while *rajasik* and *tamasik* foods are banished to the margins. Or, to translate this tripartite division into the essentialist opposition it turned out to be, the vegetarian menu is placed at the center of society while the nonvegetarian menu is banished to its periphery.

This opposition between the center and its margins can be taken literally. Looking at earlier Christian ideas on urbanism, it is fairly obvious that the Catholic Church stood in the center of the village, with the houses of laymen situated in relation to it. India’s caste-based society practices a similar ideology. In terms of food, we see that the strict opposition between the vegetarian and the nonvegetarian menus has always shaped the spaces of a city like Bangalore according to moral norms. Even at the end of the twentieth century it was difficult to find a single restaurant in Bangalore’s city center that served meat. This situation was not because only Brahmins lived in the center. But they very much gave form to the city (the center and its outskirts) by organizing it according to their moral standards. Thus the Brahmin alimentary rules and regulations caused the city center to remain vegetarian.

Only on the outskirts of the city, within specific groups who questioned the caste system, did the public selling and consumption of nonvegetarian meals (i.e., meat) take place. First of all, Muslims sold chicken biryani and kebabs in the back streets. Bangalore’s relatively large Muslim population has lived within the caste-based society for more than a thousand years and has by and large attained a position of respect. (In contrast to frequent news reports, outbursts of religious violence do not dominate interreligious relations in this society, especially not in Bangalore. The relations between Hindus and Muslims are perhaps best described as mutual tolerance).

Next, and in contrast to the Muslims, the outskirts of Bangalore are home to another nonvegetarian minority group, which lives in a much more difficult situation: the

**Left:** Anglo-Indian woman looking at her nonvegetarian meal.

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Anglo-Indians. Because this group falls outside of the caste system it does not accept the alimentary moral code that the Brahmins have implicitly imposed. And, much more so than the Muslim population, the Anglo-Indians position themselves very much against the Brahmins and their ideas of what is Good and Bad. It is mainly through their eating habits that Anglo-Indians resist Brahmin moral dominance. They practice a “countersignifying semiotic,” as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call it,<sup>8</sup> engaging in a semiology of destruction and abolition that is most of all defined by its nonvegetarianism, its not being *saatvik*. One elderly Anglo-Indian articulated this position very clearly: “If you had dhal with rice, side dishes were always there: cutlets, roast, sausages, beef. And then we came down to eating curry and rice. But our dinner was never like that. It was bread and butter and sausages.... So, at night we eat fried liver, liver steaks, cutlets. All these things we eat. But the rice was also there at night—we still maintain that, we are still Anglo-Indians. And I shouldn’t say that we think like the British.... We think like the people abroad. We like that type of living.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1996, near the end of the last millennium, the caste system, with the Brahmins on top, still controlled the city of Bangalore. The Brahmins controlled not only the other castes but also the two social groups that placed themselves outside the caste system: the Muslim and the Anglo-Indian minorities. These groups had not been willing or able to question Brahmin rule successfully. So the Brahmins continued to impose their alimentary morality on the other social groups constituting the city.

## Food Politics Today

But at the dawn of the new millennium, not even ten years after the KFC riots, the Muslims and the Anglo-Indians are no longer alone in evading Brahmin domination.<sup>10</sup> On a microlevel the Brahmins cling to their privileged position; there are still many apartment complexes that do not allow their residents to prepare or even consume meat because this practice could upset the Brahmin residents, who would be appalled by the smell of meat coming through the ventilation systems. And there are still many restaurants, both within and outside of the city center, that have not been willing to prepare non-vegetarian meals. Nevertheless, the situation has changed dramatically over the past ten years. What happened?

Ten years ago global capitalism entered the city of Bangalore and changed it completely. Attracted by its high level of education and low wages, global capitalism considered Bangalore an interesting location for what Manuel Castells calls “global labor” or the “process of globalization of specialty

labor.”<sup>11</sup> This process includes activities that are less and less hampered by spatial limitations and thus allow for the practice of a “purer” capitalism than we knew before, a capitalism that can focus even more closely on profit and surplus. This expansion of global capitalism had dramatic consequences for Bangalore. In ten years’ time it changed from a provincial midsize city of approximately six hundred thousand, oriented toward the old imperial city of Mysore, to a “global city,” as Saskia Sassen would have it,<sup>12</sup> of more than six million inhabitants captured in a network of capitalist structures. Bangalore is said to be the fastest-growing city in Asia and has rapidly become the leading city of India in economic terms.

This explosive growth resulted in an increasingly dense social life in various ways. The coming of capitalism to Bangalore, with its demand for skilled employees, attracted people from all over India. Today, capitalism has also introduced foreigners to the city, making Bangalore not only a national but also a global conglomerate of people, a city whose tentacles are spread all over the world. Bangalore is now an urban space in which the local and regional connections that previously defined the city have been mostly erased.

Consequently, the boundaries among the different castes have become less rigid, with food as an obvious example. As one informant put it: “If you look at city life in the past few years, things have changed considerably.... A few years ago, we had only South Indian foods. But now we have all kinds of food coming at us, including Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese... not only international foods, also foods that were previously available only in other parts of India, for example, in the North, West, and East.... We did not have access to that. So in the last years, a large number of caterers have come who sell all these foods.”<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the caste they belong to, many people seem to consider these new foods as one of the enjoyments the global city has to offer. “The local boys—Tamil, Karnataka—they all have TV and they all go to the hippest places at Brigade Road. And every person goes to the Chinese restaurant even if it is nonveg. They just sit there and take a sweet and sour vegetable dish. Even though their friends will sometimes take meat, they have to be there.” Only ten years ago, it was impossible to get any food other than vegetarian South Indian in the center of Bangalore; it was impossible to get any foods that were not thoroughly inscribed within the caste system. Today, by contrast, all sorts of previously unknown foods from every part of the world can be found in these streets.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that so many different cuisines can be found in Bangalore today is not too offensive to the Brahmins (although strict Brahmins flatly refuse to consume food from outside their own home or, to be more precise, food

that is not prepared by the loving and dignified mother of the house). What is, however, a real thorn in the side of the Brahmin caste is that an increasing number of restaurants are neglecting the binary opposition of vegetarian versus nonvegetarian food that had organized the city's alimentary habits until very recently. Even Brahmin youngsters indulge in nonvegetarian dishes, much to the displeasure of their parents. As one youngster confessed: "Nowadays, I am not very strict, I also eat nonveg and my parents know. They do not eat it, but I have grown accustomed to my friends' lifestyle and all that. I don't eat it in my house. My parents know, but my grandfather doesn't. They were very strict...they don't even eat egg and all that. My mom refused to speak to me. And I used to tease her and tell her I would make some chicken at home. She doesn't like me eating it."<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the arrival of global capitalism did not completely erase caste structure and hierarchy in Bangalore. The rules of the particular caste to which one belongs still organize one's daily life, and Brahmin morals continue to be imposed upon the original caste rules. But the fact that the basic law of consumption set up by the Brahmins (i.e., the strict moral distinction between vegetarian and nonvegetarian foods) is nowadays blatantly violated not only by those who were originally allowed to eat meat at home but also by their own people is not simply the outcome of the weakening power of castes or of Brahmin domination. This violation is a consequence of global capitalism at work.

## The Effects of Global Capitalism

To understand this, we should look closely at what spearheaded this capitalist colonization: the coming of the IT industry to Bangalore.<sup>16</sup> This industry has acted largely irrespective of caste and caste hierarchy, hiring people on the basis of their education and professional skills. Thus both vegetarians and nonvegetarians have been hired. Their employment is based on an "achieved status" (education) instead of on an "ascribed status" (caste), to put it in anthropological terms. It is this amalgam of people created and/or activated by the IT industry that has implemented the capitalist thoughts that are decoding the caste structures and pushing against Brahmin domination. They are largely responsible for the *Umwertung aller Werte* (revaluation of all values, as Nietzsche would have called it)<sup>17</sup> that has changed the city of Bangalore so dramatically over the past ten years, and their importance cannot be overestimated.

Aligning themselves with the forces of capitalism that disregard existing social structures, the IT professionals have escaped the caste structures and the Brahmin moral codes

much more completely than the Muslims or the Anglo-Indians ever did. They have also escaped in a different way. Unlike the Muslims, the IT professionals did not enter into a nonaggression pact with the Brahmins; neither did they deliberately act in opposition to Brahmin morals, as the Anglo-Indians did. The IT professionals never intended either to dethrone the Brahmins or to gain power. Instead, they emancipated themselves from the Brahmins' dominant position simply by ignoring them; they constructed a multitude of escape routes that were immune to Brahmin dominance, thereby *becoming impervious* to Brahmin control.

In their neglect of Brahmin caste power, in their radical emancipation from the dominant, the IT professionals set the course for the emancipation of many others from this rigid Moloch of social organization. Deleuze and Guattari note that "it is always on the most deterritorialized element that reterritorialization takes place."<sup>18</sup> In their implementation of global capitalism, the IT professionals function as the most deterritorialized element in the city of Bangalore. Thus it is thanks to their emancipation that the entire city has entered into a radical capitalist metamorphosis, a decoding of social and cultural rules and morals.

The leading role the IT professionals played in this capitalist revolution is nicely illustrated by one respondent who emphasized how eagerly people intend to follow the examples set by the IT professionals: "They add more value to someone who is from the software industry, hardware industry...anything in IT. That is the kind of trend now taking place in Bangalore and all over India. So the status of a person who works in the IT industry is basically very high. Even if he has a very low job, a very low profile in that organization, just being in the IT industry boosts him high up in the order.... Maybe he will get a better salary than a person in the mechanical industry, but [if] he just says, 'I am a security guard in the IT industry,' people will look at him with great respect."<sup>19</sup>

Despite the caste system, capitalism in general, and the IT industry in particular, has been able to institute a different social structure. This structure, however, does not imply a hierarchy similar to that of the caste system. The IT professionals do not intend to rule Bangalore, nor do they intend to come up with new moral alimentary codes that tell the people what is good food and what is not. Their emancipation does not offer a recoding, a new social hierarchy of the city; rather, it decodes Brahmin morals without any intention of replacing them with new ones.

By looking more closely at food, we can clearly see how the IT professionals, in their relation to the capitalist forces, have torn down the barriers that organized caste-based and Brahmin-imposed eating habits. Their tight schedules have



**Above:** *The International Technology Park, home of Bangalore's IT Industry.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK DOLPHIJN © 2002

led to a rise in local fast-food restaurants (*darshini*), where quick traditional lunches are served. As global capitalism connected Bangalore to other parts of India, and later to every other part of the world, it turned the city increasingly into a patchwork quilt that included “segments from everywhere,” to use the words of Saskia Sassen: products, people, customs, practices, and so forth.<sup>20</sup> Bangalore was not simply confronted with that which was different; it now comprises the different.

For instance, the IT industry has created stronger ties to the United States: “And what happens is that the IT industry has got foreigners coming over, most of the time the business has contacts with companies in other countries. Also they go to foreign cultures and then return. So a person coming from India goes [to the United States] and eats hamburgers and pizzas, and when he comes back, he doesn't wish to have something very local. He wants to have the same US stuff. When he comes back, he goes to a place where they sell the American or Italian food he has had. That is how the IT community has an effect on how India is changing.”<sup>21</sup>

The American fast-food restaurants like KFC are not generally resisted nowadays. On the contrary, they are used as escape routes to evade Brahmin dominance, since they implicitly question the Brahmin binary distinction between the vegetarian and the nonvegetarian menu. Yet these fast-food restaurants should not be considered part of the identity of

the IT professionals. Such an identity does not exist, as the IT professionals are not a homogeneous group. They do not strive for a given goal or even resist the Brahmins systematically. Rather, the IT professionals are the true missionaries of capitalism's anti-ideology. Surely, they did not turn every individual within the city of Bangalore into a carnivore, but they did radically overturn the dominant rules and morals that previously organized society.

The coming of global capitalism has radically redefined Bangalore over the last decade, causing the provincial industrial city to morph into the high-tech metropolis it is today. The changes have been articulated in many ways. Now there are approximately one hundred TV stations, which bombard the people of Bangalore with images from all over the world; new highways have given a major boost to automobile sales and thus to transportation within the city; major hotel chains with five-star restaurants have appeared. Yet, most of all, it is food that presaged and effected these changes. Alimentary changes in Bangalore offer a unique perspective through which we can see how the coming of the IT industry dismantled the codes to which the city had been subjected.

The controlling Brahmin hierarchy proved incapable of coping with capitalist invasion. In Bangalore eating chicken at KFC is above all a political act, not because it makes reference to the United States or because it establishes a particular identity. In Bangalore eating chicken is pure politics because it undermines Brahmin rule, thus effecting a radical emancipation. ☉

#### NOTES

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1. Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sundry Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Kolkata: Samya, 1996).

2. Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's "The History of British India and Orientalism"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 28.

3. Even conservative Brahmins sometimes see this abstinence from animal products as a rather impossible position in today's society. One Brahmin girl made an interesting remark regarding "pure vegetarianism": "It is very difficult to be really vegetarian. I just try to be. So...I always say...in Kannada [the local language], *naanu* means 'I'. If somebody asks me 'Are you a vegetarian?' I say '*naan-vegetarian*'...which can be understood as 'I am a vegetarian' in Kanada, and 'nonvegetarian' in English. It's a joke."

4. Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 11.

5. Franklin Edgerton, ed., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), xvii, 22.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

7. Earlier it was briefly mentioned that Ilaiah claims that the lower (*sundra*) castes were not allowed to read the *Bhagavad Gita*. We should add that this prohibition was put into place by the Brahmins. The history of Catholicism shows similar strategies, where, for example, nonpriests were not supposed to read the Bible.

8. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), plateau 5.

9. Conversation of 27 February 2002 with Cedric Joseph Aburatti.

10. The position of the Anglo-Indians in Bangalore has nevertheless weakened over the last ten years. They are increasingly isolated from the rest of society, forced to live together in the worst areas of the town, not allowed to make use of the better hospitals, thwarted in their attempts to get better jobs, and so forth.

11. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 130–132.

12. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New Press, 1998).

13. Conversation of 20 February 2002 with Mr. Anandagiri.

14. Conversation of 27 February 2002 with Cedric Joseph Aburatti.

15. Conversation of 28 February 2002 with two young Kabir Panths, Mithun and Avinash.

16. Bangalore is known nowadays as the IT capital of India, and since it has surpassed California's Silicon Valley at least in size, many Bangaloreans proudly refer to their city as the IT capital of the world.

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967).

18. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 221.

19. Conversation of 6 March 2002 with an anonymous IT professional.

20. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*.

21. Conversation of 6 March 2002 with an anonymous IT professional.



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