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## ***Bajji* on the beach: Middle class food practices in Chennai's New Beach**

Sir, — We, the residents of DeMellows Road, Pattalam, are severely affected by the large-scale encroachment of platforms and roadsides by fruit and vegetable vendors. The encroachers force pedestrians to walk on the road...The encroachers do not clear perished vegetables and fruits and refuse. With the wares of encroachers displayed on pavements the business of the pucca shops is affected. They threaten us with dire consequences and abuse us when we unwittingly step on their goods. Though most of the shops are unoccupied in the two markets on the same road, the vendors misuse the road...We urge the removal of encroachments...on DeMellows Road.

*G. Thirunavukarasu, president, DeMellows road-residents' welfare assn. & treasurer, Pattalam 'vyabarigal sangam' [traders' association], (The Hindu, 04 October 2004)*

Sir, — In a number of places in the city, vendors are selling food from small food carts. However, most of them do not have a licence and little is being done to control or regulate the quality of food sold by these vendors. Ideally, each ward should have a few food plazas where vendors can sell foodstuff in a clean environment and at affordable rates. This will ensure that hygiene is maintained. The Bangalore Mahanagara Palike can levy a small fee on licence to operate such food carts.

*DBN Murthy, Bangalore (The Hindu, 24 January 2005)*

The readers' mail section in any Indian daily newspaper (English-medium and vernacular) is a passive yet popular 'public forum' for the Indian middle class to express their anguish over a laundry-list of concerns, ranging from macro issues of economic development, education, foreign policy, national unity, secularism/religious fundamentalism, and nuclear (dis)armament to the nitty-gritty, micro-level problems of everyday life involving irregular bus/train services, garbage collection, potholes in local neighbourhood roads, water supply, and encroachments in the urban environment. The write-up in every instance is pretty much the same: a 'concerned citizen' who wishes to bring the attention of

state authorities to abysmal conditions, and ends with a demand for ‘immediate action’. Such columns are in fact ironic reminders of middle-class mildness, or even middle-class ineptitude at forcing any kind of spontaneous remedy. For, given their limited remit and influence, these letters are often a convenient means of venting one’s frustration with an inefficient state bureaucracy without ruffling too many feathers, making scholars wonder if this passivity based on a morality of condescension is yet another characteristic trait typical of middle-class apathy (Varma 1999; Fernandes 2000a, 2000b; Mazzeralla 2003). Such complaints however cannot be simply dismissed as a politics of indifference. Embedded within these laments is a strong undercurrent of a politics of intolerance, where the middle class finds itself unable to tolerate certain (ill) aspects of urban living, particularly those that challenge their bourgeois sensibilities of cleanliness and order. While the readers’ mail remains a widely sought platform for the middle class to vent their anxieties, they are increasingly seeking more active forums for their pursuit of bourgeois urbanism. This is especially seen in their rising intolerance against one particular urban ‘evil’, informal street vendors. For a long time, the ‘encroachment’ of public spaces (roads, platforms, and open spaces) by informal vendors trading in all kinds of goods and causing inconvenience to the ‘public’ has been a common issue raised in the letters to the editor. However, middle class residents in the city are no longer willing to sit and moan about this menace, and are actively lobbying the state through Public Interest Litigations (PILs) and other mechanisms to take stern action against them, i.e. evict them or at least to regulate their presence.

This middle class aggression reflects the changing nature of political and cultural attitudes to informality in general where instead of being viewed as an innovative solution to the problems of the urban poor, it is condemned as an epitome of the crisis of urban governance (Bhowmik 2003). This anxiety is set against the context of transition from state-led development to market liberalisation, the benefits of which the Indian middle class are eager to reap, amidst fears that a continued presence of the hawkers mirrors all kinds of doubts

attending this metamorphosis. Thus, if initially hawkers were tolerated as a sign of an incomplete modernisation project, then in the era of economic neoliberalism, there is concern that informal traders might trigger the collapse of liberalisation dreams, as they continue to symbolise the negative image of an unattainable disciplinary project (Rajagopal 2004).

The middle class subscribes to the modernist assumption that informality is some kind of a temporary solution to problems of housing and employment, one that would eventually be absorbed into the formal setup. In doing so they fail to recognise that the landscape of informality has become intensely complex in the neoliberal setting, and that the earlier discourse conceptualising the formal-informal sector in a dualistic framework is no longer valid. Current academic debates not only stress that a formal-informal dichotomy is a falsely created one, but also underline the need to recognise that the earlier assumption of a clear class division between the two sectors is no longer valid.<sup>1</sup> Roy (2009b) and AlSayyad and Roy (2004) thus emphasise the need to recognise that informality is not just the domain of the poor, but that of the middle class and the elite as well, suggesting different concretisations of informality. It is in this emerging context of middle class complicity that one needs to address and challenge their current conceptualisation of the informality debate.

The arguments presented in this paper are set amidst an acknowledgement that while economic neoliberalisation spatially delineates certain pockets of investment in Indian cities, it also geographically blurs the urban landscape via an increasing fuzziness in planning regulations, as the result of which the city's spaces are subject to intense contestations. Overlapping claims produce acute class conflicts with the rich, the middle class and the poor alike resorting to

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<sup>1</sup> Breman (1976) was one of the earliest scholars to argue against the ILO (1972) definition of informal economy differentiating it from the formal sector. He maintained that by interpreting their relationship in a dualistic framework and by focussing on the mutually exclusive characteristics, we lose sight of the unity and totality of the productive system. This contention is now firmly entrenched in the informality discourse as seen in the recent work of Potts (2008) and Roy (2005).

informal production and consumption practices. The tendency of the middle and upper classes however is to acquit themselves by persisting with polarised formal-informal portrayals, where informality continues to be depicted as a largely ‘illegal’ domain of the poor. Duplicitous as this may be, it offers an opportunity to question the emerging bourgeois discourses of the new middle class, whereby it is exposed as flawed, and hence easy to challenge.

The objective of this paper is to unpack the middle class arguments surrounding one particular informal practice, food vendors in public spaces, wherein their recent aestheticised reasoning of order and cleanliness is framed by an emphasis on hygiene and health. Examining middle class attitudes to informal food vendors in Chennai’s beaches, this paper illustrates the ambiguous role of the middle class as consumers, while simultaneously revealing that the ‘formal’ food retail establishments on the beach patronised by the middle class are equally rooted in several aspects of informality. In order to do so, it is important to understand the evolution of India’s middle class from its old to new version, and the role they play in perpetuating some of the myths about informality. This is examined in the next two sections, followed by a discussion of their more recent ‘aestheticised’ discourse on informality. Recent portrayals of informal trading practices as a visual deterrent highlight a changing perspective of public spaces in Indian cities, which is covered in the middle section of the paper. The final section dissects the middle class position objecting to informal food practices in Chennai’s beaches as they embark on a bourgeois re-imagination of the city’s public spaces, arguments that are challenged by the accompanying ethnographic analysis.

### **India’s new middle class**

It is a generally established argument amongst scholars that the ‘modern’ Indian middle class is a colonial construction when a loyal, subservient class was created via the British educational system to participate in the colonial administration and act as an intermediary between the colonial state and the local society (Misra

1961; Varma 1999; Joshi 2000; Fernandes 2006). By the late nineteenth century, the middle class had diverged into a new terrain involving the imagination and mobilisation of a new form of nationalism, emerging as leaders of an anti-colonial struggle for independence (Sarkar 1983; Vanaik 1990; Chatterjee 1993). This ensured that the colonial middle class entered India's early postcolonial years marked by the Nehruvian era through a monopoly of the state bureaucratic machinery as technocrats and bureaucrats. There was however a great deal of undermining of this middle class empowerment in the 1970s when Nehru's successor Indira Gandhi resorted to a more populist form of machine politics resulting in a pervasive "politics without administration" syndrome. The political identity of middle class during this period was shaped by an acute sense of state failure, with their withdrawal from and eventual disdain for the political sphere. This situation reversed in the mid-1980s when Rajiv Gandhi came to power as he, in direct contrast to his mother's clientalist politics, emphasised the economic clout of the middle classes and openly sought their political support. With his adoption of economic liberalisation in a limited form in the 1985 Budget and its eventual formal launch as the New Economic Policy in 1991, a new middle class was born 'that rested on specific linkages between middle-class aspirations, consumption practices, and policies of economic reform' (Fernandes 2006: 38).

Fernandes's (2006, 2004, 2000) work on the new middle class has to a large extent become pivotal in shaping contemporary discussions on this critical social group of urban India. Although she initially displays a tendency to portray the new middle class as agents of globalisation and neoliberalisation, she does exercise caution against redefining the new middle class identity through the language of economic neoliberalism. Statistical evidence to this extent has been provided by Sridharan (2004) who argues that it is too simplistic to suggest that the new middle class is associated with private sector employment against the state-dependent job opportunities sought by the old middle class. However, Fernandes and Heller (2006) clarify that it is this small, elite and dominant segment of the middle class, as the concrete beneficiary of economic reforms,

which provides the standard against which the aspirations of other fractions of the middle class are measured.

If the new middle class has become crucial to our understanding of the political dynamics of neoliberalisation in India, it is also due to the attitudinal change they represent towards life, with an emphasis on lifestyle and material well-being rather than an earlier practiced welfare-oriented austerity. Again, while the commodity choices of the new middle class has been highly publicised through a plethora of consumption images and projections, scholars including Sridharan (2004), Deshpande (2003) and Nijman (2006) are critical of these unabashed portrayals of the new middle class as a globalised consumer class, questioning their actual capacity to consume. Yet, as Datta (2006) convincingly argues, irrespective of its actual capacity to consume, what is real is its fascination with the imagery of consumption, which it uses effectively to hold no longer a middling position but a central and normative one. It is in this context that Fernandes (2006) as well as Fernandes and Heller (2006) clarify that while the old middle class never fully “captured” the state and was only able to assert rather than consolidate hegemony, the new middle class as a dominant fraction has come to articulate better the hegemony of the ruling bloc. The new middle class’s embodiment of a changing set of socio-political norms for the Indian state is perhaps most evident in the way they have come to influence recent official discourses on informality. As the following section illustrates, this is achieved in several ways including their domination of judiciary debates, media portrayals as well as influencing state policies.

### **Perpetuating the myth**

Despite Roy’s (2009a; 2009b) efforts to present informality as a mode of production of space defined by the territorial logic of deregulation rather than an unregulated system, the middle class emphasise the formal-informal divide, depicting the informality of trade and habitation not only as a practice of the poor but also setting it within the terrain of illegality and irregularity. Remarking on the

recent efforts of the hawkers to organise themselves into the National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), an association that has successfully lobbied the Ministry of Urban Development and poverty alleviation for a draft national policy on street vendors, a member of a prominent middle class residents' association in Chennai adamantly exclaimed:

Today there are associations for everything. It needs to be controlled and limited. Take for example, this hawkers' association, the association for platform businesses. It is a completely baseless association. It is illegal. It is them who have stolen the footpaths of T Nagar and Pandy Bazaar [shopping districts in Chennai] away from us. (ECR-020904-01)

In direct contrast to Roy's (2009a) identification of informality as a state of exception and ambiguity, inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, authorised and unauthorised, such outbursts suggest otherwise, and parallel an active campaign led by the media, the state and the middle-class dominated civil society against the informal street vendors. Recent spate of judicial efforts incriminating the hawkers present them as interlopers, or as one middle class resident put it, 'they are people who have no business to be there' (SR-190304-01). The media likewise, when referring to the presence of hawkers exhibit a tendency to portray them as encroachers. 'Encroachment of roads / illegal activities' read a headline in *The Hindu*, describing the pavement dwellers as not only a hindrance to the local residents, but also as indulging in anti-social activities and illegal trading.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, the same newspaper had published a special analysis on *The politics behind encroachment*, portraying pavement vendors as conniving figures abusing political patronage to their advantage and to the inconvenience of 'tax-paying road-users', further alleging that such encroachments have eaten up a great deal of space in the city.<sup>3</sup> These reports echo the middle class language of fear and disgust of vendors evident in their readers' mail columns, where the vendors are seen not merely as encroachers but more

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<sup>2</sup> Bhattacharya, S. (2003, 15 November). Encroachment of roads / illegal activities: Jamarah Thottam residents suffer in silence. *The Hindu*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Radhakrishnan, R.K. and Natarajan, S. (1997, 27 September). The politics behind encroachment. *The Hindu*, Metro p. 1.

importantly are incriminated with accusations of being abusive and threatening. This is again contrary to scholarly findings that suggest that street vendors are crucial contributors to maintaining vibrancy on the street, who through their long daily hours of peddling goods in the public spaces offer a sense of safety not only to the shopkeepers but also to the general public (Anjaria 2006).

If there is a sense of confidence in the middle class outbursts against the informal traders and vendors it is in large part due to the incriminating attitude of the state. Again, while Roy (2009b) views informality as an integral part of the territorial practices of the state power in what she describes as informality from above, everyday practices of the state continue to see informality as an antithesis of a planned city. Most state policies in this regard have focussed predominantly on new ways of regulating the hawkers, with current explorations of the creation of hawking and no-hawking zones in different parts of the city, which many suspect is an exercise in optimal surveillance. However, in the absence of a formal relationship between the state and the hawkers, these regulations often come out as knee-jerk attempts to bring the latter within the legal fold. State efforts to address the issue of hawking oscillates between regulatory and predatory tendencies (Anjaria 2006), swinging between the threat of eviction and extortion. Their recent decisions to issue license to hawkers and designate specific hawking zones are not entirely convincing in this context. Firstly, given the practical limitations of the number of licenses that can be issued, licensing will only serve to delegitimise a vast majority of unlicensed hawkers. Secondly, in many instances, middle and upper class residents and businesses dictate the designation of hawking zones hardly take into account the economic considerations of the hawkers. Thus, even as a majority of the hawkers cannot be accommodated in the designated hawking zones with most avoiding these areas due to practical (market) reasons, the city's middle class makes this a bone of contention alleging that the informal practices of street vendors implies an inherent non-conformity to regulations. In recent years, as their hostility to informality is framed around their frustrations over this form of 'civic disobedience', much of their objections are

phrased in an aestheticised discourse where a bourgeois sense of cleanliness and order permeates their justification for stringent control.

### **The aesthetics of informality**

In spite of the current round of ambiguity surrounding the effectiveness of state-led regulatory solutions for the problems of hawking, the middle class remain undaunted as they formulate their arguments in terms of elite environmentalism, and promote an agenda of beautification through concerns of dirt and disorder. This was in fact a rallying point during the 1996 mayoral elections in Chennai, when the candidate of the ruling party *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) MK Stalin ran his campaign on an assurance of restoring a *Singara* Chennai, or beautiful Chennai. So much so, that a year later, a newspaper article summarising his achievements in office reminded him of his promise, and highlighted the continued presence of hawkers as encroachers in the city's landscape, thus asking, *Encroachments....whither Singara Chennai?*<sup>4</sup> Today, even though the 2003 draft national policy on street vendors, conscious of the dangers of neoliberal urbanism, clearly states that no hawker or street vendor can be arbitrarily evicted in the name of beautification, it remains the rallying point of several middle class calls for removal of informal traders from the city's public spaces. Based on a highly aestheticised argument emphasising order, the middle class have been seduced by the neoliberal project's new consumption landscape centred around a store-and-mall culture, which has not only reduced their dependence on the hawker economy but has also created a disdain for the latter as a visual eyesore.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Oppili, P. (1997, 12 September). Encroachments...with 'Singara Chennai?' *The Hindu*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> In the earlier years, middle class residents in the city tended to be one of the largest consumers of informal trade, where a combination of their rather austere lifestyle as well as their financial inaccessibility to a great number of everyday products meant that they depended on informal vendors to make these goods available to them at affordable prices. This included perishable items such as fruits and vegetables as well as consumer durables ranging from petty household items to clothing and even electronics. However, the recent rise of supermarkets and malls targeting the middle class coupled with the increase in the consumption capacity of the middle class has reduced drastically their dependency on informal traders. With the weakening of this economic linkage, the middle class are less tolerant of the vendors' presence in the streets and public spaces, assuming a more hostile attitude towards them. In this context, informality has become an affordable source

current call of middle class residents' associations in Chennai for the removal of informal tea stalls in different parts of the city is a reflection of their increasing patronage of a cappuccino culture, amidst a subscription to the bourgeois etiquette of food and drink consumption in conditioned environments. Open-air informality in this context is seen as a practice that is not just restricted to the poor but more importantly a nuisance:

This whole area used to be like full of vendors we could never exit Harrington Road early because everybody would collect around the tea bunk and drink this tea. Ugh! So now we have removed all of that, cleaned up. Just started a green patch so like that you couldn't go across and stand there you know. (HRRRA-210204-01)

Such violent actions against the poor, whether perpetuated by the middle class or the state (mostly on behalf of the middle class), might signal the enforcement of a new commodity aesthetics, but as Rajagopal (2001) rightly reminds us this renewed interest in controlling city space as a corollary to new regimes of accumulation must be located against a historical process where workers engaged in the informal economy were classified as hawkers subject to all manner of regulation by the developmentalist (and now liberalising) Indian state. For, as Anjaria (2008) remarks, the informal economy is a harsh reminder of the aesthetic failure of the Third World city.

In many ways, this kind of aesthetic censure is not new and has already been played out several times against the presence of slums in the urban condition.<sup>6</sup> Rosenberg (2007) pursues a slightly different line of argument where he is convinced that a concept of the aesthetic is essential as representations of the slums cannot remain wholly abstract, but inevitably involve a sensory (usually visual) depiction as well as a narrative element. According to him, aesthetic

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primarily for the poor and the working classes, and hence subject to intense stereotyping by the middle and upper classes.

<sup>6</sup> The best example is *The challenge of the slums* report published by UN-Habitat in 2003, which refers to slums as the visual expression of urban poverty and as a challenge of the aesthetic ideals of urban form. It also identifies the increasing use of the aesthetic discourse to portray slums as an urban nuisance and therefore justify their removal; See also Davis (2006).

representation ‘gives the viewer or reader an experience of the slum, and is thus essential to defining it as a place of pity or revulsion, of victims or criminals, and perhaps also as a place beyond such binary distinctions, as a place with its own varieties of fully lived experience, its own habits and energies as well as blights’ (Rosenberg 2007: 281-2). However, his use of a slum aesthetic to balance and formalise the presence of slums in relation to larger structures and challenge the marginalisation of the poor has hardly helped make the argument against their eviction. In fact, the middle class employ an aesthetics discourse emphasising the visual to create a new urban imaginary that condemns the informality of poor (both in terms of their shelter and employment strategies) in relation to the city and its inhabitants. Thus, informal practices are portrayed as ugly and disturbing in the new urban imaginary employed by the middle class denying the possibility of a richer and more complex urbanity.

This forms the crux of the bourgeois reasoning used in the re-imagination of public spaces in several Indian cities where it is argued that the visual appearance of the poor contributes to the perception of chaos and disorder. Thus, according to Fernandes (2004) the invention of the new middle-class lifestyle is based on an urban aesthetics that not only promotes class purity (and class-based socio-spatial segregation) but a more radical attempt to cleanse the city’s public spaces of any sign of poverty. This is not surprising given that the valorisation of public spaces draws not just on an emphasis of financial and moral values but increasingly on a visual discourse that is steeped in aesthetics. As Amin (2008) reaffirms, if a significant role of public space is to frame and test the pulse of public culture, a visual culture of its aesthetics and physical architecture becomes crucial in defining the social performance of life in public, thus underlining the power of aesthetics in the interface between public culture and public space. As public spaces in Indian cities become visible spaces of consumption, there is a clear effort by both the state and the middle class to aestheticise them. In order to best illustrate these latest efforts, it is important to establish the background of

public space discourse in India, particularly the complexity and ambiguity of its evolution through the colonial and postcolonial years.

### **Shifting sands and changing attitudes: Public spaces in the Indian city**

If one traces the history of public space discourse in a city like Chennai, it becomes evident that the rise of bourgeois urbanism fuelling the middle class claim to unrestricted ‘clean and orderly’ public spaces (Chatterjee 2004) is rather recent, following decades of indifference towards the city’s open spaces. Chennai like any other Indian or developing city, in the post-independence years, displayed a nonchalant attitude towards its open spaces saddled as it was with the pressures of hyper-urbanisation, where unoccupied spaces were either squatted upon by the residents (poor and rich alike) or developed by the state. The helplessness of an overstretched local government notwithstanding, an important reason for the state’s failure to develop and implement a significant public space discourse in early post-independence years is the fundamentally troubled understanding of public spaces in a country like India, one that extends back to the colonial time. This is obvious from the way the city’s most prominent open spaces, its beaches, lack a clear public space emphasis. For a shoreline city stretching more than 20 km along the coast, this might be surprising, especially since the potential of the city’s beaches as a high-profile public space had been recognised in the nineteenth century when colonial administrators developed the 3.5 km stretch of Marina Beach to serve as a combined display of colonial power and civilising mission. Through the development of the Marina, the imperial colonial government sought to establish a new typology of public spaces that would not only display colonial power and superiority but would also provide the local population with a healthy, educative civic life. Colonial administrators took pride in this transformation, as an intervention unique to their legacy and unknown to the earlier precolonial period.

For, the kind of open spaces that existed in precolonial India were predicated on a system of commonness that differed from the European public

spaces. Precolonial open spaces did not have clear boundaries and were left to utter contingency, existing without the characteristic features of a bourgeois publicity (Kaviraj 1997). For the colonial settlers, this precolonial urban form was upsetting as it revealed little social order in the urban environment. Instead of a clearly distinct public and private, they found that the daily functioning of the Indian society was predicated on an entirely different notion of the inside and the outside (Chakrabarty 1992; Kaviraj 1997). Here, cleanliness and order were limited to the domestic inside, and the outside presented ‘a total confusion of the “private” and “public” in the many different uses to which it was put’ (Chakrabarty 1992: 541). Unlike the public spaces that the English knew, the outside ‘did not constitute a different kind of valued space, a civic space with norms and rules of use of its own, different from the domestic values of bourgeois privacy’ (Kaviraj 1997). The subtle modes of hierarchical assertions employed by the locals were not sufficient for the Europeans who were puzzled and troubled by the traditional employment of streets, bazaars and other open spaces, where all manner and means of communication including material, visual, social, the semantic and the additive mingled spontaneously and indifferently (Lamprakos 1992). In this context, colonial imposition of public spaces in several instances failed to displace the existing system of common spaces, producing instead an overlapping condition and leaving in its wake a confused medley of open spaces that vacillated between the public and the common. This is particularly true in the case of spaces like the Marina, where non-elite natives did not passively accept their exclusion and constantly contested its imagination through their own local interpretations. Informality in this context can be understood as an expression of precolonial ‘bazaar-like’ practices operating in a system of common spaces, and as an opposition to the western invocation of ‘public discipline’.

With the rise of the anti-colonial struggle for independence, large open spaces such as the Marina became symbols of indigenous resistance—spaces of subversion—with the native elite using its precolonial character of the common to challenge the power of the European publicity. However, post-independence, the

tendency of the local elite leaders was to legitimise the colonial position rather than the precolonial cultural practices as they had inherited and internalised the colonial administrative structure. Yet, having emphatically drawn on the latter to subvert colonial power, they were unable to immediately illegitimise them. The resulting nationalist imagineering exposed their indecisiveness in envisioning postcolonial open spaces, vacillating between that of a bourgeois public sphere inherited from the colonisers and a looser form of less-prescribed common spaces. In the case of Chennai, the rise of a particular type of regional politics also meant that a bourgeois interpretation of public spaces was selectively employed at a cosmetic level and juxtaposed cleverly by emphasising the commonality of open spaces at occasions to create political advantage. Over the years, the development of Chennai's beaches has been marred by a persistent clash between the bourgeois sensibilities of a large section of the city's residents who subscribe to a westernised notion of public spaces, and the common space activities of the fishermen and the poor.

With the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms since the 1990s, the beach has become an important element in the realisation of a neoliberal urban vision for the city, given its vast canvas and its ability to serve as the public face of the city. Neoliberalism has promoted the employment of a strong bourgeois vocabulary in this re-imagination advocating cleanliness and order without acknowledging that a clear understanding of public spaces in Indian cities is distorted and problematic, oscillating as it does between the westernized concept of an orderly public and the careless outside of precolonial, indigenous practices. But a desperate state looks less and less for reconciliation between the two polarized conceptualizations of open spaces, and instead seeks to legitimize one (public) by discrediting the other (common). Prominently featuring in their list of undesirables are the informal food vendors on the beach against whom the state and its significant middle class ally frame their opposition conveniently in a Naipaulian discourse of dirt and disorder. They instinctively blame the poor as a source of pollution in the city's public spaces. In Chennai's southern shorelines,

middle class associations residing along the up and coming New Beach have recently targeted the patronage of commercial interests on the beach by the poor and lower classes by raising their bourgeois version of environmental concerns (Figure 1). Interviews with the residents reveals a marked dislike for informal food vendors who need to be purged in order for the city and its public spaces to attain at least some semblance of the transnationalised imagery of stylised pristine beachfronts found around the world.

### **The ‘dirty’ business of street food**

It is a general assumption that given the rigid social matrix in the Indian (Hindu) society, food practices (both in the public and private realm) are dictated by strict caste and ethnic boundaries, with food serving as a central trope around which a large number of basic moral axioms could be constructed (Marriott 1968; Khare 1976, 1992; Appadurai 1988). Based on the work of anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss (1997) and Mary Douglas (1997) who clearly stressed the significance of food in the construction of social systems, this understanding produced a rather simplistic overview of the Hindu caste system where upper castes do not share with or accept food from the lower castes. While it cannot be denied that food habits do encode social structures and relationships, one has to resist the urge to reduce the Hindu ideology of food to a rigid social practice where it is treated as an unchanging essence of Hindu ideology. Thus, Nandy (1994) insisting on a more fluid politics of food is deeply sceptical of the traditional ethnography of food based on a falsely created dichotomy of the cooked and the raw, the pure and the polluted, commensality and its absence, and the sanctified and the profane. Moreover, as Khare (1992) rightly reminds us, it is no longer possible to formulate food and culture relationship in India purely based on classical and other learned texts, as the contemporary Hindu’s food discourse is often an ambiguous critique of this foundational structure of the Hindu cosmic order. Appadurai (1988) thus clarified that even though dining across caste or boundaries is still a relatively delicate matter, the metropolitan pragmatic of India

helps to loosen these boundaries with formal and informal dining taking place across the caste lines.

It is in this context that one needs to examine (the changing nature of) middle class attitudes to street food culture in India. Somewhat of a less spectacular manifestation of an emergent vernacular mass-culture phenomenon, Nandy (2004) dates the rise of street food in India back to the colonial times catering to the long distance native commuters working in the colonial political economy.<sup>7</sup> In the postcolonial years, the practice persisted offering a staple diet for many urban workers mainly drawn from the working classes providing nutritious fare at cheap prices (Bhowmik 2005). The role of middle class patronage of street food is less clear, as in the first instance, one would assume that with the members of the Indian middle class drawn mostly from the Hindu upper castes it would be highly unlikely for them to consume street food without a clear idea of its (caste-based) origins. In this context, Iverson and Raghavendra (2006) clarify that public-eating places in early modern urban India did seek to maintain boundaries amongst castes, regions, and food preferences. They admit that orthodoxy is only advantageous in a static social context, turning quickly into a liability with rapidly changing consumer tastes. However, citing Toft Madsen's (1991) work they speculate that public eating practices in modern India has secularised and democratised, albeit only to the extent of serving customers, not in terms of liberalising the employment structure.

In this context, attitudes of the Indian middle class towards street food culture is at best ambivalent, as their modern values might compel them to reject the rigid and unjust caste-based hierarchies, while at the same time, their upper caste identities would make it difficult for them to challenge the primacy of a traditional caste-based hierarchical order. It is in lieu of the latter that

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<sup>7</sup> He does not engage with the possibility of street food culture having existed in precolonial times, which was probably present in all likelihood particularly during fairs and festival periods, catering to pilgrims and tourists.

Mukhopadhyay (2004) in a rather self-reflective manner views street food as an absolute no-no for a respectable member of the middle class. But as he himself clarifies, while it is not uncommon to find members of the middle class frequently snacking at roadside eateries, it is precisely because non-ritual snacks do not interfere with their need to conform to the stricter requirements of the more sacrosanct, ritual meals.<sup>8</sup> More recently, however, globalisation has introduced new dynamics into the culture of fast food in India where new status games have come into play in the public consumption of food in India. This has triggered a turn in the ambivalence of the middle class towards the street food vendors, particularly in prominent locations such as the beach, as they patronise them less and less, adopting instead a sharply and rigidly defined stance against their presence.

This is clearly seen in the way they have developed a position against the informal snack sellers in Chennai's beaches, popularly known as *channa* or *bajji* stalls, after the particular type of snacks they sell: either a spicy version of boiled chickpeas or vegetables fried in batter. Their opposition to these informal food practices is in the first instance constructed around concerns of health and hygiene, which on deeper examination reveals not any kind of scientific evidence base, but a bias perhaps drawn from their ties to traditional hierarchies. Thus when an official of a middle class association responsible for the maintenance and development of the beachfront argues against the informal street vendors on the basis that '[i]t shouldn't be there. It is not good for health. Over time we need to rectify it.....we need to avoid it. If the association gets the report that they are coming here, selling useless no good stuff, then on health conditions...we have avoided by giving instructions against them', one cannot help wonder if this is an indication of the middle class reverting back to the traditional social and moral matrix of food practices in India. Even as Nandy (2004) cautions that the ideas of

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<sup>8</sup> Mukhopadhyay (2004: 40) also clarifies that it is mostly the younger members of the middle class who indulge in street food as these 'foods exude non-conformist values like youth, vigour, sexual attractiveness, humour and fun times'.

health and ritual under globalisation are not the same as the older ideas based on social and religious rituals, newer definitions of food-related health and hygiene criteria reveal a rationalisation that is not congenial to informal food vendors. For instance, globalisation and neoliberalisation have introduced a reversal of attitude in everyday food practices in urban India where, instead of the earlier perception of freshly prepared food made from ingredients brought off the street being hygienic and pre-packaged food being stale and unhealthy, the new lifestyle indicates a clear shift towards packaged and processed foods whose high calorie content is equated with better nutrition.

Such accusations of street food being unhygienic comes not from any systematically conducted sample checks but from a general suspicion that the poor living and working conditions of food vendors will invariably result in poor hygiene. However, while studies by international health organisations of street food vendors in the mid-nineties frequently highlighted the consequent health hazards of unhygienic street food (Chakravarty and Canet 1996), Bapat (cited in Gokhale 1992) conducted a bacterial analysis of 252 samples of food and water taken from all kinds of street food vendors and restaurants only to find that restaurant food was no better than street food in terms of contamination. In this context, Lintelo (2009) has provided a useful analysis of the 2007 ban imposed by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) on the cooking and selling of food on the streets of Delhi, one that was upheld by the Supreme Court of India. Even though the MCD justified the ban based on its poor hygienic quality, Lintelo (2009: 64) is convinced that the ‘the ban is much more about urban spatial politics than food hygiene. It specifically reflects the intensifying contestation for urban space between the surging middle classes and the poor, against a backdrop of a restructuring retail sector and a liberalizing economy’. He thus endorses the suspicion that such bans selectively emphasises the lack of hygiene in street foods while displaying amnesia about similar hazards in another large group: formal food retail units.

Lintelo (2009) expands his argument to locate the MCD ban as a latest episode in a regulatory history that seeks to safeguard public spaces from permanent encroachment by the urban poor. Even though he is convinced that the ban is unlikely to contribute to “spatial purification”, there is room for alarm if one were to place the hygiene argument in the larger middle class-led elite environmental cries framed by concerns of dirt and disorder. For instance, most of the middle class opposition to these informal food practices tended to invoke hygiene against the wider context of pollution:

..I remember one day, I was really annoyed with this one lady, because she was pouring her leftover oil into the sand.<sup>9</sup> I was trying to tell here not to do that and she, you know, she got really mad, and she talked back....and she said look I am a very poor person. This is my business opportunity and why can't I be here, which made perfect sense to me but you see that is exactly what I am saying that she is very right and she is not doing anything wrong, she is a very poor person and she has a right to be there but she has to use that space responsibly. That is all my point. I am saying this on behalf of the fisherfolk, on behalf of me, on behalf of the beach, that's all. I am saying, don't pour oil there, use the space responsibly and when you leave it must seem like nobody was there. That's all. (ECR-300304-02)

No, I don't think so [allowing food stalls on the beach]....It is a different thing you having peanuts and some (snacks) which they come and sell. That's a different thing. It is not so bad but I mean this bajji bonda, then they throw the whole oil and onions onto the sand. That's not nice. Yesterday, I saw one whole lot of corns on the sand. He had thrown the whole thing right on the sand. (ECR-010404-02)

These narratives based on cleanliness however fail to acknowledge that commercial interests cater to all classes of users on the beach, and that none of them tend to leave the beach as if ‘nobody was there’. While the middle-class beach users complain against the presence of ‘commercial activities’ of the poor, they admit that:

There are different stratas of people, socio-economic, they have their own concept of what they should do on in a place like beach. They have their own affordability levels. You can't say that ‘listen, you must be going to an organised shop which sells quality ice cream and not eat at roadside corner shop’. I don't think so. It is a common property. You can have certain rules

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<sup>9</sup> The snacks are often fried in oil, and at the end of the day, one can find used oil discarded in the sands. To that extent this observation is right.

in terms of hygiene, cleanliness, for proper usage of trash so that people don't make it dirty. (ECR-010404-03)

They are also aware that the formal commercial establishments catering to the middle and upper class beach goers create as much garbage as the informal ones serving the poor and the lower classes (Figure 2). Several popular restaurants have opened alongside New Beach with associated adverse impacts on the beach. An early morning ramble by the backside of these restaurants reveals piled up garbage from these establishments which are not disposed frequently. Yet, the middle class association monitoring the development and re-imagination of this beach stretch maintains that:

There is no disturbance to us from the restaurants. Evenings only they open. In the morning time it is not open. In the evening, the people who come are decent fellows, because it is a costly place, like a hotel, so those who come to eat, if you see they come according to its status. (ECR-040404-01)

When asked about the garbage created by these enterprises, the official insisted that 'we cannot avoid that. The government gives permission....they are doing it in their own area' (ECR-040404-01). Instead, he remained convinced of a correlation between social status and cleanliness, maintaining that a 'decent' place such as a restaurant could not have negative repercussions on the beach's natural environment.

The middle class do not acknowledge easily the environmental damage caused by these 'licensed' commercial vendors. There are quite a few beach clubs, resort complexes, and restaurants along the beach, which are known to discharge their waste directly into the sea. Yet, middle-class residents have failed to organise collectively against such pollution, choosing instead to pick on the informal traders. While the middle class were once uncertain consumers of informal food practices on the beach, the increasing presence of clubs and restaurants on the beachfront has reduced their patronage of such businesses, because of which their indifference turns into intolerance. Empowered by the collective strength of their bourgeois civil society, middle-class residents have no

qualms about disciplining the hawkers and traders on the beach citing concerns of health and cleanliness, but are weak-kneed about taking similar actions against the institutionalised polluters. An easy way of reading this is to say that it is natural for the predator to pick on the weaker ones. As a trait this is highly characteristic of the middle class, and is noticed by the fishermen and the poorer residents in the area:

...when we sun dry the fish, some VIPs living nearby complained of smell, saying that pollution should be under control. They act like that, but really, fish, smell of fish or dried fish is specific to its users. There isn't anything harmful to it. It isn't a breeding ground for mosquitoes or anything harmful to people. It doesn't pollute the beach...fishing doesn't pollute....but if you see today, there is a situation of sewage getting into the sea....From Sindur Sea Club for example there is a direct discharge. It goes to the sea.<sup>10</sup> We were the only ones to object to it. We did. Have you seen what they built? They have put a hole through their compound wall to let their sewage out directly to the sea. (ECR-090404-02)

As patrons of commercial establishments such as clubs and restaurants, the middle class are hardly in a position to chastise the poor for dirtying the beach. Also, when one starts speculating on the various sources of dirt and pollution on the beach, it seems that marginal groups are less responsible than the middle class who, through the sheer mass of their consumption generate more waste. The problem of pollution posed by carelessly disposed plastics, paper, bottles and other by-products of middle-class consumption is of a greater magnitude than the concerns of dirt raised against the presence of informal food vendors. But the middle class avoid the implication of greater pollution by admitting that in fact, all sections of the society defile the beach. This is done with a certain amount of faux-magnanimity in sharing the blame:

If you take the social classes, you start from the lowest, they go and shit all over and piss all over. That has to stop. That only education can do. Social awareness has got to be created at every level. Middle class are the worst. Some I would say, they will take channa [peanuts] here, like the groundnuts and all and then throw the paper. What? They are the educated class. They are the people who are contributing to a hell lot of garbage. So if you want to improve, you have to educate all of them. (ECR-010404-03)

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<sup>10</sup> This is one of the membership-based beachside clubs that has come up recently on New Beach. Its members include residents of from the neighbourhoods along the southern beaches.

And the people who actually litter the beach, it is not the illiterate and the poor. It is the well-dressed people who come in bikes who come in cars who put on music, who enjoy the beach and they throw all their wrappers. So that is very disturbing. You know there is no excuse. (ECR-310304-02)

In doing so, they reveal an inherent contradiction in their statement. While the middle class seems to be convinced that civic sense and responsibility are ‘enlightened’ features that can be developed through education, the implications of middle-class abuse of public spaces and their inability to confront powerful polluters neutralises the same conviction. The point being that, when it comes to public spaces, Indians are still struggling to reach a consented understanding of what is essentially a western concept bequeathed by the colonisers, one that is only further complicated in the current neoliberal condition of a bourgeois urban imaginary.

### **Conclusion**

With rise of the entrepreneurial state in the context of economic globalisation and neoliberalisation, it has become increasingly common to rely on spectacles and festivals to promote the city and the state to capitalist investors. *Chennai Sangamam* is one such event conceived and organised by the state of Tamil Nadu since 2007. Even though projected as a celebration of the Tamil culture and its art forms, held annually in January to coincide with the popular Tamil harvest festival of Pongal, the fact that it is held in Chennai and not in the Tamil heartland suggests that it is probably yet another city marketing ploy couching the interests of economic neoliberalism. Moreover, an interesting aspect of this particular festival is that all the events are organised in the city’s public spaces, including its parks, streets and beaches. While the organisers claim that it is a good opportunity to celebrate the cosmopolitan character of Chennai, and that by conducting it in the open spaces, it is best accessible to all sections of the society, one cannot help wonder if this provides the authorities with yet another justification to embark on

a cleanliness drive as they ‘prepare’ the city for the festivities. In 2008, a food component was added to the second edition of the festival to enhance its popular appeal. What is interesting in this new addition is the offer of ‘five star street food’ where the organisers acknowledged street food as part of the rich culinary tradition of Tamil Nadu but believed that street food can only be worthy when it is served out of clean and hygienic ‘designer trolleys’.

Even as scholars are suggesting that informal food practices are a long established cultural practice in countries like India, legal efforts to sanitise or erase their presence is rampant. Thus, the Supreme Court in 2007 upheld the Municipal Corporation of Delhi’s ban on the sale of cooked street food in Delhi based on arguments of hygiene while in Mumbai, following the 2005 floods, the Mumbai municipal authority banned all street food vending for two weeks citing concerns of epidemic scares. At the same time, debates about informal food vendors cannot be examined simply as a political mobilisation between the state and the poor but as a more complex debate, acknowledging the alliance between the state and the propertied groups. It is in this context that this paper examined the middle class discourse of informal food practices in prominent public spaces such as Chennai’s New Beach.

As AlSayyad and Roy (2004) have observed urban informality in the current phase of globalisation and neoliberalisation not only proves the formal-informal divide as a false dichotomy, but more important is the differentiation that exists within informality, spanning all classes. And yet, despite their culpability and implication, the tendency of the middle class is to reclaim a bourgeois city from the informal sector by invoking in the first instance the illegitimacy of informal practices. At another level, the middle class persist with their dirt discourse pinpointing the poor for polluting the beach and for creating unhygienic conditions with their informal businesses. But, as the paper shows, given the colonial history of incomplete transformation of precolonial common spaces into a westernised system of public spaces, any application of a bourgeois discourse

will be warped, thereby undermining the arguments made from this angle. Thus, when the middle class attempt to highlight the bourgeois ideology of order to tackle the concerns of dirt and danger, and apply a class divisive angle to identify the informal vendors as improper users of the beach, it comes across as flawed, wherein it is impossible to polarise a righteous bourgeois self against an aberrant poor, and bourgeois habits themselves become deviant. In fact, the more the middle class attempt to distinguish themselves from the informal vendors, the more they are implicated and inculpated in their dirt discourse. It is by interrogating and unpacking their arguments that one is able to establish the flawed nature of the middle class discourse and wherein the informality of the poor can challenge and contest the hegemonic promotion of bourgeois food practices in the beach.

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