Can we really deny that the food is not constitutive of the Self? I don’t mean fat or slim and the varieties of slimming diets that are offered these days for a good price. That too does make our Self; the fact that America is so obsessed with obesity that they give tax-breaks for joining slimming programmes or buying exercise gadgets is enough of an indicator. Nor do I mean vegetarian, non-vegetarian, dairy free, sugar free, salt free and so on, the kind of menu indicators you most often forget to tell your travel agent about while booking international flights, only to find an overworked and unfriendly in-flight attendant serving a red-dotted pack of steak so you wake with your Brahmin sensibilities all shaken saying to yourself “Shiva! Shiva!” and hope the smiling stewardess in the other aisle will show some kindness and give you a green-dotted food pack. We never entered the flight-caterers’ kitchens and don’t really know whether the chef used the same knife to chop both the meat and the vegetables before you. Such mistakes of ritual pollution do not generally occur in the kitchens of our Brahmin households. For that matter they do not occur, or so we believe, in the numerous Udupi hotels that dot the cityscape of Chennai, or the numerous other vegetarian restaurant chains like Saravana Bhavan and Sangeetha Hotel that have left Udupi hotels trailing far behind. Here in Jhusi, Allahabad, which really does not offer much by way of cuisine other than the usual chai-samosa, I have often engaged in deep introspection on what makes those Chennai hotels tick. It didn’t take long to figure that out. It’s unarguable that idlis and dosas have more culture and commerce than chai-samosa.

We can argue whether culture precedes commerce or commerce precedes culture, but we do know for sure that whatever the commerce of idli-dosa in North India, its culture lies wholly in the heart of the South. Rather, the heart of the Tamil Brahmin, even if Chettinad Aatchis raise a few objections and the Kanchepuram iyengars staked claim to an independent identity long ago on the basis of their Kanjeevaram idlis. The fried idli of the North is an unwelcome intruder, which seeks to dislodge both idli and vada from their cultural heights through the power of vulgar commerce. But how did idli-dosa become the quintessential feature of Tamil Brahmin culture, at ease when juxtaposed with Carnatic music? For that matter, why did idli-dosa as an aspect of Brahmin culture spread and find acceptance among the Tamil subalterns, while Carnatic music suffered elite containment within the Mylapore Music Academy? These perennial questions can preoccupy the new breed of cultural theorists but one thing is for sure: when culture and technology meet, the filter coffee that distinguished Brahmin culture in South India loses out to idli-dosa.

Filter coffee, the Brahmin specialty, remained technologically stagnant, not giving way either to Starbucks culture or the commerce of coffee percolators. Not for us the Café Stainless Ste
Latte, Café Mocha, Cappuccino, Turkish coffee, Brazilian or Colombian coffee. Not even Nescafé or Bru for that matter. Not for us the filter papers and electric coffee makers that compete with each other in American department stores; even liberalisation and duty-free imports have not brought those coffee makers to Chennai’s recent fad, Spencer’s Shopping Mall. Although coffee filters may not have much to offer as a story, the small black coffee grinder from Brahmin kitchens of some 30-40 years ago has now become a museum artefact. In those days when there were no television cartoons, the coffee grinder helped mothers discipline naughty children in the afternoons. They filled it up with roasted beans and made them grind it all. Coffee filters made little progress, only the brass ones were replaced by stainless steel. And therein lies the little known story of the stainless steel modernity of Brahmin kitchens.

Stainless Steel Modernity

Traditional Brahmin kitchens took pride in their collection of brass, bronze and copper utensils. Shining brass and bronze vessels like kuja (screw type flask), kudam (water pot) and shombu (small water pot) were cleaned meticulously with tamarind and ash every day by the non-Brahmin domestic servants of Brahmin households, while the Brahmin women themselves spent considerable time in acquiring them and comparing their collections with others’. A considerable part of the collection was part the dowry and part the heirloom of the family. But no ‘utensil dowry’, known in Tamil as paathra sheer, was considered complete without the Adhirsam container – thooku, sampadan or adhuku. The long traditional bronze lamp called kuthu vilaku still remains in all Brahmin homes, almost the sole relic of the era of brassware. The replacement of these brass and copper vessels by ‘ever-silver’ (stainless steel) was mainly on account of the ‘ever-silver’ quality. Brass and bronze vessels tended to get tarnished and their cleaning was a complex process done by domestic servants. As urban poverty made survival increasingly difficult for poor households, most domestic servants had to take up such work in more than one house. They were the first to resist brassware, as cleaning consumed a lot of time, which they could not afford. Also, as absenteeism among maids became routine, the task of cleaning was often left to the grown-up daughters or daughters-in-law of the house.

Brahmin mothers of the sixties and seventies collected ‘ever-silver’ vessels with a passion, but were still attached to the brass and bronze they brought along as dowry or heirlooms. Now the daughters took up the cudgel against brass and copper ware, and either through tactful persuasion or aggressive initiatives compelled their mothers to take them to the utensil stores that ran a profitable business in repurchasing old brassware. For days after, mothers were still to reconcile parting with them, and the few hundred rupees in their handbags concealed in the steel trunk were a poor substitute for the lost wares. They said to themselves and to other family members that they had not used those brass and copper vessels for ages, but they had a store of memories associated with each of them, such as how their mothers had got them, from where, about how her other sisters wanted them but that she was lucky, and so on.

The physics and chemistry of why a particular utensil was made of bronze and not of brass was common knowledge to women. It had to do with both heat regulation and chemi-
cal reaction of the particular food that was to be cooked in it, and almost each food item had its own special utensil. To this day there is a consensus among Tamil Brahmins that rasam (a light soup-like dish had with rice almost daily) tastes best when made in tin shombu, which has now disappeared from all Brahmin kitchens. As Brahmin women generally observed pollution taboos and were secluded during their menstruating period, young girls, often five-year-olds and above, were sent to the kitchen and forced to learn cooking. It is often remarked that no girl learns to make rasam without melting away at least one tin shombu in the process. The tin shombu was popular when charcoal fire was used in a small iron chula called kumuti. It started going out of use when kerosene stoves replaced the kumuti in the early sixties, and by the mid-seventies when gas stoves entered most Brahmin kitchens, the tin shombu vanished, as gas fires would melt the tin much faster than slow charcoal fires.

Among the vessel collection, the appam kuzhu and idli pathram stood out, the one for slowly deep-frying balls of jaggery and flour in ghee (clarified butter) and the other for steaming rice and lentil cakes. There was of course more than one idli pathram in every Brahmin kitchen. The smaller one was for family use, and made between 7-12 idlis at a time, and the bigger one, which could steam up to 36 idlis, was used for ceremonial occasions like marriages, when there were many guests. Every few months, the artisan who specialises in coating brass vessels with tin would be called in. That was perhaps the first lesson in metallurgy that children learnt, enthralled by the rubber billow being pumped to keep the fire going on a small tunnel-like chula dug in the ground. For days after, children went to that spot, where some ash still lay, and wondered how it was all done.

Those artisans are rarely seen these days in cities; like many others, they probably took to selling vegetable or something like that. However, while the tin-coating artisan has vanished, the knife-sharpener still comes around the streets of Chennai. Generally, he sharpens few regular knives, but more a special type of knife known in Tamil as aruvamanai. This is a broad metal knife with a base and a coconut grater at its head, which allowed women to cut vegetables squatting on the ground. Like a good typist who never looks at the keyboard, the expert in cutting vegetables worked very fast, without even looking at the aruvamanai. Their hands alone moved in rhythm while they engaged in serious gossip about the moolam nakshatram in a girl's horoscope or the maham nakshatram in a boy's, as their favorite pastime was often matchmaking. The aruvamanai remains in kitchens these days, if not for cutting vegetables at least for cutting sugarcane into small pieces on Pongal (Tamil harvest festival). But the coconut grater on top is rarely used, overtaken as it is by a modern contraption, which is faster, less strenuous and can be used while standing; and also fits on both the granite platforms in the kitchen or the sunmica-topped dining tables. In the 90s, as apartments became more common in Chennai and elsewhere, women preferred to do most kitchen chores standing, although it was the increasing use of dining tables in the 80s that began dispensing with squatting on the floors.

Eating at dining tables became a status symbol just like the possession of refrigerators, although both severely compromised Brahmin notions of pathu (pollution taboo associated with cooked food). But in many ways the replacement of brass, bronze, copper and tin vessels by stainless steel was the more significant change in terms of constituting indigenous domestic/kitchen modernity. All other modern status symbols in the realm of
cooking and dining came later. In the early phase, the 1950s, stainless steel modernity in Chennai distinguished Brahmin households in terms of those that possessed locally available stainless steel utensils and those that could procure the utensils available in Poona and Bombay through kin networks. The passion to collect stainless steel vessels found many Brahmin women spending their afternoons either in utensil stores or haggling with the vendors who brought utensils home in huge round baskets. Today there are few of those stainless steel vendors in Chennai and many have taken to selling plastic buckets and plastic containers. The reason has more to do with developments in the textile industry than a lack of buyers, for such utensil vendors now dot the roadsides much like vegetable or fruit sellers.

Vendors, Chits and All
Stainless steel utensil vendors who came home did not sell their wares for cash, but exchanged them for old clothes. They collected all kinds of clothes that were worn out but not soiled, be it cotton, silk, nylon or polyester. The most prized items were worn out Kanjeevaram silk saris with jari borders; the thicker the jari the greater the customer’s bargaining power. Those days jari borders were made with gold plated silver threads, which had resale value for the precious metal content that was melted and recovered. Now such jari borders set the price of saris so prohibitively high that consumer preference has shifted to synthetic jari, or what is popularly called ‘Japan jari’, and gold color thread work. The clever vendor was one who could tempt buyers with a particular utensil and induce them to part with clothes they had not considered ready to give away. Many women gave away a sari or two in anticipation of the next Deepawali purchase because they just could not resist a particular utensil; more often women judged the utensils by the thickness of the sheet metal and the finish. With silver jari going out of vogue, such vending practices have been rendered unprofitable forcing vendors to start selling plastics to an altogether different clientele of slum and low income households. Analogous to the stainless steel modernity of Brahmin households in the 60s and 70s, the 90s saw plastic modernity enter the slum households. They too replaced their few brass water pots with plastic ones, as these could be left unattended near public water taps and hand pumps when acute water scarcity hit many urban centers. Also, as more water had to be carried home, plastic vessels were less heavy. Most people probably pawned their brass utensils and never redeemed them.

Apart from this kind of barter trade, many Brahmin women acquired more utensils by enrolling themselves in ‘utensil chits’, known in Tamil as paathra chits. Stainless steel utensil stores first acquired pre-eminence in the two Brahmin localities of Mylapore and T. Nagar in Chennai, and subsequently set themselves up in other localities, as upper-caste non-Brahmin kitchens too joined the stainless steel modernity. All the well known utensil stores in Mylapore and T. Nagar had schemes of monthly ‘utensil chits’. These were like a recurring deposit account into which monthly payments of a fixed amount were made for a certain number of months at the end of which one could buy any utensil of one’s choice. Invariably the shops also had a lucky draw every month, and if one were lucky enough to win, one could pick up the utensil without making any further payments. Most non-working Brahmin housewives generally do not have bank accounts, and most of the household finance is controlled by the male head. Women generally save a little every month out of the
money they are given for household expenses, which they use to join the utensil chits. These women rarely buy utensils as outright cash purchases, except of course when they buy for marriages in their homes. Many begin collecting ‘ever-silver’ utensils for their daughter’s marriage when she is just two or three years old. For women who could not make trips to the shops, most shops had a team of mostly Brahmin women of lower economic strata, who would go around enrolling women for the chits and collecting their monthly payments as well. In the 60s and 70s, stainless steel modernity had caught on most particularly among Brahmins, and the Brahmin women who went around enrolling women in the utensil chits did more than just that. They often helped women exchange horoscopes of boys and girls and carried the neighbourhood Brahmin families’ news and gossip from one house to another. They acted as marriage counsellors for young married women, advised them on pregnancy-related health care, could be counted on to come and receive betel leaf and betel nut during religious ceremonies like Mangli Pondugal, and shared with the women the secrets of the deities in various temples, like whom to propitiate on which occasion.

Today, utensil chits are not as popular as they were; nor do women attach themselves to any particular utensil store as regular customers. There are far more stores around and equally large numbers of roadside vendors of stainless steel vessels. With the Salem steel plant’s production of sheet metal, utensil prices have become affordable, and cooking sets of saucepans and copper-bottom utensils of the Butterfly brand have become the heart-throb of many. Roadside vendors of stainless steel utensils do a good business these days, for Brahmin women used to giving two-by-two blouse pieces with betel leaf and betel nut on every auspicious occasion to other Brahmin women find that giving a small utensil is more affordable. Women of non-Brahmin households too have adopted this practice. Maybe one can call it “Sanskritisation under Modernity”.

**Cooker, Gas Stove and Smartness**

The most remarkable consequence of utensil chits was that most middle-class Brahmin households acquired their first pressure cooker through them. The pressure cooker was probably the first contemporary gadget to enter the Brahmin kitchen, and almost simultaneously the gas stove followed. To have acquired both was then considered by women as worthy of news among one’s kin and friends circle, and it was said over and over again how considerably cooking time was reduced and how fast the toor dhal got cooked. Before the pressure cooker one is inclined to believe that rice was cooked in pots, if not exactly over a wooden chula, at least with the help of the kerosene stove. That was not quite how. The 60s saw the introduction of a variety of kerosene stoves, but the Primus stove introduced much earlier was preferred. The Primus stove inspired some awe among women for it was a contraption whose principle they did not quite understand. Before lighting, the stove had to be pumped to bring the kerosene up from the base, which was a delicate job as one might pump too much kerosene and let it spill over, causing fire. This was when nylon saris had just been introduced, and there was the perennial fear that it might catch fire. It is also possible that many deaths due to kitchen fires, today deemed dowry deaths, were then written off as caused by the Primus stove.

Although wick kerosene stoves were considered safer, changing the wicks in a ten-
wick stove was tedious. The gas stove in comparison had far too many plus points. The only problem was the long wait to get a new connection. In many Brahmin homes, young girls were asked to register themselves after matriculation at the nearest authorised dealer for a new gas connection in their name. They got their gas connections just after post-graduation, a good five to six years later, when their marriages were being arranged. A gas connection thus became part of the girl's dowry. There was a time when a family was considered smart if it secured two gas cylinders so as to ensure uninterrupted supply. Some homes strictly enforced the rule that the cylinder suppliers should wash the cylinders in the bathroom or the nearest available tap before bringing it inside the kitchen, and the suppliers generally obliged for an additional rupee or two.

For a long time, the pressure cooker contest in Chennai was between the Prestige brand manufactured by the TTK House, a Chennai-based industrial concern, and Hawkins. For many Brahmin households, the choice was over-determined. The Prestige brand won over, though not on account of Brahmin loyalty to a Brahmin industrialist. Rather it was considered more convenient, because of its high-raised lid that allowed one to pile up the family's requirement of rice over toor dhal to be cooked simultaneously, than Hawkins with its flattened lid. If a woman had a line of lunch-carriers to be packed all at the same time, or if the family had lunch as early as 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning, these were serious considerations. Women soon learnt the basics of steam pressure cooking; they knew that if the Prestige cooker gasket was new, they should allow the steam to release three to four times for the rice and dhal to cook, and that as the gasket became old and slightly loosened, they should let the steam release a few more times. Often they kept tab of their neighbours' cooking schedules from the pressure cooker noise. The pressure cooker too underwent progress from aluminium to stainless steel, but unlike stainless steel utensils these were less popular. Nor has the recent Rice Cooker, an electrical appliance, caught on; it remains a showpiece for enthusiastic window shoppers, largely because it can cook rice alone, while the staple diet of the Brahmins requires toor dhal as well.

Despite its daily use, the pressure cooker never became the pride of the kitchen, nor for that matter did the refrigerator. The refrigerator became a marker of social and economic status along with the TV, both often standing in the same living or drawing-cum-dining room. And these days, if the apartment is small, sometimes you will find the washing machine there as well. In an era of competitive consumerism, families are eager to possess and display these items, to let the world know their worth. But the pride of the kitchen for every Brahmin woman is the Sumeet Mixie. What did the Mixie do to acquire this status? If we recall our earlier observation that idli and dosa have more culture and commerce than has hitherto been acknowledged, then the mystery of the Sumeet Mixie's status in the Brahmin kitchen is easier to decipher. Long before American and the French nutritionists came up with their theories of how the ratio of carbohydrates and proteins had to be maintained for a healthy diet, the Tamil Brahmin had already figured it out in his idli and dosa.

Grinders, Mixie and Subjectivity
idli and dosa made of rice and black gram lentil, the one steamed and the other fried like a pancake, need the dough to be ground after soaking the ingredients in water for several
hours. For centuries, women ground the rice and lentils in a stone grinder called the 
*aatuкал*, used for wet grinding. It is by all accounts a back-breaking job and was usually an 
afternoon chore. The *aatuкал* usually stood close to two other grinders, one a flat stone 
surface with a pestle known as the *اممی*, and the other, *येंద्राम*, a grinder with two round flat 
stones, the one on top to be rotated and used to grind dried cereals and lentils. Of the 
three, for some unknown reason, the *اممی* acquired a ritual status, and was obligatory near 
the *होमां* fire in Brahmin weddings. Marriage ceremonies at the auspicious *मुहूर्तम* 
time required the bride to place her foot on the *اممی*, and the groom to wash her feet. For 
most women, it is symbolic of bondage to kitchen life and grinding stones.

Perceptions of the extent of bondage varied both between the different grinding tech-
nologies as well as the different Brahmin groups. The *اممی* was used almost every day to 
grind the masala needed for cooking. A quick glance at the English edition of Meenakshi 
Ammal's *Samaithu Par* ("Cook and See") the most popular cookery book of Tamil Brahmin 
food, indicates the extent of grinding, usually with grated coconut, required for the different 
kinds of food. *कूटू*, *avial*, *sambhar* and sometimes even *रसम*, the staple of a Brahmin 
meal, all required the use of *اممی* for grinding. Even though grinding on the *اممی* was 
never considered as tedious as grinding on the *aatuкал*, many Brahmin households with 
office-goers whose lunch times varied from 7.30 to 10.30 in the morning found even the 
limited time for grinding on the *اممی* so bothersome that women often invented abbreviat-
ed versions of cooking. Grinding on the *aatuкал*, however, was definitely a drudgery and 
considered unavoidable at least twice or thrice a week. It is said that Thanjavur Brahmins 
would not like to get their daughters married into Palghat Brahmin households, because in 
such households grinding on the *aatuкал* was a daily compulsion. The Palghat Brahmin's 
 fondness for a special variety of lentil pancakes called *अधाई* required grinding every day, 
although in recent years their claim to it has been undermined by the Udupi hotels in 
Chennai that offer it on their menus as ‘Malabar Adhai’.

After centuries of cultural adaptation, and many decades after electrical and mechani-
cal inventions had caught on, *aatuкал* grinding became mechanised, with large versions of 
the present wet grinders. In the late 60s and early 70s, wet-grinding shops came up all over 
Chennai, often managed by Brahmin-looking men who wore their threads prominently as 
markers of status. Despite the Brahmins' fussiness about matters of ritual purity and pollu-
tion, they took their rice and lentils to these shops to be ground into dough, while com-
plaining endlessly of possible cheating. Scientifically minded Brahmins, and there are many 
like that, resorted to theories of physics and chemistry to suggest that electrically opera-
ted machines tended to heat up quickly leading to quicker fermentation of the dough. This 
process, they believed, reduced the dough. But entrepreneurial talents were soon to outwit 
everyone, and the grinding shops hardly knew that theirs was a very short life indeed.

If today Coimbatore remains on the industrial map despite the secular recessionary 
trend of its long-standing textile industry, it is largely due to the wet grinder industry. Much 
as computers shrank in size from IBM mainframes to desktop PCs, laptops and palm tops, 
wet grinders too kept shrinking. First to fit into kitchens, and replace the traditional *aatuкал*. 
Then they became sleeker, and tilted, to fit on top of the narrow kitchen platforms of new 
apartments. With electrically operated wet grinders, the long-standing practice of having
idlis and dosas thrice or so a week, what elderly Brahmins used to call pala aharam or ‘variety food’, continued. Wet grinders may have reduced the drudgery of the aatukal, but office-going women found that washing the grinder was still an unavoidable chore. Yet another instance of entrepreneurial acumen was the sale of ready-made dough in plastic pouches; appropriately, the most popular pouch is called Thayar, meaning ‘ready’ in Tamil. Dry mixes for instant idlis and dosas, even those of the famous MTR brand, lost their market share to the ‘ready’ mixes. And the sleek, bright blue and red wet grinders now stand unused, but remain an important marker of consumer status in most Brahmin kitchens.

In contrast, the Sumeet Mixie that replaced the traditional ammi remains the heartthrob of Brahmin women. No marriage paathra sheer or utensil dowry is complete these days without one. Its versatility for both wet and dry grinding makes it possible to retain the authenticity of Brahmin cooking. Working women especially find that it enables them to balance their dual roles – to prepare the preferred but complicated combination of kootu and thogai in the morning and take the 8:45 bus from Perambur to reach their office in Adyar on time. Even in households where NRI children bring back an Osterizer bought from Jackson Heights in Queens, New York, the Sumeet Mixie stands next to it, unruffled by foreign competition.

Behind the story of the Sumeet Mixie lies the little known story of the “entrepreneur for the masses”, V.G. Panneerdas or VGP, a Nadar Christian whose life moved from rags to riches. On Chennai’s famous Mount Road is the VGP showroom, stacked with consumer durables. VGP can be credited for truly understanding the links between gadgets, desires and money much more than the firms producing the durables, who thought that advertising alone was enough to create a demand. Before the days of credit cards, VGP realised that desires alone were credit worthy. Many middle-class homes purchased their first ceiling fan in the 60s under the instalment scheme begun by VGP, the VGP men coming home to collect monthly instalments.

Much the same happened to the Sumeet Mixie in the 70s. Once again the VGP instalment scheme got the Mixie into Brahmin homes until there was no looking back. It moved from there to refrigerators, two-in-ones and black and white TVs. By the time it came to colour TVs, most salaried Brahmin households had the advantage of a few pay scale revisions and outright purchases of colour TVs and washing machines became the norm. With more and more cash and credit card transactions, there are more festival discounts in the year. Not just for Deepawali or Pongal, which was the practice till recently, but newer discounts like Aadhi Thallupadi during the Tamil month of Aadhi - interesting instances of the merging of temporal modernity with temporal tradition. Even jewellery and silk sari shops, the two crazes of middle-class Tamils if one goes by the crowds, have followed the VGP approach.

An “entrepreneur for the masses” could make the masses dream and transform their dreams into reality. He has now put up a beach resort in Chennai, for people to dream in comfort on weekends, not just about gadgets but also their Singapore holidays and Dubai shopping. It is an altogether different story why his astute understanding of gadgetry and subjectivity failed to make people dream about ‘homes’ in the way he wanted them to.