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Culinary Trends at Hindu Weddings That Contribute to Perceptions of Middle-Class Identities among Indian South Africans

Marriage ceremonies and celebrations globally are often celebrated with pomp, exuberance, and glamor. Hindu wedding ceremonies in the diaspora purposefully contribute to the sustenance of Hindu rituals and lifeways. The Hindu Indian community in Durban, South Africa has sought to uphold its marriage traditions and rituals, which have also been influenced by both local and Western cultural trends. Contemporary global and local influences are evident in the culinary consumption trends at Hindu weddings. Food consumption patterns and preferences have evolved to serve as identity markers of sociocultural patterns and social class positions amid middle-class Indians in Durban. This qualitative study based on twenty-five in-depth interviews reflects on the ways in which food is used to celebrate and represent Hindu traditions and beliefs at Indian South African Hindu weddings, how food reflects on status, how conditions have changed, and various reasons for such change. The study contributes to the lacunae in scholarly literature concerning critical appreciation of Hindu weddings in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: consumption—Durban—Hindu weddings—Indian South Africans—middle-class—wedding foods

Marriage is perceived to be one of the most important life-cycle rituals (*samskāra*) for all Hindus for two primary reasons, one of which is to physically reproduce. The other reason is that marriage is seen as a structure or institution through which one perpetuates cultural, spiritual, and religious practices (Mullatti 1995; Singh 1989; Lal and Vahed 2013; Singh and Bhoola 2016, 2018). Indeed, it is virtually compulsory for all Hindus to marry, since it allows for the preservation and continuity of religious and cultural practices and philosophical values of Hinduism (Singh 1989). “For Hindus, marriage is for life, a purificatory ritual and a sacrament,” according to Leela Mullatti (1995, 1).

The marriage ceremony therefore usually involves relatives from both the bride and bridegroom’s paternal and maternal families and has become an elaborate event that aims to unite two families through a new relationship that becomes consecrated as a result of Hindu marriage pre-events, the wedding ceremony itself, and the post-ceremony events. The sustenance of Hindu practices within South Africa has been studied in a variety of contexts both in India and abroad (for example, Lal and Vahed 2013; Gopal, Khan, and Singh 2014). Naturally, such rites of passage must adapt to local contexts in order to survive. Thus, the localization of Hindu rituals in South Africa tends to be a process combining the will to practice traditional rituals with the challenges posed by modern sociocultural contexts. The marriage ritual has also become an important social event for many Indian South Africans because the Hindu philosophy of family values and reproduction are upheld by it. In addition, there are various sociocultural representations that emerge at these events. The collective beliefs and opinions embodied symbolically in the performance of a Hindu marriage are showcased, and social conduct in relation to cultural and traditional practices are reified as a result.

This article includes a descriptive overview of contemporary Hindu weddings in Durban, which serves as the background for understanding the context of the study. Contemporary global and social influences are evident in discussions that describe culinary consumption trends at weddings. The modified and acceptable foodways at such weddings are described in relation to current food trends, the accepted practice of blending cuisines at weddings, vegetarianism and nonvegetarianism, as well as the consumption of alcoholic beverages at wedding festivities. Through these perspectives, we attempt to identify certain markers that assist in understanding what constitutes good hospitality practices among Indian South African middle-class

people in Durban. The sociocultural and class representations of food at a Hindu wedding are brought to the fore through a qualitative methodological approach. The authors conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews to serve as primary data. The aim of our study is to fill some of the existing lacunae in the preexisting literature that contextualize and analyze the sociocultural and class representations of food practices at Hindu weddings within the South Asian diaspora. The way in which food is used to celebrate and represent the traditions and beliefs of Hindus at Indian South African weddings has been relatively undocumented.

Diversity in the world has illuminated the differences in the way people connect to food, rituals, symbols, and belief systems. In his concept of the “culinary triangle,” for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) explains that the study of food enables an anthropologist to understand a society’s unconscious attitudes toward the meals it consumes. He notes that culinary study is of greater value when one’s palatable taste and food preferences have been emplaced in specific social and ethnic traditions (see Counihan 1998). Following his logic, we proceed to study the fluid food consumption patterns of ethnic groupings within a globalized context in order to attempt to determine if consumption patterns are still being shaped by influential social structures, such as religious and educational institutions, as well as the impact of collective residential communities or influential individuals within the target communities under study.

Anthropological research (Douglas 1972; Kaplan 2013; Jagganath 2017; Kumar 2003) has focused on the interrelationships between food and cultures globally and the impact of modernization and globalization on food consumption (Singh and Bhoola 2018). In our case, each caste and ethnolinguistic group originates from a variety of geographically specific locations in South Asia, and their differing income levels have been considered. Such groups perceive or imagine their “real” identities based on the development and evolution of their beliefs concerning which foods are appropriate to serve at Hindu religious events such as weddings. From a consumerist perspective, the food, location, décor, music, and attire of the bridal families are markers of social identities that are ratified by public engagements during spectacular wedding events (Singh and Bhoola 2016).

Hindu weddings within the Indian diaspora

Publications that focus on Hindu weddings, marriage, and family life within the Indian diaspora around the globe discuss themes such as patriarchy, feminism, arranged marriages, the dowry system, and tradition versus modernity (Sheel 2008; Biao 2008; Pande 2021). The wedding as a cultural performance among transnational South Asian communities surely contributes to the ongoing development of Hindu identity by celebrating the wedding itself as an integral aspect of culture and tradition for diasporic Indians living in locations like Houston, Texas, which was studied by Gail Sutherland (2003), for instance. However, very few scholarly studies articulate and discuss the sociocultural context and anthropological interpretations of Indian meals served at diasporic Hindu weddings. Scholars such as Hannah Bradby (2002) discuss the symbolic aspects of the exchange of food among Punjabi people living in Glasgow,

Scotland. She describes how food sharing at events like weddings gustatorily and olfactorily demonstrates various aspects of one's identity. Her study pays special attention to perceptions of what a celebratory meal at such an event should include as well as descriptions of an average, daily Punjabi meal in Glasgow. More recently, the popularity and commodification of "authentic" Indian cuisine being packaged for home consumption in the United States has also been analyzed (Srinivas 2006).

Comparatively, southern African studies (Erlank 2014; Kuper 2016; White 2017) focus mostly on bride wealth and Caucasian Christian weddings within different racial groupings that take into account kinship. There are a few studies that pay attention to the cultural attributes of South African weddings, where the role of indigenous songs at weddings in modern times is analyzed (Mulaudzi 2013). The marriage ceremony as a representation of love and desire is often depicted as being an achievement among South Africans (Pauli and Dawids 2017). The multiple sociocultural influences and symbolic meanings of selected wedding practices have also been elaborated upon. Amid Africans in Namibia, for example, weddings represent varying notions of modernity within different class and social groupings. Such studies further explain that weddings in Namibia have become an indicator of eligibility to belong to the middle class (Pauli and van Dijk 2016).

Julia Pauli and Rijk van Dijk (2016) contend that marriage in South Africa has been on a decline in the early twenty-first century. According to a 2023 survey, more and more South African couples are opting to practice conjugal relationships outside of marriage by simply living together. The survey proves that fewer marriages took place in the year 2020 than in previous years. Moreover, in 2021 there was a 13 percent hike in the number of divorces recorded (Statistics South Africa 2023). However, none of these local studies focus on food practices and preferences or culinary trends at South African weddings. Scholarly work on Hindu marriages and practices in relation to customs, cuisine, and traditions within the Indian South African community has been minimal. Karen Fernandez, Ekant Veer, and John L. Lastovicka (2011) describe the sociocultural meanings of the gifting of gold jewelry between family members during Southern African marriages, in particular from the matriarch of the groom's family to the newly wedded bride. Aashistra Babulal (2011) specifically focuses his study on Hindu marriage and the law, whereas the dissolution of Hindu marriage is detailed and described in a case study authored by Jacqueline Heaton (2008).

There are two publications that focus primarily on Hindu marriages within South Africa. In 1956, Hilda Kuper published a descriptive paper of a Hindustani marriage ceremony in Durban. Her foundational paper provides a brief description of the wedding meal served, but its anthropological significance in relation to the meal's social meanings is excluded. Fifty years later her study was usefully analyzed by Anand Singh (2007). He emphasizes the need for an anthropological study in the contemporary era to update Kuper's findings. In comparison, Kuper (1956) makes reference to the traditional criteria utilized for spouse selection within the Hindu community in Durban, which include caste, ethnicity, and family reputation. Singh (2007) discusses how this community was socialized after apartheid during the democratizing era in South Africa. The birth of a new South Africa in the year 1994 was indicative of egalitarian values such as equality for all, as well as the role

of integrating ethnicity and concomitant cultural elements that could symbolize a newly united nation. Therefore, in his discussion of unmarried Hindustani youth and the emerging patterns of change in romantic courtships, he includes partner selection preferences and wedding dynamics among Hindustani couples in the twenty-first century. This study, too, excluded culinary preferences and modern trends in cuisine that have infiltrated Hindu weddings in Durban (Singh 2007). Newspapers such as the weekly *Sunday Tribune*, which includes a subsection titled “Herald,” nonetheless focus on local Indian communities. They regularly feature weddings in Durban to highlight the featured couples and their selection of wedding attire, the venues for events, the weddings themselves, décor artists, caterers, and confectioners.

Aside from those already discussed, contemporary studies that focus on the lifeways, cultural practices, and food and its consumption patterns among Indian South Africans in Durban are few. Gerelene Jagganath (2017), in a study based on Indian women immigrants residing in Durban, states that food has become a “significant cultural marker of identity in contemporary societies and provides a means to comprehend a multitude of social dynamics amongst people, cultural relations and lifeways as well as class and consumption” (2017, 1). Sophie Chevalier (2015) published on food and consumption patterns of people of all race groups living in Durban, which contributes to the categorization of South African middle classes. She explains that consumption patterns no longer define large groups of people, but rather the individuals living middle-class lifestyles. Henning Melber (2022) adds that these social contexts contribute toward dissecting the preferences and identities of the new middle class. The view conveyed by the essays just mentioned is that early socialization and cultural influences within the home have assisted anthropologists in understanding and analyzing the food preferences made by middle-class citizens of Indian descent, as well as how they have incorporated food into their holistic identity.

Similarly, Chevalier (2015, 119) indicates that “eating is also a principal vehicle for sharing social life and for expressing a range of lifestyles.” Therefore, food in some contextual settings can be a pointer to indicate social status. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) had earlier posited that eating habits and food choices tend to reproduce class distinctions and reinforce differences between people based on social, ethnic, and religious grounds. A number of sociocultural meanings are evident in the food choices individuals make, and these choices are influenced mostly by accessibility, availability, and resources. The value in understanding the role food plays within a social setting like a wedding is that it is an indicator of cultural consumption patterns and their correlates. This understanding therefore contributes to an appreciation of traditional and nontraditional practices in ethnic minority communities such as the Indian diasporic ones located around the world (Bourdieu 1984).

The Hindu community in KwaZulu-Natal

Indians were brought to Colonial Natal from “British” India to work as indentured laborers on sugar plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thereafter, other Indians migrated to South Africa as “passenger” Indians with the

initial intention of supplying commodities to indentured and “free” Indians. Indians were mainly of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian religious backgrounds. Hindu immigrants originated from all parts of India, such as the north, south, and west. As a result, vernacular and caste identities varied tremendously, since the cultural heritage from these different regions was so diverse. Among Hindus, the languages that were spoken were Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Gujarati. Within each of these languages, dialectal diversity was also indicative of regional influences and origins (Kumar 2013). Bringing Hindu religious practices and ideas mainly from India to Durban and other South African provinces is still ongoing. South Africa currently has immigrant populations from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka also, but their exact locations and numbers are yet to be documented (Jagganath 2017).

Hinduism is still practiced in Durban, albeit with distinct South African characteristics. This is evident in the numerous temples that now dot the landscape, for the diasporic Hindu community began to erect new structures of worship within a few years of the arrival of the first Indians in 1860. Some of these temples have adjoining halls that serve as venues for bridal couples to host their weddings. For instance, The Umgeni Road Temple’s adjoining halls, the Hindu Sanskruti Kendra’s adjoining halls, and the Merebank Temple halls have been available to the community for social, religious, and cultural events since the year 2001 (Kumar 2013).

Study participants

Six heterosexual married couples and thirteen additional individual respondents were interviewed for our study. Of these study participants, nine were relatives, such as parents of the bridal couples and maternal or paternal aunts and uncles (see table 1). All interviewees were practicing Hindus but from different linguistic groups. Seventeen of the study participants were from the Hindi-speaking group, six were from the Tamil-speaking group, and two were Gujarati speaking. The remaining three study participants were comprised of event coordinators and caterers. One participant was a vegetarian, and the rest followed an omnivorous diet. The six weddings that are described by study participants (that is, six young couples and family members) are reflected upon in the analysis and discussions that follow. Table 1 indicates the detailed demographics of the participants.

Overview of contemporary Hindu weddings in Durban

Hindu marriage ceremonies can be marginally or widely distinct from one another due to regional practices, traditions, and the vernacular variations spoken. For instance, Tamil wedding customs differ from Gujarati weddings in the sequence of Hindu deities that are worshiped, the offerings made, and the language in which the prayers are conducted. But central to all Hindu weddings are common rituals practiced by all Hindus irrespective of their dialectal, regional, and customary diversity. Central Hindu wedding procedures follow what has come to be known as *sanātana dharma* (“eternal duty”), which is the reformist version of traditional Hindu law that prescribes much of the teachings and practices within the Hindu diaspora

Table 1: Demographics of 25 Study Participants

Occupational Category	Male	Female	Younger than 35 years	Older than 35 years
Caterers	3			3
Event coordinators		2		2
Engineers	2		2	
Medical doctors and radiologists	2	3	5	
Accountants	1	1	2	
Graphic designers		1	1	
ICT/Information technologists	2		2	
Housewives that have small businesses or part-time employment		5		5
Businessmen based in Durban	3			3

(Dimitrova 2007).¹ The weddings have been theoretically unmodified but clearly differ via vernacular, regional, and customary diversity. Thus, the Sanskrit terminology used during wedding rituals by Hindu priests in Durban still more or less adheres to Hindu precedents set in India prior to the indenture period.² English, however, has also been incorporated into most Hindu nuptial ceremonies, so that rituals and their symbolic value are more easily understood by communities who largely no longer speak the vernacular or comprehend the liturgical Sanskritic *mantras* recited during *pūjās* (“worship services”) of various sorts, including weddings.

The key rituals structurally include the offering of food and water to the groom and *kanyadān* (“gift of the virgin”).³ It is also widely believed that during these rituals the parents of the bride give away their *lakṣmī*, which suggests that the new bride becomes symbolically equivalent to the Hindu goddess of wealth whose name is Lakshmi. A gift of food from the father to his daughter also takes place, after which family members and guests present the new bride with cotton clothes, brass and silver trays, fruits, chocolates, and sweetmeats. This is followed by igniting a fire in a pit reminiscent of the Vedic *yajña* (fire sacrifice). Fire is revered as the Vedic deity Agni (“fire personified”), who is considered to be one of the highest forms of Hindu divinity, as he is a mediator between humans and the pantheon of deities. The fire then bears witness to the seven promises the couple makes to one another while encircling the fire. This process is known as *saptapadī*, the “seven steps” of marriage undertaken by the couple.⁴ The couple promises to grow together in happiness and spirituality, to attain prosperity and personal growth together as well as live long, healthy lives, while being true in their commitment to each other. The climax of the wedding is when the groom applies *sindūr* (vermilion paste) along his new wife’s hair parting (Kuper 1956). This sequential set of ritual practices is also documented

to be the normative wedding nuptial procedure among various diasporic Hindu communities, for example in Houston, Texas (Sutherland 2003).

Other prewedding rituals are practiced at ceremonies days before the actual wedding takes place. They include customary celebratory dancing, symbolic cleansing, and prayers to invoke the presence of God (*bhagvān*). Couples also tend to host reception parties on the same day as the wedding but after the nuptial rituals have been completed. At times, the reception party is hosted a day later, depending on the personal preferences of the couple and bridal families. Each event is usually a colorful, ritual-based affair attended by extended family members and friends.

The women of the bride's family are usually involved in the preparation of *prasād*, the food offerings made to Hindu deities at the prenuptial ceremonies. But the food and snacks served to invited guests are prepared by caterers. Traditionally, the food served to the guests at the prewedding events and the weddings was sometimes prepared by the women of the family. The famous Durban cookbook published in 1961 titled *Indian Delights*, for example, details recipes like *biryānī* and other popular dishes in the quantities of ingredients that are required to cater up to eight hundred wedding guests (Vahed and Waetjien 2010, 112).⁵ Cookbooks and personal photographs of women preparing food in the past during wedding festivities suggest that food preparation used to largely be the traditional task of women.

Contemporary food trends at Hindu weddings

Menus at wedding ceremonies still tend to include both traditional dishes and contemporary dishes that have been influenced by international or other local cuisines. There are traditional regional customs that are sometimes still maintained and influence the types of dishes served at weddings. Hindustani families tended to serve vegetarian food (Kuper 1956) to their guests, while the South Indian families incorporated a variety of nonvegetarian dishes into their menu (Wilson 2010). These historically based regional food traditions are no longer practiced because of the constantly increasing number of intergroup marriages between Hindus who have different linguistic and cultural roots. In the 1950s, the cuisine type would have been traditionally reflective of the geographical location from where the families originated in India. This was a common practice, especially if the bride and groom shared the same place of origin, cultural roots, and traditions. For instance, the meals served would be prepared in the appropriate cuisine type that articulated the unique flavors of North Indian cuisine, South Indian cuisine, or Gujarati cuisine. Nowadays, it is an accepted "breach" of normative practice in Durban for a Tamil- or Telegu-speaking individual to marry a Hindustani- or Gujarati-speaking person. Hinduism in Durban does not prescribe any ceremonially specific rituals and food practices for interfaith, intercaste, or interregional marriages, and it is the individual families' responsibility to make decisions related to religious and customary practices (Khan and Singh 2015).

Food served at prewedding events, wedding ceremonies, and reception parties, therefore, has been largely reflective of the bridal couple's personal preferences and familial customs. Menus consist of a wide variety of dishes that have originated

from a blend of cuisine types including “authentic” Indian cuisine,⁶ Durban Indian cuisine,⁷ or dishes that are borrowed and adapted from other local or foreign cultures. Examples include foods such as pastas, puddings, and especially the wedding cake. It has become common and trendy for couples to celebrate their union after the marriage ceremony by cutting and sharing a wedding cake with each other and with their guests, then proposing a toast with alcoholic beverages, champagne and sparkling wines being the most popular. Often at reception parties, selected alcoholic beverages are available to guests. The consumption of various cuisines at public events allows people to make connections and explore controversies that exist in blended cultures, modernized societies, and the gradual demise of traditional practices (Singh and Bhoola 2018). The bridal family’s values are echoed through the type and choice of dishes they choose to serve at their weddings or prenuptial functions. In contemporary times, food has possibly come to be a representative of class status of the bridal couple and their families, since the consumption of decadent meals has become a common practice for people from the middle and upper classes in Durban (Chevalier 2015). Such gastronomic feasts are often rich in flavor and high in calories, being prepared with high-cholesterol ingredients such as clarified butter (*ghī*). The indulgent versions of curries served at weddings are most often prepared with ingredients such as creamy dairy, sugar, and butter. These same ingredients are also utilized to prepare the sweetest and finest of desserts, pastries, and cakes, which are also served at the ceremony to present a plethora of gastronomic delights.

The blend of cuisines at Hindu weddings in Durban

Two of the six couples that were interviewed hosted their weddings at four- and five-star hotels in Durban. They were constrained by contractual agreements to use their in-house catering services, so clients could not recruit independent caterers who specialize specifically in Indian cuisines. Such instances present couples with an opportunity to serve their guests a blend of different types of cuisines at their weddings. The buffets can consist of a variety of salads, breads, pasta dishes, vegetable *biryānī*, grilled meats, and steamed vegetables served alongside curries, fragrant rice dishes, and an array of Western and traditional Indian desserts, such as *kṣīr* (sweet vermicelli prepared with milk, sugar, saffron, cardamon, and nutmeg) and *sūjī* (semolina).⁸ The wedding cake is served together with tea and coffee. Often the vegetable *biryānī* is incorporated into the elaborate menu along with other dishes. In addition to that, caterers that specialize primarily in Indian cuisine have ventured into preparing dishes from other cuisines too, such as creamy pastas made with locally available fresh vegetables, soups, along with both vegetarian and nonvegetarian lasagnas and Chinese noodles. Bradby (2002) provides three perspectives of wedding meals that emerged from his qualitative study of thirty-two Asian women from Glasgow. The majority of his study participants agreed that the wedding meal needs to be special and rich in comparison to daily food. It must also be plentiful and include dishes with meat.

Other study participants also described the extravagant buffet stations at weddings, which include cuisine variations that are not usually included on Hindu

wedding menus in Durban. These include cuisines such as Mexican, Chinese, Thai, and selected delicacies from South Indian cuisine. These consumption patterns are closely aligned with Dana Kaplan's 2013 discussion of middle-class consumption patterns, which are showcased through events such as weddings. The omnivorous type of diet includes the mixing and matching of a variety of dishes and foods that he indicates as contributing factors that mark class and social distinctions.

The majority of our respondents indicated that they believed having a variety of cuisines and dishes for their guests to select from reflected generous hospitality, which is to say they were being very considerate wedding hosts. The combination of cuisines available at a wedding also represented a competitiveness between the hosting families and their guests. One participant explains it as follows: "My mother decided that the wedding had to be different to my cousin's wedding in more than one way. This meant that even her selection of foods served to guests on the wedding day had to be different and far more decadent than my cousin's wedding. This did mean that we had to allocate a bigger budget for food for 450 guests."

Kaplan (2013) states that new middle-class couples want to be perceived as good hosts by their social circles and the broader community at large. They can achieve this task by hosting a wedding that is different from the norm. She explains that representation of too much individuality can be seen as presumptuous and elitist. Table décor trends for these weddings depict both influences from the West and the East and often include table decorations and eating utensils predominantly utilized by people of other cultures. Candles, candelabras, under plates, wine glasses, and champagne glasses sometimes accompany the blended cuisine menu and the traditional Indian menu. A culture of a cosmopolitan South Africa is represented in these instances. However, there are Indian South Africans who have a preference for upholding tradition in their choice of décor, tableware, and meals served at their weddings.

Caterers explained in detail during the interviews that there is a tendency for people, especially within the same social circles and families, to be in competition with one another. The avenue to outdo one another was to have elaborate and expensive meals served at weddings accompanied by extravagant decorations. One caterer said that some bridal families believed that a simple vegetarian menu would indicate that the hosting family or couple is of a poor financial background, stingy, or has low standards of hospitality.

A Western tradition: Cutting the wedding cake

Three of the six couples interviewed indicated that they had cut and shared a cake after the wedding ceremony. The caterers and event coordinator stated that this has become a very popular trend in the early twenty-first century. The cakes have mostly been described as elaborate. Simon Charsley (1988) explains that the fancy two- or three-tiered wedding cake had its birth in the nineteenth century among urban middle-class British people. Cakes have become a global phenomenon in both simplicity and extravagance in the early twenty-first century. Kuper (1956) and Singh

(2007) make no mention of the wedding cake in their publications, but in Charsley's (1988) research it is mentioned that this trend has become increasingly common.

The three couples that opted not to have a wedding cake had various personal reasons for their decision. One couple explained that fancy tiered cakes were expensive, and because they had many guests at their wedding, a large three-tier cake would have been required. Another couple explained that it was not important to them and that it would prolong the wedding formalities. The last couple explained that they opted to have a wedding cake after they returned from their honeymoon and shared it with their family and friends at their parents' home. Convenience, cost, and practicality were determining factors for them. The consumption of nonvegetarian dishes and alcohol at Hindu weddings in Durban has also become more prevalent and even quite common. "Wedding food is perceived as constructing, integrating, reproducing and transforming social identities and communities," according to Kaplan (2013, 218). The symbolic representations of the food presented to guests are numerous, one of which is the building of a collective identity, which can impact the merging of cultures.

There are conflicting perceptions about the permissibility of the consumption of meat dishes at Hindu weddings, however. Hindu South Africans whose origins can be traced to southern India often eat meat at weddings, even though many of them increasingly prefer vegetarian food at weddings. At the same time, those claiming to be from northern India, although they may be omnivorous, prefer vegetarian dishes at weddings. Vegetarianism in both the north and south of India tends to reflect higher social status, and the practice is apparently rooted in such hierarchical notions. These preferences are nonetheless influenced by familial heritage and practices, individual beliefs, and contemporary social influences of the community (Bradby 2002). Mary Douglas (1972) classically exclaimed that food is a communication system, with particular foods or choices of foods and cuisines having the ability to transmit information about the self to others. Within diaspora societies it is often the case that food regulations governed by religious, traditional, and cultural sanctions have been reformed through migration, adaptation, and the process of acculturation (Singh and Bhoola 2018).

Most of our respondents indicated their preference for having both vegetarian and nonvegetarian menus at the prewedding events and wedding ceremony. However, of the six couples interviewed, four of them opted to have a vegetarian and nonvegetarian menu on the wedding day, even though they served vegetarian food at their prewedding events.

Bradby (2002, 125) explains that having "plentiful . . . meaty and other rich dishes at a marriage meal was essential to demonstrate good hospitality." Perceptions of stinginess are strongly associated with simple Indian vegetarian dishes like everyday *dāl* and potatoes. Serving only them is also seen as a meal enjoyed by lower economic groups by the Punjabi Hindu community residing in Glasgow. Chicken and lamb curry have been documented to be the most favorite dishes among middle-class Indian South Africans living in Durban (Chevalier 2015).

A vegetarian diet has been historically encouraged by religious beliefs of high-caste Hinduism globally. Despite that, a large proportion of Indian South Africans consume

nonvegetarian foods regularly. Study participants indicated that most Hindus consume poultry, seafood, and lamb with the exception being beef. Other Hindus choose to consume beef, too, despite the fact that it is still considered to be taboo (Bradby 2002). The consumption of beef is considered taboo among Hindus because of the cow's significance as a revered and respected animal and its association with particular deities (Korom 2000).

Most Hindus in Durban opt to not consume meat on days of religious festivals and special days of prayer. The consumption of chicken, fish, and lamb, with the exception of beef, has been the typical diet of most Hindus residing in diaspora communities globally, whereas vegetarian diets are still more prominent in India itself among upper-caste Hindus (Saunders 2007). The event coordinator and the caterers interviewed stated that weddings and celebrations have become more about representing the couples' personal preferences and their meal choices. One caterer elaborated by commenting that "meat dishes such as mutton *biryānī*, or chicken, or fish curries have been primarily served at reception parties that take place after the wedding ceremony. These are often accompanied by both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. However, families are often in conflict about this, as in many instances, the Hindu rituals are completed in the same venue and the after party begins."

The consumption of alcohol has become a norm among mainly men at prenuptial events and weddings. The six bridal couples indicated that they all served alcohol at their prenuptial events as well as on the wedding day itself, alongside vegetarian menus. They further stated that alcohol consumption has become part of the family foodways, because it was expected that intoxicating beverages should be available for family and guests at such events. One couple elaborated during the interview by explaining that "sometimes alcohol is served in a discreet manner while the ceremony is being performed at wedding venues. Men leave their seats at their dining tables to socialize outside the hall and have a drink. In most cases, the alcohol is served in an adjoining hall, or from the boot of a car in the parking vicinity."

The majority of the respondents indicated that they believed the consumption of alcohol is indeed permissible at Hindu weddings, but only half of them noted that they preferred to consume alcohol at a celebratory wedding event. The other half of respondents indicated that they would prefer to drink alcohol at the prewedding events and the wedding reception only, but not at the wedding ceremony itself because of its religious nature. Another study participant indicated a more orthodox view by insisting that "it is very disrespectful to enjoy an alcoholic drink in the company of elderly people at weddings." So, even though it is common knowledge that family members consume alcohol, it is still considered a sign of respect not to do so in front of elders. Five participants mentioned that they believed once the wedding ceremony is completed and the *yajña* has been removed from the wedding venue, it is acceptable to serve meat and alcohol to guests. Literature indicates that Punjabi Hindus in India as well as in the diaspora serve and consume meat at all wedding events (Bradby 2007). It is not clearly articulated, however, if the consumption of alcohol is permitted during the wedding ceremony or only upon completion. This study reveals that the consumption of both vegetarian and nonvegetarian meals and alcohol are common practices at both pre- and post-Hindu wedding events in Durban.

Vegetarian food trends and the upkeep of the traditional meal

Global Indian and South Asian diasporas generally differ in the ways they sustain traditional meals at wedding celebrations. Bradby (2007) documented that food is mainly vegetarian at Punjabi Sikh and Hindu wedding events in Glasgow, and that consumption of alcohol at these events is prohibited. At a Hindu wedding in Houston, Sutherland (2003) notes in addition that although the bridal families had a preference for Western cuisine, the family served a vegetarian Indian meal to their guests on their wedding day.

Two out of six bridal couples indicated that they only had a vegetarian menu at their weddings. These vegetarian menus were also a blend of a variety of cuisine types, such as Durban Indian, “authentic” Indian, and Italian. Participants indicated that popular vegetarian menus included vegetable *biryānī* with all its accompaniments, such as *dāl* (split pigeon pea or chickpea lentils blended with cooked tomatoes, onions, and spices), *dahī* (cultured yogurt spiced with fresh coriander or mint), and *sūjī* (Parbhoo 2008). Additional accompaniments would include plates of fried snacks like vegetarian *samosās*⁹ and *paṭṭa* (deep-fried *madumbe* leaves battered in a mix of yogurt, chickpea flour, and aromatic spices).¹⁰ Other popular accompaniments include salads, pickles, and a variety of battered fried vegetables (*pakaurā*).

A menu like the one just described is perceived to be traditional vegetarian wedding fare in Durban by a majority of the study participants. The anthropological study of traditional foods has the capacity to contribute toward the analysis of cultural and religious practices of ethnic minorities. People’s value systems are studied in relation to the types of diets they prefer, either vegetarianism or omnivorous diets (Singh and Bhoola 2018). This is also affirmed by the caterers and event coordinator interviewed. Yet, the consumption of vegetarian food has been a traditional and respected practice at Hindu weddings by Indian South Africans for decades. The wedding menu at a Hindustani wedding in Durban in the 1950s was purely vegetarian, consisting of five different vegetable dishes inclusive of sweet delicacies, which were served on banana leaves (Kuper 1956, 214). The extent of Westernization and localization is therefore clear in our current findings that are backed up by much of the cited literature.

Caterers told us that the bulk preparation of *biryānī* in a large pot on a fire makes the dish unique, something valued at weddings. The cooking process on the fire contributes to a distinct smoky, savory flavor, with an aroma other than that normally prepared on a stove or in an oven at home. More than half of the participants indicated that this traditional menu is still popular today at wedding ceremonies in Durban. One participant opined, “I look forward to eating that wedding *biryānī* because it is cooked on a fire. It just tastes so much nicer.” Another participant said, “The *biryānī* is enough. How much can people eat? Also, food is a costly affair.” Participants made reference during the interviews to historical narratives that support the belief that the preparation described above has been a traditional practice for more than five decades in Durban. A modernized version of the vegetarian menu served at Hindu weddings in Durban includes diverse vegetarian curries (for example, a combination of beans, a fresh vegetable, potato, and *panīr*, a soft cheese that is formed through the coagulation of milk), along with the *biryānī*. *Panīr* is perceived to be a delicacy because of its rich creamy texture and its unique flavor. These curries are accompanied with

unleavened Indian breads and rice. The caterers indicated that there is a growing demand for *panīr* curries and different varieties of the dish. This creamy cheese has become representative of opulence in a meal, because it is expensive in comparison to the other dishes. Italian foods served at two weddings we observed included pastas, lasagnas, a variety of green salads, as well as bread rolls and the wedding cake.

Notions of class representations in relation to food

We have argued that food served to guests at weddings is perceived to be an indicator of good hospitality and class classification. Traditionally, the quantity of food consumed by people was used as an indicator to differentiate one class from another. However, contemporary food trends that include the consumption of a variety of exotic, expensive cuisines in lesser quantity are associated with middle- to upper-class food consumption patterns (Melber 2022).

“Class-based culinary tastes are distinguished according to food quantity, quality and presentation,” says Kaplan (2013, 247). For instance, Punjabi weddings in Glasgow include a ritual of food exchange from the bride’s family to the groom’s family. It is within this context that the food offered is discussed, critiqued, and even compared to previous weddings. “Hierarchies of prestige and honor are rehearsed and reworked,” according to Bradby (2002, 112). The wedding feast has traditionally been indicative of class and social status within South Asia as well as in the diasporas stemming from there. Cultural spaces and platforms always contain conflict and class competitions. Cultural events are used as spaces where dominant classes can demonstrate their middle- to upper-class lifestyles and affirm their sense of superiority over others (Bourdieu 1984).

Interviews revealed that three of the six couples with whom we spoke shared the wedding festivity expenses with their parents. This financial contribution allowed them to make decisions about food served to guests during the festive days leading up to the definitive event. However, two participants explained that their parents had pressured them into spending money on elaborate menus and decor for their events, as they believed that the overall occasion would be symbolic of their class status as a family. One participant even stated, “my parents somehow wanted to prove to their social circles that they could still afford a lavish lifestyle, which they once had over a decade ago, when my father was hugely successful in his business.”

Chevalier (2015) explains that eating is a principal vehicle for expressing a range of lifestyles, and that middle-class measures for analysis includes an individual’s source of income and property evaluation. Julia Pauli and Francois Dawids (2017) indicate that the hosting of an extravagant or lavish wedding can be an important indicator that a person is a member of the middle class. Weddings in Namibia, for instance, and in other areas have become key identifiers of middle-class belonging for people. This fact is affirmed by Natasha Erlank (2014). She discusses the wedding rituals of an African Christian wedding that highlight the social aspirations and limitations of a middle-class society. Globally people aspire to be classified as middle or upper class.

Two couples indicated that they had self-financed their wedding festivities and spent lavishly on food and décor. The occupations of these four participants

included engineers, medical practitioners, and accountants, which determined their source of income, spending, and consumption patterns. They also felt compelled to demonstrate their middle-class membership by serving their guests elaborate menus at their weddings. One participant explained that elaborate events became the norm among their social circles, and they too felt compelled to maintain this standard. Another respondent explained, "A luxurious wedding celebration says that I am successful in my lifestyle and can earn a good living."

The remaining couple interviewed stated that their parents financed their wedding festivities, and that their wedding events included elaborate foods and decorations. Five couples explained that their largest bills for the wedding festivities were for food and alcoholic beverages. Both caterers interviewed indicated that almost 40 percent of their clientele have a preference for elaborate décor and extravagant food menus for their wedding festivities, while other guests desire to spend less. The event coordinator stated that "for many people, their financial status is evident in the manner or style in which they host guests for their children's wedding."

Concluding remarks

Wedding celebrations of the Hindu Indian diaspora have significance in the modern, economically stratified society, since they can serve as conscious indicators of class position and social status. They are also indicators of the effort that minority communities make to sustain traditional and customary practices of Hinduism in the diaspora. They can be identifiers of change, whereby interethnic and interreligious marriages among Hindus and those of other religions have become permissible and even embraced in the contemporary milieu of South Africa. These events also serve as a lens through which we can see ourselves and identify with peers to articulate the cultural changes that diaspora communities experience over time. The practice of Indian South Africans consuming meat, alcohol, and cake at Hindu weddings reflects the amalgamation of cultural practices shared between Hindus and people of other cultures and faiths in Durban.

All of the aforementioned elements have contributed toward continual change, the loss of traditional practices, and the adoption of new ones combined with challenges of recreating new universal standards of what should prevail to be the norm among Indian South Africans (Bradby 2002). We can conclusively argue that the development of the blended identity of Indian South Africans has indeed influenced ritual practices associated with weddings. Hindu customs of meal preferences as indicators of social status suggest to us that class is gradually replacing caste in an era of conspicuous consumption.

Perceptions evident from this qualitative study reveal that wedding food is associated with one's perceived class position and the extent of cultural assimilation, which includes the demise or continuance of traditional practices. Similarly, for the Indian Punjabi diaspora community in Houston, food at weddings demonstrates the possession of wealth and the family's capacity to be hospitable (Bradby 2002). Food has thus become a viable nonverbal medium to communicate good hospitality to

guests. We suggest that cosmopolitan food preferences are closely associated with middle-class membership among Indian South Africans living in Durban.

In conclusion, qualitative data analysis reveals that wedding rituals and practices among our interlocuters reflect a combination of modern and traditional food practices, the result of ongoing processes of cultural assimilation in a multicultural, capitalist society. Hindu weddings in Durban have been influenced by current social trends, “mixed” marriages, financial means, class categorizations, and perceptions of aspirations to become middle- or upper-class members. The foodways we observed and in which we participated at the Hindu weddings discussed are unique to the Indian South African community, whereas the class element is more universal, as can be witnessed in diasporic South Asian communities worldwide.

NOTES

1. The term was coined by Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), a charismatic Hindu holy man who founded the Arya Samaj, which was very active in the revival of a reformist version of Hinduism during the nineteenth century. In addition to its missionizing work in India itself, it was very active in diasporic Indian communities as well.
2. The ancient Indo-European language of India that has been utilized in classical Hindu scriptures and philosophy from the oldest Vedas down to the present. It is used ritually both in India and the contemporary diasporic context. Sanskrit is recited primarily by Brahmin priests in the form of *mantras*.
3. The symbolic act of the father handing over his daughter to the groom to be nurtured and protected for the rest of her life.
4. It consists of the bride and groom making seven circumambulations (*parikrama*) around the fire pit. Once the seventh circumambulation is completed, the marriage is thought to be solemnized and legally irrevocable.
5. It is a seasoned rice that is prepared with either meat, seafood, poultry, or vegetables.
6. Authentic Indian dishes that are prepared with similar ingredients and techniques as utilized in India.
7. A distinct variation of Indian cuisine that is influenced by local cuisines within Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, South Africa.
8. A rich buttery pudding that is made with ground wheat, *ghī* (clarified butter), sugar, cardamom, and nutmeg.
9. *Samosās* are one of the most renowned Indian snacks around the world. The variations are many. However, in South Africa, one variation is mostly consumed. The *samosā* that is popular among South Africans can be described as a flatly folded triangle of pastry that is stuffed with a variety of fillings such as potatoes, mixed vegetables, brown lentils, chicken mince, mutton mince, and so forth (Parbhoo 2008).
10. *Colocasia esculenta*, taro root leaves.

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