Conviviality?
Eating Together with Hare Krishna Believers

TAMAS LESTAR
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Tamas Lestar,1 University of Essex, UK

Abstract: The practice of eating together is of increasing interest in social scientific fields. Often referred to as “conviviality” or “commensality,” eating together is on global decline. It is claimed that the absence or presence of the practice impacts mental development, physical health, sports achievement, and substance abuse. The decrease may be explained by changing lifestyle practices and labour patterns influenced by urbanisation, materialism, and consumerism. Led by an interest in Hare Krishna dietary practices, the researcher visited three Hare Krishna eco-communities in Europe to observe their food-sharing programmes and daily living. Food-sharing programmes are arranged to represent Krishna philosophy coupled with a lifestyle alternative based on simplicity, non-violence, and caring. As well as teaching about food, Hare Krishna communities provide a detailed educational programme on environmental sustainability through guided eco-tours and lifestyle practices. Apart from observations and participatory action, twenty-nine interviews were conducted to tease out details of Hare Krishna food practices from growing food to sharing it with others. The researcher utilised some tenets and methods of social practice theory to understand and analyse the community’s dietary practices. Findings show a high level of conviviality in the community when outreach programmes and food-sharing schemes are executed. However, eating together in the official settings of temple communities falls short of the expected sociability and conviviality by encouraging individual introspection and seclusion. While the Hare Krishna movement proves exemplary in cordially sharing with outsiders more sustainable food and dietary competences, some of its spiritual practices may counterbalance the efficacy of the community’s ecological education. Apart from its social scientific applications, this research offers a point of departure for interfaith discussions about eating together.

Keywords: Conviviality, Eating Together, Hare Krishna

Introduction

This article is one of the outcomes of a broader study investigating Hare Krishna spirituality and pro-environmental practices. In another work, I outlined connections between spiritual conversion and dietary change (Lestar 2017). Eating together is one of the prominent practices in Krishna communities. It is becoming a socially and scientifically important subject in connection with its documented decay, especially in Western societies (Yates and Warde 2017; Kiefer 2004). In my framing, eating can be a commensal practice where communities of people share location and time while consuming meals together. It can also be a convivial practice where people socialise, get to know each other, talk, share, or rejoice. In this latter sense, it may bind people together in love, as suggested in the commercial made by the Canadian government encouraging its citizens to eat together.² Both commensality and conviviality are deemed socially beneficial to solitary, segregated eating (Weinstein 2006). Apart from healing eating disorders, eating together is claimed to positively impact general well-being and health. Studying this declining practice is crucial as it impacts health and well-being (Weinstein 2006), which correlates with ecological, economic, and social sustainability (Jackson 2009).

In this study, I demonstrate Krishna dining with a special focus on its outreach activities, on the one hand, and insider practices on the other. Findings in these two settings signal different messages. The aims of this article are to demonstrate the subtlety of the practice and place Krishna simplicity, service, and sharing into a wider discourse about a postgrowth alternative to consumerism and related lifestyle practices (e.g. Jackson 2009; Seyfang 2009).

1 Corresponding Author: Tamas Lestar, Wivenhoe Park, Management, University of Essex, Colchester, Essex, CO4 3SQ, UK. email: tomlestar@gmail.com
² http://eattogether.presidentschoice.ca/.
Methods

I visited three Hare Krishna eco-farms—in Scotland, England, and Hungary—and stayed together with devotees for a sum period of about two months. Despite an outstanding homogeneity in the Hare Krishna movement, each case provided different perspectives and additional insights about the Krishna diet. The basic aim was to explore how food practices are maintained within the group and how they are promoted in the outside world. Apart from a general understanding of these practices, I was particularly interested in the spiritual motivation that characterised their enactment. Hare Krishna spirituality promotes simplicity and a lifestyle that is more sustainable than the alternatives based on consumerism and unlimited growth (Jackson 2009). This latter theme provides an important focus for this article, in which the wider social and ecological aspects of eating together are also considered, from the perspectives of a “prosperity without growth” (Jackson 2009).

Social practice theory (SPT), as outlined by Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012), offered methods for data collection and for studying practices from a close-up perspective. The mixed methods of participatory observations, semi-structured interviews and email interviews were chosen to tease out meaning together with community members. I conducted twenty-six interviews with men and three with women, a ratio that reflects a natural selection process, as men are more likely to fulfill positions of responsibility in Hare Krishna communities. Notes, diaries, and photographs assisted in noticing—often retrospectively—what could otherwise have gone unheeded. The use of photography in practice theory approaches often proves useful not only as a reminder of important themes, but as a guide toward aspects not thought of before (e.g. Pink 2001). I participated in the everyday life of the communities and placed a special focus on their food practices, took part in gardening, food sharing programmes, and outreach activities, observing members and non-members as they performed or referenced practices.

According to SPT’s basic tenets, the social world is constitutive of practices, while practices are constitutive of elements (Reckwitz 2017). In brief, there are three main elements (namely, meanings/beliefs, competence, and materials) that can be followed up when practices are in the centre of investigation. For example, to perform swimming there is an elementary need for water (material need), ability to swim (competence), and a reason for enactment (e.g. enjoyment, exercise, competition). This reason, depending on the nature of practice studied, may arise from cultural, religious, or political factors, but some kind of motivation will make an inevitable part of all social practices (Reckwitz 2017). To SPT scholars, social change equals change in social practices, and for any effective policy intervention it is practices and their elements that need to be targeted rather than individual behaviour (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Hence, it is important to study them from a close perspective. In the following descriptions and the succeeding discussion, I emphasise how the element of meanings/beliefs (which is also referred to as “motivations”) overpower the other elements of competence and materials in this specific context. I show that Hare Krishna spirituality as the main motivator plays a crucial role in the ongoing maintenance of conviviality in eating together but also shows how the practice is performed differently in different community settings.

In line with the scrutinising methods of SPT, I followed up the food practices on the visited eco-farms by paying attention to minute details that later provided guidelines for understanding and describing those practices as they get manifest on the ground. As a long-time vegetarian coming from a spiritual (Christian) community background, I had to constantly guard against taking Hare Krishna food practices for granted. Because of a bias towards community eating, it was easier to capture the convivial elements than to uncover ambiguities. If left unchecked, this could have led to a less subtle account of eating together with Hare Krishna believers. In what comes next, I give accounts of communal Hare Krishna eating by first describing the practice as it is performed outside the community circles. This will be followed by a section about eating together in the religious setting of temple communities.
Food Sharing Programmes and Outreach Events

Kitchens constitute one of the most important units in Hare Krishna societies. This is particularly so in the Bhaktivedanta Manor (Watford, UK), which serves as a base for food-sharing activities in London and other parts of the UK. While tasting Krishna food forms an inevitable part of the eco-programmes and most other outreach events offered by community members, sharing it purposefully with the needy and on a large scale is one of the major activities here. To secure the flow of its food sharing schemes, the Manor’s eco-farm works together with famous supporters and celebrities like Paul McCartney, The Sex Pistols, Russell Brand, Boris Johnson, and others.

Organised from this centre, one thousand students and homeless people receive charitable food in London six days a week, a programme that has been running for over ten years. The idea of preventing foodstuff from becoming waste was first introduced by Parasuram das when he worked for a Hare Krishna restaurant in London thirty years ago. He did not like to waste, and decided to mix all leftover together (rice, lentils, salads, and dressing) in one huge pot and distribute it to homeless people. He has remained in that service ever since. The activity today is organized by a social enterprise called Food for All. The director describes his hands-on approach to the work as follows:

It’s only a small group of us. But small is good, because if you have got any money you can know exactly where it is, there is no office, the office is this in my bag here, you know there is no administrators, we all just work as a team and we all you know some of us cook, some of us serve, some of us fix the bicycles, some of us lend some little money if we need, you know I have my Rock ‘n Roll friends; they all chip in. Now, the only funding we get is my Rock ‘n Roll friends and they help out.

Parasuram is not business-oriented, but when I ask if he would be willing to open a restaurant he does not say no. But he thinks of a “different type” of restaurant where people give donations instead of a fixed price and where food is “my kind of food”—he says:

We collect it, and then we cook it and just give a donation. And, I find it work better than you are charging people the menu you have to cook all different preparations. You cook one preparation we call it poor men’s feast, it is kitchari, we call it poor men’s feast, fit for a king. And I entered this in a…there is a television show, there is a competition and it’s a nationwide competition, and I’ve done pretty well in it. I didn’t win but I got quite high and they came out to film here. They filmed the homeless people, this really helping people.

The task of regular food sharing requires order and tight co-operation on the part of team members who painstakingly start work at five o’clock in the morning until the last dish is served in the early afternoon. Led by an interest of what it means to serve one thousand people, I joined the work for two days to familiarise myself with the daily routine of the group.

When I cooked in the kitchen, my primary interest was not centred on what it meant to chop up so many vegetables or stir the dahl in the gigantic pot used for large-volume preparations. What I mostly focused on was how it was possible to do this service incessantly for decades, and with as little fluctuation as Parasuram and group experienced. Could I do the same? Would I not give up? What is the motivation that makes this activity running?

The hot meal that was distributed got prepared each morning starting at five o’clock by a few members, generally the same few workers. Ingredients and additional fruit and vegetables were provided by a local supermarket and other donors and transported every morning by the director. We did not look at the expiry dates when we packed the car with prepacked items. We looked at the items themselves to judge whether they were off. “No waste” is one of Parasuram’s phrases. The group was friendly and willing to utilise my help. Large tins of tomatoes got
opened; bags after bags of lentils, chickpeas, and other legumes got washed and placed in the huge pot to produce one big portion of mixed dahl. Music was on, but it was not the local radio. It was Hare Krishna mantras. Salt was added, but tasting was not allowed. Krishna tastes it first. It is good as it is, provided it is cooked with love. Love and Devotion, L&D, is one of the slogans of the community. The taste depends on the heart and attitude, not on outward excellence. A few hours went by, and indeed the dahl smelled very good. Parasuram himself added the flavours and spices. I finished by placing the content into big plastic containers that are used to ship the food to its destinations. Someone else was making the rice. Vegetables were chopped; containers were filled; the van was packed. Another group were ready to drive to London and carry on with the activity. It was well organised; it felt habitual. The van was gone. I could go to my room to rest.

Feeding 1,000: London

Another day I decided to go to London with the serving group and experience some of their daily challenges. The university where we served was closed to motor vehicles, so we pedalled our way up to the site of distribution. We had to upload all the hot meal containers, puris, bread, fruit, vegetables, and desserts onto the cargo bikes especially designed for the purpose. As the region was steep and hilly, it required quite an effort to pedal up food and equipment to the destination. Some of the food items fell off one of the tricycles. There was not enough space. The devotees decided to leave an empty basket behind on the roadside. The ride must have been tiring uphill. I was giving a supportive push to one of the riders by running next to his tricycle. Exhausted before even starting the actual serving, we quickly set up the scene, as the queue was already meandering long on the street.

We served university students, teachers, homeless people, and some workers who joined the queue from companies and offices in the neighbourhood. Another part of the group separated from us earlier on to take a different route and serve only the homeless at their service point. Once all set, we started serving the rice, dahl, bread, yoghurt and a handout inviting for a celebration held later the week at the nearby temple. The Croatian group leader was a fascinating person. He recommended Krishna food with moderate but steady enthusiasm. He handled wisely and patiently a mentally disturbed person who was trying to play havoc with our meal distribution. The man finally calmed down. The people in the queue cheerfully conversed with each other while waiting for their turn. The devotee had been serving food for several years, and he appeared to love this service. When it was my turn to take a meal, I sat on a bench next to a student who said she came for the food every day because she wanted to learn more about vegetarianism. It also helped her financially, as she thought it was hard to find reasonably priced vegetarian food in London. In the summer she would volunteer on a French eco-farm, where she could continue her vegetarian journey. Among the students, lecturers, office clerks, and a wide range of by-passers also queued. They all seemed to enjoy Krishna hospitality and prasadam (food offered to Krishna before consumption). There was a cheerful atmosphere. The sun was out, and we started packing and heading back to our van.

Donations for the work are received daily, sometimes through unexpected channels. The day I joined the work we received a phone call on the way back to Watford. A company in London offered half a van of muesli, which was to be collected the same day. Negotiations and transactions were made in quick succession. By the time the van arrived in Watford, unloaded and cleaned, the director had to be present to begin preparations for tomorrow. Come what may, rain or sunshine, provisions must be made ahead as hundreds of people will be expecting another portion of hot meal, served with love and devotion. But the intention, says the Food for All director, is not to help people to buy a new car or a house. The campaign, as he calls it, is designed to lead people to acquire and cultivate a higher taste. It’s not just we are feeding people so that they have enough money to buy a house, buy a car, but it’s whether one can develop a spiritual identity. And all can actually do that. No matter what tradition they are in, whether
Christians or Muslims or Jews, they can develop a spiritual nature. Then they can be at peace with the world, and the whole world would become a better place.

Besides waste prevention and the “development of a spiritual identity,” the sharing programmes also have a political economic aspect attached to them. As explained by Parasuram das, the scheme addresses issues of social inequality by mediating between rich and poor. “Actually,” he says, “we are a bit like Robin Hood because we steal from the rich and give it to the poor. You know, the rich guys are the supermarkets, you know, hoarding the stuff, let’s liberate them from their goods and give it back to the poor.”

The philosophy behind Parasuram’s reasoning is more than just a general goodwill for social justice and the prevention of food waste. Simple living, animal compassion, and connectivity with nature are central to what he advocates in everyday activities as well as food-related practices. Emanating from an “alternative” way of living he first encountered on an Irish Hare Krishna farm, he sums up his experience as follows:

You know in my time in Ireland when I met the devotees I had never met a vegetarian. I thought that if I stopped eating meat I would probably die. So, I was, I didn’t know what to cook, there cooked beans and toast, the next day I cook peas and toast, the next day I cook beans on toast, and I was thinking I was going to die and realize gosh I am still alive. And then, luckily, I started to find out how to cook you know. When I joined the community, we were living on a farm, there was no electricity, there was no telephone, there was no...with wood burning stove and we were growing the vegetables on the land and we were living on the side of a mountain in a simple natural lifestyle. I saw that this is very good, very interesting, we don’t have to hustle and bustle and rush into work from nine to five. There was an alternative you know. More natural, simple lifestyle, living in harmony with nature and that was appealing. And something a whole country could do like this. In harmony, working on the land, growing their own vegetables, you know.

This slow, simple, and natural lifestyle in the Krishna teaching is also connected to ideas of sharing and service, which are reflected multiply in the community’s endeavour to serve each other as well as outsiders. The suffix \textit{das}(a) and \textit{dasi} following the devotees’ spiritual name—such as Parasuram das—means “servant” or “servant of God.” While personal enjoyment may have a place in the believer’s life, it can never be the primary purpose of action, and it cannot centre on the self. All things are to be arranged to please Krishna, and Krishna is pleased with loving service toward all living beings. This is the source of the believer’s real enjoyment. To reach such a standard, a so-called “higher taste” must be cultivated so that the lower cravings do not gain victory over the high. Service is regarded an excellent way to “restrict” oneself from “sensual enjoyment” and “pleasures.” In Parasuram’s own words:

So you can give up the lower taste for the higher taste. So everybody needs a higher taste, because you can give up something for a week, OK I am not gonna do that for a week, I am not gonna drink for a week, I am not gonna—but you must get a higher taste, otherwise you will actually slip down to the lower taste. But the soul needs to be directed in the right direction because we got bewildered that is the whole thing we came to the material world and we got bewildered so desires are there. If you are an artist paint picture of Krishna, if you are a musician make music for Krishna, if you are a farmer grow stuff for Krishna, if you are a dressmaker make stuff for Krishna, you engage all your things in spiritual activities. If you are cook, cook for Krishna. We cook every day for Krishna and we feed a thousand people every day.

And cooking for Krishna can only mean vegetarian food, as that is what devotees say he likes and what ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) organisationally
promotes. One main reason for this is compassion toward all living being. During my ad-hoc open-air interview with Parasuram, he pointed to three ducks that were flying in the air right above our head. A friend of his donated the ducks to him as his dogs started to trouble them during the mating seasons. He cherished his pets, gave them names, and now visited them at the Manor often, asking Parasuram how they were. Yet—says Parasuram—they are the same species that he buys in the local supermarket disguised in a frozen, unrecognisable form.

Apart from its ethical and environmental benefits, the diet is proclaimed to be a healthier alternative as, in Parasuram’s words, “meat is responsible for so much cancer, colon cancer and so on, different cancers. So, doctors now recommend: eat healthy food. What does that mean? Fruit and veg. Green vegetables, fruits. Five fruits a day. Five a day, you know.” Parasuram and his fellow believers also argue for the health benefits of their diet by explaining the biological differences between the intestines of humans and carnivorous animals. Also, because of “poisons” found in meat, one “is very likely to avoid cancers on a vegetarian diet.”

When large-scale sharing programmes are in operation, they seem to attract celebrities, politicians, musicians, artists and affluent supporters. These connections are especially visible in Watford where other popular programmes are designed, such as the Feed the 5000 campaigns. The involvement of celebrities such as Paul McCartney, Russell Brand, and politicians makes the social network of the farm wide and diverse. But the charity, according to its director, is not seeking financial help through fundraising campaigns of any kind. Supporters get involved through word of mouth.

The Food for All director organised international programmes of sharing for example at the Notre Dame in France, where civilians got involved in the chopping and preparation of the food, making the event a communal social activity. At the EU headquarters in Brussels, politicians joined to eat and listen to the talk given by Tristram Stuart, who proposed policy changes to prevent supermarket food from becoming waste. The feeding programme currently set in London is also planned to be extended to 5,000 people. Parasuram said:

I want to expand this to 5,000. And we are hoping that with the help of Russell Brand, the friend of ours, he is a famous comedian and actor, and possibly Paul McCartney, we can do that. If I had a van just full time collecting the food, I cook it all in the big pot, drive it in, and there are 20,000 students at UCL, University College London, and these students would be happy to get a hot meal. Because student fees now have gone up double and they are struggling and now it’s becoming a thing like…even like…it’s almost like rich people can only get education.

To continue, Parasuram das explains what “real economics” and the philosophy behind these sharing programmes mean to him:

Most of the supermarkets won’t give away their stuff. They chuck it out. They think if we give away our stuff people will not buy our stuff. Because they are just thinking of money, of economics. But this kind of economics may appear to be proper, but real economics is coming, for instance, nobody has ever gone poor by giving away. You know you don’t get poor, you will not become a poor man, by giving away things. You know that’s not the law. You know there is laws of nature, the law of gravity, the law of action, reaction. These are, we won’t be able to see it, but if you give away, you share, and everything becomes balanced. So, there is enough for everybody’s need but not everybody’s greed. So, we have campaigns where we are going to France this month and we cook for 5,000 people, but we are cooking what’s called “ugly vegetables.” Cosmetic reasons. The apple is too big, or the apple is too small. The carrot is bent or funny shape, the vegetable, the broccoli is too big you know, for cosmetic reasons, so all it is getting thrown away for cosmetic reason. We say, no, this is good fruit and veg, so we reuse it back to the community. So that’s what this campaign is about so we do this
in many countries from Ireland, usually we do about three or four a year in the UK, and then we do Brussels.

Parasuram mentioned Christianity several times. When I asked him about the origin of the Feeding 5000 title, he explained that on his trip with devotees to Israel they met a solitary monk who offered them the choicest fruits that had fallen off his trees. The monk was supposedly living on a spot where Jesus fed the 5,000, and in Parasuram’s account his own waste prevention programme was “divinely arranged” and “probably named by Jesus Christ.”

Apart from the extensive feeding programmes, the international community offers many opportunities for outsiders to become familiar with Krishna practices. Festivals and open days, music, food and yoga events, outreach activities, and a great variety of open-air and temple programmes attract visitors from all walks of life. These outreach events are renowned for the special food served as a communion treat at the end of the programmes.

The Hare Krishna group in another location (Lesmahagow, Scotland) use these events as opportunities to offer vegan food, as it is recognised as an intersection where different ethical viewpoints can unite on grounds of animal compassion. The events organized by the community in Edinburgh and Glasgow are often held in public places where likeminded organizations proclaiming spiritual messages can meet and co-operate. There is an established connection between the eco-farm and the University of Glasgow where devotees hold music and contemplative meditation workshops at the university in the examination periods. When I attended one of the music programmes there were about twenty people in class. The musical session was followed by serving and sharing food and herbal tea, which was consumed in a friendly, lively, and sociable atmosphere. I noticed that when these programmes are arranged for missionary purposes, Krishna believers often do not wear their Indian dresses, and the focus is not on personal introspection but on creating a lively and cordial atmosphere to befriend outsiders. According to my interviewees, this approach was deliberately chosen to counter-balance previous efforts to evangelise people by spiritual pressuring. In my observations, visitors did enjoy the community of believers, and the food-sharing programmes brought some cheerful hours into their lives. On such occasions partakers represent a mixed population, religiosity is not made prominent, and food is served and consumed in an inviting, considerate manner. Indeed, many of the devotees I interviewed reported that it was these events where a “free meal” and “vegetarian food,” prepared and shared by “love and devotion,” was instrumental in their journey to the Krishna faith.

Eating Together in Temple Communities

Having illustrated Hare Krishna food-sharing as a missionary outreach activity, I now turn to eating together as an insider practice in religious settings. The following account is a description of my personal impressions of eating in Krishna temple communities. Although I describe one of the visited locations only, my experience elsewhere and the practice of eating is very similar throughout the movement, as it is based on a homogeneous philosophy.

In this particular location, every mealtime food was carried outdoors or into a large tent. Members and potential visitors queued up for food, most of them carrying their own plates. Visitors received wooden spoons and biodegradable plates for a set price. My outsider status was obvious by the clothes I was wearing. With usually no other outsider around, I was the odd one out within the community. Generally, nobody would talk to me during the line-up, not even those I had met and befriended before. The Krishna community show much reserve and a lack of curiosity. It may be an unspoken rule, perhaps an outcome of the teachings on “detachment.” Hare Krishnas promote a demeanour that needs to be detached from secular customs and emotions. During mealtimes, members seem to focus on their individual development and not interfere with the lives of others. Some are reluctant even to say a word of greeting. Often their
FOOD STUDIES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

beads—a rosary-like tool—hang on their hand, and chanting at times may even take place in public spaces such as the dining room.

Nevertheless, when it was my turn to be served, I always received a loud welcome of “Hare Krishna” and generous service. There are generally several devotees, mostly men, who do the serving. Before receiving my plate, I was having to pay cash in return for my meal, which felt a bit awkward because I was the only one to do that in the queue. I was different, someone who did not belong. I would have preferred to buy vouchers in the local shop or pay a lump sum to pre-book a set number of meals, but the use of cash felt a bit unnatural in an otherwise natural setting. When I fancied some food and asked for bigger portions, it was never a problem to serve me generously. Sometimes *maha prasadam* was offered in tiny quantities. *Maha prasadam* is a special food item (normally a cooked sweet) that is offered to *murtis* (semigods), of which there are manifold varieties in the worldwide Krishna community. Devotees are especially delighted to receive *maha prasadam*. Sometimes it is brought onto the serving table later than the main food items, and at such times devotees queue again in excitement to get a share of the blissful treat. In temple societies *maha prasadam* is distributed among the guests as an act of service. It is prepared by meticulous care and sacramental purity, and it tastes better, so say believers. It is regarded—as well as the chanting of his name—no differently than Krishna and as a means to perfecting character.

When people receive their food, they sit down on the floor or elsewhere, sometimes on the lawn or on a bench. In that latter case, several devotees choose to sit aside somewhere, away from the rest, sometimes turning their back on the community. This time may be used as preparation for chanting or just meditation and contemplation. When staying indoors, women, children, and men sit apart. It is rare to see men and women sitting and eating together unless they are family members. Once served, I usually sat and waited, but when nothing happened—which was normally the case—I started to converse with the person nearest to me. They usually responded, but at times remained quiet, which I then politely accepted.

Ritual purity is required when someone is serving food. At times, and this holds for all three communities I visited, I did not dare to request a second helping, as it seemed unclear whether it was right to do so. Once I tried to risk it but was immediately told not to proceed as there was no “clean” person around, although a variety of food was still resting on the table. I took the situation easy but was wondering why newcomers were not introduced to customary rules to prevent embarrassment and misunderstanding. Krishna food sometimes appeared to be marking out boundaries of exclusivity while in theory trying to include all people.

Krishna food (*prasadam*) was talked about in Krishna communities in such superlatives that it was hard to question its convivial impact on outsiders. Yet clearly the conviviality of eating together fell short of what I had expected. When it is served on the street or in public places, the spirit and atmosphere feels more uplifting than in its “religious,” official setting. Once I had a chance to eat pizza together with devotees who were making it in an outdoor oven built next to the cowshed. The pizza was delicious (no Indian ingredients for a change) and the level of conviviality was high, though again, not one woman was present in the group. But in its religious setting, in my experience, it would be more appropriate to talk about commensality rather than conviviality when eating together (with outsiders) is described. Notwithstanding, the qualities of this commensality (slow, peaceful, vegetarian) are more encouraging for sustainable behaviour than those offered by the fast-food dietary culture in the outside world.

In terms of eating together, an initial sense of conviviality may seem promising when devotees and guests are seen sitting on the floor, sometimes eating with their fingers and quietly talking. But this feeling may soon be over when—a few meals taken together—visitors notice a stark segregation and lack of sociability among the believers. Women and men sit apart and do not interact as a norm. Devotees are centred upon the self by honouring *prasadam* and its merciful maker. As an unspoken rule—I observed—talking to each other and to guests is not encouraged. Besides, regulations of purity and cleanliness may cause embarrassment and
complications for visitors. “Generally, and ideally,” explained a farm manager in an email interview, “devotees eat ‘with equals’. For example, the brahmacaris (male monks) eat in the association of other brahmacaris, Swamis (religious teachers) amongst the Swamis, etc. Prasad time is ideally not a social event, but rather time to respect and enjoy the prasad.” In my experience, indeed, eating together is lacking in conviviality when it is practiced in religious setting of Krishna communities. Yet when it takes place during food sharing activities or after outreach programmes, as described earlier on, it assumes a cheerful and friendly, convivial character.

Discussion and Conclusions

Findings from Hare Krishna communities could be discussed from a variety of perspectives. A social practice theory (SPT) approach could take the practice of eating together as an entity and juxtapose it to contemporary tendencies of eating alone by depicting the two as they compete against each other. This approach could help to understand and make sense of large social phenomena, while also explain the role—pro and contra—of Hare Krishna dining in this wider and competitive process. This could be the aim of a more detailed work, here only to touch upon a few insights to illustrate such analysis.

One view offered by SPT scholars is to perceive of the temporal aspect of life practices as non-different to what it has been before. According to this, it is not the pace of life that has somehow become faster. Instead, what changed is the character and number of practices juggled into a day by practitioners (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Dropping children at school, urban businesses, suit-and-tie-style labour, meetings and gatherings, appointments, gym workouts, television shows, social media and many more practices compete with each other and for our time, striving for supremacy. As the number of practices people can daily enact is limited, it may often be the family or community meal that gets sacrificed (Kiefer 2004).

Another important factor to consider is that practices follow or depend on each other by forming sequences. The question is not only how much time is left to perform specific practices, but also what kind of practices precede and prepare the way for the next action. For example, the type of action that could follow a late hour spent in the office may be altogether different from an hour spent in the garden harvesting food ingredients. One might call for a quick microwave dish, perhaps solitarily consumed, while the other a manual preparation for family meal. It is in a specific social context that eating together is in decline while choices of fast-food and drive-thru restaurants are increasingly favoured (Ritzer 2000).

Moreover, practices condition each other and link into bundles where practices stabilise together while defect or exclude others. For example, changing labour patterns is discussed as a possible cause for declining conviviality (Yates and Warde 2017), and I suggest that urbanisation and the nature of work required in urban settings need also to be considered. Changing family patterns (Yates and Warde 2017), longer office hours, and fast-food solutions may often exclude the possibility of communal meals, and when food is consumed in public eateries, it may remain individualised. Likewise, the spatial arrangements of the social world are such that they may discourage slow and community eating. Ready-to-eat meals exclude the need for preparation, which could often serve socialising purposes by cooking together and sharing.

A lack of connectivity with land and nature in general and the resulting level of food literacy may also weaken motifs for preparation and sharing while the social elements of food consumption is disregarded. In contrast, Hare Krishna communities abound in material conditions that enable the cultivation of food preparation and sharing practices. The simplicity found in a close connectivity with nature and in growing food creates an atmosphere in which food is valued more than mere necessity or enjoyment. Raw ingredients are often locally produced, and cooking skills acquired and supported by spiritual motivation. Spirituality awakens an appreciation of food (prasadam), which—as a missionary goal—needs to express non-violent compassion through vegetarianism and service through sharing. However, the
fascination with *prasadam* is not restricted to farm communities alone. It is carried to urban homes, temple communities, and restaurants alike as the practice element of *rules/beliefs* (motivation) may travel out of its original context and enable Hare Krishna practice despite unfavourable material arrangements. Clearly, as illustrated from the interviews and my observations, spirituality is the overriding drive for Krishna food in both eating and sharing. The practice element of rules/beliefs is the dominant factor in the stabilisation of Hare Krishna food practices. While materials and competence may play more important roles in maintaining a meat-free diet, eating itself—for Krishna believers—is primarily motivated by spiritual factors.

Yet sharing food and eating together within and outside the community walls is nurtured by different spiritual motifs. While in religious settings the chief aspiration is to introspectively appreciate Krishna and *prasadam* as a source of personal development and character-building (to perfection), sharing in missionary settings is motivated by a desire to show love and cordiality to others. These two different motifs result in two different practice enactments when eating together with Krishna believers is experienced and described.

The practice of eating together can also be discussed from the perspective of a more sustainable economic system, or as Parasuram das put it, “real economics.” Consumerism creates and leaves people with an insatiable desire that urges us into high-street spending (Jackson 2009). According to Jackson (2009, 152), society is structured “inconsistently” and “asymmetrically” by sending “all the wrong signals, penalizing pro-environmental behaviour, and making it all but impossible even for highly motivated people to act sustainably without personal sacrifice.” On the other hand, simplicity, frugality, conviviality, and sharing are all part of a vocabulary for a de-growth era (D’Alisa, Demaria and Kallis 2014). Advocates claim that it is these and related “intrinsic” properties (e.g. belonging) that result in a level of happiness and environmental responsibility that materialistic values have proven unable to provide (Jackson 2009). Interestingly, these qualities overlap with several aspects of Hare Krishna philosophy and practice, which makes the community a significant object of social scientific research. The named attributes are becoming crucially important for a body of scholarly outputs that—together with Jackson—claim that demand-side simplicity and resource reductions are pre-requisites to a possible system-wide transition toward a more sustainable society (e.g. Seyfang 2009).

Hare Krishna vegetarianism and the widespread sharing of food—often through waste-management programmes—provide an exemplary model for an alternative eating culture that is more sustainable (Aleksandrowicz et al. 2016). Beyond general socialising, eating together with Krishna believers is a means to learn about philosophical messages encoded into Krishna food, such as equality, connectivity with nature, frugality, simplicity, service, and an alternative approach to high-street spending. Simplicity serves as the chief slogan in the Krishna movement, which subscribes to a principle of “simple living and high thinking.” Members emphasise the need for simplifying and claim it to be the most efficient way among all alternative solutions to combat consumerism as well as climate change.

However, Hare Krishna simplicity becomes somewhat complicated in performing practices of Indian culture and eating together in temple communities. Most dishes prepared in the Krishna communities are of Indian origin. Although this may stand as an obstacle for beginners and outsiders who find it hard to reproduce the Indian meals, for community members—except for a few opposing opinions—it is a source of fascination rather than hindrance. There is a spiritual enthusiasm around the Indian culture, which gets manifested in practices like wearing Indian attire, painting the nose and forehead with Indian clay, using Indian names, distributing gender roles, and more. Some of these customs are moderately changing in the communities toward patterns of flexibility, which may partly be the outcome of adjusting outreach activities to contemporary social demands. At the same time, for many Hare Krishna members, these are emblems of identity that should continue to remain to hold the community together. It is possible that whatever seems alien to the scrutinising eye works to stabilise institutional practice. Several devotees reported in their conversion stories that prior to joining the community they had been
seeking principles, rules, and austerity of lifestyle. For them, the undiluted nature of spiritual messages was the very proof of the genuineness and valuableness of the Krishna faith. While this logic and its accompanied practices may not appeal to large masses of society, it may be a contributory factor in the organisation’s survival. The relevant literature states that a radical counter-culture and a determined, unwavering adherence to principles, especially if they challenge social conventions, may be beneficial for change (Carroll 2004). Notwithstanding, it is also argued that when it takes the form of self-centredness or narcissism, or when it is “too counter-cultural,” societal influence may be hindered (Lasch 1978, 4; Taylor 1999, 508; de Witt 2013, 1061).

Srila Prabhupad—the movement’s founder—is reported to have given a banana or other food items to visitors to send them on their way and sit at his own plate to—in slow contemplation—consume the spiritual food. This type of “slow food,” contemplative eating, and detachment hardly fulfils the requirements of conviviality in eating together. In my observation, the conviviality of eating together in Krishna circles is primarily experienced in sharing and outreach programmes (e.g. music events) and other non-official settings (e.g. yoga courses) where devotee behaviour is less religiously regulated. In its official settings, Hare Krishna dining showed a remarkable lack of conviviality. This finding was not easy to capture and register, as in my paradigmatic view eating together was always already a communal and sociable, amiable practice. Besides, several of the interviews and conversations also attested to this view. It was only at a late phase of fieldwork that the conundrum got uncovered through raising questions about my observations in an email interview, as quoted earlier. This reassured me about the advantages of participant observation, which methodologically allowed me to learn through repeatedly experiencing the practices under investigation and keep on scrutinising them for an extensive period. Without participating in the lives of the communities, I may never have discovered some delicate subtleties of Krishna food practices.

To close, Krishna prasadam and eating together is an ambiguous project in the sight of an outsider. While it is tangibly convivial in outreach community settings, within its official confines it may discourage tableside socialising as it is practiced and understood in Western cultures. Rather, eating is an event for quiet contemplation and personal development, with the backs of isolated devotees turned upon the rest of the community if required by moments of spiritual engagement (e.g. pre-chanting meditation). This attitude too is an outcome of the philosophy that teaches and motivates adherents to conceive of eating as a time to reverence prasadam—and what is connected to it—rather than socialising with others. This account is not the first to find that eating together may serve to set social boundaries just as effectively as to demolish them (Julier 2013). Beyond its impact on human health and the environment, researchers are invited to evaluate the practice of eating together from a variety of social aspects, such as religion, psychology, equality or gender. As far as religion is concerned, this article is a call to community members and interfaith researchers to discuss spiritual and practical details of conviviality by exchanging thoughts on this increasingly important subject.

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3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v92DggbjRB8.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Tamas Lestar:** Research Fellow, Management, University of Essex, Colchester, Essex, UK
Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal explores new possibilities for sustainable food production and human nutrition. It provides an interdisciplinary forum for the discussion of agricultural, environmental, nutritional, health, social, economic, and cultural perspectives on food. Articles range from broad theoretical and global policy explorations to detailed studies of specific human-physiological, nutritional, and social dynamics of food. The journal examines the dimensions of a “new green revolution” that will meet our human needs in a more effective, equitable, and sustainable way in the twenty-first century.

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