

The menu was vegetarian. The criticism was biting.

NEW DELHI

BY YAN ZHUANG
AND ALEX TRAVELLI

The world leaders who dined together at the BRICS summit in India over the weekend were served plate after plate of delicacies: Cubes of paneer simmered in gravy, Himalayan morel mushrooms with saffron, lentil broth with tomatoes and curry leaves.

Meat was conspicuously absent.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political opponents, who rarely miss a chance to criticize him, accused him of promoting an incomplete image of India's culinary landscape. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition in the lower house of Parliament, pointed out on social media that most Indians are not vegetarian.

Kiren Rijiju, a minister in Mr. Modi's government, rejected the criticism, saying the guests had enjoyed vegetarian dishes that reflected India's "diverse regional traditions."

"I can't believe that Congress party is making politics even on the food menu served to the leaders of BRICS nations," he said, referring to Mr. Gandhi's Indian National Congress political party.

Food can be a sectarian and political flashpoint in India, and has become increasingly polarizing during Mr. Modi's tenure. Mr. Modi has a Hindu nationalist base, and his government has taken steps in recent years to promote Hindu causes and to sideline Muslims and other groups.

Vegetarianism has particular religious and cultural associations among some Hindu communities, especially among upper castes and in parts of northern and western India, though many Hindus eat meat.

The BRICS dinner was not an isolated

example. President Patrick Herminie of Seychelles and President To Lam of Vietnam are among the world leaders who were served vegetarian meals during visits to New Delhi this year.

Mr. Modi is vegetarian and does not drink alcohol. At functions he attends, public or private, alcohol is removed from view; at wedding receptions, for example, his security agents have had bars closed before his arrival.

When India hosted the Group of 20 Summit in New Delhi in 2023, world leaders were served a dinner that prominently featured millet grains — at a time when India's government had successfully proposed that the United Nations designate 2023 the "International Year of Millets."

Meals served to visiting dignitaries can have an important diplomatic function, said Keri Matwick, a scholar at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore who studies food and culinary diplomacy. "It's a way to try to highlight something about the country to another country," she said, adding that it can also be a way to show respect to a visiting leader or facilitate conversation.

When Singapore hosted President Trump and Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader, for a summit in 2018, for example, the menu nodded to both countries. For Mr. Trump, there was shrimp cocktail and beef short rib. For Mr. Kim, there was a traditional Korean dish of cucumbers stuffed with beef, egg and carrot, along with soy-braised cod.

At other diplomatic gatherings, food has been used to set the tone. In 1939, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of Britain were served hot dogs during a picnic at President Franklin D. Roosevelt's family estate in Hyde Park, N.Y. "People laughed because of how informal it was but it added a uniqueness" to the event, Ms. Matwick said.