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Meat-eating in India: Whose food, whose politics, and whose rights?

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Abstract

Transitioning towards a plant-based diet is considered both ethical and environmentally friendly from a Western perspective of high per capita consumption of flesh foods. However, in contemporary India, beef-eating has emerged as a political act of subversion in the context of its current ban by the Indian state which is transforming unapologetically into a theocracy under the aegis of Hindu fundamentalist groups. To understand the contemporary discourse on beef-eating, it is important to locate it in the discourse prevalent during the Independence movement, when there was an attempt to unify the Hindus to forge a nationalist identity, and to bring the ‘outcaste’ ‘untouchables’ – who were a sub-group acknowledged to consume beef – within the Hindu fold of ‘caste purity’. Data from an ethnographic study of over fifteen months in a village in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, demonstrate the place of flesh foods, including beef, in the everyday lives of people, and question the concept of a ‘normative’ Indian diet. The paper argues that contrary to the notion that vegetarianism is morally superior, in the context of Hinduism, where vegetarianism is a marker of upper caste identity, the food hierarchy is a function of the caste structure. Hence, the protests, particularly from the former ‘untouchable’ caste groups, reclaiming the right to eat transgressive foods as a marker of their identity, poses a serious challenge to upper caste hegemony. The violence which ‘vegetarian’ India has unleashed on such transgressions has laid open the structural violence embodied in the caste system and questions its claim to moral superiority.

Keywords

Food politics, beef consumption in India, ethics of vegetarianism, food and caste

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Introduction

From a Western perspective of high per-capita consumption of flesh foods, transitioning to a plant-based diet is upheld as a counter-cuisine of ‘political resistance to disciplinary power’ against food choices shaped by one’s ‘upbringings, media, agribusiness, and government funded nutritional science expert discourses’ (Taylor, 2010: 73). While Taylor argues for ‘ethical vegetarianism’ from a position that a meat-based diet is ‘morally problematic’, with vegetarianism as a ‘proof of human superiority’ (Taylor, 2010: 75), recent events in contemporary India problematize both these notions.

In India, the term ‘non-vegetarian’ is used to describe those consuming either egg, fish, meat or any combination of these (Gulati and Verma, 2016), and though milk is from an animal source, milk and its products are consumed by those who define themselves as ‘vegetarians’.¹ As Arunima remarks, ‘[t]he neologism “non-vegetarian”, created by vegetarian India itself speaks volumes, and makes the country possibly the only one in the world where meat is not called by its name! Consequently, the normative status of vegetarianism is reinforced by rendering meat nameless, and by reducing it to a depleted “non” of vegetables’ (Arunima, 2014: unpaged, para 2). This is indicative of the power wielded by vegetarians in India who form a minority of the population.² For instance, an authoritative study completed in 1993 by the Anthropological Survey of India found that 88% of the population comprised ‘meat eaters’ (Pathak, 1993).³ However, the category ‘non-vegetarian’ is not a homogenous entity because it is not accessibility and availability alone, but cultural factors – caste and religion being chief among them – that determine which flesh foods are consumed by a particular social group. Among these, the taboo within the Hindu religion against the consumption of cow’s flesh which, in the 19th century, was used as a rallying point during the nationalist mobilization in northern India (Sarkar and Sarkar, 2016), has now assumed centre stage in contemporary debates.⁴

It was in 1949 at the time of Indian independence that a provision against slaughtering of cows, calves, and other milch and draught cattle was written in the Directive Principles of State Policy.⁵ Although its inclusion was very much linked to the upper caste Hindu religious sentiment with regards to the sanctity of the cow, the wording, bowing to modernity, was couched in the language of science. Following this, as it was deemed to be a ‘state’ subject, the law on slaughter of cattle varied in the different states in India, ranging from a total ban to slaughter of animals no longer considered useful. Currently, under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule at the centre, a party that subscribes to Hindu nationalism (Harriss, 2016), a more comprehensive ban, broadened to cover bulls and bullocks, is being operationalized in the states where the BJP is in power, and there is an increase in the quantum of punishment for violating the law (Bahl and Purkayastha, 2015).⁶ Not only that, even the possession of beef is considered a crime punishable by imprisonment by the police force in Maharashtra – a state that has one of the most stringent laws against slaughter – who are provided with a meat detection DNA kit to test whether the meat is that of a cow or not (Shaikh, 2017).⁷ Emboldened by the support provided by the BJP, the country is also witnessing extra-legal actions carried out by the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist groups, with increasing incidence of violence against those who are traditionally known to consume beef. However, the emerging militant cow vigilantism has targeted one particular religious community with a study showing that since 2010, 86% of those who were lynched by the Hindu *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors) were Muslims, with 97% of these attacks taking place after the year 2014 when the BJP came to power at the centre (Abraham and Rao, 2017).

Contrary to popular belief, beef-eating is prevalent amongst most religions including Hinduism, and forms an important part of the regional cuisine, as in, for instance, the states of Kerala and Meghalaya. Hence, the slaughter ban which imposes the dietary norm of a minority social group on all its citizens, varyingly termed as food fascism (Biswas, 2017) or culinary apartheid (Masoodi, 2016), has triggered counter-movements in the country.⁸ At the forefront of these struggles are students' groups in universities, political parties, and ordinary citizens (Avenshi Centre for Women's Studies, 2012; Ehsan, 2015; Express News Service, 2015; Mathew, 2015).⁹ Their attempts to organize beef-eating festivals in public spaces have been disrupted by vigilantes, police or are disallowed by the Court citing law and order problems (Press Trust of India, 2012). Riding on the back of the beef ban, are attempts to impose a strict vegetarian code by targeting abattoirs, ostensibly for not complying with regulations, and closing meat shops during religious festivals (Chatterjee, 2017)¹⁰ and citing 'sentiments' of people affected by the sight of meat (Press Trust of India, 2017).¹¹

This paper examines the politics of meat-eating, specifically beef-consumption in India. To understand the contemporary discourse on beef-eating, it is important to locate it in the discourse prevalent during the Independence movement, when there was an attempt to unify the Hindus to forge a nationalist identity and to bring the 'outcaste' 'untouchables'¹² – who were a sub-group acknowledged to consume beef – within the Hindu fold of 'caste purity'. The paper begins by examining the creation of the popular image of India during the colonial period (1858–1947), as a nation of vegetarians with a particular aversion to beef-eating and the stands taken by the nationalist leaders, Gandhi (an upper caste Hindu vegetarian) and Ambedkar (from the beef-eating 'untouchable' caste group), as they spoke to the constituency of beef-eaters. Drawing upon an ethnographic study conducted over fifteen months in a village in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the paper looks at the place of flesh foods, including beef, in the everyday lives of people, and questions the concept of a normative 'Indian diet' and how the politics of food plays out at the 'peripheral' level. This paper argues that contrary to the notion that vegetarianism is morally superior, in the context of Hinduism, where vegetarianism is a marker of upper caste identity, the food hierarchy is a function of the caste structure. Hence the protests, particularly from the former 'untouchable' caste groups, reclaiming their right to eat transgressive foods as a marker of *their* identity, poses a serious challenge to upper caste hegemony. The violence which 'vegetarian' India has unleashed on such transgressions has laid open the structural violence embodied in the caste system and questions its claim to moral superiority.

India, a vegetarian nation?

'Like many large tropical countries, India is characterised by a complex mosaic of distinct agro-ecosystems, differentiated by its climatic, soil, geological, vegetational, and other natural features' (Kothari, 1994). The country's food culture reflects this diversity, differing from region to region, having evolved over millennia, shaped by local availability and mode of production. Though meat consumption was and continues to be very much part of this multicultural cuisine, the popular notion that the pan-Indian diet is vegetarian could perhaps be traced to the time of the colonial rule. The largely plant-based diet of the Indians was a contrast to the British colonizers' flesh-based diet, a marker of their 'exotic' status as outsiders (Arnold, 1994: 3). However, it was in the 1860s, 'driven by two areas of colonial concern – famines and prisons', that the first systematic documentation of food

consumption among this population was carried out (Arnold, 1994: 5). Hence, it was the food culture of the deprived, one that was almost all cereal, that came to be seen as the normative 'Indian' diet and pronounced as inferior to the Western meat-based diet. It was also pronounced as the source of subjugation of the Indian people (Nitti, 1896: 31).

McCarrison, an Army physician who had set up a nutrition research laboratory in southern India in 1918, added to this notion by observing that the reason for the poor physique that 'characterized' the average Bengali or south Indian was due to their inadequate protein diets containing little milk, milk products, and meat because 'by religion... [they were] often a non-meat-eater' (McCarrison as quoted in Walker, 2002: 107). In India, this piece of nutritional thinking, that foods sourced from animals were essential components of a healthy diet, met with serious opposition from Gandhi, a vocal proponent of vegetarianism who wrote

[m]edical opinion is mostly in favour of a mixed diet, although there is a growing school, which is strongly of the opinion that anatomical and physiological evidence is in favour of man [sic] being a vegetarian. His teeth, stomach, intestines, etc. seem to prove that nature has meant man to be a vegetarian (Gandhi, 1948: 13, 14).

Gandhi had initially succumbed to the power of Western nutrition science and had subscribed to the thinking that consumption of '[meat] would make [him] strong and that, if the whole country took to meat eating the English could be overcome' and tried experimenting with consuming goat meat for almost a year (Gandhi, 1949: 7). However, born in a vegetarian household he was unable to overcome his distaste and guilt in deceiving his parents, from whom he had hidden his meat consumption. It was when he was in London, trying to live up to a vow he made to his mother not to consume flesh foods under any circumstance, that he found in Henry Salt's 1886 book, *A Plea for Vegetarianism and Other Essays*, the moral basis as well a scientific rationale for his 'hereditary behaviour' of vegetarianism. While, according to Arnold (1994), Gandhi's rejection of flesh foods in his formulation of a 'swadeshi' diet was to be seen as a part of his wider struggle against Western dominance, for Gandhi, it was a spiritual quest as well.¹³ Gandhi linked his vegetarian morality, based on 'scientific thinking' from a Western source, to the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and declared that the 'only basis for having a vegetarian society and proclaiming a vegetarian principle [was], and must be a moral one' (Gandhi, 1959 [1949]: 23, 26).¹⁴

However, his knowledge about the dietary behaviour of Indians appeared narrow. For instance, while addressing the London Vegetarian Society in November 1931, he remarked that he belonged to a country that was predominantly vegetarian by habit or necessity (Gandhi, 1949 [1929]: 26). Though Gandhi was averse to all flesh-eating, his upper-caste Hindu sensibility was particularly outraged at the consumption of beef, and it was the 'untouchable' caste groups which became the target for his reformist propaganda as they were the ones who openly consumed the flesh of cow.¹⁵ It was left to Ambedkar, born of this 'untouchable' caste group, to show how it was that the food hierarchy among the Hindus, specifically beef consumption, provided the material basis of the unjust caste system.

Food hierarchy and the caste system

Even a superficial view of the food taboos of the Hindus will show that there are two taboos regarding food which serve as dividing lines. There is one taboo against meat-eating. It divides

Hindus into vegetarians and flesh-eaters. There is another taboo which is against beef-eating. It divides Hindus into those who eat cow's flesh and those who do not. From the point of view of untouchability the first dividing line is of no importance. But the second is. For it completely marks off the Touchables from the Untouchables. (Ambedkar, 1948: 318–319)

Thus wrote Ambedkar on the food pyramid of the Hindu caste system. He elaborated further that there was yet another dividing line: those who ate freshly slaughtered cow and those who ate the flesh of a 'dead' cow; it was not that the untouchables ate cow's flesh that made them 'untouchable', because the people he termed 'settled community', who were part of the 'touchables', also ate beef, but it was because the untouchables ate the flesh of the dead cow. It was therefore the fact of consuming carrion which made the untouchables polluted and polluting and it was their lives of abject poverty that forced them to eat. Living on the doles of the upper caste and forced to perform the scavenging work – including the removal of dead animals as their caste obligation and not having access to live cattle whose fresh meat could be consumed – eating the flesh of the dead cow was one of the few ways of adding to their meagre food basket. Gandhi, on the other hand, had a different take on carrion-eating by the untouchable caste groups.

Cow preservation is an article of faith in Hinduism. No Harijan worth his salt will kill cattle for food. *But having become untouchable*, he has learnt the *evil habit* of eating carrion. He will not kill a cow but will eat with the greatest relish the flesh of the dead cow. *It may be physiologically harmless. But psychologically there is nothing, perhaps, so repulsive as carrion eating.* And yet, when a dead cow is brought to a Harijan tanner's house, it is a day of rejoicing for the whole household. Children dance round the carcass, and as the animal is flayed, they take hold of bones or pieces of flesh and throw them at one another ... the whole family is drunk with joy at the sight of the dead animal. I know how hard I have found it working among the Harijans to wean them from the *soul-destroying* habit of eating carrion. (Gandhi, 1960 [1934]: 26; emphasis added)^{16,17}

While Ambedkar locates the eating of dead cows as a reason for conferring his people the untouchable status, Gandhi evades the issue of the origins of untouchability and locates what he terms the 'evil' and 'soul-destroying habit' of eating carrion as a result of becoming an untouchable failing to ask why they would be 'drunk with joy' at the sight of a dead cow. From a short story entitled 'Cull' by Amitab, we have a grimmer description of what a dead cow meant as food to a starving people:

[They] pounced upon the prey, raising a full-throated battle cry ... young and old, all marched forth, flashing their knives. Everyone had an eye on the thick thighs and buttocks. They pulled and tugged at the carcass. Tens of knives were sawing at the chest at once. Whatever piece, small or big, they could manage, they cut and put into their containers. The knives slashed and sliced, chunks and chunks of meat were piled into the hampers and baskets ... They were all covered in blood ... Their hair was red. Their limbs were red. The dirty rags they wore were red. From top to toe they were all dyed in the same colour – red ... The kites, vultures, and crows now sprang into action. The dogs, alerted, attacked the skeleton. The crows hovered over the heads of the people going home and swooped down on the troughs they carried on their heads ... The men and women, used to such attacks, held on to their baskets and troughs tightly with one hand and with the other brandished their knives and twigs picked on the way to ward them off. (193–195)

(Short story entitled ‘Cull’ by Amitab from Arjun Dangle (ed.) *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Bombay, Orient Longman, 1992), as quoted in Ramachandran, 2004: 32–33.)

In fact, Gandhi was so keen to find a scientific reason to buttress his arguments against carrion-eating which did not necessarily involve the deliberate killing of cows against which he could bring forth religious admonition, that he posed a series of questions to Dr Deshmukh, the first president of the Indian Medical Association, on the physiological distinction between carrion and slaughtered meat, and was particularly concerned to find out ‘any medical reason for the great repugnance that even meat eaters have against carrion’ (Gandhi, 1949: 44). While Deshmukh could not provide Gandhi with a physiological reason against eating carrion even when poisoned, he provided him with a ‘psychological’ reason for aversion to eating non-slaughtered, dead cow despite admitting to ‘[c]ertain persons of superior taste … decomposing meat before eating to pander to their epicurean taste’ (Gandhi, 1949: 45). Yet, Deshmukh said: ‘[i]t is a psychological fact, in the same way as the flowing of water or rotation of the earth is a physical fact; as such use of carrion for food in normal times is bound to create a feeling of loathing in the human mind, and feeling of repugnance for the human being who practices this … Universal psychology is against it and, therefore, it must go’ (Letter from Deshmukh to Gandhi, cited in Gandhi, 1949: 47).

Ambedkar also urged his people to refrain from eating carrion, not from the point of view of aversion, but as an affirmation of self-respect. On 20 March 1927, during the Mahad Satyagraha he urged his people to ‘[root] out from our minds the ideas of highness and lowness among ourselves. Make an unflinching resolve not to eat the thrown-out crumbs’ (Ambedkar, 2014 [1927]: 4). The Mahad Satyagraha also resolved to appeal to the caste Hindus to bury their dead animals themselves. Gandhi (1973 [1933]: 65), on the other hand, perceived the disposal of the carcasses as a sacred obligation of the untouchables, which they should continue but, in order to achieve self-purification, should refrain from consuming the flesh.

Though carrion-eating is no longer the norm, it continues to lie at the heart of the contemporary politics on beef-eating: aversion of the upper-caste Hindus against the beef-eating ‘untouchables’ versus the celebration of self-affirmation and identity as beef-eaters by the former untouchable and other caste groups who have traditionally consumed beef. The following section looks at the meat consumption pattern, including beef, in contemporary India.

The flesh-eaters in India

In 2014, a national-level survey showed that more than two-thirds of the respondents identified themselves as non-vegetarians, with the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal reporting more than 90% as non-vegetarians (Government of India, 2014). A household consumption pattern showed that 29.2% of rural and 37.6% of urban households reported consuming eggs, 26.5% rural and 21.0% urban consumed fish/prawns, 21.7% rural and 27% urban consumed chicken, 6.4% rural and 10.0% urban consumed goat meat/mutton, and 4% rural and 5% urban consumed beef/buffalo meat, in the 7 days prior to the survey (National Sample Survey Office, 2014: 26). However, when per-capita consumption (in 30 days) was considered, with the exception of fish (266 g in rural and 252 g in urban), and chicken (178 g rural and 239 g urban), the other

flesh items were minimal; the per-capita consumption of eggs was only 1.94 – in rural and 3.18 – in urban, that of goat meat and mutton was 49 g in rural and 79 g urban, and that of beef/buffalo meat was 42 g and 64 g respectively.

A noticeable regional difference was apparent, with the highest number of Hindus eating beef/buffalo meat in Andhra Pradesh, followed by Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. Beef/buffalo meat-eating was most common in Lakshadweep (1.135 kg per-capita consumption in 30 days), followed by rural Nagaland (576 g), and Meghalaya (419 g) (National Sample Survey Office, 2014). Thus, the largest beef-consuming state was not the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir but Meghalaya, where more than 80% of the population consumed beef (Kishore and Anand, 2015). Though the number of ‘Indians eating beef and buffalo meat went up from 7.51 crore¹⁸ in 1999–2000 to 8.35 crore in 2011–2012 the total household consumption of beef/buffalo meat went down from 4.44 crore kg per month to 3.67 crore kg in the same time period’ (Bansal, 2016).¹⁹ The analysis also showed that beef/buffalo meat consumption in the month preceding the survey was highest among the Muslim population (42%) followed by Christians (26.5%) (Bansal, 2016). Though Hindus were less than 2%, in absolute numbers they ranked second with more than 12.5 million reporting beef-consumption (Kishore and Anand, 2015). However, the consumption reported by the Hindus was considered an underestimate as often they would consume it outside in eateries but not cook it at home.

These national-level data showing high prevalence of households and individuals consuming meat, including beef, yet with per-capita consumption at a minimal level, are corroborated at the micro level as well. In an ethnographic study carried out in a village in Tamil Nadu, a state that was reported to have 90% of the respondents reporting as ‘non-vegetarians’ (Government of India, 2014), among the households from which in-depth information was collected on their everyday diet, only two households reported not consuming flesh foods (Sathyamala, 2016).²⁰

The everyday diet consisted of the cereal rice eaten with a thin gravy of lentils and vegetables. Milk, egg, chicken, mutton, beef, and pork were consumed varyingly. Cattle rearing was the traditional occupation of the *konar* caste (‘Touchable’ caste) which was numerically and socially dominant in the village. In the past, the cattle strength was many times greater than what it is now and was meant primarily for producing dung for manure and for agricultural operations. Milk was available in plenty and with no refrigeration or market, was processed into curd, butter and ghee (clarified butter) and the village was said to be overflowing with these products. The surplus milk went to the calves. What the market had done was to empty the village of milk and with that had led to its disappearance from the diet of almost all the households. The reduction in the population of the hardy Indian buffalo was the other casualty of the changing demographic pattern. While in the past the village was said to be teaming with them, now only one household reared them. Dwindling population of buffaloes has been noticed all over Tamil Nadu. This is a loss, nutritionally speaking, because buffalo milk has a higher protein content than cow milk.

Eggs were consumed not infrequently but the quantity was just sufficient to become a side dish of ‘*thodu-curry*’ (‘touch-food’); two eggs would be bought and scrambled with onions and shared among four or five family members. . . . Approximately half of the households (53%) in SC [Scheduled Castes] and one-third (67%) of the other caste households reported that they rarely ate eggs because of the cost. . . . Although chicken was not the preferred flesh food in the past, it had come to replace other flesh foods because it was now cheaper and more readily available

than the others. Yet, only 30% of the SC households and <6% of households in the other castes reported once a week consumption; in all the other households it was occasional. Even in the households that reported weekly consumption, the amount bought would be just sufficient to provide each with a small piece, with the larger share going to the males in the family. Men habituated to alcohol who had regular income were known to consume ‘non-vegetarian’ food, often beef, when they imbibed alcohol on a daily or weekly basis. Fish, both from the sea (the coast was just 70 km away) and seasonally from the local tanks/ponds, were available at door-steps, sold by traders on motorcycles. Sometimes fish was caught ‘illegally’ from the streams flowing near the village during the rainy seasons. However, its consumption was infrequent and seasonal. Dried fish was available through the year and was eaten with great relish particularly because of its high salt content and was either fried as a side dish or made into gravy as *kulambu*...

Consumption of mutton, beef and pork were reported to have come down drastically from the past and was now rare and confined to special occasions only, even among the not-so-poor. This was particularly true for the *Konar* caste households where mutton was very much part of their weekly diet in the past. The change was said to be due to the decrease in cattle strength, the shift to more land-based livelihoods and the increasing cost of mutton. With the price of mutton going up, the cost of beef and pork—foods consumed by the lower caste and the poor, which were much cheaper—had also gone up and was increasingly moving out of the reach of the poor. However, the consumption of beef and pork was also underreported because of the negative association with its consumption, specifically linked to caste status. Yet, it was stated that those previously eating mutton were shifting to beef whose price was going up because of the increasing demand. The SC households in general had no taboos concerning eating beef but only the *Arunthathiyar* caste [the lowermost of the ‘untouchable’ caste hierarchy] openly stated that they ate beef. Consumption of beef had declined greatly also because of difficulty in accessing it. In the past it was sold quite openly in the village but was now available only in the weekly market in a nearby town. Lately the communal angle, the banning of cow slaughter and sale of beef, had added to its non-availability. Though I was informed that even ‘today’, people in the village from diverse castes ate pork, only one family from the SC community openly stated to relishing it, but then too only the men said they ate it. Some also mentioned that pork was eaten for its alleged medicinal properties, particularly as a cure for piles.

The annual temple festivals (linked to clan gods) were times when families feasted on flesh foods following animal sacrifices and, depending on the particular deity, goats, chicken or pigs were sacrificed and eaten. It was reported that till a decade or two ago, bulls were sacrificed to the clan gods by the ‘touchable’ caste groups and its meat consumed, but the practice had now stopped. It was also said that in the past, men from the SC groups would go hunting to snare hare or birds but now with the installation of wind turbines, the scrub land was cleared, disturbing the habitat of these creatures. (Sathyamala, 2016: 288–289)

Thus, though almost the entire village of a mixed caste composition comprising the former ‘untouchable’ castes and the ‘touchable’ castes reported consuming all types of flesh foods, including beef, albeit some of them clandestinely, its reported consumption had come down drastically, both because of the association of beef with low caste status and due to its increasing price and non-availability. Carrion-eating appeared to be a thing of the past and in any case, it was only the *Arunthathiyar* caste group that traditionally removed the carcasses, ate the meat and used the skin for making leather articles utilized primarily in irrigation.²¹ Randeria (1989: 184) too, in her study on carrion-eating among the

‘untouchable’ castes in North Gujarat in the 1980s, reported that carrion-eating was no longer prevalent. Moreover, as Cole (2017) argues, scientific studies have shown that ‘no hard and fast rule exists between fallen flesh and slaughtered meat’. In any case with refrigeration and processing, the distinction between carrion and fresh kill makes little sense. Unlike the findings from Chigateri’s (2008) work with Dalit women in Bangalore, where beef-eating was a source of contestation, in my study village, the Scheduled Castes’ households did not see this as an important source of their ‘untouchability’ status or oppression. This could be perhaps because flesh consumption was not perceived as a transgression as almost all households consumed flesh foods and consumption of beef was not a taboo even among those from the ‘touchable’ castes.

Structural violence of Hindu vegetarianism

From both macro- and micro-level data, though the majority of the Indian population identifies itself as ‘non-vegetarian’, the reality is that the consumption of flesh foods, including that from cattle, is so little as to be almost negligible, indicating that the everyday diet of the poor who form the majority of the population continues to be primarily cereal-based. However, it is not this group of the economically underprivileged who are protesting the imposition of a certain food choice of a minority over the majority. Though the cow vigilantes have targeted the Muslim population that consumes beef, and also trades in it, again, the major protests have not risen from this group either. It is from within the Hindu population that the more militant protests have risen and though the beef-eaters from the ‘touchable’ caste groups are very much part of it, the challenge posed by the Dalit groups move beyond the ‘right to eat’ to, as Satyanarayana puts it, recreating caste as ‘a new identity of assertion and pride’ (Satyanarayana, 2014: 52). In this new reimagining, the project is not the annihilation of caste but to reconfigure it as a contemporary form of power, as modern, and subjective (Satyanarayana, 2014: 52). Beef-eating then becomes a marker of identity, an identity that needs to be celebrated against the centuries of aversion and humiliation imposed on a particular people on account of their location in the unjust hierarchy because of the accident of birth.

Contrary to Chigateri’s argument that the ‘moral ethic of non-violence that forms such a powerful symbolic tool of vegetarian caste communities’ is subverted by the Dalit critique of the politics of food (Chigateri, 2008: 24), I would argue that the upper-caste, Hindu brand of vegetarianism is based on the notion of caste purity which is not necessarily linked to care of animals or non-violence, even though it drew its original inspiration from Buddhism and Jainism, both of which had non-violence as a central tenet.²² For instance, a study on Euro-American and Indian vegetarians concluded that while the former were more concerned than the omnivores about the consequences their daily food choices have on environment and animal welfare, the universalistic values they endorsed were not given much importance among the Indian vegetarians (Ruby et al., 2013: 340). The Indian vegetarians’ motivation was based on the belief that eating meat was polluting due to a ‘heightened concern for the conservative ethics of Purity’. Thus, in the upper-caste Hindu context, to speak of vegetarianism is then, as Pandian puts it, to ‘talk of caste by other means’ as against talking of caste ‘on its own terms’ (Pandian, 2002: 1735). In modern India, to impose a code against meat-eating in general and beef-eating in particular is to smuggle casteism through the backdoor. Claiming beef-eating as a marker of self-identity by the ‘untouchable’ groups then becomes a political project to talk of caste on its own terms.

The violence with which a certain vegetarian code is being enforced in India and the violence with which the counter-discourse has been met with, renders its claim of non-violence an empty rhetoric, revealing the continued structural violence of the caste system despite claims of modernity. As Smith puts it, ‘... every ethical discourse expresses and constructs a different moral field, draws different boundaries around morality, writes or speaks of different cultural contexts’ and that one would need to speak of moralities rather than morality (Smith, 2001: 25). Hence, in India, as long as caste dictates social norms, including what one can or cannot consume, vegetarianism as an enforcer of caste purity will need to give up its pretence of being in a morally superior position of non-violence towards living beings.

Conclusion

This paper examines the politics of meat-eating, specifically beef consumption in contemporary India. The violence which transgression of a certain food code has evoked, has laid bare the continued need for the Hindu upper caste India to maintain its hegemony at all costs. Though its wrath is directed against the ‘other’ – the Muslim population – it is the former ‘untouchable’ caste groups that have posed a serious threat to upper caste supremacy by laying claim to their identity in all matters including their food culture. In this context, orchestrated beef consumption promoted as a counter-cuisine is to be viewed as a political act of subversion and resistance to the disciplinary power of the state which is attempting to transform unapologetically into a theocracy under the aegis of Hindu fundamentalist groups.

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Notes

1. Some ‘vegetarians’ consume unfertilized eggs.
2. Today, a ‘Hindu meal’ has become synonymous with a vegetarian meal.
3. In addition to the usual ‘meat’, the food culture included consumption of field rats, baby crocodiles, civets and jackals, to name a few.
4. For an excellent analysis of the historical aspects of the beef ban see Sarkar and Sarkar (2016).
5. Passed in 1949, Article 48 in the Directive Principles of State Policy states: ‘The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall in particular take steps for preserving and improving the breeds and prohibiting slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle’.
6. But, as Sarkar and Sarkar (2016) point out, most of the cow protection legislations were passed by the Congress party which the Bharatiya Janata Party strengthened and implemented under its rule fulfilling its electoral promises.

7. In some states it can incur 10 years of imprisonment, higher than that for rape which is only 7 years (Mahendra, 2016). In 2017, Gujarat enacted a law making cow slaughter punishable with life imprisonment (First Post Staff, 2017).
8. In Maharashtra, a one-day ban on slaughter and sale of meat (not only beef) during the Jain festival of Paryushan Parva has existed since 1964 in the Congress ruled Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation and in 2015, during the Bharatiya Janata Party rule, was extended to eight days (Shekar, 2015). This was to cater to the sentiments of the Jains who are only 1.25% of the population in Maharashtra (see: <http://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/6-jainism.html>).
9. For instance, after the police conducted a ‘raid’ in the Kerala state guest house on the instigation of a right-wing Hindu group which reported that the restaurant was serving beef, scores of people lined up the next day to partake of the buffalo meat curry on its menu as a sign of defiance, and the restaurant ended up serving 5 kg more than was the usual amount (Mathew, 2015). Some of those who partook in the protest admitted to going against their doctor’s advice warning them of the health hazards of consuming red meat.
10. See Wire Staff (2017) for a map on the lynching in India in cow-related violence between 2015 and 2017.
11. Even the screening of a film by students in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, *Caste on the Menu Card* on the beef-eating practices in Mumbai, was prevented by the authorities, but the students went ahead and screened it (Shankar and Sabhrawal, 2015).
12. *Varna* is a system of social stratification in the Hindu religion, with no counterparts in any other religion. There are four *varnas*: Brahman (scholars and teachers); Kshatriya (rulers and warriors); Vaisya (traders and merchants); and Sudra (artisans and labourers); there is also a fifth group, so low socially as to be considered outside the *varnas* and deemed ‘untouchables’ who were considered polluted and polluting and discriminated against in various forms. Post-independence, when untouchability was abolished legally (through Article 17 of the Indian Constitution which came into force on 26 January 1950), the ‘untouchables’ were categorized as ‘Scheduled Castes’. Gandhi named them as ‘Harijans’ (people of God), which has been rejected by them. Dalit, meaning oppressed, is a term that has been adopted by some, particularly from the North. While caste is said to be a convenient form of division of labour, it is in fact a hereditary system of inequality legitimized by the Hindu religious texts. However, in India, the caste system is so pervasive, that it is found among other religious groups (Christians, Muslims and Sikhs) as well. Caste is a system of social exclusion and continues to determine a person’s socioeconomic location. The ‘purity’ of caste is maintained by strict endogamy.
13. Swadeshi (of one’s country/nation) was the call of the Indian National Independence movement boycotting British goods and urging towards home rule.
14. Ironically, though Gandhi started out by rejecting all animal foods, when his health deteriorated, he was forced to include milk in his diet. He argued himself out of his earlier position of a vegan diet by stating that since his oath against consuming milk was for cow and buffalo milk, he did not perceive any violation in taking goat’s milk, although he admitted that it was keeping to the letter but not the spirit of the vow.
15. However, Gandhi did not advocate a ban on slaughter of cows as he felt it would ‘mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus ... It is not as if there were only Hindus in the Indian Union. There are Muslims, Parsis, Christians and other religious groups here. The assumption of Hindus that India now has become the land of the Hindus is erroneous’ (Gandhi, 1983 [1947]: 424).
16. This scene is as described by a Harijan tanner who was then living at the Harijan Ashram after having ‘forsaken’ his original home in the village (Gandhi, 1960 [1934]: 26).
17. Gandhi was also not being very truthful when he stated that no untouchable (Harijan) would kill a cow because he was well aware that cows were deliberately poisoned by them so that their carcass would be available for food (Gandhi, 1949: 44).
18. 1 crore is equivalent to 10,000,000.

19. This was based on three rounds of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (the most recent being 2011–2012) of the National Sample Survey Office.
20. The study village had a mixed caste base comprising the former ‘untouchable’ caste groups, designated here as Scheduled Caste (SC) as per the Constitution and other caste groups. Data were collected in 2011–2012 with the baseline covering 674 households; in-depth information was collected from a sub-sample of 288 households (147 SC and 141 ‘other castes households’). Christians formed 12% of the total population and there was not a single Muslim family in the village. All the Christians, with the exception of one household were from the SC category. The village is in a drought-stricken area with a single rain-fed crop.
21. With the shift to mechanized irrigation using electricity or diesel, the market for such products has disappeared.
22. Historians have contended that beef consumption was very much part of the Hindu religion during the Vedic times and that it was to counter the rise of Buddhism and Jainism that vegetarianism, particularly, the taboo against beef rose (Ambedkar, 1948; Kosambi, 1965; Jha, 2009).

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