

‘Will Eat Anything That Moves’ Meat Cultures in Globalising India

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The singular focus on cultural aspects of food habits in India—meat eating and its associated sociocultural meanings—has rendered the debate on animal vulnerability invisible. While many countries are now seeking a way out of large-scale livestock farming and animal foods due to ecological concerns as well as animal rights, India perversely is doing the opposite.

In this commentary, we examine the cultural politics of meat in India. The key aim is to understand how debates around the sociocultural aspects of meat consumption have the effect of rendering invisible animal vulnerability. To the uncritical eye, India is the land of vegetarianism and sacred cows and therefore a land characterised by compassion for non-human animals. Recent headlines about India’s soaring beef exports have helped to partly problematise this impression albeit only in relation to the bovine family (Gopal 2015; Narayanan 2015; Kasturirangan, Srinivasan and Rao 2014).

This article, spurred by ongoing debates around beef, dairy and eggs, reflects on the place of animal foods and livestock animals in Indian political imaginaries (Punwani 2015; Joshi 2015; EPW 2015). In doing this, it takes these debates forward by investigating the complex character of Indian vegetarianism and unpacking its implications for animal well-being.

The Cultural Baggage

In many parts of the world, heightened scientific and public concern about the impacts of livestock farming and the

meat industry on the environment and animal welfare has led to an increasing eschewal of meat and dairy, especially that sourced from large-scale farming (Emel and Neo 2015; Sage 2014). In countries in the West, a shift away from animal foods is associated with what some would describe as a left-leaning concern for environmental and animal justice! (Foer 2009).

In stark contrast, in India, vegetarianism, and particularly the advocacy of the same, is seen as the product of conservative, often right-wing, beliefs and attitudes. Indeed, critical commentaries in journals such as the *Economic and Political Weekly* as well as in newspapers and magazines are more often than not focused on celebrating meat-based cuisines (Deshpande 2015; EPW 2015; Joshi 2015; Punwani 2015; Rowlett 2015; Sukumar 2015; Teltumbde 2015).

The negative perceptions of plant-based diets stem from the linking of vegetarianism with Hindutva politics and cultural elitism. India’s image as a vegetarian country where meat-based diets are referred to as “non-vegetarian” is seen as the product of upper-caste cultural hegemony (Ilaiah 1996a). Far from being predominantly vegetarian, the majority of the Indian population consumes meat in some form or the other. An oft-quoted survey conducted in 2006 (Yadav and Kumar 2006) estimates that only 31% of the Indian population is vegetarian; indeed, the consumption of animal flesh and foods has always been an

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integral part of the diets of communities across the subcontinent (Deshpande 2015; Jishnu 2014). This includes many groups that are labelled as upper caste—the Kshatriya caste, for example, or the Bengali and Kashmiri Brahmins.

That said, meat consumption in the Indian subcontinent has always been very different to meat consumption in other parts of the world. Meat in India is often eaten just once a day, and in many places, just a few times a week. It does not commonly constitute the main element of a meal (Sage 2014; Osella 2008). By contrast, in places like Britain, a traditional meal comprises a big chunk of meat with potatoes and veggies as sides.

In India, starchy foods tend to form the main portion of the meal with meat and vegetarian dishes as the sides. This is partly because of the availability of a rich diversity of plant foods in the subcontinental region (and cultural knowledge about plant-based cuisines), and partly because animal foods have always been more expensive in India, being free of the subsidies that prop up their easy market availability in the West (Emel and Neo 2015).

Meat, Progressiveness, Modernity

All the same, Indian vegetarianism is seen as a marker of upper-caste Hindu culture (Chigateri 2008; Ahmad 2005). In Ilaiah's (1996b: 68) words, "vegetarian" is synonymous with "Brahmin." The recurrent Hindutva deployment of food politics, especially revolving around the cow, against minority caste and religious groups has only served to strengthen this association. Thus, being vegetarian has connotations of being traditional and conservative in the worst possible sense. This has the result that the politically conscious in India more often than not eschew vegetarian/vegan diets and support meat-based ones to express their disavowal of caste hierarchies and traditions, and to express solidarity with those who have been traditionally marginalised on account of their caste and food habits (Srinivasan 2010; Anand 2005). If you are left-wing, secular and politically progressive, chances are you will eat meat even if you grew up in a vegetarian household.

The discursive and material contestation of Indian vegetarianism on cultural and political grounds has gone along with a more mundane rise in meat consumption with rising incomes. It is well-documented across the world that the consumption of animal products—meat, eggs, dairy—increases with economic affluence (Sage 2014; Cirera and Masset 2010). India is no different, and meat consumption went up from 3.7 kg/capita/year in 1980 to 5.1 kg/capita/year in 2005 while dairy consumption went up from 38.5 kg/capita/year to 65.2 kg/capita per year (FAO 2014: 11). This is still very low in comparison to the world averages of 41.2 kg/capita/year (meat) and 82.1 kg/capita/year (dairy) in 2005, but the FAO (2014) predicts a steady transition to animal foods as India becomes increasingly urban, affluent and integrated with global markets.

The rising consumption of animal foods in India is accompanied by a shift away from vegetarianism among those who were formerly vegetarian. The perception of meat as a symbol of affluence and modernity has the outcome that being "vegetarian" is becoming "uncool" in India (Jishnu 2014). While a combination of political-economic and biophysical factors might make meat the food of the poor in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States in India, meat and other animal products are, in general, more expensive than plant foods. Therefore, being non-vegetarian

is a symbol of prosperity in India; it is not just about food—it is about being modern and a part of a global culture. It is increasingly common for middle- and upper-class people from vegetarian backgrounds to claim—with a curious pride—that they will eat "anything that moves."

This transition is enabled by the fact that vegetarianism in India is primarily a cultural phenomenon stemming from religious and caste traditions. It has nothing to do with animal well-being. Lifelong vegetarians, for example, would not hesitate to wear leather or silk, or experiment on animals in the laboratory. Vegetarians in India also tend to consume more dairy than other groups, and turn a blind eye to the living conditions of dairy animals and the slaughter of male, spent or unproductive bovines that forms the foundation of the dairy industry (Kasturirangan, Srinivasan and Rao 2014; Narayanan 2015). And it is because Indian vegetarianism is primarily cultural that globalisation, increasing spending power in some, mainly urban, sections of society, exposure to other cultures, and international food chains is easily displacing the vegetarianism of those who were previously vegetarian.

Invisibilisation of Animal Vulnerability

In essence, the correlation of non-vegetarianism with modernity, affluence, cultural sophistication, trendiness,

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secularity, and political progressiveness goes along with deeply embedded negative perceptions of vegetarianism. This cultural and political mire, in turn, enables the easy dismissal of animal vulnerability in food systems in India; animal activism centring on livestock animals is almost always interpreted as a manifestation of Hindutva ideology or co-opted into the same (Rao 2011).

Articulations of concern about the animals that are caught up in the meat industry are more often than not interpreted as a manifestation of caste and religious politics, as a violation of the eating cultures and livelihoods of minority communities (Radhakrishna 2007). The animal becomes a pawn in cultural and religious politics. This situation has only been exacerbated by the affiliation of one of India's most prominent animal and environmental advocates, Maneka Gandhi, with the Hindutva-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party.

The question we wish to raise with this analysis is this: does the cultural baggage of meat in India necessarily have to preclude serious consideration of the vulnerability of the animals that become meat and that are violently exploited for eggs and dairy?² Caste is a blight, as is communalism, but should that stop us from addressing other forms of injustice at the same time?

These are questions that assume particular importance with the increasing industrialisation and growth of livestock farming in India, especially in the chicken and dairy sectors. While many countries are now seeking paths out of large-scale livestock farming and animal foods because of the attendant animal welfare, environmental and health consequences, India, most perversely, is beginning to embrace the same.

This, to us, suggests the urgency of the need to make visible the animals that have remained hidden and deployed instrumentally in the debates around food in India. For this, it is vital that animal advocates consciously distance themselves from rhetorics that are tainted by communalism. But equally important is the broader need to move away from narrow conceptions of justice centring on only the human and instead

towards a multi-optic lens (Kim 2015) that simultaneously considers both human and animal life.

NOTES

- 1 And also health concerns; but in this commentary, we focus on animal vulnerability.
- 2 Animal foods may be a convenient way of delivering nutrition but they are certainly not the only way, and as is becoming apparent in other parts of the world, may not be the best way either, given the long-term environmental and health impacts (Key, Appleby and Rosell 2006).

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