

Appropriating the Cow

Beef and Identity Politics in Contemporary India

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Introduction

To international onlookers, debates over cattle slaughter and beef consumption might have seemed like a sideshow to the main issues (corruption, the economy and women's safety high among them) that dominated the 2014 general election in India. The fact that they registered at all, however, points not only to the continuing symbolic, material and affective significance of beef to life in the sub-continent, but also to the levels of ambivalence and controversy that still surround a meat apparently long since rejected by the majority of Indians. During the election campaign, Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the soon-to-be prime minister, was harsh in his criticism of the outgoing government's subsidies and tax-breaks for slaughterhouses that had, he claimed, led to the mass killing of cows and buffaloes. 'Those at the Centre want a "Pink Revolution",' Modi told a rally in Bihar. 'When animals are slaughtered, the colour of their flesh is pink. Animals are being slaughtered and taken to Bangladesh. The government in Delhi is giving subsidies to those who are carrying out this slaughter.'¹

To many of those outside India, Modi's objections might have seemed relatively uncontroversial. India is, after all, well known for its wide-spread vegetarianism and veneration of the cow, while meat eating more generally has traditionally been interpreted, by anthropologists as well as by casual onlookers, as a marker of low or impure caste status among Hindus (see, e.g., B eteille, 1996:56-60; Marriott, 1968; Mayer, 1960). The split between vegetarianism and meat-eating has been flagged as a key marker of distinction between high and low (Seneviratne, 1992:195; Srinivas, 1966:23-24; Dumont, 1970:146-151),

with meat eaters further ordered on the basis of whether or not they eat beef (Chigateri, 2008:20) and, in some cases, over whether they eat the meat of the buffalo and that of the cow. Both types of meat may be rendered as ‘beef’ in English, or as *goddu māmsam* in Telugu – the mother tongue of most of my interlocutors in India. I shall introduce those I worked with more fully later, but in short they comprised mainly Christians, Hindus and Muslims from rural Andhra Pradesh and the state capital, Hyderabad. Some of them, however, distinguished between *eddu māmsam* (buffalo meat) and *āvu māmsam* (cow meat) in discussing their preferences. The distinction can be important, on the basis that buffaloes, although protected by some of the same legislation as cows², do not enjoy the same religious status in Hinduism. Some Dalits eat *eddu māmsam* but not *āvu* for example, while some Muslim informants distinguished themselves on the basis that they did eat *āvu*, but avoided *eddu māmsam*, which they associated with low caste Hindus. Nevertheless, we should not overstate this distinction: just as many of my interviewees shrugged their shoulders when I asked them if they had a preference for one or the other. ‘How can we tell?’ as a Christian man in his early 60s told me, ‘Sometimes the butcher might mix meat from one with meat from the other. Other times we won’t ask, we’ll just ask for *goddu māmsam*, and not everyone can tell the difference.’ In the following, unless people have specifically distinguished, I have used the term ‘beef’ in the same fuzzy sense as my informants to refer to either *eddu* or *āvu*, or both.

As the above suggests then, attitudes towards beef are rather more ambivalent than the essentialist correlation of vegetarianism with high ritual status and meat-eating with low ritual status implies (see, e.g., Osella & Osella, 2008). Statistics blur the picture still further. The US department of agriculture, for example, claims that by 2014 India was the world’s second largest exporter of beef, claiming 20 per cent of the world market, and was being forecast to export 1.9 million tons by the end of the year.³ Gujarat, the state over which Modi had presided as chief minister for the previous decade, was still a major player, slaughtering more than 1,000 buffaloes a day (Singh *et al*, nd: 79)⁴ despite action to control it. Throw into the mix the statistic that around 70–75 per cent of Indians are non-vegetarians (Mehta *et al*, 2002; Achaya, 1994:57) and that beef is apparently the most highly consumed meat product by quantity after fish (Chigateri, 2008:17; Ghosh, 2013), and the stereotypical image of India as a nation squeamish about cattle slaughter starts to unravel.

The picture that emerges in its place is not a straightforward one, and despite the cow’s status as what Yang calls a ‘fundamental symbol’ (1980:585), one so embedded in the common pool of human experience in India that its reception,

to paraphrase Mary Douglas (1966:114), should be fairly uniform, the symbolic value of its flesh is highly contested. In some contexts beef consumption is held up as a marker of cosmopolitan sophistication⁵. In others it is decried as an unclean, defiling practice that threatens the cultural sensibilities (and perhaps bodily integrity) of the Hindu majority. Opposition to beef eating is described by Dalit activists as ‘cultural fascism’, at the same time as those same beef-eaters are accused of violence towards the cultural values of the non-beef eating castes. Beef consumption is presented as a historically validated Hindu practice, referenced, for example, in the *Rig Veda*⁶ as suitable for everyday consumption and for sacrifices (Kosambi 1975; Jha 2002), and also variously as a colonial imposition, a hangover from Mughal rule, and a symptom of more recent Western cultural imperialism. As Modi’s reference to Bangladesh as the likely destination of slaughtered Indian cattle also implies, beef is particularly associated with a Muslim (as well as Christian, Dalit or otherwise foreign) other, against which Hindus might identify themselves. As such, the cow becomes an important symbol of purity through which Hindu nationalism might be asserted or resisted. Trying to make sense of these apparent contradictions in how beef is understood and responded to in India is what shapes my current enquiry.

My search for answers draws on long-term fieldwork in India, much of it with beef-eating Christians and Dalits in coastal Andhra Pradesh (AP) and in Hyderabad (now the joint capital of Telangana and AP states). In placing this material into a wider regional context I also draw on recent press reports, blogs and websites, and especially on the multiple comments they elicit; on anthropological writings on meat-eating in India; and on the work of historians and others who, in turn, draw on ancient textual sources such as the *Rig Veda* in order to explain the ambivalence beef evokes. Through all this I set out to demonstrate that beef is at once a potent multivalent symbol and, from the perspective of some of those I spent time with, an aesthetically satisfying centre of a meal. Beef, as it became clear in the course of my enquiry, satisfies and repels bodies in equal measure, while offering food for both thought and action.

Anthropological perspectives on meat-eating in India

Let me start, then, by sketching out some of the contexts in which anthropologists of India first became interested in food. This ongoing interest dates back at least to the early decades of the twentieth century, but took on new life during the village studies era of the 1950s and 1960s, when food transactions became recognized as one of the most significant markers, alongside marriage, of relative

status. Food, who one ate with and what one ate, provided a language through which unspoken thoughts could be communicated. It is upon this historical context that contemporary practices of eating and not-eating meat in the region have, at least in part, been made sense of.

That upper castes routinely feared those of lower ritual status might pollute them through food has been well documented. Célestin Bouglé, for example, noted as far back as 1908 that ‘...it is above all from food that contamination is feared. It can only be eaten amongst caste-fellows; it should not even be touched by a stranger, whose glance is sometimes sufficient to pollute it’ (1971:23; see also: Dubois, 1906: 181-189; Senart, 1930; O’Malley, 1932). The ethnographic village studies that proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Srinivas, 1952; Dube, 1955; Bêteille, 1996 [1965]) similarly recorded that while those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy were, at least in theory, prepared to accept food from everyone, other castes were only prepared to accept food from those they considered equal or superior. These same authors also demonstrated how, by refusing invitations to dine with particular castes, those putatively ranked towards the bottom could theoretically enhance their status. Srinivas, in particular, drew on his work with the *Coorgs* of South India to classify such strategic dining practices as an example of what he called Sanskritization (1952; see also Bailey, 1957:271; Charsley, 1998); a process by which lower castes adopted the practices and ideologies, including those relating to food and commensality, of those they aspired to be.

Such practices related not only to whom one might accept food from (of particular interest to my current inquiry), but, also what one ate. Shifting towards vegetarianism, for example, in a world where vegetarianism was associated with high ritual status, it might be understood as a strategy of social mobility, or even as literally spiritually transformative (Desai, 2008)⁷. It might also, in certain circumstances, be seen as a rational economic choice⁸. Similar shifts in eating practices have been recorded among low caste converts to Christianity. For the Paraiyar Catholics of Tamil Nadu, for example, conversion to Christianity was seen as symbolising a shift from practices regarded as unclean, beef-eating among them, to those warranting respect (Mosse, 1999). Madiga (leatherworker Dalits) converts in the 1920s, in Telugu-speaking South India, likewise eschewed beef to remove barriers to other castes from converting alongside them (Harper, 2000:278). In short: ‘To move upwards meant changing one’s diet, usually by becoming *more* vegetarian’ (Goody, 1982:115, *my emphasis*). As Goody’s comment suggests, vegetarianism is a relative category. While Jains, Brahmins and Vaisyas avoided all forms of meat and eggs (although consumed

dairy products), most middle-ranking castes included chicken, goat, fish and eggs in their diets, with beef only an option for Dalits, Muslims, Christians and foreigners, those beyond internal Hindu caste categorisations.

Although there is a tendency in the ethnographic literature to treat the cow's sanctity in Hinduism as a given, recent historical scholarship, notably Jha's *The Myth of The Holy Cow* (2002), argues that cow veneration came relatively late to the sub-continent. This book was considered so controversial that the author faced threats to his life (ibid: xii). Vegetarianism in India, the Vedas suggest, did not become widespread until some point between the ninth and the eleventh centuries. In the *Rig Veda* (written between 1,500 and 1,000BC) cattle were used widely in sacrifice (Achaya, 1994: 53) and even though the sacrificial cow was usually a barren one it was notably consumed by Brahmins (ibid: 55). Prohibitions on meat begin to appear more explicitly in the *Dharma Sūtras* (religio-legal texts, linked to the Vedas, and compiled between 1200 and 500BC), but to put these prohibitions into context, the *Manu Smriti* noted that the slaying of bovines was a lesser sin than alcohol consumption (Achaya, 1994: 55). When told that eating beef was sinful, the Upanishadic sage Yāgnavalkya apparently responded, 'That may well be; but I shall eat of it nevertheless if the flesh be tender (amshala),' (Kosambi, 1975, cited in Achaya, 1994: 55; Harris, 1985: 55). Travellers to India commented on the vegetarian habits found there as early as the fifth century (Achaya, 1994:56; Legge, 1972), but prohibitions on beef often appeared to be practical or economic rather than because of the spiritual status of the cow *per se*. According to Persian scholar Al-Biruni, who visited India in the eleventh century, beef was forbidden for Brahmins, in part, because its 'thick and cold' qualities were incompatible with Brahmin digestion. In addition, foreshadowing Harris's (1989) later insistence of the economic rationality of 'cow love', he noted:

'...we must keep in mind that the cow is an animal which serves man in travelling by carrying his loads, in agricultural, in the works of ploughing and sowing, in the household by the milk and the product thereof. Further, man makes use of its dung, and in winter-time even of its breath. Therefore it was forbidden to eat cow's meat...' (Sachua, 2005:152-1530).

On balance, despite clear evidence of earlier vegetarian preferences, cattle veneration as it is currently understood appears to be more rooted in the nineteenth century than in antiquity, a product of Hindu nationalism pitched against both a colonial oppressor and former Muslim rule. The Basantpur riot of 1893 in rural Bihar, for example, was provoked by a procession through Saran

district by Muslims of cattle intended for slaughter (Yang, 1980), and, with its involvement of various activists, bears more than a passing resemblance to the unrest following beef festivals in Indian Universities⁹ more than a century later.

The historical record on beef-consumption then is more nuanced than many on the Hindu right might claim. Nevertheless, there remains in the present a wide scholarly and popular consensus that beef is now rejected by Hindus of all but the putatively lowest castes in much of India¹⁰. 'All the Bengali cooks I interviewed,' confirms Janeja, 'proclaimed vehemently that they never cook beef. Beef for a Hindu, especially a Brahmin, is taboo given that the cow is perceived as sacred' (2010:83).¹¹ Against such a background, it seemed that beef-eating could only be understood in a negative light. As my fieldwork in the late 1990s suggested, however, there were other perspectives to be had on beef.

Beef as a marker of positive identity

In a paper based on fieldwork in coastal Andhra Pradesh in the late 1990s, in an area I had been visiting since the 1980s, I was surprised that not only did Victoria-Rani (a Christian woman who had invited me to dinner) surreptitiously encourage me to eat beef but also at her slight note of offence at my refusal. Having visited me daily for some time as my Telugu teacher, she knew well that I was a pescetarian, but still found it difficult to comprehend that, as a Westerner, I did not eat beef (Staples 2008). I, in turn, was puzzled as to why, in a country where beef seemed widely rejected as food, she should find my culinary habits so peculiar. Until that visit to India, I had never been offered beef as a dinner guest. This time, however, Victoria Rani was by no means alone: several of the Christian families I ate with that year, most of them from what might be described as lower middle class, educated households, with adult members working as teachers, nurses or in clerical jobs, all of them originally from Dalit castes, tried to tempt me with beef dishes. All of them registered similar disappointment when I refused them.

Part of the explanation for this, as I went on to explore, could be found in what beef had come to represent for local Christians, particularly those who had converted from Dalit castes, often two or three generations earlier, like Victoria-Rani. *Not* to eat beef, in the context of what she perceived to be her caste's oppression by non-beef eating Hindus, was a snub; it implied I was taking a pro-Hindu stance and, in so doing, tacitly accepting that she was untouchable. To embrace and enjoy beef, on the other hand, was to celebrate a Christian identity, to reject the notion of untouchability, and to partake in modernity.

As such, the shared consumption of beef was a socially cohesive act, symbolically binding together Christian diners against a common oppressor. Consumption of particular foods, as Gillette (2000) also shows in relation to the *Hui* in China, can help constitute and maintain a group's distinctive identity vis-à-vis others. At the same time, the sharing and enjoyment of beef, albeit privately and away from the gaze of non-beef eating Hindus, resisted the notion that its consumption was inherently linked to impurity and low social status. For Madigas¹² in particular, the leatherworker caste into which Victoria Rani had been born, positive associations with beef allowed them to reconceptualize their traditional work with dead cattle, still practised by many Madiga families I encountered, as respectable rather than polluting.

Such inversions of the meanings applied to beef are not peculiar to coastal Andhra. Although, as noted above, many Christian converts in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu were reported to have given up beef at the point of conversion (Mosse, 1999), suggesting they bought in to high caste perspectives on beef, Mosse's more recent work on Dalit Christianity describes how Jesuit schools in some areas of the state have, conversely, begun promoting beef eating as 'a provocative, conflict-generating, dramatic act of protest and the denial of shame' (Mosse, 2010:254; Arun, 2004). Victoria-Rani and others like her, who read the Telugu newspapers and watched the news on cable television, were no doubt conscious of these wider movements, and their increasing identification with beef might in part be attributed to them.

In the nearby multi-caste leprosy colony where I lived and carried out the bulk of my fieldwork, and where conversion was often more recent than for the Dalit Christians I knew from the local town, their identification with beef tended to be less explicit. In part this was because, despite their conversion to Christianity, members of the traditionally powerful peasant farming castes continued to eschew beef. They did so, as one of my informants put it, because 'eating beef had never been our habit'. Sixty-five per cent¹³ of the colony as a whole did admit to eating beef, however, and several argued that the figure was somewhat higher, around 75 per cent, suggesting both that beef-consumption was widespread *and* that not everyone was as open about it as Victoria-Rani and other Christians I knew from the local town.

In addition, I recalled the story, based on events in the early 1980s, of a representative from the overseas NGO that funded a crèche in the community suggesting that the children it sponsored should be fed beef on at least one of the days on which meat was served as the main meal. Beef was, the local NGO officer argued, a good, cheap source of protein, and, given that the

beneficiaries of the programme were at least nominally all Christians, there was no religious bar to them eating it. Villagers resisted this, however, on the basis that many of them came from castes that did not eat beef and so were not accustomed to eating it, arguing for the provision of chicken or goat instead. Their suggestions might have been partly strategic; chicken and goat were, at the time, more expensive than beef, so were considered more prestigious and otherwise less accessible. But their resistance also suggested that, even though beef was served in many of their households, it was not an acceptable dish to be served in a public setting such as the crèche dining room. It would have highlighted differences between people in a community where equality and a shared sense of identity, as stigmatised leprosy patients, were strongly valued. This perspective was ~~born out~~ of the fact that beef was never served locally at weddings and other feasts¹⁴, including those organised by Victoria-Rani's family, where chicken, often with biryani rice, *gongora* (a local green-leaf vegetable) chutney and *perugu charu* (curds with chopped onions and green chillies) was the default offering for non-vegetarians.

Nevertheless, although informants in the leprosy colony displayed a more nuanced relationship to beef than local Christians outside it, the sense of shame that had accompanied its consumption previously had certainly declined by 1999–2000. Whereas friends who I knew from others ate beef had previously denied it, only occasionally opening up when I got to know them very well, beef-eating had become an occasional topic of conversation in ways that it had not been a few years earlier. Indeed, while I had never encountered beef in the village on any of my previous visits (and it was not offered to me there on this one either), several informants this time commented on how ubiquitous it had become. 'People have become very bold about it these days,' one of my non-beef eating friends told me. 'They cook it at home and share it with neighbours who also like to eat it. There are people who buy it in from the market and then sell it inside the village. In the past they might have worried that someone would object to the smell, or look down on them for cooking it. But now they don't care!'

Easy availability, in that people did not necessarily have to go the meat market themselves to buy it but could purchase beef from neighbours, and price, considerably lower than that for either chicken or goat meat in 1999–2000, were both significant in shaping villagers' choices. But the strength of pro-beef feeling in the late 1990s was also a consequence, as I argue elsewhere (Staples 2016, 2017), of local Christians fearing that their religious identity was under immediate threat. The recent case of a missionary who, while working with leprosy-affected people in Orissa, had been killed by Hindu extremists

borne out by

was a common topic of discussion in the teashops.¹⁵ Following a spate of local church bombings, there was also a police presence outside local churches on Sunday mornings for several weeks during my fieldwork; a physical reminder that some saw Christianity as un-Indian.

It was in promoting 'Indian-ness', or *Hindutva*, that the then BJP-led coalition pressed for greater compliance with the Constitution's anti-cow slaughter provision, in doing so helping to constitute beef-consumption as a battleground on which identities might be asserted. 'I would rather die than eat beef,' the then BJP prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in 2003, ahead of presenting a bill that would have imposed a nationwide ban on cattle slaughter. Ironically, the stand being taken against cattle slaughter by hard line Hindu nationalist groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was, at the same time, helping to constitute beef as something more than a lower cost and apparently tasty alternative to chicken: for Christians and Dalits alike it was also becoming a positive symbol of their identities.

Ten years later...

Neither my initial fieldwork in coastal Andhra, nor a subsequent 16-month trip to Hyderabad in 2005-2006, had focused specifically on food. Indeed, it was only in scrutinizing my field notes afterwards that I realized how significant everyday food was in shaping people's identities and in allowing them to communicate about status without explicitly referencing caste or religion. By the time I returned to Andhra for short field visits, each between four and six weeks, in 2009, 2011 and 2013, food was becoming an increasingly significant focus of my research agenda.

Keen to explore in more detail the positive associations Christians and others had with beef, I confess that I was slightly taken aback on the first of these field trips to discover more complex reactions than my earlier encounters had suggested. Take my friend Mariamma, for example, who, like Victoria-Rani, was a middle-class Christian from a Dalit background. Her late father had been a pastor, and her training as a social worker had enabled her to find work with a local NGO, the context in which I had first met her back in 1984. Like Victoria-Rani, each time I visited her family's house for lunch or dinner during my 1999-2000 trip to India, a beef dish had appeared among the array of foods on offer. She was less persistent than Victoria-Rani in trying to get me to try them, but she would, nevertheless, casually inform me that there was *goddu māmsam pulusu* (beef in a sauce) on offer, and would leave the serving vessel

within easy reach of my plate in case I changed my mind. Used to honouring guests by serving them meat, Mariamma clearly found it a challenge to offer me dishes that could be distinguished from the meals I ate everyday.

By 2011, Mariamma was running her own orphanage and school, having acquired funding from American evangelists to enhance what once had been a basic two-roomed brick dwelling she had constructed with her husband. Now large and impressive, Mariamma's building stood out from those alongside it, and she commanded considerable respect in the neighbourhood. Whereas 10 years previously I would have been fed on a mat on the floor of her house, now I sat opposite her at a formica topped table and, in a nod to dining practices that she had learned from her American sponsors, she ate with me rather than after I had finished eating. The food, now prepared by a cook rather than by Mariamma's own hand, was also different. Not only was there no sign of the beef curry, but neither was there other meat or fish on the table. We were served a simple, lightly spiced mixed vegetable curry, a *dhal* (pulse based dish), and plain rice, with *papad* (poppadum), curd, and hot mango chutney. Bananas were offered afterwards.

Surprised that she was not eating meat, as well as thrown by the fact that she had not pressed me to eat more when I, as is customary, first refused the offer of a second helping, I asked her if she had changed her way of eating. 'Ah,' she sighed, 'we are becoming old, no? At my life stage, beef is too heating for my body, I can't digest it in the same way. Sometimes I will take [it], but mostly now I take simple food like this.' She gestured towards the insulated serving dishes that filled the space on the table between us. 'And also I came to realize, from having these foreigners here, that we should let people eat as they want to. We shouldn't push, push, push people to take more and more. And we should let them eat what they want to. If you don't want to eat meat, I should also respect that, shouldn't I?'

Although I continued to probe Mariamma in the hope of uncovering some of her old passion for beef, I was left disappointed. Subsequent interviews with other informants revealed a comparable ambivalence: among those who had been the most vocal advocates of beef only a few years earlier, I found far more ambivalent positions. Within the colony, as many of those I interviewed in 2009 claimed to be broadly supportive of the state's anti-cattle slaughter legislation, enshrined in the Andhra Pradesh Prohibition of Cow Slaughter and Animal Preservation Act 1977¹⁶, as those who were opposed to it, while nearly a third of my 50-strong sample remained unconvinced either way, and most conflated legislation with the more general Hindu doctrine of *ahimsa* (the avoidance of violence, including that against animals).

Only two respondents referred to nationalist Hinduism specifically, while others criticised any regulation as undemocratic, or argued that if meat-eating was to be permitted at all, it should not matter what the animal was. Most, however, positioned themselves somewhere in the middle. Bhaskarao, for example, had previously been one of the most open and vociferous promoters of beef consumption in the colony and had, until his wife's death six months earlier, eaten beef several times every week. Although he maintained that, as a Madiga, buffalo meat had been especially well suited to his body, enabling him to flourish, his current health condition meant he was no longer able to digest it properly. He also conceded, contra to my expectations, that the government was right to impose controls on the slaughter of cattle. Consumption, he felt, should be limited to cows or buffaloes no longer able to give milk, or males not suitable for breeding or for work in the fields. Several of my other informants likewise agreed that it was indeed better *not* to eat beef, or, indeed, any meat, even though they continued to serve it. 'What can we do? We need to eat something, no?' was a common response, delivered with a shrug of the shoulders.

In terms of numbers, a similar proportion of people admitted to eating beef occasionally as they did in 1999-2000, even though its consumption levels had been overtaken by those of chicken, which was now the default meat option on a Sunday, the only day on which all meat-eating householders regularly consumed meat or fish. Despite the fact that beef was still widely eaten, however, its value as a symbol of radical identity politics, a marker of defiance and of positive self-identity, seemed to be on the wane, at least in coastal Andhra.

There were a number of possible explanations for this, which go beyond the observation that my interlocutors were getting older and had changing dietary needs¹⁷, or the possibility that my later research was more alert to nuances in consumption practices. For one thing, the rise of the Hindu right, apparently at its zenith in 1999-2000, appeared to have been curtailed by the defeat of the BJP and its coalition partners in the 2004 general election. Christians and other non-Hindus, at least in coastal Andhra, felt less under threat than they had done in the past, and more able to discuss the pros and cons of beef rather than simply to defend their consumption of it. There were, to be sure, still incidents reported elsewhere in India in which beef remained central to assertions of identity: for example, opposition to a Dalit Students Union beef stall at the annual *Sukoon*¹⁸ festival at Hyderabad Central University in 2006 (Gundimeda 2009), or the serving of beef, again in the face of protest, at a hostel mess of the English and Foreign Languages University, also in Hyderabad, some years earlier. Nevertheless, for my own informants, the value of beef as a symbol had

taken a hit. The picture was also complicated by wider environmental and health concerns, on the one hand, and by economics on the other.

In terms of environmental concerns, new ways of thinking about meat consumption were being promoted in India by organizations such as the Society for Environmental Communications, publisher of the environmental magazine *Down to Earth*¹⁰, which emerged out of a developing interest in environmentalism in the region (see, e.g., Guha, 1997; Shah, 2010). The work of such campaigning groups and NGOs was not overtly about *ahimsa*, nor was it concerned directly, if at all, with veneration of the cow. Nevertheless, in discussing the sustainability of meat production (e.g., Shrivastava 2010, on goat production; Jamwal & Dua, 2003, on waste disposal by abattoirs), parallel and sometimes intersecting frameworks within which debates over whether or not to eat beef could be played out were beginning to open up. Vandana Shiva, for example, the Director of The Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy, has argued against cattle slaughter not because cows are sacred, but on the basis of the savings that could be made by *not* slaughtering cattle, owing to their potential value in the production of dairy and other products, such as fertilisers, and as labour (1999:60).

Environmentalism has sometimes been identified as ‘a full stomach phenomenon’ (Guha, 2006:1): the concern of a liberal, educated and economically secure elite. In the Indian context, I would argue, it also offered a set of arguments for resisting meat consumption that went beyond those framed by Hindu scripture and caste distinctions that excluded a large proportion of the population. Former BJP minister Maneka Gandhi, for example, was also founder of People for Animals, an animal rights organization which, among other activities, seizes trucks believed to be transporting cattle for illegal slaughter. Although much of the material on the organization’s website situates the cow within Hindu cosmology, it also highlights the cow’s value across community divisions, noting that the cow has been ‘revered and protected down the ages by Hindu *and Mughal* rulers alike’ (*my emphasis*). The website also frames cattle protection as a rational, ecological concern: ‘The cow is vital to life and strength.’

Those I worked with were at least aware, through reports in newspapers or on television bulletins, of such debates, elements of them increasingly cropping up in our discussions. Many of my informants, for example, expressed concerns about intensive meat production, complaining that meat was less healthy than it had been in the past. Beef, while considered good for strength and stamina, or framed as a medicine, cited in *Ayurveda*, was also seen as posing potential health risks. People with diabetes or high blood pressure, I was told, should avoid eating too much of it.

As environmental and health concerns began to add a layer of additional complexity to people's decisions about whether or not to eat beef, changing (and related) economic factors were also playing a part. The same intensification of poultry production that generated health concerns had also made chicken a more cost-effective option vis-à-vis beef than it had been a decade earlier. The price of broiler chicken, I was told, could fall to as low as Rs60 per kilogramme during the hot season, compared to Rs100-120 for the same quantity of beef, around the same price as chicken at its peak. For those who had previously eaten beef because it was the only affordable option, there was now a choice, and chicken offered a level of respectability that beef did not. One of my friends in Hyderabad, for example, told me that he and his family had now stopped eating beef on a regular basis because it avoided the risk of neighbours in the middle-class suburb where they rented rooms from smelling the meat cooking and complaining. 'Now that we can afford to eat chicken on Sundays, I think to myself, why unnecessarily give anyone cause to judge us, to think we are lowly people? We can eat beef back in our native place, no problem, but here there are lots of other castes around, so it is better not to eat it.' By not eating beef the family was able to avoid outward identification as low caste.

A Muslim man I met who ran a new food takeaway shop in the small coastal Andhra town where I had conducted most of my fieldwork told a similar story. A beef-eater himself, his restaurant, in a building owned by vegetarian Vaisyas, served only vegetarian dishes. And although the food was prepared at home by his family members, where meat, beef included, was prepared, he employed high caste Hindus to serve it in the shop. 'If they could smell meat cooking there would be so many objections,' he told me. 'They are all Vaisyas in this street, so if I want to succeed here as a Muslim businessman I can't afford to offend them.' As a consequence of these kinds of sensitivities, I never saw beef offered in public settings; neither in non-vegetarian restaurants in the area nor at weddings or at other feasts. Its sale was also restricted to walled compounds, away from the main market, usually before sunrise. It is also for this reason, I would argue, that Victoria-Rani's firm but quiet celebration of beef, within the confines of her own home, never took on a wider resonance, drifting back out of sight when the immediate threat of the Hindu right appeared to subside.

Beef after 2012

The partial decline in beef's potency as a positive symbol of identity post the 2004 election victory of the Congress Party-led coalition¹⁹ that I have just

described, a change palpable in the ways my informants talked about beef consumption during that period, appeared to be slowing by 2012 (and, in some parts of the state, was more clearly in reverse). By then, the Hindu right was already building momentum for what was to be a landslide election victory for the BJP in May 2014, accompanied with promises to ‘crack down on beef exports and [...] review the subsidy the government gives for beef or buffalo meat exports’²⁰ (*Financial Express* 2014). In a wider sense, we might chart these nationalist shifts as part of a global response to the economic crises that had begun in 2008: as austerity measures across the world began to bite, a tendency to blame others for national hardships and to turn inwards appeared to be on the rise²¹. In India, this tendency led to increasing tensions between a Hindu majority and those against whom it implicitly defined itself, once again made visible through the medium of beef.

Take, for example, the annual beef festival at Osmania University in Hyderabad and the protests against it in April 2012. I was not in India at the time but the events were widely reported in the national and international press, and they became a focus of lively online discussion. A reported 1,500–2,000 people were fed beef biryani during the festival, while Dalit groups on campus campaigned for beef to be included on campus hostel menus (a wish that was denied). ‘Everyone should have the freedom to eat the food of their choice,’ B. Sudarshan, the festival organizer, told the BBC at the time, adding: ‘Beef has traditionally been a part of Dalit food, it’s a part of their identity’²². According to the Dalit Nation blog²³, which commented in support of the festival, beef is ‘the food of our toiling Dalit brethren’, a reference to the perception that the proteins of beef confer the strength required by the labour classes in order for them to perform their jobs, unlike the vegetarian diets of what the blog provocatively termed ‘grass eating Brahmins and Banias.’

A 100-strong group of protestors from the right-wing student council, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)²⁴, was reported to have marched towards the site of the festival, where one student was stabbed (Rama Krishna, 2012)²⁵, two vehicles were set alight, and the police had stones thrown at them before fighting back with batons and tear gas. Among other things, the ABVP described the festival as ‘an evil design by Western countries to split the Indian students’, re-casting the debate as one between Indians and dominant Western powers rather than one between Hindus and non-Hindus, or between Brahmins and Dalits. They had no objection to people eating beef, claimed one ABVP activist, ‘as long as they eat in private’. In a separate incident at around the same time, beef was thrown on to the walls of a Hanuman Temple at Kurmaguda in

Madannapet, also in Hyderabad, by Hindu extremists, apparently in an attempt to foment communal tensions in the area.²⁶

Incidents surrounding the beef festival also spawned a number of blogs and editorials, which, along with subsequent readers' responses on their message boards, demonstrated that beef was again growing in symbolic importance. A provocative blog by Murali Shanmugavelan²⁷, for example, framed the Dalit campaign to have beef served on campus as one of 'culinary rights' against 'food fascism'; a justifiable Dalit protest against the Brahmanical Hinduism that connects caste with food and reinforces purity-pollution rules through which Dalits are oppressed. Given the secular status of the University campus, as others also argued in relation to beef festivals elsewhere in India (see, e.g., Kandasamy 2012, regarding Kolkata), what was the logic of *not* cooking or serving beef in campus canteens? Gorringe & Karthikeyan offer a plausible response in an article analyzing the ban on the consumption of non-vegetarian food in the staff canteen of *The Hindu* newspaper in Chennai in 2014. Given that most Indians *do* eat meat, to ban it, they argue, involves a 'silent coding of caste into the institutional space' (2014: 20). In contexts where caste hierarchies can no longer be overtly articulated, a practice rejected as 'pre-modern' by many in contemporary India (Pandian, 1991), a high-caste, Brahmin hegemony is re-inscribed through the imposition of food rules. Not to serve beef on University campuses might thus be seen as the subordination of Dalit, Christian and Muslim tastes to those of higher caste Hindus (see also Gundimeda, 2009).

Shanmugavelan's blog piece attracted 136 responses. Some of the threads veered off into a more general discussion about the merits or otherwise of vegetarianism, but among those that focused on the content of the article and which took a clear stand, roughly equal numbers supported and refuted the arguments being made. Throughout, the right of people to eat what they chose, and do so publicly, is set against the right of Hindus to defend what is presented as their 'culture': 'I don't see any food fascism from those trying to protect their heritage,' as one commentator put it, in doing so appearing to shift Hindu food taboos out of the political arena of ritual purity, pollution and status and into one of simple cultural identity. What he or she was implicitly doing, it seemed to me, was re-emphasising the value of Brahmin 'heritage', re-glossed as Indian heritage more generally, over that of Dalits and other marginalized groups. It was, however, a stance shared by many others who claimed not to see the need to celebrate beef publicly, when few objected to them cooking and eating it in their own homes, safely in the private sphere. Other dissenters, picking up on the environmental and health-related arguments discussed earlier, focused

on the ecological benefits of a vegetarian diet or the unreasonableness of the 'Brahmin hatred' shown in the article.

Comments on the Dalit Nation blog site, 75 of them posted in the month following the 2012 beef festival, were likewise balanced between those for and against the festival, although on both sides tended to be more vitriolic. While some Muslim commentators pledged their support for Dalits to consume beef, Brahmins and other caste-Hindus argued that Dalits were also Hindus, like them, and so should stop eating beef and reinsert their *Indianness* against foreign influence, re-articulating the dispute as a communal one. 'Western education [...] has been successful in creating a group of people who despise their own culture, their own religion,' as one commentator on another blog expressed it²⁸. Others, following along this same line, suggested that instead of a beef festival they should celebrate pork, with one commentator sarcastically inviting Muslim readers of the blog to come along and join them for a hot dog.

More close ethnographic work both with those eating beef and those condemning the practice in contemporary India is much needed, but what the above does suggest is that the battle over what beef means in contemporary India is far from over.

Conclusions

In as much as it is immediately evocative of India, Yang is correct in calling the cow 'a fundamental symbol' (Yang, 1980:585); an icon widely recognized by all, despite the different ways in which it might be invoked and acted upon. And although a common feature of a symbol is that it need have no natural affinity with the thing or things it represents (Deacon, 2011:393), in the case of the cow, and its taboo flesh, its symbolic salience is also bound up in its materiality. The ways in which economic, environmental, health-related, political and spiritual concerns come to be mediated through the cow or beef materially affect the relationship Indians have with cattle and its products, and in turn have ramifications for how the cow might be symbolically deployed.

Precisely because of its embeddedness in Indian society, battles over what the cow represents can be fierce. It becomes clear that it is not simply that a symbol helps to initiate social action, in the way that Victor Turner defined it (1967:36) but, in the case of the cow, that action defines and redefines what it might mean in given contexts. People do not obediently follow rules, accepting meanings pre-imposed on objects; rather, they act strategically by interpreting or changing meanings in the service of particular interests. Presenting the

cow as a symbol of life, of motherhood, or of strength, for example, can all be imagined in different ways and lead to different outcomes, depending on who wrests control of the symbol. When meaning becomes over-determined by the Hindu right, as we have seen, beef takes on ever more powerful meanings for those who celebrate its consumption.

In one sense, then, the appropriation of the cow by dominant Hindu castes provides them with a way of articulating superiority and asserting power without reference to caste. Attempts to control the public consumption of beef, and, as in the case of *The Hindu's* staff canteen in Chennai (Gorringer & Karthikeyan, 2014), meat more generally, are increasingly being unmasked by activists not simply as the markers of respect for a distinctively Indian culinary heritage that they are presented as being, but as a means of declaring political control. Vegetarianism, as Khare presciently noted, is 'a dual weapon, of dominance as much as of spiritual self-discipline' (1992:20).

In response to this, consumers of beef, Dalits, Christians and Muslims in particular, have attempted to appropriate the meat not as a marker of their own lowliness but as a positive marker of strength and of their respective identities. The right to be served and to eat beef publicly, as Dalit students across India have called for, is as much about celebrating a Dalit cultural history as its enforced avoidance is about manifesting the power of an elite. But, as I hope to have shown, this division is not just about two sides of the same coin; an ongoing battle between two distinct positions. Away from the ferment of University campuses, as my own research suggests, ordinary beef-eaters are often more circumspect in celebrating their habits. For my interlocutors in coastal Andhra and in Hyderabad, to be worth fighting for, beef also needed to be considered tasty, healthy and affordable, and a decline in any of these things rendered it less valuable in terms of defining their identities. In this sense, beef was understood and responded to not only in relation to moral or political battles but also in terms of economic, environmental, aesthetic and health-related considerations, which in turn had an impact on the potency of its symbolic meanings. In their respect for cattle, as providers of dairy products, fertilizer and work, as well as of meat, my informants' perspective on the cow was not simply oppositional to that of the high caste Hindu; rather, it was flexible and contingent.

Cattle and beef, then, are not only fundamental symbols, but particularly rich, pliable ones, intricate layers of contested meaning added as they are pulled to and fro across boundaries. As what Janeja (2010) describes as 'actants', as material beings themselves, economically and ecologically active, natural symbols can also be particularly volatile. In this sense, the cow is particularly good for

thinking through wider problems posed by symbolic anthropology. On the ground, meanwhile, the stakes are high for whoever wins control over what the cow means in India at particular moments. And as a Hindu nationalist agenda once again tightens its grip on policy, I predict that appropriation of beef by the marginalized, already a part of larger projects of identity assertions by Dalits working to remove past practices of Sanskritization, will start to rise afresh.

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Notes

1. See, for example, the NDTV news story, reported on 4 April 2014: <http://www.ndtv.com/elections/article/election-2014/government-s-pink-revolution-destroying-cattle-says-narendra-modi-503604> (Accessed on 10 June 2014).
2. Laws on cattle slaughter vary from state-to-state, some imposing a ban on the slaughter of 'agricultural cattle' or 'bovines', both of which might include buffaloes, while others allow the slaughter of buffaloes over a certain age (over 8 in Andhra Pradesh, above 12-13 in Maharashtra, or over 14 in West Bengal). In other cases, wording of the legislation is potentially ambiguous (Singh *et al* n.d: 76-78).
3. See http://apps.fas.usda.gov/psdonline/circulars/livestock_poultry.pdf (Accessed on 10 June 2014).
4. The Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (www.ficci.com) places Gujarat 11th out of 26 States and Union Territories listed by number of cattle slaughtered, drawing in turn on official figures from the State Pollution Control Boards and Pollution Control Committees.
5. Although note Drishadwati Bargi's (2014) observation, following a University beef festival in Kolkata, that 'the habitual beef-eaters bypassed the event. Perhaps they were ashamed of eating beef minus the cosmopolitan aura surrounding it.' kindlemag.in/beef-babasaheb-bhadrolok/ (Accessed on 27 July 2014).
6. One of the canonical sacred Hindi texts, written around 1500BC (Fuller 1992:12).
7. See also Osella and Osella (2008: 184) who, in turn, argue, contra Desai, that contemporary vegetarianism in India can never be separated from its links to Hindu fundamentalism.

8. Debate on this point was provoked in particular by Marvin Harris (1966), and responses by, among others, Heston (1971), Azzi (1974).
9. The most prominent of these were in Andhra Pradesh, notably, Osmania University and the University of Hyderabad, and at the Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages (CEFL), although there were also related activities in Kolkata and at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi.
10. Kerala is a notable exception, although the rules in general seem more relaxed in the southern as opposed to the northern states.
11. See also Dumont (1987:146-151); Srinivas (1966).
12. The Madigas, the cobbler and leather-working caste, was one of the two main Scheduled Castes in the area where I worked. The other was the Malas.
13. Based on a full household survey of consumption practices in 2013.
14. Although this was not necessarily the case elsewhere in India. My Ph.D. student Michelle Carter, for example, attended a Christian wedding feast of middle-class nurses in Kerala at which beef was a central dish (per.com, July 2014).
15. See, e.g., www.rediff.com/news/1999/jan/23oris.htm (Accessed on 8 September 2011).
16. For the full-text of the Act, see: <http://ahfd.ap.nic.in/mcrhrd.htm> (Accessed on 8 September 2011).
17. An observation that nevertheless needs to be taken seriously, and which suggests the need for follow-up comparative research with younger members of the communities in which I worked.
18. A three-day cultural festival, including food stalls, held in late March or early April each year on the campus of Hyderabad Central University.
19. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA).
20. A quote, reported in *The Financial Express* by news agency Reuters on 11 May 2014, from Satpal Malik, the BJP vice-president who drafted the farm policy section of the party's election manifesto. <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/narendra-modiled-bharatiya-janata-party-could-curb-beef-exports-if-it-takes-power-after-elections/1249519> (Accessed on 18 July 2014).
21. Evident in the rise of nationalist parties across Europe in the May 2014 European parliamentary elections, for example, when, in Britain, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) topped the polls for the first time. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/vote2014/eu-uk-results> (Accessed on 18 July 2014).
22. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-17727379> (Accessed on 18 July 2014).
23. <http://dalitnation.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/beef-food-festival-makes-the-grass-eating-brahmins-and-banias-shiver/> (Accessed on 18 July, 2014).
24. The ABVP translates into English as the All India Student Council, and is the student wing of the nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Although there are no explicit links between the ABVP and the BJP, Narendra Modi, the BJP-leader, is also a member of the RSS.
25. See <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/investigation/the-beef-eaters-of-osmania> (Accessed on 18 July 2014).

26. See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/Saffron-extremists-desecrated-temple-to-trigger-riots-Cops/articleshow/12657326.cms>, and http://www.ummid.com/news/2012/April/29.04.2012/4_held_in_hyderabad_case.htm (Both accessed on 19 July 2014).
27. See <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/04/30/food-fascism-the-vegetarian-hypocrisy-in-india/> (Accessed on 19 July 2014).
28. See discussion that followed the decision not to serve beef at venues during the Commonwealth Games in Delhi: <http://indiafirsthand.com/2010/01/14/no-beef-during-commonwealth-games-in-delhi/> (Accessed on 27 July 2014).

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