

Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India

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Abstract

This article explores the connection between food and utopia within the Dalit student movement. Research data was gathered during the multi-stage ethnographic fieldwork in the university campuses in New Delhi (Jawaharlal Nehru University, University of Delhi) and Hyderabad (Osmania University, the English and Foreign Languages University) during 2013 and 2014 (total seven months). Seeking to demonstrate the centrality of the beef symbolism in the local Dalit student movement in Hyderabad, this article provides a content analysis of “Beef Anthem”, written and performed by Dalit student activist NS Chamar,¹ contextualizing it with fieldwork observations and interviews with the Dalit activists. This article uncovers multilayered meanings and strategies surrounding beef issue allowing one to understand how through the symbol of beef, the Dalit activists in Hyderabad reimagined themselves and strategized their movement in the context of the strengthening right-wing politics.

Keywords

Dalit movement, caste, beef, utopia, student politics

Introduction

In 2009-2015, the beef issue rocked universities’ campus life in Hyderabad and New Delhi. It began in 2009, when Madiga² student organization, the Dalit Students’ Union, at the University of Hyderabad set a beef stall during campus’ *Sukoon*

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¹Even though the author of “Beef Anthem” gave a permission to use his original name in the article, due to the research ethics requirements and personal security reasons, his name, as all other names of interlocutors, are coded. NS Chamar is the pseudonym that the author of “Beef Anthem” chose himself.

²Madigas are one of the largest Scheduled Caste groups in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states.

festival. In the following years, through the students' network the idea spread to other Indian universities. In 2011, beef was consumed publicly in the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad. In 2012, a beef festival was organized in the neighboring Osmania University. In both places, public beef eating on campuses led to confrontation between the festival participants and their opponents, mostly right-wing student groups. In 2012, there were also attempts by certain leftist "lower" caste student groups to organize beef and pork festival in Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. However, the initiative remained on the level of public debates without an actual realization due to the legal obstacles.³ While in the University of Hyderabad beef stall has been maintained during *Sukoon* festivals, in the following years, it failed to remerge on other campuses. The beef issue again came to prominence among Dalit and progressive students in 2015, when beef bans were implemented by the Maharashtra state government. However, in most of the discussed campuses public beef consumption remained a utopia, a matter of debate and online activism, rather than an actual practice.⁴

Why did beef become a bone of contention on university campuses? Dalit and other marginalized students in Hyderabad and New Delhi were dissatisfied with the food being served at university canteens. The arguments they used were not only about the absence of beef in the menu, the food certain groups prefer, but more broadly, about the imposition of upper caste vegetarian food habits upon culturally diverse students' groups and the non-representation of the marginalized groups' culture on campus public space and their subsequent stigmatization. There are studies that show how certain food practices (e.g. vegetarianism and beef taboo) serve as a means to maintain cultural "purity" and social superiority of the dominant groups and resultant stigmatization of those who have different food habits, be it "lower" castes, religious minorities or indigenous communities (Chigateri 2008; Kikon 2022). Therefore, it is quite natural that food, specifically beef, was taken by Dalit students as a symbol to challenge discriminatory social norms and taboos, and express their utopian dream of the inclusive future.

Keeping in mind the value of holy cow in Hindu culture, the beef festivals, whether actually enacted or at the level of public debates, ignited passionate discussions and physical confrontations. Public beef eating on campuses was not a simple act of marginalized food consumption, but rather a social and political protest, accompanied by public discussion and the spread of certain socio-political discourse. Besides Dalits

³Delhi Agricultural Cattle Preservation Act, 1994 prohibits slaughter, sale and transportation of agricultural cattle, and also the possession of its flesh. In 2012, relying on this Act, the administration of JNU temporarily barred a student from campus activities and sent notices to three additional students. This action was taken due to their involvement in organizing a festival centered around beef and pork consumption, which was seen as a potential source of disturbance on the campus (Upadhyay 2016).

⁴For more about beef festivals on campuses, see Gundimeda 2009, Pathania 2016, Sébastia 2017.

and other marginalized students, the beef festivals managed to attract a handful of various liberal and progressive students who found beef as a powerful symbol to critique prevalent social structures (caste), food hegemony (vegetarian normality) and right-wing politics, espousing these norms and values. Even though temporary and episodic, the beef issue allowed the educated marginalized youth to articulate their utopian visions of Indian society.

Seeking to demonstrate the centrality of beef symbolism in the local Dalit student movement in Hyderabad, in this article, I provide a content analysis of “Beef Anthem”, written and performed by NS Chamar,⁵ Dalit activist at Osmania University, contextualizing it with my observations and interviews with the Dalit activists. This article relies on the ethnographic data gathered for my PhD research on Dalit student activism in New Delhi and Hyderabad. I conducted the first stage of research in Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Delhi from March to June 2013 and the second stage of research in Osmania University (OU) and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad from January to March 2014. My understanding of Dalit student politics on these university campuses relies on 64 semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews with student activists and faculty members primarily from the Dalit background but not limited to them. The Dalits, whom I interviewed, were from diverse caste, regional, religious and political backgrounds. In this article, I mostly rely on the material from my fieldwork in Hyderabad, because beef issue as a political strategy among students emerged there and had much stronger visibility than in New Delhi. In Hyderabad, interviews were conducted in English mostly with males as they were referred to me by other students or faculty. When away from the field, I kept following Dalit students online, mainly on Facebook, which allowed me to be updated with the happenings on campuses while not being there physically. I must admit that this research paper lacks women’s perspective because during my fieldwork I did not get a chance to communicate directly with female Dalit student activists in Hyderabad, though I had a few conversations with Dalit student activists in New Delhi.⁶ When necessary for the analysis, the material from New Delhi will be involved in this article as well. The analysis of “Beef Anthem” and interview material with students will uncover multilayered meanings and strategies surrounding the beef issue allowing one to understand how through the symbol of beef, Dalit activists in Hyderabad reimagined themselves and strategized their movement in the context of the strengthening right-wing politics.

⁵I got the permission and even encouragement from the author to use his original name and the lyrics of “Beef Anthem”. However, due to the research ethics requirements and personal security reasons, I code his name in this article. NS Chamar is the pseudonym that the author of “Beef Anthem” chose himself.

⁶The visibility of female Dalit activists was rather limited on Osmania campus, as the central place in public happenings was usually taken by men. However, Dalit student activists were aware about this injustice existing within their own community and the movement, and they made attempts to provide some space and visibility for the female perspective.

Beef, Caste and Politics

Even those hardly familiar with Indian culture know that the cow in India has a holy status. The popular understanding of the Indian holy cow can be read in the words of S.M. Batra:

The cow is held in great reverence by the Hindus. She occupies a place closer to the divine and there is hardly any temple where the cow does not figure prominently. The concept of sacredness of the cow is deeply ingrained in the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of Hindus so much so that her protection and care is considered as a religious duty. There is a strong abhorrence for killing and eating the flesh of a cow. They have become so inviolable that in big cities they wander unmolested through the busiest traffic. Even a bull that gores a man to death may not be touched. The mere slaughter of a cow has led to many communal riots during pre as well as post-Independence period leading to a loss of several human lives and valuable property in India. (1986: 163)

How has the cow been gradually turned into such all-encompassing symbol of Hindu culture as Batra describes? Historical research seems to suggest that in Vedic and post-Vedic times, cow was sacrificed in rituals and was a preferred food for Brahmins. As a number of scholars argue, the change in practice happened after a series of encounters with cultural “others”, Buddhists, Muslims and British colonizers, which made Hindus gradually change their culinary habits to delineate community boundaries and maintain their cultural difference from other religious and social groups (Jha 2010; Lodrik 2005).

Even though often seen as a uniting cultural symbol, the cow in India for centuries has been a divisive “political animal” (Desquesnes 2016). In the beginning of the twentieth century, the cow issue gained unprecedented significance in the context of the Indian independence movement, when the construction, consolidation and polarization of Hindu and Muslim identities was at its peak.⁷ Hindu reformist organization Arya Samaj and its proponent Dayananda Saraswati travelled throughout India establishing cow protection societies (Heimsath 2015: 294). Sandria B. Freitag has examined the development of the Cow Protection society (*Gaurakshini Sabha*) in Uttar Pradesh. According to her, all the reformist nationalist organizations, though conflicting at times “worked to achieve together that important and new goal: consciousness among Hindus that they constituted members of an identifiable community” (1980: 605). The cow was invoked as a uniting Hindu symbol of both urban and rural population as, “[o]nly the sacred cow could have easily bridged the gap between Great and Little

⁷Freitag noted that before the Indian independence movement, there were no homogenous Hindu and Muslim communities and identities. What mattered for people at that time were their caste, kin and village as identifying principles. Freitag saw the crystallization of Hindu and Muslim identities as an internalized colonial project: “at first members of the groups merely used the labels against the British for their own purposes, but in time the labels took on a reality they had not had” (1980: 598).

Traditions, between urban searches for community identity and rural values” (p. 614). Organizations preoccupied with cow protection started targeting not exclusively Muslims but also other communities (such as Banjaras and Chamars) that had cow-related occupations, lifestyles and habits (p. 607).

Cow-oriented motives also emerged in the landmark political opposition between the two leaders of Indian independence movement—M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. Gandhi in the broader context of his non-violence ideology (*ahimsa*), stated:

And it was some such argument that decided the *rishis* of old in regarding the cow as sacred, especially when they found that the cow was the greatest economic asset in national life. And I see nothing wrong, immoral or sinful in offering worship to an animal so serviceable as the cow...cow slaughter is indefensible on moral grounds. (as cited in Chigateri 2008: 19)

For Gandhi the cow had the meaning of spiritual and economic assets and had a special importance in the development of the new nation state. Meanwhile, Ambedkar, the ideological opponent of Gandhi and the leader of the untouchables, took a rather materialistic and much more down to earth approach ranking Hindu communities by their eating habits distinguishing *shakaharis* (vegetarians), from *mansaharis* (meat eaters), and separately pointing out beef-eating *mansaharis* (Chigateri 2008). In Ambedkar’s perspective this three-fold division corresponded to the caste hierarchy. Beef consumption of dead animals for him was the main reason behind the practice of untouchability and meant a major source of caste stigmatization for the untouchables. Hence, one can see that already since the times of the Indian independence movement there emerged a split in the meaning of cow in terms of spirituality (Gandhi’s vision) and materiality (Ambedkar’s vision).

The independent Indian state had to search for an equilibrium regarding the holy cow, finding a consensus between conflicting communities and ideologies. A compromise was reached in Article 48 of the Constitution of India. It foresaw that the Indian state should be “prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle” (Government of India 2007: 23). However, this principle was implemented differently in various Indian states in the post-Independence period, some of the states continuing with beef consumption and others passing legislations banning cow slaughter. The spread of the criminalization of cow slaughter and beef consumption has been continuing and strengthening in the last decades (“The States Where Cow,” 2015; Sayeed 2021).

In the post-independence period, cow and beef issues entered the sphere of electoral politics consolidating the Hindu vote bank and heightening communal tensions. Christophe Jaffrelot demonstrated how in the 1960s right-wing groups used cow slaughter banning initiatives, alongside other religious and cultural issues as political propaganda at the time of elections. The cow slaughter issue was taken up to consolidate the Hindu vote bank and to deter it from the secular Congress Party, for which Muslims and other minorities usually voted (1996).

In the 2014 general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) followed an already well-tested strategy of using Hindu religious symbolism for political mobilization. In the Party manifesto it proclaimed among other points that, “In view of the contribution of cow and its progeny to agriculture, socio-economic and cultural life of our country, the Department of Animal Husbandry will be suitably strengthened and empowered for the protection and promotion of cow and its progeny” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2014: 41). Their election campaign was based on popular slogans *Modi ko matdan, gai ko jeevedan* (“Vote for Modi, save the cow”), *BJP ka sandesh: bachegi gai, bachegi desh* (“BJP’s message: save the cow, save the country”) (Roy 2014). At the time of elections all major national and international news headlines announced that India under the Congress rule was the world’s number one exporter of beef (Kannan 2014), a fact that the Party found to be instrumental for election campaign. Internet memes soon appeared showing flourishing cow farms under the future BJP government and this was contrasted with cow slaughterhouses under the Congress rule.

With the BJP coming to power in the central government in 2014, the cow protection sentiments and policy has been gaining momentum. In 2015 in the state of Maharashtra, the local government passed legislation criminalizing cow slaughter in the state, leading Muslim butchers, minority groups and even some parties into protests (Shaikh 2015; Johari 2015). Hundreds of students at Hyderabad universities (UoH, OU and EFLU), led mainly by the Dalit organizations, staged protests against the beef ban in Maharashtra, publicly indulging in *kalyani biryani* (famous Hyderabad beef and rice dish) (“Maharashtra Beef Ban Sparks,” 2015). More recently, in January 2021, Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Act, 2020, came into effect criminalizing the slaughtering, buying, selling and transporting all types of cattle, and prescribing punishments from monetary fines (Rs 50,000 and Rs 5 lakh) to up to seven years’ imprisonment (Sood 2022).

In recent years, cow and beef issues emerged not only in politics, but what is most important, also affected the everyday lives and relations of ordinary people, both in urban and rural localities. Chigateri enlisted several cases in which cow was a main cause of religious (anti-Muslim) and caste (anti-Dalit) conflicts and ensuing violence (lynching Dalits and Muslims for supposedly killing a cow, repetitive communal attacks on Muslims celebrating Eid etc.).⁸ Right-wing groups attempted to censor academic writing and teaching syllabus by erasing the traces of beef-eating practices of Hindus which was seen by them as contradicting the Hindu holy cow sentiment (2008: 15–16). In 2014, there was a notorious scandal related to the national daily *The Hindu* prohibiting its staff to bring beef dishes into a common canteen room, which supposedly caused discomfort for the majority of vegetarian upper-caste staff members (Kumar 2014). Many of these cases indicate that behind beef issue stands a strong religion and caste sentiment, and that attempts to prohibit beef entering public spaces are actually attempts to sustain upper-caste dominance and its cultural hegemony.

⁸Cow vigilantism has strengthened in the last decades leading to numerous injuries and killings of Muslims and other minority communities (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

These incidents bring us to a more general discussion of the role of food in caste relations. The edited volume *Caste in Life: Experiencing Inequalities* (2011), in which famous Indian scholars and journalists describe their personal experiences of caste, aptly demonstrates how many of the caste practices were essentially constructed through food. One of the authors, anthropologist Balmurli Natrajan drawing on his own personal experience argued:

The banality of caste is best seen in non-dramatic aspects of everyday life, such as food – the conception of what is food, its production...preparation, the conviviality or lack thereof that accompanies its consumption, etc. Although food-sharing as a marker of caste is on the decline, largely due to the onset of certain aspects of modernity...distinctive food practices continue to provide occasions where caste reveals itself. Or, shall we say, food is still a key site where people perform, produce and reproduce caste. Intimately shaped by caste, or even constituted by caste, food in the Indic context verily contains a ‘surplus of meanings’ perhaps like no other cultural setting in this world. (2011: 35)

If caste hierarchy and caste identities are intimately related to food practices, accordingly, the dominance of certain castes corresponds to the dominance of certain food habits or food cultures. It results into naming what is normal and what is not, what is acceptable and what should be denounced and banned. G. Arunima, reacting to the incident related to *The Hindu*, aptly argues that “[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!” (2014).

However, food is not just a means of dominance but also the locus of emancipatory imaginaries and a means of resistance in India and beyond. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, introduced the practice of *langar*—the sharing of food irrespective of religious beliefs, social background, caste, color, age, gender, or societal rank which was a revolutionary idea in the back then caste-ridden society. It is also known that M.K. Gandhi at some point of his spiritual and political career expressed positive ideas about inter-dining and did not see it as a contradiction of the *varna* order. In other contexts, and closer to the current times, several authors have analyzed how different communities employed food as a medium to communicate the critique of the dominant discourse and assert alternative identities. Psyche Williams-Forsen has shown how an African American comedian in the stand-up comedy “Bigger and Blacker” mocked racial prejudices using chicken as a stereotypical referent of African American identity (2008). Dylan Clark has demonstrated how punk sub-culture indulged in raw and rotten foods to define their subculture identity and to critique American mainstream culture, characterized by: “corporate capitalism, patriarchy, environmental destruction, and consumerism” (2008: 19). Similarly, in certain Dalit groups, beef does not indicate merely a social stigma, but also a means of self-assertion. C.J. Arun showed how

Paraiyars, the SC community in Tamil Nadu, re-evaluated *parai* drum⁹ and beef—the prior symbols of pollution¹⁰—into positive symbols of Dalit culture. Arun reported how Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu staged a cultural performance that featured a drumming competition between a Brahmin and a Paraiyar. The Paraiyar, winning over the exhausted Brahmin stated:

Do you know the secret of my energy? I eat beef every day. Your sambar (lentil and vegetable stew, mostly eaten in these parts by Brahmins who are vegetarian) is useless. Come tomorrow and I will ask the butcher to give you a half kilo of beef and 250 grams of bone. (Arun 2007: 100)

Arun's account indicates that the Paraiyar community “de-polluted” themselves by re-evaluating the symbols with which they were traditionally associated. The symbols of the beef and *parai* drum that before had constituted the main source of Paraiyars' pollution and subordinate position became the source of Paraiyars' pride and superiority.¹¹

Similarly, James Staples observed that around 1999-2000 Christian Dalits of coastal Andhra region began changing their perception towards beef eating re-signifying it from social stigma to a positive identity symbol (2017). However, apparently, this was a short-lasting change, as he reported about the “decline in beef's potency as a positive symbol” within these communities since 2004 largely due to the state's anti-slaughter politics, economic and environmental concerns (2018: 70). He also briefly reports about the rejuvenation of beef issue in the beef festivals on Hyderabad university campuses around 2012, however, suggests that this was a largely campus-related issue not finding wider resonance among “ordinary beef eaters [who] are often more circumspect in celebrating their habits” (p. 74).

Beef has also been a central theme in Kancha Ilaiah's (also known as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd) thought for many years. He can be considered the most visible public intellectual in India with regards to beef question. Ilaiah's most recent and eloquent piece on beef titled “No Democracy Without Beef: Ambedkar, Identity and Nationhood” was published as an introductory article in the recent Navayana's edition of Ambedkar's “The Untouchables” (2020) thus establishing his position as a follower of the historical leader of the Dalit movement. In his earlier article published in 1996, Ilaiah states about beef:

⁹In the context of the Telangana Dalit student movement, the *dappu* drum, equivalent to the Tamil *parai* has come to represent the Dalit *counter culture*.

¹⁰One of the traditional occupations of Paraiyars was beating the *parai* drum during funeral ceremonies.

¹¹Hugo Goringe challenges the idea that *parai* drum in the Paraiyar community is unanimously perceived as a symbol of resistance against upper castes. He reveals that some Paraiyars object the celebration of the drum as a community symbol, claiming that this “merely perpetuates [their] degradation” (Goringe 2016: 1). I observed similar disagreement over the movements' strategies in the context of Asura counter culture when some movement's participants questioned whether the counter culture can indeed be subversive if it communicates through the religious symbolism of the dominant culture.

The food rights of people form part of their civil and democratic rights. No religious community can ban the food of another religious community until and unless a particular community turns cannibal. So also no caste can ban the food of another caste. The discourse that vegetarian food is morally superior has no validity for those who are historically habituated to eat meat and beef. Among many castes and communities in India, for example, a festival cannot be imagined without meat. Vegetarian food in such communities is treated as inferior food. If a guest is served with vegetarian food, it is considered a humiliation. Among many castes and communities there are jokes that ridicule vegetarianism. Indian society has been co-existing with all these practices and must be allowed to do so.... If beef is banned it will be the beginning of the end of the country's multiculturalism. (Ilaiah 2017)

Ilaiah relates beef to the questions of democratic rights, multiculturalism and identity, prophetically proclaiming the current majoritarian upsurge in Indian politics and society. This significantly differs from the Ambedkar's discourse on beef. When referring to beef, Ambedkar was mostly preoccupied with the historical past and avoided addressing political actualities. If in Ambedkar's writing we do not feel a sentiment of pride in the discourse of beef, Ilaiah's tone is overtly proud, assertive and encouraging. He even slightly mocks vegetarian food habits. In his later writings it gets clear that beef constitutes a key issue in his ideological program of Dalitization—the creation of an alternative Indian society based on democratic, inclusive and multicultural principles that stem from the social experiences and worldview of the marginalized.

There are several accounts that show how beef issue functioned in the field of campus politics. Gaurav Pathania interpreted beef festivals on university campuses in terms of counter-hegemonic assertion of the marginalized groups. He, however, also critiqued this strategy as replicating the strategies of their opponents (Pathania 2016). For Balmurli Natrajan, beef strategy reinforces culturalization of caste identity which limits the capacity of the Dalit movement to turn into the liberatory anti-caste movement that goes beyond one group's culture (Natrajan 2012, 2018). Instead of trying to evaluate beef strategy and its possible effects for the larger Dalit movement, in this article I seek to delve into the complex ideas and meanings that surround beef issue within Dalit student activism and how beef enabled Dalits to imagine and communicate the ideas of the anti-caste future. I contribute to the work of Brigitte Sébastia who provided a participatory account on beef festival in Osmania University in 2012 also focusing on "the plurality of discourses on beef consumption" (2017: 105). In her account, "Beef Anthem" figures episodically, nevertheless, it is not taken as a central focus of analysis, which is the core idea of this article.

"Beef Anthem" and Its Multiple Meanings

Beef ideology in a quintessential form can be found in "Beef Anthem" created by NS Chamar, a Madiga by caste, who back then, during my fieldwork in 2014, was a PhD

student and activist at Osmania University. He created “Beef Anthem” specifically for the beef festival in Osmania University in 2012. Since then, it has been performed many times on various occasions on campus and beyond becoming a significant part of the political repertoire of the local Dalit student movement. “Beef Anthem” is interesting to look at as it reveals the complexity of meanings that are invoked in the construction of beef as a symbol of the anti-caste utopia. The dense text of “Beef Anthem” is embedded in the longer history of the Dalit movement, social and political realities of the Osmania campus and NS Chamar’s personal life story; a blend which has come to represent the Dalit “political act in performance” (Redmond 2013: 8).

It is necessary to understand that anthems as a genre are not simple texts, but rather gain their full meaning only through performative practice. Shana L. Redmond in her work on anthems in the African American diaspora noted:

These sonic productions were not ancillary, background noise—they were absolutely central to the unfolding politics because they held within them the doctrines and beliefs of the people who participated in their performance, either as singers or listening audience. Those involved in the performance were actively engaging in a quest for alternatives to their political present. (2013: 8)

“Beef Anthem”, though a rather recent creation, was gaining the central stage in the local Dalit student movement in Hyderabad which reveals its mobilizing and community-building potential. NS Chamar, the author and key performer of “Beef Anthem”, popularly called the local Bob Marley or Michael Jackson, would appear on stage in many cultural programs held on the Osmania University and the English and Foreign Languages University campuses, and his anthem became a sort of protocol during several Dalit political gatherings. “Beef Anthem” contains layers of meanings that Dalits on campuses shared in envisaging their own alternatives to the oppressive social and political present. In the following, strophe by strophe, I seek to unpack these complex imaginaries and their meanings.

There is a general assumption that untouchables’ demeaning position in caste society was because of their long-standing association with a dead cow’s body, which was seen by Hindus as being extremely polluting. Untouchables were obliged to practice dirty professions such as removing dead cows’ carcasses from roads, skinning them and producing various leather goods. Due to the scarcity of food and the overall lack of various resources, some untouchable communities consumed dead cows’ meat. Already B.R. Ambedkar elaborated on the interrelationship between beef consumption and untouchability in his text “Untouchability, the Dead Cow and the Brahmin,” in which he stated that,

No Hindu community, however low, will touch cow’s flesh. On the other hand, there is no community which is really an Untouchable community which has not something to do with the dead cow. Some eat her flesh, some remove the skin, some manufacture articles out of her skin and bones. (2010: 184)

Louis Dumont reaffirmed this understanding by stating that beef eaters and leather workers constituted the lowest ranks of the Indian caste hierarchy. He emphasized that “if you eat beef, you must accept being classed among the untouchables, and on this condition your practice will be tolerated” (1980: 80, 191).

In “Beef Anthem”, surprisingly, we hear a completely different tone:¹²

We resemble black lotus
 We have been shining like a black sun
 We have been singing very beautifully
 We have been learning very easily
 We have been standing very healthy
 Reason for all these things is beef.

The first strophe of the anthem twice invokes black color in quite paradoxical manner to describe lotus and sun, objects that have bright and shining quality. The pronoun “we”, appearing in the beginning in nearly all lines of the strophe, indicates that it intends to define the qualities of the Dalit community. The usage of black in this context, stands as an indirect referent to the dark complexion of the Dalit folks, however, here through the association with sun and lotus it is used not in a derogatory but rather celebratory manner. In these lines, the anthem essentially claims that Dalits are proud of what they are, with all their qualities—abilities to sing beautifully, learn easily and stay healthy, quite contrary from what casteist society perceives them to be—without talent, physically repulsive and mentally inferior. The following refrain explains, from where these qualities and abilities emerge:

Beef secret of my energy
 Beef secret of our knowledge.

“We were born with beef, Chamars, Madigas”, NS Chamar told me during an interview, thus proudly declaring that beef constitutes the habitus of his community.¹³ The single line of refrain of the anthem asserts power and pride in beef consumption. The physical repulsion generally associated with beef and which is the pre-dominant notion in the Hindu caste society goes unmentioned. Instead, one hears about all the positive qualities that beef provides. While vegetarian Hindu culture perceives beef as religiously polluting, and as any meat, supposedly disgusting and bad for health, the anthem contradicts this notion by stating about beef:

¹²There is some degree of variation and flexibility in the usage of lyrics during various performances. Sometimes certain strophes are omitted and certain words can be replaced by synonyms.

¹³This can be contradicted by Sébastia’s account. According to her, “[t]he students’ claim for beef as their own food culture is, however, debatable. Among the Dalit students I met at OU, rare are those who eat beef at home. Because of its condemnation by Hindu higher castes and its ‘famine food’ identity, bovine meat is no longer prepared in many families.” (Sébastien 2017: 115). Some of my Dalit interlocutors in New Delhi and Hyderabad, had sentiments towards cow and did not support beef eating. Others began experimenting with their food habits only on campus for the first time in their lives.

It's fantastic – It's aesthetic
 It's our favorite – It's native
 It's delicious – It's dearest
 It's marvelous – It's precious.

How can one understand this act of the resignification of taste? In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1996), Pierre Bourdieu analyzed how taste relates to one's social position in society and how it is generally employed in marking social difference:

Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others... Aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes. (1996: 56)

Bourdieu proposes that tastes of the dominant classes tend to dominate the tastes of other social classes. If we were to re-apply Bourdieu's class analysis to the Indian context of caste relations, we could say that in India vegetarianism is largely associated with upper caste Hindu culture that was transmitted to the "lower" levels of Indian society through the process of "sanskritization" (Srinivas 2013). Eventually, it has become the widespread form of taste hegemony, which dominates over others either through the imposition of vegetarian food habits or the social stigmatization of those who do not comply with the dominant norms of vegetarian normality. N. Sukumar in his auto-ethnographic piece aptly described the trajectory of the evolution of his taste and simultaneously cultural selfhood when his family began rising through the social ladder. He reveals that in his childhood, beef was a valued food in his community, but once his father got a bureaucratic job, due to social pressure, beef had to be replaced by cleaner meats. He got back to beef consumption through the association with the Dalit movement at the University of Hyderabad that enabled him to reinvestigate his cultural selfhood with regards to food consumption (Sukumar 2015).

The anthem attempts to re-signify the taste of beef and simultaneously re-signify social norms and boundaries. Stigmatizing and having an aversion towards beef eaters, the vegetarian Hindu culture draws boundaries between upper and lower-castes, Hindu and non-Hindu communities. The anthem indulges in the subversive aspect of taste. It re-signifies beef from aversive to delicious, and also similarly to the dominant discourse, puts beef as a marker of reversed social boundary. While the dominant vegetarian Hindu discourse takes beef as a marker of exclusions and stigmatization, "Beef Anthem" employs it for the assertion of an alternative culture and values from those of the dominant society.

We have been eating tasty beef
 We have been struggling against the state

We hate hierarchy in the world
 We hate casteism in the soul
 We hate patriarchy
 We love matriarchy
 Every quality got from shia (Beef).

The strophe is framed in terms of dichotomous oppositions. It declares what Dalits have been “struggling” and “hating,” that is, “state”, “hierarchy”, “casteism” and “patriarchy”. While the critique of social hierarchy, casteism and patriarchy is a common line within the larger Dalit movement, the critique of the state can be seen as a product of the specific cultural context—the Telangana state and the Osmania University campus’ environment where the communist movement has been particularly vibrant throughout several decades. In this condensed form, the anthem refers to the history of state, caste and gender oppression that has characterized Indian society for centuries and which is seen as a major source of Dalits’ suffering.

The mention of matriarchy deserves a longer explanation. I noticed that Dalit activists from Hyderabad, when talking about religion, tend to stress their autonomy from the dominant Hindu tradition and refer to their local religious beliefs and practices where feminine goddesses play a central role. Jitesh, a senior Dalit activist from the University of Hyderabad, a place where beef counter culture first started, noted:

So Vedic, I mean Brahmanical practices are clearly demarcated from Dalit practices. Their Yajnas [rituals] and the Gods are different from [ours]. We have no God basically. Dalits do not have any God. We worship God, but [our] God does not have a form. He’s anywhere, everywhere. So, if we have God - that is Goddesses only. We don’t have male Gods. Elama, Pochama, Maisama, Uppalama, Budiposhama all these are female Goddesses...But Brahmins have male Gods. All the Gods of Brahmins are male. Male-centric worship. And we are female-centric worshipers. And they don’t eat beef, we eat beef. Ok, we don’t, I mean, we don’t eat vegetables in the festival. We used to have meat in the festivals. Whatever the festival [we are] eating meat, whether it is chicken, mutton, beef. Sankranti, Dussehra, Divali, any festival, we eat mutton. But Brahmins do not eat...Culture for them is domination, culture for us is resistance. Simple, for them – domination, for us – resistance.

Here we can see how relating to religion and beef, Jitesh constructs the notion of the Dalit cultural autonomy and difference from the dominant upper-caste Hindu culture. It is not the “great” Hinduism, but “little,” female-centric Hindu traditions that Dalits grew up with. In his view, instead of worshiping patriarchal vegetarian Hindu gods, Dalits worship various meat-eating goddesses. Similarly, “Beef Anthem” with the reference to matriarchy infuses beef with feminine values. However, despite these references in the anthem, I got the impression from my personal communication with festival participants that the beef festival was mostly attended by male students. Women’s abstention from participation in the celebration might be explained by the

fact that beef festivals both at OU in 2012 and at EFLU in 2011 were accompanied by the expression of emotional outrage leading to violent student clashes, reactions that usually pertain to masculinist cultures of protest preventing women's participation.

The anthem is not only explicit about what it denounces. It refers to an alternative social world with different values that existed in the past:

My forefathers were brave warriors
Each warrior fought bravely
Each emperor ruled morally
Mercy human Mahishashura
Kind-hearted Narakashura
Courageous Ravanashura
Natural Eve Thataka
They had enriched fraternity
They had extended equality
They had founded social freedom
They had started transformation
They have eaten cow mutton
It's an entire Dravidian culture
They had started transformation.

The anthem historicizes the Hindu religious mythological narrative stating that the values of Dalits—fraternity, equality and freedom—were prevalent during the reign of various Asura kings. In the ancient Hindu religious texts as well as in the popular Hinduism, Asuras are depicted as dark-skinned demons that brought chaos to the world but were eventually conquered by the Hindu gods. In this strophe, Asuras are depicted not as mythological demons but rather as inheritors of Dravidian culture, that prevailed in the Indian subcontinent before the Aryan invasion. Asuras and their reign is represented as a sort of golden pre-Aryan age during which Asuras, not mythological figures, but historical Dalit predecessors, though being powerful, ruled in a courageous and kind-hearted way, spreading fraternity, equality and social freedom. These qualities of Asura Dravidian kings supposedly come from beef. They indirectly, in Aesop's manner, are opposed to cruel vegetarian Hindu gods, while the morally superior Asura-Dravidian social and political order—to the hierarchical caste society. Asura narrative is not an absolutely new line of thought within the anti-caste movement in India. Jotiba Phule, a nineteenth century social reformer, already encouraged to rethink Hindu mythology and its characters (Omvedt 2017). This also resonates with the Dalit students' practice to stage Asura martyrdom commemoration days on the Osmania, EFLU and Jawaharlal Nehru University campuses.

The last strophe of "Beef Anthem" takes an unexpected turn. It states that it was not only Asuras who ate beef and mutton, but also a range of intellectual, religious, historical and popular figures:

Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Buddha
Mohammed, Jesus, Marx, Ambedkar

Newton, Einstein, Stephen Hawking
 Martin Luther, Malcolm X
 Stalin, Lenin,¹⁴ Lincoln, Che Guevara
 Bob Marley, Serena Williams
 Paul Robeson, Michael Jackson
 All the legends are beef eaters.

While right-wing politicians and supporters, drawing their evidence from Hindu epics, increasingly epitomize ancient Indian culture as an origin of modern knowledge and science (Rahman 2014; Lakshmi 2015; Macaskill & Nair 2014), the Dalits turn their gaze to the West. The anthem refers to Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Newton, Einstein, and Stephen Hawking as if trying to assume that their intellectual abilities are stemming from beef consumption, though it is unclear if the author had any proof of their food practice. Nevertheless, the qualities that these foreign personalities represent stand out in the anthem as symbols of rationality and logic and are opposed to the “irrational” spirituality which surrounds the holy cow symbolism. Following this line of thought, Dalits would argue in a vein of rational choice that beef is a source of proper nutrition since it is a cheaper protein, the best food for workers to be strong since lentils (*dal*) is expensive and unaffordable.¹⁵ Arjit, a Dalit student activist from JNU originating from Andhra Pradesh/Telangana where beef-eating is a prevalent practice, told me while comparing Dalit visual appearance in New Delhi and Hyderabad:

But workers, you see them, you can't imagine workers looking like this in Andhra...Physically their look is different there, [they are] built different there. Food I think is the way they have controlled us to be weak in the North.

What he meant here is that namely the imposition of vegetarianism on the North Indian Dalits was a conscious strategy of upper castes to starve and weaken untouchables. Apparently, for some Dalits from the Telangana or Andhra Pradesh states, beef is a source of physical and mental strength and does not bear a meaning of social stigma.

Furthermore, by invoking Martin Luther, Malcolm X and Abraham Lincoln, the anthem draws parallels between the Dalit and the black Civil Rights Movement in the USA of the 1960-1970s. This discursive trajectory has been set in motion by the Dalit Panther Movement since 1972 and is elaborated further by the Dalit students on the Osmania campus in a form of performative celebrations. For example, Dalits in OU annually commemorate simultaneously in December Ambedkar's and Nelson Mandela's death anniversary, while in February – Malcolm X's death anniversary.

¹⁴Pro-communist activists whom I spoke to did not critically reflect about the negative aspects of communist ideology, its leaders and politics in the larger context. Also, they were not much aware about the tragic effects communist ideology and rule had in the Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

¹⁵Sébastien notes that Dalit students often referred to the report produced by Veena Shatrugna from the National Institute of Nutrition that highlighted the nutritional qualities of beef. This report strengthened students' position on the need to de-stigmatize beef and provided them with scientific and rational arguments (2017: 115).

These initiatives stand as an attempt to learn from the success story of the Civil Rights Movement.

Instead of invoking Indian pop-culture icons, which in Dalit understanding usually represent high caste groups, the final lines of the anthem refer to popular music and sport icons of black origin, in a way suggesting their artistic and physical skills come from beef consumption. What is relevant in these icons is not only their blackness, but also their international recognition. In this vein, the anthem calls beef as “a pure international brand,” which contrasts with right-wing attempts to exalt the cow as a sacred, all-encompassing symbol of national Indian culture. Thus, the anthem tries to suggest a different vision of Dalits—not as backward and local, but forward, modern and international. This sentiment resonates with the larger feeling among the Telangana Dalits that they were backward and not exposed to colonial and capitalist modernity in contrast to the Dalits from the Andhra region. Interestingly, some Dalits did not have a negative approach towards the colonial past because colonial administration was seen as empowering Dalits. It began the policy of reservations designated for the upliftment of the marginalized communities. Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar was trained in the Western education system and positively related to the values of Western modernity. Contemporary Dalits prioritize English as a language of empowerment and this idea is strongly promoted by certain intellectuals and ideologues such as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd who stated that “[t]his shared international language would allow them to live as equal and respectable citizens of the global community” (Ilaiah Shepherd 2022). In Uttar Pradesh there is even a Dalit temple created for the English Goddess (Pandey 2011).

Finally, in the lines of this strophe, one can see obvious parallels with NS Chamar’s life story—his early involvement with the Christian church, the Communist Party, and later exposure to the Dalit movement and recent career within the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party. His personal life story is thus reflected in the anthem, producing a broader political narrative of the movement. The reference to Buddha, Mohamed, Jesus, Marx, Che Guevara and others represents Dalits’ attempts to shape broader alliances across religious and political spectrums. It also tries to solve inner divisions prevalent within the Dalit movement, especially in terms of religious and political differentiation. In an interview, NS Chamar noted:

They [right-wing students] believe god and they come outside, they are doing political movement. Celebrate Rama, Vivekananda, Hedgewar. Like that... But Christians – only Jesus. They are not connecting Ambedkar, Phule. All Christians in India – they belong to Dalits only. But Dalits are divided. When they are attached [to] Jesus, they are not accepting Ambedkar, Phule...Oh Jesus, please tell our people [that] your one shape is Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

NS Chamar assumes that the right-wing draws its power from the ability to fuse various icons into one ideological fold, which is seen by him not as a religious sentiment, but a political strategy. In a similar vein, “Beef Anthem” embraces Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, Marx, Ambedkar and other historical and contemporary personalities to provide

an inclusive political alternative. The anthem reflects the broader realization that the success of the Dalit movement largely depends on the integrational capacity to include various subaltern communities under its fold. Beef in the anthem stands as a uniting symbol upon which various taste-alliances among minority communities can be constructed. Interestingly, the anthem does not use the term Dalit anywhere, thus the supposed listener and the wider audience is rather open-ended.

“Beef Anthem” in Performance

On May 3, 2015, NS Chamar organized a cultural program on the Osmania campus in front of the Arts College building with fully-fledged stage arrangements—huge posters, stage lighting and sound system.¹⁶ The program was called *Bheem Drum*. *Jai Bheem* is a common greeting phrase among Dalit activists across India, referring to B.R. Ambedkar, while drum refers to *dappu*—an occupational and also artistic symbol of Madigas. The program was intended to showcase the voices of various Dalit Bahujan artists who wrote and sang against the caste system (*Manuvada*). As the poster states, “the actual aim of the Bahujan artists is to fetch state power to Bahujans by being aware and conscious perennially”.¹⁷ “Beef Anthem” was performed at the culmination of the program. NS Chamar appeared on stage accompanied by a team of students, mostly guys cheerfully dancing and singing on the stage, dressed in jeans and specially designed blue *Bheem Drum* T-Shirts. A recently departed revolutionary balladeer Gaddar also rose onto the stage in a modern outfit instead of his regular mass attire thus stylistically synchronizing with the Dalit movement.

At the center of the poster advertising *Bheem drum* celebration one sees a *dappu* drum as if referring to the centrality of Madigas in the local Dalit movement. Not by coincidence, since NS Chamar, the author of “Beef Anthem” and the key organizer of the program, belongs to the Madiga sub-caste group. Madigas’ cultural and political assertion might be explained by their subordinate position in the traditional caste hierarchy and contemporary class relations. Madigas political assertion began as a protest against Malas, who are also Dalits but of higher caste and class status. Due to various reasons (higher caste status, exposure to colonial modernity) Malas managed to benefit better from the governmental reservations compared to Madigas. Therefore, in the late 1990-ies there began the Madiga Dandora movement seeking the categorization of SC reservation quotas.¹⁸ The university campuses in Hyderabad witnessed similar fragmentation among the Dalit students. The Dalit Student Union, that initiated beef stall at the University of Hyderabad in 2009, had split from the Ambedkar Students Union (largely represented by Malas) to defend the interests and causes of Madigas. They took the beef issue as a symbol of community culture and as a strategy to draw wider support and gain more power in campus politics. Its

¹⁶I did not have a chance to attend *Bheem Drum* celebration myself, because it happened after my fieldwork, therefore, while discussing the event I count on the material circulating online.

¹⁷From the *Bheem drum* poster.

¹⁸Regarding the reservation subcategorization issues and Mala-Madiga conflict see, Muthaiah (forthcoming) and Rao (2009).

important to mention that beef is eaten by many other non-Dalit groups, therefore, Madiga students at the University of Hyderabad and later Osmania University took it as their key political symbol and major strategy to attract support from non-Madiga and even non-Dalit students. Gundimeda notes that DSU's beef stall in the University of Hyderabad at the *Sukoon* celebration was supported by the wide range of organizations—Student Federation of India, the Ambedkar Students Union, the Tribal Students Association, the North Eastern Students Forum, the Telangana Students Association, and the Bahujan Students Front (Gundimeda 2009: 133–134, 145). The sub-caste differentiation was also present in the Dalit student politics on Osmania campus, as there was a separate group representing Malas interests, that is All Mala Student Association (AMSA). Meanwhile, Madigas at OU tended to embrace their Madiga identity within the larger Bahujan framework which allowed them to assert Madiga identity while shaping broader solidarities.

Hardly leaving any empty space and overcrowded with symbols, the poster of the *Bheem Drum* program characteristically reflects the scope of the Dalit student movement in Osmania University. Similar to “Beef Anthem”, the poster targets diverse student groups and is loaded with different ideological influences. The desired solidarities can be seen through the multitude of various historical icons and contemporary personalities depicted in the poster. The biggest portraits are of B.R. Ambedkar and Jotibha Phule, key icons of the Dalit Bahujan community, one relating to the SC, another—to the OBC groups, according to these two ideological icons' caste backgrounds. Behind them, in the right left-hand corner one can see Buddha and on the upper right—Kanshi Ram, the historical and contemporary anti-caste ideologues. In between these two, at the top of the poster there is a row of local leaders, including those of the Indian subaltern communities, African American and Muslim origin. The poster, highlighting its pro-feminine orientation, places women icons in the middle of the poster to be surrounded and protected by the many of the Dalit Bahujan men. Below the image of the *dappu* drum and the festival's title *Bheem Drum: The Rhythm of Bahujans*,¹⁹ there is a row of Telangana movement icons and festival participants, who come from both Dalit and Left political camps. They are separated by the burning guitar which stands as a symbol of modernity and Dalit Bahujan energy, as if declaring publicly, “our fury is burning” (Hardtmann, 2003). In the poster the predominant colors are blue, red and green, thus addressing three separate communities—Dalits, communists and Muslims. Thus, there is obvious semantic correspondence and an overlap of political objectives between the text of “Beef Anthem” and the idea of the *Bheem drum* program.

It is also important to note that the strategy of the symbolic redefinition of beef is employed not only to change Dalits' self-perception and to form broader anti-caste alliances. Beef issue had its outward audience. Keeping in mind the value and meaning of the cow in Hindu culture, beef counter culture appears not only as an integrational, but also prevocational strategy. It seeks to challenge the type of politics and ideology,

¹⁹I want to draw attention to the fact that the poster does not use the term Dalit, but instead that of Bahujan, thus addressing the wider audience.

which is built on the symbolism of the holy cow, purity/pollution rules, vegetarian normality and, most importantly, hierarchical caste relations. Similarly, C.J. Arun has argued that Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu purposely instigated confrontation with upper-castes since “they come to realize that they could assert themselves in the village only by creating conflicts” (2007: 93).

This becomes clear if we look to the reaction the beef festivals instigated. The beef festival at EFLU in 2011 led to the stone throwing by the students in opposition and the destruction of the festival place. The beef festival at OU in 2012 was held under police presence on campus that sought to prevent clashes between the conflicting student camps but eventually failed to prevent the burning of a media van and the injury of a student. In 2015, before the beef festival at OU, Raja Singh, a member of legislative assembly declared that, “I have resolved that I will make every effort to prevent this festival, which I believe hurts the sentiments of Hindus” (Janyala 2015). I have come across a poster on Facebook that calls cow protectors to march to OU in protest of the beef festival. At the center of the poster stands Raja Singh, with a red *tilak* on his forehead, dressed in a white shirt and orange scarf around his neck. In his extended hand, Singh holds a sword as if intending to punish those who dare to eat beef and desacralize the Gai Mata (“mother cow”), which is seen on the upper left corner of the poster, depicted as containing various Hindu gods within her body. These examples indicate that beef issue worked successfully not only as a community building, support base expanding, but also as a confrontational strategy that managed to agitate the oppositional groups and bring beef issue even to the national media attention.

Conclusion

Far from being simply a food item, beef in contemporary India reveals a nexus of caste, politics and community sentiments. It functions as a communicative issue through which social relations are negotiated and politics is being performed. The construction of vegetarianism as a cultural norm can be viewed as a discursive practice of the dominant, which marginalizes or stigmatizes those who fail or reject to follow the norm. It is not surprising, thus, that counter culture initiatives of the marginalized and subordinated groups were also framed through the same communicative sphere of food, which functions both as a source of cultural constitutedness and a means of subverting cultural norms. If the food is a constituent of oppression and discrimination, it was also logically taken up as a source of alternative values.

“Beef Anthem” within the contemporary Dalit student movement stands as an encouragement to embrace Dalit identity and not to be ashamed of eating beef. Infusing beef with various positive qualities, the anthem seeks to boost Dalit self-respect and its outward image, as if suggesting that if beef is re-evaluated, the Dalit position in Indian society can change too. The anthem re-constitutes the general notion prevalent among Dalit activists in Hyderabad, that because of their marginalization Dalits have different and supposedly superior moral values. It is Dalits’ different social experience

and essentially their segregation from the dominant religion and society that renders them the “better” people.

Besides being a Dalit community symbol, beef was also an attempt to search for broader solidarities that are seen as an inevitable trajectory in forming the alternative anti-caste future. Beef strategy enabled the questioning of the entrenched social hierarchies, inequalities and division by forming minority alliances on campus and, most importantly, gave more public visibility to anti-caste utopias. On campuses in Hyderabad beef issue, indeed, managed to temporarily unite people coming from very different communities, regions, castes and classes. Under different circumstances, it could have been possible to inquire further if beef issue could result into actual and long-lasting political solidarities among various marginalized groups on campus and beyond and whether campus-based beef politics could have a potential to resonate beyond campus walls. With the beef issue literally disappearing from the Dalit student political repertoire in the last few years, the question that could still be relevant today is how Dalit activists retrospectively evaluate the effectiveness of beef issue and how they view the possibility of “survival” of beef as a symbol of anti-caste utopia in the currently politically hostile environment. Also, it would be interesting to investigate, how Dalit activists would justify the beef strategy in the context of the global environmental concerns related to the cattle agriculture and climate change.

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