

March 8, 2022

Meat-Eating in the Time of Hindutva

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Indians who are either food-deprived or animal meat consumers [easily constitute a majority](#). What is more, a large chunk of these majorities might overlap. Yet, there is [a violent crackdown](#) on livelihoods that surround the acts of eating meat. An explanation of this contradiction lies in the [growing dominance](#) of vegetarian upper castes in political decision making.

On a different register, the discourse against the militant drive towards Hindu state-making paints meat-eaters as powerless minorities denied their right to food-choice. If that is so, it is due to the playing out of a polarised debate – between activists of differing agendas – between cow protectionism and food rights.

A deeper understanding of these phenomena is necessary. In *Sacred Cows and Chicken Manchurian: The Everyday Politics of Eating Meat in India*, James Staples attends to the everyday politics around production and consumption of meat that is “both nuanced and fluid, refined in relation to intricately negotiated identities and contexts.” His exploration of the foodways of a diverse range of interlocutors in ‘rural’ Anandapuram, “rurban” Bhavanipur (both in Andhra Pradesh), and metropolitan Hyderabad carefully documents the transformation of these spaces, their peoples, and the myriad factors that influence their meat-eating routines.

This ethnography looks beyond the [‘high’ constitutional politics](#) around the production and consumption of meat—especially beef—mediated by ideologies of purity, piety, rights, and resistance (Pandey, 1983). Drawing on Staples’ 35 years of field experience, the book “offers an anthropological take” on “how nonactivists — a broad category of people who position themselves neither as cow protectionists nor as pro-beef activists” navigate political dilemmas in their everyday life.

The activist debate and its discontents

Though attentive to the [pre-modern](#) and modern history of the cow debate, Staples' project is situated in the middle of their polarising agendas. The activist positions are frequently explained in terms of Brahminical vegetarianism and militant cattle protectionism pitted against valiant acts of public assertion by marginalised, beef-eating communities in activist spaces such as the English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad, where a beef festival had once been organised. He explores the meaningful interactions between this ideologically charged old debate with cultural, economic, aesthetic, and social foodways of the time and space that he studies. Staples’s work attends to participants in the beef supply chain who exhibit ambivalent tendencies. For instance, it corresponds with beef consumers who find slaughter unacceptable and cattle traders or butchers who would not eat beef.

Traversing the pathways of accessing cattle meat in rural South India, Staples shows how a culture of silence, ignorance, and inexactitude permits multiple, perhaps contradictory, meanings to coexist as bovines move from farm to food.

Staples’ ethnography also challenges “dominant assumptions” borrowed from the cow debate on “cattle slaughter and beef consumption in South Asia”. These include a *Dwij* (twice-born) fallacy that “respect for cattle, cows especially, is the sole preserve of upper-caste Hindus”. He elaborates on the close, kinship-analogous relationships that members of the beef-eating ‘underbelly’ had with their cattle. These relationships of care are premised on concern for the animal’s well-being and respect for its role in the owner’s sustenance.

Staples highlights the role of ambiguity in their social behaviour. His cattle-rearing yet beef-eating interlocutors remarked that “they kill, we eat!”, stressing the social distinctions “drawn between those who slaughtered (Muslims, in particular, but also Dalits in some cases) and those who merely ate”. Dalit women tell Staples about the surreptitious consumption of beef by Brahmins. This ambiguity is further facilitated by the practice of “not quite knowing” and thinking about the source of the cattle meat relished by these communities.

Nonactivism(s) and surviving the 'cow-sensus'

How and when does India's meat-consuming majority relish its preferred animal protein in the prevailing atmosphere of stigma and hostility? What explains the survival of cow slaughter and the beef trade, when both carry penal sentences up to life imprisonment in many states? Would the explanations for the survival of the beef trade also portend the social pathway of its possible death?

The ethnographic material in *Sacred Cows* provides rich insights into this paradox. In doing so, it deftly discredits what I call an 'underbelly assumption', that "Indian beef trade directly concerns only Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, and Christians, in other words, that high-caste, non-beef-eating Hindus play no part in a process to which they are implacably opposed". Traversing the pathways of accessing cattle meat in rural South India, Staples shows how a culture of silence, ignorance, and inexactitude permits multiple, perhaps contradictory, meanings to coexist as bovines move from farm to food.

Those who engage in slaughter and those who buy flesh do so discreetly. Brokers, butchers, traders, and final customers maintain an element of ambiguity about whether the milch animal they transacted in was a cow or a buffalo. Intermediate caste agriculturists relied on the cattle trade for sustenance. For consumers, "asking ran the risk of exposing them to knowledge that contradicted what they believed and wanted to be true." Non-activist beef eaters often downplayed their beef-eating. These acts helped manage everyone's expectations and taboos and prevented hostile action by the state or vigilantes.

There were "costs [...] of paying off local police officers and others to ensure that they were left to trade in peace." This bovine nexus of not knowing circumvents, brackets, and denies legibility of the resilient political society, while also betraying a form of 'secular' acquiescence of the state to this paradox. The ban on cow slaughter has coexisted under a "secular-accommodative mediating apparatus" for over six decades.

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Drawing on Shaheed Tayob's work about navigating the disgust of the vegetarian, cow-loving population while engaging in the meat trade, Staples explains how, much like other livelihoods in the political society, these dynamics of survival often existed outside the scope of the law (Tayob, 2019). "The act of making something illegal helped to determine the parameters within which it continued to happen."

The regime of "official ignorance" and "avoidance of knowing" materially enabled the existence of cattle trade, reflecting what I term as an unusual *cow-sensus*, mediated largely by non-activist members of India's political society. To be sure, this cow-sensus looks nothing like a consensus. It seeks to balance the religious sentiments against cow slaughter with the economic imperative of the livelihood of communities engaged in the cattle trade and slaughter (De, 2013). Yet, the ambivalent politics of *secular politicians* and administrative regimes – mediated in equal measure on an electoral-political contract with those engaged in this trade and to the *jugaad techniques* of trading communities – can be credited for insuring this trade from *militant reprisals of the powerful cow-protectionist minority*.

Social identity plus

Food remains connected with status, but also with male virility and feminine honour, and ideas of religious piety. Styles of preparation and choices of particular organs provide testimony of the persistence of status hierarchies. Beef curry is more respectable than fried beef, which in turn is superior to dry beef. Hierarchies of caste and histories of disgust still dictate the order of aesthetics. Staples' material provides evidence of the ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of disgust even within caste communities. Beef-eating Dalits, for instance, were disgusted at the mention of pork-eating Adivasis.

The messy enactment of social identity is complicated by personal trajectories. Shiva, a Madiga caste individual, adhered to the ethics of ahimsa and avoided meat altogether since early childhood (debunking the *Dwij* fallacy). But he had to relent when he became old and dependent on his son. Marking the transition from religious to health reasons for justifying his consumption, he claimed to relish beef for medical reasons as it is "strength-enhancing", though "hard to digest".

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Besides religious observance, the book sheds light on the affective registers of pleasure-seeking by non-elite “gastronomical connoisseurs” (Osella and Osella, 2008). While pleasure seeking can be connected to acts of resistance, it depends on the social capital of the resistant individual in their immediate context. While Victoria Rani, a Madiga convert to Christianity, performed this resistivity, in contrast, Prakash, a first-generation migrant to Hyderabad, avoided association with beef-eating as it could diminish him socially amongst his caste Hindu neighbours. “There was nothing to gain, for Prakash, from building an oppositional identity based on beef consumption, and — given that a number of his colleagues would not have eaten beef and that some were vegetarian — there was plenty to lose”.

Staples’ interlocutors challenge the presumption that “culinary identities are fixed and reproduced ad infinitum through caste and community endogamous marriage practices”. His work closely expositis the role of plus factors such as “class, gender, age, family position, and education”. Thus, “distinctions between eating and not eating meat are better plotted along a continuum—along which one might also shift position over time and according to circumstance – rather than as binary opposition”.

But, then, why does Aziz, a Hyderabadi butcher, narrate the Dadri tragedy and troubles of cattle traders by exclaiming, ‘It’s not about the meat. It’s about Muslims’?

Vigilante action in relation to cow slaughter is not, as Aziz correctly surmised, just about the love of the cow. Such action is also about ensuring that Muslims, Dalits, and Christians remain aware that they are the “other.”

Capitalist transition and environmentalism

Staples insists that “forces of Hindutva” are not the only game in town when it comes to changing patterns of meat consumption. Nor are these forces unfacilitated. Altering against the hazards of “universal binary oppositions” like environmentalism-vegetarianism-liberalism versus nationalist conservatism, he points to the extensive use of ecological (Vandana Shiva) and animal protectionist (PETA, Maneka Gandhi) arguments by Hindu nationalists. Doing so, he reminds his readers not to overlook the “appropriation that goes on in plain sight.”

Staples emphasises that this camouflaging of ideology by science and health is not the sole preserve of the elite anti-meat interests. In fact, it allows meat-eaters to “reframe their practices in new, more positive ways.” At the same time, he elaborates on how some meat-eaters tended to be “dismissive of the suggestion that their meat consumption might be harmful to the environment.” Citing their “modest meat-eating habits, rarely more often than once a week,” these responses underscored the cultural and class distinction in environmental impacts of [meat-eating in the Global South](#) and Global North.

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Beef was also affected by the relative popularity of chicken, which acquired the status of an accessible yet aspirational commodity. The act of consuming “KFC-style” fried chicken signalled participation in glitzy modernity. In parallel, global capital transfers were transforming the poultry business. The alliance between the Indian conglomerate Godrej and the multinational meat giant Tyson Foods to expand chicken consumption had effected extensive transformations in meat-eating patterns, putting India on the global bandwagon of mass chicken consumption at the expense of pork and beef. Simultaneously, neoliberalism developmentalism has caused a decline in goat and farmed-fish populations because of the usurpation of common lands by the [‘developmentalist’ broker state](#).

Mass-produced broiler chicken had its problems, but people adapted their habits to it. Relatively new consumers of express deep concerns about the health and sanitary risks posed by broiler production methods. But chicken’s relative cheapness helped, even as the inaccessibility of much-desired mutton continued to sting.

A possible cow-sensus

Reading *Sacred Cows* can provide glimmers of hope for someone who has seen septuagenarian Muslim beef merchants break into tears while sharing their tales of dispossession via cattle slaughter bans. How meat sellers, dealers and eaters looked beside and looked

within, instead of looking at, and went about their barely private rituals of beef eating, told me how modern law can only tyrannise so much. For, in this culture of not knowing and not saying, lies a possible cow-sensus.

Per Staples' story of the south Indian countryside's foodways, the Hindu nationalist factor has caused disruptions to this logic of survival but has not destroyed it. Despite the existence of restrictions and onset of vigilante activity, the ambivalent cow-sensus provided a sense of security to those making choices. As a respondent said: "the government, it doesn't make much of a difference around here to what meat we eat. We eat what we choose".

Sacred Cows is valuable for enriching the existing ethnographic material about the impact of caste norms and Hindu nationalist politics on meat-eating, with [fresh insights](#) on this phenomenon in a time of ascendant Hindu autocratic politics. Staples' ethnography, however, was done in a different 'state' and place. It, by design, does not discuss the subject positions of those who might be driving a militant transition. It is not clear if the cow-sensus of everyday ambivalence has survived the vagaries of [a tyrannical crackdown by UP government](#) machinery and [the 'good faith' bearing vigilantes](#). What is more worrying than the breakdown of a secular cow-sensus is the ["shattered Muslim hopes"](#) for mere survival. Anthropologists and other social scientists should take a cue from this transition.

Since dominant narratives are not the last word, it is important to pay attention to newer forms of resistance and survival strategies when state and dominant society fuse into a tyrannical panopticon in the laboratories of Hindutva. But, if political responses to [the problem of stray cattle in UP are any indication](#), the Hindu autocratic state is unlikely to have the last laugh. There can be no excuse for despair. As *Sacred Cows* reminds us, the meat-curry-laden hands of the non-activist masses shall survive autocracy through ambivalence.

The author would like to thank Professor Atreyee Majumder of NLSIU for intellectual guidance, and beef traders in Mumbai and Bangalore for allowing him to access their survival toolkits in autocratic times.

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