

Bringing Beef Back

Ravi Duggal

Beef bans and intolerance of the diversity that abounds in this country are clearly not the way to win elections.

Beef, Pakistan, intolerance and an anti-reservation stance have in sum made the BJP a ‘bahari’ in Bihar. The people of Bihar have shown that the multi-cultural ethos of the Indian social fabric is intact. Casteism and communalism have been resoundingly defeated and secular and progressive forces are still alive and kicking. Bihar is a warning against the politics of divisiveness, and it’s an opportunity for promoting respect for diversity, peace and harmony.

India is a multi-cultural/ethnic/religious society. This means that social practices, including food habits, would vary widely across communities. Notwithstanding Article 48 of the Constitution, which states “*the state shall endeavour to... prohibiting slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle*”, it is imperative for the State to respect socio-cultural practices, including food habits of every community. The State exists for the common good and not for the good of any one community, so it cannot take sides. On the contrary it must protect communities, especially the minorities, so that they don’t feel threatened by dominant groups.

The unnecessary focus on beef politics is an intrusion into social practices of communities that have since ancient times respected each other’s beliefs, social mores and food choices. Comments by members of the ruling regime that those who want to eat beef should go to Pakistan, or worse still, attacks by a rabid fraternity and murder of those suspected of eating beef is an attempt to communalise India further and create animosity between communities. The top leadership has neither condemned these communal utterances and the violence and nor have they taken action against the perpetrators.

The people of Bihar have, it would appear, taken the lead in rejecting such communal politics and shown the way to healing the impaired social fabric of democratic India.

The politics around beef is historically entrenched and dates back to a time much before Islam came into the picture. Historically, since Vedic times records show that upper castes consumed fresh cow meat (that is, slaughtered) and the ‘untouchables’ who handled cattle corpses ate dead

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cow meat. When Buddhism emerged on the scene as a counter, Brahmanism created food fascism and beef gradually moved out of at least the upper caste Hindu menu. Further, under Mughal and British rule, with Muslims and Christians consuming beef, this acquired a religious colour and Brahmanism increasingly projected vegetarianism. Ambedkar and other dalit writers have discussed this at length.

However, it is only in post-independent India that a legal ban on cow slaughter was imposed to respect Hindu sentiments and the minorities were forced to forgo their food choice. (Some states like Kerala and the North-eastern states have not fallen in line). And now with right-wing regimes emergent, there is a war cry to extend this ban to the bull and ox with a clear attack on the food culture of not only the minorities, but also a large number of lower caste and dalit Hindus. This has become another lever to promote divisiveness within the Indian social fabric.

The sacredness-of-the-cow theory hardly holds water. The supposed sacred cow is left to wander the streets and is at risk of accidents; eats plastic that chokes and kills it; is neglected and generally dies of malnourishment, etc. How sacred then, is the cow?

Millions in the country are malnourished, but we will not allow consumption of beef because these notions of the sacredness of the cow. As the Telugu poet Digumarthi Suresh Kumar writes

*When its udders were squeezed and milked You didn't feel any pain at all
When it was stitched into a chappal you stamped underfoot and walked You didn't feel hurt at all
When it rang as a drum at your marriage and your funeral You didn't suffer any blows
When it sated my hunger, beef became your goddess?*

Well, the tulsi plant is also sacred and worshipped regularly by a large spectrum of Hindus, perhaps much more than the cow is worshiped. Yet we eat the tulsi plant and use it as a home remedy for many illnesses. The Bihar result beckons us to stop this madness of food fascism and fascism in general.