

# Beefing up the Republic?

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<http://www.thehansindia.info/News/Article.asp?category=1&subCategory=5&ContentId=55263>

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“Oxen are a treasured possession of the peasants; slaughter an ox in this life and you will be an ox in the next” has become almost a religious tenet; oxen must never be killed. Before the peasants had power, they could only appeal to religious taboo in opposing the slaughter of cattle and had no means of banning it. Since the rise of the peasant associations their jurisdiction has extended even to the cattle, and they have prohibited the slaughter of cattle in the towns.” Mao Tse-tung (“Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan”, March 1927)

While their fellow students are committing suicide every week for the sake of Telangana, it seems odd that a set of Osmania students have gone to the extent of having a “festival” of beef eating that has captured (as usual) the attention of the 24/7 media and the weeklies.

Students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) – that Anti–Establishment training ground for the Establishment-- describing themselves as “beef and pork eaters” and “people who do not care about the mythic claims of ‘holy cow’ and ‘unholy pig’ ” launched the ‘JNU Beef-Pork Eating Campaign’. But JNU Scheduled Caste students opposed it and ultra-left All India Students’ Association (AISA) thought it a gimmick, which would recoil badly in the North Indian context. Maybe they read Mao Tse-tung?

However, some Osmania students, encouraged perhaps by half-baked learning and irresponsible teachers, took up this issue as a protest against “food fascism” (is there “food communism” or “food liberalism” or “food secularism”?). Equally, they tried to assert the Right to Eat Beef/Pork as a part of a “traditional subaltern culture”. Either way, the slogan of “Beef is the secret of my energy” was not going to help them pass exams and get jobs to support their despairing parents. Having said this, what are the basic issues behind this extraordinary manifestation? Basically, some communities, castes and religions have different food habits.

Judaism and Islam reject pork, but accept locusts (insects) and all other meat only if it is halal (ritually slaughtered by slitting the neck and draining out the blood). Christians do not reject anything edible and need no ritual before they eat meat. Jains don’t eat anything grown underground, such as potatoes, onions, carrots, etc.

Buddhists don’t eat meat in keeping with the Enlightened One’s doctrine of ahimsa which forbids killing of all living beings. Hindus vary in food habits; their diets are specific to their caste and tribe. By tradition, Brahmins and Vysyas are not supposed to eat any meat. Kshatriyas only eat meat of animals they hunt.

Sudras eat meat but not beef. The Scheduled Castes generally eat meat and beef. Some tribes/communities eat rats and others, wild birds. But crabs and mollusks in paddy fields have been the traditional right of particular castes even if they don’t own the fields themselves. Some communities eat the intestines of animals, some the liver, tongue, hoofs, etc. Some eat raw fish – sushi is particularly posh these days in the West.

Taking a mature view, it seems that traditional Indian society has dealt a set of different menus to its variegated people. Whatever the effect of health and nutrition of these diets, it seems religion and tradition is at the root of the dietary issue.

When the issue of ban of cow slaughter under Article 38(A) came up in the Constituent Assembly on 24th November 1948, the Muslim League Member from United Provinces, Z. H. Lari, put it clearly: "...it is better to come forward and incorporate a clause in Fundamental Rights that cow slaughter is henceforth prohibited, rather than it being left vague in the Directive Principles..... In the interests of goodwill in the country and of cordial relations between different communities, I submit that this is the proper occasion when the majority should express itself clearly and definitely..... The question is whether, considering the sentiments that you have, considering the regard which the majority has for certain classes of animals, do they or do they not permit the minority - not a right - but a privilege or a permission which it at present has? I cannot put it higher. I won't class it as interference with my religion".

Frank Anthony, speaking for the Christian minority, reinforced this line of thinking when he too demanded clear, definite and honest expression of the desire of the majority community on banning cow slaughter, for which he had no objection. The Republic failed to make this clear as Lari and Anthony asked for, creating instead a destructive ambiguity, which, as they feared, causes violence and destruction and ill-will among Hindus and others. Now it is the fringe elements in the Scheduled Castes that have taken up the issue, which should have been buried long ago. Hospitality in communal eating usually requires serving the most acceptable of all foods – vegetarian to be specific. But while most vegetarians tolerate meat as long as it is cooked and served separately in the same location, many non-vegetarians join vegetarians in objecting to beef and pork based on respective religious sanctions. What does one do in these circumstances with multi-communal eating?

Under Muslim rule in the Nizam's Hyderabad State, the aristocracy developed a sophisticated style to cope with this problem. Muslim aristocratic households did not cook, let alone serve, beef, while Hindu aristocratic households did not cook or serve pork. Since they entertained each other, they did not want to offend their guests nor attract their opprobrium. They gave up their own preferences in order not to offend their guests. On the other hand, many non-vegetarian Hyderabad Hindu would eat only halal meat, emulating Muslims.

An exception took place when the Nawab of Kalyani, who had lost his estates to the Republic, could not afford to entertain his former subjects from Kalyani with normal biryani when they came to visit and live in his deodi in Hyderabad. His khansama (cook) then devised a combination of thick rice and bada gosh (beef), which, being cheaper fitted into the impoverished Nawab's budget and saved his honour as a host. "Kalyani Biryani" has come to stay but the Nawab or his khansama don't get royalties for it. Still his name lives on and shows the sophistication of those times and that class.

Finally, even under Muslim rule in the Nizam's Hyderabad, beef was never cooked or eaten in Osmania University hostels. Can this "secular" Republic treat the majority of its citizens with the same sensitivity that an autocratic and all-powerful Muslim King did?

It is well to remember that the Great Revolt of 1857 started due to beef/pork fat used in bullet packets, which needed the use of the (Hindu and Muslim) soldier's teeth to open.

The lesson that the British Raj learnt then, this Republic has forgotten – perhaps the Second Republic will deal with it with greater clarity.

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