



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

## Cow Politics and Slavery

The recent comments by members of the Sangh Parivar on the complete ban on the consumption of beef in Goa have ignited a controversy. The comments, casteist as they are, have shifted the attention of the Goan people away from pressing issues like the future of casinos, the Mopa airport, the crises in the mining sector, environmental pollution, and everyday governance. That such comments divert our attention elsewhere is unfortunate; but every time such comments are made we should remind ourselves what exactly lies at the heart of such hate politics.

The online Ambedkarite portal, Round Table India, has been publishing articles critically analyzing the economics and politics of 'beef ban', especially since the ban enforced by Maharashtra from 2015. It is with the help of these and some other news reports that I wish to make the case that, through 'beef bans' and cow politics, the poor and minoritized population is being pushed further into the depths of poverty and caste, eventually making them live in conditions akin to slavery.

Following the ban in Maharashtra by the Devendra Fadnavis-led government, Arvind Kumar argued that the move had all the makings of a "social conspiracy" against the dalit-bahujans in India, especially in Maharashtra. "I see the beginnings," he says, "of a reversal of 'social change'". Kumar argues that if non-productive cattle – whether used for dairy products or as draught animals – are not slaughtered then they will have to be disposed by someone after they die. Who will do this dirty work? He says that it is those who come from the 'untouchable' castes who will either be forced or lured into occupations such as disposing and skinning dead cattle and further "get trapped in the evil practice of untouchability".

Kumar seems to have rightly perceived the diabolic game plan behind the ban on cow slaughter in Maharashtra as the NGO that worked to make the ban a reality has similar plans. In an interview to *Scroll.in*, Rajendra Joshi, a trustee of the Viniyog Parivar Trust, said, "Cattle will now die their natural deaths scattered across the state, and it will help revive the traditional vocations of *chamars* and *mochis* [tanners and cobblers] across the state". In making such a statement, Joshi admits that people are moving away from occupations such

as tanning and hence such occupations need to be “revive[d]”. Obviously, people would not volunteer to perform such demeaning traditional occupations, hence the coercion of the state is seen as so necessary.

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This emphasis on bringing back the ‘traditional’ precisely confirms what Kumar had suspected all along: undo social mobility and reorder labor relations. The idea ultimately is to return to a casteist way of life and production relations that perpetuates practices of untouchability. Talking in terms of untouchability does not mean that the issue is solely about religion, rituals, or belief; it is also fundamentally an economic issue as those who provide labor in a caste society – including those who work in agriculture and clear/skin dead cattle – come from the lower strata of society.

Studies have shown that if non-productive cattle are not culled – that is livestock rearing is not done in a scientific and economically rational manner – then the population of cattle begins to shrink. In other words, slaughter is essential if the agricultural and dairy production is to be maintained at an economically viable level. Farmers, being unable to dispose of such cattle, have to bear the burden of sustaining non-productive animals. Selling non-productive cattle (whether cows or bulls) for slaughter (with the resultant production of food, leather, and other important goods) sustains an agrarian economy dependent on bovine animals. The butcher is an integral part of this economy. In fact we can observe that a ban on cow slaughter economically burdens farmers, dairy farmers, butchers, and meat traders. However, the only ones who are laughing all the way to the bank are the beef exporters – many of them upper caste Hindus – who seem to be increasing the quantum of exports despite this hate politics.

Seen from the perspective of the ill-effects that a ‘beef ban’ and anti-cow slaughter laws have on the society and the economy, it is imperative that secular forces and those keen to maintain Goan traditions call for nothing less than a complete revocation of these ‘cow protection’ laws, including the one that the MGP government brought into force in Goa in the 1970s. It is also a litmus test to the votaries of secularism and Goemkarponn if they will push for the revocation or change of laws antithetical to the lives and livelihoods of Goans.

In Goa too, one can observe that it has become increasingly difficult for people to maintain cattle. It is simply not economically viable, and over a period of time so many people have stopped rearing cattle. Add to this, one sees a large number of cows scavenging from dustbins and other areas. The oppressive 'cow protection' laws – circumscribed by a upper caste Hindu morality – has made it difficult for people to maintain cows and the bovine population to sustain itself.

Thus, the issue is not simply about people being unable to eat beef (that is, without being lynched or killed for it). While it is true that 'beef bans' pose a threat to a loosely defined ethos of 'secularism', the issue is much deeper in which the laboring poor are trapped within the oppressive structures of caste, poverty, and tradition. It is a form of slavery that is perpetuated by the law and a casteist morality which is undoing the social mobility achieved through the struggles of various groups. While forcing labor relations based on caste hierarchies, such 'beef bans' also deny 'minorities' like Christians and Muslims (of all castes and classes) the choice of food and cultural practices ostensibly because it offends upper caste Hindu sensibilities.

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