By AMITA KANEKAR

The Modi government clearly wants to keep the heat on, regarding the issue of beef. In the wake of a number of lynchings of mainly Muslims and Dalits by gaurakshaks on the issue of cow slaughter, a normal government would have at least claimed concern and talked about taking action. But this government chose to pass a national directive against cow slaughter instead. In other words, let the violence continue. It was followed by some virulent hate-speech in Goa, demanding death to beef-eaters, which has met with the expected lack of response from the Goa government; we can expect worse to come.

Beef in South Asian history

But there is really little to be surprised about this, when you look at the history of beef-bans. Many critics of this gaurakshak government have in fact been delving into history for ammunition against it, but they make the mistake of looking, not for beef-banning, but for beef-eating. Especially beef-eating by Brahmins and as described in the texts revered by Hindus today. And they do find plenty of it. As Wendy Doniger, scholar of Sanskrit and Indian textual traditions, says (*On Hinduism*, 2013), the people of the Vedas saw the cow as sacred and also ate it, both ritually and otherwise. Dr Ambedkar pointed out that it was because of its sacredness that the cow was killed and eaten, and this went on long after the Vedic era into the Buddha's time, as can be seen from the Buddhist texts.

The question though is, does it really matter for us today whether the ancient Brahmins ate beef or not? Do we want to emulate people who, whatever they ate, were rabid cateists and patriarchs? By using them as a reference, we only uphold the gaurakshak idea that the Brahmanical tradition is worthy of respect and emulation.

If we do need historical justification, it is surely enough to know that beef has been a part of the diet of most bahujan communities in the subcontinent for a long time. Although the lives and diets of the bahujans, tribals, and other minoritised groups are hardly documented compared to the savarnas, 19th and 20th century records, as also oral history projects of today (like Sharmila Rege, Deepa Tak, Sangita Thosar and Tina Aranha (Eds) '*Isn't this plate*

Indian? Dalit Histories and Memories of Food', 2013), show that non-savarnas everywhere in the subcontinent traditionally ate a wide variety of meats. This included beef, if and when available. And, given the harsh social conditions under which many communities lived, this food was a valuable source of nourishment. In Goa, of course, we know that people have been eating beef, pork and fish for at least half a millennium now, probably longer, and have developed a distinctive, even celebrated, cuisine based on these staples.

In other words, there is no shortage of proof that most people of the subcontinent, whatever their faiths and beliefs, have been traditionally and historically beef-eaters. From where then does the idea of a beef-ban come?

The rise of beef-bans

It comes actually from the very idea of India, for it was an important part of the nationalist movement in the 19th century. Of course, there were some mentions of bans before that too. The most famous one perhaps was by the Mughal conqueror, Babur, who apparently instructed his son, the future Badshah Humayun, that the cow should not be slaughtered as it was precious to 'Hindus'. Humayun's son Akbar also upheld this ban, for it suited the very brahminised and Rajput-mimicking court he had set up. Thus, many of the Muslims elites at the Mughal court refused to eat beef. Even Aurangzeb, who removed the ban on cow slaughter as part of his desire to follow Islamic law, did not eat beef himself; he was vegetarian. Some of those who followed the decline of the Mughal empire took these brahmanical traditions forward, like the Peshwa-ruled Maratha confederacy. But the real beef-ban or cow protection movement, which is directly connected to the movement of today with its violent anti-minority/Dalit focus, began in the nineteenth century with the Arya Samaj.

Sandria B. Freitag ('*Sacred Symbol as Mobilising Ideology…',* 1980) points out that before the late 19th century and even afterwards, people in the subcontinent identified themselves by their caste and village. It was in the 19th century that monolithic religious identities were sought to be founded, both Hindu and Muslim, which cut across caste and region. And in the creation of the Hindu identity, cow protection was an important instrument. Dayanand Saraswati, who founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, was also the first to set up a Gaurakshini Mandal in the 1880s in the Punjab. The movement spread rapidly, gaining support from all

Hindu organisations, reformist as well as conservative. The influence of these in Portuguese India began as early as the turn of the twentieth century, with such newspapers as *O Bharat* in its Marathi edition actively promoting cow protection.

Brahminism as Nationalism

The cow protection movement was, not surprisingly, led by brahmins. G. Aloysius (*Nationalism Without a Nation*, 1998) has pointed out that, thanks to the churning of society by colonialism, the 19th century saw a great many bahujan movements against the caste system, demanding education, jobs, and other political rights for discriminated-against communities across the subcontinent. The movement by brahmins around Hinduism—whether reformative or conservative—was in response to this bahujan rise, and an attempt to preserve caste and brahmin hegemony. And it was the brahmanical movement that became the nationalist movement, says Aloysius, which is why Indian nationalism is cultural nationalism (based on preserving traditional culture, by which is meant brahmin culture) rather than political nationalism, i.e. based on equal political rights for all.

Shabnum Tejani (*Indian Secularism*, 2008) points out that the emergence of a new Hindu community in the Bombay Presidency in the late 19th century was marked by conflicts and cultural innovations. These included the cow protection movement, the public celebration of the Ganpati festival, and conflicts over music before mosques. (Along with this was the idea of 'shudhi' to convert Muslims and Christians to Hinduism). All were rooted in brahmin culture—in fact, the cow was usually depicted in the company of a brahmin man/woman—and couched in brahmanical terms of purity/pollution, vegetarianism, and temperance, and portrayed Hindus as warriors who had to fight the illegitimate rule of foreigners.

To be Hindu—i.e. a brahmanical Hindu—was portrayed as being a patriot; the Hindu identity was thus also the national identity. Hinduism was nationalism, the cow was the Hindu nation's mother, the Hindu nation was India. And in all this, the caste question was ignored. All non-Muslims and non-Christians were now Hindus, even those still treated as untouchable and horribly oppressed.

A critical part of this nationalism, critical for binding the different castes together, was the

evil ‘other’. Muslims were portrayed as opponents. As Tejani describes, ‘One poster depicted a cow, on which were inscribed the names of Hindu deities, being milked by a matronly woman in the dress of a Chitpavan Brahmin. A plump, milk-fed child stood nearby and in the background was a reverential Brahmin worshiping the cow. Nearby a Muslim butcher with a villainous expression brandished a long knife and eyed the cow with murderous intent. This representation of the villainous Muslim stalking the god-fearing Brahman and his gentle cow was repeated in picture after picture…’ Cow slaughter was said to have begun with the arrival of Islam and continued with Christian rule, representing a grievous attack on the Hindu religion.

Brahminism as Secularism

These ideas were an intrinsic part of the Congress party’s development, from Tilak to Gandhi. But this is something that many liberals do not accept. Although they vociferously condemn the BJP’s policies, calling them communal and fascist, they refuse to see that these policies were part of the new nation’s make-up from the word go. India is supposed to be secular, but secularism here takes brahmanical Hinduism as the default culture. Cow protection was even pushed into the Indian constitution, but—thanks to Dr Ambedkar—only a directive principle. Laws against cow slaughter were however passed by almost all Indian states, including Goa under the increasingly-brahmanical Mahashtrawadi Gomantak Party. Indian English remains the only language with the word ‘non-veg’, a negative that implies that vegetarianism is the default situation, even though more than 70% of Indians eat meat.

But, as Minu Ittyipe pointed out, while reporting on the high infant mortality in the tribal community of Pallakad, Kerala (‘*Leech Fields*’, Outlook, 29 July 2013), many bahujan diets have worsened after 1947. The tribals of Pallakad have been increasingly denied their traditional diets, thanks to the nature of Indian ‘development’. The tribal diet used to be rich in meat, fish, and leafy vegetables, but with tribal lands and forests taken over by non-tribals, and the wildlife destroyed, and the tribals themselves denied any of the benefits of development, they have been forced to rely on the poor quality grains (and nothing else) supplied by the public distribution system, leading to widespread malnourishment. Such are India’s brahmanical food policies: beef for massive export as well as five-star hotels, bug-infested grain for the marginalised.

We have to challenge the foundational ideas of this brahmin nation if we want change. One important step would be to demand a cancellation of all the existing cow protection laws of Goa.

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