

## Food Culture in the Student Hostel Messes and Brahmanization of Economics

"If we aren't supposed to eat animals, then why the hell they are made of meat?"

[I have been working on this topic for quite a long time. However, I could only manage to put together a few points in a very 'populist' mode. One of several problems I faced is lack of archival resources, (articles, information etc.,) and works of other scholars in the field. Thus this article has not gone beyond being an outline of the intended larger argument/article, which is still under progress. Readers are therefore kindly requested to send their opinions, suggestions, and all related information to me at: <dunking@rediffmail.com> & <dunkin\_jalki@yahoo.co.in>]

This article is not offering a matured argument per se, but several thematic sights on which the argument can be developed. Divided into several sections, each section, therefore presents, a sight where the battle can be fought for the issue, the title suggests. Though no attempt is made to contextualize the argument, the whole issue resurfaced, at least for me, in the context of rustication of ten Dalit students of Hyderabad Central University (HCU) on January 10, 2002. So it would be just appropriate to brief the incident for the readers unaware of it.

On Jan 10, 2002, a few students of HCU (Hyderabad Central University) raised dissenting voices against several incidents including increasing mess bills in the hostel. University responded very awkwardly by rusticating ten students, all belonging to dalit castes, and filed criminal cases against them, charging physical assault on the hostel warden. The question, I am raising here, is not the validity of such shameless easy assumptions and hasty conclusions of a five star repute university. But for me this traumatic, case of rusticating ten Dalit students in HCU has again pointed at the question of Brahmanization of our food habit. This has implied in effect a serious consequence on the food composition of meals in the hostels, and an imaginary symbiotic and direct relationship amidst food composition and mess bills. One of the objectionable attitudes of the HCU hostel administration, that lead to the problem, is to "segregate vegetarian and non-vegetarian eaters."<sup>1</sup> Further, as the Dalit students are telling, they are watched at by upper caste students with a quizzical look while eating, as if to say all Dalit students eat a lot causing increase in the mess bills, which all others have to bore. Subsequently Dalit students were even denied to be in the student mess committee and the purchasing committees in the hostel.<sup>2</sup>

Let us come back to the arguments we began with. Last year when I took charge of the mess administration of CIEFL (Hyderabad) hostel, (as a part of the mess committee run by students), for a month, the easiest way I chose to slim down the apparently high mess bills

was to reduce the quantity of non-veg food from the weekly menu of our mess. Not surprisingly, mess bills came down significantly. BUT, a question hanged on unsolved for me, the politics of such economic equations, which I realised soon:

**Can the cost distinction of food habit (as veg and non-veg) be made 'democratically', devoid of any inherent (caste) biases?**

If the composition of food goes hand-in-hand with the exercise of power, power exercised to prescribe food cannot simply be associated with the questions of raising mess bills. Even economics is just an annex to the power relations in cultural politics. Anything and everything under the sun, should be considered a specific variant of such 'cultural politics'.

## I

A careful glance at the (national) common menu of our hostel messes (which comprises of rice, chapati/parota, sambar/dhaal/rasam, curd, pickle, happala(m) and a vegetable curry) should surprise everybody. Not many hostels provide non-vegetarian food for students. And wherever meat is provided the taken for granted items in this non-veg menu are egg, fish and chicken/mutton (notice the absence of pork and beef items in the menu). Two layers of oppressive strategies are sandwiched into this deceptively simple problem: *firstly* the absence of non-veg in the food and *secondly* the absence of pork and beef from the non-veg menu. These disciplinary attitudes are justified on several grounds:

- ◆ The absence of meat (including egg and fish) is justified as, providing meat is against 'Indian' food sentiments (the argument will be "hostel is a public place", i.e., to say, hostel is meant for people from all religions/castes and economic backgrounds, so meat cannot be provided), and in a little 'radical', atmosphere (like HCU or CIEFL) meat becomes a non-affordable, luxury, fashion food.
- ◆ The absence of beef/pork (in those hostels where meat is provided) is justified on the grounds that beef and pork are against the sentiments of Hindus and Muslims respectively.

A whole set of ridiculous (contradictory and paradoxical) categories and equations are at work in these two defensive methodologies. The former argument is presented as, either something that consensually shaped itself, devoid of any kind of politics or as something natural to a Gandhi and Buddha's non-violent India. This clichéd pretext of 'Indian food sentiments/hostel is a public place', when divides students into vegetarians and non-vegetarians, the school/college reserves both India and public-sphere exclusively for vegetarians. The logic of this equation, assumed to be distanced from relations of power, exiles more than two third of Indians out of India. For, (a) on the whole, vegetarianism stands for Hindus and non-vegetarianism for non-Hindus, and (b) the collective noun 'Hindus', here

comprises of (only) theoretically vegetarian upper-caste (Brahmins and Jains). Theoretically in the sense of the cultural by our history and social sciences textbooks, according to those textbooks all 'Hindus' in general and Brahmins and Jains in particular, are vegetarians. The danger of this theory is that it keeps out individual exceptions, of a Brahmin/Jain eating meat, or the 'exceptions' like meat eating Brahmins of Bengal, Bihar and South Kanara of Karnataka, or several meat eating Buddhists living in the Himalayan Mountain region. Naturally only vegetarians become lawful citizens of India. Thus this segregation structurally reinforces the varna distinction of Hinduism into impressionable young brains. In the 'modern' days (that too in a 'modern' institution like HCU), exploitation of Dalits on caste line is increasingly becoming impracticable. As such, the power in the dominating position has to constantly upgrade its tools and technologies of exploitation. Rendering food culture of non-vegetarians as polluted or luxury has become one of several such modern technologies involved in contemporary casteism.

## II

The concept of 'Indian food sentiments' is being easily demonstrated as secular and pan-Indian tradition as more and more celebrities are adopting vegetarianism and publicising it as something 'Indian' and 'natural'. Vegetarianism thus is becoming a demonstrably active non-religious symbol of public life of 'secular modernity', enshrined as different from Western modernity. In the present era where 'secular' and (values that are) non-Western (in India) is predominantly Hindu; Islam and Christianity are rendered alien and (so) communal by the unstrained effort of the Hindutva organizations, constantly wagging the flag of anti-meat eaters campaign. This invokes an aura of nationalism for vegetarianism, an old but effective tool to counter the Muslim and Christian critique of vegetarianism. Sadly, more the vegetarianism is ornamented with religious meanings and institutions; more it becomes 'secular' and 'Indian', an easily incontestable terrain. Thus, such a clichéd version of 'nationalism'- both for export and internal consumption - becomes a form of cultural imperialism. The whole Indology and Oriental studies, it seems, also have contributed to this mission.

## III

The often-heard argument of ecologists and environmentalists, that an omnivorous human requires ten times more land space for food production than does a vegetarian, also denies meat eating. What is implied in this argument is that, by stopping eating meat man frees up land to feed the world's starving and eases the pressure on rain forests and other

valuable resources. But these mathematical equations never correspond to real life situations. They are just paradoxes of our great power politics, for in our day-to-day life all the land owning and ruling (upper) castes and classes are by rule vegetarians. The contradiction of this equation is, majority of the world population eats meat, and they are the back-bending farmers working on the land. In contrast to this fact, the majority of the landowning class (at least in India) is vegetarian, and the meat eating farmers who cultivate land, by common sense, engage in producing vegetarian food and not meat. (*Thankfully our poor sociologists have failed to pick upon such arguments of ecologists and environmentalists. Otherwise, they might have proved to the world long back that upper castes confiscate/d land from carnivores Dalits, Tribals, and minorities, in the supreme interest of the humanity, and saved the mankind from starvation.*)

#### IV

A few more catalysts in the process of ever-increasing popularity of vegetarianism are *Animal Rights Activists*, (pro-vegetarian) *NGOs*, *NRI*s and *Celebrities*. Each one of them has their ‘misplaced’ concern for vegetarianism, an anti-Dalits and anti-minorities movement. The tools, with which activists fight for ‘animal rights’, whether safeguards animals or not but, always re-establishes Brahmanism; as eating animals is by far considered *the most unkindest* (some time the only) *crime of all* against animals. The corollary is only meat eating masses are rendered susceptible to violation of animal rights; as though Dalits and minorities had to carry the burden of Gandhi’s non-violence. In fact ‘Gandhi’ is increasingly being produced as a non-liquidatable *virtuous* (!) restraint on the freedom of Dalits and minorities. Animal activists have also (though rarely) talked about abstaining from eating dairy products (i.e. veganism) as it involve gross ‘abuse’ of cows and dairy products are very bad for human health (as it is argued). However the influence of Jains and Brahmins on our knowledge system has never allowed the activists to fight for veganism seriously. Thanks to the herbivores celebrities, *NRI*s, and *NGOs* – the list includes such saintly personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Dalai Lama, Maneka Gandhi, Amala and so on – for their assistance through posters, appearance in advertisements, sponsorship etc., to promote such a cause in the global (rather animal) interest of converting meat eaters into Good, Indian, Hindu vegetarians.

#### V

If we just go by the argument of several “eminent jurists”, state too has its role in the game, as it “cannot spend any funds for any religious event or institution.”<sup>3</sup> State, as a

consequence, cannot/should not fund on advertising vegetarianism, as it redefines meat-eating practices of several cast/religious communities out of existence. But “In both the Gandhian and RSS mode of nationalist thought...”, which state buys readily, “the cow not only remains sacred but is constructed as a constitutional animal as well”.<sup>4</sup> Thus – in fact the over Brahmanization of our state apparatus camouflages the fact that – the state which is thought to be democratic is in fact patronising anti-Dalit and minority power. When Andhra Pradesh “government took up the temple entry programme for Dalits” the Hindutva organisations, made some embarrassing oafish statements, “Dalits can enter Hindu temples only when they give up meat and beef eating”. But the question is “why should somebody give up his/her food culture to become a priest in a Hindu temple?”<sup>5</sup> About 15% schedule castes, 12% Muslims, 3% Christians, 7% Tribals and 10% OBCs eat beef in the contemporary era. What these Hindutva organizations never understood is that the sentiments of these 47% people (excluding exceptions among upper castes mentioned previously) are also hurt.<sup>6</sup>

## VI

Defining inequality in terms of wealth misrepresents caste inequalities. One can invoke here the long battle of Dalit thinkers, on the over use of Marxian tools to analyse caste problem, which according to them, has rendered caste oppression less severe in comparison with race oppression. For, money based distinction dubiously assumes that only rich people eat meat and poor do not. In fact it is poor who eat more meat (think about beef as food among Muslims, Christians and Dalits or fish as food in Kerala, Bengal or any coastal areas for that matter) and vegetarianism is a fashion among rich people. (For instance, beef/pork is not provided in train or air travel, or in star hotels.) Therefore denying meat, taking its high-cost into consideration or dividing students in terms of food habit is clearly an indication of Brahminization of economics. People even argue that such a division is very ‘natural’ and inevitable, because it is a habit of upbringing. To elucidate the ineptitude of such segregation try dividing students as pickle eaters-non-pickle eaters or rice with rasam eaters-rice with dhal eaters, and arrange separate mess or counters for them at the best, or ban either of them at the worst.

The unreflective enforcement of Jain/Brahmin centred vegetarian food habit as something ‘normal’ is particularly distressing in a college/school atmosphere where usually (if the school is not run by an upper caste organisation, preferring students from the same community) non-vegetarians outnumber vegetarians. So asking meat eaters, to abstain from their usual food (meat) to respect the cause of minority non-meat eaters is relatively more horrendous than to ‘blasphemously’ ask non-meat eaters to eat meat to respect the cause of

majority. It is mere cannibalism. Though a critique need not provide a ‘solution’ per se, just to suggest, as we do not divide between dhaal eaters and rasam eaters, and arrange food separately or ban either of them, division between meat eaters and non meat eaters also should not be followed either.

## VII

Regarding providing beef and pork in a hostel mess, Christians and Dalit food habits (eating both beef and pork) are never taken into consideration. The whole issue is posed as Hindu v/s Muslim’s problem. The collective noun ‘Hindu’, it seems, now includes everybody except Muslims (Jains, Brahmins and those castes which eat meat and not beef will be the standard bearers of this Pan-Indian Hindu tradition, an anti-Muslim alignment). “The ‘sacred’ cow has come to be considered a symbol of community identity of the Hindus whose cultural tradition is often imagined as threatened by the Muslims who are thought of as beef eaters.”<sup>7</sup>

A very modern and secular teacher used to take social studies classes, in my high-school days. He used to argue that (beef/pork) meat eating is entirely a personal matter. “I respect their culture.” He will say, and stop, and look around, each one of us straight in our eyes, and will narrate an incident, why he did not attend a Muslim friend’s marriage, even though he happened to be his closest friend. “*They serve meat in public.*” After such a long preamble, in a mesmerising tone he used to teach us the First War of Independence; how British provoked Muslims and Hindus against each other. Anything but one lesson he and t/his history has taught me in my high-school days was that ‘Hindus’ do not eat cow (but eat pork!), and Muslims do not eat pork (but eat cow!), AND British, because they are *Christians*, do not mind eating either of them. It seems, our nationalist historiography it self, in its urge to counter British imperialism, is written in such a way that the First War of Independence/1857 Sepoy Mutiny instead of uniting Indians under one banner divides them on their food habit. But is it not very funny that only those cows which Muslims, Dalits and Christians eat are Holy, those which are allowed to “wander waif and orphan-like on the streets of cities”,<sup>8</sup> or to steal onto neighbours fields in villages are not holy?

## VIII

It is indeed sad that a school that tries to incorporate a culture of equality among its students from the very first day by insisting them to wear ‘Uniform’ dress, on the contrary teaches them to divide themselves in terms of food. In a system where Dalits and minorities are tend to be alienated culturally, both by the choice of texts and teaching methods, unreflective adoption of vegetarianism only adds to the cultural alienation felt by them. Such

a feeling mars their performance in the courses. It is high time, Food habit should be declared fundamental right of a citizen, and any kind of impediments, 'hate campaigns,' against particular food, should be regarded violation of basic human rights.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chandrabhan Prasad draws our attention to this food issue (Dalit Diary *Sunday Pioneer* "High on Science Low on Morals." 27, Jan 2002. p. 5.) This article should neither cause a misunderstanding that the whole issue is based merely on problem regarding food nor that the activist fighting for the cause have totally forgotten this issue. Though it is an important issue, for the time being, struggle committee, I feel has not paid much attention to this, as the consequence of other discriminations are for more severe and needs immediate attention.

<sup>2</sup> For more information refer the article written by Anveshi Law Committee, "Castaway in Hyderabad." *The Hindu* "Magazine", Sunday March 3, 2002. pp.1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Rajeev Dhavan, "The Kumbh." *Hindu* Jan 26, 2001. p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Kancha Ilaiah. "Caste and the UN Meet." *Hindu* Aug 21, 2001. p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Kancha Ilaiah. "Reject the Oppressor." *Hindustan Times* Nov 21, 2001. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Udit Raj. "Who Killed Buddhism?." *Hindustan Times* Nov 27, 2001. p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> DN Jha, "Paradox of the Indian Cow." *Hindustan Times* Dec 18, 2001. p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Akhilesh Mithal *Sunday Chronicle* 16 Dec 2001. p. II