

Beef Festival at Osmania

The political battle over what we can eat is a challenge to established politics across the spectrum.

Beef, or more generally, the meat of cattle has been a contentious issue for more than a century, leading at times to riots, killings, social divisions and political movements. Much of this has been initiated by groups foregrounding their “Hindu” identity who have used the protection of the cow to mark out lines of difference from the “Other”, primarily Muslims. Indian politics and academia are by now, thanks to this bloody history, well conditioned to view public posturing over beef eating as the preserve of Hindutva politics which furthers a reactionary agenda.

The “beef festival” organised by some dalit and left student groups in Osmania University of Hyderabad has been, however, quite an unprecedented affair. This is perhaps the first time that an organised voice has been raised in favour of eating beef. What is striking is that most political formations did not know how to react to this “festival”. The secular formations, which do not want dietary restrictions imposed by law, seem to be divided, largely between those who have condemned this event for stirring up communal and caste tensions over a “trivial” issue and those who have looked on in indifference at this “spectacle”. Outside of the networks of dalit activism there do not seem to be many takers for what these groups call a movement against “Food Fascism”.

The Hindutva forces, of course, reacted with the expected violence, but their protest was both ill-organised and localised and indicated that they really did not know how to meet this ideological and political argument that beef is integral to dalit food cultures and should be provided in public spaces like university hostels and canteens. The cow-related politics of Hindutva has been primed only to hit at the Muslims, while here the opponents were dalits, whom the Hindutva forces are keen to bring within their political fold. This explains much of their ideological and political disarray on this occasion. That this beef festival was timed with Ambedkar Jayanti made matters that much more difficult for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh family which would not want to appear hostile to this dalit icon.

A similar food protest was organised by dalits in Karnataka who cooked and served meat on Ambedkar Jayanti to break a state law which banned sale and consumption of meat on that day, forcing the Bharatiya Janata Party government to quietly withdraw its order. News reports suggest that Osmania University’s beef festival has become something of an exemplar and plans are now afoot in various parts of the country to organise such beef and/or meat festivals to highlight “non-brahmanical” food traditions.

This is the first time in the history of modern India that a political challenge has been thrown, apparently with some success, to the Hindutva politics around the cow. This move also throws a spanner in the Hindutva attempts to ally with and possibly incorporate dalit politics within its folds. Despite the widening legal proscription on the sale of beef, it remains widely available though only surreptitiously in most states of India. Official data itself suggests that beef is among the most commonly eaten of non-vegetarian foods. In 2001 out of a total annual per capita meat consumption of 5.6 kg, beef (cow, buffalo, veal, etc) accounts for as much as 2.8 kg while lamb, goat, pork and chicken together make up for the rest. Government data indicates that Indians on an average probably get more protein from the consumption of meat and fish than they get from pulses.

It is also important to remember that beef is primarily a food of the poor, whatever the religious affiliation. And the Muslim gentry often exhibit biases about beef similar to upper-caste Hindus. The shrillness and violence of the cow protection movement has been successful in representing the food of the poor and discriminated as the preferred dish of the Muslim.

The question, then, which has been foregrounded by the organisers of the Osmania University beef festival is: Who are these people who eat all this beef (and meat)? How has Hindu, or even Indian, food culture been defined as largely vegetarian and who has decided that beef is against Hindu food culture? It is the north Indian, Hindu, upper-caste male who has had a free run for more than a century and a half in defining Indian food and culture. The beef festival is an assertion by those who have remained at the cultural/ideological margins of India that they will not be defined anymore by this so-called mainstream; rather they will define what constitutes this mainstream.

Until some years ago, the entrants from the margins into the national mainstream were too few to assert themselves. But the cumulative effect of the slow, yet steady, rise in literacy, social as well as physical mobility, the opening up of professions, the development of the media, the consumerist boom, etc, of the past few decades are all perhaps leading to a structural transformation of India’s mainstream. It is not a coincidence that the beef festival was organised in a university that has been at the heart of live political battles over caste, region and religious identity and not in one of the traditional left bastions. This new politics challenges and confounds not just the Hindutva forces, but equally the gentrified left-liberal politics of composite culture and *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*.