

# Toxic gastronationalism in India

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As historian [Ian Copeland noted](#) in 2005, ‘Every Indian government of the past 200 years has had to grapple, at one point or another, with the imponderable question: what to do about cows?’

As Copeland’s paper outlines, communal violence between Hindu nationalists and other communities (in particular Muslims) over the slaughter of cows has a very long history in India. And the Australian government, too, found itself facing the question of ‘what to do about cows’ when negotiating the recent Australia India Economic Cooperation and Free Trade Agreement. As then Australian Trade Minister Dan Tehan [stated](#) ‘Obviously there are sensitivities around anything to do with cows in India, so that’s obviously something we had to take account of.’ While the agreement offers new opportunities to the textiles, pharmaceutical, hospitality, gems and jewellery sectors, ‘given the sacred status of the cow in India, we left beef and dairy out of this interim agreement’.

For the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, communal tensions about cows represent not so much a problem to be grappled with as a political opportunity to be seized. As outlined in a 2019 [Human Rights Watch report](#), since the 2014 election victory of Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, 23 out of 29 states across India have passed ‘cow protection laws’ prohibiting the production, sale and consumption of beef, with penalties ranging from fines to life sentences.

More dangerous still has been the rise of so-called *gau rakshas*, or cow-protection brigades, who undertake vigilante attacks upon those suspected of producing or consuming beef. Far from being spontaneous expressions of outrage, these lynchings are highly coordinated exercises, often undertaken with the cooperation of the police

and the tacit or explicit approval of powerful politicians. As has become commonplace with hate crimes around the globe, the perpetrators often film their crimes and post the footage to social media as a means of both generating terror among targeted communities and gaining celebrity status among those who share their ideology. In many cases, the perpetrators of the attacks have escaped punishment, while family members of the victims have been prosecuted for collusion in their loved ones' alleged crimes against cows. Although the number of lynchings declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have continued in high enough numbers to maintain fear among potential victims. While the majority of the victims have been Muslim, Dalit and Adivasi communities have also been subjected to threats, abuse and violent attacks in the name of cow protection.

The definition of 'sacred cows' is usefully flexible. Only the Indian native cow is regarded as sacred, with other bovines such as buffalo considered legitimate sources of food. Scholar Yamani Narayan refers to this hierarchy as ['casteised speciesism'](#) with native Indian cows representing Hindu purity while buffalo, crossbred and Jersey cows occupy a similar status to Dalits. This explains the apparently contradictory situation in which a nation with stringent cow protection laws is also one of the [world's largest exporters of beef](#)—sourced of course from buffalo rather than from sacred Indian native cows. However, any meat may be considered 'potential beef' when the mob or the authorities need a pretext to attack members of targeted communities.

Cow protection is far from the only issue deployed by Hindu nationalists against minoritised communities in India. Other examples include the so-called ['love jihad'](#) conspiracy theory which alleges that Muslim men are seducing and/or abducting Hindu women and girls as a form of demographic conquest, as well as the ['corona jihad'](#) theory which blamed the spread of COVID-19 on Muslims intent on infecting the Hindu nation. However, it is perhaps unsurprising that beef has played such a prominent role in the current wave of Islamophobia fermented by the BJP and other Hindutva organisations such as the RSS and the Shiv Sena. They can, after all, point to Article 48 of the [Indian Constitution](#), which does not prohibit cow slaughter but

does provide a 'directive principle' under which the state shall 'take steps for improving the breeds and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves'. Cow protection laws in various forms were in place in several states even before Modi's election promise to turn back what he called a 'pink revolution' (pink referring to the colour of freshly-slaughtered meat). And food in general has a well-established role in establishing caste hierarchy. As anthropologist [Dolly Kikon](#) has noted, '[a]n integral part Brahminical power is based on is based on regulating and upholding dietary taboos based on caste ideology', with 'outsiders' such as Dalits and tribal migrants from Nagaland mocked for their consumption of 'shit', smelly food, which renders their bodies abhorrent to higher-ranking caste Hindus.

The consequences of the cow protection campaign extend well beyond arrests and physical attacks. Low-income Dalit, Adivasi and and Muslim communities have suffered the loss of livelihoods in the herding, slaughtering and tanning industries, as well as the loss of the affordable source of protein that beef has long provided to those Indians willing to consume it. And while India's so-called 'wandering cows'—male calves and adult cows that have reached the end of their milk-producing lives—are spared the slaughterhouse, they are instead condemned to die long, slow deaths from neglect and starvation. *Gaushalas* (cow rescue shelters) provide photo opportunities in which Hindu nationalist politicians garland retired cows with flowers. However, they do not have the capacity to house more than a small proportion of India's abandoned cattle. As *Wired* magazine [reports](#), farmers engaged in other forms of agriculture are reluctant to fence off their fields of grain and legumes with barbed wire, for fear of retribution for any accidental injury to a cow. Anger about the damage caused by stray cattle has become a major issue even among the BJP's own supporters. During the 2022 election campaign in Uttar Pradesh, protests by farmers prompted the BJP Chief Minister to promise compensation to those who had lost crops to stray cows, while Modi claimed to be establishing a scheme which would make cow dung financially lucrative.

Like their Salafi Muslim counterparts, Hindu nationalists see themselves as reviving a glorious historical past while simultaneously claiming to be at the cutting edge of

contemporary scientific methods. Their claim that the consumption of beef was unknown in India prior to its conquest by Muslim invaders has been contested by academics such as [Wendy Doniger](#), as well as by Dalit advocates, most notably B.R Ambedkar, the jurist and social reformer best known for his role in drafting the Indian Constitution. Doniger notes that Vedic texts instruct followers to slaughter a bull or cow to celebrate the arrival of guests. For his part, Dr Ambedkar [wrote](#) that in ancient India, '[f]or the Brahmin, every day was beef-steak day', since Brahmins during that era had ready access to beef from cows sacrificed in the temple.

But while BJP politicians claim that abstinence from beef consumption is rooted in age-old tradition, they also boast about their use of innovative technology in enforcing the ban on beef. As A. Parikh and Clara Miller have [documented](#), these technological methods include installing cameras in slaughterhouses to monitor for any covert beef production, Unique Cattle Identifier numbers, which track cows throughout their life-cycle, geotagging livestock farmers' homes and 'beef detection kits' deployed in Maharashtra state, which supposedly allow police to immediately distinguish between beef and permissible meats such as lamb. These innovations provide Hindu nationalists with images of clean efficiency and modernity to contrast against the brutal images of the *gau raskak* vigilante attacks. These measures are said to provide protection both for cows and for those humans wrongly accused of harming them. However, for minoritised communities, the price of this unreliable defence against false accusations is being ensnared an ever-expanding system of surveillance and control.

Cow protection for the most part has been a domestic issue in Indian politics, with Hindu nationalists seeking only to ban beef within India and to a lesser extent its global diaspora. Loyalty to the Mother Cow therefore does not prevent India from engaging in diplomatic relationships with nations where beef-eating is common practice, nor does it hinder warm exchanges between Modi and beef-eating heads of state such as Donald Trump and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Shared economic and security interests and as political anthropologist [Irfan Ahmed](#) illustrates, shared Islamophobia are much more important than differing dietary

regimes.

However, as the exclusion of beef and dairy from the Australia-India Economic and Free Trade Agreement illustrates, governments and corporations outside India cannot afford to ignore Hindu sensibilities in regard to food. In 2017, the Indian government lodged an [official diplomatic protest](#) in response to an advertisement by Meat and Livestock Australia not for beef, but for lamb. The advertisement in question depicted figures from major world religions including Jesus, L. Ron Hubbard, and Zeus enjoying a roast lamb dinner under the slogan 'You'll Never Lamb Alone'. Among the dinner guests joining the toast to lamb as 'the meat we can all eat' was the Hindu deity Ganesh—and Lord Ganesh of course is vegetarian. After initially finding that the advertisement did not breach the advertising standards code, the Advertising Standards Board eventually found that it was offensive to those of the Hindu faith, and the advertisement was withdrawn.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Dr Ambedkar's great-grandson Rajratna Ambedkar posted a [video](#) to his Facebook page titled 'Cow is India's Mother. Look who's eating it now'. Rajratna Ambedkar claimed that Brahmins were guilty of hypocrisy, attacking Muslims in India in the name of protecting the Mother Cow, but establishing a 'Brahman pies', a franchise of beef pie outlets in faraway Australia. Those responsible for Brahman pies were forced to clarify that their company was '100% Australian owned company (not Indian)' and that their product was named after Brahman cattle, not after the Brahmin caste.

It is important to note that India is far from the only society to experience the effects of toxic gastronationalism. In Australia, a [moral panic over halal certification](#) led to a Senate inquiry into the third-party certification of food in 2015. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a wave of hate attacks against Chinese restaurants across Australia, Europe and North America, while kosher food has been the target of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories for centuries. And South Asian communities in Australia, Europe and North America have themselves been targeted by toxic gastronationalism, with Indian-looking immigrants reviled as 'curry-munchers' who

are considered to be as smelly and repulsive as the food they consume. In India itself, however, the list of [Hindutva-imposed restrictions](#) has expanded in some locations to include not only beef but also other types of meat and fish and eggs. A country which ranks at 101 of 116 on the [Global Hunger Index](#) cannot afford these types of limitations to the diets of its poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

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