

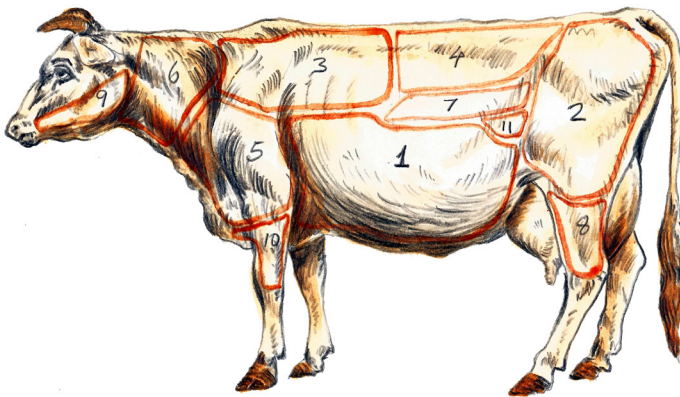
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BEEF STAKES

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BEEF



- ① GRANDFATHER'S
- ② GRANDMOTHER'S
- ③ FATHER'S
- ④ MOTHER'S
- ⑤ MINE
- ⑥ SISTER'S
- ⑦ BROTHER IN LAW'S
- ⑧ NEPHEW'S AND NIECE'S
- ⑨ UNCLE'S
- ⑩ AUNT'S
- ⑪ KOBRI'S

STUDY OF A COW FOR A FAMILY DINNER

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The Syrian Christian meat-seller in the Bengaluru suburb where I live sells beef, but in order to purchase it one must be literate in Malayalam. It is the only item on his price chart inked by hand in a curvy southern script. It's Greek to most of his clientele, which encompasses a swath of humanity from stridently piscivorous Bengali grandmothers to Arab students drenched in Issey Miyake. Among this variegated menagerie of carnivores are also several Hindus who deem beef as not merely unpalatable but ungodly, a taboo. Hindu Malayalees have largely been indifferent to, or tolerant of, beef-eating. Some, like me, have acquired a taste for it cultivated over generations, and taken it with us where we migrated. In my family home in Bengaluru, we buy, cook, and eat beef openly but are sensitive enough not to serve it to those that we know don't relish it. Likewise, when I go to this shop to buy beef, I nod towards the chart out of deference to the sentiments of other customers. However, since March this year, I have been saying the word as if it were a civil rights slogan.

'One Kilo Beef' may not have the same gravitas as 'Yes We Can' or 'We Shall Overcome' but you can imagine it boiling up to a war cry rooted in the angst of beef-eating Indians marginalised by an establishment hell-bent on furthering its fascist, majoritarian agenda.

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept India's general elections and formed a government in New Delhi in May 2014, Hindu right-wing groups all over the country - but most evidently in the northern "cow-belt" states with a Hindu majority - were emboldened to demand their pound of flesh: that cow protection be absolute and enforced. On March 2, 2015, the newly elected BJP government of Maharashtra wrote into law a contentious bill making the possession and sale of beef an offence punishable with a hefty fine and imprisonment.

Maharashtra was not the first Indian state to criminalise the sale of beef; in fact, it is among twenty states that restrict it in some form or other. Haryana, for instance, made possession and sale of beef a crime tantamount to murder.

Ludicrous as that may sound, it is backed by compelling, if flawed, logic. Many Indians take

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the slogan '*Gai hamari mata hai* (Cow is our mother)' quite literally. The Sangh Parivar, the collective of right-wing Hindu outfits, cannot wait to extinguish what it deems alien to the homogeneous cultural ethos that it seeks to impose upon the nation it calls Bharat.

Maharashtra's new law set off a tempest of outrage, and not just on Twitter where the hashtag #beefban began to trend. Critics, among them several large-hearted vegetarians, raged against a totalitarian state that was infringing upon the dietary choices of the people. Although the predecessor of this

law had also upheld the ban on cow slaughter, it had permitted the slaughter of bulls and bullocks that had been certified by a government veterinarian as unfit for agricultural use. The amended law made the slaughter of all cattle (except buffaloes) punishable.

Interesting, because in 2014 India trumped Brazil to become the world's largest beef exporter and widened its lead in 2015 by exporting 2.4 million tons against that country's 2 million tons. Digging deeper, one learns that the four top beef exporting firms in the country are owned by Hindus. Going by these statistics, beef and not basmati rice is India's largest agricultural export. It must be noted that much of it is carabeef, the flesh of buffaloes. Which explains why butchers in Deonar, where Mumbai's largest abattoir is located, staged a month-long protest by refusing to slaughter buffaloes until the ban was revoked. Worn down by a government that didn't blink, they got back to work.

The government got to work, too, on enforcing its shiny new law. One of its major accomplishments has been to equip a forensic lab in Mumbai with kits to DNA-test and successfully identify suspected samples of beef. Taxpayer money well spent, as it were. If you are caught carrying



contraband, this is where it will be tested. One of its first catches was a woman from Goa suspected of bringing beef into Maharashtra (it turned out to be pork).

The beef ban reduces to petty contraband an affordable source of nutrition for many Indians, particularly those belonging to minority communities – read Muslims, Christians and Dalits. Further, it has set off a deleterious domino effect in a cow-oriented micro-economy that encompasses much more than the animal's meat. In addition to hurting the livelihoods of butchers and meat traders, the ban forces farmers to shoulder the expense of maintaining cattle long after they have outlived their utility. Farmers habitually sell aged and unproductive cattle to agents who purchase them for slaughterhouses. While the meat is exported or sold in the local market, the hide is sold to tanneries, and the blood and bones to chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturers.

Although pro-Hindutva commentators endorsed the beef ban, it came in for unexpected criticism from within the BJP. Laxmikant Parsekar, chief minister of Goa where beef-

eating Christians and Muslims account for 38 per cent of the population, was the first to declare that Goa would never ban beef in its entirety. In May, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, a Muslim minister in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Union Cabinet, upheld the beef ban when he exhorted Muslims "dying without beef" to go to Pakistan. Reacting to that statement, another minister Kiren Rijiju, who hails from the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh with a significant population of Christians and Buddhists, asked who could stop him from eating beef in his home state. Not to be outdone, the Republican Party of India (Athawale), an ally of the BJP in Maharashtra, mobilised beef traders to oppose the ban, but even that did not succeed in altering the government's stance.

In Karnataka, where I live, beef has been a bone of contention for decades. The BJP government, which ceded power to the Congress in 2013, attempted to pass a bill banning beef in 2010 but failed. If re-elected with a majority, it will most certainly enact the law.

That is the dread that hounds Dastagir, a beef merchant I met earlier this year in the

Beef Market inside Bengaluru's Russell Market, which was built to supply garrisons in the early days of the British Cantonment. I used to come here with my father as a child and I remember the bazaar as a bustling, thriving place. As Dastagir spoke to me, his voice echoed in the empty stalls surrounding his lonely shop, their meat hooks glazed thick with cobwebs.

Dastagir's family has sold beef here for five generations, but he now fears for the security of his vocation. Although the BJP lost control of the state government in 2013, the following year it elected thirteen parliamentarians from Karnataka. "Eventually you must do what your daddy says," said Dastagir, worrying aloud that a weakened state government might yield to pressure from the Centre and revive the troublesome bill. Already, right-wing Hindu activists are intercepting and 'confiscating' cattle trucks headed for the slaughterhouse and forcibly taking away the animals to *goshalas* or cow shelters.

Unlike in Mumbai, there is residual comfort in the fact that Bengaluru restaurants serve beef. For four decades, beef and veal kebab rolls have been the staple of Hotel Fanoos near Masjid-e-Askari, the city's oldest Shia mosque, adjacent to Johnson Market. For as little

as thirty rupees, one can enjoy a sumptuous portion of the eatery's signature Jumbo and Mumbo Rolls - spicy *seekh* kebabs tucked into a wrap with rings of sliced onion and chopped coriander. The aroma of grilling meat advertises itself, and come evening, Fanoos throngs with patrons who have commuted as many as 20 kilometres through unforgiving peak hour traffic for these rolls.

Shakir, the 25-year-old proprietor, took my order as I waited in line at the newly renovated takeaway counter. Upon the death of his father, who had manned the dilapidated shop front for the better part of forty years, Fanoos faced an existential crisis. Shakir and his elder brothers, who inherited the business, had no idea what went into the kebabs. The original recipe of the famous *seekh* kebab - whatever it was - had been lost with their father. They ran the shop anyway, but with its crumbling façade and the rowdy roaches that fearlessly prowled its front steps, it was a health inspector's wet dream. Their fortunes turned one day when they discovered in an old *almirah* a scrap of paper with their father's handwriting. It was the recipe for the *seekh* kebab.

Bragging about Bengaluru's beef at a recent family gathering, I



was whisked into conversation with an expat Malayalee relative visiting from Narendra Modi's Gujarat, where beef is one on a list of banned items.

"But we enjoy it every now and then," she said.

How, I asked incredulously.

Turns out she dials a number for home delivery and whispers: "One kilo beef."

Even a war cry must begin as a whisper.

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[1] Sunoj D, *The Study of a Cow for a Family Dinner*,

Natural colour and graphite on paper, 21 cm x 29.7 cms, 2015

[2] Photograph by Deepa Bhasthi

[3] Photograph by Sunoj D