

Matt Smith

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast from La Trobe Asia where we discuss the news, views and general happenings of Asian states and societies. I'm your host Matt Smith.

The cow is a sacred animal in India with nearly 80% of its Hindu population worshipping the animal for its production of milk and abstaining from eating beef, (Ah... the cow doesn't abstain from eating beef, the people do – I should probably rephrase that). Anyway, surprisingly enough, the country has become the world's largest exporter of beef products, exporting more than 2 million tonnes a year and consuming just as much.

With such a clash of ideals it's become a topic of controversy, corruption and murder, and is an issue debated on many cultural and political platforms.

Here to discuss why India is selling the sacred cow is Dr Yamini Narayanan, a DECRA Senior Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University. Thank you for joining me Yamini.

Doctor Yamini Narayanan

Thanks for having me here Matt.

Matt Smith

So, what the hell? I feel that that's maybe an inappropriate way to start this podcast. Why is cow slaughter and beef such a contentious topic in India?

Yamini Narayanan

Well Matt, the Indian constitution directs various states in India to enact legislations that prohibit the slaughter of cow, bull and progeny in order to adhere to the principles of cow protection that's ostensibly embedded in Hinduism based on a belief that cows are gods or living embodiments of gods. Some 29 states in India now have legislations that fully or conditionally prohibit the slaughter of these animals and several states now also criminalise beef that are sourced from these animals, so in fact trafficking, even ownership or possession of beef can attract higher penalties than the pedalling of narcotics in India.

But a number of reasons make the criminalisation of only cow beef and protection of only cow very contentious and problematic. The blind spot in India's cow protection discourse and politics is that it's fundamentally not based on animal rights ethics. It's not about animal protection. The definition of protection is very strategically, loosely defined in the Indian constitution, limiting protection only to the prohibition of slaughter. And it thereby allows the Indian state to detract attention from all the other abuse that cattle suffer in India starting from birth to support the several booming cattle industries in India, which can only actually be sustained through the mass trafficking and slaughter of cattle. Right? India's not just the largest exporter of beef but it's also the largest producer of milk, it's amongst the top ten producers of leather. All of which can only be sustained by the mass slaughter of cattle.

But in order to sustain the slaughter of cattle in the state that formally prohibits the slaughter of cattle, the formal state also has to support an informal economy, like the slaughtering of animals, the trafficking of animals all happens informally, and the formal state has to support this by turning a blind eye.

Matt Smith

You say support, but in essence it's ignore it – just wilfully ignore it?

Yamini Narayanan

It is wilfully ignore it in order to actually benefit from it. All of these industries are highly lucrative industries.

Matt Smith

Ok, so if I wanted to get into the beef industry in India, would I look for a supportive state or would I look for underground means?

Yamini Narayanan

It depends on what your aims were. If your aim was to process beef for export only, you would have to have a licensed slaughterhouse that can export – it has to meet certain health guidelines and public safety guidelines, etc. It also has to meet pollution norms right, minimum pollution norms, because all slaughterhouses are high polluting industries and the primary source of pollution comes from blood because there is absolutely no way of sustainably draining blood off and blood of course is a carrier of diseases, right.

But if your aim was to cater for a domestic market, then you'd probably do it the way beef is generally processed in India which is in backyard slaughterhouses, in informal slaughterhouses, in informal slaughterhouses and these really support the cattle economy in India, whether it is for milk, beef, leather, rendering, anything.

Matt Smith

So how popular are these products in India then? Is there a market for it?

Yamini Narayanan

As regards beef, India consumes as much beef as it exports, which is a staggeringly high number. Certain states in India of course don't have cattle slaughter prohibitions, like for example Kerala has no cow slaughter bans, West Bengal has no cow slaughter bans and many of the states in North East India don't have cow slaughter bans, so beef is consumed in very large quantities in these states. But of course beef is also consumed just about everywhere in India.

In my work I have spoken to a number of informal butchers, unlicensed butchers and when I asked them 'who are your main consumers?' they all tell me that 'if Hindu's stopped buying from us we'd have to shut down', because they do form a large number of their customers.

Matt Smith

What Hindu's form a large number of their customers?

Yamini Narayanan

Absolutely.

Matt Smith

Ok, yeah.

Yamini Narayanan

Absolutely throughout. But the thing is it's not just beef that leads to cattle slaughter it's also dairy and Hindus and Jains they are amongst the largest consumers of dairy, not just for consumption but also for its use in religious rituals, like almost no religious rituals in Hinduism can be carried out without large quantities of butter, ghee and milk being offered to the deity.

Temples consume enormous quantities of all these products and dairy is really what leads to slaughter in India but also elsewhere, because dairy leads to slaughter of male calves, bulls and also spent dairy cows.

In India dairy directly leads to cow slaughter because we actually don't have a formal boiler industry, that is exclusively meant to serve the beef industry, so all we have is the spent dairy cows and the bull calves and the bulls that are globally regarded as the waste product of the dairy industry, so it's the slaughter of all these animals that directly supports beef.

Matt Smith

Ok, just stay with me for a moment here. I've talked to people who live in Kentucky which is a dry state in the US, you cannot get alcohol legally, if you want to get alcohol you've got to go across the border to a nearby state, pack your car up and then smuggle bottles of whiskey back over the border.

So if I was in India and I wanted to get some beef, I really wanted a hamburger, how difficult is it for me to get beef or any sort of cow product? How widespread is this for an underground industry? Is it down to who you know?

Yamini Narayanan

No, so if you go to an informal butcher it's very easy to get it. So what Indians typically tend to prefer is what they call hot born meat, which is meat from a freshly slaughtered animal.

Matt Smith

And you can still get freshly slaughtered cow?

Yamini Narayanan

Every day.

Matt Smith

Wow.

Yamini Narayanan

Everyday yeah. So I have been to informal slaughterhouses in India and cows and bulls are waiting slaughter, yes, very openly so. I've visited Mathura the local village where Krishna was born there, he was a lover of cow's right. Right next to the temple are entire neighbourhoods of illegal butchers.

Matt Smith

The obvious question that comes to mind then is, how does the State turn a blind eye to this? I'm not asking for their ethical ruling on it, but clearly there has to be a way that the State can justify this kind of thing going on?

Yamini Narayanan

Yes. So there's a number of ways in which the State and its various institutions turn a blind eye. One when it comes to actual transportation for example. So I've spoken again to traffickers and transporters of cattle as well and they'll tell me that they budget police bribes into their total costs. It's common, it's clear, so if you are transporting animals from point A to B you estimate that there's probably going to be about five police stops that you'll pass...

Matt Smith

So there this much for road toll, this much for petrol, this much for bribe money.

Yamini Narayanan

... for bribe money. And then if you have to go from A to C for example then you might have seven police stops that you have to pay across the border, so you budget that in as well. Highway infrastructure, the police infrastructure, the animal husbandry infrastructure, they'll all actively turn a blind eye, they all actively are complicit in this.

And then often times; and this is really common as well – animal activists have told me, often-times animal activists will be involved in this. So what they might do is stop a cattle truck which is obviously overloaded with animals, and then take a bribe to say that all these are actually just dairy animals; because according to Indian animal transportation laws you can only transport 6 to 8 animals per truck. What you normally find is 50 – 100, in some cases 180 animals stuffed inside the one truck to save on transportation costs. Often times the animals come out more dead than alive.

Matt Smith

So what about the international trade then? How does it work then? Because if you're the biggest exporter of beef in the world – beef products, there's clearly got to be checkpoints involved there's got to be?

Yamini Narayanan

This is the other thing and this is the next level of corruption involved, this is international corruption. So India can only export directly to a very few countries. Vietnam is on paper, one of our major importers and so are many countries in the Middle East like Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq etc. Unofficially evidence shows that China is really our largest importer, even though we don't have direct import relations with China.

What happens is that Vietnam and Thailand who are our major South Eastern importers, they process a high number of beef from India and then it gets repackaged and sent on, either under cover or repackaged and sent on as Vietnamese beef. So there's corruption at multiple levels. But if you look at the actual reach of Indian beef through second party or third party, even fourth party transfers, it actually covers it quite extensively including Europe and the United States.

Matt Smith

It's done under the guise of being a bit more ethically acceptable by saying that its buffalo meat isn't it? Because that's classified as beef but it's not a cow. Is it all going to be buffalo, is it all going to pass the guidelines that they set out?

Yamini Narayanan

In 2010 for example, India claimed to export 653,000 tonnes of buffalo. Curiously the global imports of the same beef came to less than 170,000 tonnes. Much of the gap is assumed to be made of contraband cow, cleverly disguised until it arrives on foreign shores.

There's been a number of commissions set up to monitor the export of beef to ensure it is buffalo beef and now cow beef. However, there has been some research again, based on the total birth rate of indigenous and Jersey cattle breeds in India over a 5 year period, they believe that there is a shortfall of nearly 7 million cows. We don't know where these cows are.

Matt Smith

So where are these cows going?

Yamini Narayanan

Where are these cows going? Even if you attribute an exaggerated; a highly exaggerated infant mortality rate of 50%, we still losing a staggeringly high number of cows. So where are they? It is possible they have either been exported or been consumed locally.

Matt Smith

This is an amazing amount of investment to try and keep a hold of this industry as it's trying to function in India. How much of a cultural issue has it become? Why is there such a big response to it?

Yamini Narayanan

It has always been fundamentally a combination of a cultural issue and an economic issue. Right, and this has always been India's conundrum or its 'cattle complex' so to speak. Culturally it has been promoted as a sacred animal, it represents Hinduism at its core and right wing Hindu groups have always used the cow as a symbol of an ideologically pure Hindu nation – a pure Hindu nation yeah?

This has always been a primary goal of cow protection, it's always been sectarian, it has always been casteist to marginalise Muslims and low caste Hindus. And in fact 2014, 2 Muslim women, a Muslim couple and 4 Dalek men were severely beaten by self-stated cow vigilantes for allegedly possessing cow beef or hide. But at the same time, the cow – in India, like everywhere else is also extremely commercially valuable. The cattle industry is a booming industry in just about every country in the world, whether its Australia, whether its Brazil, New Zealand, America etc., and India with its large cattle population is also been consistently trying to formalise and commercialise and make profitable its cattle industries.

These two don't go together. You can't protect an animal and then continue to benefit and profit from its body right. Even an industry that seems very benign like milk, is actually profuse with cruelty and violence to cattle bodies.

Matt Smith

So during the Indian election Modi promised to curb the industry. The BJP blamed the Congress Party – their rivals, for encouraging beef trade to woo India's Muslim vote. But it's been a promise that he's had trouble following up with so, why is it such a difficult thing for Modi to get a grasp on?

Yamini Narayanan

A few notable things have happened since Modi became the Prime Minister. There has been a slight dip in global beef exports the world over including India's export of beef due to rising oil and transportation prices, but nonetheless it was during this period, in spite of the global slowdown, India became the global exporter of beef during this period. Modi or actually any government in India cannot actually afford to curb the beef industry as long as India has a thriving milk industry.

India has an extraordinary, almost reckless program of artificial insemination to increase milk outputs, which basically means that they're going to have an extremely high cattle population. Along with this massive rise of cattle numbers there also exist cattle protection laws. How can this work? Like how can this be profitable? How can you have so many cows and expect to profit from milk leave alone beef? Yeah?

In a nutshell it cannot work and it cannot be profitable. Cows need to be slaughtered in order to keep the milk and leather industry profitable. The leather industry in India is one of the top ten

foreign exchange earners in the country. The government is not in the position, would not want to be in a position to stop this. It has registered an annual turnover of US\$12 billion in the last decade. It has a growth rate of 13.5% annually which is huge. The leather industry employees about 2.5 million people and about 30% of these people are women.

So if anything the government is trying very hard to push up its milk outputs and by 2020 India aims to push up its milk outputs to 200 million tonnes a year which is an extraordinarily high number and India's milk industry is fundamentally inefficient as well because, per animal the annual milk output is actually very low because Indian cattle exist in a state of starvation, about 80 per cent of our animals exist in a state of starvation. What they eat is actually just dry hay. Dry hay has zero carbohydrates, zero minerals, zero vitamins, almost no nutrition – it just about contains enough to keep the animal alive.

So which basically means Indian cow's milk output per animal is about the lowest in the world. So its huge milk production actually comes from large numbers of highly inefficient cows and highly unhealthy cows.

Matt Smith

Aside from you not slaughtering cows, you're meant to care for them; it sounds a trivial way to put it – there's meant to be a 'cow retirement plan'?

Yamini Narayanan

Yes, so traditionally as well as now much more formally in the Indian economy the government is meant to support gaushalas, which are cow retirement sanctuaries for male cattle as well as spent dairy cattle (retired, unproductive female cattle) and of course this applies only to cows not to buffalos, what we call white cattle, not black cattle, (that is buffalos) right. However, if you think about the large numbers, literally the millions and millions of cattle that are unproductive, there is absolutely no way that any gaushala plan would be able to absorb all of these animals and still keep the milk industry profitable. It doesn't work out like that.

If hypothetically speaking on paper, every single animal was to be cared for in a gaushala, the milk industry would be a colossal failure in terms of profits, the numbers just wouldn't add up at all.

Matt Smith

Australia's got a large problem when it comes to cattle methane emissions as well. It must be on an entirely different scale altogether in India?

Yamini Narayanan

Right. Methane emissions from animal agriculture are among the leading contributors to global warming. India has the world's largest cattle-head. Its livestock emissions are a key global polluter and India has also exceptionally vulnerable to climate change, because it has a long peninsula coastline and it also is situated in the tropics and most tropical countries are in the red zone for climate change.

The two main sources of greenhouse gases are methane and also livestock waste. The global warming potential of methane produced by cattle is 23 times higher than that of carbon dioxide and it actually contributes almost 63% of the total polluting emissions coming from the total agriculture sector.

Now animals bred for consumption also tend to travel long distances and in India animals when they are transported from one part of the country to the other in extremely large numbers, they contribute immensely to transport emissions, they also have their feed transported, generally,

right. In the specific case of India though, India has the highest livestock population of 485 million, of which cattle comprise nearly 200 million, as per the IPCC, the Inter Government Panel on Climate Change, ruminant methane from Indian cattle are the single largest contributor to methane emissions in the world.

The poor quality diet, of Indian cattle can also lead to elevated methane productions. So whatever diet they do have is of extremely poor quality as I said its mostly dry hay, oftentimes it is actually urban waste, you'll often find cattle eating waste in Indian cities and the Indian network for climate change assessment notes that India is highly vulnerable to the debilitating aspects of climate warming as the country expects to register an increase in temperature from 2.3 degrees to 4.8 degrees Celsius in the next five years even.

Matt Smith

Yes, a contentious massively sized industry that's just having an impact on every aspect of India's life.

Yamini Narayanan

That's right. The interesting thing is that in fact, a lot of the international dairy producing industries now want to relocate to India because in Australia milk is about 99 cents a litre, in the United States it's about 40 to 50 cents a litre. In India milk is cheapest at about 25 to 30 cents a litre. So a number of these dairy producing companies like cheese companies in particular, want to relocate their factories to India to benefit from the cheap primary commodity.

And the government will encourage this too because milk is seen as benign. Milk is not actually seen as a slaughter industry and it won't be acknowledged as one either.

Matt Smith

Thank you Yamini for an insight into a contentious but really important issue. Thanks for your time today.

Yamini Narayanan

Thank you Matt for having me here.

Matt Smith

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I'm Matt Smith and thanks for listening.