

Blurring bovine boundaries: cow politics and the everyday in South India

Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with butchers, cattle traders and beef-eaters in South India, the aims of this paper are two-fold. Firstly, it challenges two dominant assumptions made in respect of cattle slaughter and beef consumption in South Asia: one, that the beef trade directly concerns only Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis and Christians; and two, that respect for cattle is the near sole preserve of upper caste Hindus. Secondly, given the strength of the empirical evidence against these two assumptions, it considers how such a stark framing of the debates along caste and communal lines has been sustained so successfully and for so long. Using insights from the anthropology of ignorance—to which this article makes a unique contribution—I argue that part of the answer lies in the strategic acts of *not* knowing what goes on at particular junctures along the chain from the cowshed to the dinner plate that a number of different actors are complicit in working to maintain.

Keywords: India, beef, cows, Hindu nationalism, politics, butchers, anthropology, ignorance

Prologue

‘It’s not about the meat, it’s about Muslims!’ says Aziz, adopting, as he does so, a defiant pose: hand on hip, chest puffed forward, chin theatrically twirled upwards. Standing in his beef shop on a sultry July afternoon—seven months after our first encounter—he concurs with others I have spoken to that the situation for those trading in beef in South India, whether from cows, oxen or water buffaloes, has grown progressively worse. When we

last met, vigilante attacks by self-styled ‘cow protectionists’¹ on those transporting cattle or beef were incidents happening further north, in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat or Bihar. His experience of them was limited to news reports and the clips he viewed on YouTube. Since then, the mini-truck drivers he hired to deliver meat from the state-owned slaughterhouse to his shop had twice been attacked by men claiming to represent the Bajrang Dal—the youth wing of one of the several militant groups committed to protecting what they see as India’s Hindu identity from the influences of Islam and Christianity. The vigilantes had seized more than Rs30,000 of beef and contaminated it with phenyl. They also beat up the driver, threw him face down into the Musi river, and forced him to chant ‘Jai Sri Ram!’ (‘Victory to [the Hindu deity] Ram!’) before finally letting him go. Previously, Aziz was angry; now he is angry, afraid, *and* struggling to make a living: delivery charges have rocketed, and it has become harder to access quality meat at a good price. The Hindu fundamentalist groups leading the attacks are not, in his view, driven by a love of the cow, but by a hatred of non-Hindus in general, and of Muslims, like him, in particular. ‘But what else can I do?’ he says, echoing the sentiments of other butchers I met in Hyderabad that monsoon. ‘This is what I know. It’s what my father does, what my grandfather and his father did. Shall I go begging? Otherwise, what else?’

Aziz’s story was not atypical: an everyday tale of beef-sellers dealing with the rising number of vigilante attacks that were occurring against a backdrop of increasingly stringent legislation from central Government on the sale and slaughter of cows and buffaloes. While Andhra Pradesh, of which Hyderabad was until recently a part, has had state regulations

¹ The Bharitiya Gau Raksha Dal—which translates as Indian Cow Protection Organisation—for example, is a federation of cattle protection groups, often cited in reports of cow-related vigilantism.

restricting the slaughter of cattle for at least 40 years², since their election in 2014, the Hindu-fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the centre has overseen a sustained clamp down on the slaughter of cows, which many Hindus view to be sacred. According to Narendra Modi, the prime minister, opposition parties had been complicit in cow slaughter through state subsidies: accusing them during the 2014 election campaign of wanting a ‘pink revolution’³ he ensured that the debate took on a very different tone to that of the past.⁴ One of the most recent in a stream of initiatives was an attempt in May 2017 to introduce regulations, made under existing legislation on the prevention of cruelty to animals, to ban the sale of cows and buffaloes for slaughter through animal markets⁵. There was vocal resistance by some states—notably Kerala and West Bengal—and by the end of 2017, frustrated by the Supreme Court, the government had withdrawn the regulations. Nevertheless, the Government’s persistent attempts to take control from the centre, and what some considered to be its half-hearted condemnation of the vigilante groups to which its hard-line gave encouragement⁶, marked a shift away from what many of my interlocutors described as the hitherto ‘live and let live approach’ that had been favoured by the more secular Congress Party-led Government of the previous decade.

² Laws on cattle slaughter vary from state-to-state. Some impose a ban on the slaughter of ‘agricultural cattle’ or ‘bovines’—which might include buffaloes; others allow the slaughter of buffaloes over a certain age. In Andhra, cattle slaughter is covered by The Andhra Pradesh Prohibition Of Cow Slaughter And Animal Preservation Act, 1977.

³ See, e.g., Abhinav Bhatt, ‘Government’s “Pink Revolution” destroying cattle, says Narendra Modi’, *NDTV* (2 April 2014) [<http://www.ndtv.com/elections/article/election-2014/government-s-pink-revolution-destroying-cattle-says-narendra-modi-503604>, accessed 10 June 2014].

⁴ James Staples, ‘Appropriating the Cow: Beef and Identity Politics in Contemporary India’, in Kiranmayi Bhushi (ed.), *Farm to Fingers: Culture and Politics of Food in Contemporary India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp58–79.

⁵ The full text of the legal change was published in *The Gazette of India* on 23 May 2017, and can be accessed via the following link [<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/centre-bans-cow-slaughter-across-india-cows-can-be-sold-only-to-farmers/story-8sFXJxiNmZ8eD6NXDgbvnL.html>, accessed 27 Sept. 2017]

⁶ See, for example, Amnesty International India’s call on the Government to condemn vigilante attacks in far stronger terms [<https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/06/india-hate-crimes-against-muslims-and-rising-Islamophobia-must-be-condemned/> accessed 22 Sept. 2017]

Introduction

My aims in this article are two-fold. First, I intend to demonstrate the distinctive contribution that an ethnographic approach—as opposed, for example, to a historical one⁷—can make to an issue that has already received widespread media attention. The press, in reporting and commenting on events from student beef festivals to vigilantism, has made an incisive contribution, especially in calling to account the government for what might charitably be described as a lacklustre response to the mob violence inflicted on those suspected to be in breach of cow protection regulation.⁸ An ethnographic approach, however, goes further, to undermine two dominant assumptions, evident throughout my fieldwork in the comments both of those who consumed beef and those who did not, that have been central in framing a debate that sets beef-eaters against cow protectionists, and which remain largely unchallenged in, for example, press reports. The first assumption is that the India beef trade is the sole preserve of Muslims, Christians, Adivasis and Dalits (former ‘untouchables’ in the Hindu caste hierarchy; scheduled castes or SCs in state nomenclature): a non-Hindu and, by implication, non-Indian ‘other’ that needs to suppress its identity to survive in an increasingly ‘saffronised’ nation.⁹ This is an assumption prevalent in media reporting of bovine-related skirmishes; in the nature of the vigilante attacks themselves—which are targeted near exclusively on Muslim and Dalit transporters, traders and consumers of beef, and are perpetrated by those identifying as Hindus; and, conversely, by pro-beef activists, who likewise draw a distinction between what the Dalit

⁷ See, e.g., D. N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (London: Verso, 2002).

⁸ S. Rama Krishna, ‘The Beef Eaters of Osmania’, *The Sunday Guardian* (22 Apr. 2012). [<http://www.sunday-guardian.com/investigation/the-beef-eaters-of-osmania>, accessed 6 October 2017]; M. Kandasamy, ‘Opinion: A cowed-down nation’ *Outlook India* (30 Apr. 2012). [www.outlookindia.com/article/A-CowedDown-Nation/280608, accessed 29 July 2014].

⁹ Smitha Rao, 2011. ‘Saffronisation of the Holy Cow: Unearthing Silent Communalism’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 46, no. 15 (Apr. 2011) pp. 80–87.

Nation blog described as ‘our toiling Dalit brethren’ on the one hand—for whom beef is a vital source of protein—and ‘grass-eating Brahmins and Baniyas’¹⁰ on the other.

¹⁰ <http://dalitnation.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/beef-food-festival-makes-the-grass-eating-brahmins-and-baniyas-shiver/>, accessed 18 July, 2014.

The second, related assumption is that respect towards cattle, cows especially, and the application of the logic of kinship to human-bovine relations, is the near-exclusive preserve of high-caste, mostly vegetarian, Hindus. Framing the arguments in this binary way—as I and others have argued elsewhere¹¹—offers a smokescreen for discrimination along caste and communal lines that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable or ‘pre-modern’¹². On an international stage, cow veneration is frequently read as a benign aspect of India’s cultural heritage and so left un-interrogated, whilst overt communalism arouses more critique. The communal politics played out through debates on whether the slaughter and consumption of cattle should be allowed or otherwise has, of course, real effects—as Aziz’s story above clearly demonstrates. But an ethnographic approach, one that documents the concrete, everyday relationships, exchanges, networks and processes through which buffaloes and cows are transformed into one of the most contested components of the Indian diet, helps us to separate (and potentially challenge) rhetoric from the more complex realities that underpin the bovine meat trade.

My second aim, which arises out of the first, is to respond to questions raised by my data about how such a stark framing of the debate along caste and communal lines has been sustained. In seeking answers, I draw on insights from the anthropology of ignorance—an emerging body of work which recognises that despite our valorisation of what people *know*, there might also be strategic value in *not* knowing. It is through the structuring of relations between bovines and the human actors involved in their journey from cattle shed to dinner

¹¹ James Staples, ‘Beef and Beyond: Exploring the Meat-Consumption Practices of Christians in India’, in *Ethnos* Vol. 82, no. 2 (2017) pp. 232–251; H. Gorringer & D. Karthikeyan, ‘The hidden politics of vegetarianism: caste and *The Hindu* canteen’, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, no. 20 (May 2014), pp. 20–22.

¹² M. S. S. Pandian, ‘Chicken biryani and the inconsequential Brahmin’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, no. 35 (Aug. 1991), pp. 2043–2044.

plate in such a way that knowledge can be avoided, denied, ignored or bracketed that the beef trade—and, conversely, objections to it—can be sustained at all. As such the article contributes to a slowly growing genre that recognises the strategic value of ignorance, expanding on it by attending to how an entire chain or network based on *not* knowing might operate and reproduce itself effectively.

In the following, then, I begin with an account of the movement of cattle from the cowshed to serving dish in contemporary south India, charting the transactions along the way that make this possible, even as that trajectory becomes increasingly treacherous. It draws on long term fieldwork in the region over two decades—not on beef-eating *per se*, but largely with beef-eating people—and, more recently, in December-January 2016 and July-August 2017, when I conducted specific research on bovine politics with what I defined as ‘ordinary’ people who mostly ate beef. This constituted a wide category of people who were neither directly involved in neither vigilantism nor pro-beef activism, but for whom bovines were an important part of everyday life. Among these people, many of whom I had known for decades, were consumers, small-scale cattle herders, butchers and meat-sellers. This fieldwork all took place in locations very familiar to me: in a village and neighbouring small town in rural coastal Andhra Pradesh, and in Hyderabad, now capital of the newly formed adjoining state, Telangana. I then go on to explore the mechanisms through which the meanings attributed to cattle are transformed along its biographical route, and the epistemological manoeuvres required to sustain those transformations.

From the cattle shed to the stomach

Compared to the labyrinthine complexities of industrialising food systems more generally, the journey from tethered cow or buffalo to plate in south India is a relatively short one. Nevertheless, tracing that trajectory still exposes a network of locations, diverse actors and

processes that unsettle routinely made associations between beef and a non-Hindu other. At the same time, in the same way that other commodities are observed to be transformed by, or transformative of, the contexts through which they pass¹³, so too are cattle and the other parties involved changed along the way.

I encountered sales of cattle for meat in two main contexts in south India: private sales from animal owners to butchers, with the formal or informal aid of a local broker, and sales via *shandys*—cattle markets or auctions. In towns like Bhavanipur¹⁴, a town in coastal Andhra Pradesh I know well, most transactions were of the first, small-scale kind. Those wishing to dispose of their cattle would either contact a known broker or seek one out from those who waited around the teashops in the town centre every evening. Sellers came from a variety of backgrounds, Hindu as well as Muslim and Christian. Most of those I encountered were rural, small-scale farmers or others who reared small numbers of buffalo for dairy provision, or who kept oxen to pull a cart or plough. Male calves were often surplus to requirements—and so sold on—as were females no longer able to produce milk. Even those who ate beef, like my Christian friend Mariamma—from a beef-eating Dalit caste—would not routinely slaughter and consume their own surplus cattle. As she put it: ‘They are like our pets, members of our family!’ So, instead of eating them, they sold them on.

Brokers also came from a variety of backgrounds, although cattle brokerage had traditionally been an occupation of those from the Yadav—non-beef eating and cattle-herding—castes, who were often credited with having developed the particular sign-language used by brokers at cattle fairs.¹⁵ In small rural communities, brokers were usually part-time,

¹³ Sjaak Van der Geest, Susan Reynolds Whyte & Anita Hardon, ‘The Anthropology of Pharmaceuticals: A Biographical Approach’, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol 25 (1996), pp. 153–178.

¹⁴ A pseudonym. Names of places (except for major cities, such as Hyderabad) and people, along with other identifying details, have been changed in order to preserve anonymity.

¹⁵ Lucia Michelutti, ‘“We (Yadavs) are a caste of politicians”’: Caste and Modern Politics in a North Indian Town’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology (n.s)*, Vol. 38 no.1–2 (2004), pp. 43–71; and Lucia Michelutti, ‘“We are Kshatriyas but we behave like Vaishyas”’: Diet and Muscular Politics Among a

helping neighbours to find buyers for surplus cattle alongside other work. Others, like those I met at major cattle markets, made a full-time occupation of it.

In Bhavanipur, all the butchers I met were Hindu (or converted Christian) Madigas (Dalits), and all were doing the work that their forefathers had done. Rajshekar, who I got to know best, purchased buffaloes almost daily, usually within a 10km radius, from wherever his brokers directed him to. He hired a small truck to transport the animals he purchased, keeping them tethered in his small, domestic compound until he was ready to slaughter and sell them on as beef from his pitch in Bhavanipur's market. Recently, Rajshekar told me, the village panchayat (council), no doubt alert to current sensitivities surrounding cattle slaughter, had broadcast a diktat from an auto rickshaw via a loudspeaker that slaughter should now only take place at the municipal-owned abattoir, a couple of kilometres away. As we discovered, however, much of the slaughter still occurred, albeit more discreetly, in Rajshekar's own compound, at around 3.30am. It was, he explained, less time consuming than attending the abattoir and saved on both the cost of transport and the small charge imposed by the abattoir's 'cutting man.' The animal's legs were tied together, and it was silenced by tying its mouth shut and, usually, by stunning it with a swift blow to the head. Once it was lying on the ground, its jugular was slit. Killing the animal in this way appeared to render its meat suitable for local Muslims as well as for Hindu and Christian consumers. Rajshekar or one of his brothers, aided sometimes by his now adult sons, would then dissect the animal, piling the meat into the plastic woven baskets they used to transport it to market, mopping up the blood as they went along and wringing their cloths into a bucket of water that, even in the fading light of the moon, grew discernibly darker in colour as the process continued. Most local butchers did not have access to refrigeration, so slaughter was a daily affair, and any meat neither sold at the market nor

Community of Yadavs in North India', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* XXXI, no. 1 (2008), pp. 76–95.

consumed by the household would be cut into strips and preserved by drying it out in the sun, either to be eaten later at home or sold on to neighbours. Rajshekar had a good idea of how much he was likely to sell on a given day, however, and purchased animals accordingly: a small male calf, for example, was usually adequate for midweek sales; an older, larger animal would be needed to satisfy demand on Sunday mornings.

For those specifically in search of cow (officially prohibited) rather than buffalo meat, it was usually necessary to travel further afield, to quasi-secret, secluded places, the locations of which were communicated through informal networks. One such place was a pitch we travelled to in a dark clearing, surrounded by trees and accessed via a narrow dirt track, in a town around 20km from Bhavanipur. Here, on Sunday mornings before sunrise, a Madiga farmer and his two Muslim helpers slaughtered and butchered two milk cows by the light of kerosene lamps. The outer skin—which, once stripped, operated as a clean surface on which to dissect the animal—would be removed from view before daylight. The meat, laid out under a bamboo thatched canopy ready to be sold, was then less easily identifiable as coming from a cow rather than a buffalo. Customers, however, seemed to be in no doubt about the meat's provenance: they bought it either for their own consumption or, as the farmer who made his livelihood through the business informed me, represented biryani restaurants in large towns from the across the state whose discerning diners could apparently tell the difference between buffalo or cow. The latter meat, I was often told, by Christians and Muslims alike, was sweeter, because the animal had produced milk, than the flesh of the buffalo. Pricewise, in July 2017 the meat was being sold at Rs200 per kilogramme, a rate comparable with that charged for buffalo meat.

The city butchers I encountered in Hyderabad, by contrast, tended to buy their meat, directly or indirectly, through *shandys* (cattle markets). The first one I attended was a weekly event, 90km out of Hyderabad. Unlike an auction at a comparable *shandy* we tried to visit in

coastal Andhra a week or so later, where we were barred entry by security guards and warned not to take photographs, we had no difficulty in entering that first market, an open plot of several acres, well-shaded with trees. There were no obvious security guards, and several brokers were happy to talk with us. Sellers were varied, although, like the brokers and the buyers, they were exclusively men. Some represented dairy farms selling relatively large numbers of animals: mostly in the range of 20-40, but sometimes as many as 100 buffaloes in a single lot. Others brought just one or two of their own domestically reared cattle. Both cows and, in greater numbers, buffaloes were available. The sellers, as far as one could tell based on their dress (dhotis or lungis and kurtas, towel over the shoulder, simple *chappels*) and other signifiers, were mainly rural, Hindu farmers. The buyers were a mix of rural and urban-based Hindus and Muslims (in city wear shirts and trousers); some relatively local, some coming as far away as Kerala, around 1,000km south-west. Although cattle were being sold here for milk and draft as well as for meat, a lot of the animals we saw, several of the brokers predicted, would end up as beef in the Gulf. Some purchasers, like Mohamed, the Hyderabad butcher whose son had accompanied us to the fair, were buying cattle to supply their own shops; others were hoping to secure bigger numbers to prepare for export, as frozen boneless meat or processed meat products.

The atmosphere felt unexpectedly relaxed. There were several stalls selling *tiffin* (snacks), as well as small cups of sweet, milky tea and coffee, and there was no detectable undercurrent of fear. ‘We’ve had no trouble here,’ a broker told me when I asked if there had been any issues with the anti-beef ‘cow vigilantes’ of the kind Aziz had described, suggesting that the South—and Hyderabad, with its large Muslim minority, in particular—even now remained a relatively safe place *vis-à-vis* the so-called ‘cow belt’ further north. Nevertheless, he went on: ‘But the danger is when those buying or selling are on the road, coming or going. Everyone has read in the newspapers about the attacks or seen them on the news.’ Some buyers,

like Mohamed's son, had regular brokers; newcomers were approached as they entered the market along the track from the main road. In addition to the cut taken from the broker for each transaction, buyers also paid a levy of Rs150 per animal to the leaseholder of the land: a local 'big man', as the tea vendor described him. He, in turn, paid Rs100,000 a week in rent to the municipality, which owned the land. With upwards of 1,000 bovines sold at each market, the potential for profit was still significant. Buyers paid their fees at an office kiosk where they were issued with a chit to hand into one member of the cluster of the leaseholder's employees to exit the market with their animals. They were also issued with a receipt for the animal and a copy of the permission for its sale, pre-obtained from a district level branch of the Animal Husbandry Department.

Mohamed's preferred method of transporting his purchases—on this occasion, eight buffaloes—back to Hyderabad was by a rented air-conditioned van. Unlike Bhavanipur's abattoir, the state-owned slaughterhouses in Hyderabad could accommodate animals pre-slaughter, so Mohamed's cattle were taken there directly, while his son travelled back to the city by bus. He would later go to the slaughterhouse to identify his cattle—which were marked at the point of sale—and have them slaughtered as needed over the course of several days. Sometimes they also sold meat wholesale at the slaughterhouse to other, smaller-scale butchers who did not attend the *shandys*. Aziz, who ran a small shop in a Muslim enclave of Banjara Hills, was one such butcher. The meat would then be transported to the points of sale in hired vans or auto trucks.

For Mohamed, sales were from a covered and enclosed building rented from the municipality in a large, daily food market, which included space both to hang and prepare the meat and for a fridge and chest freezer in which to keep stock. The plot was alongside the others selling meat, chickens, goat and fish, although it was harder than the others to identify as the beef was kept in the covered space at the back, out of immediate view and separated

from the external market space by a short corridor. The presence of Mohamed outside: an elderly man with a white beard and lace Muslim skull cap, as well as the shop's location, were the only obvious signifiers of what might be inside, at least until one got close enough to peer down the corridor to the slab and meat hooks within.

In the case of Aziz, the smaller scale butcher, the destination was a small shop facing on to a side road in a residential, working-class Muslim area. Here, hooks displayed meat from the open frontage, above which was a signboard advertising it as a beef shop, in English and Urdu, alongside an ambiguous illustration of a cow. Behind the hooks, working from a raised platform, Aziz rendered the meat into smaller chunks on his large chopping block. Several large steel knives, electronic scales on a compact wooden chest—in which he kept black plastic bags that the sold meat was packed into—and a small, bloodstained bin were the only other objects in the shop, a space of less than eight-foot by eight-foot square. Whereas the fact that the market was a communal space—frequented by Hindus, Muslims and others alike—appeared to demand that the meat was hidden from public view, the location of Aziz's shop in a Muslim area meant that there were fewer issues in publicly displaying the meat.

Rajshekar, in Bhavanipur, traded from a similar set-up to Mohamed's: his regular bay in the municipal market was one of ten spaces inside a walled, gated compound that separated it from other traders. Only two were occupied every day (bar Mondays, when the beef compound was closed) at present, although there were sometimes five or six butchers there on Sundays. The arrangement was even simpler than Aziz's shop in Hyderabad: a bamboo pole tied across the front enabled larger pieces of meat, awaiting cutting, to be hung, behind which was only his chopping block, a knife, the empty woven bags in which they had carried the meat to market, and the ubiquitous black plastic bags in which to pack the sold meat. There were no scales—people just asked, he said, for Rs100 or Rs200 worth of meat, and he filled the bags accordingly. Unlike Aziz in Hyderabad, who tried to keep his shop open all day, returning to

the slaughterhouse for more supplies if he sold more meat than they expected, Rajshekar had often sold all his supply by 10 or 11 am.

Turning to the next link in the chain, the final consumers, a universal claim from the butchers I interviewed were that sales of beef had significantly dropped—by as much as 50 percent, according to Mohamed—since the BJP came to power in 2014, and there had been a particularly sharp drop in recent months, partly for reasons outlined in my opening vignette. Chicken, once a costly alternative to beef, was also now around half the price, at Rs140 per kilogramme in Bhavanipur. Nevertheless, although overall domestic sales had declined, I was given the impression that the *range* of buyers had widened. When I posed the question ‘Who buys from you?’, *all* the butchers gave the same immediate reply: ‘Everyone!’ Members of all communities and across castes purchased their meat, even if their main customers remained Dalits and Christians (particularly for Rajshekar), and Muslims.

Notionally, when I asked them, Muslim customers expressed a clear preference for cow beef (‘Who would eat buffalo?’ was not an uncommon response), while Dalit Hindus and some Christians, depending on the wider communities within which they had grown-up, tended towards buffalo meat. Purchasers of meat, whatever their backgrounds, were usually men, although it was mostly women who then cooked it. There was also an enduring narrative among traditional diners of beef, both in Hyderabad and coastal Andhra, that price increases and shortages of quality meat were because others were now increasingly buying a meat that had once been the preserve of Dalits, Muslims and Christians. ‘And the [other castes] are eating beef directly too, that’s why the price became so high!’, as one of my interlocutors put it, was a not uncommon refrain. Whoever the buyers were, they generally bought the meat generically rather than by cut, and it would be chopped for them into chunks and tied up in small black plastic bags, some butchers throwing in additional bones free of charge.

The recipes I collected, across locations, were strikingly similar. After carefully washing the meat in several changes of water, a *pulusu* (wet curry) would be prepared by frying it in oil, often with the addition of onions and (sometimes) tomatoes, along with garlic, ginger, green chillies, curry leaves, turmeric, salt and chilli powder, plus water to create a gravy. Chopped coriander leaves (and sometimes mint) might also be added. Some cooks also added ground coconut, towards the end of cooking, and/or a final addition of a particular *garam masala*: a ground-up powder of cloves, coriander seeds and cinnamon. Various vegetables, such as green leaves, *dosakaya* (marrows), potatoes or aubergines might also be included, and bones would often be added to the pot to impart additional flavour. The resulting curries were nearly always served with rice.

In coastal Andhra, where my informants were less likely to have refrigerators, beef curry was mostly consumed at lunchtime on the day of purchase (usually Sunday) with any leftovers eaten on the same evening. For most, meat was a weekly, celebratory offering, with beef, chicken and sometimes fish prepared alternately. In the village where I worked, it was eaten privately, with family members, at home. When publicly feeding others—at weddings, for example—the meat served was always, in my experience, chicken; a meat that *all* non-vegetarians could openly partake of.¹⁶ In Hyderabad, where refrigerators were more common, several women I spoke to told me that they stored the meat in a plastic box and cooked it in smaller quantities over the course of a few days. There was an aspiration, certainly among my urban Muslim interlocutors, to eat beef more regularly than on Sundays, when it was deemed essential. ‘We say, “Without meat, we cannot eat!”’ as one woman summarised what she saw as the Muslim attitude towards beef consumption. Beef facilitated the essential consumption of rice.

¹⁶ James Staples, ‘Beef and Beyond: Exploring the Meat-Consumption Practices of Christians in India’, pp. 245.

What to make of all this?

The anthropology of ignorance

What is notable along this bovine biographical journey is not only that actors and meanings shift as they move through what Appadurai called ‘regimes of value’¹⁷, significant though this is. Actors change from, predominantly, Hindu cattle herders—many of them non-beef eating, some of them vegetarian¹⁸—at one end of the chain, to Muslims, Dalits and Christians at the other, while the cattle themselves change, both materially and symbolically, from being described as kin or sacred objects to an edible source of protein, a celebration of a cultural identity and, conversely, a symbol of a spoiled, marginalised identity.¹⁹ But also noteworthy is the work that various actors do, in different ways, to avoid, subvert, bracket or deny knowledge of activity and meanings at other points along the cattle-to-meat chain. This work is vital to the maintenance of a chain that relies on the management of otherwise apparently insurmountable contradictions.

Understanding what is going on here, I argue, is aided by relatively recent anthropological enquiries into why ignorance—the sometimes-willful act of *not* knowing—might in many cases be as or more important as *knowing*. Conventionally, ignorance has received scholarly attention predominantly as a negative attribute ‘that one group assumes others possess in order to create boundaries that benefit the defining group’²⁰. In the 1990s,

¹⁷ Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.4.

¹⁸ Paul Robbins, 1999. ‘Meat Matters: Cultural Politics along the Commodity Chain in India’, in *Cultural Geographies* Vol. 6, no. 4 (1999), pp. 399–423.

¹⁹ James Staples, ‘Beef and Beyond: Exploring the Meat-Consumption Practices of Christians in India’.

²⁰ Ilana Gershon and Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj, ‘Introduction: the Symbolic Capital of Ignorance’, in *Social Analysis* Vol. 44, no. 2 (2000), p. 3.

Hobart²¹, Vitebsky²², and others, for example—in critiquing development and defending indigenous knowledge—explored the ways in which ignorance might be projected on to autochthonous groups by devaluing their own knowledge systems. Such work has been recognised as a valuable check on the underlying assumption that Western rationality is universal and objective, while indigenous knowledge is, at best, parochial and contingent or, at worst, plain wrong. However, as subsequent collections of work on the anthropology of ignorance, such as those by Gershon and Raj²³ and, later, by High, Kelly and Mair²⁴ have made clear, it tells only part of the story. What happens, those scholars ask, when people claim, construct or maintain ignorance for themselves and their own purposes, as a form of symbolic capital or a strategic space of resistance? Ignorance, rethought in this way, is not simply the opposite of knowledge, but, as Mair *et al* set out more recently, ‘a substantive historical phenomenon that... might incorporate certain knowledge, ethics, emotions, and social relationships.’²⁵ The point being made here, then, is that ‘ignorance’—a broad category into which we might also bundle discussions of secrecy, mystery, obfuscation and acts of bracketing—in all kinds of different ways and across different contexts, plays a vital role in structuring everyday life, helping to resolve conflicts that otherwise keep people intractably apart. Acts of ‘not knowing’, of strategically forgetting or bracketing differences are often vital, for example, in enabling cohesion and enabling action that everyone involved

²¹ Mark Hobart (ed.), *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

²² Piers Vitebsky, ‘Is Death the Same Everywhere? Contexts of Knowing and Doubting’, in Mark Hobart (ed.), *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 100–115.

²³ Ilana Gershon and Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj, ‘Introduction: the Symbolic Capital of Ignorance’, in *Social Analysis* Vol. 44, no. 2 (2000), pp. 3–14.

²⁴ Casey High, Ann H. Kelly & Jonathan Mair (eds) *The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²⁵ Jonathan Mair, Ann H. Kelly & Casey High, ‘Introduction: Making Ignorance an Ethnographic Object’, in Casey High, Ann H. Kelly & Jonathan Mair (eds) *The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 3.

can subscribe to. It is in this sense, I suggest, that the insights proffered by the anthropology of ignorance are particularly valuable as an explanatory model for the relative flourishing of the beef-trade in conditions that appear otherwise antithetical to it. The particular case I describe also extends discussions of the value of not knowing to a whole network of exchanges within which, as will become apparent, ignorance plays vital and sometimes contradictory roles. This willful ignorance on the part of consumers and traders might also be considered, as we shall see, the flipside of the over-certainty of the cow protectionists: the sophistry of claiming to know that which, in fact, they did or could not know.²⁶

Deciphering the beef chain

So, to start near the beginning of the chain, sellers of cattle, even those who ate beef, not only balked at the idea of consuming their own animals but said that they would not sell them on for consumption either. ‘They are like brothers and sisters to us’, or ‘they are our children!’, people routinely claimed of their livestock, invoking kinship as the logic that prevented them from eating them.²⁷ ‘We rear them like members of our own family, how we could we eat them?’²⁸ Informants also claimed to be supportive of the Hindu doctrine of *ahimsa* (the avoidance of violence) whilst continuing to purchase and eat beef. ‘They kill, I eat!’ as one man summed up, rather pithily, how people dealt with the apparent contradiction between not killing animals and meat eating.

²⁶ I am grateful here to one of the anonymous reviewers for the suggestion that the notion of ‘sophistry’ might productively be employed as on a continuum with ignorance.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 242; and Ben Campbell, 2009. ‘Fields of Post-human Kinship’, in Jeanette Edwards & Salazar Carles (eds), *European Kinship in the Age of Biotechnology* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), pp.162-178.

²⁸ In reality, it should be noted that claims to kinship should not necessarily be taken to mean that people’s animals were well-treated. In many cases, the people I knew demanded significant labour from their cattle (as indeed in some instances they also did of their own kin, so the analogy is not an entirely erroneous one).

For vegetarian, high caste Hindu cattle owners, the potential contradictions were even higher, since cows were not only kin but also venerated. However, given the limited uses of a cow or a buffalo after a certain age, to *not* know that they were being purchased for meat required what Chua describes as a certain ‘wilful ignorance’.²⁹ It was not simply that they knew and chose not to acknowledge the fact (although sometimes this might well have been the case), but that they ensured their ignorance was maintained through the act of not asking. As Chua puts it: ‘[S]eeking ignorance is not merely a tactically empowering manoeuvre, but an admission and evasion of the potentially *disempowering* drawback of knowing’.³⁰ Mariamma, for example, was emphatic that her family did not sell their buffalo for consumption, even as she conceded, later in the same conversation, that the only use for non-milk producing buffaloes was as meat. Purchasers I spoke to recognised this need-not-to-know, and were complicit in keeping their own intentions undeclared: ‘We don’t *tell* them that’s what we are buying their animals for!’ one butcher told me, laughing at the naivety of my question, when I asked him whether those from whom he bought cattle were ever reticent about selling to butchers. If they were not told, and if they did not ask, how could sellers *know* that their animals were going to be eaten?

Brokers provided a further buffer between seller and purchaser, although they too often maintained an uncertainty about the destinations of the animals whose sale they facilitated. This was particularly so for those working in *shandys*: who could know, for example, if two young bulls were being bought to pull a cart or a plough, or as meat for midweek sales at a market? In a changing context, where the sale of animals for meat from such places could become illegal, ignorance was increasingly worth maintaining. Where brokers’ *knowledge* was

²⁹ Liana Chua, ‘To know or not to know? Practices of knowledge and ignorance among Bidayuhs in an “impurely” Christian world’, in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. 15, no. 1 (2009), pp. 332–348.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

important was in knowing the cash value of any given animal at a glance, something which, of course, required implicit knowledge of whether the animal could still produce milk or perform labour *and* of the value of cattle as meat,³¹ but it was a knowledge that could be bracketed from its practical application. Even in small towns, like Bhavanipur, non-beef eating cattle sellers, unless they were also surreptitious consumers, were unlikely to encounter the butcher who bought the animal when he sold it as meat: the latter lived, for the most part, in Muslim or Madiga settlements, away from the enclaves of higher caste Hindus, and they traded from within walled and gated compounds inside the market. Beef sales were subsequently difficult just to stumble across. Geography and architecture were utilised effectively in maintaining the states of not-knowing that the smooth running of the beef trade required.

When selling the meat for consumption, different kinds of knowing and not-knowing seemed to be in evidence. Sellers, while they could not usually avoid knowing what animals they had purchased—unless, perhaps, they were small-scale urban butchers, who bought their meat pre-skinned from wholesalers at the slaughterhouse—sometimes strategically forgot, or at least bracketed, their knowledge. Mohamed, for example, when I asked him what kind of beef he sold, delayed answering me by seeking clarifications: ‘Are you talking about the white ones or the black ones when you’re talking about “cows”?’ he asked, as though the dark-skinned water buffaloes and white Indian cows were simply different coloured versions of the same animal. ‘Whatever is available and is good,’ he finally told me, avoiding—as did the other Hyderabadi butchers I spoke to—confirming what the meat on his block at that moment was. On a larger scale, recent press reports of hikes in the quantities of frozen buffalo meat

³¹ Akash Kapur, 2011. ‘The shandy: the cost of being a cow broker in rural India’, *The New Yorker* (10 Oct. 2011) [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/10/the-shandy>, accessed 27 September 2017].

being exported through southern Indian ports has aroused suspicions that the meat being exported, much of it transported from north India, might, in fact, be cow.³²

For butchers like Mohamed, clear identification of the meat he was selling was problematic either way. To say openly that it was cow meat would be to admit that they were selling illegal meat and, potentially, put off Dalit and Christian consumers who, in general, were said to prefer buffalo meat. It also lay them open to attack from vigilante groups, and even prosecution, if the information got out. On the other hand, to say that it was buffalo—while legal, at least in some cases—would be to deter Muslim customers who claimed they could not imagine anyone eating anything *other* than cow meat. For them, very often, buffalo meat was associated with Hindu untouchability. It was not by accident, I would suggest, that the depictions of cattle I observed on the signs of beef shops were recognisable neither as common breeds of Desi cows nor as buffaloes³³.

Customers, in turn, were often more passive in maintaining their ignorance, but for similar reasons. They tended not to ask: because they knew it was too risky a question for any butcher to answer in any case, so was not a question worth asking; because asking ran the risk of exposing them to knowledge which contradicted what they believed, and wanted, to be true; or because, in some cases, it simply never occurred to them that the meat could ever be anything other than that which they had grown-up learning it to be. And it was not just that some people ate buffalo believing that it was cow, nor that they were undiscerning in their purchases. Restaurateurs buying cow meat from the illicit outlets I described in the previous section, for example, despite seeking it out because they knew it was why many of their customers returned

³² See, e.g., Harish Damodaran, 'Sharp spike in buffalo meat export via south ports raises beef question', *The Indian Express* (01 Oct. 2017) [<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/sharp-spike-in-buffalo-meat-export-via-south-ports-raises-beef-question-4869096/> accessed 06 Oct. 2017].

³³ The animal depicted above Aziz's shop, for example, was almost identical to an online image I found of a Dangi cow, which, although it is apparently native to Western Maharashtra, is unlike any cow I ever encountered in Andhra.

to them to purchase their ambiguously named meat biryani, would not openly admit what it was. Mariamma told me that she sometimes bought biryani from one of the stalls that lined the road out of Bhavanipur. ‘They try to tell me it’s goat mutton,’ she said, confirming what they had also told me. ‘But I can tell from the bones what it is!’ For those in the know, the illicit insertion of what she believed to be beef into these dishes offered a secret pleasure for the discerning palette, a reason to return. For some Christians and Dalits I spoke to, it also offered a small sense of victory over those seen as their higher caste oppressors.³⁴ For some who presented as non-beef eaters, it held a comparable lure: they could consume and enjoy a forbidden dish and, because they were not actively aware its ingredients, could not be seen to have acted immorally. And for those who genuinely did not wish to eat beef: ‘Well, how would they know what the bones are like?!’ exclaimed Mariamma. ‘They will just think that they are eating goat mutton. So where’s the harm?’ Although there is of course a difference between strategic ignorance and that enabled by deliberate deception, the line between the two is sometimes harder to discern than one might imagine.

More problematically, vigilante groups were likewise vague in distinguishing buffalo meat, which often was legal, and illegally slaughtered cow. The fact that Aziz’s drivers were most likely transporting legally-slaughtered buffalo, for example, did not prevent them from being attacked, in the same way that no-one was sure that meat found in the fridge of the Muslim man famously killed by a lynch mob in Dadri was actually cow beef.³⁵ Not only were vigilantes less concerned with knowing the origins of the meat than might be expected, in some

³⁴ See, e.g., James Staples, ‘“Go on, just try some!”: meat and meaning-making among South Indian Christians’, in Caroline Osella & Filippo Osella (eds), *Food: Memory, Pleasure and Politics*, special issue of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXI, no. 1 (2008), pp. 36–55.

³⁵ This was the case of Hindu lynch mob beating to death a 50-year-old Muslim man in Bisara village, near Dadri in Uttar Pradesh, who was suspected of having killed and consumed a cow to mark the festival of Eid-ul-Adha in late September 2015. See, e.g., Vatsa Aditi, ‘Dadri Lynching: Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal claims he was initially stopped from entering Bisara’, *The Indian Express* (4 Oct. 2015) [<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/kejriwal-stopped-from-entering-dadri-village-asks-why-me/> accessed 29 September 2017].

cases, it appears, they were also actively complicit in spreading misinformation. There were several reports of high-caste Hindus deliberately using beef to foment communal tensions. In April 2012, for instance, it was discovered that the beef used to desecrate a Hanuman temple in Hyderabad had been thrown there by Hindu, not Islamic, extremists³⁶. And more recently, in October 2017, a Brahmin was arrested in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh after stealing and slaughtering a cow, allegedly with the intention of disturbing communal relations on the day before Muharram processions.³⁷

At the level of the state, its institutions and its officers, a certain ignorance was also required for state-run slaughterhouses, municipal markets and cattle fairs, from which the state took a cut, to benefit from a trade that it also, officially, objected to. The rent charged by the municipality for the land on which the weekly *shandy* I attended took place, for example, was economically tenable *only* because a high volume of the livestock traded there was for the beef market. These two pieces of information—one about the rental value of the land for a cattle market, the other about the markets for cattle—could though be held apart from one another, in much the same way as those selling cattle could deny to themselves and others that they were selling it as meat.

Moving in closer, to those charged with enforcing state policy, the police officers whose station backed on to the clearing where I witnessed the slaughter of two cows could not, given the extent of the news coverage on the subject, have been entirely ignorant of the laws on cattle slaughter. Nor could they have been entirely oblivious to the activity that was going on almost

³⁶ See, e.g., ‘Saffron Extremists Desecrated Temple to Trigger Riots: Cops’, (14 April 2012) [<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/Saffron-extremists-desecrated-temple-to-trigger-riots-Cops/articleshow/12657326.cms>, accessed 6 Oct. 2017], and ‘Hyderabad Riots: Hindu Youths Held for Desecrating Temple’, (29 April 2012) [http://www.ummid.com/news/2012/April/29.04.2012/4_held_in_hyderabad_case.htm, accessed 06 Oct. 2017].

³⁷ Sahu Manish, ‘Uttar Pradesh: Cops Probe Conspiracy Angle to Cow Slaughter in Gonda’, *The Indian Express* (5 Oct. 2017) [<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/uttar-pradesh-cops-probe-conspiracy-angle-to-cow-slaughter-in-gonda-4874933/>, accessed 6 Oct. 2017].

literally under their noses. Given that the town's high Muslim population was reflected in the make-up of the police station, however, many of its officers were, the butcher told me, also regular customers, rewarded for not enforcing the law with favourable rates on the meat. In this case, knowing, without making the knowledge public, about the business also gave the local police considerable power over the operation, enabling them, for example, to extract a cut of any profits. It also ensured the discretion of the butcher and those working for him, in the same way that the panchayat's banning of home slaughter helped ensure that Rajshekar carefully moderated his own activities. Just as the law offered the vigilante groups a level of protection, given that those transporting cattle were not in a strong position to complain to the authorities, so too were law enforcers able to use the system to their advantage. As Mathews, an anthropologist who examined the workings of the Mexican Environmental Agency, observed: 'The various forms of official ignorance, misrecognition, collusion and complicity, and acts of official ignoring... imply a much more complex relationship between power and knowledge than is suggested by Foucauldian studies of power/knowledge'.³⁸ In other words, what he dubs 'official ignorance'—from actively turning a blind eye, as in the case of the police officers referred to above, to the avoidance of knowing, as for the municipal authorities reaping substantial rental income from cattle markets—was as significant to power as was knowledge.³⁹ What the law appeared to demand to happen was not a reflection of what happened on the ground. Rather, the act of making something illegal helped to determine the parameters within which it continued to happen.

³⁸ Andrew S. Mathews, 'Power/Knowledge, Power/Ignorance: Forest Fires and the State in Mexico', in *Human Ecology*, Vol. 33, no. 6 (2005), p. 798.

³⁹ See also Jonathan Mair, Ann H. Kelly & Casey High, 'Introduction: Making Ignorance an Ethnographic Object', in Casey High, Ann H. Kelly & Jonathan Mair (eds) *The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1–32.

Discussion and conclusion

Tied-together in the same webs of knowledge and ignorance that kept them apart, the systems through which bovines in India come to be eaten are sustained, I argue, by the active separation of different knowledges within the chain. Knowledge that relates to selling one's buffalo—which involves knowing its market value and how to find brokers—is actively separated from one's knowledge that buffaloes and cows of a certain age are usually purchased only for consumption. Likewise, sellers and consumers of meat collude in not-quite-knowing, all of the time, precisely what it is that they are selling and buying, enabling those who only eat cow beef to consume buffalo with impunity and *vice versa*.

Cattle, and the different things they come to mean and be at various stages of their biographical journey—from potential family member to beef curry—along with the human agents involved at various points along the chain, might usefully be said to form a bovine nexus: something akin to what Petryna *et al* described as a 'pharmaceutical nexus' in their collection of essays on the movement of medicines.⁴⁰ In taking a biographical approach to pharmaceuticals, the editors considered not just the prescription and consumption of medicines but recognised the importance of studying also their manufacture and marketing, stages during which pharmaceuticals carried quite different meanings from those with which they later became associated.⁴¹ The biography of a buffalo or cow from its existence as a dairy, dung and labour supplying family member to its eventual reappearance on someone else's dinner plate is, for the most part, more straightforward than that of the pharmaceuticals Van der Geest and others describe, and, indeed, much simpler than that of most industrialised foods. Despite that—or, perhaps more accurately, *because* of it—significant work needs to be undertaken by

⁴⁰ Adriana Petryna, Andrew Lakoff, and Arthur Kleinman, *Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Sjaak Van der Geest, 'Anthropology and the Pharmaceutical Nexus', in *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 79, no. 2 (2006), p.308.

the human agents who come in and out of the animals' biographies to distance themselves from those aspects of it with which they are not directly involved, and which in some instances would threaten their involvement at all. Appadurai's notion of 'regimes of value' is useful here in distinguishing the qualitatively different meanings that bovines take on at different stages of their biographies. The same animal that begins its life as relatively high-status part of a Hindu vegetarian household can, for example, become transformed into a commodity. As the latter, it is first an animal brokered, negotiated over, bought and sold, before, in another regime of value, becoming raw meat and, finally, the central part of a cooked meal. In other contexts—re-packaged and served in international hotels and cosmopolitan restaurants—it might also serve as a marker of urban sophistication.⁴² Bovines have the capacity to carry multiple, apparently contradictory meanings.

But while Van Der Geest *et al*⁴³ pose questions about how knowledge of medicines is constituted and travels, in relation to bovine biographies we need also to consider how and why dissemination of that knowledge not only travels, but is circumvented, bracketed and denied. It is in doing so that the value of ethnographic interventions into the current debates become apparent. What emerges on the ground is not a radical distinction between the practices of high caste Hindu cattle lovers, on the one hand, and beef-eating Christians, Dalits and Muslims, on the other—a narrative necessary to sustain debates about cattle slaughter and consumption in their current forms. Brahmin cattle owners, for example, appear no less likely than their lower-caste or Muslim counterparts to sell their no longer useful cattle into the beef market, even if they work hard to maintain ignorance of their involvement. Those who eat beef, too, relate to their own cattle via the same kinship idioms as vegetarian Hindus, in some cases even keeping

⁴² James Staples, 'Civilizing Tastes: From Caste to Class in South Indian Foodways', in Jakob A. Klein and Anne Murcott (eds), *Food Consumption in Global Perspective: Essays in the Anthropology of Food in Honour of Jack Goody* (New York Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 65–86.

⁴³ Sjaak Van der Geest, Susan Reynolds Whyte & Anita Hardon, 'The Anthropology of Pharmaceuticals: A Biographical Approach', p. 170.

their own animals out of the market. Such knowledge might be used to challenge a vigilantism which, as Aziz surmised, is often less about meat *per se* and more about the identities of those targeted.