

In the Land of Vegetarians

by Mathieu Ferry

In India, the ban on meat-based diets is still linked to an obligation of ritual purity for high castes – but not solely. As the geographer Michaël Bruckert explains, in modern-day India the consumption of meat structures the social, cultural and economic space of the sub-continent.

Reviewed: Michaël Bruckert, *La Chair, les hommes et les dieux : La Viande en Inde* (“Flesh, Men and Gods: Meat in India”), Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2017, 408 pp.

What place does meat occupy in India? What meanings do meat substances take on when vegetarianism is supposed to be the country’s symbol? To what extent are they altered by rising standards of living? This book by geographer Michaël Bruckert, the fruit of a dissertation that was awarded the prize for innovation by the Society of Geography, gives an analysis of the multiple statuses of meat by conceiving it in terms of a “spatial fact” (Fumey, 2010). By understanding this space on different levels and in different contexts, the author sets out to study the values attributed to meat. His interpretative framework is considered in a relational and situational way, with the aim being to study humans’ relationships with animals, with their environment and with each other, according to the social contexts analysed.

Based on a survey involving observations and interviews conducted in and around Chennai, capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the author's approach allows him to highlight the many moral and biological regulations that govern food practices and their transformations. By studying representations of meat, the author rejects the analysis of dietary trends in terms of “nutritional transition” (Popkin, 1993), which attributes shifts in consumption to economic development and urbanisation alone.

From region to body

In India, consumption of meat substances makes up a tiny fraction of the total food intake per capita: on average barely 1% of calories, or just 60 grams a week. In comparison, the weekly meat consumption of North Americans stands at around 2 kilos. This level has risen since 2004, although the National Sample Survey Office – the Indian public statistics service – has not recorded any sudden rise. And yet, these differences hide very strong disparities on an Indian sub-continent characterised by diverse cultural foundations: in southern India, average consumption is higher, as it is in the north-east, while it is lower in the north-west. This spatial correlation can be explained in particular by the relatively strong cultural hegemony of Brahmin high castes in the country.

Vegetarianism corresponds first and foremost to a cultural valorisation of ritual purity by Brahmin high castes (around 4% of the total estimated population), whose high social status has gradually been associated with abstinence from meat, justified by *ahimsa* – non-violence and compassion towards living beings. The author reiterates the fact that eating establishes one's position in a cosmos that follows a hierarchy (Appadurai, 1981) between foods considered pure (vegetarian) and impure (non-vegetarian, with meat itself subject to its own hierarchy), which means that “the body is seen as the primary place, almost in a geographical sense, in which the symbolic meanings of meat are defined and recorded.” (p. 68)

While the Brahmin ethos has spread widely to other population groups, this ritual food norm coexists with other registers. In particular, the distinction between the “warming” (devalued in bodily terms) or “cooling” (valued) energetic properties of meat – rooted in *Ayurveda* and *Siddha* medicine (Zimmermann, 1982) – is frequently cited by meat eaters. Among non-vegetarians, the thermal qualities of food can explain its low rate of consumption, since meat is perceived as a “warming” food (especially chicken, beef, mutton, seafood and fish). These representations may be reinforced by the lipophobia that characterises modern medicine, which is itself influenced by the dominant Brahminic discourse, since doctors often come from a vegetarian elite (Sébastien, 2013).

However, food norms do not uniformly denounce meat consumption, with some repertoires actually valuing its nutritional properties. Meat may be perceived as a provider of energy, strength, vigour, sexual power and virility (its consumption then becomes men's responsibility). This is particularly true among certain social groups, such as low-caste Dalits, Muslims or high-caste martial Rajputs.

Other normative repertoires may also value other factors, such as: pleasure; the freedom from inherited standards that meat consumption can bring for young people from high castes; the cosmopolitan and ostentatious dimension that comes into play for middle

classes and urbanised upper classes; and even "carnivorous resistance" (p. 303) among politicised lower castes, which underlines the political dimension of meat consumption.

This "proliferation of food repertoires" (p. 284) based on diffuse Brahminic ideology explains why Indians consume relatively little meat. Certainly, the consumption of meat has become democratised, but remains segregative because meat is still too expensive for some social groups, as well as selective, because its consumption is still devalued by certain cultural groups.

Inside and outside the home

The author also highlights a highly structuring distinction in carnivorous food practices: the dividing line between the interior and the exterior of the home. Within the home, maintaining purity and not sharing a table with lower castes are compulsory for high castes; whereas the outside space (less pure) is also a space in which new forms of consumption emerge.

Eating outside the home is primarily the result of urban mobility and a daily necessity for single workers, business people on the move and students. However, it is also an elite activity for the wealthiest citizens. Eateries are clearly divided between, on the one hand, small canteens and street stalls in working class neighbourhoods and university districts and, on the other hand, local fast-food restaurants, mid-range and high-end restaurants and Western fast-food chains, which are on the increase. These places give people a chance to try new dishes, including meat, and are becoming spaces in which food practices are secularised.

Dining out can therefore be a way of consuming meat products without one's family, caste or religious group finding out, as evidenced by the non-vegetarian restaurants that have opened in dark rooms shielded from prying eyes and set back from the street. Meat then becomes a means of developing a selective form of sociability outside the home, rather than a marker of social distinction.

While members of high castes may adhere to a vegetarian diet within the home, the urban exterior provides a space for carnivorous discovery. Diners carry out "selective vegetarianism" (Donner, 2011) or what Michaël Bruckert proposes to call "diphagia" (p. 140). Inspired by the word "disglossia", the term designates the conscious transition from a diet codified by the rules of one's community, within the home, to a more individualised diet outside the home.

The places in which meat is consumed have not spread uniformly within the urban space, however. "Meatscapes" can be traced across the city (Ahmad, 2014), the product of urban segregation between religious communities and social classes. Brahminic ritual purity is

part of the space. In particular, the Brahminic cultural hegemony is apparent in the almost total absence of non-vegetarian restaurants and butchers around Hindu temples (*agraharam*). This absence is sometimes supported by the law, for instance in Delhi, where it is officially forbidden to open a butcher's shop less than 100 metres away from a Hindu temple. In these neighbourhoods, the butcher's shop is an "upside-down temple", and the presence of abattoirs, which employ primarily Muslims and members of low Hindu castes, is sometimes even challenged in the courts.

In contrast, Christian and, particularly, Muslim neighbourhoods are areas in which meat is highly visible, with restaurants and shops open to the street. Generally speaking, however, apart from these neighbourhoods and wealthier districts, butchers and non-vegetarian restaurants are marginalised, relegated to backstreets rather than main thoroughfares, and meat – much like alcohol – is carried in a black plastic bag once purchased.

The circuits of meat

The book also focuses on the "becoming-meat" aspect of meat, and identifies three socio-spatial circuits of its production and distribution, each of which corresponds to a different method of consumption. These circuits make it possible to highlight humans' greater or lesser proximity to animals, and reflect different justification regimes for abattoirs and the consumption of dead animals.

This typology avoids the opposition between traditional and modern animal farming, and compares the circuits of different modes of consumption. In the "local" circuit, extensive animal farming and slaughtering – of goats and roosters especially – is carried out within the family or social peer group. The home-consumption that characterises this circuit is sacrificial (linked to monthly or infrequent rituals) or ceremonial: it follows a weekly religious calendar of abstinence, according to the religious deities being celebrated. The "artisanal" circuit uses a semi-intensive or intensive method of farming, typically mutton and poultry, which is linked to informal sales networks. This is the dominant circuit, which corresponds to a ceremonial mode of consumption that is also commonplace in the sense that consumption practices are being democratised beyond certain social groups. Finally, the "mass" circuit – that of intensive farming – which is part of an industrial network dominated by large-scale food companies such as Suguna, Shanti and Venky's. In this circuit, farming is typically based on broiler chickens (rather than country chickens).

From one circuit to the next, meat is becoming increasingly commercialised and "de-animalised". The different production circuits for meat are having an impact on carnivores' perception of meat, with meat being associated with different "imaginary geographical worlds" (p. 357).

A non-exotic perspective

The book thus provides an overview of the production and consumption of meat on the Indian sub-continent, based on a review of the extremely dense literature available on the subject; it also puts forward an original geographical interpretation by considering the relational dimension of meat within different spaces.

From a methodological point of view, the lack of detail with regard to the author's interviews is regrettable. A table summarising the social position (age, gender, religion, caste, profession, residential area) of eaters would have supported and indeed qualified certain claims, such as “people’s relationship with meat appears to be individual rather than collective” (p. 89). One may indeed wonder if this food-related individuality is not constitutive of the rhetoric of some upper-class eaters belonging to the Hindu high castes, who thereby assert their “castelessness” (Deshpande, 2013). The privilege of high castes has allowed their members to access dominant positions, and therefore food identity is less of a distinctive issue, but the fact remains that this rhetoric forms part of a social logic. Moreover, while there are multiple repertoires when it comes to meat consumption, a question mark hangs over the respective influence of the different socio-demographic characteristics which, in addition to context, shape meat-eaters’ perceptions. The complexity of situational categories must therefore be linked to that of social identities.

Overall, it is probably the tension that exists between a work of localised data collection on the one hand, restricted by ethnographical feasibility, and the goal of generalisation at national level on the other hand which sometimes leaves the reader dissatisfied. This book is captivating nonetheless, and proves the relevance of studying food consumption in India, particularly in relation to our own theoretical models. Indeed, it shows that Indian society is not playing catch-up with Western societies, yet does not present India as an exoticism. On the contrary, the book reveals the limits of a conceptualisation that, applied *ex nihilo*, would naturalise the needs of eaters.

Further reading

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