

FINANCIAL EXPRESS

(October 6 2015)

“Meat Politics is hurting Economics”

The export of buffalo meat has grown from \$2.87 billion in 2012 to \$4.15 billion in 2015. The potential is massive since Russia and China are showing interest. Currently, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Saudi Arabia are the biggest markets. Meat politics hurting economics

Agitations against meat export and cow slaughter are playing with the economy and interfering with personal dietary preferences

Cow slaughtering in India has always been controversial. However, it has become more so recently and has led to riots and, at times, murders of beef eaters (even on mere suspicion). There is a religious connotation to it. Cows are the sacred “mother” to the Hindus, providing them with milk. So their slaughter is offensive to many Hindus. Beef from cows is the cheapest meat and it is, therefore, a cheap source of protein to the poor, when they are able to buy it. In addition, meat is an important export item and generates considerable employment in abattoirs, cold storages, butcheries and trading. Export of cow meat (beef) is banned. Buffalo meat export is allowed. There is no religious objection to the slaughter of buffaloes and goats. Both provide milk to humans.

India is not primarily a vegetarian country. Many Indians eat eggs, fish and meat. India is also a multi-religious country. It is gracious for one religious group not to upset publicly the sentiments of another religion. But no one should interfere with what happens in the privacy of homes.

In 1966, KT Achaya, a distinguished food scientist who headed the Protein Foods Association of India, conducted a national food habits survey. He found that a large number of Indians (over 60%) claimed to eat meat. The poor could not afford it regularly and so ate it rarely. Therefore, it is wrong to say that India is a country that is vegetarian by habit; many are vegetarians most of the time because of low income levels. The survey showed that consumption of eggs during a seven-day period was reported by 27% of rural and 32% of urban households. Per capita consumption of eggs was 1.73 per month (0.40 per week). Meat export is now a \$5-billion industry. It is higher than basmati rice as the biggest processed food export. In fact, India is the world's second-biggest meat exporter.

Indian meat export price is almost 20% cheaper than the other major exporter, Brazil, which rears cattle specifically for slaughter, making it expensive. In India, female water buffaloes are sent to the abattoir only after they grow old and stop yielding milk. Further, Muslim countries prefer Indian meat because buyers are assured it is halal. Indian meat is exported to 65 countries, the biggest markets being Vietnam (40%), Malaysia (9%), Thailand (7%) and Saudi Arabia (6%).

Agitations against meat exports and cow slaughter are playing with the economy and interfering with personal dietary preferences in a multi-religious country. The Maharashtra [BJP](#) government recently banned the sale and even possession of beef. Penalties for offenders are harsh. Haryana, another BJP-ruled state, has followed suit. BJP's sister organisations—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishva Hindu Parishad—clamour for a total ban on meat export. These agitations ignore the multi-religious nature of India and peoples' dietary preferences.

The bulk of meat exported from India is of buffaloes. Sometimes, buffalo meat is wrongly described as cow beef. Cow slaughter has been either banned or severely restricted in most Indian states. Cow meat is also banned for exports. The ban was reinforced by a Supreme Court judgment in 2005. It is buffalo meat, against which there are no religious or legal strictures, which is processed and exported. The error in labelling can be easily rectified. It should not lead to violent agitations.

The export of buffalo meat has grown from \$2.87 billion in 2012 to \$4.15 billion in 2015. The potential is massive since Russia and China are now getting interested. Russia has approved buffalo meat imports from India after its Western sources dried up, following sanctions. "India can expect a \$500 million to \$1 billion increase in buffalo meat exports once shipments to Russia pick up," says Santosh Sarangi, chairman, Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority. Similarly, India and China signed a memorandum of understanding in 2013 over China providing market access to Indian meat. For a country with recurring deficits in its balance of payments, increasing these exports is a big opportunity.

Prof VM Dandekar, the distinguished economist from the Gokhale Institute (who published the first estimates of poverty in India), made a telling comment when inaugurating the Indian Dairy [Congress](#) in 1968. There were many saffron-clad sadhus at the conference, obviously intending to propagate against cow slaughter. Prof Dandekar said to them: "You regard cow as your mother. Would you let your old mother in her old age when she is no use at home wander the streets to eat garbage? Would you steal her milk by putting a stuffed dead calf in front of her?" His remarks upset the saffron-clad sadhus but they were absolutely appropriate.

The murderous agitation against the consumption and export of meat and especially beef is a gross violation of privacy. It is a blow against the right to live within the law. Interfering in buffalo meat trade is worse. It can have severe negative impact on employment, particularly among the Muslims, who are already in a socially-weakened state.

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