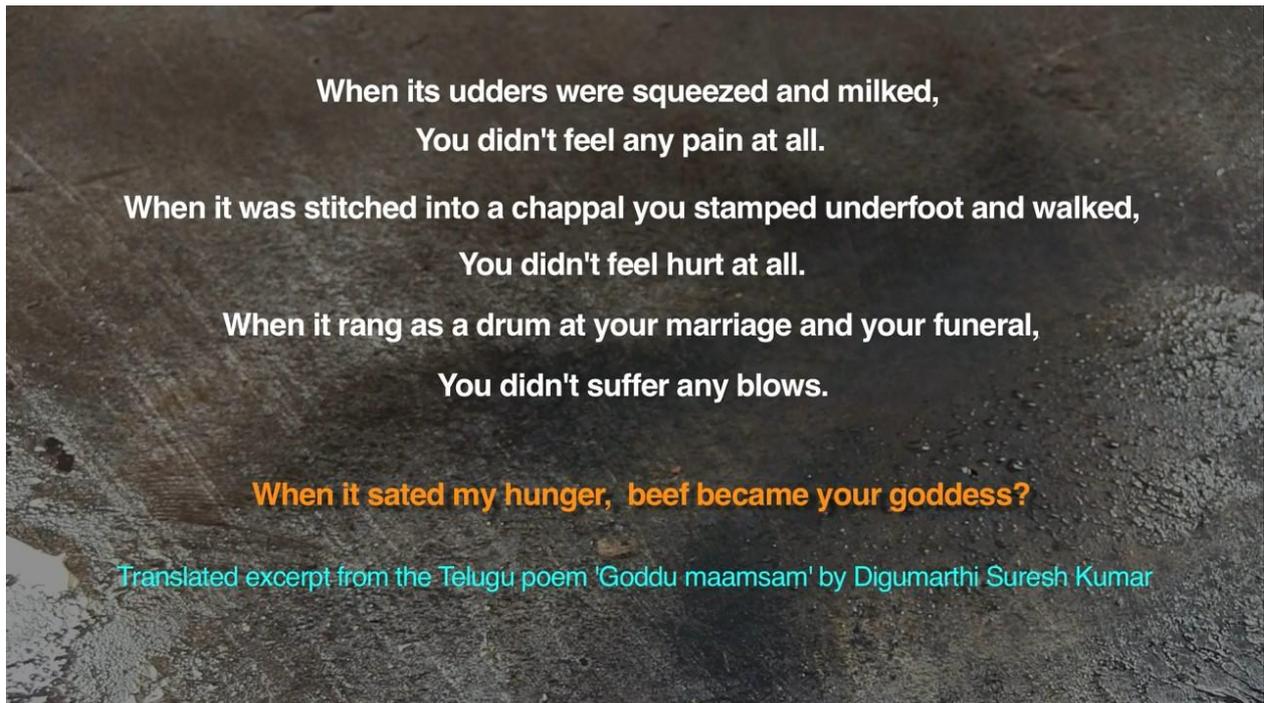


'O Hindus, don't treat the cow as a Goddess. It is only an animal!'

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Last Updated: Wed, Nov 11, 2015 11:26 hrs



"You'll be astonished if I tell you that according to old ceremonies, he is not a good Hindu who does not eat beef." This is something you would attribute to a Leftist intellectual... However, as the documentary 'Caste on the Menu Card' rightly attributes, it was said by Swami Vivekananda (Pg, 536, Vol. 3, The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 1997 Edition).

This one bit of information in the 21 minute film is enough to break illusions about the sanctimony of modern cow worship. But, the film goes to quote Manusmriti: "It is not sinful to eat meat of eatable animals. For, Brahma has created both, the eaters and the eatables." (Chapter 5, Verse 30).

The film goes on further. "O Hindus, don't treat the cow as a Goddess. It is only an animal! Use the cow for your welfare. Do Gopalan not Gopujan. (Breed cows, but do not worship them)." This was said by the apostle of Hindutva, V D Savarkar.

It is a sign of our times, that a tiny film made by a bunch of 20 something students (Ananyaa Gaur, Anurup Khillare, Atul Anand, Reetika Revathy Subramanian, Vaseem Chaudhary), quoting scriptures and people, and putting the practice of beef into perspective, is seen as a threat by Hindutva groups.

As evidenced from the quotes above it is a truth that stabs at the heart of the fanatics who rate cows over human life. And this despite many other truths like the old Hindu scriptures littered with tales of animal sacrifice including cow, the wearing of chappals and belts made of cow hide (RSS volunteers wore them till 2010 [when the canvas belt replaced the leather one](#)) etc. These are not only made of cow hide but are made by either Dalits or Muslims, two constituencies all Hindutva groups regularly target.

Yet, the essence of the documentary is neither cow nor beef. It is their use to perpetrate casteism.

Over the centuries, there have been many clashes between those who eat cow and those who do not. But none as covert and brazen as it became after September 28 when a mob entered a man's home in Dadri, UP, killed the father, molested the daughter and left the son on the verge of death merely on the suspicion of them having eaten beef.

'Caste on the Menu Card', actually shot much before this incident, found itself at the receiving end of a national controversy after it became the only film out of 35 which failed to get an exemption permission for a screening at 12th Jeevika Asia Livelihood Documentary Festival in Delhi, organised by Film Division, an autonomous body of the Government of India.

When they tried to show it separately, right wing groups protested.

Why these Hindutva groups want it banned is obvious from the quotes culled from the documentary above. This and Ashwini Mishra's (aka A-List) rap 'Beef, Pork, Chicken' with lyrics that go, 'All I Really Want Is Beef, Pork, Chicken' and 'Beef and pork are threat, to your paradigm'.

But the main strength of the film is that it delves deep into the reasons for the politicisation of the cow. If you control a population's food habit, you control their mind, some say. It is not just that.

As the Hindus shunned anything to do with dead cows many millennia ago, it is the Dalits who became the 'guardian' of the dead cow. And later Muslims. Not only did they eat it (a god sent boon considering that social ostracization often led them to starvation), they preserved the skin, harnessed it and turned them into

extremely useful, beautiful products like chappals, shoes, belts, bags, musical instruments like the table and mridangam and many other such products which the upper caste Hindus had no problems using.

It was as if the upper castes wouldn't touch the dead cow, but they couldn't live, couldn't move, their arts couldn't flourish without products made from the processed dead cow.

Thus, during partition when Muslims from Uttar Pradesh migrated en masse to the newly formed Pakistan, it left a huge gap in the shoe manufacturing business. This business was then taken over by Hindus who had come from Pakistan, despite their religions having forbidden it. This was beautifully covered in M S Sathyu and Shama Zaidi's 1973 film 'Garm Hava'.

Thus, this business of beef is not just the business of food. It is the business of business that is predominantly engaged in by the Dalits and Muslims.

Prohibiting the consumption or even export of beef (In 2014 India ranked second in the list of the biggest beef exporters of the world), has the potential to put millions of people, mostly Dalits and Muslims, into poverty and malnutrition (beef is still one of the cheapest source of nutrition for millions of these poor). Where will the leather needed for many businesses come from? What will the Dalits who survive on the processing of these animals, do?

It is these larger ramifications of the politics and business of eating beef that this 21 minute documentary made by 5 students of TISS somehow manages to capture quite well (not to mention the hypocrisy of cow-activists).

Obviously, the groups that stand exposed want this documentary to be never seen. Yet, irony abounds as it is their very opposition that has made this film extremely popular. Without their rabid enthusiasm, it would have been seen by a few hundred people and soon forgotten. But thanks to their opposition it has become the most popular video on that channel, garnering 44,000 views in four days and this without the many downloads and screenings happening all around the world.

For a film that was a simple college project, this is no mean achievement.